



Offensive defenses: The mind beneath the mask of the dark triad traits



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ABSTRACT

Those high in the Dark Triad traits, i.e. narcissism, psychopathy and Machiavellianism are often painted as either the “villains” or the “perpetrators”. The consensus of personality research thus far is that these traits function by playing offense. Nonetheless, there is scope to understand the defensive stance of these traits. In this online questionnaire design study ($N = 244$) the relationship between the Dark Triad traits, defensive strategies and stress were investigated by correlational analysis. Unique associations with stress and defensive functioning depict individual differences in the Dark triad traits. Acting out, dissociation and splitting were the defenses that all three traits had in common; and all three traits were correlated with the use of an immature defensive strategy. An important novel finding of this present study was that an immature defensive strategy was found to mediate the relationship between Machiavellianism and stress. This brings us closer to understanding the psychological makeup of this trait. Applications are discussed within a clinical framework and the case is presented for a focus on theory of psychological defense to be adopted when working with such clientele.

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1. Introduction

It is a natural human response to try to sidestep or eliminate unpleasant or painful thoughts and feelings. The act of distancing oneself from anxiety in the psychodynamic model is understood under the theory of defense mechanisms. Thought to occur both in the clinical and subclinical realm, defense mechanisms generally involve unconscious reactions to anxiety whereby threatening information is made unconscious or distorted so as to remove awareness of threats (Boag, 2012; Burgo, 2012). How defense processes apply to “deviant” personality types and the Dark Triad traits - Machiavellianism, psychopathy and narcissism (Paulhus & Williams, 2002) has yet to be explored. Although considered within the normal range of functioning, possessing higher levels of these traits can come at a cost (Jonason, Baughman, Carter, & Parker, 2015), which may in part be an unfortunate side effect of engaging in immature defensive behaviour. Remarkably thus far, the vulnerable aspects and the inner experience of these traits have been given little attention and how the dark mind processes anxiety seems to be an understudied phenomenon.

1.1. Mature, neurotic and immature defensive strategies

Defensive strategies have been divided into three groups in the literature: mature, neurotic and immature (Cramer, 2000). When applied moderately, flexibly and sensibly, mature defensive strategies are considered adaptive (Cramer, 2000; Vaillant, 1971). For instance, “sublimation”

one of the defenses categorized under the mature strategy group involves channelling negative energy into more positive acceptable behaviour, resulting in possibly cathartic release or a constructive endeavour. An example of a defense under the neurotic group is “undoing” which necessitates trying to reverse or “undo” a thought or feeling by performing an action that counteracts the thought or feeling. The defenses classified under the immature group are considered low on the spectrum of healthy. These can range from “somatization” in which stress is represented through a physical symptom to “autistic fantasy”, which entails dealing with emotional conflict or stressors by engaging in excessive daydreaming. Developing this, we query how this system fits with dark personality.

1.2. Defenses and the dark triad traits

Defense mechanisms have been associated with one trait of the Dark Triad: narcissism. The psychoanalytic view on narcissism (characterized by a sense of entitlement, egocentrism and arrogance) links this personality dimension with shame and defensive self-esteem (Grosch, 1994; Hibbard, 1992; Morrison, 2014). Here narcissism involves displaced emotive response underlined by an inability to process shame in healthy ways. Furthermore, narcissists are believed to use projection to impart shame onto others (Biscardi & Schill, 1985) and hold unrealistic exaggerated views about their abilities and achievements, which they sustain through the use of self-deception (Raskin, Novacek, & Hogan, 1991), and an “others exist for me” illusion (Sedikides, Campbell, Reeder, Elliot, & Gregg, 2002). Moreover, the term vulnerable narcissism, which has recently emerged in the literature to reflect a more defensive and complex grandiosity, may serve and

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function as a mask for feelings of inadequacy (Miller et al., 2010). Thus, we expect that narcissism should predict the use of defense mechanisms that demonstrate compensation and the use of fantasy to cope with stress (see Raskin & Novacek, 1991).

Along the same vein, psychopathy (characterized by antisocial behaviour, disinhibition and limited empathy), makes up another of the pillars of the Dark Triad (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). However, unlike the emotionality associated with narcissism, it is possible that psychopathy involves a genetic-based emotional dysfunction (the emotional deficiency hypothesis) (Blair, Peschardt, Budhani, Mitchell, & Pine, 2006; Herpertz & Sass, 2000). Consequently, psychopathic attributes are not likely to be associated with anxiety-based defensive responses but rather immature defenses associated with poor impulse control and destructive thrill seeking.

The final pillar of the Dark Triad, Machiavellianism, (characterised by manipulation, corruption and immorality) is epitomised by a “the end justifies the means” strategy (Christie & Geis, 1970). The confines of reality and appropriate boundaries mean very little to a true Machiavellian who would be of the impression that the best defense is a good offense and would place emphasis in winning at any cost. Negative home atmosphere, loneliness, and parental neglect have been linked to Machiavellianism and it has recently been queried whether Machiavellian attitude can be considered as an adaptive, defensive response to neglectful environments (Láng & Lénárd, 2015). In this perspective, the deceitful and exploitative strategy associated with Machiavellianism may be viewed as a means of pre-emptive defense. As with psychopathy, we expect that Machiavellianism is not likely to be associated with mature defensive responses but rather covert expressions of hostility, such as passive aggression.

1.3. Stress, defenses and the dark triad

We can learn a great deal from the extant literature about the external/outward manifestations and behaviour of the Dark Triad traits (Furnham, Richards, & Paulhus, 2013) but very little is currently known concerning the inner experience and causal mechanics of the traits that bring about these behaviours. Accordingly, we query how the Dark Triad traits approach the process of stress management. We note that the trait emotional intelligence, which is also thought to have a relationship with both positive stress management (Ciarrochi, Deane, & Anderson, 2002) and defensive functioning (Pellitteri, 2002) correlates positively with narcissism, but negatively with the other two traits (Petrides, Vernon, Schermer, & Veselka, 2011).

Accepted as a defining feature of psychopathy is the association with pronounced impairment in emotional (or stress) reactivity (Herpertz & Sass, 2000). Indeed, psychopathy has been found to moderate the associations between stress and affective experiences (Noser, Zeigler-Hill, & Besser, 2014). Conceivably, this moderating process may well occur through mechanisms like immature projection and immature denial, both of which are considered strong predictors of psychopathy (Cramer, 1999). We also know that the capacity to withstand pressure and regulate stress is not a strength of the Machiavellian (Petrides et al., 2011). Regarding narcissism, it has been put forward that grandiosity is a manifestation of an effort to cope with stress, along with the use of themed fantasy such as power and revenge fantasies (Raskin & Novacek, 1991). Taking these findings into account, it is possible that the use of immature defense mechanisms influences the process of stress management with those high in the Dark Triad traits.

1.4. The current study

Although it has been put forward that all three traits have substantial genetic components (Petrides et al., 2011; Vernon, Villani, Vickers, & Harris, 2008), we want to tend to the nurture end of the etiological argument. The viewpoint driving our study is that an adaptive feature

of the Dark Triad traits entails learned survival and ego protection, and we query what shape this takes.

In summary of our expectations, we hypothesize that there will be significant correlations between all the Dark Triad traits and an immature defensive strategy. Furthermore, we anticipate that there will be significant individual differences in the correlations between the Dark Triad traits and defense mechanisms. Given the patterns of conceptual empirical overlap seen in previous studies, it is likely that psychopathy and Machiavellianism will demonstrate greater set resemblance in their patterns of connecting with defense mechanisms, while differing from narcissism. In terms of association with stress, we predict there will be a negative correlation between narcissism and stress owing to an impression management bias. We also hypothesize that stress will correlate only with Machiavellianism but not with psychopathy. As a final point, we investigate whether defensive strategies mediate the relationship between the Dark Triad traits and stress.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

A total of 244 individuals voluntarily took part in this online study via surveymonky, 83% female, aged 18–68 ($M = 33.29$, $SD = 10.96$). Participants were sampled through a university population of varied disciplines and were majority Anglo-Australian ($n = 174$). The rest were made up of Europeans ($n = 23$), Native Australians ($n = 11$) North Americans ($n = 5$), Asian ($n = 3$) and other ($n = 28$). Participants were informed of the nature of the study, took a number of self-report measures, and were thanked and debriefed upon completion.

2.2. Measures

Psychopathy was measured using the *Self-Report Psychopathy Scale*, SRP-III (Paulhus, Neumann, & Hare, 2009). This is made up of 64 items and asks respondents to rate the degree to which they agree with statements such as “I think I could beat a lie detector” and “I rarely follow the rules”. The total score is the sum of the four subscales: interpersonal manipulation, callous affect, erratic life style and criminal tendencies. For psychopathy, Cronbach's $\alpha = .90$.

Narcissism was assessed using the *Narcissism Personality Inventory*, NPI-40 (Raskin & Hall, 1981), a 40 item forced-choice questionnaire that requires respondents to select which statement best describes them, e.g. A: I prefer to blend in with the crowd or B: I like to be the centre of attention. One point was assigned for each response that matches the key and then the sum was calculated. For narcissism, Cronbach's $\alpha = .83$.

Machiavellianism was calculated by scores on the *Mach IV* (Christie & Geis, 1970), which attempts to assess propensity to manipulate others in interpersonal situations, tactics, morality and views with items such as “It is wise to flatter important people” and “Never tell anyone the real reason you did something unless it is useful to do so”. After reversing the appropriate items, the overall Mach score is the mean of the 20 items. For Machiavellianism, Cronbach's $\alpha = .79$.

Defensive strategy and individual defense mechanisms were measured using the *Defensive Style Questionnaire*, DSQ-40 (Andrews, Singh, & Bond, 1993). This scale strives to measure participants' tendencies towards 20 different styles of defensive behaviour and divides them into three groups: mature (e.g. anticipation, “If I can predict that I'm going to be sad ahead of time, I can cope better”), immature (e.g. acting out, “I get openly aggressive when I feel hurt”) and neurotic (e.g. pseudo-altruism, “I get satisfaction from helping others and if this were taken away from me I would get depressed”). For the overall scale signifying general defensive functioning, Cronbach's $\alpha = .76$ (immature $\alpha = .78$; mature $\alpha = .59$; and neurotic $\alpha = .42$).

Stress was measured with the *Perceived Stress Scale*, PSS-10 (Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1983). This is a widely used psychological

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