



# The Dark Triad and dispositional aggression

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 21 February 2015

Received in revised form 10 June 2015

Accepted 11 June 2015

Available online 9 July 2015

### Keywords:

Dark Triad

Psychopathy

Narcissism

Machiavellianism

Aggression

## ABSTRACT

Previous research has demonstrated that people who are callous are more likely to be interpersonally aggressive. The present study extends this finding to research on the “Dark Triad” traits (Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy), which all share a common core of callousness and manipulation. Using crowd-sourcing and student samples, we examined the relationship between the Dark Triad traits with different facets of dispositional aggression. Results indicated that a common Dark Triad factor (i.e., callousness and manipulation) predicted a common aggression factor. However, the individual Dark Triad traits uniquely predicted different facets of aggression. Psychopathy positively predicted physical aggression, narcissism negatively predicted hostility, and Machiavellianism positively predicted hostility. Taken together, the findings shed light on the unique elements of the Dark Triad and their ability to predict unique forms of dispositional aggression.

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The cluster of malevolent traits, known as the Dark Triad of personality (Paulhus & Williams, 2002), has gained increasing attention in the research literature. This Dark Triad consists of erratic and antisocial psychopathy (Cleckley, 1976; Hare, 1999), grandiose and entitled narcissism (Kernberg, 1975; Kohut, 1951), and cynical and strategic Machiavellianism (Christie & Geis, 1970). All three traits are associated with callousness (Jones & Paulhus, 2010b) and dishonesty (Book, Visser, & Volk, 2015; Lee & Ashton, 2005; see also Jones & Figueredo, 2013). Previous cross-sectional research on the Dark Triad has suggested that these traits are universally related to dispositional aggression (Jonason & Webster, 2010). Unfortunately, this research used an assessment of the Dark Triad that lacks validity (Carter, Campbell, Muncer, & Carter, 2015; Maples, Lamkin, & Miller, 2014; Miller et al., 2012). Nevertheless, because callousness is related to dispositional aggression (Hare & Neumann, 2005, 2010; Mahmut, Menictas, Stevenson, & Homewood, 2011; Williams, Paulhus, & Hare, 2007), it seems logical that each Dark Triad trait would be related to self-reported aggression.

Although all three Dark Triad traits are high in callousness and manipulation, it is important to examine the differences in their motivations and behavioral expressions (Jones & Figueredo, 2013). Consequently, there are significant problems with assuming all three Dark Triad traits are similar with respect to aggression. For example, why would a strategic trait such as Machiavellianism (see Jones & Paulhus, 2009) be related to dispositional tendencies toward direct aggression? One answer may lie with misinterpretations due to the spurious overlap among dispositional traits (i.e., Ashton, Lee, Goldberg, & de Vries, 2009).

Ashton et al. (2009) argued that traits sharing an unbalanced overlap may appear as though they are each contributing to an outcome or higher order factor when they are not. Instead, it is the common overlap that may be driving associations with outcomes, but the individual traits may be overall unrelated (Paulhus & Williams, 2002).

In addition to oversimplifications driven by spurious associations (Ashton et al., 2009), behavioral evidence suggests that Machiavellianism has no unique association with aggressive responses to direct or ego-provocation (Jones & Paulhus, 2010a). In contrast, psychopathy has a long history of predicting aggression and violent offending (Hare, 1996). For example, individuals high in psychopathy are quick to anger, yet are just as quick to return to baseline (see Hare, 1999, for review). Additionally, psychopathy is universally recognized, in three (Cooke & Michie, 2001) and four-factor models (Hare & Neumann, 2005), as being associated with an erratic lifestyle and deficits in impulse-control. Their inability to inhibit impulsive urges is associated with dysfunctional forms of impulsivity (Jones & Paulhus, 2011) as well as a host of difficulties associated with attention (Kosson & Newman, 1986) and executive control (Newman, 1987). These additional aspects of the psychopathy trait make such individuals especially predisposed toward aggression (see also Porter & Woodworth, 2006). Finally, aggression is generally considered antisocial (Bettencourt, Talley, Benjamin, & Valentine, 2006), which serves as a moral, ethical, and legal deterrent for most. However, individuals high in psychopathy are dispositional rule-breakers (Hare & Neumann, 2005) and only consider morality in terms of rewards and punishments (Campbell et al., 2009).

In contrast to psychopathy, Machiavellian individuals are neither erratic nor impulsive (Jones & Paulhus, 2011). Machiavellian individuals are strategic, and will break rules cautiously to avoid negative repercussions (Cooper & Peterson, 1980; Jones, 2014). Furthermore, narcissistic individuals tend to be non-aggressive when praised, included, or

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rewarded but will aggress when insulted (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998), excluded (Twenge & Campbell, 2003), or when feeling deprived (Bushman, Bonacci, Van Dijk, & Baumeister, 2003). Thus, a direct association between narcissism and dispositional aggression seems unlikely.

Thus, with respect to direct physical aggression, psychopathy appears like it would be a strong predictor. However, given their cynical worldview, individuals high in Machiavellianism may have a hostile worldview. This assertion comes from the fact that individuals who are Machiavellian tend to see others as aggressive and ruthless (Brankley & Rule, 2014).

## 1. The present study

There exists a body of research demonstrating that the Dark Triad traits may predict aggression under different circumstances (e.g., Baughman, Dearing, Giammarco, & Vernon, 2012; Jones & Paulhus, 2010a; Kerig & Stellwagen, 2010; Lau & Marsee, 2013), however little work has been done to investigate the different aspects of aggression that might be associated with the different Dark Triad traits. Although the Dark Triad traits are all associated with callousness and manipulation, the present study will investigate the degree to which each of the Dark Triad traits are associated with different aspects of aggression, above and beyond their common overlap. Furthermore, the Dark Triad personality traits are all multifaceted, so a secondary investigation will examine the relationship between the facets of the Dark Triad and different types of aggression.

First we expect that the common overlap among the Dark Triad (callousness & manipulation) will predict a common factor of aggression. Next, however, we predict that there will be additional variance accounted for by each Dark Triad trait with respect to unique facets of dispositional aggression. First, and foremost, psychopathy is a trait that is linked to direct and unprovoked physical aggression (e.g., Reidy, Zeichner, & Martinez, 2008; Reidy, Zeichner, Miller, & Martinez, 2007; Reidy, Zeichner, & Seibert, 2011). Thus, there should be a direct link between physical aggression and psychopathy. Next, because of their cynical worldview, individuals high in Machiavellianism should report increased levels of hostility. This prediction stems from the fact that Machiavellian individuals are dispositionally cynical and satisfy their antisocial desires via political, rather than violent, means (Jones, 2013). Finally, no strong predictions about narcissism and unique aspects of dispositional were made.

At the facet level, given the latent profile of manipulative vs. antisocial tendencies in psychopathy (e.g., Mokros et al., 2015), we predicted that *manipulation* that is associated with psychopathy would *not* be related to physical aggression, unlike the other three facets of psychopathy. Further, we predicted that cynical worldview would drive the association between Machiavellianism and hostile worldview. Finally, because entitlement is traditionally considered the “problematic” facet of narcissism (Emmons, 1987), we predicted that narcissistic entitlement would be associated with aggression as well.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

All participants were recruited for a larger survey study on personality traits. Participants were drawn from two separate sources. Participants in Sample 1 consisted of 192 adults from Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk; 57% women; Mean Age = 34.96, SD = 12.75). These participants were recruited from across the United States who reported an ethnic heritage of: 73% European; 6% African; 3% East Asian; 4% South Asian; 6% Latino (a); 3% Native North American; 7% other or mixed ethnicities. Participants in Sample 2 consisted of 133 students (75% women; Mean Age = 20.62, SD = 2.46). These participants were recruited from The University of British Columbia and reported an ethnic heritage of: 60% East Asian, 28% European, 8% South Asian, 4% mixed

ethnicities. MTurk participants were paid \$0.50 for the participation, and extra credit was given to student participants.

The details and benefits of combining student and MTurk samples have been described elsewhere (e.g., Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011; Paolacci, Chandler, & Ipeirotis, 2010). Specifically, MTurk is a reliable crowdsourcing website with a diverse and reliable subject pool of workers willing to participate in surveys for payment. In fact, recent surveys have found that the reliability, validity, and interest in taking surveys are all greater in MTurk samples when compared to students (Rand, 2012). Moreover, the variation in responses and subjects is far greater because the pool of subjects is not limited to those enrolled in a university (e.g., Buhrmester et al., 2011).

### 2.2. General procedure

All measures (unless otherwise indicated) were answered on a 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly Agree*) Likert Scale. When necessary, appropriate items were reverse-scored. All scales were averaged into composites.

### 2.3. Measures

#### 2.3.1. Psychopathy

In order to measure psychopathy, participants were given the Self-Report Psychopathy scale (Paulhus, Neumann, & Hare, *in press*; see also Mahmut et al., 2011). The SRP ( $\alpha = .92$ ) measures psychopathy through 4 facets, which were all internally consistent: Manipulation ( $\alpha = .77$ ), Callousness ( $\alpha = .79$ ), Erratic Lifestyle ( $\alpha = .83$ ), and Antisocial Behavior ( $\alpha = .78$ ). In Sample 2, participants were given the 28-item SRP short form (Neumann & Pardini, 2014; Paulhus et al., *in press*), which is outlined in the larger SRP manual and can be obtained by contacting the SRP manual authors. All four facets were reliable (i.e.,  $\alpha > .70$ ), as was the overall scale ( $\alpha = .93$ ). Across the two samples, psychopathy correlated significantly with both Machiavellianism,  $r = .56$ , and narcissism,  $r = .46$ .

#### 2.3.2. Machiavellianism

In order to measure Machiavellianism, participants in both samples were given the Mach-IV (Christie & Geis, 1970). The Mach-IV is still the most widely used assessment for Machiavellianism (Jones & Paulhus, 2009). The Mach-IV measures Machiavellianism via two facets: Manipulative Tactics ( $\alpha = .61$ ) and Cynical Worldview ( $\alpha = .60$ ). The items were averaged into an internally consistent composite ( $\alpha = .77$ ). Machiavellianism correlated significantly with narcissism,  $r = .38$ .

#### 2.3.3. Narcissism

Narcissism was measured using the NPI-16 in both samples (Ames, Rose, & Anderson, 2006). Unlike other measures in the present study, the NPI-16 uses a forced choice response format. Participants are provided with a narcissistic and non-narcissistic option, and are asked to select the statement that is most self-descriptive. The NPI-16 is based off of items from the original NPI (Raskin & Hall, 1979). The NPI-16 had an internally consistent composite ( $\alpha = .72$ ).

#### 2.3.4. Aggression

To measure aggression, participants were given 16 items from the original Buss–Perry Aggression scale (Buss & Perry, 1992). Previous research has shown that using 12 items (three per aggression facet) results in some subscales with alpha scores less than .70 (see Jonason & Webster, 2010; see also Webster et al., 2014). As a result, the next highest loading item from the original article (Buss & Perry, 1992) was added to create four reliable facets (four items per facet) of physical aggression ( $\alpha = .78$ ); verbal aggression ( $\alpha = .81$ ); anger ( $\alpha = .88$ ); and hostility ( $\alpha = .82$ ). The composite of all four scales was reliable as well ( $\alpha = .90$ ).

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