My training in graduate school was in Social and Personality psychology with a specialization in Quantitative Methods and Evaluation Science (QMES). Thus, my research focuses on topics at the intersection of Social, Personality, and Clinical Psychology with an eye toward methodological and measurement issues in those domains.

My substantive interest thus far has been the distinction between normal and abnormal personality. More specifically, my research has focused on issues related to the measurement of Psychopathy and Narcissism and the relations between these dimensions and various forms of socially aversive behavior (e.g., aggressiveness, infidelity).

**Psychopathy and Narcissism: Measurement Issues and Construct Validity**

The main thrust of most of my published research has concerned measuring and understanding psychopathic personality attributes. Psychopathy is characterized by a pattern of persistent unreliability, callousness, impulsivity, and fearlessness masked behind a façade of normality. The seemingly contradictory nature of the construct has led to many debates over the structure of psychopathy within the literature. A recent neurobiological model of psychopathy posits deficits in two independent brain systems: one that governs fear and another associated with higher-order functioning. This conceptualization improves upon previous models in that it accounts for both the positive (e.g., dominance, the appearance of normality) and negative features (e.g., externalizing problems) of psychopathy and it helps explain the differential and sometimes opposing relations often found between these features and outcomes of interest.

Most previous research has conceptualized psychopathy as unidimensional, or in the least, as a set of highly correlated dimensions. Thus, many existing psychopathy measures were not designed with this dual-process model in mind. Accordingly, I have been working on ways of measuring these features of psychopathy with items contained in existing measures of normal personality. This work has both practical and theoretical implications. From a practical perspective it allows researchers to measure psychopathy in archival data sets that may not contain direct measures of psychopathy. From a theoretical perspective, this work represents a bridge between the study of normal and abnormal personality attributes. Specifically, the fact that measures of abnormal traits can be constructed from items meant to measure normal personality suggests that these two things are not qualitatively different from each other and instead exist on the same continuum.

My first two papers examined the validity of measures of psychopathy created from the Multi-dimensional Personality Questionnaire (MPQ) – a broadband measure of normal personality. In the first paper I found associations between these MPQ measures of psychopathic traits, antisocial behavior, and risk for infidelity via self-report measures (Witt & Donnellan, 2008). My second paper expanded on the first by examining the stability of these measures and their associations with substance abuse and delinquency via self and partner reports in a longitudinal community sample (Witt, Donnellan, Blonigen, Krueger, & Conger, 2009). My next paper (Witt, Donnellan, & Blonigen, 2009) derived new measures of psychopathic personality traits from three other existing measures of normal personality (i.e., the NEO PI-R, HEXACO PI-R, and IPIP-NEO) and provided initial evidence for the validity of the new IPIP-based measures for predicting aggression in a laboratory procedure (via a hot sauce aggression study). This work represents an important step in the scale validation process because it demonstrates the prediction of theoretically relevant, observable behavior by a pencil-and-paper self-report inventory.

Finally, a fourth paper examined the stability and validity of the new NEO-based measures over a ten year interval in a large longitudinal sample of individuals diagnosed with personality disorders (Witt et al., 2010). In that study, these NEO PI-R measures were found to be relatively stable, to have differential associations with personality pathology and psychopathology, and to have incremental validity over another NEO-based measurement approach for predicting outcomes related to functioning. This work represents an important extension of my previous work in college and community samples because it demonstrates the utility of these measures in a large clinical sample.

In the past year I worked as a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at George Mason University in Dr. June Tangney’s Human Emotions Research Laboratory. This experience gave me access to a sample that I had previously not
worked with inmates. In the last ten years Dr. Tangney’s lab has run three separate longitudinal studies in a local Adult Detention Facility examining a variety of factors including substance abuse, recidivism, and psychopathy. In my short time in the laboratory I collaborated on a number of research projects including a paper that I am about to submit for publication evaluating differential item functioning in the “gold standard” clinical psychopathy measure – the Psychopathy Checklist – via item response modeling (Witt, Kendall, Stuewig, McKnight, Kim, & Tangney, *in prep*). Given that this instrument is so widely used – often to make very important decisions about treatment or sentencing – it is critical that its item characteristics be evaluated to determine whether or not the test is biased against certain populations.

I am also in the final stages of a Meta-Analytic Factor analysis on the structure of another popular psychopathy inventory, the Psychopathic Personality Inventory-Revised (Witt, Donnellan, Blonigen, & Patrick, *in prep*). For the past few years researchers have more or less agreed that this inventory has a two- to three-factor structure. However, much of this work has used college student samples and recent work with a forensic sample has called this structure into question. The goal of my meta-analysis is to account for sample-specific problems with previous analyses. However, this work represents more than a solution to a simple methodological dispute. By understanding the structure of this instrument we should be better able to understand the structure of psychopathy and whether this instrument captures relevant features of psychopathy not represented in other measures.

As mentioned previously, I am also interested in the construct of Narcissism (a sense of self-importance coupled with a persistent need for admiration from others). In a recent chapter, I reviewed the empirical and theoretical overlap between the constructs of narcissism, Machiavellianism, and self-esteem and their links to antisocial behavior (Witt, Donnellan, & Trzesniewski, 2010). Furthermore, my colleagues and I recently published a paper in which we present a new three factor structure for the Narcissistic Personality Inventory – the most commonly used measure of narcissism in social and personality psychology (Ackerman, Witt, Donnellan, Trzesniewski, Robins, & Kashy, 2011). Our factor structure consists of three factors – Leadership/Authority, Grandiose Exhibitionism, and Entitlement/Exploitativeness – found via an exploratory factor analysis on a sample of approximately 19,000 individuals. Through four studies we provided confirmatory evidence and initial construct validity evidence for this solution. This new structure suggests that the NPI captures both adaptive and maladaptive content and that the NPI factors have differential relations with other psychological constructs (e.g., self-esteem, counter-productive school behaviors). These effects are particularly important when you consider that most published work using the NPI focuses on a total score and thus potentially confounds these maladaptive and adaptive components. Also unfortunate is the fact that although Entitlement/Exploitativeness appears to be the most socially toxic of the trio, it also has the least content coverage (only four out of forty items).

**Psychopathy, Narcissism, and Economic Decision Making in Unfair Competitive Contexts**

What do people do in competitive situations where they receive an unfair advantage? A moral person might take steps to redress the unfairness whereas an individual with less desirable personality characteristics (such as those that fall under the umbrellas of Narcissism and Psychopathy) may exploit the situation for personal gain. For my dissertation I wanted to experimentally create just such a situation to address this question. I modified two economic decision making tasks (the ultimatum game and the dictator game) to create an unfair competition between a participant and his or her ostensible opponent where the winner gets to decide the division of the winnings between the competitors. The outcome of interest in these games is how individuals respond to the unfairness of the competition both when they are the victim and the benefactor. Specifically, are individuals more generous with winnings when they win unfairly and are they more likely to reject a small amount of winnings when they lose unfairly? I was particularly interested in potential moderating effects of psychopathy and narcissism on game outcomes. That is, are these personality traits associated with less generosity or more punitive behavior following an unfair competition?

The results of my dissertation suggested a main effect of game (un)fairness on the division of winnings suggesting that my studies were successful in creating situations in which participants won or lost under conditions of fair or unfair competition. However, I did not find significant evidence of moderation by Psychopathy or Narcissism. I am currently in the process of writing up the results of these studies for publication while simultaneously designing follow-up studies that I believe will help me better understand the lack of significant results.

http://www.eawitt.com
for individual differences moderation in this particular paradigm.

In summary, I strive to conduct research that addresses the research question from all angles by using a variety of samples (student, community, clinical, incarcerated) and methods (experimental, correlational, longitudinal, laboratory observation). I believe that using multiple approaches, measures, and methods strengthens the overall body of my work and helps account for the limitations in any given study.

References


http://www.eawitt.com