Dark Personality Traits as Predictors of Criminal Cognitive Distortions among Incarcerated Offenders

Dr.Rajesh Kumar Tewari
Sr. Assistant Professor & Head, Department of Psychology, T.N.B. College, Bhagalpur, T.M. Bhagalpur University, Bhagalpur

Abstract- The present study investigated the relationship between Dark Triad personality traits—Machiavellianism, Narcissism, and Psychopathy—and criminal thinking patterns among prison inmates. A quantitative correlational research design was adopted. The sample consisted of 120 male inmates selected through stratified random sampling from a medium-security correctional institution. Participants were assessed using the Short Dark Triad (SD3) and the Criminal Thinking Scale (CTS). Results indicated significant positive correlations between all three dark personality traits and criminal thinking patterns ($p < .01$). Multiple regression analysis revealed that psychopathy was the strongest predictor of criminal thinking ($\beta = .45$), and the overall model explained 50% of the variance ($R^2 = .50$). The findings highlight the importance of integrating personality assessment into correctional rehabilitation programs. Implications for forensic assessment and recidivism reduction are discussed.

Keywords: Dark Triad, criminal cognition, prison inmates, psychopathy, correctional psychology, personality traits

I. INTRODUCTION

Criminal behaviour is a complex psychological and social phenomenon influenced by environmental, biological, and personality-based determinants. While sociological theories emphasize poverty, inequality, peer influence, and structural disorganization, psychological perspectives highlight stable personality traits and maladaptive cognitive processes as key contributors to persistent criminal conduct (Walters, 2016).

One influential framework within personality psychology is the Dark Triad, conceptualized by Paulhus and Williams (2002). The Dark Triad includes Machiavellianism, Narcissism, and Psychopathy—three socially aversive personality traits that share characteristics such as manipulativeness, lack of empathy, entitlement, and moral disengagement.

Psychopathy has consistently been linked with violent offending, impulsivity, institutional misconduct, and high recidivism rates (Hare, 2003). Individuals high in psychopathy exhibit shallow affect, reduced guilt, and chronic violation of social norms. Machiavellianism reflects a strategic, cynical, and manipulative interpersonal style. Such individuals often engage in calculated exploitation and deception. Narcissism is characterized by grandiosity, entitlement, and hypersensitivity to ego threats, which may lead to aggression when self-image is challenged.

However, personality traits alone cannot fully explain criminal persistence. Cognitive theories propose that offenders maintain criminal lifestyles through distorted belief systems known as criminal thinking patterns (Walters, 2012). Criminal thinking involves entitlement beliefs, rationalization of harmful acts, power orientation, justification of violence, and externalization of blame. These cognitive distortions enable offenders to neutralize guilt and legitimize deviant behaviour.

Research suggests that criminal cognition is a dynamic risk factor and central target of cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) programs in correctional institutions. Despite extensive research on psychopathy and criminal behaviour, relatively fewer studies have explored the relationship between Dark Triad traits and criminal thinking patterns within prison populations, particularly in the Indian correctional context.

Understanding the interaction between personality structure and criminal cognition is essential for developing effective rehabilitation models. If dark personality traits significantly predict criminal thinking, integrating personality screening into correctional assessment protocols may enhance treatment responsiveness and reduce recidivism.

Therefore, the present study aims to examine the relationship between Dark Triad personality traits

and criminal thinking patterns among prison inmates.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Hare (2003) established psychopathy as a major predictor of violent recidivism. Walters (2012) demonstrated that criminal thinking significantly predicts institutional misconduct and post-release offending. Jonason and Webster (2010) found that dark personality traits are associated with unethical decision-making and exploitative behaviour.

Jones and Paulhus (2014) validated the Short Dark Triad (SD3) as a reliable measure of Machiavellianism, Narcissism, and Psychopathy. Research indicates that individuals high in psychopathy exhibit greater entitlement and moral disengagement (Baughman et al., 2014).

Although these studies provide insight into personality–behaviour links, limited research has directly examined how dark traits influence criminal cognitive distortions among incarcerated individuals. The present study addresses this gap.

III. OBJECTIVES

To assess levels of Machiavellianism, Narcissism, and Psychopathy among prison inmates.

To measure criminal thinking patterns among inmates.

To determine the relationship between dark personality traits and criminal thinking patterns.

To examine the predictive role of dark traits in criminal cognition.

IV. HYPOTHESES

H1: Dark Triad traits will positively correlate with criminal thinking patterns.

H2: Psychopathy will significantly predict criminal thinking patterns.

H3: Machiavellianism and Narcissism will significantly predict criminal thinking patterns.

V. METHOD

Research Design

Quantitative correlational design.

Participants

The sample consisted of 120 male inmates aged 18–55 years from a medium-security prison. Participants were selected through stratified random sampling based on type of crime.

Instruments

Short Dark Triad (SD3)

27-item scale measuring Machiavellianism, Narcissism, and Psychopathy (5-point Likert scale).

Reported reliability in present study:

Machiavellianism α = .78

Narcissism α = .74

Psychopathy α = .81

Criminal Thinking Scale (CTS)

Measures entitlement, justification, power orientation, and cognitive indolence.

Total reliability α = .86

Procedure

Institutional permission was obtained. Participants provided informed consent. Questionnaires were administered individually in supervised sessions. Confidentiality was ensured.

Statistical Analysis

Descriptive statistics

Pearson correlation

Multiple regression

VI. RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Mean	SD
Machiavellianism	3.41	0.62
Narcissism	3.18	0.58
Psychopathy	3.67	0.71
Criminal Thinking	78.42	11.36

Correlation Analysis

Variable	1	2	3	4
Machiavellianism	—			

. Narcissism	.42**	----		
Psychopathy	.58**	.47**	-----	
Criminal Thinking	.54**	.46**	.67**	----

$p < .01$

Regression Analysis

$R^2 = .50$, $F(3,116) = 38.52$, $p < .001$

Predictor	β	t	p
Machiavellianism	.30	3.16	.002
Narcissism	.22	2.29	.024
Psychopathy	.45	5.09	.000

Psychopathy emerged as the strongest predictor.

VII. DISCUSSION

The findings support all hypotheses. Dark personality traits were significantly associated with criminal thinking patterns. Psychopathy demonstrated the strongest predictive influence, consistent with prior forensic literature (Hare, 2003). The results suggest that individuals high in dark traits are more likely to endorse entitlement beliefs and rationalization mechanisms that sustain criminal behavior. These findings support cognitive-behavioral correctional models emphasizing restructuring of distorted thinking patterns.

VIII. IMPLICATIONS

1.Incorporating Dark Triad assessment in prison intake screening.
2.Tailoring CBT modules to address entitlement and moral disengagement.
3.Using personality profiles for recidivism risk assessment.

IX. LIMITATIONS

*Male-only sample
*Cross-sectional design
*Single correctional institution

X. CONCLUSION

Dark personality traits significantly predict criminal thinking patterns among prison inmates. Psychopathy shows the strongest predictive influence. Integrating personality-based assessment into correctional rehabilitation may enhance intervention effectiveness and reduce recidivism.

REFERENCES

[1] Baughman, H. M., et al. (2014). Lying and the dark triad. Personality and Individual Differences, 67, 35–39.
[2] Hare, R. D. (2003). The Hare Psychopathy Checklist–Revised (2nd ed.). Multi-Health Systems.
[3] Jonason, P. K., & Webster, G. D. (2010). The dirty dozen. Psychological Assessment, 22(2), 420–432.
[4] Jones, D. N., & Paulhus, D. L. (2014). Introducing the Short Dark Triad. Assessment, 21(1), 28–41.
[5] Paulhus, D. L., & Williams, K. M. (2002). The dark triad of personality. Journal of Research in Personality, 36(6), 556–563.
[6] Walters, G. D. (2012). Criminal thinking and recidivism. Law and Human Behavior, 36(3), 183–191.
[7] Walters, G. D. (2016). Criminal thinking: A psychological approach to offender rehabilitation. Springer.