

Psychopathological excursus on anti-social personality disorder, psychopathy and the dark triad: a review of international literature

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SUMMARY

Aim

This work is made up of two parts. The first part aims to give a general overview of psychopathy and anti-social personality disorder. The second part goes into more depth on the conceptual and empirical studies of the three correlated personality constructs, until now defined as the Dark Triade, but considering them independently.

Methods

We consulted information available in literature through the PubMed site and Google Scholar without filtering by year. Searches were made using the keywords “psychopathy”, “psychopathy and anti-social personality disorder” and “dark triad”.

Results and discussion

We highlight not only the specific peculiarities, but also similarities and differences that help the reader better understand that the two terms, psychopathy and anti-sociality, are not synonyms although often used as such. We also offer a definition of the concept of Dark Triad, outlining both its “undesirable” and functional aspects.

Key words: psychopathy, psychopathy and anti-social personality disorder, dark triad

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Conflict of interest

The Authors declare no conflict of interest

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Introduction

Very often the terms anti-sociality and psychopathy are mistakenly used as synonyms. Hare believes the distinction between psychopathy and anti-social personality disorder is very important, both for clinicians and for the rest of society^{1,2}. Anti-social behaviour disorder and psychopathy are two separate disorders³. According to the DSM-5, the basic characteristics of anti-social personality disorder are negligence and infringement on the rights of others, expressed in irresponsibility, absence of self-accusation, lack of compassion and aggressiveness^{2,4,5}. Psychopathy (or “Primary psychopathy”) is a personality disorder characterised by the lack of social norms, and a deficit of empathy and remorse. It usually manifests itself as impulsiveness with a lack of anxiety or sense of guilt, through manipulation and persistent violation of social norms^{1,2}. Both disorders are characterised by a lasting pattern of anti-social behaviour beginning in childhood, however psychopathy also includes a number of specific emotional and interpersonal deficits.

The other concept dealt with in this article is that of the Dark Triad, which has aspects interrelated with the disorders described above. The dark triad is a personality construct developed by Paulhus and Williams (2002). It includes three personality traits that lead to maladjusted, socially undesirable behaviour, namely Machiavellianism, psychopathy and narcissism. The adjective “dark” attributed to the combination of these personality traits is indeed used to underscore the malevolent and at

times criminal characteristics of persons who present these peculiarities to a high degree⁶. Psychopathy, narcissism and Machiavellianism are independent of each other, but positively associated⁷ and distinguished by common elements such as manipulative behaviour, inflated ego and the tendency to exploit others to achieve their goals⁸. The dark triad is thus constituted by personality traits not of immediate clinical interest, but that exercise a strong influence on the relational models of the individuals affect, their way of understanding their own emotions and those of others, and even on their behavioural and mating strategies⁹.

Psychopathy versus anti-social personality disorder: differences and similarities

DSM-IV-TR (2000) only defines the diagnosis criteria for anti-social personality disorder, but not those of psychopathy. However, Section III of DSM 5 mentions psychopathy in an area of the manual that includes an 'alternative model for diagnosing personality disorders'. The criteria for psychopathy are specified and assessed through the revised Psychopathy Checklist (PCL-R)¹⁰. The current conception of psychopathy was introduced by Cleckley in his celebrated didactic work entitled the *Mask of Sanity* (1941)¹¹, and refined by Hare through the construction of the PCL^{12,13}, which is still the gold standard for assessing the disorder.

Psychopathy is a personality disorder characterised by a constellation of interpersonal, affective and behavioural traits. These characteristics correspond to the 20 items in the PCL-R (Psychopathy Checklist – Revised), a semi-structured interview with the purpose of investigating the disorder. The items on the list, and so the aspects characteristic of the disorder are: glibness/superficial charm, grandiose sense of self, need for stimulation/propensity for boredom, pathological lying, cunning and manipulative behaviour, lack of remorse or guilt, shallow emotional response, callousness and lack of empathy, parasitic lifestyle, poor behavioural control, sexual promiscuity, early behavioural problems, lack of realistic long-term goals, impulsivity, irresponsibility, failure to accept responsibility, short-term relationships, juvenile delinquency, revocation of conditional release, criminal versatility¹⁴.

Neurobiological models of psychopathy tend to concentrate on the limbic and paralimbic systems¹⁵ involved in regulating emotions and social behaviour, in particular the amygdala and ventromedial prefrontal cortex¹⁶. Neuroimaging studies have confirmed the association between dysfunction of the amygdala and psychopathy¹⁷. The studies showed that high PCL scores are associated with a smaller amygdala. The importance of the dysfunction in the ventromedial prefrontal cortex

in psychopathy depends mainly on the interaction between this zone and other cortical and subcortical regions of the brain involved in the affective process, in social cognition and decision making. Two areas are of particular interest: the amygdala and the medial parietal region, including the precuneus and the posterior cingulate cortex. Both the precuneus and posterior cingulate cortex are densely and reciprocally connected with the ventromedial prefrontal cortex, and are both regions characterised by reduced activity in psychopathy^{17,18}. In psychopaths reduced differentiation, with respect to non-psychopaths, in heart rate in response to neutral vs. threatening stimuli has been observed. In the same way, psycho-physiological studies have shown a reduced electro-dermal response to aversive stimuli in psychopaths, just as a reduced potentiation of the startle blink reflex¹⁹. This could suggest that psychopaths have a reduced defensive fear capacity when exposed to threatening situations²⁰.

The cognitive characteristics of psychopathy include somewhat rigid and inflexible schemata of self, others and the world. Psychopaths see themselves as strong and autonomous, while seeing others as exploiters or to be exploited, or weak, vulnerable and to be preyed upon. Another fairly common characteristic is a marked cognitive bias in perceiving malicious intent in others²¹. The emotional characteristics of psychopathy manifest themselves in difficulty processing emotional information and responding empathically to others. Deficit in processing emotions is one of characteristic aspects Cleckley identified in psychopaths¹¹.

If on one hand it is true that anti-social personality disorder and psychopathy have many common traits, it is also true that they have a great many differences. The principal characteristics able to distinguish psychopathy from any other personality disorder – including anti-social personality disorder – is the incapacity to form ties; while at lower levels than normal, an anti-social person has the capacity for form bonds with others, the psychopath does not. For the psychopaths there is only themselves, and their own needs. Likewise there is a clear distinction in the motivations that drive these people: the psychopath aims for a precise goal, while the anti-social acts on impulse without a specific goal. The latter lacks emotional control (inhibitory functional deficit), reacts with violence and aggression to a threat perceived as imminent (defensive attack); the cause of the psychopath's behaviour is instead traceable to a deficit in aversive conditioning assimilation: he is a predator fully aware of exploiting others to achieve his deviant goals (predatory attack). The final consideration regards the sociological aspect. Most of the individuals affected by anti-social personality disorder come from the most disadvantaged social classes, and their illicit

behaviour is very much aimed at assuring personal survival; the anti-social acts on impulse and makes no effort to disguise their nature. Psychopaths usually come from the middle-upper social classes, are well integrated in society and their crime serves to satisfy their desire for control and power; they hide behind a mask, plot in the shadows and act with calculation and prudence to achieve their devious aims ²².

The concept of empathy

Empathy is the capacity to understand the state of mind of other people, and is compromised in all of the personality traits described above. Empathy is fundamental for social interaction, it allows us to understand the suffering of others, and attenuate maladjustment in terms of aggressive behaviour ^{23,24}. Reduced empathy, together with other traits, is proposed as the “core” that interconnects three constructs of maladjusted personality – Machiavellianism, narcissism and psychopathy – which together are conceptualised in the Dark Triade ^{25,26} and associated with aggressiveness ²⁷.

Empathy is a multi-dimensional construct ^{28,29}, comprising cognitive and affective components. Cognitive empathy has been defined as the capacity to understand the mind of another person, recognising what the other thinks. This kind of awareness is essential for predicting the behaviour of others and manipulating it ³⁰. Affective empathy implies an indirect response to the emotions of others, feeling what they feel. It's the kind of empathy involved in the model of violence inhibition mechanisms ³¹, and it is thought that the selective deterioration of this capacity is the underlying cause of aggressiveness, at least in psychopathy ^{32,33}. Over and above deficits in affective empathy, compromised cognitive empathy (defined as the capacity to know rather than feel the emotions of another) has been found in institutionalised criminals with psychopathic tendencies ³⁴. These mechanisms are also found in the other traits of the dark triad. Indeed, deficits in affective empathy have been linked with all three of the dark traits, indicating a reciprocal incapacity to share the emotional experience of others. In other cases, cognitive empathy seems to be spared, or even augmented as in the case of narcissism, which would suggest a normal or perhaps better comprehension of the thoughts and intentions of others ³⁵, allowing the narcissist to create a more favourable image of themselves through understanding and predicting the reactions of others.

In the case of Machiavellianism, a partial cognitive deficit has been observed. In effect, the conserved part of cognitive empathy allows the person to predict the intentions of others, facilitating them in their manipulative strategies ³⁰. Lastly, in psychopathy empathy is compromised at all levels, both cognitive and affective,

and is associated with aggressive behaviour. Thus, in line with previous research into direct aggression ^{36,37}, psychopathy present a more serious overall model of maladjusted traits.

The dark triad

The dark triad has three underlying structures – narcissism, psychopathy and Machiavellianism ⁶, it is a predominantly malevolent type of mentality, manifest in self-interest, aggressiveness and ruthlessness ³⁸.

Each trait of the DT has its own unique characteristics: Machiavellianism describes a cynical, parasitic, manipulative nature ^{39,40}. Narcissism is characterised by an exaggerated sense of personal entitlement, superiority and grandeur ⁵. Psychopathy includes a constellation of interpersonal-affective deficits (superficial charm, insensitivity) and behavioural deficits (irregular lifestyle, anti-social behaviour) ^{41,42}.

The traits of DT share a propensity for an insensitive, manipulative type of interpersonal lifestyle, and previous research has examined the empirical superimposition of these subclinical personality traits in order to identify the underlying core of the malevolent personality. The so-called “dark core” thus identified offers a better understanding of the series of emotive traits and empathic deficits that combine to promote an egotistical type of lifestyle ²⁷. In effect, the dark core is constituted by all three of the dark traits⁷, such as a sense of grandeur ²⁵, low honesty-humility ^{30,43,44} and interpersonal exploitation ⁴⁵.

Psychopathy

The etymological root of the word psychopathy comes from the Greek *psych* (soul or mind) and *pathy* (suffering or disease). Psychopathy refers to the incapacity to perceive, comprehend or confront emotions due to a lack of emotive intelligence and empathy. Its principal traits are manipulation, deception, ruthlessness and the need of high levels of excitement and stimulation. Psychopaths are insensitive to loss or risk, and have no fear of failure ⁴⁶, allowing them to risk far more. They despise social norms and are fully prepared to oppose the status quo ⁴⁷. Psychopathy is characterised principally by deceit, ruthlessness and the search for stimuli ⁴⁸. Psychopathic people show indifference toward others and low sensitivity to risk, but often achieve high level social standing and are considered intelligent, attractive and efficient ⁴⁹.

Narcissism

The characteristic traits of narcissism are domination, exhibitionism and an augmented sense of entitlement

and superiority⁵⁰. Narcissists not only feel good about themselves, but also feel more worthy of respect from others⁵¹⁻⁵². They tend to be egocentric and in constant search of admiration and attention from others⁵³, and gain self-esteem, power and status through the effective utilisation of social relations⁵⁴. At the same time, they lack human values and have a strong desire to control others⁵⁵, they are good at using their charisma to their advantage, inducing others to follow their plans⁵⁶, and expect others to accept their vision of the world. The principal characteristics of narcissism are an inflated sense of self-importance, expansive perception of self and self-love⁵⁷. Individuals with high-level narcissist traits tend to have a high degree of self-acknowledgement and are very good at creating and grasping opportunities⁴⁹. Moreover, they are highly motivated in the pursuit of personal objectives⁵⁸ and fully aware of their abilities⁵⁹; even in aversive conditions, it seems that persons affected by high-level narcissist traits believe they are more capable than others⁶⁰. This quality gives them greater self-confidence in doing things in their own interests. Brookes⁶¹ indicates that people with high levels of narcissism tend to have greater confidence in their capacity to achieve their own objectives, which significantly increases self-effectiveness.

Machiavellianism

Machiavellianism describes an egotistical, deceitful, scheming and manipulative personality trait^{62,63}. Individuals of this kind are usually self-serving, driven by their own interests and have a strong desire to control others⁶⁴. They lack affinity and responsibility, and tend to be highly persuasive⁶⁵. In general terms, their persuasive abilities helps them facilitate and motivate others toward any given objective⁴⁹. This particular capac-

ity feeds their desire to control and achieve status⁶⁶, by manipulating and using others to realise their own personal interests⁶¹. Hence the fundamental traits of Machiavellianism include the pursuit of personal interests, deception, strategy and manoeuvrability⁶³. They often resort to unsavoury methods to achieve their goals or maximise their interests⁴⁹. Perhaps as a result of these characteristics they are more inclined to be enterprising. These people believe that the end justifies the means and have a strong disposition toward wealth, power and competition⁶⁷, often choosing short-term strategies that demand immediate satisfaction, and that are closely correlated with a propensity for life 'in the fast lane'⁶⁸.

Conclusions

This article is made up of two sections forming part of a psychopathological continuum.

The first analyses anti-social personality disorder and psychopathy, two disorders often confused, to shed light on the differences between them and make a distinction.

The second part analyses DT, highlighting both the negative aspects: criminal tendency, insensitivity, interpersonal exploitation and the potentially destructive effects that these individuals have on their environment and interpersonal relations, and the functional-adaptive prospects that these personality traits present, at least in certain limited contexts. In effect, DT shows positive correlations with factors capable facilitating them in achieving their goals, with strong points ranging from creativity to courage, leadership, assertiveness and a predisposition for power, achievement and self-valorisation.

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