Follow the Narcissist: Dark Triad Traits and Their Association to Involvement and Leadership on Campus

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Introduction

The Dark Triad Traits (DTT) are composed of three deviant personalities: psychopathy (remorseless, impulsive, antisocial, exploitative, and sensation-seeking), narcissism (conceited, egotistical, and interpersonally superficial), and Machiavellianism (coercive, manipulative, power-driven, and opportunistic) (Cooke & Mitchie, 2001; Crowe et al., 2019; Hare, 2003; Mirkovic & Bianchi, 2019; Paulhus & Williams, 2002). The purpose of the current study is to examine how the DTT may be uniquely associated with involvement in campus activities and leadership positions.

In terms of involvement, psychopaths and Machiavellians have little internal motivation for emotional intimacy and affiliation with groups, suggesting that both personalities are unlikely to pursue involvement in campus groups. In contrast, narcissists desire social ties and interpersonal connections, suggesting they are likely to be involved in college organizations (Jonason et al., 2016).

Several characteristics of DTT may also contribute to the pursuit of leadership positions. Psychopaths are socially dominant (Jones & Figueredo, 2013), and engage in thrill-and-sensation-seeking activities (Dickey, 2014). These characteristics may push psychopaths towards taking authority roles that allow control over others and contain elements of risk. Potential adaptive characteristics of psychopathy, like assertiveness (Lilienfield, 2015), charismatic leadership (Vergauwe et al., 2021), low anxiety, and high self-confidence may be beneficial in maintaining authority in occupations such as policework (Falkenbach et al., 2017) and corporate work (Babiak et al., 2010). Narcissists crave status, respect, and recognition to validate their egos (Zeigler-Hill et al., 2019). Narcissists are charming on first impressions, and this may help them ingratiate themselves to others and help them secure leadership positions (Galvin et al., 2010). Obtaining leadership positions to dominate others may fulfill the narcissist's need for prestige. Qualities associated with narcissism such as being bold have been associated with increased leadership development throughout multiple years within occupations such as the military (Harms et al., 2011). Lastly, Machiavellians desire the power to control and dominate others (Jonson & Ferrell, 2016). Machiavellians may pursue success and attempt to keep power within occupational settings through different methods of manipulation and controlling others' perceptions of them (Kessler et al., 2010). This Machiavellian tendency to use multiple means to achieve power predicts Machiavellian individuals may procure more leadership roles to maximize control over others.

Based on previous research, we hypothesize that 1) psychopathy and Machiavellianism will independently predict less campus involvement, and narcissism will independently predict greater involvement, and 2) psychopathy, Machiavellianism, and narcissism will independently predict taking on more leadership positions.

Methods

Participants: 419 undergraduates (82.6% white, 70.6% female), ranging in age from 18 to 35 were recruited from a northeastern university.

**Procedures:** Participants completed a battery of self-report questionnaires.

Measures: The Short Dark Triad (Jones & Paulhus, 2014) was used to measure psychopathy, Machiavellianism, and narcissism. The College Student Experiences Questionnaire (Zhao, 2002) was used to measure campus involvement and leadership positions.

Table 1. Bivariate Correlations

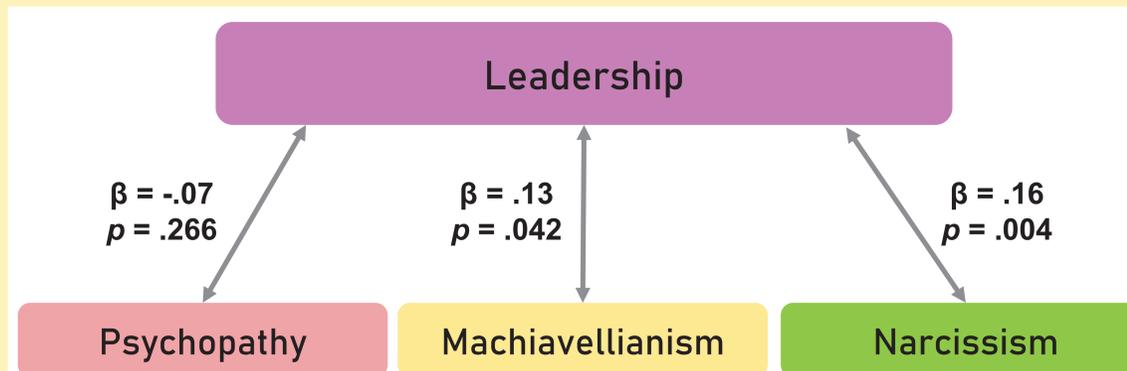|	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	*M*	*SD*
1. Age	-	.12	-.01	.04	.04	.19**	.20**	19.21	1.72
2. Sex		-	.30**	.21**	.21**	-.02	.06	-	-
3. PSYC			(.81)	.62**	.40**	-.00	.07	11.67	5.66
4. MACH				(.80)	.42**	.11*	.16**	17.78	5.68
5. NARC					(.68)	.17**	.19**	17.43	4.66
6. INV						(.72)	.79**	.86	.71
7. LEAD							-	.75	1.04

Note. PSYC = psychopathy, MACH = Machiavellianism, NARC = narcissism, INV = campus involvement, LEAD = campus leadership, numbers in parentheses represent Cronbach's alphas
*p < .05, **p < .01

Figure 1. Involvement and Dark Triad Traits

Involvement

β = -.15, p = .019 — Psychopathy
β = .13, p = .038 — Machiavellianism
β = .16, p = .002 — Narcissism
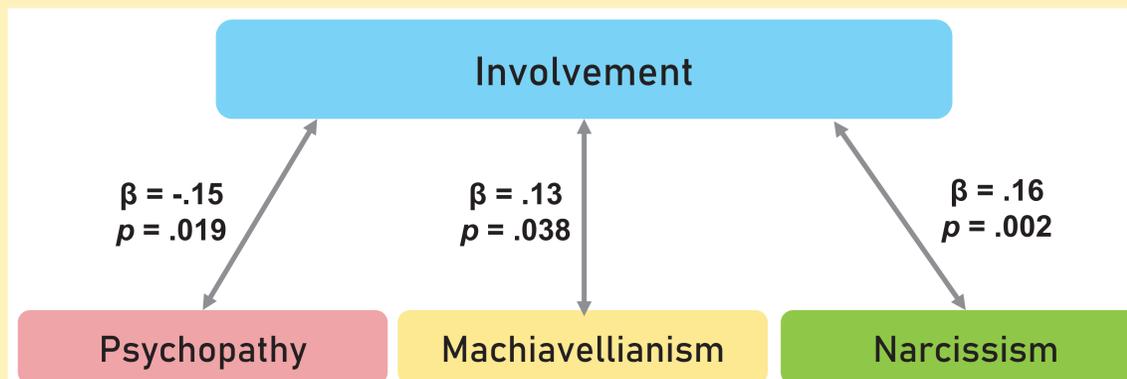
Note: Standardized betas reported.

Figure 2. Leadership and Dark Triad Traits

Leadership

β = -.07, p = .266 — Psychopathy
β = .13, p = .042 — Machiavellianism
β = .16, p = .004 — Narcissism

Note. Standardized betas reported.

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Results and Discussion

As shown in Table 1, correlation analyses indicated that age was significantly positively correlated with involvement and leadership, thus age was controlled for in subsequent regressions. Consistent with prior research, the three personalities were significantly positively correlated with each other. Only Machiavellianism and narcissism were significantly positively correlated with involvement and leadership; psychopathy was not.

Multiple regression analyses were used to test the independent associations between DTT with involvement and leadership. After controlling for age, involvement was associated with psychopathy (β = -.15), Machiavellianism (β = .13), and narcissism (β = .16), all ps < .05 (Figure 1). Leadership was associated with Machiavellianism (β = .13) and narcissism (β = .16), all ps < .05 (Figure 2).

Partially supporting our first hypothesis, greater levels of Machiavellian and narcissistic traits predicted greater campus involvement. Interestingly, psychopathy now uniquely predicted less involvement in campus activities. Further, narcissism showed the strongest association with involvement, which is consistent with research that shows narcissistic individuals pursue social engagements to uphold their self-image. Inconsistent with our hypotheses, Machiavellian individuals may actually seek greater campus engagement due to their opportunistic nature (Mirkovic & Bianchi, 2019). Regular involvement in college activity may be sufficient to allow them to network and manipulate others while helping give access to later leadership roles (Bereczkei, 2018). Meanwhile, psychopaths may ruin social ties with their antisocial tendencies; lack desire for intimacy, affiliation, or achievement (Jonason et al., 2016); and thus may be less likely to be involved in social settings.

Our second hypothesis was partially supported. In terms of attaining leadership positions, individuals who possess Machiavellian characteristics (strategic tendency to exploit others for power) and narcissistic traits (egocentrism and inflated self-admiration) are more likely to pursue positions that put them in charge of others (Packer West et al., 2021). Positions of power may have different appeals for both groups: Machiavellians crave domination of others alone (Jonson & Ferrell, 2016); narcissists only chase after the reputability of being able to do so (Mahadevan et al., 2019). Psychopathic traits may have failed to predict leadership due to various reasons. Traits such as self-assurance and stress tolerance may assist assuming authority, while other traits like low conscientiousness and deviance could be detrimental to doing so (Falkenbach et al., 2017). The distinct aspect of psychopathy characterized with reckless, impulsive, and risk-taking tendencies (Williams et al., 2007; Ermer & Kiehl, 2010) may contribute to psychopaths making careless or rash decisions (Neo et al., 2016). Psychopaths' impulsivity and antisocial tendencies may create an unreliable and adverse perception of them, lowering the likelihood they will get selected for these positions.

Overall, our findings suggest that Machiavellian and narcissistic individuals may not only be members in more organizations in their undergraduate career but are also more likely to volunteer for duties within these organizations that allow them more jurisdiction and command over others. Machiavellians may want to rule over others while narcissists want admiration and superiority. Furthermore, psychopaths are less likely to be involved in on-campus activities due to their disinterest in creating social ties. Psychopathy is unrelated to adopting leadership positions possibly due to an inability to inhibit behavior, which may undermine collective goals of clubs or associations and compromise their reputation of being dependable. Unfavorable social images of psychopathic individuals may harm ability to attain leadership positions.