

## **Triade oscura della personalità e operatori delle forze dell'ordine: analisi di un gruppo italiano**

### **Les traits de personnalité de la Triade noire et policiers : Analyse d'un échantillon italien**

### **Dark Personality and police workers: analysis of an Italian sample\***

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#### **Riassunto**

La triade oscura della personalità è costituita da tre tratti maladattivi di personalità: machiavellismo, narcisismo e psicopatia. Sebbene questi tratti siano correlati fra loro, essi rappresentano tre differenti aspetti di personalità. D'altro lato, è risaputo che una carriera nelle forze dell'ordine è particolarmente stressante e le esperienze proprie di tale professione possono avere un impatto sulla personalità dell'individuo. Mentre il tratto della psicopatia è stato osservato in appartenenti alle forze dell'ordine, minore attenzione hanno destato gli altri due tratti della triade oscura di personalità. Scopo di questo studio esplorativo è di investigare la presenza dei tratti della triade oscura in un campione italiano di appartenenti alle forze dell'ordine, suddivisi per età e anni di servizio. Abbiamo somministrato la versione italiana del questionario denominato *Short Dark Triad* al campione, consistente in 121 appartenenti alle forze dell'ordine (gruppo sperimentale) e 541 "civili" – non appartenenti alle FF.OO. (gruppo di controllo). I dati raccolti sono stati analizzati mediante il software SPSS v25. È stato condotto il t-test a campioni indipendenti al fine di analizzare eventuali differenze nei tratti della triade oscura tra gli appartenenti alle forze dell'ordine ed i soggetti del gruppo di controllo. Inoltre, è stata utilizzata la correlazione punto biseriale al fine di esplorare eventuali correlazioni tra le esperienze pericolose durante il servizio o esposizione a scene di violenza con i tratti della triade oscura, nel gruppo sperimentale. I risultati del t-test indicano che nel campione di appartenenti alle forze dell'ordine si riscontra un minore livello nei tratti del Machiavellismo e della psicopatia rispetto ai soggetti del gruppo di controllo (civili), mentre nessuna differenza è emersa nel tratto del narcisismo. Riguardo il gruppo sperimentale (appartenenti FF.OO.) i risultati statistici mostrano una correlazione positiva tra l'esposizione a scene di violenza durante il servizio ed il tratto della psicopatia. Infine, è emerso che le esperienze pericolose durante il servizio non hanno influenza su alcuno dei tratti della triade oscura.

#### **Résumé**

La triade noire de la personnalité est constituée de trois traits mal adaptatifs de la personnalité : le machiavélisme, le narcissisme et la psychopathie. Bien que ces traits soient interconnectés, ils représentent trois aspects différents de la personnalité. D'autre part, il est bien connu qu'une carrière dans les forces de l'ordre est particulièrement stressante, et les expériences propres à cette profession peuvent avoir un impact sur la personnalité de l'individu. Alors que le trait de psychopathie a été observé chez les membres des forces de l'ordre, moins d'attention a été accordée aux deux autres traits de la triade noire de la personnalité. L'objectif de cette étude exploratoire est d'investiguer la présence des traits de la triade noire dans un échantillon italien de membres des forces de l'ordre, répartis par âge et années de service. Nous avons administré la version italienne du questionnaire appelé *Short Dark Triad* à l'échantillon, composé de 121 membres des forces de l'ordre (groupe expérimental) et 541 'civils' - non-membres des forces de l'ordre (groupe de contrôle). Les données collectées ont été analysées à l'aide du logiciel SPSS v25. Un test t a été réalisé sur des échantillons indépendants afin d'analyser d'éventuelles différences dans les traits de la triade noire entre les membres des forces de l'ordre et les sujets du groupe de contrôle. De plus, la corrélation bisériale a été utilisée pour explorer d'éventuelles corrélations entre les expériences dangereuses pendant le service ou l'exposition à des scènes de violence avec les traits de la triade noire dans le groupe expérimental. Les résultats du test t indiquent qu'il existe un niveau inférieur de machiavélisme et de psychopathie chez les membres des forces de l'ordre par rapport aux sujets du groupe de contrôle (civils), tandis qu'aucune différence n'a été observée dans le trait du narcissisme. En ce qui concerne le groupe expérimental (membres des forces de l'ordre), les résultats statistiques montrent une corrélation positive entre l'exposition à des scènes de violence pendant le service et le trait de psychopathie. Enfin, il a été constaté que les expériences dangereuses pendant le service n'exercent aucune influence sur aucun des traits de la triade noire.

\* This article builds upon the study titled: "La Triade Oscura di Personalità: quale correlazione con il comportamento di Intimate Partner Violence (I.P.V.) e Stalking? Indagine su di un campione italiano" published in *Rivista di Psicodinamica Criminale*, 15(1) (F. Delicato, 2021). Although this article focuses on different subjects and themes, it utilizes the same test and methodology.

• Psicologo, psicopatologo forense, Associazione Criminiseriali.

## Abstract

The Dark Triad of Personality consists of three negative and maladaptive traits: Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy. Although these traits are positively correlated, they represent distinct aspects of personality. On another note, a career in law enforcement is known to be particularly stressful, and the experiences in this profession can have an impact on an individual's personality. While psychopathy traits have been observed in police officers, less attention has been given to the other Dark Triad traits. The aim of this exploratory study is to investigate the Dark Triad traits in a sample of Italian police workers, categorized by age and years of service. We administered the Italian translation of the Short Dark Triad to the sample, which consisted of 121 Police Workers (experimental group) and 541 civilian individuals (control group). The collected data was analyzed using SPSS v25 software. An independent sample t-test was conducted to examine any differences in dark triad traits between police workers and civilian individuals. Additionally, a point-biserial correlation was used to explore any correlations between work-related dangerous experiences or exposure to violence scenes and dark triad traits in the experimental group. The results of the t-test indicate that the police workers sample had lower levels of both machiavellianism and psychopathy traits compared to civilian individuals, with no significant differences noted in the narcissism trait. Regarding police workers, the statistical results show a positive association between exposure to work-related violence scenes and the psychopathy trait. Furthermore, work-related dangerous experiences do not influence any of the dark triad traits.

**Key words:** dark triad; psychopathy; narcissism; Machiavellianism; police workers.

## 1. The Dark Triad of Personality and Police work

The dark triad of personality refers to a combination of three distinct traits: Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy (Paulhus and Williams, 2002). These traits are positively linked (Fehr et al., 1992; Gustafson and Ritzer, 1995; Jonason and Webster, 2010; McHoskey, 1995; Paulhus and Williams, 2002), despite representing different aspects of personality (Jones and Paulhus, 2010; Lee and Ashton, 2005; McHoskey et al., 1995; Paulhus and Williams, 2002). Psychopathy is typically associated with a strong desire for excitement, lack of empathy, interpersonal hostility, manipulation, and a pattern of anti-social behavior (Hare and Neumann 2008). Machiavellianism is a construct based on the writing of Niccolò Machiavelli and has been studied most commonly in the personality literature (McHoskey, Worzel, & Szyarto, 1998); it is defined by high self-interest and tendencies toward deception, exploitation and manipulation of others, and by a cynical perspective both on life and interpersonal

relationships (Christie and Geis 1970); Machiavellian individuals tend to be viewed as

ambitious, strategic, capable, and amoral. Finally, individuals with high level on narcissistic trait tend to extensively focus on themselves; they are characterized by sense of self-absorption, dominance, grandness, and devaluation of others (Emmons 1987).

Over the past few years, there has been an increase of research exploring the usefulness of these traits (for a comprehensive review, refer to Furnham et al., 2013). Recent surveys revealed that the dark triad traits provide varying levels of insight into interpersonal interactions, mate selection, antisocial behavior, and financial misconduct (e.g., Jones and Paulhus, 2010; Lee and Ashton, 2005; Malesza and Ostaszewski, 2016a, b). Moreover, previous studies on impulsivity in a dark triad model support that psychopathy is most closely associated with dysfunctional impulsivity, whereas narcissism is associated with functional impulsivity. (Jones & Paulhus 2011).

On the other hand, a career in law enforcement is known to be uniquely stressful (Selye, 1978; Brown

& Campbell, 1994; Beehr et al., 1995; Lennings, C.J., 1997; Biggam et. al. 1997; Lucas et al., 2012; Chopko et al., 2015). The trauma from this career seems to have an impact on the personality of law enforcement workers (Wills & Schuldborg, 2016) and it has been claimed that police are constantly at risk of danger. There is a widely debated discussion on the nature and extent of violence experienced by police workers, particularly in relation to the type of violence experienced (physical or psychological), the source of violence, gender differences in exposure, and the consequences of such exposure. For instance, Santos et al. (2009) found that there were no gender differences in the frequency of experiencing violence, whether in public or among colleagues. However, their study did show some minor variations between genders in terms of the types of violence exposure and the resulting effects on personal well-being. Studies on the consequences of exposure to violence on personality structure are limited. Some studies argue that this kind of exposure can play a role in youth psychopathology (Gudiño et. al. 2011), while others suggest that aspects of psychopathy (callousness) and childhood exposure to violence have a role in rape myth acceptance (Debowska et. al. 2015). Investigating the consequences of exposure to violence in police workers can contribute to the discussion on the mental health of the police force and can also assist counselors working with law enforcement personnel and others who need to cope with the direct and indirect effects of violence (Anderson, Bauer, 1987). In this context, it would be interesting to examine the role of exposure to violence, within a dark triad model, in a sample of police workers. Although psychopathy traits have been observed in police workers (Próchniak, 2012), there has been limited focus on the other dark triad

traits. This exploratory study aims to investigate if certain aspects of a police career, such as violence exposure, dangerous situations, years of service, or rank, are related to Dark Triad traits. Additionally, a comparison of dark triad trait levels between police workers and non-police workers (civilian individuals) was conducted.

## **2. Aim of the Study**

The aim of this exploratory study is to investigate dark personality traits in a sample of police workers by verifying if there is any correlation between D.T. traits and work-related dangerous experiences or exposure to violent scenes. Additionally, we investigated the differences between police workers and civilian individuals in terms of Dark personality model.

## **3. Materials and Methods**

The methodology employed in this study adopts the same approach that the author had previously utilized in their research on the dark triad of personality.

### **3.1 The Short Dark Triad Questionnaire – S.D.3.**

The Short Dark Triad Questionnaire – S.D.3 (Jones and Paulhus, 2014) is a self-report questionnaire used to assess three dimensions of the dark triad personality model. It consists of 27 items, with nine items in each subscale. Participants rate their agreement on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). These statements reflect the aforementioned dimensions of the dark triad. The psychometric properties of the original SD3 revealed acceptable internal consistency for every dimension and convergent validity with the external variables, consistent with Cronbach's alpha of the scale is in a range between .78 to .74. (Furnham et al. 2013; Jones & Paulhus

2014; Lee & Ashton 2005; Paulhus & Williams 2002). For our study, we used an Italian version of the SD3 questionnaire that has already been validated (Somma, Paulhus, Borroni, & Fossati, 2020).

### 3.2 Participants and Proceeding.

The sample, consisting of 662 participants aged between 18 to 75 years, was anonymously administered, and randomly distributed throughout Italy.

The survey was conducted online during the first six-month period of 2022. It was done via a provided link, which consisted of initial demographic questions and informed consent, followed by the S.D.3 questionnaire items.

The participants were divided into two groups: control group (A – civilians) with 541 subjects (241 males and 300 females), and experimental group (B – police workers) with 121 subjects (101 males and 20 females). To reach police workers, the link of the questionnaire was diffused thanks to the help of some trade unions and worker representations. Otherwise, to reach the persons composing the control group, the link of the questionnaire was diffused by e-mail or WhatsApp to students at some universities of Campania and Lazio regions thanks to the help of the trainees of the author of this article; moreover, other people were reached through the Presidents of some cultural associations (for example, the *Associazione Culturale NarteA*).

The control group included individuals who declared having jobs outside the police force, as well as students and unemployed individuals. Exposure to violence or dangerous experiences were not considered an exclusion factor. The experimental group consisted solely of police worker subjects.

For the study, only police workers (experimental group) were asked to answer questions related to:

- their rank;
- (through a true/false item) admission of experiencing episodes of great danger during work;
- (through a true/false item) admission of frequent exposure to severe violence scenes during work;
- years of service (YOS) (divided into five range groups: YOS Range 1 = 0-10; YOS Range 2 = 11-20; YOS Range 3 = 21-30; YOS Range 4 = 31-40; YOS Range 5 = over 40).

The collected data were analyzed using SPSS v25 software (IBM SPSS 2017). Point-biserial correlation was used to examine the association among variables, and an independent sample t-test was performed to compare Dark triad levels between the control group (A – civilians) and the experimental group (B – police workers).

### 3.3. Results.

Descriptive statistics are presented in table 1. An independent sample t-test was performed to compare the control group (A – civilians) and the experimental group (B – police workers) (table 2).

Table 1. Descriptive statistic of the sample.

		N	Mean	St.Dev.
<b><i>Machiavellianism</i></b>	Group A (civilians)	541	<b>3,0600</b>	,62156
	Group B (police workers)	121	2,79117	,05118
<b><i>Narcisism</i></b>	Group A	541	2,7575	,53653
	Group B	121	2,6870	,03717
<b><i>Psychopathy</i></b>	Group A	541	<b>2,1999</b>	,57308
	Group B	121	2,0651	,03908
<b><i>Gender difference among groups</i></b>				
<b><i>Machiavellianism</i></b>	Male Group A	241	<b>3,1780</b>	,59950
	Female Group A	300	2,9651	,62368
	Male Group B	101	<b>2,8317</b>	,58158
	Female Group B	20	2,5895	,41267
<b><i>Narcisism</i></b>	Male Group A	241	2,7855	,51463
	Female Group A	300	2,7351	,55333
	Male Group B	101	2,6874	,42087
	Female Group B	20	2,6850	,35156
<b><i>Psychopathy</i></b>	Male Group A	241	<b>2,3680</b>	,59253
	Female Group A	300	2,0648	,51982
	Male Group B	101	<b>2,1130</b>	,42067
	Female Group B	20	1,8235	,40246

Table 2. – Dark triad traits - t Test (indipendent sample) Groups A – B.

		Levene's Test		t-Test				
		F	Sign.	t	d.o.f.	Sign. (Two tails)	Diff. from mean	Diff. Std. err.
<b><i>Machiavellianism</i></b>	Equal variances	1,752	,186	4,364	660	,000	,26831	,06148
	Unequal variances			<b>4,647*</b>	191,181	<b>,000*</b>	,26831	,05774
<b><i>Narcisism</i></b>	Equal variances	10,257	,001	1,360	660	,174	,07052	,05186
	Unequal variances			1,612	222,882	,108	,07052	,04375
<b><i>Psychopathy</i></b>	Equal variances	10,326	,001	<b>2,437*</b>	660	<b>,015*</b>	,13477	,05529
	Unequal variances			2,917	226,422	,004	,13477	,04620

\* significant values in bold

The results, presented in table 1 and table 2, show a significantly higher level of both Machiavellianism and psychopathy traits in the control group (A - civilians) compared to the experimental group (B -

police workers). However, there was no significant difference in the narcissistic trait between civilians and police workers (tab. 2, t-Test sig. > .05).

Gender differences were observed in both the control group and the experimental group, with Machiavellianism and psychopathy traits being statistically higher in male subjects (t-Test sig. < .05). No gender differences were noted in narcissism traits in both groups (A – B).

Table 3 presents the Point-biserial correlation coefficients between the dark triad traits and age, dangerous experiences during work, and frequent work-related exposure to violence scenes in the experimental group (group B – police workers).

**Table 3. Dark Triad traits and Age/Danger Experiences/Violence exposure (Point-Biserial Correlation coefficients) in Group B (Police workers).**

	Age	Danger Exp.	Violence exposure
<i><b>Machiavellianism</b></i>	,008	,116	,176
<i><b>Narcisism</b></i>	- ,296**	- ,029	- ,018
<i><b>Psychopathy</b></i>	- ,006	- ,112	,186*

\* $p < .05$  level (two tail) - \*\* $p < .01$  level (two tail)

Results (tab. 3) show a positive correlation ( $p < .05$  level, two tails) between psychopathy and frequent work-related exposure to violence scenes. Additionally, no significant correlation was found between any dark traits and dangerous experiences during work. Notably, there was a negative

correlation ( $p < .01$  level, two tails) between narcissism and age in the experimental group.

To investigate if there is any correlation between years of service (YOS) and any dark triad traits, the experimental group was divided into five YOS ranges; point-biserial correlation was performed (table 4).

**Table 4. Dark Triad traits and Years of Service Ranges (Group B – Police workers) - Point-Biserial Correlation coefficients.**

	Range 1	Range 2	Range 3	Range 4	Range 5
<i><b>Machiavellianism</b></i>	- ,011	,018	,065	- ,027	- ,142
<i><b>Narcisism</b></i>	,211*	- ,068	,001	- ,141	- ,184*
<i><b>Psychopathy</b></i>	- ,087	,113	,006	- ,010	,015

\* $p < .05$  level (two tail)

No significant correlation was found between Machiavellianism or psychopathy and any YOS range (tab. 4). However, a positive correlation ( $p < .05$  level, two tails) was found between narcissism and YOS range 1 (the younger ones), and a negative

correlation was found between narcissism and YOS range 5 (the older ones).

Finally, no significant correlation was found between any dark triad traits and the rank of police workers (tab. 5).



**Table 5. Dark Triad traits and Rank (Group B - police workers) - point-biserial correlation coefficients.**

	Rank
<i>Machiavellianism</i>	-,057
<i>Narcisism</i>	-,099
<i>Psychopathy</i>	-,083

#### 4. Discussion

In recent years there has been growing fascination among scholars in studying the dark triad of personality, especially in work contexts (for a review see Le Breton et. al. 2018, O'Boyle et. al. 2012). In this study, we explored the dark traits of personality in an Italian sample divided into two groups: group A - civilians (non-police workers) and group B - police workers. The anonymous administration of the Short Dark Triad questionnaire - Italian version (Somma, Paulhus, Borroni, & Fossati, 2020) was used to investigate any differences between police workers and civilian individuals in the dark personality model.

Considering that a career in law enforcement is stressful (Selye, 1978; Brown & Campbell, 1994; Beehr et al., 1995; Lennings, C.J., 1997; Biggam et. al. 1997; Lucas et al., 2012; Chopko et al., 2015), and may have an impact on personality (Wills & Schuldberg, 2016), as well as job-related traumatic events tending to have a negative impact on empathy (Wills & Schuldberg, 2016) or moral injury is influenced by dark traits in a sample of police workers (Papazoglou et al., 2019), we investigated if there is any correlation between dark triad traits and work-related dangerous experiences or exposure to violence scenes. The consequences of exposure to violence in police workers can contribute to the discussion on the mental health of the police force

and provide information for counselors or psychologists working with law enforcement

personnel. Additionally, studying the effects of violence exposure within a dark triad model can contribute to the understanding of the dark traits. Furthermore, we investigated if there is any correlation between dark triad traits and age or rank in the police workers group.

Results in our study showed a lower level of both Machiavellianism and psychopathy traits in police workers compared to civilian individuals (tables 1 and 2). No differences were noted regarding the narcissism trait. These findings raise the question of whether the choice of a law enforcement career is related in advance to a low level of both Machiavellianism and psychopathy traits, or if this career choice influences a decrease in these traits after joining the profession. Future studies are needed to better understand this relationship.

In the police workers group, the exposure to work-related violence scenes was positively associated only with the psychopathy trait (table 3). This result suggests the hypothesis that frequent exposure to scenes of violence during work may increase the psychopathy trait in a police worker. Future studies should investigate the effects of exposure to violence on the civilian population or in other work contexts, particularly in a dark triad model, by verifying the possible correlation with psychopathy. Additionally, future studies are desirable to further

examine the influence of exposure to work-related violence scenes on the psychopathy trait in other contexts or populations. It would also be interesting to explore the effect of exposure to violence in the context of self-control and antisocial/criminal outcomes, as previous studies have suggested that self-control mediates the association between psychopathy and Machiavellianism in young criminals (Pechorro et. al. 2021).

Moreover, our study found a negative correlation between narcissism and age (table 3) in the experimental group (police workers), and a positive correlation (table 4) between narcissism and years of service range 1 (0 to 10 years of service); conversely a negative correlation between narcissism and years of service range 5 (over 40 years of service) was found. These results suggest that narcissism trait may decrease with age and a long career in law enforcement. No correlations were found between the rank and any dark triad traits in experimental group (table 5).

Finally, concerning gender differences, our findings (table 1) are consistent with a previous study on dark triad traits (Jonason & Davis, 2018) and specifically psychopathy (Forth et al., 1996). We observed a higher level of both Machiavellianism and psychopathy in male subjects compared to females. This suggests that gender roles may play a role in the dark triad model. Notably, the trait of psychopathy is more prevalent in males than females. Some studies (Wynn, Høiseth & Pettersen, 2022) have suggested that interpersonal symptoms in female psychopaths may vary from those in males. Unlike males, female psychopaths may not display charm and a grandiose self-image. Furthermore, these studies suggest that conventional signs of psychopathy, such as engaging in promiscuous behavior, may be

influenced by different underlying motivational factors based on gender. Additionally, it is proposed that social norms may influence the assessment of certain psychopathic characteristics differently in men and women.

#### Limitation.

The first limitation of this study is the size of the sample which, although quite representative, is still limited, especially in the experimental group (police workers). A further limitation concerns the use of a self-report questionnaire that, although anonymously administered, still suffers the influence of social desirability and self-perception, and might not reflect accurately the subject's behavior.

#### Ethics Approval.

All procedures carried out in this study, involving human participants, were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards set by national research committee or align with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its subsequent amendments, or similar ethical standards.

#### Declaration of Conflicting Interests.

The author confirms no competing interests.

#### Consent to Participate.

All participants were provided with information regarding the content and aims of the study, as well as the assurance of their anonymity and the voluntary nature of their involvement. Subsequently, all participants were requested to sign an informed consent form.

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