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Antecedents and consequences of political moral laxity: a Peruvian case

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Political Moral Laxity is defined as a set of beliefs and attitudes that tolerate and
support dishonest or corrupt actions of authorities and politicians, especially
when these actions benefit private interests to the detriment of the public good.
Political Moral Laxity is the result of perverse political socialisation in political
systems characterised by the lack of legitimacy of authorities, the weakening of
institutions and, consequently, the non-compliance of citizens. The current study
focuses on the mediating role of Political Moral Laxity between Social Dominance
Orientation, the components of the Dark Triad of Personality, and Tolerance to
Normative Transgression among Peruvian citizens. For this purpose, 242 Peruvian
citizens of both genders (male = 45.9%, female = 53.7%, not specified = 0.4%),
of legal age (M_{age} = 20.8, range 18−65), from the region of San Martin in the
Peruvian Amazon were surveyed online. Results show that Political Moral Laxity
fully mediate the effects of Social Dominance Orientation and only Psychopathy
component of the Dark Triad on Tolerance to Normative Transgression. We discuss
the results in terms of the Peruvian political system, which is heavily influenced by
the neoliberal model, as well as the personality traits that predispose to Political
Moral Laxity, thus reinforcing the negative effects of a political model on citizens'
dispositions to transgress.

KEYWORDS

political moral laxity, neoliberalism, SDO, personality dark triad, tolerance to
normative transgression

Introduction

Neoliberalism is a political and economic doctrine asserting that welfare is best achieved by promoting individual entrepreneurial freedoms within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights and free markets (Venugopal, 2015). Accordingly, the state's role should be limited to establishing and maintaining the institutional conditions necessary for exercising these rights, refraining from direct intervention in market dynamics or individual economic activities (Harvey, 2005). During the 1980s and 1990s, neoliberalism was imposed on many societies as a narrative that sacralised private property, economic stability and meritocracy, resulting in the inequalities observed in those societies being fully accepted (Piketty, 2019; Richards, 2019).

This resulted in considerable deterioration of economic and social inequality, fostering fatalism and populist identity drifts (Piketty, 2019; Stiglitz, 2015), as well as other forms of weakening of democracy in the societies (Rottenbacher and Schmitz, 2012). Since the 1990s, the imposition of a neoliberal economic model in Peru has shaped political structures and discourse within this doctrine (Dargent, 2021). While this model yielded significant

macroeconomic growth, it reinforced a lack of critique toward the imposed economic model, despite its implementation was not accompanied by a strengthening of democracy, institutional robustness, or a considerable improvement in the country's public policies (Vergara, 2018). In Peru, the neoliberal political landscape has meant not only absence of institutional strengthening, but also a progressive weakening of some public institutions (Beramendi et al., 2020; Dargent, 2021; Latinobarómetro, 2018; Vergara, 2018), increased corruption, and widespread normative transgressions across various societal spheres (Proética, 2019; Quiroz, 2013; Vergara, 2018).

Emerging evidence suggests that institutional weakening and corruption have fostered a degree of tolerance and acceptance of these issues among citizens (Quiroz, 2013; Vergara, 2018). Politically, there is a growing perception of systematic ineffectiveness, contributing to feelings of hopelessness and anomie, which collectively drive dissatisfaction with the political system and diminish optimism for improvements, as conventional political action seems to lose relevance (Chaparro, 2018). Consequently, dissatisfaction with the political system and its performance, rooted in institutional fragility and corruption, creates a vicious cycle where citizens adopt survival strategies, acting on what they "feel like" or "what they can" (Palacios et al., 2023; Chaparro, 2018). This perpetuates distrust, corruption and transgression as endemic issues across individual, interpersonal, collective and institutional levels (Chaparro, 2018; Janos et al., 2018; Quiroz, 2013; Schmitz and Espinosa, 2015; Vergara, 2018). Nonetheless, despite the above, the neoliberal model and its socialising influence in Peru remain largely unchallenged (Vergara, 2018).

Building on the tolerance for institutional weakness and corruption, non-compliance with rules and perceptions of systemic political inefficiency further distort democratic values, fostering unfair competition for resources that disproportionately harms vulnerable groups (Stiglitz, 2015; Richards, 2019). This dynamic contributes to a growing disillusionment with democracy, which is increasingly viewed as a system unable to recognize or address citizens' concerns (Beramendi et al., 2020; Brussino and Alonso, 2021; Cañete-Alonso, 2018). Taken together, these interlinked issues deepen civic and democratic decline that reduces or corrupts citizen, eroding genuine citizen engagement in public affairs (Dargent, 2021; Espinosa et al., 2024; Vergara, 2018).

In the context of increasing tolerance for systemic inefficiency and corruption, alongside declining civic engagement, Political Moral Laxity (PML) emerges as a pervasive phenomenon. PML is characterized by dishonest, transgressive, and corrupt beliefs and behaviors among politicians and authorities, particularly when such actions serve the interests of individuals or groups that endorse them, yet harm other citizens and society as a whole (Espinosa et al., 2022a; Janos et al., 2018). PML reflects a broader erosion of democratic and ethical standards, where actions favouring private interests increasingly override the common good (Espinosa et al., 2022a; Espinosa et al., 2022b; Espinosa et al., 2022c). This dynamic raises questions about whether such behavior is a product of prolonged exposure to neoliberal perverse political socialisation, which fosters a competitive vision of society (Richards, 2019), or stems from specific individual motivations and traits that guide their interpersonal interactions to fulfil their own goals.

To further contextualize Political Moral Laxity (PML) within ideological frameworks that support inequitable social structures, preliminary evidence suggests that specific conservative ideological framework, such as Social Dominance Orientation (SDO; Pratto et al., 1994), function as antecedents to self-serving, empathy-deficient behaviors, especially toward society's most vulnerable members. These dominant attitudes and beliefs are directly related with heightened levels of PML, as they justify competitive, asymmetrical and inequitable political and social systems (Espinosa et al., 2022a; Espinosa et al., 2022c; Janos et al., 2018). SDO, as an ideological framework, reflects a preference for hierarchical and unequal relations between groups, favouring a societal structure in which more powerful groups maintain dominance over those with lesser power and status (Jost, 2019; Sidanius et al., 2004). This orientation underscores how entrenched ideological beliefs contribute to PML, reinforcing a political culture that prioritizes private interest over the common good.

In relation to the above, research consistently indicates a direct relationship between PML and SDO in Ibero-American samples (Espinosa et al., 2022a; Espinosa et al., 2022b; Janos et al., 2018). However, the role of personality traits as antecedents of PML remains underexplored. A promising avenue to investigate this link lies in examining individual tendencies toward the use of perverse social behaviors. To this end, Jonason and Webster (2010) propose the Dark Triad of Personality, a set of subclinical traits that shape social interactions through emotional coldness, deceit, callousness, selfishness and malice. The dark triad presents three components (Jonason and Webster, 2010; Lambart-Schmidt and López-López, 2018): the first, Psychopathy, entails manipulation, a lack of affective reactions, and an absence of remorse or guilt when relating to other people. The second, Machiavellianism, emphasizes interactions where personal success is prioritized over communal goals, viewing others as obstacles or instruments for achieving personal ambitions. The third component, Narcissism, is characterized by a lack of empathy, a need for admiration and exhibitionism, and defensiveness against criticism. Although no prior evidence directly relates PML to the Dark Triad components, we expect that each trait will be associated with PML, reflecting the Dark Triad's alignment with the self-serving and ethically perverse expression of PML in political behavior.

Finally, we focus on tolerance to normative transgression, which, according to Beramendi and Zubieta (2013), is based on a widespread perception that norms can be frequently violated due to the lack of institutional legitimacy or control. This absence of control promotes non-compliance with norms at any time, by both power groups and ordinary citizens, in public and private spheres alike. Rottenbacher and Schmitz (2012) discuss tolerance for transgression as encompassing a spectrum – from acceptance for transgression of social conventions, to tolerance of legal violations and corrupt acts. These suggest that incremental dishonesty, or the gradual escalation from minor transgressions of social norms to significant corrupt practices, is a key factor promoting corruption (Chaparro et al., 2021; Philp and Dávid-Barrett, 2015). While PML is a novel construct (Espinosa et al., 2022a), we anticipate its association with certain expressions of tolerance for transgression, as it might justify using resources or influence for personal or ingroup benefit, ultimately impacting public goods (Monsegur et al., 2014; Gnädinger, 2018; Rottenbacher and Schmitz, 2012). Exploring PML's role in linking dominant conservative ideologies, such as SDO (Monsegur et al., 2014), and antisocial attitudinal tendencies, such as those in the Dark Triad of Personality traits (Lambart-Schmidt and López-López, 2018),

with the tolerance and acceptance of transgressive behaviors that compromise the common good is of particular interest.

In light of the above, the present research aims to analyse the relationship between SDO, the components of the Dark Triad of Personality, and Tolerance to Normative Transgression, as well as the potential mediating role of PML in this model, among Peruvian adults. Specifically, we propose that (1) SDO and each of the components of the dark personality triad will be positively associated with PML; (2) PML will be positively related to transgression tolerance; and (3) PML will fully mediate the relationship between SDO, the Dark Triad components, and Tolerance to Normative Transgression.

Methods

Participants

A total of 242 Peruvians, who self-identify as Peruvian, currently living in Peru, from the San Martin region of Peru participated, 111 males (45.9%) and 130 females (53.7%), plus one person who preferred not to specify (0.4%), aged 18 to 65 years (M = 20.8, SD = 5.51). Regarding self-perceived socioeconomic status, 51.2% were in the middle level, 40.9% in the lower level, and 7.9% in the lower level. Regarding educational level, 63.6% had completed secondary school, 29.8% had higher education, 2.9% had technical education, 2.1% had postgraduate studies, and 1.7% had only primary education. Regarding political orientation, 62.8% considered themselves to be centre, 26% right, and 11.2% left oriented. Participants were recruited using a non-probability purposive sampling method. The inclusion criterion required participants to be Peruvians aged 18 or older, while the exclusion criterion excluded minors and non-resident foreigners.
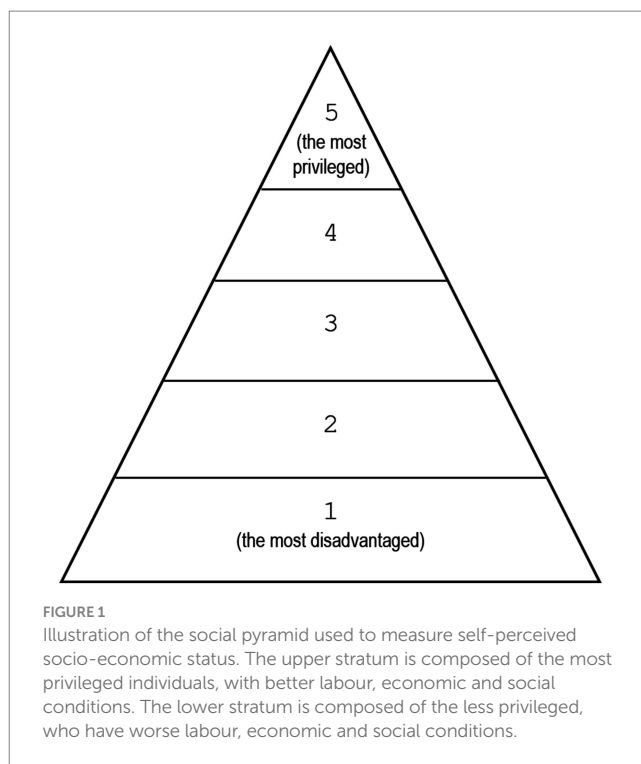
Measures

Sociodemographics

We collected sociodemographic for gender, age, academic level, self-perceived socioeconomic status, and political orientation. Specifically, self-perceived socio-economic situation (SSE) was recorded using a pyramidal image (Figure 1), similar to MacArthur's Subjective Scale of Social Status (Adler et al., 2000), with the statement "Many societies in the world show differences in the social situation and status of their citizens, placing some few in a privileged situation (better living, material, working, social and economic conditions) and many others in a disadvantaged situation (worse living, material, working, social and economic conditions). Here is a pyramid with 5 levels, representing the way society is composed, from the lowest or most disadvantaged level (1) to the highest or most privileged level (5). Next, we would like you to make the effort to place yourself in one of these five levels according to your current situation".

Political moral laxity

This concept refers to attitudes favouring a corrupt and inefficient political system, prioritizing the interests of certain groups while neglecting or harming other sectors of society. It highlights the conflict between public and private interests, emphasizing the concessions

FIGURE 1
Illustration of the social pyramid used to measure self-perceived socio-economic status. The upper stratum is composed of the most privileged individuals, with better labour, economic and social conditions. The lower stratum is composed of the less privileged, who have worse labour, economic and social conditions.

made to benefit specific groups at the expense of the broader societal good. It was measured by the Political Moral Laxity scale (Espinosa et al., 2022a), adapted for the present study. The instrument is composed of four items of the type "*It is legitimate to elect those candidates who best respond to my personal interests, even if they are corrupt*" and "*It is valid to elect those candidates who respond to my own interests, even if they affect the interests of other citizens*," which operationalizes the decision for private interest with a selfish end or towards the public good. The measure has a 5-point Likert-type response scale, where 1 = "Strongly disagree" and 5 = "Strongly agree" with the proposed statements. For the present study, the scale had good reliability ($\alpha = 0.70$ and $\omega = 0.71$).

Social dominance orientation

We adapted the version scale translated from the original (SDO; Pratto et al., 1994) into Spanish by Monters-Berges and Silván-Ferrer (2003). The scale has 8 items that measure people's beliefs and attitudes towards the relationships between different groups in a society (i.e., negative item: "*There would be fewer problems if we treated different groups more equally.*"). It uses a 5-point Likert-type response scale, where 1 = "Strongly disagree" to 5 = "Strongly agree" with the proposed statements. The higher scores express a greater tendency for hierarchical and unequal intergroup relations ($\alpha = 0.86$ and $\omega = 0.86$).

Dark triad of personality

It was assessed by the Spanish version (Lambart-Schmidt and López-López, 2018) of the Dirty Dozen by Jonason and Webster (2010). The scale has 12 items that can be treated as a single measure (Jonason and Webster, 2010), and has three factors: Psychopathy, Machiavellianism, and Narcissism (Lambart-Schmidt and López-López, 2018). The response format is a 5-point Likert-type scale, where 1 = "Strongly disagree" and 5 = "Strongly agree." Higher scores express greater agreement with perverse relationship practices at the

interpersonal level (Psychopathy α = 0.67, ω = 0.68; Machiavellianism α = 0.86, ω = 0.87; Narcissism α = 0.76, ω = 0.77).

Tolerance to Normative Transgression

It was measured by an adapted version of Rottenbacher and Schmitz's (2012) scale. It refers to a set of behavioral guidelines that affect coexistence within a society. Tolerance to Normative transgression emerges as a result of a problem of perverse political socialization. These behaviors represent a form of selfish actions that violate the norms intended to regulate coexistence (i.e., item: "*Keeping a friend in his job, no matter how incompetent he may be*"). The instrument measures tolerance for various transgressive and illegal behaviors through 12 items describing a level of tolerance for general transgression, on a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 = "Strongly Disagree" and 5 = "Strongly Agree" (α = 0.87 and ω = 0.90).

Procedure

The study design and data collection that ensured compliance with ethical standards and informed consent were approved by the Research Ethics Committee for Social Sciences, Humanities and Arts of the Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú by ruling 072-2022-CEI-CCSSHHyAA/PUCP. The data collection protocol was digitized using a form in Qualtrics, to apply the surveys online. This option would allow a larger number of participants with varied characteristics, according to the study criteria. Contact with the participants was incidental, making an open call through the researchers' social networks (Facebook, Whatsapp and email) during May and June 2023. Participants were initially presented with an informed consent form on their screen, in which they were informed of the nature of the study, information on ethical aspects, voluntary participation, confidentiality, as well as the freedom to stop answering the questionnaire if they so wished at any time. Once the participants had finished reading the informed consent form, they agreed to answer the survey by selecting the corresponding button to start the survey. Only the researchers had access to the data.

Results

We used weighted least squares mean estimation and variance adjustment (WLSMV), to run a confirmatory factor analysis for Political Moral Laxity (PML) and Tolerance to Normative Transgression (TRG) and evaluated model fit indices. Values comparative fit index (CFI) Tucker-Lewis index (TLI) Bentler-Bonett normalized fit index >0.90 and the standardized residual root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) < 0.08 were considered adequate (Holgado–Tello et al., 2010). However, as Vignoles et al. (2016) have observed, fit indices for self-construal measures – which include the psychological measures used in this study – tend to fall outside the range that is commonly accepted. Furthermore, model fit should be evaluated in part based on the progress of previous results. For example, some scales have been found to yield a CFI ranging from 0.25 to 0.65, a SRMR up to 0.10 and a RMSEA ranging from 0.076 to 0.268, which are nevertheless regarded as acceptable results (for further details on this topic, see Vignoles et al., 2016). Next, a descriptive analysis was performed for Political Moral Laxity, Social Dominance Orientation,

the components of the Dark Triad of Personality and Tolerance to Normative Transgression. We entered SDO and Psychopathy component as our predictor variables, PML as our mediating variable, and TRG as our dependent variable (Figure 2). It is worth nothing that the latent model only showed adequate to marginal fit: $\chi^2(590) = 1,272$, $p < 0.001$; $\chi^2/df = 2.16$, SRMR = 0.10, RMSEA = 0.07, CFI = 0.87, TLI = 0.86. We recognize that model fit could be enhanced through statistical methods like item parcelling (Little et al., 2002). However, since our focus is on the critical relationships between latent factors, we have chosen to retain the original model that uses individual items as indicators in this article.

We perform a series of linear correlations between all the study variables and the sociodemographic data collected. We applied the criteria derived from the meta-analysis of Richard et al. (2003) to interpret the effect sizes of our results. The following rule was used: statistical value close to 0.10 will be interpreted as small, equal to or greater than 0.20 as medium, and equal to or greater than 0.30 as large. For regression analysis, effect size (f^2) criteria of <0.02 will be interpreted as small, < 0.15 as medium and < 0.35 as large, and will be obtained based on the relationship between indicators. Thus, we run a regression analysis to test the hypothesized model in which we entered SDO, the components of the Dark Triad of Personality, and the sociodemographic variables as independent variables; PML as mediating variable, and TRG, as the dependent variable. We computed the indirect and total effects using the bootstrap method with 95% bias correction (BC) and 10,000 re-samples.

We report the descriptive statistics and zero order correlations between our variables in Table 1. It can be observed that the scores are below the midpoint of the response scale (2.5) and are even close to the minimum score, specifically for TRG and the Dark Triad components Psychopathy and Machiavellianism. First, we observe that that PML is directly related to the components of Dark Triad, SDO, and TRG. Second, at the level of sociodemographic variables, PML is inversely related to gender (Male = 1, Female = 2, Prefer not to specify = 3) and directly related to SSE (from highest privilege group = 1, to lowest privilege group = 5).

To understand the relationships between the variables, we then ran a multiple regression analysis in two steps. We first entered SDO, the components of the Dark Triad, and sociodemographic variables as predictor variables, and PML as the dependent variable (Table 2). We obtained a model that explained 20% of the variance of PML ($F(8,226) = 8.23$, $p < 0.001$, $1-\beta = 1.00$, $f^2 = 0.90$). Only SDO ($\beta = 0.21$, 95%CI [0.10, 0.48]) and Psychopathy ($\beta = 0.25$, 95%CI [0.12, 0.51]) predicted PML.

Next, we proceeded to test our proposed model (Figure 2). Results for indirect effect key components showed direct positive associations; SDO with PML (B = 0.38, 95%CI [0.20, 0.55] $p < 0.001$), PML with TRG (B = 0.21, 95%CI [0.10, 0.35], $p < 0.001$) and DTps with PML (B = 0.41, 95%CI [0.22, 0.60], $p < 0.001$).

Next, we tested our final hypothesis, the mediating role of PML between SDO and components of the Dark Triad. Out of three components only Psychopathy had a significant association with PML. Therefore, we tested the mediating role of PML through SDO-TRG, and DTps-TRG paths. For this, we created composite variables by combining items for each scale. Model showed acceptable to good fit: $\chi^2(7) = 4.24$, $p = 0.752$; $\chi^2/df = 0.61$, SRMR = 0.04, RMSEA = 0.07, CFI = 0.94, TLI = 0.86. Results showed that (Table 3) SDO ($\beta = 0.08$, $p < 0.01$) and DTps ($\beta = 0.09$, $p < 0.01$) has a positive
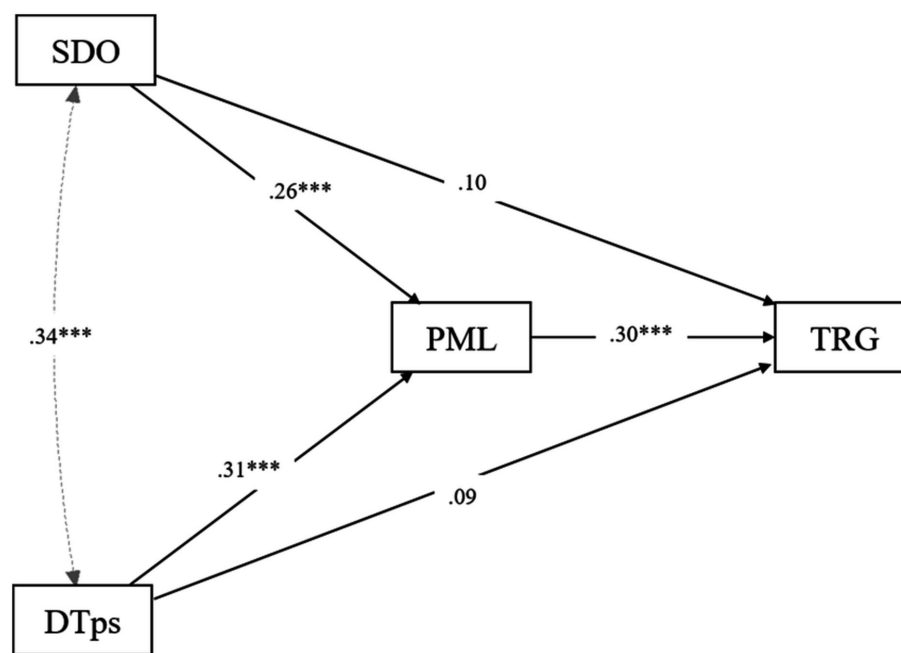
FIGURE 2
Path model of the mediating effect of PML on the relationship between SDO as well as Psychopathy, and Tolerance to Normative Transgression (TRG).
SDO = Social Dominance Orientation; PML = Political Moral Laxity; DTps = Psychopathy; TRG = Tolerance to Normative Transgression. Path
coefficients are standardized (*p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001).

TABLE 1 Descriptive statistics and correlation matrix.

	M	SE	PML	DTps	DTma	DTna	SDO	TRG	Age	Gender	Edu	Pol	SSE
PML	2.02	0.91	-	0.403***	0.334***	0.268***	0.337***	0.371***	−0.091^{ns}	−0.191**	−0.045^{ns}	0.025^{ns}	−0.129*
DTps	1.89	0.71		-	0.602***	0.484***	0.352***	0.248***	0.021^{ns}	−0.235***	−0.095^{ns}	0.027^{ns}	−0.127*
DTma	1.66	0.84			-	0.502**	0.486***	0.357***	0.009^{ns}	−0.261***	0.025^{ns}	0.001^{ns}	0.052^{ns}
DTna	2.15	0.82				-	0.252***	0.214***	−0.025^{ns}	−0.131***	−0.153*	0.099^{ns}	0.011^{ns}
SDO	2.16	0.64					-	0.236***	0.006^{ns}	−0.285***	0.027^{ns}	0.005^{ns}	0.064^{ns}
TRG	1.66	0.65						-	−0.013^{ns}	−0.087^{ns}	−0.021^{ns}	0.081^{ns}	−0.024^{ns}
Age	20.8	5.51							-	0.017^{ns}	0.350***	0.015^{ns}	0.107^{ns}
Gender	1.55	0.51								-	0.038^{ns}	0.060^{ns}	0.133*
Edu	2.67	0.99									-	−0.072^{ns}	0.085^{ns}
Pol	2.15	0.59										-	−0.030^{ns}
SSE	2.64	0.71											-

PML = Political Moral Laxity; DTps = Psychopathy; DTma = Machiavellianism; DTna = Narcissism; SDO = Social Dominance Orientation; TRG = Tolerance to Normative Transgression;
Gender (1 = male, 2 = female); Edu = Education Level; Pol = Political Orientation; SSE = Self-perceived Socio-Economic Situation.
*p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001.

indirect effect on TRG via PML, while direct effect is non-significant (SDO β = 0.09, p = 0.17; DTps β = 0.10, p = 0.16). This means that individuals ranking higher on SDO and DTps would be more willing to display PML as result of these traits only via PML.

Discussion

The influence of neoliberalism has transcended beyond the economic domain into the political sphere, and in some societies it is often justified under an uncritical and sacralised perspective that weakens democracy at both institutional and civic levels (Piketty, 2019; Stiglitz, 2015; Richards, 2019; Zmerli and Castillo, 2015). In contexts similar to the Peruvian case, where neoliberal economic narratives are deeply ingrained, it is important to open public discussions on the need to balance economic growth with institutional strengthening (Vergara, 2018). This also highlights the importance of regulating certain practices promoted by neoliberalism that, when expressed in citizens' behavior, distort areas of societal coexistence that should not necessarily be governed under free market

TABLE 2 Multiple regression for political moral laxity.

Model	B	SE	IC 95%	t	p	β	IC 95%
Intercept	1.00	0.44	[0.16; 1.85]	2.28	0.02		
SDO	0.29	0.10	[0.10; 0.48]	2.98	0.01	0.21	[0.07; 0.34]
DTps	0.32	0.10	[0.12; 0.51]	3.15	0.01	0.25	[0.09; 0.40]
DTma	0.06	0.09	[−0.12; 0.24]	0.62	0.54	0.05	[−0.11; 0.22]
DTna	0.07	0.08	[−0.09; 0.23]	0.89	0.38	0.06	[−0.08; 0.21]
Gender	−0.08	0.11	[−0.30; 0.15]	−0.66	0.51	−0.04	[−0.17; 0.08]
EDU	0.00	0.06	[−0.11; 0.11]	0.01	0.99	0.00	[−0.12; 0.12]
POL	0.03	0.09	[−0.15; 0.21]	0.30	0.77	0.02	[−0.10; 0.13]
SSE	−0.15	0.08	[−0.30; 0.01]	−1.86	0.06	−0.11	[−0.23; 0.01]

R = 0.475***; R²Adjusted = 0.198.
SDO = Social Dominance Orientation; DTps = Psychopathy; DTma = Machiavellianism; DTna = Narcissism; EDU = Education Level; POL = Political Orientation; SSE = Self-perceived Socio-Economic Situation. *$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.001$.

principles –especially if the aim is to build a society where the public good prevails (Harvey, 2005).

Building on the understanding that neoliberal ideology permeates both institutional frameworks and individual behaviors, the results of the present study corroborate that PML, as a psychological process, is related to SDO. SDO serve as an ideology that legitimizes a hierarchical and inequitable political system, such as neoliberalism, characterized by limited institutional capacity to address issues arising from citizens' disengagement from public concerns (Espinosa et al., 2022a; Espinosa et al., 2022c). Likewise, based on a review of the relationship between citizenship with politics and the political in the Peruvian context (Cañete-Alonso, 2018; Chaparro, 2018; Dargent, 2021; Quiroz, 2013), we explore the potential association of PML with some dark personality traits as subclinical indicators. These traits could represent a form of self-centred individualism detrimental to the public good. Among the three components of the Dark Triad, Psychopathy was the only trait found to be significantly related to PML.

Our findings suggest that both SDO and the Psychopathy component of the Dark Triad of Personality are significant predictors of PML (Espinosa et al., 2022b; Rottenbacher and Schmitz, 2012; Schmitz et al., 2021). These results suggest that expressions of PML in Peruvian society may arise from an interaction between exposure to perverse political socialization processes, as expressed in SDO, and dark psychological tendencies, as indicated by Psychopathy. This interaction potentially influences citizens' political decisions in ways that undermine construction of the public good in a society, as a form of system justification (Espinosa et al., 2022a; Jost, 2019). Consequently, the interaction between PML, SDO and dark personality traits highlights the pervasive impact of individualistic and hierarchical ideologies on democratic and civic engagement.

Psychopathy, rather than Machiavellianism or Narcissism, most effectively explains PML due to its core traits of impulsivity, emotional coldness, lack of empathy, and absence of guilt –characteristics that facilitate self-serving, transgressive behaviors without regard for societal norms or collective welfare. These traits align closely with PML, as individuals high in Psychopathy are predisposed to prioritize private or endogroup benefits, readily overlooking the societal harm their actions may cause. While Machiavellianism involves self-centered strategies, it is characterized by calculated manipulation and a tendency to operate within social norms to avoid exposure, thereby limiting overtly transgressive behaviors. Narcissism, characterized by

a need for admiration, grandiosity, and sensitivity to criticism, can also contribute to unethical behaviors but is often constrained by the desire for social approval and validation. By contrast, psychopathy's indifferent and impulsive disposition fosters more direct engagement in ethically lax actions, making it a more fitting predictor of PML, particularly in socio-political contexts where institutional weaknesses and competitive individualism prevail.

Thus, expressions of PML seem to intensify within political systems characterized by weakened institutions, like the Peruvian case, where systemic issues such as lack of legitimacy, inequality, transgression, and corruption foster a detachment of citizens from the pursuit of political projects that protect or contribute to public welfare (Martí, 2024; Espinosa et al., 2022a; Espinosa et al., 2022c; Gnädinger, 2018; Proética, 2019; Villagrán et al., 2021). Regarding the above, in Peru, political consensus in recent years has largely centred on the neoliberal economic model, which, while producing remarkable economic growth, primarily promoted citizenship as access to consumer goods for many people rather than fostering democratic institutional strength, nor projects, nor public policies that improve the common good beyond the economic component. This approach has yielded an economy characterized by informality and disorderly economic growth, yet it has failed to promote public policies or initiatives that enhance citizens' quality of life beyond economic gains, leaving democracy and its institutions vulnerable (Vergara, 2018).

The disaffection with institutional structures has constituted in Peru a scenario of aggressive competition, social inequality and erosion of social capital, with impacts visible across various spheres of daily life (Chaparro, 2018; Palacios et al., 2023; Villagrán et al., 2021). This institutional weakening, as discussed above, contributes to a deterioration in the socially responsible behavior among citizens (Gächter and Schulz, 2016). In this context, analysing Tolerance to Normative Transgression becomes particularly relevant, as this study has found it to be directly related to PML. This connection suggest that, through an increasing tolerance to normative transgression, citizens may deprioritize the construction of collective and public interest, motivated by getting ahead individually. This shift reflects a context perceived as unfavourable or antagonistic to collective well-being, where closest individual or endogroup interests are prioritized over broader societal goals, providing a framework for political cynicism (Espinosa et al., 2022b; Espinosa et al., 2022c).

TABLE 3 Indirect and total effects of SDO and psychopathy on TRG via PML.

Type	Path	B	SE	Low	Upp	β	z	p
				(95% CI)				
Indirect	SDO ⇒ PML ⇒ TRG	0.080	0.027	0.033	0.156	0.079	2.98	0.003
	DTps⇒ PML ⇒ TRG	0.088	0.027	0.032	0.181	0.093	3.22	0.001
Direct	SDO ⇒ TRG	0.095	0.070	−0.036	0.227	0.093	1.36	0.173
	DTps⇒ TRG	0.091	0.066	−57	0.246	0.097	1.39	0.163
Total	SDO ⇒ TRG	0.175	0.070	0.047	0.299	0.172	2.51	0.012
	DTps⇒ TRG	0.179	0.065	0.030	0.368	0.189	2.77	0.006

SDO = Social Dominance Orientation; PML = Political Moral Laxity; DTps = Psychopathy; TRG = Tolerance to Normative Transgression. Betas are completely standardized effect sizes.

Thus, PML appears to reinforce citizens' transgressive behaviors, influenced by a socially dominant ideological foundation and/or an obscure individual psychological foundation as the trait of Psychopathy. In this context, PML demonstrates a complete mediating effect, serving as an intermediary to explain the relationship from Psychopathy and SDO –as independent variables– with Tolerance to Normative Transgression as dependent variable. This results is the aforementioned deterioration in social capital, which could lead to a system justification (Beramendi et al., 2020; Janos et al., 2018; Jost, 2019). The mediating role of PML in the relationship between SDO, Psychopathy, and Tolerance to Normative Transgressive behavior reveals key psychological and ideological mechanisms.

PML serves as a bridge, transforming the hierarchical and competitive tendencies of SDO and the emotionally detached, impulsive nature of psychopathy into politically and socially transgressive attitudes and behaviors. For individuals high in SDO, PML provides a framework that normalizes the prioritization of self-interest and ingroup benefits over collective welfare, effectively justifying actions that reinforce existing social hierarchies and inequalities. This suggests that PML translates abstract ideological preferences into concrete behaviors that align with competitive, individualistic values.

For individuals with high Psychopathy, characterized by lack of empathy, emotional coldness, and impulsivity, PML similarly acts as a mediating force, framing transgressive actions as acceptable or even necessary in the pursuit of personal or endogroup objectives. PML reduces accountability to broader societal goals and fosters a tolerance for norm violations, enabling individuals to perceive unethical actions as pragmatic responses within a competitive or hostile environment. In this way, PML amplifies the impact of SDO and psychopathy, embedding these factors within a framework that justifies and sustains unethical political behavior. In sum, PML emerges as a socialized phenomenon that is exacerbated by some dark personality traits, such as Psychopathy, and mediates the relationship between ideological and personality characteristics with the propensity for normalized transgressive behavior.

The findings of the present study show how politically lax beliefs and attitudes in political decision-making establish a tension between the public and the private interests, with the Peruvian public sphere being deprioritized. Transgressions are thus perceived as means to achieve immediate private –or tribal collective– benefits, while the broader harm inflicted on society tends to be overlooked. For this reason, further research should be done on the potential negative effects of PML on social life (Beramendi et al., 2020; Beramendi and Zubieta, 2013; Janos et al., 2018), especially given that the absence of guilt and lack of empathy at the societal level hinder the development of goals directed toward the common good, as suggested in political cynicism studies (Espinosa et al., 2022b; Espinosa et al., 2022c).

On the other hand, studies on transgression behavior during the pandemic in Peru (Palacios et al., 2023) suggest that certain forms of transgression were driven not by a lack of empathy but by the need for survival in a crisis-ridden and hostile environment. This insight is relevant to our sample, as people perceived as having fewer resources or greater socioeconomic vulnerability reported higher levels of PML. These findings allow us to hypothesize that, even when transgressive actions originate as responses to necessity rather than selfishness, they may evolve into PML in the long term within a context of institutional weakening, thus creating a vicious cycle. This underscores the importance of fostering a republican narrative that emphasizes the strengthening of democratic institutions to mediate relations among citizens, regulate perverse behaviors, and promote political socialization models centred on the common good as a prior step for safeguarding individual welfare (Cañete-Alonso, 2018; Chaparro et al., 2021; Dargent, 2021; Vergara, 2018).

We believe these results contribute to the ongoing debate on political attitudes endorsing unethical behavior in several significant ways. Nonetheless, we would like to exercise caution in terms of drawing broad generalizations for several reasons. First, like similar studies, our research relies on cross sectional data, making causal claims challenging. In this regard, the sample does not statistically represent the national reality; however, the results are applicable for understanding this phenomenon in Peru, as shown in similar studies (Beramendi et al., 2020; Espinosa et al., 2022a). Nonetheless, we believe these findings should be further examined in other Latin American political and cultural contexts. However, we believe our investigation effectively examined multiple processes, and our findings can guide future research in formulating hypotheses for more in-depth studies (Wang and Cheng, 2020). For instance, future studies could examine how SDO and Dark Triad traits interact with political and economic conditions to reinforce PML, potentially increasing tolerance for transgressive behaviors aimed at securing personal or endogroup advantages. Additionally, within contexts marked by institutional weakness and socioeconomic vulnerability, transgressions driven initially by survival could be explored as they may evolve over time into habitual expressions of PML, signifying a shift from necessity-based actions to entrenched unethical attitudes.

Second, we studied our variables of interest within a single study and a specific context, limiting the extent to which broad generalizations can be drawn. Future research would benefit from examining the processes and attitudes involving both personality traits and PML through multiple studies conducted in distinct contexts. Testing these relationships in different settings could clarify the generalizability of our findings. Given their shared socio-political and economic features, other Latin American societies offer a compelling starting point for such investigations. So, relationship between PML, SDO, and Dark Triad traits may vary across different Latin American societies, influenced by institutional strength, neoliberal impact, and historical context.

Third, in the present study focused solely on behavioral tendencies, which, although informative, tendencies might not consistently translate into actual behavior. Future research could address this limitation by employing experimental designs that assess actual behavioral outcomes, providing a more robust understanding of the relationship between PML and observable actions. In this regard, specific contextual factors –such as crises or perceived threats to endogroup interests– may act as triggers that activate behavioral tendencies, thereby translating associations with PML, SDO, and Dark Triad traits into observable actions.

To conclude, further contextualized research is need to address the complex relationship of individual, group, and societal levels factors contributing to PML and transgression behavior. Understanding the role of processes that perpetuate unethical political behavior and the ensuing structural conditions could shift the debate toward addressing the long term effects of such unethical tendencies and behavior. By investigating processes at the individual, group, and societal levels, future research could explore how SDO and components of the Dark Triad, such as psychopathy, interact with socio-political contexts marked by neoliberal values and weakened institutions describe by PML. Such an approach aligns with our hypotheses, suggesting that these ideological and personality factors, within specific institutional frameworks, can foster tolerance for transgressive behavior, thereby eroding social capital and democratic values. Understanding these dynamics could ultimately inform strategies to strengthen societal welfare and reinforce ethical standards in democratic systems.

The present study serves as a preliminary step, offering a foundation for future investigations that address the long-term impacts of PML and related behaviors on civic life and democratic engagement. By focusing on these ethical and political challenges, future research can inform policies and initiatives aimed at strengthening democratic institutions, fostering socially responsible behavior, and promoting a narrative centred on the common good as essential to societal welfare.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

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Ethics statement

Author contributions

AE: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. RA: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. JJ: Data curation, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. HÇ: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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