

Disturbing Concerns for Dark Personalities: Anxiety Sensitivity and the Dark Triad

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Abstract

Former empirical findings on psychopathy, narcissism and anxiety symptoms suggested that even socially aversive or antisocial personality traits could be positively related to the different dimensions of anxiety. However, the relationship between the Dark Triad and anxiety sensitivity – the tendency to interpret the different effects (physiological, psychological, and social) of anxiety experiences as aversive or threatening – hasn't been investigated, yet. Based on previous research and the unique strategies associated with dark personality traits, we predicted that narcissists, psychopaths, and Machiavellians would react to anxiety symptoms in a unique way. Predictions were tested with self-report measures. In line with our assumptions, psychopathy was positively associated with Cognitive Concerns and marginally with Physical Concerns. Machiavellianism was related to Social Concerns, whereas narcissism showed negative association with the same dimension of anxiety sensitivity. Results are discussed from a perspective where Dark Triad traits are considered as pseudopatologies.

Keywords

Dark Triad; Anxiety Sensitivity; Pseudopatologies

Introduction

The Dark Triad (DT) construct is a personality framework dedicated specifically to the socially negative or hostile traits referring to three interrelated constructs of Machiavellianism, subclinical psychopathy, and subclinical narcissism [1]. Several socially aversive features form the common core of the Dark Triad traits, like callousness, being manipulative [2], selfishness, inability to delay gratification [3], low agreeableness and conscientiousness [4], and the low level of honesty-humility [5]. There is also a consistent gender difference in DT traits: males receive higher scores on DT measures [6] [1].

Although Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and narcissism are interrelated personality constructs, many studies suggest that each of these personalities represents a different aspect of the dark personality (e.g., [1] [5]). For example, narcissism is suggested to be characterized with a friendly-dominant, Machiavellianism mostly with a hostile-submissive, and psychopathy rather with a hostile-dominant interpersonal style [7]. Accordingly, DT traits appear to be uniquely associated with different facets of aggression [8]: psychopathy is positively related to physical aggression, narcissism associates negatively with hostility, whereas Machiavellianism positively predicts hostility. Moreover, regarding self-monitoring (i.e., explicit observation, regulation and control of the person's public presentation), narcissism is characterized by hope for gaining social rewards, Machiavellianism relates with fear of social rejection and psychopathy with both forms of this construct [9].

Consequently, a recent theorizing [10] has considered the DT traits as pseudopatologies. According to this approach, undesirable and socially aversive traits – such as the DT traits – can be beneficial for the individual even at the cost of the group or society [11]. To acquire these benefits, each DT personality uses somewhat different strategies (for a summary see [2]). Machiavellian individuals use others as means for reaching their goals. In doing so, they plan for long-term exploitation and carefully adapt to changing social environment. In psychopaths, lack of impulse control leads to failure of coordinating duplicitous behaviors. As a result, psychopaths use coercive tactics and often engage in high-risk behaviors even for little benefit. For narcissists, grandiose identity in itself provides gratification of their needs. Grandiosity - together with feelings of entitlement and a self-absorbed state of

mind – leads to disregard for others in narcissists.

Socially aversive or antisocial personality traits have been hypothesized to be negatively associated with anxiety symptoms [12], but more recent studies revealed high levels of comorbidity between anxiety disorders and antisocial personality disorder (for a summary see [13]) in community samples. One of the key factors in the development and maintenance of anxiety disorders is anxiety sensitivity (AS) [14]. AS is suggested to be a stable dispositional variable reflecting the tendency to interpret the different effects (physiological, psychological, and social) of anxiety experiences as aversive or threatening [15]. Individuals with elevated AS react negatively to anxiety experiences more often and they tend to believe that anxiety symptoms have adverse consequences. In contrast, individuals with low AS might experience anxiety symptoms as unpleasant but non-threatening [16]. Like in anxiety disorders, there are gender differences in AS as well: men are less likely to develop an anxiety disorder [17] and report less concern regarding the cognitive misinterpretation of the symptoms of and beliefs about anxiety than women [18].

Beyond gender differences, former studies on AS and measures of psychopathy and narcissism showed different patterns of relation between the different facets of these traits (i.e., primary vs. secondary psychopathy; vulnerable vs. grandiose narcissism) and AS [19]. More specifically, AS scores correlated positively with the interpersonal features linked to secondary psychopathy, whereas a negative correlation was found with measures of the core emotional deficits of psychopathy [19]. Considering narcissism, grandiose narcissists enjoy opportunities for self-enhancement and report low levels of trait anxiety [20], whereas vulnerable narcissists report higher state, trait, and attachment related anxiety. Current conceptualizations of AS propose a multidimensional structure, with a distinction between the fears of physical, social and cognitive consequences of anxiety symptoms [21].

Although previous studies investigated the interconnectedness of AS and the DT mostly within a psychopathological framework, we suggest that investigation of the relations between these two constructs might shed light to the unique reactions of narcissists, psychopaths, and Machiavellians to anxiety symptoms. More specifically, it is reasonable to predict that psychopathy associates with cognitive concerns because of the emotional and impulse control deficit linked to this trait. Based on their different strategies in manipulation and exploitation, Machiavellianism might be related with more social concerns, whereas we expected narcissism to be associated with less concerns about social consequences of anxiety. In the current study, we investigated these suggested associations with self-report measures of the DT and AS.

Method

Sample and Procedure

After giving their informed consent, 184 Hungarian undergraduate students (124 females) participated in the study. Their average age was 20.70 years ($SD = 2.69$). They filled out the questionnaires in small classes ranging from 15 to 30 in size. Participation was anonymous and voluntary, and participants received no reward in any form.

Measures

Short Dark Triad (SD3) [22]. SD3 is a 27-item self-report measure of three socially aversive personality traits. The three scales – each with 9 items evaluated on a 5-point Likert-scale – measure Machiavellianism (e.g., ‘Most people can be manipulated’; Cronbach’s $\alpha = .70$), narcissism (e.g., ‘I know that I am special because everyone keeps telling me so’; Cronbach’s $\alpha = .75$), and psychopathy (e.g., ‘Payback needs to be quick and nasty’; Cronbach’s $\alpha = .76$). Correlations between Machiavellianism and psychopathy ($r = .58$; $p < .001$), between Machiavellianism and narcissism ($r = .33$; $p < .001$), and between narcissism and psychopathy ($r = .49$; $p < .001$) were of expected direction and strength [23].

Anxiety Sensitivity Index (ASI) [24]. ASI is a 16-item self-report measure of anxiety sensitivity. Participants rated intensity of fears connected to different anxiety-related symptoms on a 5-point Likert-scale. ASI consists of three dimensions (i) Physical Concerns refer to fears of anxiety-related bodily sensations (e.g., ‘When my stomach is upset, I worry that I might be seriously ill’); (ii) Cognitive Concerns refer to fears of cognitive disorganization (e.g., ‘It scares me when I am unable to keep my mind on a task’) and (iii) Social Concerns refer to fears of negative social

consequences connected to anxiety (e.g., 'It is important for me not to appear nervous'). Internal consistency was acceptable for each dimension (Cronbach α : .88, .80, .64, respectively).

Statistical Analyses

We used IBM SPSS for Windows 22.0 for statistical analyses. We used MANOVAs to test gender differences on the DT components and on the different dimensions of AS and used Cohen's d s to demonstrate effect size. We also used hierarchical multiple linear regressions to test the relationship between components of the DT and the different dimensions of anxiety sensitivity.

Results

Descriptive statistics were computed and compared between genders (Table 1). MANOVAs showed a significant gender difference in the DT (Wilk's $\lambda = .942$; $F_{(180,3)} = 3.694$; $p < .05$) and a marginally significant gender difference in the dimensions of AS (Wilk's $\lambda = .960$; $F_{(180,3)} = 2.526$; $p = .059$). With respect to the components of the DT, ANOVAs revealed gender difference in Machiavellianism. Machiavellian traits were more characteristic of men than of women. With respect to the dimensions of AS, no significant gender difference emerged on any of the dimension.

TABLE 1 GENDER DIFFERENCES ON THE MEASURED VARIABLES; RESULTS OF ANOVAS

		Men (n = 58)		Women (n = 127)		F	p	Cohen's d
		M	SD	M	SD			
SD3 scales	Machiavellianism	29.70	5.01	26.92	5.80	9.803	< .005	.51
	Psychopathy	21.14	5.98	19.56	6.36	2.523	= .114	.26
	Narcissism	22.77	5.46	22.83	5.93	.004	= .953	.01
ASI dimensions	Physical Concerns	6.56	5.71	8.14	6.72	2.378	= .125	.25
	Cognitive Concerns	2.98	3.35	2.71	3.25	.273	= .602	.08
	Social Concerns	5.07	2.33	4.69	2.30	1.050	= .307	.16

To test the unique relationship of each component of the DT with dimensions of AS, we used hierarchical multiple linear regressions (Table 2). After controlling for the effects of gender and age, presence of more pronounced psychopathic traits was associated with more frequent experience of anxiety-related cognitive concerns and concerns with anxiety-related bodily sensations (marginally significant result). Higher levels of Machiavellianism related to more concern with the negative social consequences of anxiety, whereas more pronounced narcissism was marginally associated with less concern with the harmful social effects of anxiety.

TABLE 2 THE UNIQUE RELATIONSHIP OF EACH COMPONENT OF THE DARK TRIAD WITH DIMENSIONS OF ANXIETY SENSITIVITY; RESULTS OF HIERARCHICAL MULTIPLE LINEAR REGRESSIONS

Models	Predictors	Dimensions of anxiety sensitivity								
		Physical Concerns			Cognitive Concerns			Social Concerns		
		ΔR^2	β	p	ΔR^2	β	p	ΔR^2	β	p
Model 1	Gender (female)	.04	.107	= .144	(.02)	-.045	= .545	(.01)	-.077	= .300
	Age		-.157	< .05		-.144	= .052		-.031	= .677
Model 2	Gender	.05	.138	.063	.04	-.015	= .838	.05	-.025	= .736
	Age		-.147	.047		-.123	= .100		-.019	= .796
	Machiavellianism		.044	.628		.010	= .915		.213	< .05
	Psychopathy		.178	.070		.223	< .05		.019	= .846
	Narcissism		.017	.835		-.036	= .667		-.146	= .087

Note: all ΔR^2 values are significant at the level of .05, except for values in parentheses.

Discussion

The present study addressed the question of how dimensions of AS are associated with DT traits. In the first place, we successfully replicated the results of former studies regarding gender differences in DT features [6] [1] and in AS [18]. Consequently, we controlled the effects of gender in further analysis to clarify the distinguishable associations between dimensions of AS and each DT trait.

Taking our findings together, each of the DT traits appeared to be related to AS. This finding is in line with the findings of former studies on anxiety disorders, anxiety sensitivity and the different aspects of the Dark Triad. More specifically, psychopathy was related to Cognitive Concerns and marginally to Physical Concerns, suggesting that psychopathic individuals are more prone to be afraid of cognitive disorganization and in some degree, of anxiety-related bodily sensations. This finding is in line with the results of Lilienfeld and Perna [19] and with the personality features of psychopathy: their callousness and lack of empathy [25] suggest that they are not concerned about their social evaluation, rather about the cognitive or somatic effects of their anxiety experiences. In the case of exploiting others, engaging in high-risk behaviours or using hostile and dominant manipulative tactics, it is reasonable to be concerned about the cognitive or physical consequences of anxiety. The presence of anxious thoughts or symptoms presumably disable these types of behaviour or reduce their efficiency.

Machiavellianism predicted higher scores on the Social Concern dimension of ASI, suggesting that Machiavellian individuals are more afraid of being rejected by others. This concern about negative social evaluations is in line with previous findings on Machiavellians' protective self-monitoring [9] and ability to be flexible and to adapt in changing social situations [26]. Machiavellian individuals are more prone to use other as means to accomplish their goals. Accordingly, their success depends on their social reputation, thus they have to avoid personal confrontations and have to be sensitive for the social consequences of anxiety. Unlike Machiavellianism, narcissism was associated with less concerns about anxiety-related social consequences. Although this correlation was marginal, it corresponds with the core features of this trait: they are self-focused, dominant and ignore others (see [1]). Thus, narcissistic individuals disregard how they are perceived or evaluated by others.

The current study, first in the literature, revealed associations between dimensions of AS and DT traits. In line with several former studies, each DT trait was uniquely related to different dimensions of ASI according to their different manipulative tactics and interpersonal behaviour. As mentioned in the introduction, AS refers to an individual's tendency to interpret effects of anxiety as aversive or threatening [15]. Dark personalities might experience effects of anxiety aversive or threatening as far as they interfere with their exploitative tactics.

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