



Short Communication

What a tangled web we weave: The Dark Triad traits and deception

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ABSTRACT

We investigated ($N = 447$) the relationship between the Dark Triad traits (i.e., psychopathy, narcissism, and Machiavellianism) and domain-general and domain-specific measures of deception. Psychopathy and Machiavellianism were linked to telling more lies, psychopathy was linked to telling lies for no reason, and Machiavellianism was linked to telling white lies. Narcissism, in contrast, was linked to lying for self-gain and self-reported skill at lying. The Dark Triad traits were linked to the use of various intersexual and intrasexual deception tactics but these differed as a function of the domain, the category of deception, and the particular tactic used. We found some evidence that sex differences in deception were partially a function of individual differences in the Dark Triad traits. Our results provide new details about the cheater strategies linked to the Dark Triad traits.

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1. Introduction

There is a new kid on the (personality psychology) block to rival the Big Five. The Dark Triad traits are characterized by entitlement, superiority, dominance (i.e., narcissism), glib social charm, manipulativeness (i.e., Machiavellianism), and callous social attitudes, impulsivity, and interpersonal antagonism (i.e., psychopathy). Not surprisingly, most researchers and lay-people consider these traits to be maladaptive (Kowalski, 2001). However, some have suggested the Dark Triad traits might be adaptive by providing specialized “cheater” adaptations (Jonason & Webster, 2012; Mealey, 1995). In this study, we try to better understand this proposed latent cheater strategy that may be underneath the surface of each of these traits.

Despite some efforts to treat the Dark Triad traits as a collective (e.g., Jonason, Li, Webster, & Schmitt, 2009) it is clear the three traits have unique interpersonal (e.g., friendship motivations) and intrapersonal outcomes (e.g., self-control) linked to them each. In order to understand the unique cheater strategy that characterizes each trait, we examine them in relation to measures of deception. We examine the correlations between domain-general measures of lying and domain-specific measures of lying.

In terms of domain-specific measures of deception we expect a number of findings. While few people lie, it may be predominantly

done by those high on psychopathy (Kashy & DePaulo, 1996; Serota & Levine, 2014) and Machiavellianism may be conceptually similar to psychopathy (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Therefore, we predict that psychopathy and Machiavellianism will be associated with deception in a domain-general fashion. In particular, the traits should be correlated with telling more lies. However, the motivations behind deception might be seen in (1) telling lies for no reason and (2) telling white lies. Those high in psychopathy may have a less strategic and more impulsive approach to life than those high in Machiavellianism (Jones & Paulhus, 2011). This may translate into high psychopathy individuals telling more lies for no reason whereas those high on Machiavellianism may strategically use white lies more. Last, narcissism may be a particularly selfish trait (Jonason, Li, & Teicher, 2010) which might translate into deception for self-gain but narcissists also tend to over-estimate their abilities (Campbell, Goodie, & Foster, 2004), which may relate to the belief that they are good at telling lies.

In addition, we examine how the Dark Triad traits relate to deception that might be particularly relevant to those high in the Dark Triad: competition (Jones, 2013) and mating (Jonason et al., 2009). Those high in psychopathy and Machiavellianism may have a particularly exploitive mating strategy (Jonason, Luévano, & Adams, 2012), which could have an association with being deceptive in a wide range of intersexual contexts, such as deceiving potential mates about dominance, sincerity, sexual intentions, and involvement in the relationship. In contrast, narcissism may be a lighter trait in the cluster (Rauthmann, 2012). We expect those high in narcissism to lie about their dominance and appearance

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which is consistent with their desire for status and prestige and focus on physical attractiveness (Raskin & Terry, 1988). With regards to intrasexual deception, we expect the links to be loaded up on psychopathy, given its particularly aggressive nature (Lykken, 2006), and narcissism, which is characterized by the need for admiration and rivalry within one's own sex (Back et al., 2013).

Above we have focused on overall relationships but we have reason to believe the sex of the participant may help us further understand the cheater strategies linked to the Dark Triad traits. Empirically, men score higher on the Dark Triad traits (Jonason et al., 2009) and deceive more (Kashy & DePaulo, 1996) than women do. This might translate into mediation effects such that sex differences in deception might be, in part, accounted for by individual differences in the Dark Triad traits. Theoretically speak, if we take a Life History Theory perspective (Rushton, 1985), we predict (in an exploratory fashion) that one of the reasons men lie more than women do is because they may benefit more than women do from engaging in an exploitive social-sexual strategy.

We provide new data testing the “cheater strategy” hypothesis about the Dark Triad. We examine how the traits relate to domain-general measures of lying, such as the frequency of lying and use of white lies. We examine how the traits relate to domain-specific lying by assessing intersexual and intrasexual deception. Last, we test for mediation of sex differences in lying by individual differences in the Dark Triad.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

Altogether, 447 participants (161 men) completed ($M_{Age} = 23.47$, $SD_{Age} = 7.90$) an online study on “personality and deception in relationships” was advertised to students in the United Kingdom ($n = 308$) and Australia ($n = 139$)¹. Participants were informed of the nature of the study, completed the measures, and, upon completion, were thanked and debriefed.

2.2. Measures

Psychopathy was measured with the 64-item Self-Report Psychopathy Scale-III (Paulhus, Neumann, & Hare, 2009). Participants rate how much they agree with statements such as “I enjoy driving at high speeds” (1 = *Strongly disagree*; 5 = *Strongly agree*). Items were averaged together to create an index of psychopathy (Cronbach's $\alpha = .92$).

Narcissism was assessed with the 40-item Narcissistic Personality Inventory (Raskin & Terry, 1988). For each of the items, participants choose the statement that best applies to them. One of the statements reflects narcissistic attitudes (e.g., “I have a natural talent for influencing people”), whereas the other does not (e.g., “I am not good at influencing people”). The total number of the narcissistic statements chosen by the participants are added and averaged to form an index of narcissism ($\alpha = .87$).

The 20-item Mach-IV scale (Christie & Geis, 1970) was used to measure Machiavellianism. Participants were asked how much they agree with statements such as “It's hard to get ahead without cutting corners here and there” (1 = *Strongly disagree*; 7 = *Strongly agree*). The items were averaged to create an index of Machiavellianism ($\alpha = .53$).^{2,3}

¹ Differences were not detected as a function of sample-type/location.

² Not ideal (Nunnally, 1978), but it passes the liberal threshold of .50 (Schmitt, 1996).

³ Psychopathy was correlated with Machiavellianism ($r(445) = .62$, $p < .01$), and narcissism ($r(445) = .55$, $p < .01$). Narcissism was correlated with Machiavellianism ($r(445) = .34$, $p < .01$).

Table 1

Zero-order correlations and regression coefficients for the Dark Triad and domain-general measures lying.

Lie measures	r (β)		
	Narcissism	Machiavellianism	Psychopathy
Number of lies	.10* (.01)	.21** (.13)	.21** (.14)
Number of people lied to	.07 (–.08)	.20** (.07)	.25** (.25**)
Number of self-gain lies	.20** (.18)	.12* (–.04)	.14* (.03)
Number of white lies	.06 (.04)	.13* (.14*)	.07 (–.05)
Number of no reason for lies	.18* (.05)	.16* (.03)	.26** (.27**)
Self-rated lying ability	.29** (.14*)	.27** (.05)	.40** (.28**)

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

In order to find out about the deception tendencies of the participants, we asked them, in reference to the last seven days, (i) How many lies they have told, (ii) How many different people did they lie to, (iii) How many self-gain lies did they tell, (iv) How many lies did they tell in order not to hurt another person, and (v) How many lies they told just because they felt like it. We also asked participants to rate themselves on how good they are in telling lies (1 = *Very poor*; 5 = *Very good*).

We used the Deceptive Mating Tactics Scale (Tooke & Camire, 1991) to examine intersexual and intrasexual deception. Participants were asked to recall the frequency of lies (1 = *Never*; 5 = *Very frequently*) they have told in the past two years in order to impress a member of their own sex (e.g., “How often have you greeted members of the opposite sex that you don't know in order to appear popular among your friends”). They were also asked to recall the frequency of lying to members of the opposite-sex (i.e., intersexual strategy; e.g., “How often have you acted more humble than you really are”; 1 = *Never*; 5 = *Very frequently*). Intersexual deception ($\alpha s = .71$ –.91) and intrasexual deception ($\alpha s = .61$ –.85) were measured with various subscales (see Table 2).⁴

3. Results

Men scored higher than women did on the Dark Triad traits ($ts(445) = 3.27$ – 7.00 , $ps < .01$, Cohen's $ds = 0.30$ – 0.68). Men told more lies, lied to more people, told more lies for no reason, told more lies related to intrasexual promiscuity and intensity, and rated their lying ability better than women did ($ts(445) = 2.43$ – 4.32 , $ps < .01$, $ds = 0.23$ – 0.43). Women, in turn, told more intersexual lies about their appearance than men did ($t(445) = -11.07$, $p < .01$, $d = 1.13$).

We examined the associations between the Dark Triad and domain-general deception (Table 1). The number of lies had a positive relationship with psychopathy and Machiavellianism, but not with narcissism. Psychopathy was positively correlated with the number of people that participants reported having lied to. Self-gain lies had a significant, positive relationship with narcissism, and altruistic lies with Machiavellianism. Psychopathy was related to telling lies for no particular reason, and both narcissism and psychopathy (but not Machiavellianism) were related to increased self-rated lying ability.

Evidence for moderation (Fisher's z) by the sex of the participant was rare ($p < .01$). Higher Machiavellianism was linked to telling lies for no reason in women ($r(286) = .30$, $p < .01$), but not in men ($r(161) = .01$; $z = 3.02$, $p < .01$). Psychopathy was more strongly related to self-rated lying ability in women ($r(286) = .43$, $p < .01$) than in men ($r(161) = .24$, $p < .01$; $z = 2.23$, $p < .01$). When

⁴ More details available upon request.

Table 2

Zero-order correlations and regression coefficients for intra- and inter-sexual tactics and Dark Triad.

	<i>r</i> (β)		
	Narcissism	Machiavellianism	Psychopathy
Intersexual deception	.25** (.08)	.35** (.20**)	.33** (.20**)
Dominance	.28** (.13)	.25** (.06)	.34** (.24**)
Appearance	.13* (.15)	.12* (.15)	.04 (–.13)
Sincerity	.21** (.03)	.33** (.20**)	.34** (.20**)
Sexual intentions	.32** (.10)	.31** (.21**)	.29** (.11)
Involvement	.24** (.05)	.32** (.14)	.38** (.29**)
Third party	.27** (.09)	.29** (.08)	.38** (.28**)
Self-representation	.08 (–.04)	.26** (.21**)	.21** (.10)
Intrasexual deception	.27** (.06)	.34** (.12)	.40** (.33**)
Promiscuity	.31** (.09)	.30** (.03)	.45** (.39**)
Intensity	.34** (.18)	.28** (.07)	.38** (.24**)
Popularity	.30** (.12)	.26** (.05)	.37** (.26**)
Indifference	.16* (–.05)	.32** (.16*)	.35** (.27**)
Superiority	.18* (.01)	.23** (.04)	.33** (.30**)

* $p < .05$.** $p < .01$.

we tested for mediation (Sobel's z) psychopathy emerged as a significant mediator between sex and self-rated lying ability ($z = -3.20, p < .001$). Sex differences ($\beta = -.18, p < .01$) in self-rated lying ability were fully mediated ($\beta = -.05$) by higher psychopathy scores in men.

We examined the associations between the Dark Triad traits and domain-specific deception (Table 2). Machiavellianism was linked to a wider range of intersexual competition tactics than intrasexual competition tactics, including intersexual deception tactics of appearance, sincerity, sexual intentions, involvement, and third party and the intrasexual deception tactics of indifference. Narcissism was linked to the intersexual deception tactics of dominance and appearance and the intrasexual deceptions tactics of intensity and popularity. The correlations did not differ across the sexes ($p < .01$). Mediation tests revealed that psychopathy fully mediated the relationship between sex and intrasexual deception about promiscuity ($z = -8.66, p < .001$). Significant sex differences ($\beta = .22, p < .01$) disappeared when psychopathy was added as a predictor in the regression model ($\beta = -.01$).

4. Discussion

The evolutionary approach to the Dark Triad asserts that the traits embody a cheater strategy (Jonason & Webster, 2012; Mealey, 1995). However, this fundamental assertion has not really been empirically examined until now. In this report, we provide the first evidence that (1) tests this assertion but (2) examines how the Dark Triad traits may all embody their own unique cheater strategy by examining domain-general and domain-specific measures of deception.

While all three traits were linked to various forms of deception, a number of general observations are worth noting. First, it was clear that psychopathy and Machiavellianism are more similar in their cheater strategy than narcissism. Second, despite the overlap between psychopathy and Machiavellianism, psychopathy generally evidenced its more aggressive and exploitive nature (Jonason & Webster, 2012; Lykken, 2006) whereas Machiavellianism revealed evidence of its more strategic nature (Jones & Paulhus, 2011) in its link with telling more white lies. Third, we found psychopathy was related to lies for dominance, sincerity, and sexual intentions. Fourth, narcissism was only associated with intersexual deception for dominance and appearance.

We replicated sex differences in the Dark Triad traits and deception. We added tentative—albeit thin—evidence suggesting what might account for some of these sex differences might be individual differences in the Dark Triad traits. This is consistent with the contention that the Dark Triad traits might be adaptations for exploitation especially for men. From an evolutionary perspective, men pay fewer costs and gain more from engaging in an exploitive approach to life than women do (Jonason et al., 2009).

Our study was not without limitations. We were reliant on a WEIRD (i.e., western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic; see Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010) sample, nearly all research on the Dark Triad traits has been conducted using such samples. We failed to assess actual lying ability mostly because doing so has proved particularly difficult in research settings (Book, Holden, Starzyk, Wasylkiw, & Edwards, 2006). Nevertheless, our study provides new details about the hypothesis that the Dark Triad traits reflect cheater strategies but we also add nuance suggesting that each may have its own unique cheater tactics in the form of deception.

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