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## An Examination of the Dark Triad Constructs with Regard to Prosocial Behavior

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### Abstract

It was hypothesized that altruism could be displayed by individuals scoring high on measures of the “dark triad traits” (Machiavellianism, narcissism, and subclinical psychopathy) if these individuals believed that the presumed altruism would in some way benefit them personally. However, measures of empathy, which are typically correlated with altruistic tendencies, would remain low in these individuals. Survey testing of a subclinical population of 281 college undergraduates confirmed these hypotheses for one of the dark triad constructs: Narcissism scores were found to be positively correlated with reciprocal altruism ( $p < 0.02$ ) and self-reported altruistic acts ( $p < 0.003$ ), whereas they were negatively correlated with affective empathy ( $p < 0.0001$ ).

**Keywords:** Subclinical psychopathy; Narcissism; Social behavior; Evolutionary psychology

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### Introduction

The three psychological constructs comprising the “dark triad” are Machiavellianism, narcissism, and subclinical psychopathy. Paulhus and Williams [1] considered these three factors to be the most prominent personality variables contributing to aversive social behavior. The three concepts are highly correlated across a number of empirical measures which has often led to confusion on the part of researchers investigating these traits. It was for this reason that Paulhus and Williams sought to empirically delineate the distinctiveness of each of the three constructs.

The American Psychological Association [2] defines narcissism as a pervasive and enduring pattern of grandiose cognition and behavior. The need for admiration and the lack of empathy are two of the most defining qualities. Psychopathy is characterized by persistent antisocial behavior, impaired empathy and remorse, and impulsive, disinhibited, egotistical traits. Psychopathy is often been seen as synonymous with extremely low scores on the five factor personality traits of agreeableness and conscientiousness [3,4]. Machiavellianism was named after Nicolo Machiavelli, a political advisor to the Medici family in the 1500s. A questionnaire for Machiavellianism was created by Christie and Geis [5] based on the philosophy and psychological recommendations found in Machiavelli’s original text [6]. Empirical studies have shown that individuals who score high on this questionnaire tend to be cynical in principle; they regard interpersonal manipulation is the

key for life success and behave accordingly in their day-to-day lives [7].

On the surface it would appear that the dark triad constructs and prosocial behavior are antithetical concepts. However, the reality may be more complex than this. Altruism may be displayed by individuals scoring high on measures of the dark triad traits if these individuals believe that the presumed altruism would in some way benefit them personally. However, measures of empathy, which are typically strongly positively correlated with altruistic tendencies, would remain low in these individuals.

### Methods

This study employed a subclinical population of volunteer college undergraduates ( $n=281$ ) to investigate the traits of interest as having continuous normal distributions.

### Instrument #1: Costly signals questionnaire (CSQ)

In order to determine the relative influence of the benefactor-beneficiary relationship on an individual’s altruistic tendencies, an assessment instrument was needed. One of the authors J. Palmer created the Costly Signals Questionnaire (CSQ) to examine human altruistic tendencies from the perspective of evolutionary psychology [8,9]. Altruism can be categorized by the type of relationship that exists between the individual who

is helping (*the benefactor*) and the individual being helped (*the beneficiary*). The CSQ was designed to measure the strength of a person's support of altruistic acts performed in these four categories of the benefactor-beneficiary relationships:

- **Kin-based altruism:** The beneficiary is close kin to the benefactor [10].
- **Reciprocal altruism:** The beneficiary is not close kin and is not a member of the same group, but could potentially reciprocate toward the benefactor [11].
- **Group-based altruism:** The beneficiary is not close kin, but is a member of the same group (same club, religion, etc.) as the benefactor.
- **Stranger-based, i.e., pure or ideal altruism:** The beneficiary is a complete unknown or stranger to the benefactor, i.e., is not kin, is not a member of the same group, and provides no potential for reciprocity.

### Instrument #2: Rushton's altruistic personality scale (APS)

The self-report Altruistic Personality Scale (APS) is a questionnaire created by Rushton et al. [12] to measure individual differences in altruistic behaviour. The scale is designed to measure altruism in a behaviorally concrete manner. Participants respond on a 5-point scale ranging from "(0) Never" to "(4) Very Often" to 20 statements describing various altruistic acts. Sample statements are:

- I have given a stranger a lift in my car.
- I have helped a classmate who I did not know.

### Instrument #3: Basic empathy scale (BES)

The BES is a scale developed by Joliffe and Farrington. It consists of 20 items, 9 of which assess cognitive empathy (the capacity to comprehend the emotions of another) and 11 that measure affective empathy (the capacity to experience the emotions of another).

### Instrument #4: The narcissistic personality inventory (NPI)

The NPI is a 40 item forced-choice scale developed by Raskin and Hall [13].

### Instrument #5: Levenson self-report psychopathy scale (LSRP)

The LSRP was developed to measure psychopathy by Levenson, Kiel & Fitzpatrick [14].

### Instrument #6: MACH-IV test (MIV)

The Mach - IV test is a twenty-statement self-assessment tool to measure Machiavellian tendencies [5].

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## Results and Discussion

As predicted, the dark triad measures (NPI, LSRP, and MIV) were all negatively correlated with measures of empathy: Narcissism was negatively correlated with BES affective empathy ( $p < 0.0001$ ). MIV was negatively correlated with BES affective empathy ( $p < 0.0001$ ). LSRP was negatively correlated with BES cognitive and affective empathy ( $p < 0.0001$ ).

Similarly, two of the dark triad constructs were also negatively correlated with most of the altruism scales of the CSQ: LSRP was negatively correlated with Kin-Based Altruism, Group Altruism, and Pure Altruism ( $p < 0.0001$ ). MIV was negatively correlated with Kin-Based ( $p < 0.001$ ), Group ( $p < 0.0001$ ), and Pure Altruism ( $p < 0.0001$ ).

However, this pattern of inverse correlations between dark triad constructs and measures of altruism was not sustained by one of the dark triad constructs--narcissism. Narcissism scores were found to be positively correlated with the CSQ scale of reciprocal altruism ( $p < 0.02$ ) and the self-reporting of altruistic acts (APS) ( $p < 0.003$ ).

Considering the lack of empathy displayed by those scoring high on narcissism, we must look to explanations that do not involve empathy to explain these positive correlations. The reporting of numerous personal acts of altruism is congruent with the narcissist's inflated self-view. In our society, there is an implicit expectation that truly great people will act altruistically when given the opportunity. The narcissist's unwavering belief in his or her own personal greatness necessitates the self-reporting of numerous acts of personal altruism, whether true or not. (It is, of course, beyond the scope of this particular study to verify the legitimacy of these claims.) However, it seems likely that narcissistic individuals actually believe these claims because their minds actively distort memories of events in such a way as to accommodate their grandiose self-image.

The positive correlation between narcissism and reciprocal altruism sheds light on another interesting aspect of the highly narcissistic individual. For the narcissist, their social standing and how they are perceived by society in general is usually extremely important to them. Metaphorically, the narcissist is like an organism that must feed on the energy of others in order to survive. That energy comes in the form of attention and adulation from other members of society. When presented with the prospect of engaging in a contract of social obligation, which is what reciprocal altruism is, the narcissist jumps at the opportunity. To the narcissist, the future social obligation owed by another individual is like money in the bank or food in a refrigerator. It is an essential commodity, a critical resource that must be extracted and exploited whenever possible.

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