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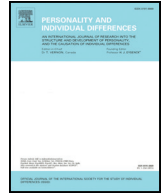


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## Keep calm and don't worry: Different Dark Triad traits predict distinct coping preferences

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### ABSTRACT

Studies on reactions to psychological stress suggest a strong association between personality traits and coping style. Despite of the many studies on this topic, there is a lack research that has examined whether the different social aversive personality traits are associated with different coping preferences. A personality framework dedicated specifically to the socially aversive traits is the Dark Triad Personality referring to Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and narcissism. Therefore, the current study was aimed at examining the association between Dark Triad personalities and coping strategies. Two hundred individuals (82 men) completed the short Dark Triad questionnaire and two different self-report coping scales (CISS, WCQ). Correlation and multiple regression analyses showed that the way how narcissists cope with psychological distress appear to be clearly distinct from the coping preferences associated with Machiavellianism and psychopathy. More specifically, Machiavellianism and psychopathy were negatively associated with task-oriented coping and positively with the emotional-oriented coping process suggesting a more emotional reaction to stress. In contrast, narcissism was found to be associated with task oriented and emotionally controlled coping.

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### 1. Introduction

When facing psychological stress, the effect of stressors can be reduced by the use of effective coping strategies. The strategies preferred in a stressful situation might rely on many different factors including, for example, the appraisal of stress, age, and internal state of the person, as well as the conditions of the external environment (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). The reduction of the effect of stressors can be accomplished by various coping strategies. Thus, problem-focused coping involves efforts to change or eliminate the source of stress, whereas emotion-focused coping strategies tend to regulate the negative emotional consequences of the stressors (Folkman, Lazarus, Dunkel-Schetter, DeLongis, & Gruen, 1986). In addition, avoidance-focused coping reflects the persons' intent to avoid the stressful situation (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004; Eaton & Bradley, 2008). Individuals' preference for a specific coping strategy has, however, been linked to their subjective evaluation of the stressful situations suggesting strong associations between personality traits and coping strategy (Vollrath, 2001; Aneshensel, Rutter, & Lachenbruch, 1991; Watson, David, & Suls, 1999). The current study is addressed to explore these associations further by examining the association between coping

strategies and social aversive personality traits, represented in the Dark Triad.

#### 1.1. Coping and personality

A meta-analytic review implies that each of the BigFive personality factors might predict a specific coping strategy (Connor-Smith & Flachsbart, 2007). Moreover, maladaptive personality traits (e.g., inflexible personalities related to coping with psychological distress) were found to be related to avoidant and emotional coping (Ireland, Brown, & Ballarini, 2006) suggesting that maladaptive or socially negative personality traits associate with specific stress related behavioral responses, or coping strategies (Tandon, Dariotis, Tucker, & Sonenstein, 2013). Thus, for example, subclinical, interpersonally adaptive, but social aversive personality traits, which are not comprehensively represented in the BigFive concept (e.g., Lee & Ashton, 2005; Vernon, Villani, Vickers, & Harris, 2008; Veselka, Schermer, & Vernon, 2011), might possibly modulate individuals' behavioral reactions under stress (e.g., Campbell-Sills, Cohan, & Stein, 2006). A personality framework dedicated specifically to the socially negative or hostile traits is the Dark Triad Personality referring to three interrelated constructs of Machiavellianism, subclinical psychopathy, and subclinical narcissism (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Several socially-averse features frame the common basis of the Dark Triad traits, like callousness, being manipulative (Jones & Paulhus, 2011), low Agreeableness, low Conscientiousness (Jakobwitz & Egan, 2006), and the low level of honesty–humility (Lee & Ashton, 2005) Therefore Dark Triad might be

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an ideal candidate to specifically investigate how social aversive but interpersonally adaptive personality traits associate with the choice of strategies used to cope with stress.

### 1.2. The Dark Triad personality

Although Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and narcissism are inter-related personality constructs, there are many evidences from previous studies that each of these personalities represents a different aspect of the dark personality (Jonason, Koenig, & Tost, 2010; Paulhus & Williams, 2002). For example, recent studies revealed (Jonason & Tost, 2010; Rauthmann & Kolar, 2013; Szijarto & Bereczkei, 2014) that narcissism can be characterized with a friendly dominant interpersonal style and a higher degree of self-control. In contrast, Machiavellianism has been found to be associated with a hostile-submissive interpersonal style and low self-control. Finally, psychopathy is a trait associated with a hostile dominant interpersonal style and low self-control.

Self-control, dominance, and hostile attitudes are known to affect coping strategies (Campbell-Sills et al., 2006; Englert, Bertrams, & Dickhäuser, 2011) suggesting that the different Dark Triad personalities might be associated with distinctive strategies of coping. In spite of the plausibility of this hypothesis, to our knowledge, no previous study has investigated the potential differences in coping strategy between the three members of the Dark Triad. More particular, only two studies have been addressed to a similar research issue but focusing only on one of the Dark Triad traits and its association with a specific coping strategy. First, Rim (1992) investigated coping behavior preferred by Machiavellian individuals but only in relation to the emotional coping strategies. Second, highly recently, focusing only on narcissism, Ng, Cheung, and Tam (2014) found, that individuals with grandiose narcissistic traits can be characterized with a better ability to adopt the suitable coping strategy in different stressful situations as compared to vulnerable narcissists. This better coping flexibility of the grandiose narcissistic individuals is suggested to be an important mediator between their life satisfaction, perceived levels of stress and narcissistic personality traits.

Although these studies clearly indicate the potential effects of Dark Triad traits on coping strategies they still leave open the question of which are the distinctive coping characteristics of the three Dark Triad members.

### 1.3. Aims of the current study

Considering the strong associations between personality traits and coping, and the lack of research on the potential coping differences between the Dark Triad traits, in the current study, we aimed at investigating the question whether the different members of Dark Triad (i.e. Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and narcissism) are associated with different coping strategies. More specifically, in line with their self-controlled and friendly-dominant personality, we predicted a controlled, task-oriented coping strategy for narcissist individuals. For individuals higher on Machiavellianism and psychopathy, coping behavior is plausibly not executed through self-control, therefore they might tend to prefer either emotional oriented or avoidance oriented coping strategies. In the current study, these predictions were investigated by two self-report questionnaires assessing a high variety of coping strategies (e.g. task-oriented, emotion-focused, or avoidance).

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

Participants were 200 individuals (82 men) aged between 18 and 38 years ( $M = 26.43$ ,  $SD = 5.78$ ). As in most of the previous studies, all of the participants were under-, and postgraduate students. They

were naïve with regard to the purpose of the study and provided written consent.

### 2.2. Measures and procedure

The Short Dark Triad questionnaire (SD3) (Jones & Paulhus, 2014) was used to assess the Dark Triad construct. The SD3 is a 27-item self-report scale that measures Machiavellianism, psychopathy and narcissism with 9 items for each subscale ranging from a minimum score of 9 to a maximum score of 45 (in this sample: Machiavellianism:  $M = 27.28$ ,  $SD = 6.21$ ; psychopathy:  $M = 20.92$ ,  $SD = 6.12$ ; narcissism:  $M = 24.61$ ,  $SD = 6.04$ ). All three subscales returned acceptable internal consistency in the current study (Cronbach's  $\alpha$ : Machiavellianism = .75; psychopathy = .70; narcissism = .76).

To assess coping strategies, we used two different self-report scales: The Coping Inventory for Stressful Situations (CISS; Endler & Parker, 1990, 1999) and the Ways of Coping Questionnaire (WCQ; Folkman & Lazarus, 1988). The two scales rely on different concepts to assess the main aspects of coping strategies: While CISS is a dispositional scale referring to a general, situation independent coping strategy, WCQ is aimed at mapping coping in a more situation-oriented way. It measures coping processes, rather than coping strategies with identifying thoughts and actions used by individuals to cope with everyday stressors. Consequently, unlike CISS, WCQ can measure whether individuals use a variety of strategies across different situations or they are more rigid applicants of a few coping strategies. The detailed structures of the two scales are as follows.

CISS is a 48-item, five-point Likert-scale designed to assess three dimensions (task-oriented, emotional, and avoidant) of self-reported responses to stressful circumstances (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .87$ ,  $.76$  &  $.71$  respectively). According to Endler and Parker (1999), *Task-oriented coping* describes an active problem solving approach to stressful situations. In contrast, *Emotional coping* is characterized by engaging behaviors such as ruminating or becoming emotional in response to stress. Individuals who report a preference to avoid stressful situations have a predominantly *Avoidant coping* strategy.

The WCQ consists of 50 items with a four-point Likert scale format, for eight scales measuring 8 different coping processes (Folkman & Lazarus, 1988; Lundqvist & Ahlström, 2006). *Planful Problem Solving*: Individuals high on this scale deliberate problem-focused efforts to alter the situation and to solve the problem (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .78$ ). *Seeking Social Support*: It refers to the seeking informational, emotional or tangible support (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .88$ ). *Self-Control*: Individuals high on this scale make efforts to regulate their own feelings and actions (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .77$ ). *Confrontive Coping*: It describes the aggressive efforts to change the situation and may include some degree of hostility (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .75$ ). *Positive Reappraisal*: High scores on this scale reflects high efforts to create positive meaning of this situation by focusing on personal growth (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .65$ ). *Distancing*: cognitive efforts to detach oneself or minimizing the significance of the situation and to create a positive outlook (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .72$ ). *Accepting Responsibility*: the person acknowledges his/her own role in the problem (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .76$ ). Finally, *Escape Avoidance*: It refers to wishful thinking and attempts to escape or avoid the problem (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .68$ ).

The scores for the WCQ subscales can also be interpreted in accordance with the basic coping strategies. Thus, the subscales Self-Control, Confrontive Coping, Positive Reappraisal, Distancing and Accepting Responsibility can be defined as scales for emotion-focused coping processes (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985). Planful Problem Solving scale represents a task-oriented coping process, whereas Escape-Avoidance reflects avoidance orientation. In addition, the Seeking Social Support Scale has been suggested as a distinct coping dimension, because its' possible inter-correlations both with emotional-focused and problem-focused coping strategies (e.g. help from our friends

could be both instrumental and/or emotional) (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

### 3. Results

In order to examine the possible differences in coping strategies between the Dark Triad traits, first, bivariate correlations were performed between the scores for each of the traits and the scores for each coping subscale. The results are presented in Table 1. However, as previous studies indicated, the Dark Triad traits are somewhat overlapping personality dimensions, therefore, to evaluate the unique contribution of these traits to the different coping factors, we conducted a series of multiple linear regression analyses (see Furnham, Richards, & Paulhus, 2013). More specifically, the CISS and WCQ scales were separately regressed on a block of predictors including Machiavellianism, psychopathy and narcissism.

For the analysis of CISS, both Machiavellianism and psychopathy were found to be negatively and independently associated with Task-oriented coping suggesting that individuals who score high on the Machiavellianism or the psychopathy scale of SD3 tend to show less effort to take direct actions to alter the circumstances when facing a stressful situation. In contrast, in line with our prediction, narcissism was associated positively with Task-oriented coping and negatively with Avoidance indicating that narcissists do not tend to avoid stressful situations and they react with more efforts to minimize the effect of the stressor.

The analysis of the associations between the WCQ factors and the Dark Triad personalities revealed many differences between narcissism and the other two Dark Triad members. Thus, unlike Machiavellianism and psychopathy, Planful Problem Solving, Self-Controlling, and Positive Reappraisal were confirmed as independent predictors of narcissism. Furthermore, two other factors of WCQ, Accepting Responsibility and Escape-Avoidance showed negative associations with narcissism. These findings, similarly to those found for the CISS scales, suggest that narcissist individuals tend to face the stressor, and they prefer to control their own feelings in stressful situations. Furthermore, again in accordance with our predictions, Machiavellianism and psychopathy were found to be negatively associated with Seeking Social Support.

Importantly, however, only two distinctive associations were found between Machiavellianism and psychopathy. First, unlike psychopathy, a positive and independent association was revealed between Machiavellianism and Positive Reappraisal. Second, the Confrontive coping strategy appeared to be the unique positive predictor of psychopathy but not that of Machiavellianism.

### 4. Discussion

The present study addressed the question of how the Dark Triad personality traits are associated with stress-coping strategies. Taking our findings from the two coping assessments (CISS, WCQ) together, the most salient finding is that the way how narcissists cope with psychological distress appears to be clearly distinct from the coping preferences associated with Machiavellianism and psychopathy. The specific findings are discussed below.

#### 4.1. Narcissism and coping

In a good agreement with the predictions, only narcissism from the Dark Triad members was associated positively with coping strategies aimed at altering or solving the stressful situation (i.e. Task-oriented coping scale (CISS) and Planful Problem Solving scale (WCQ)). In addition, findings for narcissism do not indicate preferences for emotion-oriented coping strategies. More particular, Accepting Responsibility, as a factor for emotion oriented coping, was also found to be distinctive for narcissism compared to Machiavellianism and psychopathy. Higher scores on narcissism associated with lower Accepting Responsibility scores in WCQ indicating that narcissists account lower subjective responsibility for triggering stressful situations. This is in line with the egoistic enhancement characteristic of narcissists (Paulhus & John, 1998) and, with their tendency to avoid the apperception of experiences with a possible negative impact on their self-concept (Farwell & Wohlwend-Lloyd, 1998).

In accordance with findings for a task-oriented and emotionally controlled coping strategies, avoidance of stressful situations do not belong to narcissists' coping strategies: narcissism, again alone from the three Dark Triad personalities, showed a reliable *negative* association with Avoidance (CISS) and Escape-Avoidance factors (WCQ) indicating that narcissists tend to face the stressful situations (Endler & Parker, 1999). In sum, these findings suggest that narcissists do not exert efforts to escape or avoid stressful situations they rather prefer the problem-focused actions. This focused and purposeful coping strategy is in line with the generally high level of self-control found to be associated with narcissism in previous studies (e.g. Jonason & Tost, 2010). Two findings in the current study suggest that the self-regulatory aspect of coping is indeed a core characteristic of narcissists' strategy. First, a strong association was found between narcissism and the Self-Control factor of WCQ indicating a coping strategy for individuals' efforts to control emotions and actions under stress (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985). Similarly, narcissists' attempts for emotional control might be related to the association between narcissism and Positive Reappraisal: The

**Table 1**  
Correlations and regression coefficients between the Dark Triad, the CISS and the WCQ subscales.

Coping measures	$r(\beta)$			$R^2$
	Machiavellianism	Psychopathy	Narcissism	
Task-oriented coping	-.20** (-.24**)	-.17*** (-.15*)	.27** (.38**)	.183
Emotional coping	.18* (.10)	.16* (.08)	.19** (.13)	.058
Avoidance	-.12 (-.01)	-.11 (-.01)	-.36** (-.35**)	.132
Planful problem solving	-.03 (-.07)	-.05 (-.09)	.24** (.29**)	.082
Seeking social support	-.35** (-.33**)	-.29** (-.20**)	.10 (.24**)	.203
Self-controlling	.06 (-.03)	.08 (.002)	.36** (.37**)	.133
Confrontive coping	.08 (-.05)	.25** (.26**)	.12 (.06)	.072
Positive reappraisal	.22** (.22**)	.01 (-.13)	.21** (.18*)	.084
Distancing	.09 (.06)	.07 (.02)	.07 (.04)	.012
Accepting responsibility	-.13 (-.04)	-.10 (.004)	-.34** (-.33**)	.124
Escape-avoidance	-.03 (.03)	-.06 (-.03)	-.19** (-.19**)	.039

Note:  $R^2$  is for R-squared effect size for regression analysis.

\*  $p < .05$ .

\*\*  $p < .01$ .



positive re-evaluation of a situation might be an effective strategy to control emotional reactions in stressful situations (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). This association indicates that individuals with high scores on narcissism tend to control negative emotions (e.g. sadness) as an effective way to cope with problems using own means (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985). Alternatively, the association between narcissism and Positive Reappraisal could be explained by narcissists' egoistic enhancement tendencies (Paulhus & John, 1998) to gain a more positive self-interpretation of their actions.

#### 4.2. Machiavellianism, psychopathy and coping

The findings for Machiavellianism and psychopathy are also in good agreement with the predictions. Thus, in contrast to narcissism, the Machiavellian and psychopathic coping strategy was found not to be task-oriented: Individuals with high scores on these traits reported no preference for performing active problem solving strategies to eliminate the source of stress. In addition, these two traits were negatively associated with Seeking Social Support. Apparently, the cynical, exploitative social attitude of Machiavellians and psychopaths (Christie & Geis, 1970; Paulhus & Williams, 2002) cannot be accompanied with preferences for those coping strategies, where they have to rely on others. Interestingly, however, similarly to narcissism, Machiavellianism showed positive association with Positive Reappraisal indicating that although Machiavellian individuals do not prefer a problem solving coping approach, but in a stressful situation they still make efforts to control their emotional reactions. In contrast, we found no indications of emotional control for psychopaths. For the psychopathic trait of the Dark Triad, the only significant strategy was revealed for Confrontive coping with high correspondence to their low-stress tolerance and generally offensive (e.g., most likely aggressive) behavioral reactions when they are exposed to stress (Patrick, 2005).

#### 4.3. The Dark Triad and seeking social support

Additionally the findings suggest that the preference for seeking social support also differentiate between the Dark Triad members: Machiavellianism and psychopathy had negative associations with seeking for social support, and only narcissism was associated with an increased preference for this coping strategy. Seeking for social support has three different aspects: Social support to find solutions, emotional support by friends and family members, and professional support (e.g., asking a physician in case of a health problem) (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985). The positive association between narcissism and this factor suggests that in order to effectively control the stressful situations or to reduce the perceived stress, narcissists accept and seek support provided by social relationships. This finding is also in line with previous observations about the interpersonal tactics used by narcissist individuals. Narcissism was found to be associated with a higher tendency to use approach-oriented social tactics in real men-women interaction (Rauthmann & Denissen, 2014). In addition, narcissists seem to have a preference to use social influence tactics to build their social status among same-sex friends (Jonason & Webster, 2012).

#### 4.4. Limitations

Our study has some limitations. First, there might be age-related differences in coping strategies and/or in Dark Triad personality traits. For example, as a recent study showed, coping strategies generally appear to become more adaptive with maturation, with less use of emotion-focused coping and a greater reliance on task-oriented coping (Wingo, Baldessarini, & Windle, 2015). Thus, investigating college-aged participants only, as we did it in the current study, might limit the generalization of the present findings about the associations between coping strategies and the Dark Triad. Second, another limitation is that only self-report questionnaires were used to examine the predicted associations. The

generally formulated questions of these scales might not be sensitive enough to coping behavior in real-world situations. Observing subjects' reactions in stressful situations might leads to more realistic associations between the Dark Triad traits and coping. Future studies might consider real world settings to examine the Dark Triad and coping relationship.

#### 4.5. Future directions and implication

Previous studies have found significant associations between psychopathological problems and the socially-aversive personality traits. For example, it has been suggested that psychopathy in adult male prisoners influences the way how they experience depression (Willemssen, Vanheule, & Verhaeghe, 2011). In addition, in a recent study, Machiavellianism has been found to have a positive correlation with scores on state-depression and trait-anxiety (Al Aïn, Carré, Fantini-Hauwel, Baudouin, & Besche-Richard, 2013). In contrasts, individuals with high self-esteem, one of the characteristics of grandiose narcissists, seem to have a lower risk for developing depression (Orth, Robins, Meier, & Conger, 2015). The findings of the current study might suggest that these differences between the Dark Triad members in the vulnerability to depression might partly rely on their different coping strategies. This suggestion is also supported by the findings for the relationship between depression and coping strategies observed in *general populations*: While problem-solving strategy correlated negatively with depression, avoidant and emotion-focused strategies were found to show a positive correlation with depression (Nagase et al., 2009). In sum, future studies might examine the potential mediator role of coping strategies on the associations of the Dark Triad personalities with depression and other psychopathological problems.

There, however, are suggestions from highly recent studies that not only depression but other health related problems might also be differentially associated with the Dark Triad personalities. For example, Jonason, Baughman, Carter, and Parker (2015) examined the potential health correlates of the Dark Triad in three studies. Importantly, life expectancy showed a distinguishable association with the Dark Triad traits: Machiavellianism was not related to life expectancy, psychopathy was associated with lower life expectancy, and, finally, narcissism was associated with a longer life expectancy. Accordingly, considering the several determinants of life expectancy, Dark Triad personalities might be linked to various health-related outcomes. Based on the current findings, one might, however, assume that life expectancy and the underlying health-related processes are associated with distinct coping strategies assessed by the different Dark Triad personalities. Therefore, future studies might also need to clarify further that how the Dark Triad personalities process psychological distress in ways that appear to be distinctive and lead to different health related outcomes.

## 5. Conclusion

In summary, the current study reveals how individual personality differences represented in the Dark Triad are associated with stress-coping responses. Our findings, first in the literature, show that Machiavellians and psychopaths cope with stress in very similar ways. In contrast, narcissists, with their task oriented and emotionally controlled coping strategy, are distinct from the other two members of the Dark Triad personalities.

Taken the previous observations and our findings together, it is plausible to suggest that different personality traits may urge individuals to use particular interpersonal behavioral strategies, which come with their respective costs and benefits related to the physiological and psychological health of the individual. The possible associations remain to be investigated by future studies.

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