

Elite Players or Psychopaths? The Relationship between High-Performing Athletes and the Dark Triad of Personality: A Literature Review

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Abstract: Successful businesspeople and politicians seem to have a high tendency in the Dark Triad of personality. Since achieved individuals often share similar personality traits while striving in a similar environment (prospering at others' expense), high-performing athletes are most likely to have similar characteristics. Through the examination on kinds of literature that are relative to the topic of the relationship between high-performing athletes and the Dark Triad of personality, homogeneous results were found across studies: the better the performance an athlete has, the more he/she would score in both overall and subsets of the Dark Triad scale. Potential drawbacks of such phenomena, such as doping and cheating, were also presented by literature, which should be paid attention to in future research.

Keywords: Dark Triad, elite athletes, Machiavellianism, narcissism, psychology

1. Introduction

When someone is being addressed as a psychopath, the person could as well be perceived as a criminal. At least that is how it is represented and portrayed in the media. In general, only around 1-2% of the entire population are psychopaths, yet, they are responsible for around 30% of the violent crime [1]. Together with "Narcissism" and "Machiavellianism", these undesirable and to some degree negative characteristics were grouped and is commonly known as the Dark Triad of personality [2]. Psychopathy refers to the type of personality of feeling remorseless, manipulative, and likely to display violent/antisocial behavior [3]; narcissism and Machiavellianism include but are not limited to characteristics such as entitlement, self-service, and deception [4]. However, the Dark Triad of personality does not solely embed in a clinically diagnosed psychopath. Studies across different fields have shown that it could be represented in people who seem perfectly normal. A commerce student could score higher on the psychopathic scale than students from other subjects while group leaders with an increased desire to stay in power display more relevance with Machiavellianism [5]. Although the Dark Triad of personality seems to have potential drawbacks that would hinder an individual from achieving success in life, researchers like Paul Babiak and Robert Hare have found it to be quite the opposite. In their book *Snakes in Suits When Psychopaths Go to Work*, Babiak and Hare argued that there are potentially four factors that contribute to psychopaths' success in a corporate setting such as their superficial charming first impression, manipulation and the urge of taking control masked as

leadership, the fast changing nature of business world requires making hard decisions, meaning egocentric and callous individuals are more likely to survive, and that psychopathic individuals are drawn towards the high profiting yet less regulated corporate environment [6].

The dark personalities exist within successful business individuals, but they could also be found in global leaders and achieved politicians. Donald Trump, known for his "enticing" character, is an exemplar for possessing a dark personality and being considered a pathological narcissistic [7]. Moreover, it is argued that individuals with dark personalities are attracted to political careers as they think themselves suitable for the office and have a better chance of winning [8]. Similar patterns and characteristics are shown between "successful psychopaths" in both the corporate and political world. Although having the dark triad of personality is not widely accepted by society and countless "unsuccessful psychopaths" end up being incarcerated, some of the traits get results through the expense of moral codes and potentially other people [9]. The question is would "psychopaths" succeed in other areas?

Athletes require constant training if they want to reach the next level. One of the most famous claims is the 10,000-hour rule proposed by Gladwell, which is based on Ericsson's original idea of deliberate practice [10]. According to Ericsson and Harwell [10], deliberate practice is an effortful behavior and should not be objectively enjoyable. The harsh nature of deliberate practice, together with other stressors, builds towards athletes' resilience. One claim also suggested that minor trauma would help athletes working on their coping mechanisms, which would enhance their performance [11]. It could also be argued that the construction of resilience could have drawbacks since younger athletes would learn from how they were treated, very much like Bandura's Bobo doll experiment, causing younglings to develop darker traits. Besides the coaching and training techniques, other environmental factors such as the competition could also contribute to the development of the Dark Triad. Current talent systems are somewhat fixed, meaning competitions are result-oriented [12]. Instead of praising people for their own progression/improvement, they are praised for the outcome. Individuals have to be able to outperform others before reaching the next level. Winning-oriented objectives would lead to a potential increase in the Dark Triad scores as the self-gain originates from winning, usually positively correlated with dark personality traits [8]. Therefore, the more games an individual was winning or wishing to win, the more likely for him/her to develop the Dark Triad traits to some degree. The purpose of this paper is to examine some of the existing literature on the relationship between high-performing athletes and the Dark Triad of personality traits. Specifically, the better the performance correlates with higher dark personality traits. Since it is a reasonably novel research area, papers in light of the relationship proposed are not as abundant. Literature is selected according to its relevance to the current research direction. Keywords such as "athletes," "Dark Triad," "psychopathy," "narcissism," "Machiavellianism" were used for literature search through PsycInfo. Only peer-reviewed articles were included.

2. Reviews

2.1. Dark Triad

The Dark Triad comprises three distinct yet interrelated personality traits: psychopathy, narcissism, and

Machiavellianism [4]. Furthermore, these traits are considered to be "dark" due to their antagonistic qualities such as impulsivity, grandiosity, and manipulation [4]. Scales for measuring the Dark Triad range from Psychopathic Personality Inventory Revised (more than 100 items in the questionnaire) to the Dirty Dozen (DD) (only 12 questions, four items per construct) have their strengths and weaknesses [13]. The more items are in one questionnaire, the more comprehensive the result would suggest. Nevertheless, it would be demanding due to the length of the survey. Dirty

Dozen, on the other hand, is often criticized due to its lack of some essential elements [2]. Short Dark Triad (SD3), a relatively new 27-item questionnaire created by Jones and Paulhus [2], has better predictive validity when compared to the Dirty Dozen [13]. SD3 and DD, including its different language variations, are mainly used via distributing questionnaires to large samples of participants in the selected studies examined in this paper. Vaughan et al. hypothesized that the Dark Triad traits measured by SD3 would vary across different performance levels [13]. Other studies also focused on similar research topics and tested for similar results through empirical research [4,14-15]. As for the overall Dark Triad score, gender differences, level differences, and sport-type differences were presented across these studies. Male, higher level, and individual sports athletes tend to score higher in the Dark Triad Scale than their counterparts. Besides simply investigating the Dark Triad score among participants, competitiveness was also explored as a potential mediating factor towards athletes' performance. Vaughan and Madigan [4] concluded that the Dark Triad traits could successfully predict individual performance on the basketball shooting task. Results also suggested factors such as hypercompetitive and self-developmental competitive orientations functioned as mediators [4]. On the other hand, Gonzalez-Hernandez et al. directly examined the correlation between the Dark Triad and competitiveness [15]. The collected data was in line with the general hypothesis that high-performing athletes scored higher in the Dark Triad questionnaire and supported the correlation between dark personalities and competitiveness.

Sabouri et al. used a slightly different method. Instead of using SD3 or DD [16], researchers distributed separate questionnaires for each construct to participants through internet recruitment. The study explored the Dark Triad's relationship with mental toughness and physical activity. Evidence was able to underpin the claim in light of the correlation between the Dark Triad and the other two factors, respectively. However, only rigorous, not moderate, physical activity was significantly associated with the other two factors. As the researchers failed to investigate further regarding the reason, this unique phenomenon somewhat aligns with the limitation proposed by Gonzalez-Hernandez et al. [15]. The 2020 study worried that individuals' lifestyles could influence their data. Nevertheless, elite athletes would experience more rigorous training despite their lifestyle compared to non-elites, still endorsing the idea that high-performing athletes would display more dark traits.

2.2. Psychopathy

Psychopathy is possibly the most media-portrayed construct of the Dark Triad of personality. From fictional characters such as Hannibal Lecter to real-life serial killer Ted Bundy, psychopaths display similar traits. The deficit in emotions and impulsivity are the two main elements that were concluded by scientists [14]. Despite its massive exposure in the media, psychopathy had the least influence on athletes' performance compared with the other two constructs. The main group differences were aligned with the overall tendency, meaning males scored higher than females, elites scored higher than amateurs, and individual sports athletes scored higher than team sports ones [4,14-15]. Vaughan et al.'s data [13] suggested that in spite of the differences between groups, scores for psychopathy were the lowest within their respective populations. Corresponding results were also found in other literature where psychopathy scores were almost one standard deviation lower than narcissism and Machiavellianism [4,14-15]. In Sabouri et al.'s study, however, psychopathy was rated higher than Machiavellianism on some occasions [16]. Potential explanations for this deviation could be the sampling differences compared to other research and the use of separate scales for each construct. As the participants were not purposefully recruited (regular adults instead of athletes), it was possible that the collected data was not in line with other literature. Gonzalez-Hernandez et al. concluded that when athletes were too committed to achieving the result, they tended to have poorer empathy [15], which could be one probable reason why elite athletes would score higher in psychopathy. They seemed more goal-oriented and agentic, which motivated them to develop risk-taking, aggression,

and lack of particular emotional expression [4].

2.3. Narcissism

Grandiosity is one of the most distinctive characteristics of narcissism, which may first be considered "leadership" [17]. In fact, a meta-analysis done by Grijalva et al. had found that narcissism is positively correlated with leadership regardless of whether it's a "good" leader or not [17]. The subset score for narcissism shared similar overall tendencies regarding the group differences [4,13-15]. In fact, narcissism was found to correlate with the other two constructs negatively. Vaughan et al. indicated that narcissism is negatively associated with both Machiavellianism and psychopathy while it is proclaimed to be the relatively more positive factor within the Dark [13,16,18]. Gonzalez-Hernandez et al. learned that narcissism is positively related to the sense of being winners as well as competitive factors such as motivation to succeed/avoid failure [15]. These types of motivation encouraged self-improvement since narcissistic individuals considered themselves as winners. This form of self-entitlement stimulated individuals to self-enhance, which is regarded as a critical factor in becoming successful athletes [19]. Mental toughness often can be examined with narcissism collectively. To surpass their personal best and other competitors, athletes usually were required to improve their performance. Not only did mental toughness and narcissism exhibit high confidence [16], but they also ignited individuals' interests in competing in higher levels to improve their performance [18]. Thus, the narcissistic tendency was considered as a reliable predictor for athlete's performance across studies.

2.4. Machiavellianism

Named after Niccolò Machiavelli, this particular personality trait is often considered to be akin to psychopathy by numerous researchers. Despite having a great number of similarities in characteristics such as being manipulative and superficially charming, Machiavellianism also includes factors like long-term strategy/focus, capable of delay gratification, and decent impulsivity control, which are not part of psychopathic traits [20]. In accordance with the other two constructs and the overall dark triad tendency, Machiavellianism displayed similar patterns between groups in various literature [4,13-15]. People high in Machiavellianism not only were considered to be elite team leaders as their acute decision-making ability often masked their manipulation [21], but also were committed to their own goals and achievements [19]. Vaughan and Madigan [4] manifested that Machiavellian's traits seemed to influence individuals' performance in the short term but might be detrimental in the long term since Machiavellianism leads to undermining coworkers or teammates. Like narcissism, scores for Machiavellianism were relatively high among the Dark Triad constructs and were positively correlated with psychopathy, potentially due to the similarities within their traits [13]. Gonzalez-Hernandez et al. elucidated that Machiavellianism was negatively correlated with the sense of being a winner [15], which is kindred to psychopathy. It is also argued that this particular feeling of loss could lead to irrational behaviors such as taking performance enhancement drugs to gain unfair advantages for a competition [15]. Nicholls et al. indicated that people who scored highly in Machiavellianism potentially had their strategy in achieving their goals, risking putting themselves in the idea of doping [22].

3. Discussion

Through examining literature relative to high-performing athletes and the Dark Triad of personality, most evidence supported the phenomenon that the more elite the performers were, the higher they would score on the Dark Triad scales. Problems still exist even though higher Dark Triad traits seem to be associated with better performance. For instance, doping and cheating are some risky actions

athletes may take to gain advantages [15, 22-23]. Although Nicholls et al. elucidated that Machiavellianism was the strongest predictor for doping [22], psychopathy was considered the dominant factor due to its urge for immediate rewards and lack of remorse [23]. Nicholls et al. also argued that not only did the three constructs have an effect on the attitudes towards cheating [23], but narcissism seemed to be the essential aspect among athletes due to countless training that developed a sense of self-entitlement. As for non-athletes, psychopathy, since it can give unfair advantages immediately and has a strong positive correlation with motivation to success, was the factor that stood out [15,23].

4. Limitations

Some of the potential limitations for the current study include most of them are single-sessional [13,15], leaving researchers unable to track athletes' overall performance. There may be mediating/confounding variables that influenced the relationship between the Dark Triad and individual performance, such as the lifestyle between elite and non-elite individuals [15]. Some of the paper claims that their participants are too monotonous as they only examined within their cultural population [14], but combined in the present review, similar tendencies were found across cultural backgrounds, suggesting potential generalizability of existing findings. In addition, self-reporting was the primary method of collecting the Dark Triad data in most studies examined in the current review. The reliability of self-report may not be as accurate as objective data or expert's rating [16]. Conversely, as the sample size increases, the false reporting should be counteracted and the distribution should be as expected.

5. Conclusion

The present literature review inspects multiple studies on the relationship between high-performing athletes and the Dark Triad, which replicated similar results. Since it is a relatively new topic, further studies should be conducted to investigate the potential causes of such a phenomenon. Researchers should consider using longitudinal methods to keep track of athletes, analyzing the development of dark personalities. In addition, intervention for attitudes towards doping and cheating should be established, preventing at-risk athletes from destroying their careers. Sports psychologists also need to consider incorporating the Dark Triad to boost individuals' performance since studies have shown a positive correlation.

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