

Research Paper

The Interplay of Narcissism, Machiavellianism, and Empathy: A Triadic Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated gender disparities in Machiavellianism, Narcissism, and Empathy, along with the interconnections among these characteristics. A sample of 60 participants (30 males and 30 females) underwent standardized assessments evaluating these qualities. Descriptive analyses indicated that males exhibited elevated levels of Machiavellianism and narcissism, whereas females shown greater empathy. Correlational investigations revealed a negative, albeit non-significant, relationship between Machiavellianism and empathy across both genders. Narcissism exhibited minimal associations with both Machiavellianism and empathy. Independent samples t-tests revealed significant gender disparities in narcissism ($p = .012$) and empathy ($p = .044$), with males exhibiting higher narcissism scores and females demonstrating greater empathy, although differences in Machiavellianism were not significant. The data indicate that gender may influence narcissistic and empathic inclinations, although Machiavellianism remains comparatively consistent across genders. The findings enhance comprehension of dark personality traits and their interplay with prosocial characteristics.

Keywords: *Narcissism, Machiavellianism, Empathy, Dark Triad, Gender*

Machiavellianism, narcissism, and empathy are three different but interrelated personality qualities that have attracted considerable interest in psychological research. Machiavellianism and narcissism, components of the "Dark Triad" (excluding psychopathy for conciseness), signify manipulative and self-serving behaviors, whereas empathy denotes the ability to comprehend and resonate with the emotions of others. Examining the interaction between these attributes provides significant insights into human behavior, especially in contexts of social interaction, leadership, and interpersonal relationships.

Machiavellianism, derived from Niccolò Machiavelli, describes those who are shrewd, manipulative, and goal-oriented, frequently at the detriment of others. They have a cynical perspective, an absence of ethical principles, and a tendency towards deceit. Narcissism refers to an exaggerated sense of self-importance, an insatiable desire for admiration, and a

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deficiency in empathy. Narcissists are motivated by a quest for dominance and validation, frequently exhibiting grandiosity and a sense of entitlement.

Empathy is the capacity to identify, comprehend, and experience the emotions of others. It includes both cognitive empathy (comprehending others' viewpoints) and affective empathy (experiencing others' emotions). The interplay among these features is intricate and frequently contradictory. Machiavellianism and narcissism are typically linked to diminished empathy; nevertheless, the precise nature of this relationship and the processes by which these qualities interact are subjects of ongoing investigation.

Research indicates that although both narcissists and Machiavellians demonstrate poor emotional empathy, narcissists may occasionally show higher cognitive empathy, employing it deliberately to influence others. Comprehending the intricacies of these linkages is essential for forecasting and elucidating diverse social behaviors, ranging from professional interactions to personal partnerships. This research article will examine the existing literature, investigating the theoretical frameworks and empirical data that elucidate the complex relationships among Machiavellianism, narcissism, and empathy, as well as their consequences for individual and social functioning.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In 2001, a study was conducted using a sample of students from a large public university in the Midwest region of the United States. The sample included 287,181 females and 106 males, indicating a predominance of females. The participants completed the 20-item Mach-IV (Christie & Geis, 1970). MACH exhibits a significant positive connection with the borderline, paranoid, negativistic (passive-aggressive), and antisocial personality disorder scales, in addition to most specific personality disorder measures (McHoskey, 2001). The findings of the current study indicate that individuals with pronounced Machiavellian personality traits did not exhibit less empathy, yet they demonstrated fewer physiological empathetic responses, as evidenced by lower skin conductance levels. Moreover, it was found that the correlation between skin conductance levels and Machiavellian personality scores was influenced by the presence of a severe or inconsistent paternal relationship. This indicated that individuals exhibiting elevated Machiavellian tendencies appeared more impervious to the adverse impacts of severe paternal influence on their reactions to others' pain. The findings indicate that distinct physiological responses to highly emotional situations correlate with personality traits, social styles, and paternal parenting ideologies (Amber Massey-Abernathy & Jennifer Byrd-Craven, 2016).

In another study, participants' "Machiavellian Intelligence" is measured using the Mach IV scale (Christie and Geis, 1970). The use of dishonesty in interpersonal relationships, a pessimistic assessment of human nature, and a lack of morality are its three subscales. Machiavellianism was linked to high levels of anxiety, despair, anhedonia, and alexithymia, and low levels of empathy and affective ToM (Theory of Mind). These associations were observed in varying proportions depending on the three subscales of Machiavellianism (Ain et al., 2013).

Machiavellian individuals are said to possess superior "mind-reading skills" or Theory of Mind (ToM) (Davies and Stone, 2003). Certain studies indicate that individuals with Machiavellian traits exhibit a deficiency solely in affective empathy (the sharing of emotions), while their cognitive empathy (the ability to recognise and comprehend others' emotions, as assessed by the "Reading the Mind in the Eyes" Theory of Mind Test) remains

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intact, and may even be elevated [Barnett and Thompson, 1985, cited in McIllwain (2003); Repacholi et al. (2003); Richell et al. (2003)]. Research indicates that although narcissism and Machiavellianism share certain characteristics, each possesses distinct attributes. Machiavellianism pertains to strategic manipulation and self-interest, while narcissism is linked to grandiosity and a craving for admiration. (Paulhus and Williams).

Prior studies have established a correlation between adverse emotional reactions and characteristics linked to Machiavellianism and narcissism (Miller et al., 2011; Rehman et al., 2018; Ali et al.). These folks typically exhibit unpleasant feelings and sentiments. Machiavellians are purportedly more prone to irritate others than to constitute a genuine threat, as they embody a complex array of obstacles in interpersonal relationships (Robins & Beer, 2001). Research indicates that Machiavellians possess a more accurate self-perception (Christie & Geis, 1970), while narcissists frequently display more pronounced negative personality characteristics (Raskin et al., 1991; Paulhus, 1999). This study examines the correlation between Dark Triad qualities and both direct and indirect revenge-seeking objectives, along with negative feelings. It examines how these feelings result in behaviors such as avoidance, vindictive complaint, and adverse word-of-mouth (WOM), employing the frustration-aggression theory. This study constitutes a distinctive effort to examine the potential disadvantages of each component of the Dark Triad separately (Jonason & Webster, 2010).

METHODOLOGY

This study aimed to investigate the relationships between Machiavellianism, narcissism, and empathy among young adults. A correlational design was employed to examine the associations between these personality traits, while t-tests were used to explore potential gender differences. This research sought to examine the correlations between Machiavellianism, narcissism, and empathy among young people. A correlational methodology was utilized to investigate the relationships among these personality traits, while t-tests were conducted to assess potential gender differences.

Participants

The sample consisted of 60 participants (30 males and 30 females), aged between 18 and 30 years. Participants were recruited using purposive sampling to ensure an equal representation of both genders within the specified age range. This sampling method was chosen to target a specific demographic relevant to the research questions. The sample comprised 60 people (30 males and 30 females), aged 18 to 30 years. Participants were selected by purposive sampling to guarantee equitable representation of both genders within the designated age range. This sample approach was used to focus on a certain population pertinent to the research inquiries.

Measures

Machiavellianism: The Mach-IV scale, a 20-item self-report instrument, was utilized to evaluate individuals' degrees of Machiavellianism. Participants evaluated each topic using a 7-point Likert scale, from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." Elevated scores signify increased levels of Machiavellianism.

Empathy: The Toronto Empathy Questionnaire (TEQ), a 16-item self-report instrument, was utilized to evaluate individuals' overall empathy levels. Participants evaluated each item using a 5-point Likert scale, from "never" to "always." Elevated scores indicate enhanced empathy.

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Narcissism: The Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI), a 40-item forced-choice questionnaire, was used to measure narcissistic traits. Participants were presented with pairs of statements and asked to choose the one that best described them. Higher scores indicate higher levels of narcissism. The Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI), a 40-item forced-choice assessment, was employed to evaluate narcissistic characteristics. Participants were provided with pairs of statements and instructed to select the one that most accurately represented them. Elevated scores signify increased levels of narcissism.

Procedure

Participants were requested to complete the three surveys in one session. All individuals provided informed consent prior to their involvement. Participants were guaranteed the anonymity of their responses. The surveys were administered in a standardized sequence to mitigate potential order effects.

Data Analysis

Correlation Analysis: Pearson's correlation coefficients (r) were computed to analyze the links among Machiavellianism, narcissism, and empathy. The magnitude and orientation of the correlations were analyzed to ascertain the nature of the relationships among these variables.

Independent Samples t-tests: Independent samples T-tests were performed to compare the mean scores of males and females across the three scales: Mach-IV, TEQ, and NPI. This investigation sought to ascertain whether statistically significant gender differences exist in Machiavellianism, empathy, and narcissism.

Statistical Software: All statistical analyses were performed using SPSS.

Significance Level: A significance level of $p < .05$ was used for all statistical tests.

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics:

Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations for Machiavellianism, narcissism, and empathy among male and female participants.

Variable	Gender	Mean	SD	N
Machiavellianism	Male	61.80	5.50	30
	Female	59.63	5.94	30
Narcissism	Male	18.10	4.60	30
	Female	14.50	6.03	30
Empathy	Male	40.57	5.60	30
	Female	44.07	7.47	30

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Machiavellianism, Narcissism, and Empathy by Gender

As shown in Table 1, males scored higher on Machiavellianism and narcissism, whereas females scored higher on empathy.

Correlational Analysis

Table 2a. Pearson Correlations among Machiavellianism, Narcissism, and Empathy (Males, N = 30)

Variable	1	2	3
1. Machiavellianism	—	.15 ($p = .43$)	-.33 ($p = .07$)
2. Narcissism	.15 ($p = .43$)	—	-.21 ($p = .26$)
3. Empathy	-.33 ($p = .07$)	-.21 ($p = .26$)	—

Table 2b. Pearson Correlations among Machiavellianism, Narcissism, and Empathy (Females, N = 30)

Variable	1	2	3
1. Machiavellianism	—	.04 (p = .85)	-.32 (p = .08)
2. Narcissism	.04 (p = .85)	—	.06 (p = .75)
3. Empathy	-.32 (p = .08)	.06 (p = .75)	—

As shown in Table 2b, Machiavellianism was again negatively correlated with empathy ($r = -.32, p = .08$), though not significantly. Narcissism displayed negligible correlations with both Machiavellianism ($r = .04, p = .85$) and empathy ($r = .06, p = .75$).

Gender Differences

Table 3. Independent Samples t-tests for Gender Differences

Variable	t	df	p	Mean Difference
Machiavellianism	1.46	58	.150	2.17
Narcissism	2.61	58	.012*	3.60
Empathy	-2.06	58	.044*	-3.50

DISCUSSION

This study investigated the correlations among narcissism, Machiavellianism, and empathy, revealing numerous significant trends. Initially, in accordance with previous studies, gender disparities manifested in anticipated directions. Males had considerably elevated levels of narcissism, whereas females demonstrated superior levels of empathy. This corresponds with extensive research indicating that men are more prone to demonstrate narcissistic characteristics, especially grandiosity and entitlement, whereas women typically express heightened empathic concern (Grijalva et al., 2015; Christov-Moore et al., 2014). These findings corroborate the perspective that gender socialization may significantly influence the manifestation of personality traits.

Narcissism exhibited minimal associations with empathy and Machiavellianism across genders. Although the literature frequently associates narcissism with the "Dark Triad" and correlates it with empathy impairments (Jonason & Krause, 2013), the current findings indicate a more complex relationship. A potential explanation resides in the differentiation between grandiose and sensitive narcissism. Grandiose narcissism, characterized by confidence and aggressiveness, does not invariably correlate with diminished empathy, whereas vulnerable narcissism is more strongly associated with emotional deficiencies and hypersensitivity (Miller et al., 2011). Considering the non-clinical, young adult population of this study, it is likely that grandiose tendencies were more pronounced, hence diminishing the anticipated negative correlation with empathy. By contrast, Machiavellianism displayed a negative, though non-significant, correlation with empathy in both males and females. This pattern is consistent with theoretical accounts that Machiavellianism is strongly linked to emotional detachment, manipulateness, and reduced affective empathy (Wai & Tiliopoulos, 2012). Even if not reaching statistical significance in the present sample, the trend suggests that Machiavellian individuals may suppress empathic responses to maintain interpersonal control and pursue self-interest.

The findings must be contextualized within wider societal frameworks from a cultural perspective. Studies in cultural psychology indicate that individualistic civilizations typically promote self-enhancement and narcissism, while collectivistic cultures prioritize relational sensitivity and empathy (Markus & Kitayama, 2003; Fatfouta, 2021). The found

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poor correlations between narcissism and empathy in this study may partially stem from the collectivist cultural context of the group, which could mitigate the manifestation of narcissism's adverse impacts. This reinforces the idea that personality traits do not operate independently but rather interact with cultural norms and expectations.

Collectively, these data suggest that although gender disparities in narcissism and empathy are significant, the relationship among narcissism, Machiavellianism, and empathy is more intricate than commonly presumed. The data indicate that trait expression is influenced not only by personality structures but also by cultural context and the predominant subtype of narcissism within the population.

CONCLUSION

The present study explored the relationships between narcissism, Machiavellianism, and empathy, while also examining gender differences and cultural considerations. Results revealed that males exhibited higher narcissism, while females reported higher empathy, consistent with prior research on gendered personality expression. Machiavellianism showed a negative trend with empathy, though not significant, reinforcing its association with emotional detachment. Interestingly, narcissism did not demonstrate the expected strong negative relationship with empathy, suggesting that the impact of narcissism may be more nuanced in non-clinical, collectivist contexts. This study investigated the correlations among narcissism, Machiavellianism, and empathy, while also analyzing gender disparities and cultural factors. Findings indicated that males displayed greater narcissism, whilst girls shown elevated empathy, aligning with previous studies on gendered personality traits. Machiavellianism exhibited a negative correlation with empathy, while not statistically significant, so supporting its connection to emotional detachment. Narcissism did not exhibit the anticipated strong negative correlation with empathy, indicating that its influence may be more complex in non-clinical, collectivist settings.

These findings enhance the existing literature on the Dark Triad by highlighting the significance of cultural and environmental factors in influencing the expression of personality traits. Narcissism does not universally forecast weaknesses in empathy; instead, its correlation with empathy may hinge on the predominance of grandiose or susceptible types, as well as cultural norms pertaining to social interaction and self-expression.

The findings indicate that the Dark Triad qualities cannot be comprehended solely in universal terms. Gender and culture serve as essential frameworks for analyzing their behavioral outcomes. Subsequent study ought to persist in investigating these constructs among varied groups, emphasizing cultural frameworks and the multifaceted characteristics of narcissism. This method will facilitate a more thorough comprehension of the impact of dark personality traits on empathy and social functioning.

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Conflict of Interest

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