

The Dark Triad and Attitudes toward Academic Cheating

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Abstract

The current study examined the relationship between the Dark Triad of personality (Machiavellianism, narcissism and psychopathy) and attitudes toward academic cheating. While past research has linked personality traits, including the dark traits, to dishonest academic behaviors, little research has focused on attitudes toward cheating. During an anonymous online survey, a sample of undergraduate college students indicated their endorsement of statements both tolerant and condemnatory of academic cheating on the Attitude toward Cheating Scale (ATC; Gardner & Melvin, 1988) and completed the Short Dark Triad (SD3; Paulhus, 2013; Jones & Paulhus, 2014). Multiple regression analysis was used to predict tolerance of academic cheating from Dark Triad scores, and results indicated that Machiavellianism and psychopathy were significant predictors, while narcissism was not. Additional analyses included an examination of gender differences and relations to GP.

Keywords: Dark Triad, narcissism, Machiavellianism, psychopathy, cheating attitudes

The Dark Triad of personality includes three socially-aversive traits that lie within the normal range of functioning: Machiavellianism, narcissism and psychopathy (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). These traits are considered socially aversive due to their association with values that promote selfish behavior and run counter to current social norms for selflessness. Machiavellianism is characterized by strategic manipulation of others, callousness and alliance building (Paulhus & Jones, 2015). Narcissism manifests as grandiose self-views, self-promotion and feelings of entitlement. Psychopathy is defined by callous manipulation, lack of remorse, impulsivity, and antisocial behavior. Overall, the dark traits share characteristics of self-promotion, emotional coldness, and aggressiveness (Paulhus & Williams, 2002).

Research efforts have focused on understanding the common core that links the dark traits. Some researchers propose disagreeableness as the core element, since all dark triad traits have correlated negatively with the Big Five factor of Agreeableness (Jakobwitz & Egan, 2006; Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Jones and Figueredo (2013) identified manipulation and callousness as the core component of the dark triad. All dark triad traits have been associated with deficits in global empathy and affective empathy (Wai & Tiliopoulos, 2012), and additional deficits have been found in cognitive empathy for individuals high on psychopathy (Jonason & Kroll, 2015). In the latter study, however, narcissism, was found to be positively correlated with affective dimensions of empathy. Lee and Ashton (2005) point to Honesty-Humility as the common thread among the three dark traits.

Aghababaei, Mohammadtabar and Saffarinia (2014) found a negative relationship between Machiavellianism and honesty and a negative relationship between narcissism and humility. Additionally, individuals high on Machiavellianism reported an overall tendency to manipulate and deceive. Baughman, Jonason, Lyons and Vernon (2014) found that all dark traits are linked to frequency of lying.

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Machiavellianism related to lying in different contexts, including academic dishonesty, psychopathy related to more positive emotions associated with lying and Machiavellianism related to increased cognitive effort associated with deception (i.e., planning ahead, trying for original lies, including more detail). Psychopathy and Machiavellianism were linked to a higher number of lies, psychopathy to telling more lies for no reason, and Machiavellianism to telling more altruistic lies. Individuals high on narcissism reported lying more often for self-gain, and, along with those high on psychopathy, reported a higher skill at lying. In other research, Machiavellianism showed the strongest association with self-perceived skill at deception, while narcissism and psychopathy showed moderate correlation (Gianmarco, Atkinson, Baughman, Veselka, & Vernon, 2013).

Given these past research findings on the Dark Triad and dishonesty, the current research sought to explore the dark traits and academic dishonesty. Past research has examined the link between dishonest academic behavior, specifically, and various personality traits and individual differences. For instance, traits like conscientiousness and excitement seeking have been found to correlate with self-reported academic dishonesty (de Bruin & Rudnick, 2007). In their meta-analysis, Giluk and Postlethwaite (2015) reported conscientiousness and agreeableness as the strongest Big Five predictors of academic dishonesty, a finding similar to that reported by Nathanson, Paulhus and Williams (2006). If disagreeableness relates to academic dishonesty as it relates to the Dark Triad, then the dark traits would be expected to correlate with academic cheating and plagiarism. Indeed, Nathanson, Paulhus and Williams (2006) found that the three dark traits were strongly correlated with naturalistic cheating, but psychopathy emerged as the strongest predictor. A similar pattern occurred in Williams, Nathanson and Paulhus (2010) with both self-report and behavioral measures of academic cheating and plagiarism.

While research findings have established that the dark traits can reliably predict cheating behavior, the relationship between dark personality and attitudes toward cheating has not been directly examined. Attitudes toward academic dishonesty tend to correlate with cheating behavior (Whitley, 1998) and significantly predict intention to cheat (e.g., Stone, Jawahar & Kisamore, 2010), so it is important to continuously examine attitudes and intentions as precursors to cheating behavior. Indeed, when attitudes toward academic dishonesty are considered, models of cheating behavior appear better informed (Bolin, 2004). This study was aimed at addressing this lack of research on attitudes toward cheating, but also to expand on the research on personality and cheating attitudes. Past research on personality and cheating attitudes has focused almost exclusively on the Big Five, and from what is available, it appears that conscientiousness is the only Big Five trait that directly predicts attitudes toward cheating (Day, Hudson, Dobies & Waris, 2011). With this in mind, the current research examined how well the dark traits predict attitudes toward cheating. It was hypothesized that the Dark Triad traits are significant predictors of attitudes toward cheating, where higher scores on the dark traits (Machiavellianism, narcissism and psychopathy) are related to higher endorsement of attitudes toward cheating.

Additionally, recent research suggests that the dark traits should be understood as unique characteristics, but it is best to assess them simultaneously given their overlapping defining qualities (Paulhus, 2014). The *Short Dark Triad* scale (SD3; Jones & Paulhus, 2014; Paulhus, 2013) offers an efficient assessment of the Dark Triad, and the current research attempted to provide further validation for the SD3, in the context of attitudes toward cheating.

Method

Participants

The sample consisted of 681 undergraduate students (511 women, 170 men) enrolled at a university in South Texas. The majority of the participants were between the ages of 18 and 29 years (92.66%) and identified as Hispanic (96.33%). This ethnic makeup is equivalent to that of the community where the university is located, which is approximately 96% Hispanic. As such, this sample represents a sample of convenience, not specifically a planned analysis of Hispanic students, although we note that Hispanic samples are underrepresented in psychological research.

Measures

Demographics. A demographics questionnaire was used to collect data on gender, age, academic classification, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and religious preference. Additionally, participants were asked to provide their estimated cumulative grade point average (GPA).

Attitudes toward Cheating. The *Attitude toward Cheating Scale* (ATC; Gardner & Melvin, 1988) includes 34 items that assess attitudes toward academic cheating, using a 5-point Likert-type scale (+2 = *strongly*

agree, -1 = agree, 0 = undecided, +1 = disagree, and -2 = strongly disagree). Twenty items reflect tolerant attitudes toward cheating and must be reverse scored before calculating a total score across all 34 items. Therefore, total scores range from -102 to +102, where higher scores indicate more condemnatory attitudes, while lower scores indicate more tolerant attitudes. Gardner and Melvin (1988) reported a split-half reliability of $r = .82$.

Dark Triad of Personality. The *Short Dark Triad* (SD3; Paulhus, 2013; Jones & Paulhus, 2014) includes three subscales with nine items each. The Machiavellianism (Mach) subscale includes items related to cynicism and strategic manipulateness, the narcissism (Narc) subscale includes items related to grandiosity and entitlement, and the psychopathy (Psyc) subscale includes items related to callous affect and antisocial behavior. Responses to a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) are used to calculate average scores, so the range of scores is 1-5. Higher average scores on each subscale indicate a higher degree of the respective dark trait. Internal consistencies previously reported by Paulhus (2013) were $\alpha = .78$ (Mach), $\alpha = .77$ (Narc), and $\alpha = .80$ (Psyc).

Procedure

Participants were recruited through their psychology courses. Instructors shared information regarding access to the online survey on Survey Monkey, and compensation (e.g., extra course credit) was at their discretion. Participants were required to grant informed consent before continuing to the questionnaires. If they refused, they were exited from the survey without access to the questions. The online survey included a demographics sheet (i.e., gender, ethnicity, estimated GPA, socio-economic status), the measure of attitudes toward cheating and the measure of the dark traits. Upon completion, participants received a message thanking them for their participation and reminding them of the investigators' contact information in case they had any questions or concerns.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

There were no missing values among the data. Cronbach's alphas were calculated for each of the *Short Dark Triad* subscales and attitudes toward cheating (see Table 1). Reliability analysis revealed values comparable with past research for Mach ($\alpha = .72$), and Psyc ($\alpha = .74$), but the alpha was lower for Narc ($\alpha = .55$). For the *Attitudes toward Cheating Scale*, reliability was comparable with that previously reported by Gardner and Melvin (1988), Cronbach's $\alpha = .81$. Since Gardner and Melvin calculated also split-half reliability for their measure of cheating attitudes, the same was done with using this sample's responses and results a comparable $r = .79$.

Since alphas were satisfactory, scores were calculated in line with previous research. Average scores were calculated for each of the dark triad subscales and a total score was calculated for cheating attitudes. Means and standard deviations were then calculated for each of the scales and GPA (see Table 1).

Table 1.
Descriptive statistics and Cronbach's alphas.

Scale	Women		Men		Full Sample		Cronbach's α
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
GPA	3.03	.51	3.04	.54	3.04	.52	--
MACH	3.18	.61	3.40	.69	3.23	.64	.72
NARC	3.07	.48	3.14	.54	3.08	.50	.55
PSYC	2.21	.65	2.51	.61	2.29	.65	.74
ATC	7.57	13.75	5.96	17.04	7.17	14.65	.81

Note. Women (N=511); Men (N=170); Full Sample (N=681).

Bivariate Correlations

The bivariate correlations between scores on all measures are presented in Table 2. Consistent with previous research, such as Jones and Paulhus (2014), the dark triad scores revealed strong inter-correlations (all $p <$

.01). Additionally, all Dark Triad dimensions showed negative correlations with attitudes toward cheating, which suggests that individuals who scored high on the dark triad traits endorsed less conservative attitudes toward cheating.

Table 2.
Bivariate correlations.

Scale	1	2	3	4	5
GPA	--				
MACH	-.025	--			
NARC	.069	.302**	--		
PSYC	-.062	.412**	.194**	--	
ATC	.113**	-.280**	-.139**	-.341**	--

Note. N = 681; ** p < 0.01.

Regression Analyses

To control for the overlap in the Dark Triad dimensions and to assess the unique contribution to attitudes toward cheating of each dark trait, multiple regression analysis was conducted. Average scores on each Dark Triad subscale were entered simultaneously as predictors and total scores on the attitudes measure were entered as the dependent variable. Significant predictors of attitudes toward cheating were Machiavellianism ($\beta = -.16$, $p = .00$) and psychopathy ($\beta = -.27$, $p = .00$), while narcissism was not a significant predictor ($\beta = -.04$, $p = .30$). Higher scores on Machiavellianism and psychopathy were related to lower scores on attitudes toward cheating (i.e., *higher* endorsement of cheating). That is, individuals high in Machiavellianism and psychopathy reported more tolerant (less conservative) attitudes toward cheating.

Table 3.

Multiple regression predicting Attitudes toward Cheating from GPA and the Dark Triad.

	β	t	p
GPA	.11*	2.96	.003
MACH	-.16**	-3.89	.000
NARC	-.04	-1.05	.295
PSYC	-.27**	-6.86	.000

Note. $N = 681$; * $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.001$.

Additional Analyses

One-way ANOVA revealed significant gender differences for Machiavellianism ($F = 13.92$, $p = .000$) and psychopathy ($F = 28.67$, $p = .000$), where men scored higher than women on these dark traits. No significant gender differences were found for narcissism or attitudes toward cheating.

A common research finding is an inverse relationship between GPA and both self-reported and observed cheating behavior (Miller, Murdock, Anderman & Poindexter, 2007), but some research findings show also an inverse relationship with attitudes toward cheating (e.g., Roig & Neaman, 1994), so GPA was examined as a predictor. Using simple regression, GPA emerged as a significant predictor of attitudes toward cheating ($\beta = .11$, $p = .003$), where higher GPA was associated with higher scores on attitudes toward cheating (i.e., lower endorsement of cheating). Therefore, attitudes tolerant of cheating were more likely to be reported by those with a lower GPA, much like reported in past research. Differences in GPA were examined by gender and dark traits, but no significant differences were found.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine how well the dark traits predict attitudes toward cheating. It was hypothesized that the Dark Triad traits are significant predictors of attitudes toward cheating, where higher scores on the dark traits (*Machiavellianism*, *narcissism* and *psychopathy*) are related to higher endorsement of attitudes toward cheating. GPA was examined also as a predictor of cheating attitudes and gender differences in both Dark Triad traits and GPA were investigated.

In line with what was predicted, all dark traits correlated negatively with cheating attitude scores, which indicated that higher scores on the dark triad subscales were related to lower scores, or more tolerant attitudes toward cheating. Multiple regression analysis revealed that Machiavellianism and psychopathy significantly accounted for variance in cheating attitudes and narcissism, independently, was not a significant predictor of cheating attitudes. These results with cheating attitudes mirror past research with cheating behaviors (Williams, Nathanson, & Paulhus, 2010). Dark traits may predict cheating attitudes much like they predict cheating behavior, and this suggests a link between cheating attitudes and cheating behavior in line with models of cheating behavior (Bolin, 2004).

In previous work, Narcissism has shown a weak relationship to academic dishonesty and other deceptive behavior (Williams, Nathanson, & Paulhus, 2010), so the current weak relationship to attitudes toward cheating is in line with past research. Narcissism has been linked to lying more often for self-gain (Gianmarco et al., 2013), so it may significantly predict academic dishonesty to the extent that it is perceived as something that will specifically gain one public recognition. Machiavellianism and psychopathy are defined by manipulation and deception, so their stronger relationship to attitudes toward cheating is justified. Psychopathy, however, may more strongly predict attitudes toward cheating since those high in psychopathy often tell lies for no reason, while those high in Machiavellianism may be more strategic in their use of deception (Baughman et al., 2014).

Machiavellianism and psychopathy revealed significant gender differences, while narcissism did not. Results for Machiavellianism and psychopathy are consistent with past research, but narcissism did not show the difference that has previously been found using the SD3 (Jones & Paulhus, 2014). It is possible that low internal consistency in the narcissism subscale is associated with the poor prediction of attitudes toward cheating and no gender differences, but the present results still support previous findings. Findings from this study also support past

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