

What does the
term “Dark Triad”
mean?

3 constructs

“Dark Triad of Personality Traits”

Machiavellianism

- “The manipulative personality” (Christie & Geis, 1970)
- **Ex: manipulating refs by faking/selling an injury in order to reach a goal**
- **Ex: Teams misleading opponents with certain strategies/formations**

Narcissism

- A personality trait characterized by exaggerated feelings of self-importance
- **Ex: blaming teammates for failure, lack of sportsmanship**

Psychopathy

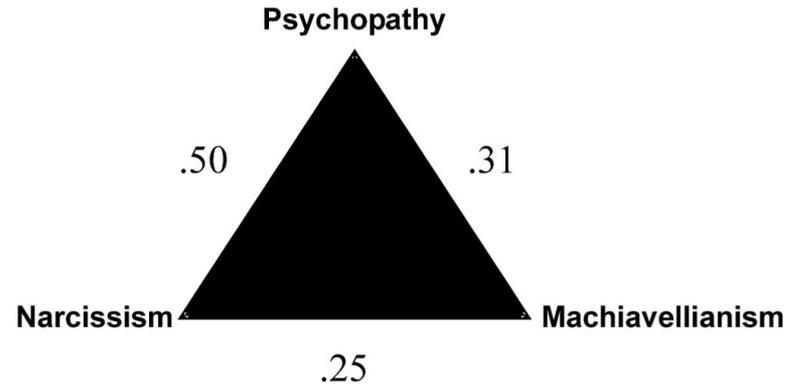
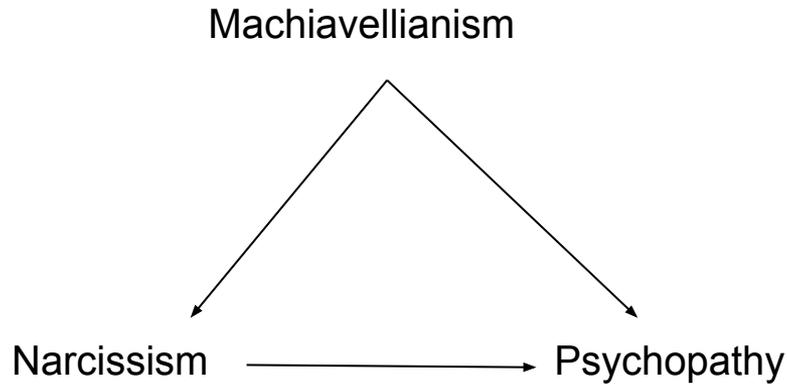
- “Indicative of an impulsive, unempathetic and anxious individual” (Paulhus & Williams, 2002)
- **Ex: could exhibit antisocial behaviour outside of sport, might engage in substance abuse**

“They all entail a socially malevolent character with behaviour tendencies towards self-promotion, emotional coldness, duplicity, and aggressiveness.” (Paulhus & Williams, 2002).

“Collectively, these traits describe a disagreeable, callous, and antagonistic individual (Furnham et al., 2013).”

There is now an overlap for machiavellianism with psychopathy, narcissism with psychopathy and machiavellianism with narcissism (Fehr et al., 1992)

- This constructs the possibility of the samples of Dark Triad being equivalent



N = 245. All correlations significant at $p < .001$, two-tailed.

Fig. 1. Correlations among measures of narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy.

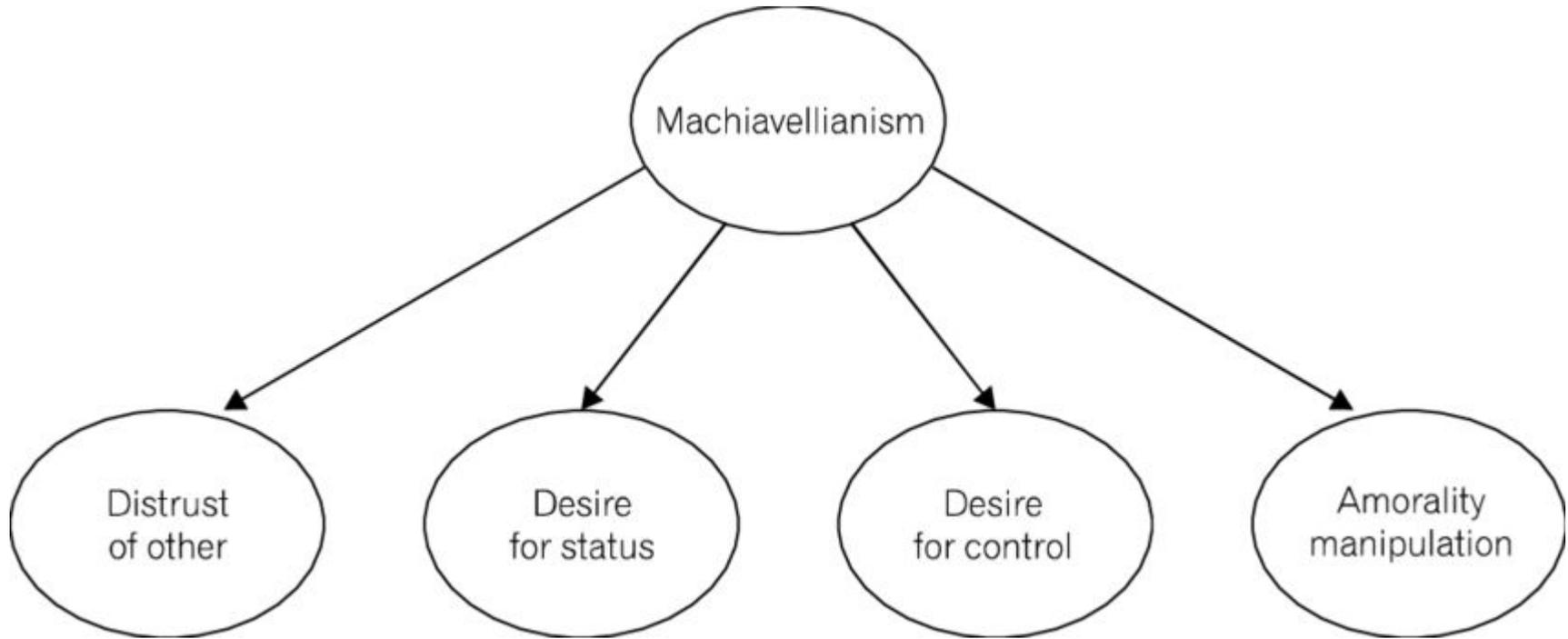
However, the maximum inter-correlation is .50 suggesting that they cannot be considered equivalent.

The facets of the Dark Triad

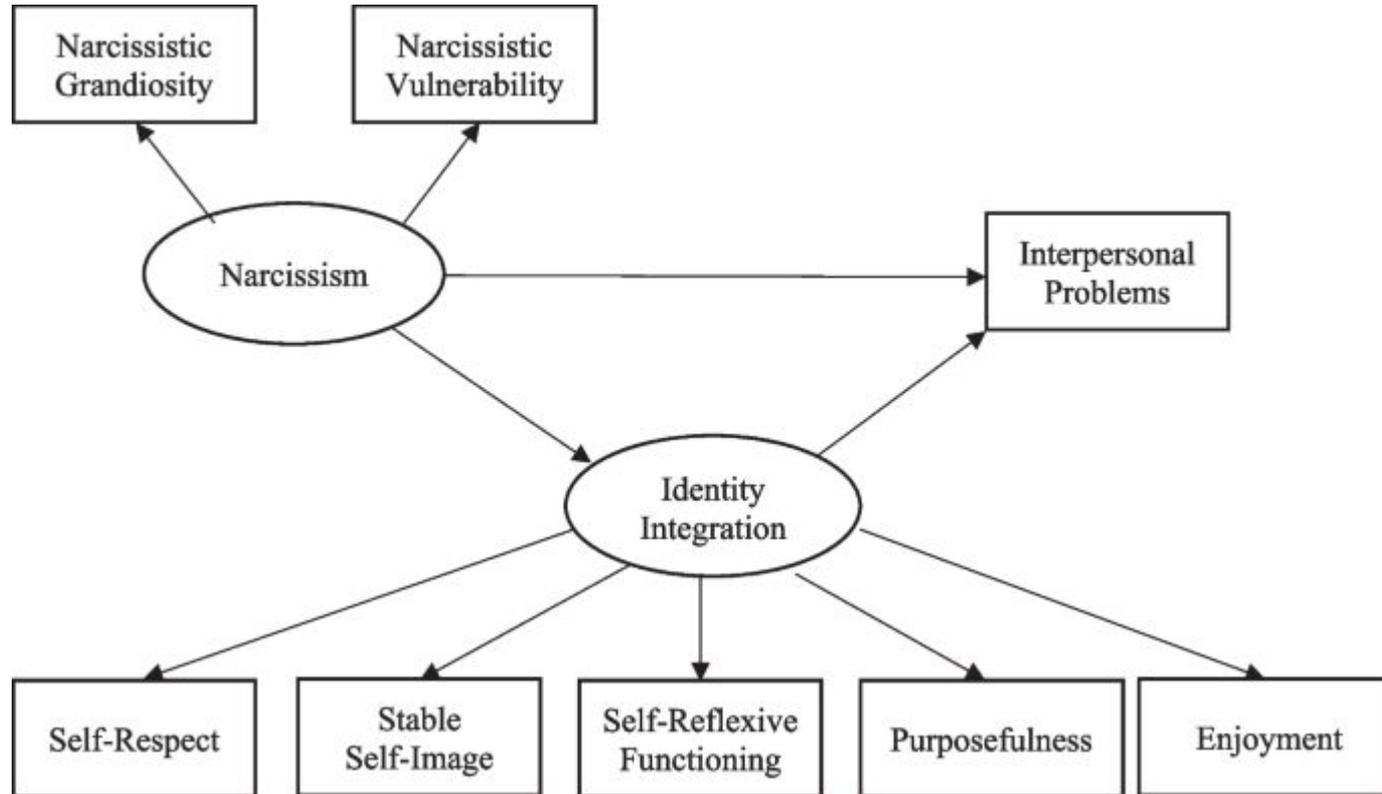
Facets of Psychopathy

| Factor 1 (Interpersonal/affective) | | Factor 2 (Social deviance) | |
|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Facet 1 (Interpersonal) | Facet 2 (Affective) | Facet 3 (Lifestyle) | Facet 4 (Antisocial) |
| Superficial charm | Lack of remorse | Need for stimulation | Poor behavioral controls |
| Grandiose sense of self-worth | Shallow affect | Parasitic lifestyle | Early behavioral problems |
| Pathological lying | Callous/lack of empathy | Lack of realistic, long-term goals | Juvenile delinquency |
| Manipulative | Failure to accept responsibility | Impulsivity | Revocation of conditional release |
| | | Irresponsibility | Criminal versatility |

Facets of Machiavellianism



Facets of Narcissism



Low and High levels of the dark triad

| Traits | High levels | Low levels |
|------------------|--|--|
| Psychopathy | <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Impulsive- Lack of empathy- Reckless | <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Thoughtful- Careful- Empathetic |
| Narcissism | <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Grandiose (arrogance)- Entitlement- Blaming | <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Humble- Seeks little attention- Empathetic |
| Machiavellianism | <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Selfish- Exploitation- Liar- Manipulative | <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Honest- Transparent- Cooperative |

Short Dark Triad Test (SD3)

How the trait is measured:

- Anonymous questionnaire, self-report of intelligence
- *Not at all (1) Very much (5)*
- NPI for Narcissism
- Mach-IV for Machiavellianism
- SRP III for Psychopath

<https://openpsychometrics.org/tests/SD3/>

For Respondents: Please indicate how much you agree with each of the following statements below.

1. It's not wise to tell your secrets.

| | | | | |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| 1. | 2. | 3. | 4. | 5. |
| Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neither Agree or Disagree | Agree | Strongly Agree |

2. I like to use clever manipulation to get my way.

| | | | | |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| 1. | 2. | 3. | 4. | 5. |
| Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neither Agree or Disagree | Agree | Strongly Agree |

3. Whatever it takes, you must get the important people on your side.

| | | | | |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| 1. | 2. | 3. | 4. | 5. |
| Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neither Agree or Disagree | Agree | Strongly Agree |

4. Avoid direct conflict with others because they may be useful in the future.

| | | | | |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| 1. | 2. | 3. | 4. | 5. |
| Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neither Agree or Disagree | Agree | Strongly Agree |

5. It's wise to keep track of information that you can use against people later.

| | | | | |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| 1. | 2. | 3. | 4. | 5. |
| Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neither Agree or Disagree | Agree | Strongly Agree |

Link to the Test!



How Might the Dark Triad be linked either positively or negatively with Expertise?



Pros

- “They may enable individuals to get ahead and achieve personal goals by disregarding others’ objectives and emotions, increasing chances of individual success” (Vaughan & Madigan, 2021)
- research shows that athletes with more expertise report higher DT scores compared to those with less expertise (Vaughan et al., 2019)
- Being more self involved and driven for their own glory or gain they are likely to become experts in individual abilities

Cons

- “One commonality across the triad namely low agreeableness”(Paulhus & Williams, 2002)
- Machiavellianism has been shown to be negatively related to the quality of job performance (Vaughan & Madigan, 2021)
- The Dark Triad has been linked to doping scandals and cheating (Nichols et al., 2020)

Conceptual Links

- Athletes who scored higher in the Dark Triad are more likely to engage in a “Win at all costs” mentality (Nichols et al., 2020)
- This may lead them to achieving higher individual success than others because they lack empathy towards the other athletes and the rules of the game
- People who scored higher in the Dark Triad also usually had higher performance than those who didn't in sports (Vaughan & Madigan, 2021)
- Do you believe that scoring high in the dark triad may be beneficial to achieving expertise?

**Based on this information can
you name an Athlete you
believe scores high in the Dark
Triad?**

Empirical Links

Maintaining Relationships

It is difficult for characters who are high on the dark triad scale to maintain relationships. This is due to traits such as machiavellians being manipulators, psychopaths having a lack of remorse etc.

Intelligence

“Narcissists (and psychopaths to a lesser extent) tend to overestimate their intelligence whereas machiavellians do not.” (Paulhus & Williams, 2002)

Risky Behaviours/Decision Making

Sensation seeking and acting on impulse can lead to risk of cheating on an assignment or excessively spending \$\$ etc.

Self-Enhancement

Narcissists exhibit the most self-enhancement, followed by psychopaths. Machiavellianism shows no sign of self-enhancement.

Vaughan & Madigan, 2021

*The winner takes it all: The mediating role of **competitive orientations** in the **Dark Triad** and **sport task performance***

- “The present study provides the first evidence that the Dark Triad may lead to better task performance in sport, and that this effect may be driven by athletes’ competitive orientations” (Vaughan & Madigan 2021)
- “Research has shown that athletes differ on levels of the Dark Triad, with **men scoring higher** than **women**, **individual** sport athletes scoring higher than **team** sport athletes, and those with **greater expertise** scoring **higher** than those with **less expertise** (Vaughan et al., 2019)
- Athletes with higher levels of narcissism, machiavellianism and psychopathy also possess **greater mental toughness** and **engage** in more **physical activity** (Vaughan et al., 2018)

Roberts et al., 2018

Pass me the ball: narcissism in performance settings.

- Narcissism and performance is fully dependent on the perceived **opportunity for glory**.
- “Narcissists reported greater levels of effort, the more they perceived that coaches created either a performance or a mastery climate. (Roberts et al., 2018)
- Narcissists are driven by the desire to **appear superior**
- These athletes will put in **more effort** if **they think** it will make them look good.

Can you think of an athlete/coach who uses the desire of “looking good” as a motivating factor of athlete success/development?

Deion Sanders

“If you look good, you feel good, and if you feel good, you play good.” - Deion Sanders (Andrews, 2019).

- Looking good on the field raises confidence & comfortability
- Clothing has an ability to change perceptions & reactions of others



Colorado Buffaloes head coach Deion Sanders against the Arizona Wildcats at Arizona Stadium. | Mark J. Rebilas-Imagn Images



Dark Triad x Doping/Cheating (Nicholls et al., 2020)

- “The Dark Triad dimensions showed significant positive correlations with attitudes towards doping and cheating behaviour.” (Nicholls et al., 2020).

Table I. Descriptive Statistics, Cronbach’s Alphas, and Bivariate Correlations.

| Variable | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|-----------------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|-------|
| 1. Machiavellianism | | | | | |
| 2. Narcissism | .66*** | | | | |
| 3. Psychopathy | .75*** | .65*** | | | |
| 4. Cheating behaviour | .39*** | .41*** | .37*** | | |
| 5. Attitudes towards doping | .51*** | .51*** | .63*** | .45*** | |
| <i>M</i> | 23.99 | 25.29 | 19.46 | 1.74 | 14.38 |
| <i>SD</i> | 7.27 | 7.10 | 7.62 | 1.91 | 9.07 |
| Omega | .83 | .82 | .85 | - | .94 |

Note. *N* = 163.

****p* < .001.

Further,

Table II. Summary of Multiple Regression Analysis.

| | ΔR^2 | β |
|-------------------------------|--------------|---------|
| DV = Attitudes towards doping | .432** | |
| Age | | .13* |
| Gender | | -.05 |
| Machiavellianism | | .05 |
| Narcissism | | .19* |
| Psychopathy | | .44*** |
| DV = Cheating behaviour | .206*** | |
| Age | | -.08 |
| Gender | | -.07 |
| Machiavellianism | | .15 |
| Narcissism | | .22* |
| Psychopathy | | .12 |

Note. $N = 163$. DV = dependent variable. β = standardized regression weight.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

- Narcissism & Psychopathy emerged as a significant positive predictor of attitudes towards doping
- Narcissism emerged as a significant positive predictor of attitudes towards cheating behaviour

**Which of the Triad
is the most
maladaptive?**

Which Of The Triad Is The Most Maladaptive?

- “There is **no personality trait** that is universally adaptive or maladaptive” (Paulhus, Fridhandler & Hayes, 1997).
- “Machiavellians and narcissists may become more of an **interpersonal irritant than a threat**; data suggests that such characters are a **mixed blessing** in personal life (Robins & Beer, 2001), interpersonal life (Paulhus, 1998) and some organizational contexts (Hogan, Raskin, & Fazzini, 1990; Robins & Paulhus, 2001).”

Strengths

- Large sample size for study; 245 undergraduate students
- Study method includes reliable measures:
 - NPI. 40 forced-choice questionnaire used to measure narcissism (Raskin & Hall, 1979)
 - The Mach-IV Inventory. 20 5-point Likert items to measure machiavellianism (Christie & Geis, 1970)
 - SRP III. 31 5-point items to measure subclinical psychopathy (Hare, 1985)
 - Wonderlic Personnel Test (Wonderlic, 1977)
 - “It’s validity is well-established” (John & Srivastava, 1999)
- Study also explored the relationship between the Big Five personality traits & cognitive ability
- Results include the potential gender differences and coming to a conclusion that despite men scoring more highly on all three Dark Triad traits (3), the correlation patterns are similar for men & women
- Came to conclusion that data does not support the contention that when measured in normal populations, that the three constructs were equivalent

Weaknesses

- Study did not mention “sport”, “expertise” or “development”
- Study doesn’t indicate why men have higher levels of dark triad than women
- Very short article - could go into more depth in regards to
- Fails to incorporate backgrounds of study participants. Some cultures lean towards dark triad as being potentially beneficial in some cases

Should Coaches screen for personality traits present in the dark triad?



Implications for coaches

- Many great athletes have been narcissists while still managing to be a part of a winning team

 - Ex: Kobe Bryant “There is no I in team but there is a me”

- May not be good teammates and lead to team chemistry falling apart due to low levels of agreeableness being present in all three

 - Ex: Kobe and Shaq duo falling apart due to not being able to put aside egos

- Greater mental toughness could lead to performance in situations where there is high pressure

- More unpredictable reactions may be harder for coaches to control and could negatively affect a team

- As mentioned before they will disregard others in pursuit of self glory and personal gain which could lead to the team success faltering

Implications for players

- Being teammates with somebody who scores high in the dark triad may be frustrating due to goals being solely individual or glory based as opposed to the greater good of the team
- May have personal success and opportunities undermined or stolen out from you by someone high in these traits
- If you have a teammate high in these traits you may be susceptible to being manipulated for their gain
- Can you think of any other ways the dark triad may affect a player who is teammates with someone who is high in traits part of the dark triad?

Take Home Message

“Every personality trait has the potential to contribute positively and negatively in certain environments” (Roberts et al., 2018)

Reading: Vaughan, R. S., & Madigan, D. J. (2021). The winner takes it all: The mediating role of competitive orientations in the Dark Triad and sport task performance relationship. *European Journal of Sport Science*, 21(8), 1183–1192. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17461391.2020.1825822>

Reference List

- Christie, R., & Geis, F.L. (1970). Studies in Machiavellianism. *New York: Academic Press.*
- Fehr, B., Samsom, D., & Paulhus, D.L. (1992). The construct of Machiavellianism: Twenty years later. In C. D. Spielberger & J.N. Butcher (Eds.), *Advances in personality assessment* (Vol.9, pp.77–116). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- De Fruyt, F., Wille, B., & Furnham, A. (2013). Assessing Aberrant Personality in Managerial Coaching: Measurement Issues and Prevalence Rates across Employment Sectors. *European Journal of Personality*, 27(6), 555–564. <https://doi.org/10.1002/per.1911>
- Nicholls, A. R., Madigan, D. J., Duncan, L., Hallward, L., Lazuras, L., Bingham, K., & Fairs, L. R. W. (2020). Cheater, cheater, pumpkin eater: the Dark Triad, attitudes towards doping, and cheating behaviour among athletes. *European Journal of Sport Science*, 20(8), 1124–1130. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17461391.2019.1694079>
- Meng, Y., Jackson, T., & Chen, H. (2016). Neural rhythms of narcissism: Facets of narcissism are associated with different neural sources in resting-state EEG. *Psychophysiology*, 53(8), 1205-1216. <https://doi.org/10.1111/psyp.12658>
- Ramsammy, A. (2020, October 19). If you look good, do you play better?. *Global Sport Matters*. <https://live-global-sport-matter.ws.asu.edu/culture/2019/01/10/if-you-look-good-do-you-play-better/>
- Roberts, R., Woodman, T., & Sedikides, C. (2018). Pass me the ball: narcissism in performance settings. *International Review of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 11(1), 190–213. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1750984X.2017.1290815>
- Vaughan, R., Madigan, D. J., Carter, G. L., & Nicholls, A. R. (2019). The Dark Triad in male and female athletes and non-athletes: Group differences and psychometric properties of the Short Dark Triad (SD3). *Psychology of Sport & Exercise*, 43, 64–72. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2019.01.002>
- Vaughan, R. S., & Madigan, D. J. (2021). The winner takes it all: The mediating role of competitive orientations in the Dark Triad and sport task performance relationship. *European Journal of Sport Science*, 21(8), 1183–1192. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17461391.2020.1825822>
- Vaughan, R. S., Brimmell, J., Nixon, E., & Duarte, C. (2025). *The Dark Triad and executive function: The mediating role of athletic expertise* [Preprint]. SSRN. <https://ssrn.com/abstract=4621105>