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The Dark Triad traits and intelligence: Machiavellians are bright, and narcissists and psychopaths are ordinary



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ABSTRACT

Extant empirical research, despite some theoretical descriptions, has consistently demonstrated that the Dark Triad is not related to general mental ability. In the present study, we investigated the relationship between the Dark Triad of personality (narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy) and fluid intelligence. A sample of 128 Polish high school students ($M_{age} = 16.89$ years; $SD_{age} = 0.31$; 28.1% of the sample were boys) completed the Polish translation of the Short Dark Triad and the Raven's Standard Progressive Matrices. Hypotheses were tested using a structural equation model, which fit the data well. As predicted, we found that of the three Dark Triad traits, only Machiavellianism was significantly predicted by fluid intelligence. Our findings are discussed in light of previous research and theory.

1. Introduction

1.1. Dark Triad

The Dark Triad consists of three related, but theoretically distinct personality traits (subclinical narcissism, Machiavellianism, and subclinical psychopathy; Paulhus & Williams, 2002). These dimensions, to varying degrees, are characterized by grandiosity, callousness, deceit, and aggression. More specifically, Raskin and Hall (1979) described subclinical narcissism as involving proclivities towards entitlement, dominance, grandiosity, and superiority. An example of narcissism in popular culture is Johnny Bravo, a pompous self-absorbed cartoon character, who presented himself to unacquainted women as perfect, whereas remained entitled and arrogant to people who knew him. Machiavellianism represents tendencies towards emotional coldness, strategic manipulation, and lack of conventional morality (Christie & Geis, 1970). An example of such a character is Theodore Kaczynski (aka the Unabomber), a mathematical genius who bombed and used threats of future violence to coerce the American press to publish his manifesto, with the goal of starting a revolution. Owing to his strategical skills and long-term planning, he remained invisible to the FBI for nearly twenty years. Lastly, psychopathy is typified by impulsivity, emotional coldness, and relative lack of anxiety (Hare, 1985). Vlad the Impaler, the fifteenth-century prince of Wallachia (aka Dracula) can be described as

an archetypal psychopath because of his deceitfulness, ruthlessness, and cruelty.

1.2. Empirical accounts of the Dark Triad

The empirical evidence on the distinction between these traits is not always consistent with this theoretical narrative. For instance, some studies suggested that Machiavellianism, as currently measured, is a global scale of psychopathy that confounds primary with secondary psychopathy (McHoskey, Worzel, & Szyarto, 1998; Persson, Kajonius, & Garcia, 2017; Rogoza & Ciecuch, 2018). Other self-report studies have corroborated this claim, demonstrating that self-control and impulsivity were correlated with Machiavellianism in a way that would be more consistent with theoretical accounts of psychopathy (low self-control, high impulsivity; Jonason & Tost, 2010; Jones & Paulhus, 2011; Marusic, Bratko, & Zarevski, 1995; Miller, Hyatt, Maples-Keller, Carter, & Lynam, 2017; Petrides, Vernon, Schermer, & Veselka, 2011). McHoskey et al.'s (1998) concerns were further echoed in self-report and meta-analytic investigations suggesting that Machiavellianism does not represent anything beyond psychopathy (Glenn & Sellbom, 2015; Lee & Ashton, 2005; Miller et al., 2017; O'Boyle, Forsyth, Banks, Story, & White, 2015; Vize, Lynam, Collision, & Miller, 2016).

This controversy is further complicated with behavioural empirical evidence that demonstrates clear differences between Machiavellianism

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and psychopathy in ways that are consistent with their theoretical definitions. For instance, in a series of studies, Jones and Paulhus (2017) demonstrated that psychopaths, but not Machiavellians, cheated in coin-flip tasks when there was a serious risk of punishment; when ego-depleted however, the results for Machiavellian individuals were similar to those of psychopaths. Moreover, Jones and Weiser (2014) found that although all three Dark Triad traits correlated with retrospective infidelity, psychopaths' infidelity predicted relationship dissolution, while Machiavellians' infidelity was not related to relationship dissolution. Jones and Weiser (2014) explained these results citing that psychopaths are reckless, while Machiavellians are more strategic in their malevolence. This explanation is consistent with other behavioural studies (e.g., Jones, 2013, 2014; Jones & De Roos, 2017). This strategic element in Machiavellianism suggests the requirement of more cognitive resources (Jones & Paulhus, 2017). Previous research has further shown that Machiavellians devoted more cognitive effort to lying than psychopaths (Baughman, Jonason, Lyons, & Vernon, 2014) and showed elevated activity in the brain areas involved in anticipation of risky situations and inference making when playing an economic game (Bereczkei, Deak, Papp, Perlaki, & Orsi, 2013).

1.3. Dark Triad and intelligence

Fluid intelligence is a general ability that determines the efficiency of all activities, and therefore is crucial in terms of adaptation to the requirements of life and also is responsible for purposeful actions (cf. Matczak, 1994) – thus, it can be described as innate ability to reasoning (see also: Strelau, 2015). Crystallized intelligence, in turn, can be defined as a set of many different detailed intellectual abilities (cf. Matczak, 1994). The former is biologically preconditioned and constitutes intellectual potential, while the latter evolves under the influence of individual experiences and learning, by engaging this fluid potential in action and investing it in activities determined by environmental and cultural factors (cf. Matczak, 1994; Strelau, 2015). Research on the Dark Triad and intelligence demonstrates another discrepancy between theoretical assumptions and the empirical results, especially with respect to Machiavellianism. Machiavellians are described as strategic manipulators. Intuitively and consistently with this description, it would follow that Machiavellianism should be correlated with intelligence. Previous research however, does not support this prediction. Paulhus and Williams (2002) found that out of the Dark Triad, only narcissism was significantly (weakly) correlated with intelligence, while none of the Dark Triad traits were related to cognitive ability as measured by the Wonderlic Personnel Test (WPT; Wonderlic, 1977). In the same vein, in a meta-analysis of 48 independent samples, O'Boyle, Forsyth, Banks, and Story (2013) found that overall, there was no consistent relationship between Dark Triad traits and general mental ability, concluding that the evil genius hypothesis (the view that intelligent people are more likely to display socially exploitive personality dispositions) is not an accurate reflection of reality. In line with this conclusion, Jones and Paulhus (2009) warned against assuming that Machiavellians are skilled at manipulating people because of their dispositional willingness to try to manipulate people. Additionally, Jones and Paulhus (2009) suggest that any manipulative abilities of Machiavellians are from their superior impulse control, rather than superior cognitive ability.

Some explanation of the observed discrepancies may be assumed from the view stating that, “narcissists and, to a lesser extent, psychopaths tended to overestimate their intelligence, whereas Machiavellians did not” (Paulhus & Williams, 2002, p. 560). In this vein, Rauthmann (2012) investigated informal student dyads and analyzed the data on the Dark Triad and several kinds of intelligence in two perspectives: (1) “how dark personalities see themselves” and (2) “how dark personalities see others”. The global intelligence score, in terms of self-appraisal, was positively related to narcissism and psychopathy, while negatively to Machiavellianism. Within dyad-partner evaluation was negatively

linked to Machiavellianism and psychopathy (Rauthmann, 2012). These results were also partially supported by the results of the study of Zajenkowski and Czarna (2015), who demonstrated that whereas narcissism was not related to objectively measured intelligence, it was positively correlated with subjectively assessed intelligence. These results are in line with observations suggesting that narcissists tend to engage in socially desirable responding (Kowalski, Rogoza, Vernon, & Schermer, 2018).

1.4. Machiavellianism and intelligence

Because many of the past studies examining Machiavellianism and intelligence have relied more on self-appraisals (e.g., Rauthmann, 2012), and because Machiavellians tend to provide socially desirable responses (Kowalski et al., 2018), using different approaches where the effect of the social desirability is at least partially limited (e.g., experimental designs, implicit tests, power tests), are needed. Although it may be hypothesized that Machiavellians, with their ease of manipulating others (Paulhus & Williams, 2002), should be characterized by extraordinarily high intellectual skills (e.g., Jones & Paulhus, 2009), the data does not support such assumptions (e.g., O'Boyle et al., 2013; Paulhus & Williams, 2002; Wilson, Near, & Miller, 1996). As Jones and Paulhus (2014) indicate, one of the key elements of Machiavellianism, apart from manipulateness and callous affect, is the strategic-calculating orientation, suggesting that the phenomenon of Machiavellian intelligence leaves much to be explained (see also: Jones & Paulhus, 2011).

In the light of the data collected so far (e.g., Jones & Paulhus, 2009; O'Boyle et al., 2013; Paulhus & Williams, 2002), the main question arises about the nature and type of intellectual abilities that could be attributed to Machiavellians. O'Boyle et al. (2013) suggested that the inability to confirm hypotheses linking Machiavellianism and intelligence within previous studies does not necessarily result from the actual lack of relationship between variables, but may rather reflect the influence of other moderators, as for example the choice of measurement tool for intelligence.

Recently Bereczkei (2018), in response to the inconsistency of previously reported results, proposed several hypotheses on the mechanisms of decision making and behavioural tactics of Machiavellians, which may determine directions of further research on Machiavellian intelligence. One of the aspects is the expectation of high intellectual abilities manifesting in reasoning, flexible processing, and quick problem solving. Thus, measurement methods used so far in order to investigate the relation between Machiavellianism and intelligence (O'Boyle et al., 2013; Paulhus & Williams, 2002; Wilson et al., 1996), seem to be not sufficiently focused on cognitive abilities attributed to Machiavellians in theoretical considerations (Bereczkei, 2018; Jones & Paulhus, 2009; O'Boyle et al., 2013). O'Boyle et al.'s (2013) meta-analysis also pointed out that the relation of Machiavellianism and intelligence assessed by the WPT (Wonderlic, 1977), is weaker than with other types of measures. The cognitive ability measured with the WPT is related to crystallized rather than fluid intelligence (Hick, Harrison, & Engle, 2015; Matthews & Lassiter, 2007). When the overall score of WPT was separated into verbal and non-verbal intelligence, a stronger relationship between Machiavellianism and non-verbal intelligence was reported (Paulhus & Williams, 2002).

2. Current study

The current paper examines the relation between the Dark Triad traits and fluid intelligence. Based on the conclusions derived from both empirical results and theoretical considerations (e.g., Bereczkei, 2018; O'Boyle et al., 2013; Paulhus & Williams, 2002; Wilson et al., 1996), it is predicted that Machiavellians can be characterized as being high in fluid intelligence. The review of the literature suggesting a null relationship between Machiavellianism and intelligence is because the

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