Short Communication

The Dark Triad and the self-presentation variables of socially desirable responding and self-monitoring

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ABSTRACT

The three socially malevolent personality traits, narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy, which make up the Dark Triad, were examined in relation to socially desirable responding and self-monitoring based on self-report responses from volunteer participants. Although the prediction that self-monitoring would be positively correlated with Machiavellianism was supported, self-monitoring had stronger positive correlations with narcissism and psychopathy. In addition, although the prediction that socially desirable responding would be positively correlated with narcissism was supported, larger significant negative correlations with both Machiavellianism and psychopathy were also found. Obtained results suggest that those scoring higher on more antagonistic traits are less concerned with social desirability.

1. Introduction

The literature surrounding the study of the sinister personality has been consistently growing, peaking the fascination of both researchers and the public. With this report, we will contribute to the body of knowledge on this topic by examining the associations between the Dark Triad and dimensions reflecting types of self-presentation, specifically, socially desirable responding and self-monitoring.

The Dark Triad consists of three related, but distinct non-pathological socially malevolent personality dispositions, including: subclinical narcissism, Machiavellianism, and subclinical psychopathy. These traits, to varying degrees, are characterized by proclivities towards self-promotion, duplicity, emotional detachment, and aggressiveness (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). More specifically, narcissism is typified by a sense of entitlement, arrogance, and superiority (Raskin & Hall, 1979) and is associated with honesty-humility (negatively), extraversion, agreeableness (negatively), and openness (Muris, Merckelbach, Otgaar, & Meijer, 2017). Furthermore, narcissism has been found to correlate with aggression, sex-related issues (e.g., infidelity, higher number of sex partners, and sexual harassment), interpersonal difficulties, and antisocial tactics (Muris et al., 2017). Machiavellianism is exemplified by manipulativeness, a lack of conventional morality, and self-interest (Christie & Geis, 1970). Machiavellianism has been found to correlate negatively with honesty-humility, agreeableness, and

conscientiousness, and correlate positively with aggression, erratic behaviour, sex-related issues, socioemotional deficits, poor well-being, interpersonal difficulties, morality problems, and antisocial tactics (Muris et al., 2017). Similarly, the essence of psychopathy is a lack of empathy, antisocial tendencies, and reckless disinhibition (Hare, 1985). Interestingly, Muris et al. (2017) found identical patterns of personality and psychosocial correlates for Machiavellianism and psychopathy.

In the present study, we investigated the Dark Triad in relation to individual differences in self-presentation, specifically, socially desirable responding and self-monitoring. Socially desirable responding reflects the tendency to endorse self-describing statements that are perceived as socially desirable and rejecting statements that are socially undesirable (Edwards, 1957). Socially desirable responding is often viewed as a nuisance variable although some have proposed that the construct is a meaningful individual difference variable (e.g., Holden & Passey, 2010; McCrae & Costa, 1983). Proponents suggest that socially desirable responding is reflective of an inflated sense of self-worth (self-deception) and conscious attempts at impression management (Paulhus, 1984). Holden and Fekken (1989) have found that the measure employed in the present study, Jackson's (1999) social desirability scale, is only concerned with a sense of self as opposed to a consideration for others. In a multi-informant study, Holden and Passey (2010) found that social desirability is correlated with neuroticism (negatively), extraversion, agreeableness, and conscientiousness.

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Self-monitoring is defined by the tendency to regulate expressive behaviour in response to interpersonal cues in order to attain a desired social impression. Consequently, low self-monitors' expressive behaviour and self-presentation are theorized to be more accurate reflections of their internal affective states relative to those of individuals that are higher in self-monitoring (Snyder, 1974). Extant research has positively linked the general self-monitoring factor with traits such as extraversion, openness to experience, and to a much lesser extent negatively with neuroticism, agreeableness, and conscientiousness (Wilmot, DeYoung, Stillwell, & Kosinski, 2016). Previous research has also suggested that self-monitoring and social desirability may be independent constructs (Snyder, 1974).

1.1. The present study

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the relationship between the Dark Triad and the self-presentation constructs of social desirability (measured using a socially desirable responding scale) and self-monitoring. An important detail to consider about the present study is that, unlike most investigations related to self-monitoring (including an investigation with the Dark Triad; Rauthmann, 2011), we reported self-monitoring as a unitary construct as originally put forward by Snyder (1974) and further validated by Gangestad and Snyder (2000) and Snyder and Gangestad (1986). Using a multifactorial conceptualization of self-monitoring, Rauthmann (2011) found that: narcissism was positively correlated with both forms of acquisitive self-monitoring (perceptiveness and impression management) and protective self-monitoring (protective variability and protective social referencing); Machiavellianism was negatively correlated with impression management and positively correlated with both protective forms of self-monitoring; and psychopathy was positively correlated with perceptiveness, and protective variability. Although there is apparent value in investigating lower order factors of self-monitoring and personality traits generally speaking, Snyder and Gangestad (1986) have demonstrated that the full self-monitoring scale usually outperformed (in terms of effects sizes) its lower order factors across studies.

Because social desirability is conceptualized as an elevated sense of self-worth, which is one of the most salient aspects of grandiose narcissism (Holden & Fekken, 1989; Jackson, 1999; Paulhus, 1984; Raskin & Hall, 1979), we predicted a positive correlation with narcissism. Moreover, we predicted that self-monitoring would be positively correlated with Machiavellianism, as self-monitoring refers to altering one's expressive behaviour to better suit the social context (Snyder, 1974). Although this prediction may seem self-evident because Machiavellianism is characterized by deception and manipulation of others for personal gain (Christie & Geis, 1970), previous research has shown inconsistent relationships between Machiavellianism and self-monitoring, with some investigations showing positive correlations (Corral & Calvete, 2000; Hogue, Levashina, & Hang, 2013), while others suggest no relationship between the two constructs (Snyder, 1974). Our study will help clarify these inconsistencies between empirical investigations and between empirical and theoretical accounts of these constructs.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants first completed the Dark Triad questionnaires as part of a larger longitudinal study (see Vernon, Villani, Vickers, & Harris, 2008). Between one and two years later, a sub-sample of individuals completed both the social desirability and self-monitoring scales. The present study is based on this subsample and includes 244 volunteers from Canada and the United States of America (29 men, 214 women, and 1 case where sex was not given). The average age was 37.67 years (*SD* = 14.96) and ranged from 16 to 75.

2.2. Materials and procedure

Participants completed the Self-Report Psychopathy Scale (SRP-III-R12) as a measure of subclinical psychopathy (Hare, 1985; Paulhus, Neumann, & Hare, 2016). The SRP-III-R12 is composed of 62 self-reflective items responded to using a five point Likert scale (example item, "I'm a rebellious person") ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). This scale has demonstrated high internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.79$) and is the most widely validated measure of psychopathy in extant literature (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Participants then completed the Mach-IV as a measure of Machiavellianism (Christie & Geis, 1970). This scale is composed of 20 self-report items (example item, "The best way to handle people is to tell them what they want to hear") and is answered on a five point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The Mach-IV has been found to have high internal consistency, ranging from 0.70 to 0.76 (Fehr, Samson, & Paulhus, 1992) and has had some support for convergent validity (Rauthmann, 2013). Participants then completed the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI) to assess individual differences in subclinical narcissism (Raskin & Hall, 1979). The NPI consists of 40 ipsative (forced choice) items where participants choose between a narcissistic response and a non-narcissistic response (example item, "When people compliment me I sometimes get embarrassed" versus "I know that I am good because everybody keeps telling me so"). This scale has shown to be consistent between peer and self-ratings (Emmons, 1984) and to have high internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.84$; Paulhus & Williams, 2002).

Participants also completed both the social desirability scale and the self-monitoring scale with items inter-mixed. Self-monitoring was assessed using Snyder and Gangestad's (1986) self-monitoring scale which consists of 18 items, responded to with a true/false format. An example item is, "I'm not always the person I appear to be". For the present sample, the coefficient alpha (internal consistency) of the self-monitoring scale was 0.66. Participants also completed the 16-item social desirability scale from the Personality Research Form (PRF; Jackson, 1999). An example item is, "I am always prepared to what is expected of me". Items are responded to using a true/false format. In the present sample, the internal consistency (alpha) value for the social desirability scale was 0.65. Although these alpha values are relatively low, the values did not increase for either scale if any of the items were deleted.

3. Results

As an initial analysis of the scale scores, men and women were not found to differ significantly in terms of variance for the five measures. Men were found to score significantly higher on both Machiavellianism ($t = 3.88$, $p < 0.001$) and psychopathy ($t = 3.97$, $p < 0.001$). Men and women did not differ significantly on either narcissism or self-monitoring. Women were found to score significantly higher on social desirability ($t = -2.68$, $p < 0.01$). Age was found to have significant negative correlations with narcissism ($r = -0.22$, $p < 0.001$), Machiavellianism ($r = -0.17$, $p < 0.001$), and psychopathy ($r = -0.22$, $p < 0.001$). Age did not correlate significantly with either self-monitoring ($r = -0.04$) or social desirability ($r = 0.06$).

As displayed in Table 1, narcissism was found to correlate significantly with social desirability as predicted, but was found to correlate higher with self-monitoring. Machiavellianism was found to correlate positively with self-monitoring as predicted, but also had a significant negative correlation with social desirability. A similar pattern of correlations was found with psychopathy in that a significant positive correlation was found with self-monitoring and a significant negative correlation was found with social desirability.

4. Discussion

The Dark Triad variables of narcissism, Machiavellianism, and