# Lies and crimes: Dark Triad, misconduct, and high-stakes deception

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## ARTICLE INFO

## ABSTRACT

The goal of the present investigation was to assess whether the Dark Triad traits (Machiavellianism, narcissism, psychopathy) add significantly to the prediction of misconduct and the propensity to engage in high-stakes deception. Self-report scores were collected (n = 464) via the Short-D3 assessing the Dark Triad traits, the Comprehensive Misconduct Inventory measuring misconduct, and the Propensity to Lie Questionnaire investigating lying tendencies. Significant correlations were observed between nearly all variables, but in a multiple regression only psychopathy added significantly to the prediction of the misconduct factors. Further, only Machiavellianism was a significant predictor of high-stakes deception over and above the other predictors in the model.

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## 1. Introduction

The Dark Triad (Paulhus & Williams 2002) is a cluster of three related yet distinct personality traits: sub-clinical psychopathy, narcissism and Machiavellianism. Psychopathy is defined by behaviors such as impulsivity, callous indifference, and low empathy (Hare, 1985). Narcissism is characterized by feelings of grandiosity, vanity and a sense of entitlement (Raskin & Hall 1979). Lastly, Machiavellianism is epitomized by emotional coldness and manipulativeness (Christie & Geis, 1970). Given the socially malevolent tendencies that characterize the Dark Triad traits, there is, understandably, an interest in their behavioral implications. Specifically, it seems salient to determine whether these dark variables are associated with equally dark actions, and particularly whether they are predictive of enacted misconduct and a tendency to engage in high-stakes deception.

### 1.1. The Dark Triad traits and misconduct

Misconduct refers to a wide range of antisocial acts that range in severity and includes behaviors such as plagiarism, reckless driving, sexual promiscuity, drug abuse, theft, and overt violence (e.g., Nathanson, Paulhus, & Williams, 2006). A rich body of research exists pertaining to the manifestation of misconduct in a broad spectrum of contexts, and numerous measures have been proposed to assess these antisocial behaviors. Recently, Paulhus and Williams (2002) developed the Comprehensive Misconduct Inventory (CMI) to allow for a far-reaching assessment of antisocial actions. The CMI measures seven main dimensions of antisocial behavior: soft drug abuse (e.g., drunk driving, buying alcohol underage), hard drug abuse (e.g., using hallucinogens, selling heroin and cocaine), minor criminality (e.g., stealing from a store, paying for sex), serious criminality (e.g., breaking into a vehicle, damaging a property), driving misbehavior (e.g., receiving a speed ticket, participating in a street car race), bullying/harassing (e.g., assaulting someone, using physical force to get money), and anti-authority misbehavior (e.g., stealing money from parents, sneaking out at night without parents' permission). Consequently, a joint analysis of the CMI and the Dark Triad traits presents a promising route through which the behavioral implications of these personality factors can be understood.

To date, a number of investigations have examined the Dark Triad traits in relation to the misconduct dimensions of the CMI. These endeavors, however, have yielded inconsistent findings and have relied on methods that do not allow for an adequate assessment of the individual contribution of the Dark Triad traits to outcome variables. Specifically, Williams, McAndrew, Learn, Harms, and Paulhus (2001) reported significant positive correlations between all of the CMI subscales assessed and the Dark Triad traits of narcissism and psychopathy. In contrast, the researchers observed significant associations between

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Machiavellianism and only two CMI dimensions—bullying/harassing and minor criminality. In a later study carried out by Nathanson et al. (2006), significant associations were noted between psychopathy and all measured subscales of the CMI—a finding that was in line with the results of the first study. On the other hand, narcissism exhibited significant associations with driving misbehavior and substance abuse only, while Machiavellianism correlated only with the bullying/harassing subscale.

In comparing these investigations, it may be the case that unreliable measurement played a part in yielding the differing results. Specifically, both investigations used the MACH-IV and the Narcissistic Personality Inventory to measure Machiavellianism and narcissism, respectively. Both of these instruments have faced criticism pertaining to their validity (e.g., Brown, Budzek, & Tamborski, 2009; Hunter, Gerbing, & Boster, 1982), and therefore it is possible that psychometric issues with key instruments have impeded the finding of similar results across studies in investigation of the Dark Triad and misconduct.

### 1.2. The Dark Triad traits and high-stakes deception

Lying—the act of making an intentionally false statement with the intention to deceive—can take on two forms (DePaulo, Kashy, Kirkendol, Wyer, & Epstein, 1996). Low-stakes lies are those that do not involve risk, and represent mundane dishonesty that is commonplace in social interactions (DePaulo et al., 1996; Gozna, Vrij, & Bull, 2001). In contrast, high-stakes lies involve risk in which the liar can gain or lose something of substantial magnitude (Gozna et al., 2001). For example, lying about cheating on an exam is considered a high-stakes lie.

Given the malevolent tendencies associated with the Dark Triad traits, past research has linked these three variables individually to lying and deception. Machiavellianism has been shown to be a strong predictor of self-serving lies (McLeod & Genereux, 2008), and Machiavellian individuals have been found to be more skilled at telling lies (DePaulo & Rosenthal, 1979; Geis & Moon, 1981). Furthermore, manipulativeness, a defining feature of Machiavellianism, has exhibited associations with both low-stakes and high-stakes lying (e.g., Gozna et al., 2001; Kashy & DePaulo, 1996).

Less research exists on the link between lying and narcissism, although current evidence does suggest that a positive association exists. High scores on narcissism have been linked to lying in an academic context, which is indicative of high-stakes deception (Baughman, Jonason, Lyons, & Vernon, 2014). Further, Kashy and DePaulo (1996) found that individuals with a high concern for impression management were more likely to tell lies in general in comparison to those who were less concerned about socially desirable self-enhancement. Given that narcissistic individuals tend to strive to maintain a grandiose image and therefore practice impression management (Morf, Horvath, & Torchetti, 2011), it seems reasonable to extend this finding to narcissism as well.

Sub-clinical psychopathy has also demonstrated a positive association with lying, both generally (Hare, 1982), as well as in academic and mating contexts (Baughman et al., 2014). Further, it has been shown that those who score high on psychopathy measures tend to engage in behaviors such as cheating, conning, or defrauding for personal gain—actions reminiscent of high-stakes lying (e.g., Widiger & Lynam, 1998). In addition to this risky form of deception, individuals with psychopathic tendencies also habitually employ deception in social situations, which suggests that they also avidly practice low-stakes lying (Seto, Khattar, Lalumière, & Quinsey, 1997).

While these outlined findings provide a good cursory glimpse at the link between deceptive tendencies and the Dark Triad, they are limited by the reliance on correlational analyses, which do not account for the overlap between these three traits. Consequently, additional analyses are warranted that aim to examine the unique contribution of each Dark Triad trait to the prediction of high-stakes deception.

### 1.3. Present study

The goal of the present investigation is to explore the behavioral consequences of the Dark Triad traits. Specifically, relations between the Dark Triad traits and the outcomes variables of misconduct and high-stakes lying will be investigated using correlational analyses. Given the inconsistency in the literature regarding the associations between the Dark Triad traits and misconduct, as well as the lack of direct research on the personality correlates of high-stakes deception, the present investigation is warranted. The study will assess the Dark Triad trait using the Short-D3 (Paulhus & Williams, 2002)—a recent and brief measure of the antisocial cluster—in an effort to overcome the psychometric limitations of existing Dark Triad scales (Veselka, Schermer, & Vernon, 2012). Furthermore, misconduct will be measured using the CMI (Paulhus & Williams, 2002) to allow for a comprehensive assessment of both past and current misbehavior, and the propensity to lie will be assessed using the Propensity to Lie Questionnaire (PTLQ), which focuses specifically on high-stakes deception. Based on previous findings, it is expected that all Dark Triad traits will exhibit correlations with both misconduct and with high-stakes deception. Given the degree of inconsistency in the literature pertaining to the nature of the associations between the variables of interest, however, greater specificity in the outlined hypotheses is not possible.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

The sample consisted of 464 undergraduate students from North America (131 males; 333 females) who were enrolled in an introductory psychology course. The ages of the participants ranged from 16 to 42 years ($M = 19.5$, $SD = 4.9$). Participants were compensated with a course credit for their involvement in the study.

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. Short-D3
The Short-D3 (Paulhus & Williams, 2002) was used to measure the Dark Triad personality traits. This measure consists of 28 items measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *disagree strongly*; 5 = *agree strongly*). The Short-D3 contains three subscales, one for each facet of the Dark Triad.

#### 2.2.2. Comprehensive Misconduct Inventory (CMI)
The 58-item CMI (Paulhus & Williams 2002) was used to assess one's propensity to engage in misconduct behaviors. Specifically, each item presented participants with a given behavior, and asked them to indicate the number of times they had engaged in that behavior. The CMI consists of seven subscales: soft drug abuse, hard drug abuse, minor criminality, serious criminality, driving misbehavior, bullying/harassing, and anti-authority misbehavior. The subscales reflecting soft and hard drug abuse can further be summed to yield a substance abuse factor, while the subscales reflecting the two modes of criminality can be combined to produce a general criminality factor. Prior to summing, all items were standardized (Paulhus & Williams, 2002).

#### 2.2.3. Propensity to Lie Questionnaire (PTLQ)
The extent to which individuals engage in high-stakes deception was measured using the PTLQ. In the first part of this questionnaire, participants were asked to respond to five general items about their typical lying behaviors on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *never*; 7 = *always*). An example item from this part of the measure is: "How often do you lie?". In the second part of the questionnaire, participants are asked to respond to 22 items pertaining to two short scenarios on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *never*; 7 = *always*). Scenario 1 describes a hypothetical mating-relevant situation, in which the participant goes out for coffee with an