# The Dark Triad and Socially Desirable Responding

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## Introduction

Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy are three personality traits known as the dark triad (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Machiavellianism is best defined as the devious belief in interpersonal manipulation being the best way to achieve personal success; narcissism is associated with a sense of entitlement, and need for a perceived power and authority; psychopathy is viewed as the most malevolent with high levels of insensitivity, impulsivity, partaking in dangerous activities, and low levels of empathy and guilt (Furnham, Richards, & Paulhus, 2013). The dark triad are frequently positively correlated; psychopathy and Machiavellianism showing the strongest association, and narcissism and Machiavellianism showing the weakest (Furnham et al., 2013). They all tend to share the traits of disagreeableness and low conscientiousness (Furnham et al., 2013).

Socially desirable responding (SDR) is defined as answering questions with the intention of displaying oneself in a favorable manner (Peebles & Moore, 1998). Part of SDR is positive impression management (PIM), or the act of trying to make yourself look better to others (Morey, 2007). Narcissists would most likely to partake in this type of deception because they are concerned with how people view them (Kowalski, Rogoza, Vernon, & Schermer, 2018). SDR is complex and can be a result of many factors: self-deception and perceived desirability, deception, defensiveness, and impression management (Peebles & Moore, 1998). It can be difficult to pinpoint the validity of negative impression management (NIM) because we do not know if people are feigning mental and physical problems, or if they are truly as problematic as they say. This is because some authentic forms of psychopathology can have cognitive distortions that lead them to believe their actions and environment are more negative than they are (Hopwood, Morey, Rogers, Sewell, 2007). Another reason someone would feign such disorders is to receive attention or treatment services—among other things (Hopwood et al., 2007). A study conducted by Kowalski et al. (2018) found that narcissists engaged in more SDR, and psychopathy and Machiavellianism engaged in less SDR. This study thus concluded that the more antagonistic a personality trait is, the more likely they will not care about responding in a socially desirable way.

The purpose of our present study is to examine the dark triad traits simultaneously in order to investigate their independent associations with SDR. We further expand on prior research by also examining NIM. For our first set of hypotheses, we expect that psychopathy and Machiavellianism will be correlated with higher NIM, while narcissism will be correlated with lower NIM. We also expect that narcissism will be correlated with greater PIM. For our second set of hypotheses, after controlling for participants sex, we expect psychopathy and Machiavellianism to be uniquely associated with higher NIM. Narcissism will be uniquely associated with greater PIM.

## Methodology

**Participants:**
- $N$ = 419 undergraduates between the ages of 18-49 years from a mid-size northeastern university (71.4% females; 75.7% Caucasian, 3.6% African American, 14.3% Hispanic/Latino, 1.9% Asian, 3.1% other, 1.5% unknown).

**Measures:**
- A demographics survey was used to assess age, sex, and race/ethnicity.
- The socially desirable responding, positive impression management, and negative impression management scales from the Personality Assessment Inventory (Morey, 2007) were used.
- To measure psychopathy, narcissism, and Machiavellianism, the Short Dark Triad (Paulhus & Jones, 2013) was used.

## Results

### Table 1. Bivariate correlations for main study variables

| | 1. | 2. | 3. | 4. | 5. | 6. | 7 | 8. | *M* | *SD* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **1. Age** | — | | | | | | | | 19.28 | 2.25 |
| **2. ETHN** | .03 | — | | | | | | | — | — |
| **3. Sex** | .07 | .06 | — | | | | | | — | — |
| **4. NIM** | -.05 | -.02 | -.03 | (.73) | | | | | 2.85 | 3.44 |
| **5. PIM** | .09 | .06 | .22*** | -.35*** | (.75) | | | | 13.32 | 4.74 |
| **6. PATH** | -.05 | .09 | .29*** | .41*** | -.09 | (.82) | | | 11.61 | 5.66 |
| **7. MACH** | .02 | .08 | .22*** | .30*** | -.23*** | .62*** | (.81) | | 17.73 | 5.70 |
| **8. NARC** | .01 | .05 | .22*** | .07 | .07 | .41*** | .42*** | (.68) | 17.43 | 4.68 |

*Note.* ETHN = Ethnicity, NIM = negative impression management, PIM = positive impression management, PATH = psychopathy, MACH = Machiavellianism, NARC = Narcissism. Sex coded as female = 0, male = 1. Numbers in parentheses are Cronbach's alphas.
***$p$ < .001

### Table 2. Dark triad traits predicting negative and positive impression management

| | Negative Impression Management | | | Positive Impression Management | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | β | *p* | 95% CI | β | *p* | 95% CI |
| **Sex** | -.15 | .001 | -1.83, -.45 | .27 | .000 | 1.82, 3.78 |
| **Psychopathy** | .42 | .000 | .19, .32 | -.03 | .670 | -.12, .08 |
| **Machiavellianism** | .13 | .026 | .01, .15 | -.34 | .000 | -.38, -.18 |
| **Narcissism** | -.12 | .016 | -.16, -.02 | .16 | .002 | .06, .26 |
| **Total $R^2$** | .20*** | | | .15*** | | |

*Note.* Sex coded as female = 0, male = 1. Standardized beta coefficients are reported.
***$p$ < .001


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## Discussion

The purpose of the study was to examine the relationships between the dark triad personality traits and socially desirable and undesirable responding via PIM and NIM.

Preliminary results indicated that being male was correlated with engaging in more PIM, as well as scoring higher on all three personality traits.

Consistent with prior research on the dark triad (Furnham et al., 2013), the three personality traits were positively correlated with each other, suggesting overlapping characteristics.

Higher scores on psychopathy and Machiavellianism were correlated with engaging in more NIM, this could be due to the shared trait of callous-unemotionality. These individuals are not interested in portraying a better version of themselves to others, they are more concerned with their own behaviors.

Higher scores on Machiavellianism was correlated with engaging in less PIM, this can be explained by the fact that they are not worried in how others see them if they are able to achieve their goals. Interestingly, narcissism was not initially related to engaging in more or less positive or NIM.

When we controlled for their shared characteristics and examined the unique associations between the dark triad and PIM and NIM, we found that psychopathy was the strongest predictor of engaging in more NIM, followed by Machiavellianism, and in contrast narcissism associated with engaging in less NIM. It is likely we saw lower rates of engaging in NIM in narcissists because they are focused on maintaining a positive image. Following that trend, Machiavellianism was associated with engaging in significantly less PIM, whereas narcissism was associated with engaging in more PIM.

This is likely because narcissists are much more concerned with how they look in the eyes of others and Machiavellians are only concerned with obtaining their goal, so as long as they are able to attain their goal then they have no need to partake in PIM.

Understanding the differences in how each of the personality traits express themselves to others can be important for properly treating and diagnosing these individuals. When it comes to NIM these correlations may need to be further examined as case studies to determine if they are indeed as callous as they say they are.

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