The Dark Triad: A Different Relationship between Personality and Empathy. A Review from an Educational Perspective

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ABSTRACT

In the present article the concept of the Dark Triad is reviewed and the investigations about narcissism, neuroticism and psychopathy are analyzed in relation to other characteristics of the personality and their negative psychosocial consequences. Likewise, it is examined and verified several studies in which there are correlations and models of structural equations that show the relationships between the different components of the dark triad and empathy. These reviews highlight the importance that an appropriate diagnosis and intervention can have in the educational field to carry out an intervention aimed at promoting empathy and reducing the levels of the different components of the Dark Triad of the personality.

Keywords: personality, dark triad, empathy, educational intervention

INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, the educational sciences have paid attention to some factors such as the environment and personality to try to obtain the maximum potential of each person, always with the help of the plasticity inherent in all human beings. To do this, teachers consider, as an educational reference and objective, an ideal of person and society that is based on certain social and individual characteristics that are considered desirable (Luengo Navas 2004). Although this represents the most widespread practice in the design of educational programs, there is also the possibility of proposing a different strategy. In these pages we are going to revise the scientific literature about socio-personal characteristics that represent what is not desirable in any individual and it is also mentioned the work based on the increase of empathy as an essential technique to design new individualized educational strategies.

COMPOSITION OF THE DARK TRIAD

Personality has been the subject of countless investigations in the fields of education and psychology. In this first field, the educational one, it is observed that the literature does not contemplate in the same measure the different variables that make up the personality. Thus, for example, when performing a search in the Scopus database with the term "dark triad" the results in the area of psychology reach the figure of 321 and 28 in social sciences. Besides, in the ISI Web of Knowledge there are 515 references distributed in the different branches of psychology, while in education we only find 2 references that bear some relation to the analyzed variables. However, the search for the terms "big five", which allude to other personality features (kindness, openness, extraversion), shows a greater extension in the educational field. Thus, in the ISI database we find 167 references in the educational field and in Scopus 1187 within the social sciences (in psychology, 3621 and 3542 respectively).

However, as we will see, the repercussion of the variables that make up the dark triad is of enormous relevance in the field of education. First of all, it is necessary to mention that these variables have been studied in isolation for decades. For instance, Sidis (1911) already studied psychopathy in relation to anxiety and fear; Emerson (1916), on the other hand, studied how narcissism along with sublimation and self-eroticism helped to capture character both individually and socially. Additionally, the work of Maritain (1942), "The end of Machiavellianism" is well known. But it is not until the study of Paulhus and Williams (2002) that the interrelation of three higher-order personality constructs was established. They called it the Dark Triad of personality, composed of Machiavellianism, narcissism and psychopathy.

Nevertheless, before focusing on the triad as a unit construct, we will briefly review the variables that comprise it. As far as the Machiavellian concept is concerned, Christie and Geis (1970) are the first to describe this personality trait and carry out a detailed study of it. For them, this feature consists in the manipulation and exploitation of the other to achieve their own objectives, referring both to the ability to manipulate through the design of long-term plans, and to obtain satisfaction due to this manipulation. It is also highly recommended to read Jones and Paulhus (2009) who devote a full chapter to this feature. They made a very interesting review of Machiavellianism in relation to motivations, skills, perception that others have about them, their personalities and psychological adjustment, issues related to the world of work, malevolence, manipulative tactics, cynical view of the world, morality and antisocial behavior, origins of Machiavellianism, etc.

The next feature of this Triad is narcissism, the British physician and sexologist Havelock Ellis (1898) was the first to use the myth of Narcissus to refer to a sexual self-erotic condition. According to this author, the tendency in these cases is that sexual emotions are absorbed, and often entirely lost, in the admiration of oneself. Later, Walder (1925) described the character or personality of narcissistic people as condescending, with feelings of superiority in front of others, concerned about themselves and the admiration they should receive, they exhibit a marked lack of empathy and a sexuality that is based on purely physical pleasure instead of combined with emotional intimacy. A recent work by Thomas (2012), shows a very complete view of the characteristics of this type of people, the strategies to detect them, as well as some advice to deal with them.

Finally, the last component of this Triad is psychopathy, which is distinguished, according to Cleckley (1941), by a conjugation of affective, interpersonal and behavioral traits characterized by insincerity, inability to love, general poverty of affective reactions and absence of nervousness, remorse or guilt. In the study by Barrutieta and Ursúa (2011) subclinical psychopathy in general population is studied as well as its relationship with the other components of the Dark Triad, narcissism and Machiavellianism. In addition to showing that in the relationship between the components of the Dark Triad, Machiavellianism is more closely related to subclinical psychopathy.

Previously, in its theoretical framework, Barrieta and Ursúa make a brief analysis of the main features that characterize the factors that form the three variables that make up the dark triad. Although we should add other criteria, such as those of Cleckley (1941) regarding subclinical psychopathy. This can be summarized in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Traits of the variables that make up the Dark Triad

Subclinical psychopathy[1]	Machiavellianism	Subclinical narcissism
Factor I: personality traits. grandiosity, cruelty, lack of empathy, lack of guilt and remorse, emotional coldness and ability to manipulate others	Interpersonal strategy that advocates one's own interests, deception, manipulation and exploitation of the other to achieve one's goals, which is also known as the "cold personality syndrome". Refers to cold and manipulative behaviors, along with insincerity and insensitivity	Subclinical narcissistic people are characterized by their tendency towards grandiosity, exhibitionism, tendency to defend themselves in response to criticism, interpersonal relationships characterized by exploitation, lack of empathy and pretension.
Factor II: style of antisocial behavior. pattern of chronically unstable behavior, impulsiveness and criminal versatility	For Christie these manipulators would be characterized by a lack of affection in interpersonal relationships, lack of concern for others, absence of important psychopathology and low ideological commitment.	Selfishness, the egocentricity of being right (since they think that everything is allowed) and their positive self-image, although unrealistic
		Excessive love for oneself, feelings of superiority, to draw attention, and the use of exploitation in relationships with others.
		Although at the beginning they are very dear to others, narcissists become, over time, increasingly unpopular.
By presenting the descriptions of each of the three constructs it has been observed that they share certain characteristics. In a different degree, the three suppose a malevolent character with behavioral tendencies toward self-promotion, emotional coldness, hypocrisy and aggressiveness		

Source: Own elaboration from Barrutieta & Ursúa (2011), Campbell et al. (2009), Christie & Geis (1970), McHoskey, Worzel & Szyarto (1998), Pastor (1982), Paulhus (1998), Paulhus & John (1998), Paulhus & Williams, (2002), Raskin & Terry (1988).

Research around the Dark Triad

After these clarifications, let us now return to the Dark Triad as the agglutinator of the three analyzed variables. Shortly after the finding of Paulhus and Williams (2002), Lee and Ashton (2005) established that the model of the Dark Triad correlates negatively with the "Big Five" and "Hexaco" models. In particular, very significant negative correlations were found between the three features of the dark triad and the honesty-humility factor of the Hexaco model. In the same sense, but with moderate significance, a relationship between psychopathy and Machiavellianism was observed with the kindness of the Big Five. Likewise, a positive correlation was found between narcissism and extraversion, with respect to both the Big Five and Hexaco. On the other hand, Jakobwitz and Egan (2006), in a similar study, found negative correlations between primary psychopathy (a dimension arising from the three variables that make up the dark triad) and kindness. Similarly, a positive correlation between secondary psychopathy and neuroticism was found. At the same time, neuroticism correlated positively with primary psychopathy and Machiavellianism. This same study analyzes the extent to which each variable tends to appear in the general population and concludes that the three variables reflect an essentially unitary construct.

Soon after, Jones and Paulhus (2009) also find a connection between these three types of personalities, arguing that "subjects with these features share a tendency to be insensitive, selfish and malicious in their interpersonal relationships" (p.100). In this sense, it can also be discussed if the dark triad has some social utility for some individuals. According to Jonason, Li and Teicher (2010), those people who are unpleasant, outgoing, open and with a high self-esteem, together with low levels of neuroticism and conscience, obtain high scores in the Dark Triad. In a second study, they found that having a more individualistic or competitive approach to others instead of an altruistic or prosocial style is also typical of those who score high in the Dark Triad. The authors conclude that there are at least two social strategies, one measured by the Dark Triad and another prosocial, measured by altruistic behavior, kindness and conscience.

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[1] To carry out the study of these features of the Dark Triad, the distinction between clinical and subclinical samples is essential. In the words of González (2015), "the former comprise those individuals who are currently under clinical or forensic supervision. In contrast, subclinics refer to continuous distributions in larger community samples" (p. 255).
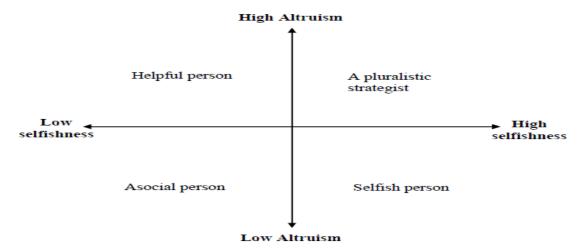
Figure 1. Plural vision of social strategies
Source: Jonason, Li and Teicher (2010)

However, not all social strategies result in relationships with similar characteristics. The study by Jonason, Luevano and Adams (2012), showed that the "triopes" correlate low with respect to the preference for serious and long-term relationships. In this sense, Jonason and Schmitt (2012), study how those people who score high in the different variables that make up the Dark Triad have different motivations when selecting friends or couples, in general, they choose relationships for strategic purposes and create volatile or short durable environments that temporarily satisfy the needs of the "triopes".

In this way, as Pozueco and Moreno (2013) affirm, "with this type of personalities the metaphor of the dark side is understandable as the most negative part of human relations" (p.91). Thus, the authors even affirm that psychological violence is the most frequently resource used by people with "Tríope" in their intimate relationships.

On the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the conceptualization of the Dark Triad, Furnham, Richards and Paulhus (2013) make a review about the generated research. In addition to analyzing the instruments used and the results of some studies in very diverse areas, they present some conclusions of great value. In the first place, they warn about the error that would be to simplify the complex combination of factors that would affect people who score high in any of the features that make up the Dark Triad, you cannot reduce everything to good or bad personalities. On the other hand, they also recommend carrying out more sophisticated analysis -not only correlations- and taking into consideration the facets in which some of the variables are divided: vulnerable or "grandiose" narcissists; primary or secondary psychopathy. They also invite us to study the relationship of this variable with others such as the orientation to social dominance or sensitivity to aggression. The challenge, they conclude, is to determine the explanatory power of the Dark Triad.

This is a challenge that must be undertaken as soon as possible when it is necessary to identify and intervene effectively both the subjects who have these personalities and those who must face this task. In this sense González (2015) affirms that "the behaviors presented by individuals with features of the Triad have been culturally cataloged as undesirable for the development of life in society" (p 256).

Shortly after Furnham and his colleagues launched the challenge, Egan, Chan and Shorter (2014) picked up the glove and used the Structural Equation Analysis in a sample of 840 people in the United Kingdom, the United States and Canada, including the Dark Triad, the Oxford inventory of happiness (OHI) and the Diener scale of satisfaction with life (SWL). The resulting model decomposes the triad, leaving out Narcissism, which nevertheless contributes substantially to the Dark Dyad composed of psychopathy and Machiavellianism. This dyad is mainly explained by a low mood and unkindness.

From an evolutionary perspective, González (2015) states that the features of the Triad are dimensional and they vary according to the strategies that the subjects require to adapt themselves to the environment in which they operate. In any case, the author concludes that the Triad is a predictor for: psychological violence, moral inhibition, manipulation, low kindness, insensitivity, selfishness; as well cause of difficulties in the interpersonal and social interaction.

Chabrol et al. (2015), use the Dark Triad in a sample of high school students and claim to be the first to study this type of feature in a sample of these characteristics. In the answers of the 615 students, it was observed that the four traits were moderately correlated suggesting that, although there could be an overlap, they were different constructs. The cluster analysis gave rise to four groups: a group of low features, a sadistic-Machiavellian group, a psychopathic-narcissistic group and a group of high features called Dark Tetrad. This last group constituted 15% of the total sample and was characterized by having the highest levels of antisocial behaviors and suicidal ideas. In sum, the article suggests that a very significant minority of high school students is characterized by very high levels in the Dark Tetrad, as well as by the use of aggression towards themselves and towards others.

Aghababaei and Blachnio (2015) using also a sample of students and investigating about the Dark Triad, they found that narcissism can be useful providing eudaimonic and hedonic well-being to the narcissistic person, likewise, it can be useful for the welfare of those around him. The authors suggest that while psychopathy is the darkest feature of the triad, narcissism is the least dangerous, they even concluded that the narcissists in their study showed high scores: in terms of establishing positive relationships with other people, as well as concern, affection, intimacy, understanding and empathy towards others. In any case, on this last issue, they recognize that it would be a speculation that requires more investigation.

Recently, Muris et al. (2017) have carried out a meta-analysis about the literature generated by the Dark Triad. Among its objectives, they decided to evaluate the interrelations between narcissism, Machiavellianism and psychopathy; the gender differences in each trait; how these traits are related to "normal" personality factors; and the psychosocial correlates of the Dark Triad. Regarding their first objective, as in previous studies, they found inter-correlations between the different traits that make up the Triope. Moreover, they found that there were no significant differences or the effect size was very small ($r = .15$ and $r = .16$) in terms of gender in the features of Narcissism and Machiavellianism. However, with respect to Psychopathy, they observed a greater link with the masculine gender ($r = .29$, which decreases $r = .24$ by controlling the variance shared between the different features). Regarding the third objective, they observed similar results to those of Lee and Ashton (2005) or Jakobwitz and Egan (2006), according to this study, the Dark Triad is related to the kindness factor of the Big Five and with the honesty-humility factor of Hexaco.
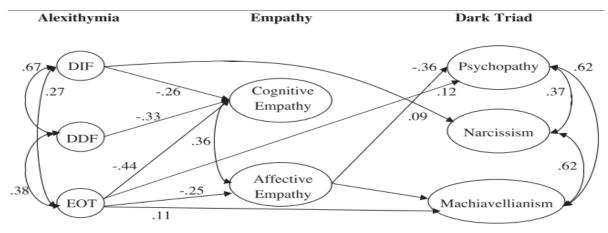
Finally, they identify 102 studies that include 122 samples that make 46234 participants in which 180 psychosocial correlates are examined, and even considering the benefits that the triope can bring to those who score high in it, the general view is that narcissism, Machiavellianism and Psychopathy represent the malevolent side of human nature and therefore are inherently maladaptive. Thus, it could be said that all the features of the Dark Triad are accompanied by negative psychosocial consequences.

THE DARK TRIAD AND EMPATHY

In addition to the results of the different studies and the characteristics of these people, mentioned previously in **Table 1**, we believe that it is necessary to highlight the absence of empathy as a common feature of the three variables that make up the Dark Triad, Cleckey more than 40 years ago, in 1976, stated that the most defining feature of psychopathy is the absence of empathy. More recently, Pozueco and Moreno (2013) have stated:

These three components coincide in one fundamental feature: the absence of empathy. From this feature derive others that are also characteristic of the three components of the Triope and that they usually stage in their interpersonal relationships. Thus, when a person does not care in the least about the feelings of others, nor does he notice the negative consequences that might be generated in other people, it is evident that this person will not show scruples of any kind to do what he intends to do if he/she achieves his/her own goals that will bring concrete benefits of various kinds - sexual, economic, social position, etc. (p.105)

In a similar way, Wai and Tiliopoulos (2012) express it in their study about empathy (cognitive and affective) and the Dark Triad of personality. According to these authors, the Triope is characterized by a common underlying deficit in empathy. Since empathy can be divided into cognitive and affective, the authors analyze in their study in which way the components of the triad are related to one or another type of empathy. Using a sample of university students, they found that the components of the Triad were associated with deficits in affective empathy, both primary and secondary psychopathy, as well as Machiavellianism and narcissism. They found, however, with respect to cognitive empathy, a single correlation and in a positive sense with narcissism.

Figure 2. Structural equation model representing the relationships between empathy, alexithymia and the Dark Triad traits.
Source: Jonason and Krause (2013)

On the other hand, Jonason et al. (2013) propose a very similar study to that of Wai and Tiliopoulos but including the gender perspective in the different analysis. Starting from the base of the empathy deficit, they wonder if it is this factor that explains the gender differences in the Dark Triad. In a sample of 352 volunteers (60 men), they found that women are more empathetic and men score higher in all the variables of the Dark Triad. They also corroborated that the Triope correlates with low scores in empathy. On the other hand, they found that gender moderates the relationship of the Dark Triad and empathy, so that in men, low empathy facilitates both Machiavellianism and primary and secondary psychopathy.

In another study, Jonason and Krause (2013), analyze the correlations between the Dark Triad and what he calls "emotional deficiencies": limited empathy and alexithymia. The results of the different analyzes show that the Dark Triad mediates gender differences in empathy and in the externally oriented thinking. The model of structural equations suggests that the different facets of alexithymia predict different forms of limited empathy, which in turn predicts the specific features of the Dark Triad.

Giammarco and Vernon (2014) include in the study of the Dark Triad and empathy two other variables: revenge and forgiveness. The multiple regression analyzes showed that Machiavellianism, psychopathy, narcissism and empathy are fundamental in the prediction of the variable forgiveness (measured with the Trait Forgivingness Scale). On the other hand, the empathic preoccupation and the taking of perspective partially mediated the relationship between Machiavellianism and forgiveness, and between psychopathy and forgiveness.

Recently, Jonason and Kroll (2015) lamented that what is known about the relationship between the Dark Triad and empathy was limited to one-dimensional or two-dimensional conceptualizations of empathy and to English-speaking samples. So, on this occasion they replicate previous studies applying multidimensional measures of empathy to verify in what way it relates to the Dark Triad in a German sample. In this way they show that narcissism is positively linked to empathy while psychopathy correlates in the opposite direction. Traits in the Dark Triad are stronger in men than in women while women are more empathetic. Likewise, the gender in the traits of the Dark Triad, were mediated by empathy.
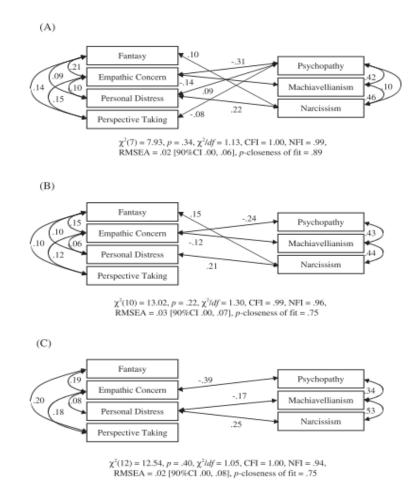
Figure 3. Structural Equation Models representing the relationship between de Dark Triad traits and four dimensions of empathy, overall and in men and women separately. (A) Overall model independent of sex of participants. (B) Model for women. (C) Model for men. Note. All links significant less than .05 (two-tailed). Source: Jonason y Kroll (2015)

The study by Lowicki and Zajenkowski (2017) examines the relationship between the Dark Triad, empathy and religious beliefs. The authors have found that empathy and religiosity are positively associated with each other and negatively associated with psychopathy and Machiavellianism. Likewise, the analyzes carried out show that empathy partially mediates the inverse relationship between the Dark Triad and religious beliefs. To conclude, they argue about the need for empathy as a necessary condition in the development of religious beliefs since people think of deities as intentional agents with their own mental states.

Finally, the research by Álvarez-Castillo, Fernández-Caminero and González-González (2018) integrates empathy into the John Duckitt´s dual-process Cognitive-Motivational model, exploring the effects of this variable, along with the impact of personality and ideological attitudes, on prejudice in both its blatant and subtle forms.

CONCLUSIONS

Although the three components of this Triad coincide in the absence of empathy as a main characteristic, this trait can be modified since empathy is an educated socio-emotional competence (Stepien and Baernstein, 2006, Bayne and Jangha, 2016). On the one hand, according to López-Pérez, Ambrona and Márquez-González (2014), the evaluation of this competence facilitates the prediction of antisocial and/or prosocial behaviors. Besides, the levels of this Dark Triad, as Vernon, Villani, Vickers and Harris (2008) suggest, can also be reduced since, Machiavellianism, narcissism and psychopathy are elements whose result is a consequence of the interaction of genetics, the shared environment and the non-shared environment. As a consequence, it is

possible to create interventions that evaluate and enhance the development of empathy and socially desirable behaviors while reducing levels in the features of the Dark Triad.

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