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Is there a “dark intelligence”? Emotional intelligence is used by dark personalities to emotionally manipulate others

Ursa K.J. Nagler^{a,*,1}, Katharina J. Reiter^{a,*,1}, Marco R. Furtner^a, John F. Rauthmann^b

^a Institute of Psychology, Leopold-Franzens Universität Innsbruck, Austria

^b Institute of Psychology, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Germany

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ABSTRACT

Potential “darker sides” of socio-emotional intelligence (SEI) have been repeatedly noted. We examine whether SEI is associated with emotional manipulation of others when used by dark personalities (Dark Triad: narcissism, Machiavellianism, psychopathy). In $N = 594$ participants, narcissism was positively, Machiavellianism negatively, and psychopathy positively and negatively associated with SEI. Moreover, narcissism and psychopathy moderated links between facets of emotional intelligence and emotional manipulation. Findings are discussed in context of a “dark intelligence” used for malicious intents.

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1. Introduction

Are social and emotional skills always used for good intentions? Potential “dark sides” of socio-emotional intelligence (SEI), such as the emotional manipulation of others (Austin, Farrelly, Black, & Moore, 2007), have garnered interest during the last years. Nonetheless, SEI is widely regarded as adaptive, desirable, and positive (Grieve & Mahar, 2010; Veselka, Schermer, & Vernon, 2012). Although SEI and emotional manipulation both involve the skill to influence others’ emotions, no empirical association between these two variables could be asserted so far (Austin et al., 2007). We thus examine in this study *under which circumstances* SEI is associated with emotional manipulation. Due to its callous and manipulative character (e.g., Jones & Figueredo, 2013; Paulhus & Williams, 2002; Veselka et al., 2012), the Dark Triad of narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy was considered as a possible moderator of relations between SEI and emotional manipulation.

1.1. Socio-emotional intelligence

“Socio-emotional intelligence” serves as an umbrella term for various abilities, skills, aptitudes, and traits (Furtner, Rauthmann,

& Sachse, 2010), including communication competence (e.g., Diez, 1984), social intelligence (e.g., Cantor & Kihlstrom, 1987; Gardner, 1993; Guilford, 1967; Thorndike, 1920), and emotional intelligence (e.g., Mayer & Salovey, 1997; Salovey & Mayer, 1990). Not only interpersonal (e.g., encoding and decoding social information) but also the intrapersonal skills (e.g., regulating own emotions) are considered important. This is also reflected in Riggio’s and Carney’s (2003, p. 1) definition of social intelligence (see also Guilford, 1967; Mayer & Salovey, 1997; Salovey & Mayer, 1990) as socially intelligent individuals are “skilled in receiving, decoding, and accurately interpreting emotional and social information from both the self and from others, and ... in sending and regulating emotional and social information appropriate to the interpersonal and situational circumstances.” In this study, we consider these different types of socio-emotional skills.

Social intelligence (SI) dates back to Thorndike’s (1920) distinction between perceiving and acting in social settings. According to him, social intelligence is “the ability to understand and *manage* men and women, boys and girls and to act wisely in human relations” (italics added). As can be gleaned from this early definition, the concept of SI already included the potential for manipulating others by referring to “managing” people. Thus, a potential “dark side” of social intelligence has already been hinted at.

Emotional intelligence (EI) was first defined by Salovey and Mayer (1990) as the ability to deal with emotions. It has since gained much attention in popular literature (e.g., Goleman, 1995) and academic research (e.g., Mayer, Roberts, & Barsade, 2008). EI has been concretized and defined quite differently in psychological literature which has lent itself to controversial debates about its

* Corresponding authors. Address: Universität Innsbruck, Institut für Psychologie, Innrain 52, A-6020 Innsbruck, Austria. Tel.: +43 6803242821; fax: +49 87429653129.

E-mail addresses: ursa.nagler@gmail.com (U.K.J. Nagler), katharina.reiter@yahoo.de (K.J. Reiter).

¹ Ursa Nagler and Katharina Reiter share first authorship.

nature. For example, it has been defined as an ability or skill (Mayer & Salovey, 1997), trait (Petrides, Vernon, Schermer, & Veselka, 2011), or mixture of both (Mayer et al., 2008). Moreover, EI may pertain to the recognition, processing, interpretation, utilization, and regulation of either own emotions or of others (Mayer et al., 2008). Here, we conceptualize EI as a skill that can be self-reported (Mayer et al., 2008).

Recent research has started to uncover potential “dark,” dysfunctional, or maladaptive aspects of EI in interpersonal relations (e.g., Austin et al., 2007; de Raad, 2005) despite the fact that EI appears to be a widely valued and genuinely positive skill (Salovey, Mayer, & Caruso, 2002). Austin et al. (2007) have therefore introduced the concept of “emotional manipulation” as the “management” of others and their emotions: emotional skills are intentionally used to achieve a desired outcome (e.g., to get someone to do something for them). Therefore, emotional skills are utilized in a strategic and manipulative way to influence others’ emotions.

The constructs of SI and EI show conceptual and empirical overlaps. First, both are usually beneficial to navigating the social world (Lopes et al., 2004) and involve decoding others’ interpersonal signals (Mayer et al., 2008). Second, both have been shown to be positively intercorrelated (Riggio & Carney, 2003). Third, both have been linked to “managing” others or “cleverly” interacting in interpersonal contexts (Kafetsios, Nezlek, & Vassiou, 2011). This may point to a common “darker side” of both SI and EI. Due to these similarities, we speak of the macro-construct “socio-emotional intelligence.”

1.2. The Dark Triad

The Dark Triad consists of three conceptually distinct, but empirically overlapping personality traits (Furnham, Richards, & Paulhus, 2013; Paulhus & Williams, 2002): narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy. The sub-clinical forms of these traits share a callous, manipulative, and exploitative nature (Jonason, Webster, Schmitt, Li, & Crysel, 2012; Jones & Figueredo, 2013; Rauthmann, 2012a). *Narcissism* is characterized by an overly enhanced view of the self and feelings of grandiosity, paired with devaluation of others (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). Raskin and Terry (1988) described narcissism as excessive self-love and selfishness, with the tendency of disregarding others and a lack of empathy. *Machiavellianism* is characterized by cold and strategic manipulation of others (Christie & Geis, 1970). Machiavellians possess an unemotional, pragmatic, and cynical perspective on life and interpersonal relationships which may be used as a justification for exploiting others and acting in immoral ways (Rauthmann, 2012b). *Psychopathy* is characterized by an anti-social behavioral style, impulsive thrill-seeking, cold affect (i.e., the lack of feeling guilt or empathy), and interpersonal manipulation (Hare, 2003; Williams, Nathanson, & Paulhus, 2003). Among the members of the Dark Triad, it can be regarded as the “darkest” (Rauthmann & Kolar, 2013).

1.3. Relations between socio-emotional intelligence and the Dark Triad

A common thread among the Dark Triad traits is their exploitative social style at the expense or disregard of others’ welfare (Jones & Paulhus, 2011). As such, persons scoring high on the Dark Triad may be prone to manipulating others’ emotions to get their way and push through their self-beneficial agendas. However, are narcissists, Machiavellians, and psychopaths socially and emotionally intelligent?

Existing research has produced mixed findings. On the one hand, a positive relation between narcissism and EI has been established (Petrides et al., 2011; Veselka et al., 2012). On the other hand, narcissists have been described as low in empathy (e.g., Paul-

hus & Williams, 2002) which should be associated with less EI. Furthermore, Machiavellianism and EI are negatively correlated (Petrides et al., 2011; Veselka et al., 2012; Austin et al., 2007; Ali, Amorim, & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2009), while Machiavellianism has also been described as a social exploitation strategy that would require a minimum of interpersonal skills to successfully manipulate others (Jones & Paulhus, 2009; Wilson, Near, & Miller, 1996). Also, psychopathy was found to be positively (Petrides et al., 2011; Veselka et al., 2012) and negatively related to EI (Copestake, Gray, & Snowden, 2013; Ermer, Kahn, Salovey, & Kiehl, 2012). Moreover, a lack of empathy is considered as a hallmark of psychopathy (Furnham et al., 2013). Taken together, dark personalities should require SEI to get ahead, but their callous, exploitative tendencies may obstruct smooth interpersonal navigation. In this study, we thus investigate whether and how the SEI is associated with the Dark Triad.

2. The current study

2.1. Aims and scope

This study had several aims. First, we examine associations between SEI and the Dark Triad. Second, we examine associations between SEI and emotional manipulation. We also address under which circumstances this link exists: Do Dark Triad traits moderate associations between SEI and emotional manipulation? It might be the case that, on average, SEI is not associated with emotional manipulation (see Austin et al., 2007), but *only when* they are used by dark personalities. Investigating these issues may shed further light on the mixed findings in extant literature. On the one hand, dark personalities are deemed anti-social with little empathy and regard for others. On the other hand, however, they seem to be motivated and adept at deciphering who can be exploited in which ways (Buss & Chiodo, 1991) which suggests interpersonal skills. This also allows us to elucidate potential “dark sides” of SEI (Austin et al., 2007).

2.2. Hypotheses

We formed five hypotheses. First, we hypothesized that narcissism would show overall positive relations with SEI (Hypothesis 1) as narcissism seems to be the “brightest” member of the Dark Triad (Rauthmann & Kolar, 2013). Moreover, narcissists have been found to be charming, interesting, and even seductive (Back, Schmukle, & Egloff, 2010; Dufner, Rauthmann, Czarna, & Denissen, 2013) which suggests some form of interpersonal skills. Second, we hypothesized that Machiavellianism and psychopathy would show overall negative relations with SEI (Hypothesis 2) as both pertain to “darker” aspects of human personality (Rauthmann & Kolar, 2013). Both traits share strong similarities so that it has even proposed they reflect one and the same trait continuum (McHoskey, Worzel, & Szyarto, 1998). Both are characterized by callousness and a lack of empathy, suggesting less ability or motivation to attend to others. Third, we hypothesized that all three Dark Triad traits would show moderate to strong positive relations with emotional manipulation due to their exploitative nature (Hypothesis 3). Fourth, we hypothesized that SEI would show overall no or at best weak positive relations with emotional manipulation (Hypothesis 4). Lastly, we hypothesized that the Dark Triad traits may function as positive moderators of the link between SEI and emotional manipulation (Hypothesis 5). Specifically, the Dark Triad traits should yield or increase a positive association between SEI and emotional manipulation because dark personalities should utilize SEI to get their way.

3. Methods

3.1. Participants and procedure

Two samples were used for this study, aggregated to one sample ($N = 594$; 438 women, 138 men, 18 no indication; age: $M = 22.71$, $SD = 4.36$, range = 18–65). Further information of this sample, along with descriptive statistics of the scales used here, can be found in Furtner et al. (2010) as well as Rauthmann and Will (2011).

3.2. Measures

3.2.1. Socio-emotional intelligence

SEI was assessed with the self-reported Social Skills Inventory (SSI; Riggio & Carney, 2003). The SSI measures SI (for the “verbal” domain) and EI (for the “non-verbal” domain) with 90 self-report items. Six subscales can be computed (15 items each). EI encompasses *emotional expressivity* (accurately expressing and communicating emotional states; e.g., “I have been told that I have expressive eyes”), *emotional sensitivity* (receiving and interpreting others’ emotions; e.g., “I am often told that I am a sensitive, understanding person”), and *emotional control* (regulating emotional displays; e.g., “I am very good at maintaining a calm exterior even if I am upset”). SI encompasses *social expressivity* (verbal expression and engaging others in social discourse; e.g., “When telling a story, I usually use a lot of gestures to help get the point across”), *social sensitivity* (interpreting others’ communication and behaving socially appropriate; e.g., “I am generally concerned about the impression I am making on others”), and *social control* (playing roles and presenting oneself; e.g., “I am not very good at mixing at parties”). Answers were given on a five-point Likert-type scale (1 = *not at all like me* to 5 = *exactly like me*), and sum scores were computed for all six scales.

3.2.2. Dark Triad

Narcissism was measured with the 17-item Narcissistic Personality Inventory (von Collani, 2008). Answers were given on a five-point Likert-type scale (0 = *not at all like me* to 4 = *totally like me*), and mean scores were computed. *Machiavellianism* was measured on a six-point Likert-type scale (0 = *not at all like me* to 5 = *totally like me*) with an 18-item scale (Henning & Six, 2008; Rauthmann, 2012b). A sum score was computed. *Psychopathy* was measured with a 30-item version of the Self-Report Psychopathy Scale-III (Williams et al., 2003). Answers were given on a five-point Likert-type scale (0 = *not at all like me* to 4 = *totally like me*), and means were computed.

3.2.3. Emotional manipulation

Emotional manipulation was measured on a five-point Likert-type scale (0 = *strongly disagree* to 4 = *strongly agree*) with the “emotional manipulation tendency” facet (10 items) from Austin et al.’s (2007) questionnaire. Means were computed.

3.3. Data-analytical strategy

Associations among the subscales of socio-emotional intelligence, the three members of the Dark Triad, and emotional manipulation (Hypotheses 1–4) were investigated with bivariate zero-order Person correlations and linear multiple regressions. Whether the three members of the Dark Triad moderated the relationship between SEI scales and emotional manipulation was investigated with Hayes’ (2012) SPSS macro PROCESS. Eighteen models were computed in total, varying the independent variable as the six subscales of SEI as well as the moderator variable as

the three Dark Triad members. In each model, the respective other two members of the Dark Triad were controlled as covariates.

4. Results

4.1. Hypotheses 1 and 2: SEI and the Dark Triad

As can be seen from correlations in Table 1, narcissism showed positive relations with socio-emotional expressivity and control, while it showed no or even a negative relation to emotional and social sensitivity, respectively. Machiavellianism showed negative relations with all SEI scales except for emotional control. Psychopathy was unrelated to socio-emotional expressivity, negatively to socio-emotional sensitivity, and positively to socio-emotional control. Multiple regressions further corroborated the finding that narcissism was generally positively and Machiavellianism and psychopathy negatively related to SEI. Thus, our Hypotheses 1 and 2 were supported by the data.

4.2. Hypotheses 3 and 4: SEI, Dark Triad, and emotional manipulation

As can be seen from correlations and regression coefficients in Table 1, emotional manipulation was strongly and positively associated with all three Dark Triad traits, thus supporting Hypothesis 3. Further, it was weakly and positively associated with emotional sensitivity (regression only), emotional control (correlation only), and social control, while negatively with social expressivity (regression only). The weak positive relations speak in favor of Hypothesis 4.

4.3. Hypothesis 5: moderations

4.3.1. Social intelligence

We found no statistically significant interaction effects of narcissism, Machiavellianism, or psychopathy with any SI facet when predicting emotional manipulation. Thus, neither member of the Dark Triad moderated links between SI and emotional manipulation.

4.3.2. Emotional intelligence

From nine possible statistically significant interaction effects, we found four Dark Triad \times EI interactions when predicting emotional manipulation. First, narcissism positively moderated the link between emotional expressivity and emotional manipulation with a significant interaction effect, $B = -.0004$ ($SE = .00$), $\Delta R^2 = .00$, $F(1, 571) = 4.72$, $p = .03$. However, a simple slope analysis indicated no significant effects for any slope. Hence, a real moderation effect was not present.

Second, narcissism further positively moderated the link between emotional control and emotional manipulation with a significant interaction effect, $B = .0004$ ($SE = .00$), $\Delta R^2 = .00$, $F(1, 570) = 4.80$, $p = .02$. A simple slope analysis indicated a non-significant slope at -1 SD of narcissism ($B = .00$, $SE = .00$, $p = .422$), a significant slope at M of narcissism ($B = .00$, $SE = .00$, $p = .002$), and a significant slope at $+1$ SD of narcissism ($B = .01$, $SE = .00$, $p < .001$). Findings are graphically presented in Fig. 1A. Higher levels of narcissism coincided with stronger associations between emotional control and emotional manipulation.

Third, psychopathy positively moderated the link between emotional control and emotional manipulation with a significant interaction effect, $B = .01$ ($SE = .00$), $\Delta R^2 = .01$, $F(1, 570) = 7.90$, $p = .001$. A simple slope analysis indicated a non-significant slope at -1 SD of psychopathy ($B = .00$, $SE = .01$, $p = .888$), a significant slope at M of psychopathy ($B = .01$, $SE = .00$, $p = .004$), and a significant slope at $+1$ SD of psychopathy ($B = .01$, $SE = .00$, $p < .001$).

Table 1
Intercorrelations.

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
<i>Dark Triad</i>										
1. Narcissism	–									
2. Machiavellianism	.58***	–								
3. Psychopathy	.74***	.59***	–							
<i>Social intelligence</i>										
4. Social expressivity	.16*** (.47***)	–.16*** (–.35***)	.00 (–.14 [†])	–						
5. Social sensitivity	–.14*** (.01)	–.01 (.18***)	–.22*** (–.34***)	–.01	–					
6. Social control	.29*** (.53***)	–.11*** (–.43***)	.16*** (.02)	.64***	–.41***	–				
<i>Emotional intelligence</i>										
7. Emotional expressivity	.15*** (.40***)	–.14*** (–.34***)	.04 (–.05)	.64***	–.01	.44***	–			
8. Emotional sensitivity	–.04 (.33***)	–.28*** (–.34***)	–.19*** (–.22***)	.39***	.18***	.24***	.29***	–		
9. Emotional control	.15*** (.09)	.12*** (.04)	.14*** (.05)	–.10 [†]	–.18***	.18***	–.36***	.07	–	
10. Emotional manipulation	.69*** (.33***)	.55*** (.14***)	.71*** (.38***)	.06 (–.02)	.01 (.13**)	.13*** (.12)	.05 (.13 [†])	–.03 (–.11 [†])	.20*** (.26***)	–

N = 594.

Standardized regression coefficients beta (β) from multiple regressions are presented in parentheses below the zero-order bivariate Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients. Social intelligence, emotional intelligence, and emotional manipulation were predicted from all three Dark Triad members simultaneously. Emotional manipulation was predicted from all six scales of social and emotional intelligence simultaneously.

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

Findings are graphically presented in Fig. 1B. Higher levels of psychopathy coincided with stronger associations between emotional control and emotional manipulation.

Fourth, psychopathy positively moderated the link between emotional sensitivity and emotional manipulation with a significant interaction effect, $B = .009$ ($SE = .00$), $\Delta R^2 = .00$, $F(1, 571) = 4.3$, $p = .04$. A simple slope analysis indicated a non-significant slope at -1 SD of psychopathy ($B = .01$, $SE = .00$, $p = .254$), a significant slope at M of psychopathy ($B = .01$, $SE = .00$, $p = .001$), and a significant slope at $+1$ SD of psychopathy ($B = .01$, $SE = .00$, $p < .001$). Findings are graphically presented in Fig. 1C. As can be seen, higher levels of psychopathy coincided with stronger associations between emotional sensitivity and emotional manipulation.

5. Discussion

We examined relationships between the SEI and the Dark Triad regarding emotional manipulation tactics. First, there was a positive relation between SEI scales and narcissism, while Machiavellianism showed mainly negative relations, and psychopathy showed mixed findings. Second, the relation between emotional control and emotional manipulation was moderated by psychopathy and narcissism. Machiavellianism showed no such effects.

5.1. Interpretation

Emotional manipulation was associated with all three Dark Triad traits. This link can be explained by the fact that the manipulation of others is one of the core characteristics of dark personalities (Paulhus & Williams, 2002; Jones & Figueredo, 2013). Emotional manipulation was also related to socio-emotional control. This seems plausible because regulating one's own and others' emotions is helpful in manipulating others (Austin et al., 2007). It seems crucial to regulate one's own emotional displays, be able to play social roles and present oneself accordingly to effectively influence others' emotions. Moreover, these results further support the notion that EI can have a maladaptive aspect in interpersonal relations (e.g., Austin et al., 2007; de Raad, 2005).

As narcissism is the "brightest" Dark Triad member (Rauthmann & Kolar, 2013), its correlation with almost all aspects of SEI seems reasonable. The positive relation with socio-emotional expressivity and socio-emotional control may reflect narcissists' thrive to maintain their grandiose self-view by behaving accordingly in interac-

tions with others. However, they do not necessarily need to be able to interpret others' emotions to keep this enhanced view of the self. The inability to interpret others' emotions and act accordingly is in accordance with Jonason and Krause's (2013) findings, which indicate that narcissists show low affective empathy and that they have difficulties identifying others' feelings. Machiavellianism showed a negative relation to all SEI scales except emotional control. This fits to Machiavellians' externally oriented thinking that does not focus on feelings (Rauthmann & Will, 2011). Psychopathy's negative associations with perceiving others' emotions and regulating emotional displays might be one of many reasons why they are perceived as cold-blooded and dark (Rauthmann & Kolar, 2013).

The moderation findings of narcissism and psychopathy may be taken as an indication that some dark personalities may reap benefits from EI skills in manipulating others. Put differently, EI can be associated with emotional manipulation (cf. Austin et al., 2007), and especially so when narcissist and psychopaths utilize those skills. Hence, there is some form of "dark intelligence" as the dark side of EI (see also O'Connor & Athota, 2013) although we may add that the interactions between narcissism and psychopathy, respectively, with the EI skills were rather small. As we had a relatively large sample size, we were able to detect small effects.

5.2. Limitations and prospects

The limitations of this work point to areas of future research. First, we assessed SEI solely with self-reports. People's reports of how socio-emotionally skilled they are may not necessarily correspond to their actual motivations or abilities. Thus, future research should include ability tests and also ask about people's motivation to utilize SEI. Second, empathy-related constructs in the SEI do not distinguish between "hot"/affective (feeling what others feel) and "cold"/cognitive empathy (understanding what others feel). For example, dark personalities may score high on cognitive empathy (Wai & Tiliopoulos, 2012; Book, Quinsey, & Langford, 2007; Dolan & Fullam, 2004; Hansen, Johnsen, Hart, Waage, & Thayer, 2008) and lower on affective empathy (Jonason & Krause, 2013). This may allow them to understand and use other people's emotions without feeling guilt. Thus, different forms of empathy should be distinguished. Third, we used Austin et al.'s (2007) global emotional manipulation tactics subscale. Future studies should differentiate between different manipulation tactics (Rauthmann, 2013) to cast a more differentiated view. Additionally, emotional

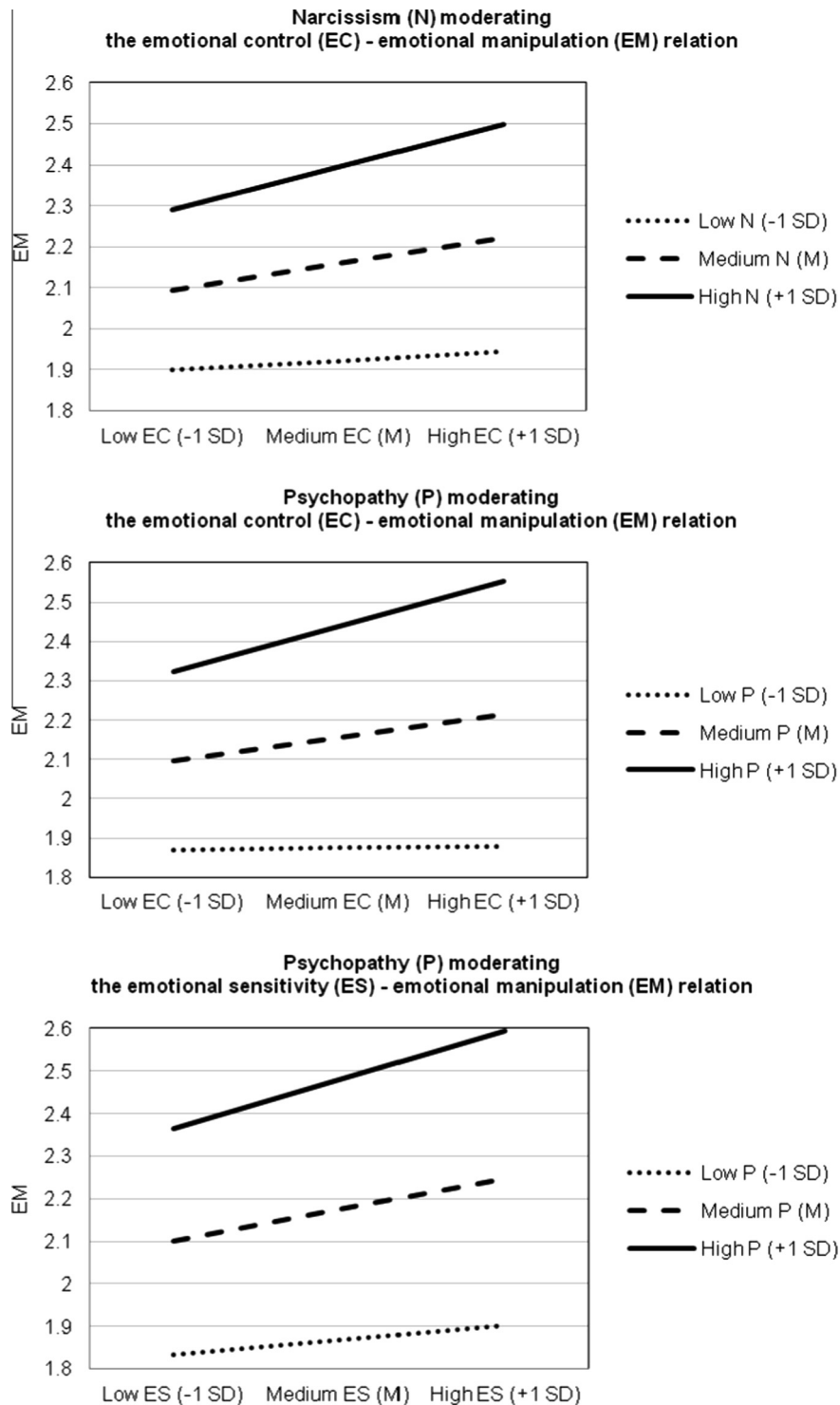


Fig. 1. Moderation findings.

manipulation should also not be self-reported, but ideally – as far as ethics allow it – be sampled as actual behavior (where success rates can be tracked by attending to the emotional outcomes of those being manipulated).

6. Conclusion

Social and emotional skills are not always used to manipulate others. The utilization of EI skills for the emotional manipulation of others is facilitated by dark personalities (namely, narcissists

and psychopaths). To the extent that EI can be and is used for malicious purposes (e.g., deception, exploitation, harm of others), a “dark intelligence” may be formed by those who use EI as a tool to a self-serving and manipulative end.

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