Expression and detection of triarchic psychopathy traits in the self-defining memories of U.S. undergraduates

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ABSTRACT

Research linking psychopathic personality to autobiographical memory and narrative identity is limited. We present preliminary evidence suggesting that traits from the triarchic model of psychopathy (measured via self-report) predict self-reported affect as well as researcher-coded affective themes, event specificity, and meaning making in self-defining memories (SDMs). We observed this in a small sample that was well-powered for multilevel modeling (1200 SDMs total obtained from 120 undergraduate participants from the U.S.). Additionally, we present preliminary evidence – using an extreme-groups approach – that raters can detect the expression of the triarchic psychopathy traits in written SDM transcripts. Ten research assistants (working independently, and without prior training in assessment) used prototype descriptions of the triarchic traits to rate 40 participants on each trait. Their ratings correlated meaningfully with a range of relevant self-reported traits. Thus, aspects of psychopathy could be detected, albeit imperfectly, solely from written autobiographical memories. This research contributes to the literatures on person perception, psychopathy, and narrative identity. It also supports the status of autobiographical narratives as a unique source of data in personality research and clinical inference.

Traits and identity comprise two of personality's major domains (McAdams et al., 2021), and psychologists are beginning to address how these domains are connected (Adler & Clark, 2019; Blagov et al., 2022; Dimitrova & Simms, 2022). Traits are enduring individual differences in temperament (Plomin et al., 2016) and cognitive-affective processes (Fleeson, 2017) that give rise to characteristic and recurring consistencies in behavior across time and situations. Increasingly, narrative-identity researchers have reported that people's narrative accounts of themselves similarly show patterns of representative consistency in affect, content, structure, and meaning (Adler & Clark, 2019; McAdams et al., 2021).

Narrative-identity theory emphasizes the role of people's life stories in their identities (McAdams et al., 2021). Singer et al. (2013) discussed a model of narrative identity that highlights the role of personal memories as fundamental building blocks in the compilation of individuals'

life stories. Accordingly, autobiographical memory narratives are increasingly recognized as a unique data source in research and clinical inference about personality (Dunlop, 2021; McKay et al., in press; Singer et al., 2013). Diverse narrative variables – including ones derived from memories – interrelate (McLean et al., 2020), and they may predict well-being incrementally over other constructs (Adler et al., 2016). A key element of autobiographical memory narratives is coherence.

Coherent memory narratives convey (a) sufficient detail about the remembered events and their context, (b) emotion to evaluate and convey the events' significance, and (c) meaning to integrate the memories into the narrator's sense of self and identity (Adler et al., 2018). Personal narratives with limited detail specificity, emotion, and meaning lack coherence and suggest unhealthy identity development (Adler et al., 2012). Empirically, coherence and its facets may have at least modest negative links to maladaptive traits, personality disorder

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symptoms, and personality-related impairment (Dimitrova & Simms, 2022).

Self-defining memories (SDMs; Singer et al., 2013) are elicited using a request for especially clear, important, recurring, and enduring personal memories that connect to similar memories and to long-standing issues in the person's life. Replicable research links SDMs' positive emotions, memory specificity and meaning making to psychological adjustment, and their negative emotions and thematic downturns to maladjustment (Blagov et al., 2022). Their commonly studied features – including specificity, affect, and meaning making - have implications for narrative coherence.

Specificity is an aspect of narrative structure, and it refers to the presence in an SDM narrative of unique details that anchor it to a given day and convey sensory details. Although not a direct indicator of coherence, a degree of specificity is often needed to orient and help the audience evaluate whether the narrative's emotions or meaning are coherent with the recalled events (Adler et al., 2018).

The positive and negative affect of SDMs correlates with their subjective importance (Ritchie et al., 2014), and for a narrative to have coherence, its affect must agree with its other aspects. One affective pattern in narratives is contamination (McAdams et al., 2001), whereby favorable or ambivalent events conclude in a permanently worsened state. Contamination lowers narratives' coherence and correlates with indicators of poorer mental health and lower well-being (Adler et al., 2016).

Meaning-making SDM narratives contain spontaneous, explicit statements of "a lesson learned from the event, a relationship affirmation, or the deliberate use of the SDM for self-regulation" (Blagov et al., 2022, p. 461). SDM meaning is a direct indicator of the meaning aspect of coherence (albeit a partial and imperfect one), as it signals reflection on how the memory informs the person's identity.

Each of the SDM attributes above has been linked to various forms of psychopathology (Wright et al., 2022). However, research linking psychopathy to narrative identity is limited. Cleckley's (1941/1988) influential commentary on highly psychopathic persons listed, among other characteristics, deficient emotional experience, lack of investment in relationships, a grandiose sense of self, and "a total absence of self-appraisal as a real and moving experience" (p. 351). Thus, such persons' personal narratives may lack coherence.

Other clinical descriptions and a few isolated studies refer to deficient emotional depth, meaning, and narrative organization in psychopathic persons' narratives (Adshead, 2014; Brinkley et al., 1999; Lanciano et al., 2019; McAdams, 2021). Additionally, psychopathy appears to correlate with egocentric and emotionally distanced language use (Hancock et al., 2018). Antisocial personality disorder (ASPD) has partial conceptual and empirical overlap with psychopathy (Anderson & Kelley, 2022). ASPD symptoms may negatively correlate with structural aspects of narrative coherence (Dimitrova & Simms, 2022), and ASPD diagnosis may be linked to lower meaning making in SDMs (Lavalle et al., 2020). Such findings suggest reduced narrative coherence in psychopathy and invite further study.

Observers (even without clinical or specialized research training) can detect psychopathy from pre-recorded clinical-research interviews (Blagov et al., 2011; Zolondek et al., 2006), thin slices of behavior (Fowler et al., 2009), biographies, and video-recorded speeches (Lilienfeld et al., 2012). To assess psychopathy, Hare's (2003) Psychopathy Checklist relies, in part, on features of examinees' narratives obtained through a semi-structured interview. Most prior research's methods confound narrative with biography, self-report, and/or nonverbal behavior, whereas observers can detect psychopathic traits from nonverbal behavior alone (Latzman et al., 2016; ten Brinke et al., 2017). In the present study, we examined whether written autobiographical memories in and of themselves allow untrained observers to detect psychopathy features in a non-clinical, non-forensic sample.

The triarchic model of psychopathy (Patrick et al., 2009) entails the intersections of the dimensions of boldness, disinhibition, and meanness. Boldness is thought to reflect low threat sensitivity at a psychobiological level, and it "encompasses social dominance, venturesomeness, and emotional resilience" (Patrick, 2022, p. 389). Disinhibition maps onto low psychobiological behavioral inhibition, and it entails proneness to boredom, low self-restraint, irresponsibility, and irritability. Meanness is construed as low function of the psychobiological affiliation system, and it subsumes callous and unempathic features as well as the proneness to manipulate others instrumentally and aggressively.

Given that each of the triarchic psychopathy dimensions captures a broad range, the model facilitates the study of psychopathy in everyday life. We proposed that, in emerging adults, the triarchic psychopathy traits (TPTs) would correlate with SDM features suggestive of lower narrative coherence. Additionally, ratings of TPTs made solely from SDMs should correlate with scores on self-reported trait measures. Considering these memories' relevance to clinical inference and intervention (Çili & Stopa, 2018; Martino et al., 2023; Singer & Bonalume, 2010; Wright et al., 2022), demonstrating a connection between autobiographical narratives and psychopathy would be valuable.

1. Method

Our approach was exploratory. First, we sought to link self-reported TPTs to researcher-coded features of 10 SDMs per participant. Blagov et al. (2016, 2022) described the collection of these data (self-reported traits and researcher-coded SDM features) and the participants. In brief, undergraduates received up to $30 or course credit for participating in an online survey with two parts, approximately 90 min. each and 1–2 weeks apart. The time gap was meant to minimize state-dependent effects and testing effects. Part 1 included the SDM Requests and WAI-SF (see below). Part 2 included the remaining personality questionnaires (TriPM, NEO-FFI, and SNAP). Of 158 participants, 120 (77 % women, Mage $= 19.7$, $SD = 1.32$) completed both parts without missing data. Participant characteristics appear in the Supplementary Materials, Table S1.

Second, we tested whether researcher-coded TPTs correlated with self-reported traits. Ten undergraduate assistants (blinded to the study's details) independently rated, based solely on 10 written SDMs per participant, the TPTs of 40 participants (the 20 scoring highest and 20 scoring lowest on self-reported psychopathy) in pseudorandom orders. This extreme-scores approach facilitates statistical power (but renders effect-size estimates difficult to interpret; Fisher et al., 2020). Because of the amount of rater labor involved, we created only one set of extreme groups based on overall psychopathy instead of separate sets, each based on one of triarchic psychopathy's dimensions.

1.1. Self-report measures

The Self-Defining Memory Request (see Blagov & Singer, 2004) elicits written SDM narratives with a standardized prompt. After recording their SDMs, participants are cued to recall each one again and rate it on each of 12 emotions using a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*extremely*). The emotion ratings are used to compute Positive Affect and Negative Affect composites for each SDM.

The Triarchic Psychopathy Measure (TriPM; Patrick, 2010) captures Boldness (18 items), Disinhibition (19 items), and Meanness (19 items). Participants choose among the response options *true, mostly true, mostly false,* and *false.* TriPM scores' validity in undergraduates was demonstrated using this (Blagov et al., 2016) and other samples (Donnellan & Burt, 2016). Reliability estimates for this and other measures appear in Table S2.

The NEO Five-factor Inventory (NEO-FFI; Costa & McCrae, 1992) measures the five-factor model's domains Extraversion, Neuroticism, Conscientiousness, Agreeableness, and Openness with 12 items per domain. For ease of administration, participants responded on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*), instead of the original 7-

point scale.

The Weinberger Adjustment Inventory – Short Form (WAI-SF; Weinberger & Schwartz, 1990) captures three trait-like dimensions. The pertinent ones are Distress and Self-restraint, represented by 12 items each. Participants indicate how well items describe them (from 1, *false*, to 5, *true*) or how often they think, feel, or act in certain ways (from 1, *almost never*, to 5, *almost always*). Conceptually, Distress is antithetical to boldness and resembles internalizing psychopathology, whereas Self-restraint is antithetical to disinhibition and meanness, and it resembles (in reverse) externalizing psychopathology (Pechorro et al., 2022).

The Schedule of Nonadaptive and Adaptive Personality (SNAP; Clark, 1993) is an omnibus personality inventory with 371 items rated as *true* or *false*. It yields scores on 13 pathological traits and the overarching dimensions of Negative Temperament (28 items), Positive Temperament (27 items), and Disinhibition (35 item).

1.2. Researcher ratings

1.2.1. Coding of SDM features
Blagov et al. (2022) described the use of established coding manuals to measure each SDM's specificity, meaning making, and contamination. In brief, a principal coder with a psychology BA, blinded to the hypotheses, received training and coded the SDMs in a randomized order, and a clinical scientist with expertise in the coding systems was the criterion coder. At three times during the coding process, ratings of the same SDMs by the principal and criterion raters yielded acceptable interrater reliability estimates (Table S3).

1.2.2. Rating of SDMs for triarchic psychopathy traits
The research assistants used the Personality Rating Guidelines to assign participants scores from 0 (*not applicable*) to 6 (*prototypical*) on Boldness, Disinhibition, and Meanness after reading a description of each TPT construct based on the empirical literature (Drislane et al., 2018; Patrick et al., 2009, Patrick & Drislane, 2015) and examining participants' SDMs. Apart from instructions to systematically apply the guidelines, the research assistants did not have any training in clinical evaluation, psychological assessment, or the detection of psychopathy. Individual raters' scores were unreliable, ICC(2,1) = 0.18, 0.43, and 0.28, but composites based on all 10 raters yielded acceptable-to-excellent reliabilities, ICC(2,10) = 0.69, 0.88, and 0.80, for Boldness, Disinhibition, and Meanness. For each TPT, we reduced the ratings to regression-based scores from the extraction of one principal component. We chose this approach (as opposed to averaging raters' scores) to weight scores based on raters' presumed reliability (i.e., their consistency with the other raters, as reflected by their principal-component loadings).

1.3. Statistical considerations

Consistent with prior research (Blagov et al., 2022; Lardi et al., 2012) linking person-level variables and SDM-level variables, we adopted a multilevel modeling approach (MLM) with memories nested within persons. With over 100 participants and 10 SDMs per participant, MLM should produce substantial power (> 0.85 for medium effects) and accurate estimation (Maas & Hox, 2005; Scherbaum & Ferreter, 2009). The fixed-effects estimates from these analyses estimate the association when regressing an SDM feature (at the lower, SDM-level) on a personality trait (at the higher, person level), averaging across participants to account for the nested structure of the data. Thus, the estimates indicate the direction and slope of linear association and can be interpreted as statistically significant when their 95 % confidence intervals do not include 0 (but they should not be confused with ordinary unstandardized regression coefficients). Given the complications involved in MLM, we have not reported or attempted to interpret effect-size estimates for the multilevel models (see Garson, 2014, Chapter 2).

As noted earlier, there were no missing questionnaire data, likely because of the participation incentives and survey's implementation, which prompted participants to attend to omissions. Six of 120 participants (5 %) were missing one SDM each. We assigned the missing SDMs modal features (i.e., specific, no meaning, no contamination). Among the 40 participants whose SDMs were rated for psychopathy, two were missing one SDM each; raters based their judgment on their remaining nine. Approximately 8 % of cases had 1–2 SDMs truncated by software-use error (typically after 1650 characters, although not all lengthy SDMs were affected); in such cases, raters relied on the text available. Given that extreme responding is of interest when studying maladaptive traits, we did not plan to detect or delete any outliers.

2. Results and discussion

Participants scoring higher on self-reported psychopathy overall, especially boldness and meanness, wrote shorter SDMs (Table S4, Supplementary Materials), suggesting that undergraduates with higher psychopathy were either less compliant with the narrative task, or they had less developed narrative identities (and, therefore, less to share).

Our study's first contribution is to link psychopathy to narrative identity. Table 1 displays relationships between self-reported TPTs and SDM features (controlling for narrative length). Higher disinhibition and meanness corresponded to fewer specific SDMs, and meanness correlated negatively with SDM meaning making. As noted earlier, we see SDM meaning making as a direct indicator of narrative coherence. SDM specificity is not a direct indicator of coherence but often promotes it by providing context and enabling the reader to judge event details against the emotion and meaning the narrator derives from them (Adler et al., 2018).

The association of meanness with lower specificity and meaning may be primarily due to disinhibition, as controlling disinhibition and boldness rendered meanness's relationship with specific and meaning-making SDMs nonsignificant (Table S5). This hints at reduced narrative-identity coherence at higher levels of disinhibition and meanness (consistent with Brinkley et al., 1999, and McAdams, 2021).

Alternatively, a lack of mental flexibility or a tendency to fixate on certain themes due to executive dysfunction at high disinhibition levels (Pasion et al., 2018; Patrick et al., 2009) may reduce the retrieval of specific memories (Williams, 2006). This would be consistent with the subtly perseverative discourse observed in some psychopathic persons (e.g., Gawda, 2022; Zolondek et al., 2006) and may explain disinhibition's negative relationship with SDM contamination. Contaminated narratives capture thematic downturns and have two parts: the more positive beginning and the dire conclusion. Executive dysfunction during retrieval or narration may truncate memories and preempt contamination.

Boldness correlated with low negative and high positive self-reported affect in SDMs, consistent with the fearlessness and emotional stability that characterize boldness (Patrick et al., 2019). Contrary to high disinhibition and meanness, and in their absence, boldness predicts psychological stability and favorable outcomes (Patrick, 2022; Skeem et al., 2011). By promoting happier autobiographical memories, boldness may similarly be linked to healthier narrative identity.

Our study's second contribution highlights narrative as a source of personality data. Table 2 displays relationships (based on extreme groups) between researcher-rated TPTs (from SDMs) and a range of self-reported traits. The researcher ratings were composites of 10 undergraduates' ratings of the TPTs from the written SDMs.

Researcher-rated boldness correlated with self-reported extraversion and, inversely, negative emotionality (SNAP Negative Temperament), neuroticism, and internalizing psychopathology (WAI-SF Distress). Researcher-rated meanness correlated with self-reported meanness, overall psychopathy, an index of basic temperamental disinhibition, and, inversely, externalizing psychopathology (inversely with WAI-SF

Table 1

Triarchic psychopathy traits as predictors of self-defining memory features.

	Boldness			Disinhibition			Meanness		
	Est.	*p*	95 % C.I.	Est.	*p*	95 % C.I.	Est.	*p*	95 % C.I.
Positive Affect	**0.33**	**0.008**[*]	**[0.08–0.58]**	0.19	0.165	[−0.08–0.44]	0.05	0.705	[−0.23–0.28]
Negative Affect	**−0.24**	**0.011**[*]	**[−0.43 to −0.04]**	−0.01	0.915	[−0.22–0.20]	−0.11	0.264	[−0.29–0.07]
Contamination	0.01	0.844	[−0.06–0.04]	**−0.08**	**0.004**[*]	**[−0.14 to −0.02]**	−0.03	0.299	[−0.08–0.02]
Specific SDMs	−0.04	0.118	[−0.08–0.01]	**−0.13**	**0.001**[*]	**[−0.20 to −0.07]**	**-0.07**	**0.013**[*]	**[−0.12 to −0.02]**
Meaning-making SDMs	−0.05	0.116	[−0.02–0.12]	−0.07	0.050	[−0.15–0.001]	**−0.08**	**0.027**[*]	**[−0.15 to −0.01]**

Each estimate represents a different model with 10 memories per participant nested within 120 participants, controlling for narrative length; C.I.s are bias-corrected and bootstrapped (1000 samplings).

[*] *p* < .05 (bolded).

Table 2

Correlations between Researcher-rated and Self-reported Traits (Participants Highest, *N* = 20, and Lowest, *N* = 20, on Self-reported Psychopathy).

	Researcher Ratings					
	Boldness		Disinhibition		Meanness	
Self-report	*r*	*p*	*r*	*p*	*r*	*p*
Boldness	0.18	0.133	0.13	0.221	0.23	0.081
Disinhibition	0.08	0.320	0.02	0.441	0.13	0.217
Meanness	0.02	0.460	0.06	0.360	**0.32**[*]	**0.023**
Psychopathy	0.12	0.233	0.09	0.287	**0.29**[*]	**0.035**
Extraversion	**0.35**[*]	**0.013**	0.11	0.251	−0.04	0.402
Neuroticism	**−0.35**[*]	**0.013**	0.17	0.144	−0.04	0.396
Conscientiousness	−0.14	0.200	0.02	0.459	−0.11	0.256
Agreeableness	−0.06	0.348	−0.13	0.208	−0.22	0.087
Openness	−0.17	0.151	0.01	0.485	−0.08	0.316
Distress	**−0.32**[*]	**0.023**	0.14	0.194	−0.11	0.254
Self-restraint	−0.16	0.156	−0.22	0.089	**−0.45**[*]	**0.002**
Positive Temperament	0.22	0.085	0.11	0.252	−0.17	0.155
Negative Temperament	**−0.32**[*]	**0.025**	−0.21	0.104	−0.15	0.189
Disinhibition	0.01	0.481	**0.27**[*]	**0.046**	**0.49**[*]	**0.001**

[*] *p* < .05 (one-tailed; bolded).

Self-restraint). Less correspondence was present between researcher-coded disinhibition and self-reported traits, except for SNAP Disinhibition. These results are broadly congruent with the triarchic psychopathy model (Patrick & Drislane, 2015).

Therefore, without special training, and working only from SDM transcripts, research assistants detected the expression of psychopathy-related traits within emerging adults' storied selves. They did so without access to external self-report data, biographical facts, or nonverbal observations. This parallels findings on person perception and psychopathy using radically different source material.

2.1. Limitations

The study is limited by its exploratory approach, small sample, probable range restriction of key variables, and imperfect reliability of measurement. Another limitation is that the SDM task's instructions do not "pull" specifically for psychopathy-relevant memories. Therefore, we may have underestimated the magnitude and statistical significance of relationships and, therefore, the expression of psychopathy in SDMs and observers' ability to detect it. Additionally, we formed the extreme groups based on overall triarchic psychopathy scores, as opposed to separately examining extreme groups based on boldness, disinhibition, and meanness. This limits the degree of inference about triarchic psychopathy's expression in SDMs.

Such limitations may explain why self-reported and researcher-rated boldness and disinhibition did not correlate. Also surprising is that we did not detect relationships of either self-reported conscientiousness or agreeableness with either researcher-rater disinhibition or meanness. This stands out because conscientiousness and agreeableness are known

as major correlates of disinhibition and meanness (including in undergraduates; Blagov et al., 2016; Donnellan & Burt, 2016). Our inconclusive results may be due to a degree of range-restriction of self-reported conscientiousness (on its low end) and researcher-coded meanness (on its high end). We caution against interpreting these results as evidence for the absence of a relationship in the broader population of undergraduates.

2.2. Implications

The results clearly require replication. If relying on the extreme-groups approach, future research should define them separately based on each triarchic trait. Researchers should also test whether the results generalize to non-student populations of participants and raters.

Key dimensions of psychopathy appear to be linked to and detectable through memory narratives. Some linkages are unsurprising (e.g., to memories' emotional valence), whereas others are more subtle – to memories' structure (specificity and coherence) and meaning.

Raters with no clinical training could infer (imperfectly) elements of triarchic psychopathy from SDMs. These findings add support to the value of autobiographical memory analysis in research and clinical inference (Angus & McLeod, 2004; Martino et al., 2023; Singer & Bonalume, 2010).

In recent decades, both personality psychologists and clinicians have written about narrative identity as a core aspect of personality and psychological adjustment (Thomsen et al., 2023). Our study contributes to the growing literature documenting relationships between the stories we tell of ourselves and aspects of personality that are relevant to psychological health.

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Ethics

This research complies with federal, institutional, and professional ethics guidelines.

Preregistration

Planned prior to the replication crisis, this research was not preregistered.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Pavel S. Blagov: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft. **Jefferson A. Singer:** Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Supervision, Writing – review & editing. **Kathryn M. Oost:** Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Project administration, Supervision, Writing – review &

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Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest.

Data availability

PL039 Triarchic Traits in SDMs (Original data) (Mendeley Data)

Appendix A. Supplementary Materials

Supplementary materials to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2023.112323.

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