

Research Paper

DARK TRIAD: Empathy Skills and Emotional Manipulation as Predictors of Socially Aversive Traits

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ABSTRACT

Machiavellianism, Narcissism, and Psychopathy—collectively known as the 'Dark Triad'—constitute a personality construct encompassing socially aversive traits, typically marked by a lack of empathy and a tendency toward emotional manipulation. This study examined whether individuals high in these traits report both the willingness and self-perceived ability to manipulate emotions, and whether cognitive and affective empathy, alongside manipulation tendencies, predict the traits. A sample of 105 volunteers ($M = 29.36$, $SD = 3.10$) completed the Short-D3, Empathy Components Questionnaire, and Emotional Manipulation Scales. Correlation analysis found adverse relationships between the dark traits and both empathy dimensions. Multiple regression analysis showed that ability and willingness to manipulate predicted all traits, although the relationship with empathy varied. Implications are discussed.

Keywords: *Machiavellianism, Narcissism, Psychopathy, Emotional Manipulation, Empathy*

Paulhus and Williams (2002) collectively dubbed the term “Dark Triad” to refer to the three socially aversive traits of Machiavellianism, subclinical narcissism, and subclinical psychopathy. These traits often manifest as cruel, manipulative, and exploitative tendencies. Although initially researched in clinical settings, it was later discovered that each of these traits is on a continuum in the general population.

Machiavellianism

Machiavellianism is named after Niccol Machiavelli, an Italian diplomat and astute politician, which essentially means “the end justifies the means.” Individuals who score well on this dimension are strategic manipulators, morally vacuous, callous, and cynical about human nature (Kowalski et al., 2021). It is mostly assessed by the Mach-IV measure of Christie and Geis (1970), who introduced the concept in their book “Studies in Machiavellianism”. Machiavellianism involves taking advantage of others while exhibiting (a) little or no empathy in interpersonal styles, (b) focusing on one’s interests often at the expense of others, (c) lopsided views of morality (one that accepts behaviours that would normally be described as unethical and immoral) (LeBreton et al., 2018).

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Narcissism

Since the 1950s, social/personality psychological literature has conceptualised Narcissism as individuals with “God Complex” who are excessively self-admiring and self-centred. The Narcissistic Personality Inventory (Raskin & Terry, 1988) is almost solely used as the major or only measure of narcissism. Notably, it measures normal range narcissistic traits, making it ideal for social science research. According to Campbell and colleagues (2010), narcissism can be broadly defined within three categories: (1) self, (2) interpersonal interactions, and (3) self-regulatory strategies. The narcissistic self could possess a high sense of uniqueness, specialness, and a desire for power and esteem. Second, low empathy and emotional closeness characterise partnerships with narcissists. They might engage in shallow relationships that range from thrilling and charming to coercive and predatory. Finally, narcissists engage in self-regulatory tactics or strategies to preserve their inflated self-esteem, for example, seeking out trophy romantic partners to feed their distorted sense of power and excitement. Narcissism appears in both personality and psychiatric literature—linked to extraversion, low agreeableness, grandiosity, and lack of empathy (LeBreton et al., 2018).

Psychopathy

The third and most pernicious trait of the Dark Triad, Psychopathy, has been well documented and studied in clinical literature for over a century. Psychopaths have been described as attractive on the surface, self-absorbed, rash, heartless, and guiltless. Hare (2003) defines psychopathy as a pattern of interpersonal (e.g., manipulation), emotional (e.g., lack of empathy), and behavioural (e.g., impulsivity) traits in an individual. It is measured using the Self-Report Psychopathy Scale developed by Hare in 1980 and its subsequent variations by the author have proved to be a reliable tool for assessing the construct in the broader community (Neumann et al., 2013). Two forms of psychopathy are generally considered for research purposes – primary and secondary psychopathy. Primary psychopaths display a lack of empathy, aloofness, and shallowness but are emotionally stable individuals. Secondary psychopathy, often known as “hostile psychopathy,” includes traits of aggression, manipulation, and socially deviant behaviour, which is considered more dangerous than primary psychopathy (Saltoğlu & Uysal Irak, 2022).

What Constitutes a Dark Trait?

Numerous studies have suggested attributes or traits for the dark cluster (inclusion and/or exclusion) without any theoretical criteria established for the same (Rogoza et al., 2022). Paulhus and Williams (2002) established that dark traits consist of a cluster of qualities such as a socially hostile personality, grandiosity, deception, emotional coldness, and aggressive tendencies to varying degrees basis empirical tests with tools on narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy. However, other scholars argue that empathy cannot be the sole criterion as excessive empathy may be counterproductive and its negative relationship with aggression measures up poorly (Bloom, 2016). Marcus et al. (2018) found that interpersonal manipulation and callousness were key to the network of the dark traits that comprise narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy.

According to the unification theory, the Dark Triad represents (just subtleties of) a single, universally dark personality feature. However, research into the Dark Triad has brought out differences among the three constructs concerning behavioural patterns, motivators, and interpersonal styles (Jones & Paulhus, 2010), suggesting that assessments or interventions should be created for each construct. These differences have also been seen across gender (male/female), age, and demography. Specifically, research that has explored sex differences

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in interpersonal relationships has found Machiavellianism and psychopathy to have higher scores among men than women (Blötner et al., 2021).

Empathy and the Dark Triad

Empathy can be understood as a multidimensional construct that enables individuals to either think or feel into another's emotional experiences i.e., cognitive, and affective domains. As defined by Lockwood et al. (2014), cognitive empathy is the ability to understand and mentally represent the emotions or perspective of others whereas affective empathy refers to the capacity to experience (feel) another person's emotional state.

Literature on Dark Triad and empathy indicates a negative association between the three maladaptive personality traits of Machiavellianism, narcissism, psychopathy, and empathy (Turner et al., 2019). In a pivotal study, it was noted that the dark traits seem to be characterised by a general lack of empathy (Jonason & Krause, 2013). Nonetheless, the link appears to be most prominent for the affective component of empathy, with the link between cognitive empathy and the dark traits being slightly more ambiguous. Psychopathy and Machiavellianism have demonstrated often non-significant to negative association with cognitive empathy, but the same is frequently seen spared or even enhanced with narcissism (Heym et al., 2021). A rather interesting find as it may indicate "narcissistic" capability to understand the feelings of those around them, to consequently serve their own need for status or validation - high-functioning narcissists may exhibit a strong ability to read the room. Lee and Gibbons (2017) however, argue that narcissists may tend to report higher scores on this measure in self-report constructs as overestimation and exaggeration are a major attribute of narcissism.

Emotional Manipulation and the Dark Triad

Emotional manipulation involves influencing individuals or situations towards one's self-interest or advantage. Through the creation of an emotional manipulation scale, Austin et al. (2007) investigated this more sinister aspect of emotion. Kessler et al. (2010) linked manipulative behaviours to negative workplace outcomes, including interpersonal conflict and ethical strain. Hyde and Grieve (2014) refined the Emotional Manipulation Scale to assess both ability and willingness to manipulate, marking a shift toward measuring intentionality behind emotional influence.

Nagler and colleagues (2014) noted that Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy is associated with dishonest and manipulative behaviour. Previous research also supports the notion that psychopaths are generally considered to be social predators who may also win their way into becoming managers or elected officials (Babiak et al., 2010), Machiavellians are master manipulators who use intricate schemes to accomplish their goals (Christie & Geis, 1970) and narcissists charm and influence others strategically to feed into their sense of inflated self-ego (Jonason et al., 2012). Several authors argue that the dark traits are linked to a range of social and emotional skills that are necessary for manipulating others (Nagler et al., 2014).

Objectives / Hypotheses

The objective of this study was to examine how two-dimensional empathy (cognitive and affective) and the ability and willingness to manipulate emotions predict the Dark Triad traits: narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy. While past research has established links between emotional manipulation ability and the Dark Triad (Grieve & Mahar, 2010; Nagler et al., 2014), few studies have explored both self-reported ability and willingness to

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manipulate (Hyde & Grieve, 2014). Additionally, previous findings show inconsistent relationships between empathy and dark traits, particularly regarding narcissism and cognitive empathy. Thus, our study aimed to: -

1. Examine the relationship between Dark Triad traits and both emotional manipulation ability and willingness and assess whether they predict these traits positively.
2. Investigate whether affective empathy negatively predicts the traits, while cognitive empathy predicts narcissism.

METHOD

Participants

The sample collected consisted of responses from 111 volunteers of the general population. Given the optional nature of the demographic details, some data points were missing – specifically age, race, and ethnicity. Six responses were excluded altogether from further analysis due to incomplete questionnaires. Thus our final sample consisted of 105 participants (32 male, 52 female; $M = 29.36$ years, $SD = 3.10$). Of those who reported demographic details, just over half (51%) identified as Indian. The remaining participants identified as Black (17%), White (12%), Asian British/Asian American (6%), and mixed ethnicity (13%), some of whom reported Indian heritage (e.g., Nigerian Indian). Countries of origin were primarily concentrated in India, with additional participants from the United Kingdom, United States, Netherlands, and Nigeria, contributing to the diversity of the sample.

Materials

The Dark Triad

The first self-report measure completed by participants was the Short Dark Triad to assess their personality traits. The Short-D3, a 27-item questionnaire on a 5-point Likert scale contains subscales to assess the three dark personality traits – narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy. Items were scored in reverse, totalled, and averaged when appropriate, with greater scores for each trait denoting higher levels of that trait. The Cronbach alpha reliabilities for the SD3 subscales for this tool are .71, .77, and .80 for narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy, respectively.

Empathy Components Questionnaire

The 27-item questionnaire assesses components of cognitive ability, cognitive drive, affective ability, and affective drive, summing up to cognitive and affective empathy scores (Batchelder et al., 2017). Statements were rated on a 4-point scale. Items were reversed-scored where appropriate and summed to reflect scores for affective and cognitive empathy. All subscales for the tool have good reliability (range = 0.70–0.81) and convergent validity.

Emotional Manipulation Scale

The last tool consists of elements to capture whether someone who believes they can emotionally manipulate others actually does so i.e., emotional manipulation ability and willingness. The Emotional Manipulation Ability Scale has 9 items from the emotional manipulation factor of Austin et al.'s (2007) measure. The Emotional Manipulation Willingness scale (Hyde & Grieve, 2014) has 11 items to measure the use of emotional skills for malicious purposes, developed by modifying the items from the ability scale. Participants indicated how often they manipulate others to advance their self-interests. Internal consistency reliability has been reported to be strong ($\alpha = .93$) for ability (Grieve & Panebianco, 2013), and particularly good ($\alpha = .81$) for willingness (Hyde & Grieve, 2014).

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All measures were used in their original form; complete scales are available in the cited publication.

Design

A correlation study design was used to understand the relationship of emotional manipulation and empathy (affective and cognitive) with the three dark personality traits. The dependent variables for the experiment were the dark traits. The independent variables included the two empathy components and emotional manipulation.

Procedure

Participants were recruited through an online survey between October and December 2022. A free tool from <https://freeonlinesurveys.com> was used to create the survey. The Short Dark Triad, Empathy Components Questionnaire, and Emotional Manipulation Scale were copied without changes to wording or structure. These resources are open source. The survey had six pages: consent, the three questionnaires, demographics, and debriefing. It was distributed via www.surveycircle.com and social media (Facebook, LinkedIn), resulting in snowball sampling. Posts invited individuals aged 16–60 to complete a study on dark personality traits, empathy, and emotional skills.

RESULTS

Bivariate correlation between the dark triad, empathy constructs and emotional manipulation is shown in Table 1. A negative relationship is seen between the dark traits and affective empathy. Machiavellianism and psychopathy were negatively correlated with cognitive empathy as well: $r = -.368, p < .001$ and $r = -.479, p < .001$, respectively. The correlation between narcissism and cognitive empathy was positive but did not approach significance: $r = .017, p = .866$. Self-perceived emotional manipulation ability displayed a strong positive correlation with Machiavellianism: $r = .731, p < .001$, psychopathy $r = .738, p < .001$, and a moderate correlation with narcissism: $r = .664, p < .001$. A similar trend was captured with emotional manipulation willingness scores. Machiavellianism ($r = .779, p < .001$) and psychopathy ($r = .806, p < .001$) shared a strong positive correlation. Narcissism displayed a moderate positive correlation which was significant: $r = .615, p < .001$. The correlation for willingness to manipulate was stronger for trait Machiavellianism and psychopathy as regards to self-reported manipulation ability, with the scores for narcissism the other way round (more for ability than willingness).

Table 1. Bivariate Correlations

	Mach	Nar	Psych	Cog_Empathy	Aff_Empathy	EM_Ability	EM_Willing
Mach	1	.577*	.773*	-.368*	-.521*	.731*	.779*
Nar	.557*	1	.646*	.017	-.264*	.664*	.615*
Psych	.773*	.646*	1	-.479*	-.592*	.738*	.806*
Cog_Empathy	-.368*	.017	-.479*	1	.580*	-.189	-.392*
Aff_Empathy	-.521*	-.264*	-.592*	.580*	1	-.467*	-.522*
EM_Ability	.731*	.664*	.738*	-.189	-.467*	1	.810*
EM_Willing	.779*	.615*	.806*	-.392*	-.522*	.810*	1

Note: Mach – Machiavellianism; Nar – Narcissism; Psych – Psychopathy; Cog_Empathy – Cognitive Empathy; Aff_Empathy – Affective Empathy; EM_Ability – Emotional Manipulation Ability; EM_Willing – Emotional Manipulation Willingness

*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2 tailed)

Descriptive Statistics

A preliminary examination of Table 2 reveals that males scored higher than females for psychopathy, and both ability and willingness to manipulate ($p < .05$). Moreover, there is a

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nearly significant difference for affective empathy ($p = 0.052$) wherein females ($M = 57.77$, $SD = 9.84$) have scored higher than males ($M = 53.56$, $SD = 8.96$) but not for cognitive empathy ($p = 0.248$).

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics

	Male Mean (SD)	Female Mean (SD)	<i>p</i>
Machiavellianism	32.69 (7.10)	29.90 (6.34)	.066
Narcissism	29.72 (5.63)	28.86 (4.69)	.456
Psychopathy	26.28 (7.69)	22.65 (6.60)	.024
Cognitive Empathy	39.13 (6.50)	40.71 (5.78)	.248
Affective Empathy	53.56 (8.96)	57.77 (9.84)	.052
Emotional Manipulation- Ability	31.97 (7.67)	27.88 (8.20)	.026
Emotional Manipulation- Willingness	30.28 (13.99)	24.10 (11.95)	.034

Multiple regression predicting Machiavellianism (Table 3) from cognitive empathy, affective empathy, emotional manipulation ability and willingness (using Enter method) was statistically significant and explained more than half the variance in Mach scores: $R^2 = 0.653$, $F(4, 100) = 47.100$, $p < .001$. Emotional manipulation willingness ($\beta = .449$, $t = 4.054$, $p < .001$) and emotional manipulation ability ($\beta = .306$, $t = 2.875$, $p = .005$) were significant positive predictors. Affective empathy and cognitive empathy were not significant. Gender differences in Machiavellianism were not statistically significant, $t(82) = 1.86$, $p = .066$.

Table 3: Multiple Regression - Machiavellianism

Model	<i>B</i>	Std.error	Beta	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Constant	25.782	3.971		6.493	.000
Cognitive Empathy	-.088	.089	-.076	-.990	.325
Affective Empathy	-.069	.056	-.100	-1.234	.220
Emotional Manipulation – Ability	.239	.083	.306	2.875	.005
Emotional Manipulation - Willingness	.214	.053	.449	4.054	.000

A multiple linear regression was calculated to predict narcissism scores (Table 4) from cognitive empathy, affective empathy, emotional manipulation ability and emotional manipulation willingness (using the Enter method). A significant regression equation was found $F(4,99) = 24.784$, $p < .001$, with an R^2 of 0.50. Emotional manipulation willingness ($\beta = .387$, $t = 2.871$, $p = .005$), emotional manipulation ability ($\beta = .372$, $t = 2.879$, $p = .005$) and cognitive empathy ($\beta = .248$, $t = 2.676$, $p = .009$) are positive predictors of narcissism in the final model. An independent samples *t*-test revealed a difference that was not significant among men and women for narcissism, where men ($M = 29.72$, $SD = 5.63$) scored higher than women ($M = 28.90$, $SD = 4.69$), $t(81) = 0.749$, $p = .456$.

Table 4. Multiple Regression: Narcissism

Model	<i>B</i>	Std.error	Beta	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Constant	9.853	3.903		2.524	.013
Cognitive Empathy	.237	.089	.248	2.676	.009
Affective Empathy	-.024	.055	-.043	-.443	.659
Emotional Manipulation – Ability	.243	.084	.372	2.879	.005
Emotional Manipulation - Willingness	.151	.053	.387	2.871	.005

Multiple regression predicting psychopathy (Table 5) from cognitive empathy, affective empathy, emotional manipulation ability and emotional manipulation willingness (using

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Enter method) was statistically significant and explained 72.6% of the variance: $F(4, 100) = 66.149, p < .001, R^2 = .726$. Emotional manipulation willingness ($\beta = .425, t = 4.318, p < .001$), emotional manipulation ability ($\beta = .301, t = 3.181, p = .002$), and cognitive empathy ($\beta = -.183, t = -2.679, p = .009$) were predictors. Affective empathy was not significant ($\beta = -.124, t = -1.719, p = .089$). As expected, an independent sample t-test revealed that men ($M = 26.28, SD = 7.69$) scored significantly higher than women ($M = 22.65, SD = 6.60$) on psychopathy, $t(82) = 2.296, p = 0.031$

Table 5. Multiple Regression: Psychopathy

Model	B	Std.error	Beta	t	p
Constant	25.116	3.934		6.385	.000
Cognitive Empathy	-.237	.088	-.183	-2.679	.009
Affective Empathy	-.095	.056	-.124	-1.719	.089
Emotional Manipulation – Ability	.262	.082	.301	3.181	.002
Emotional Manipulation - Willingness	.226	.052	.425	4.318	.000

No issues with multicollinearity, normality, linearity, or homoscedasticity were found in the preliminary analysis of the three models.

DISCUSSION

As most participants in this study were young, the findings hold particular significance for educational, workplace and developmental contexts. Understanding how dark traits and empathy interact in younger, educated populations offers insights for early interventions, personality development programs, and preparing future professionals for healthier workplace and interpersonal dynamics.

Our results indicated that Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy are inversely associated with both affective and cognitive empathy, barring narcissism which displayed statistically insignificant correlation with cognitive empathy (due to suppressor effects). The ability and willingness to manipulate others were positively correlated with all three dark triad traits. Moreover, a regression analysis revealed that emotional manipulation – ability and willingness are both significant positive predictors of the dark traits, whereas the interactions with both facets of empathy vary.

After controlling for the other factors, Machiavellianism scores have no relationship with cognitive empathy in the regression model. Narcissism scores have a positive relationship, and psychopathy scores have a negative relationship with the construct. Similarly, it was also noted that affective empathy does not significantly influence dark trait scores, but it approaches significance to an extent as a negative predictor of psychopathy.

Machiavellianism

Our assumption that Machiavellianism would be unrelated to cognitive empathy and adversely linked with affective empathy was partially met. Affective empathy was inversely associated with the construct but so was cognitive empathy. This is in support of findings from previous research which suggest that Machiavellians are emotionally detached in social and interpersonal situations and are also unable to understand others' emotional states. It is not entirely understood if Machiavellians utilize cognitive skills or emotional intelligence to further their strategic interests but studies that have explored the concept of Theory of Mind (a concept closely related to cognitive empathy) and Machiavellianism revealed a negative correlation between the two (Vonk et al., 2015). Several studies that employed self-report

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questionnaires to measure empathy (or similar categories), combining cognitive and affective empathy to produce an overall score, also found that Machiavellianism displays empathic deficiencies given the constant negative correlations between Mach and (overall) empathy (Ali & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2010; Jonason & Krause, 2013). Expectedly, given that Machiavellianism is a trait considered exploitative and manipulative by nature, we noted a strong positive correlation between Machiavellianism and the ability and willingness to manipulate.

Next, we hypothesised that emotional manipulation – ability and willingness would positively predict the trait which was well supported. The two empathy components, however, emerged as non-significant predictors of the trait after controlling for other variables. There are no significant empathetic deficits that predict Machiavellianism as per our results. It appears that high Machs support emotionally manipulative behaviour but only a deep dive into their ability versus disposition to empathize would divulge their chances of success.

Narcissism

The findings in terms of both facets of empathy and narcissism were mostly supportive of previous studies in this regard. As predicted, affective empathy and narcissism were negatively correlated. This supports the widespread belief that self-absorbed personalities are less likely to have the ability to "feel people" (Burgmer et al., 2019). It was also found that individuals with high narcissistic scores displayed positive affect after viewing photographs of depressed people, which suggests that their affective empathy is defective (Wai & Tiliopoulos, 2012). However, cognitive empathy shared a positive association with the construct that did not approach significance. This is inconsistent with findings from Wai and Tiliopoulos (2012), who observed no deficiencies in cognitive empathy when assessed behaviourally with an emotion identification task or self-reported with the empathy quotient. Further studies revealed that narcissistic people were more adept at recognising angry facial expressions during interactions (Pajevic et al., 2018). Thus, both self-report and behavioural tasks suggest a positive connection between narcissism and cognitive empathy.

Notably, cognitive empathy is a significant predictor of narcissism in our final model, but only after controlling for other variables i.e., the other variables suppress the effect of cognitive empathy when not controlled for. Also, contrary to our expectations, lack of affective empathy did not significantly predict the trait in our model when other factors are controlled for. Hepper and colleagues (2014) discovered that narcissistic people can display affective empathy when explicitly told to engage in cognitive empathy by adopting another person's viewpoint. Narcissists appear to possess a general ability to read others' emotional states but do not necessarily emotionally connect with them unless motivated externally.

While research asserts that narcissists possess low levels of general empathy, our findings suggest that the relationship between two-dimensional empathy and narcissism can be multifaceted. In line with our hypothesis, narcissism was strongly related to ability and willingness to manipulate and was also positively predicted by both constructs. While narcissists report a greater willingness and ability to manipulate, it must be noted that narcissists can over-estimate their abilities since they are considered grandiose and brag about their achievements to obtain validation from others (Urbonaviciute & Hepper, 2020).

Psychopathy

As predicted, psychopathy was negatively correlated with affective empathy but it also displayed a similar trend with cognitive empathy. The results are congruent with the suggestion that psychopathy has one of the strongest associations with emotional impairments (Jonason & Krause, 2013). The author also noted that psychopathy is adversely connected to emotional or affective empathy and associated with lower levels of cognitive empathy. Consistent with our hypothesis, psychopathy was not only found to be positively correlated with both ability and willingness to manipulate, they were also predictors of the construct. Specifically, willingness to manipulate followed by the perceived ability to manipulate, emerged as strong positive predictors. This is not surprising as studies have suggested psychopathy to be strongly correlated with the willingness to manipulate (Hyde & Grieve, 2014).

Unexpectedly, cognitive empathy emerged as a negative predictor of psychopathy scores whereas affective empathy only approached significance as a negative predictor of the construct. The empathetic profile of psychopaths appears to be adversely connected with the trait, especially the ability to identify emotional states, which implies that psychopaths might utilize other techniques – such as coercion or force to accomplish desired objectives during interactions. Thus, psychopathy often comes across as the darkest member of the Dark Triad.

Males significantly scored higher than females for psychopathy, emotional manipulation ability and emotional manipulation willingness in our findings. Given the two forms of psychopathy that are studied in literature, Hyde & Grieve (2014) revealed that being male with higher primary psychopathy scores predicted perceived ability for emotional manipulation. However, the likelihood of engaging in emotional manipulation (willingness to manipulate) was significantly predicted by being male and having greater levels of both primary and secondary psychopathy. Thus, the link between psychopathy and emotional manipulation has been well documented as a function of gender.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the Dark Triad traits all report not just the ability but also a greater willingness to engage in manipulation to advance their strategic interests. Given the results of the study, we may contend that while each is predicted by emotional manipulation tendencies, they differ in their empathetic profiles - all dark triad traits correlate negatively with both cognitive and affective empathy, apart from the near-zero correlation between narcissism and cognitive empathy. It can be suggested that Machiavellianism is not predicted by lack of empathy but rather promotes self-interest at others' expense as it demonstrates high scores on both ability and willingness to manipulate. Narcissism, also a trait positively predicted by self-reported ability and willingness to manipulate, is positively predicted by cognitive empathy as well. Although narcissists are perceived as domineering, attention-seeking and arrogant, they appear to use a certain level of interpersonal skill that perhaps enables their behaviour. Psychopathy, on the other hand, asserts itself as the most strongly predicted by manipulative tendencies and empathetic impairments. This gives ground to the premise that psychopaths could use tactics like force or coercion in their interpersonal styles as they lack both facets of empathy. As anticipated, psychopathy also associates itself strongly with both the ability and willingness to manipulate.

Future studies should address some of the limitations of the current study in order to reproduce, support, and broaden the pattern of findings reported here. First, the

generalizability of our sample is constrained because it included largely student samples, with a relatively young age range that perhaps would not reflect the general population. Additionally, the data were collected in 2022 - while the findings remain relevant for understanding stable personality constructs, replication in more recent samples would strengthen generalizability, especially within the Indian context. Next, self-reported empathy may not always be an accurate representation of genuine empathetic abilities, as studies that have employed identification of emotions from visual images have yielded more consistent results (Murphy & Lilienfeld, 2019). Additionally, self-report measures are prone to gather socially desirable responses, and an index to measure the same (robust psychometric properties) needs to be generated to cross-check the data. Considering some of our findings, a moderation test of empathy components—the drive and ability to empathise—will shed more light on whether Dark Triad members demonstrate any inclination to utilize empathy as a tool in the manipulation process to connect with their targets. This research paves the way for continued inquiry and research into emotional manipulation and empathetic abilities to categorise and inform interventions on Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy in applied settings.

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Conflict of Interest

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