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## Measuring malevolence: Quantitative issues surrounding the Dark Triad of personality



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### ABSTRACT

Paulhus and Williams (2002) proposed a constellation of malevolent traits referred to as the Dark Triad (subclinical narcissism, subclinical psychopathy, and Machiavellianism). They used the Dark Triad term to raise awareness about the need for researchers across different areas of psychology to include relevant theory and assessments of all three traits when predicting behaviour. However, there still remain misunderstandings, misinformation, and misperceptions about how to disentangle the psychometric and statistical web of interconnected variance associated with these three traits. We outline the statistical approaches that have been proposed (to date) in assessing the Dark Triad and relevant outcomes, and discuss some promising future directions. This paper is intended to inspire discussion and clarification for the nebulous issue of assessing and disentangling overlapping but distinguishable traits, including the Dark Triad of personality.

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There is a relatively new area of research into a concept called the “Dark Triad” which is an individual-difference construct proposed by Paulhus and Williams (2002). There has been an asymptotic rise in papers investigating the utility of these traits (Furnham, Richards, & Paulhus, 2013). Indeed, there are, in this journal many papers currently in press (Black, Woodworth, & Porter, in press; Jonason, Lyons, & Bethell, in press; Pailing, Boon, & Egan, in press; Porter, Bhanwer, Woodworth, & Black, in press.)

Recent papers have found that the Dark Triad traits are differentially informative in predicting workplace behaviours (O’Boyle, Forsyth, Banks, & McDaniel, 2012), aggression (Baughman, Dearing, Giammarco, & Vernon, 2012; Kerig & Stellwagen, 2010), socio-sexuality (Jonason & Webster, 2010) and financial misbehaviour (Jones, 2013a). However, the question of proper assessment and statistical approach grows ever pressing. This paper introduces the pros and cons of the established statistical techniques that have been used in previous literature and what directions may be most beneficial.

The issue of statistical overlap began with research by McHoskey, Worzel, and Szyarto (1998) who questioned the utility

of many of the malevolent constructs in psychological research. They noticed that the three literatures surrounding the three most popular traits of malevolence (Machiavellianism, Narcissism, and Psychopathy), developed in isolation from one another. For example, the forensic literature has focused almost exclusively on Psychopathy (Patrick, 2006), the applied and clinical literature has focused primarily on Narcissism (Cain, Pincus, & Ansell, 2008; Campbell, Hoffman, Campbell, & Marchisio, 2011; Miller & Campbell, 2008; Pincus & Lukowitsky, 2010), and the social/personality literature (at least prior to 1988) focused primarily on Machiavellianism (Fehr, Samsom, & Paulhus, 1992). McHoskey and colleagues questioned whether these traits were really any different, and argued that it may be useful to begin discussions across areas of psychology.

Paulhus and Williams (2002) suggested that these areas of psychology should examine more than one of these overlapping malevolent traits. They further asserted that these traits were each individually useful, and that researchers should assess all three to determine the primary predictor of a given outcome. This last assertion stemmed from the realization that it is unclear which trait would be related to a given outcome unless all three are assessed. Since the original paper by Paulhus and Williams, additional research has accumulated through behavioural genetics (Vernon, Villani, Vickers, & Harris, 2008), laboratory aggression (Jones & Paulhus, 2010), observational research (Williams,

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Nathanson, & Paulhus, 2010), and meta-analysis (O'Boyle et al., 2012), that these traits are indeed distinguishable and should be assessed simultaneously (Furnham et al., 2013).

Of these three constructs, Machiavellianism is the only one that is not traditionally seen as a clinical syndrome (notably a personality disorder), but rather a “normal” personality trait. The trait is marked by a belief system or personal philosophy that is characterized by cynical, manipulative and amoral behaviour (Christie & Geis, 1970). Machiavellians engage in behaviour that is expedient and self-interested, rather than ethical and principled, tend to be callous (Jones & Paulhus, 2011a) and have a cold and calculating disposition (Jones & Paulhus, 2009). The most common assessment tool for the Machiavellian personality trait is the *MACH-IV* (Christie & Geis, 1970). Although, it should be noted that recent attempts have been made to develop newer, multi-dimensional assessments (Dahling, Whitaker, & Levy, 2009; Kessler et al., 2010).

Narcissism and Psychopathy are constructs traditionally seen as clinical in nature, though there are measures of both at the subclinical level (Hogan & Hogan, 1997). Although psychiatric classification has traditionally focused on diagnosis and classification, more recent attempts have been made to study these traits at the subclinical level (LeBreton, Binning, & Adorno, 2006). Researchers have generalized findings from clinical to “normal” (Lilienfeld & Andrews, 1996), and business populations (Heinze, Allen, Magai, & Ritzler, 2010).

“Normal” Narcissism is characterized by grandiose sense of self-worth, entitlement, dominance, and superiority. The most common assessment for narcissism in the normal range is the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI) (Raskin & Hall, 1979). Shorter forms of these original items have also recently been validated, such as the NPI-16 (Ames, Rose, Anderson, & Cameron, 2006), and the NPI-13 (Gentile et al., 2013). However, many have argued that they fail to capture more vulnerable or pathological forms of narcissism (Miller et al., 2010; Pincus et al., 2009). Thus, Pincus et al. (2009) developed alternative assessments that assess this pathological and “covert” form (Wink, 1991) of the narcissistic style (Pincus & Lukowitsky, 2010).

Psychopathy has been noted as the most “dangerous” of the three (Paulhus & Williams, 2002), although recent theoretical work has challenged this assertion, arguing that situational circumstances dictate the toxicity of each trait (Jones, 2014). For example, individuals high in prejudiced beliefs may take violent or political roads to oppression and discrimination, both of which are equally harmful (Jones, 2013b). Subclinical psychopathy manifests itself mainly in part by high levels of impulsivity and thrill-seeking behaviours, along with low levels of empathy (Hare, 1985; Lilienfeld & Andrews, 1996). The Self-Report Psychopathy (SRP; Paulhus, Neumann, & Hare, in press) scale has, at its core, the same four-factor solution as the Psychopathy Check List (Hare, 1991), which is the “gold standard” for the measurement of psychopathy (Edens & Cox, 2012; Forth, Brown, Hart, & Hare, 1996).

Other validated assessments for psychopathy also exist in the form of Levenson's Primary and Secondary Psychopathy Scales (LPSP; Levenson, Keihl, & Fitzpatrick, 1995), and the Psychopathic Personality Inventory (PPI; Lilienfeld & Andrews, 1996). In fact, a new measure – the Elemental Psychopathy Scale (EPS; Lynam et al., 2011) – also shows much promise in the area of subclinical psychopathic personality assessment. Our focus on the SRP is not to suggest that one assessment may be more accurate in assessing psychopathy than the other. However, given that the vast majority of research on the Dark Triad proper has focused on the SRP, our review focuses primarily on that assessment.

Although there is an extensive literature on co-morbidity in personality disorders, there is little in the way of actual data in clinical populations that assess the co-morbidity of psychopathic and narcissistic disorders. Although former versions of DSM

manuals have classified these disorders in the *Cluster B* (Personality disorders), narcissism has recently been removed from the new DSM-V (Miller, Widiger, & Campbell, 2010). In spite of its removal, research has found that Narcissism (even at the clinical level) is distinguishable from psychopathy (Reise & Wright, 1996; Schoenleber, Sadeh, & Verona, 2011). Although it should be noted that many have argued that there are different types of psychopaths (Murphy & Vess, 2003) and narcissists (Wink, 1991), which may preclude their ability to differentiate between sub-types of these traits.

The most convincing literature on the relationship of these two disorders lies in two types of data. First, factor analytic studies where both disorders load similarly highly on the same factor (Furnham & Crump, 2005; Furnham & Trickey, 2011; Hogan & Hogan, 1997). Second, correlation studies that show both Psychopath and Narcissistic traits have similar correlates with many other self-, other-report, and behavioural measures (Khoo & Burch, 2008; Moscoso & Salgado, 2004).

## 1. Big Five personality traits

At the core of the Dark Triad of personality is a negative relation to the Big Five personality trait: Agreeableness (Paulhus & Williams, 2002; Lee & Ashton, 2005; Jakobwitz & Egan, 2006; Nathanson, Paulhus, & Williams, 2006a; Nathanson, Paulhus, & Williams, 2006b; Miller et al., 2010; Jonason, Li, & Teicher, 2010; Jonason & Webster, 2010; Williams et al., 2010). Individuals that are Agreeable in nature are interested in social harmony while those that are disagreeable manifest characteristics that are antisocial, which is how this personality trait relates the Dark Triad constructs. All of these sub-facets of Agreeableness (Trust, Straightforwardness, Altruism, Compliance, Modesty, Tender-Mindedness) have been shown to have negative relations to Antisocial Personality Disorder and Narcissism at the clinical level (Widiger, Trull, Clarkin, Sanderson, & Costa, 2002). Those scoring low on Agreeableness are described as demanding, clever, flirtatious, charming, shrewd, autocratic; selfish; stubborn, headstrong, impatient, intolerant, outspoken, hard-hearted; clever, assertive, argumentative, self-confident, aggressive, idealistic; and unstable (Costa & McCrae, 1992).

When considering the sub-facets of Agreeableness – trust, straightforwardness, altruism, compliance, modesty and tender-mindedness – and their relationship to Antisocial personality disorder and Narcissism, two factors emerge as having low scores for both. These defining features are altruism and tender-mindedness. Those that score low on the altruism subscale are somewhat more self-centred and reluctant to get involved in the problems of others while those that score low on the tender-mindedness subscale are more hard-headed and less moved by appeals to pity and consider themselves realists who make rational decisions based on cold logic (Furnham, 2008).

Table 1 shows nearly 100 correlations between the three scales measuring the Dark Triad including one study with behaviour genetics results (Vernon et al., 2008). It should be pointed out that researchers in the different studies are not always using the same measures and in some studies subscale scores are also used. Three things are noticeable from these results. First, nearly all correlations are positive and significant. Second, nearly a quarter are  $r > .50$ . Third, overall the highest correlations appear to be between the measure of Psychopathology and Machiavellianism, and the lowest between Narcissism and Machiavellianism. It is unclear to what extend these correlations are a function of the psychometric properties of the measures, item overlap, dissimulation, or other factors.

Most researchers in individual differences feel obliged to describe their measures in Big Five Factor space. Table 2 shows the

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