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Dark triad personality traits and theory of mind among school-age children

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the associations between four personality dimensions associated with the dark triad (callous–unemotional traits, narcissism, impulsivity, and Machiavellianism) and theory of mind (TOM) abilities among 146 middle school children. Results of hierarchical multiple regression analyses showed narcissism to be positively associated with TOM, callous–unemotional (CU) traits to be negatively associated with TOM, and impulsivity and Machiavellianism to be unrelated to TOM. No significant interactions were found between gender and any of the dimensions of personality. The putative mechanisms linking each personality dimension with understanding of mental states in others are discussed, along with directions for future research.

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1. Introduction

The integration of the psychopathy construct into the developmental psychopathology of antisocial behavior has involved extending key elements of the syndrome from adulthood into childhood. One important contribution of this research has been the recognition that psychopathic traits (i.e., callous–unemotionality, impulsivity, and psychopathic narcissism) are associated with the development of the most severe and intractable conduct problems (e.g., Frick & Ellis, 1999). These findings suggest that studying the other two components of the so-called "dark triad" (Paulhus & Williams, 2002; Stellwagen, 2010) of personality—narcissism and Machiavellianism—might also increase our understanding of the dynamics of childhood antisocial behavior. Indeed, emerging research suggests that all three points of the dark triad are distinct constructs that are linked to aggressive behavior in children (e.g., Kerig & Stellwagen, 2010) and adults (e.g., Baughman, Dearing, Giammarco, & Vernon, 2012). A challenge confronting this new research agenda, however, is determining exactly how the personality dimensions that undergird the dark triad differ on theoretically important emotional and cognitive correlates. One such correlate is theory of mind (TOM), the ability to understand others as intentional agents and to predict and explain human behavior in terms of internal mental states (e.g., beliefs, desires, motivations, misconceptions). A better understanding of how TOM skills relate to dark triad personality traits in children could more clearly illuminate the social cognition that undergirds differing subtypes of antisocial behavior, thereby proving clinicians new directions for intervention early in the lifespan when such traits are more likely to be malleable.

2. Psychopathy as a multidimensional construct

It is becoming clear that psychopathy is a multifaceted construct composed of interrelated subdimensions that demonstrate distinct patterns of association with relevant behavioral (e.g., Kerig & Stellwagen, 2010) and cognitive (Salekin, Neumann, Leistico, & Zalot, 2004) variables. For example, Frick and Hare (2001) widely used *Antisocial Screening Device* (APSD) yields three dimensions—impulsivity, callous–unemotional (CU) traits, and narcissism—each of which play an independent role in the emergence and expression of antisocial behavior. Impulsivity increases emotional reactivity and interpersonal sensitivity, decreases inhibitions against the violation of social norms, and reduces the tendency to carefully plan behavior (Frick & Hare, 2001). In contrast, CU traits—often described as the "hallmark characteristic" of psychopathy—are associated with insensitivity to punishment, a lack of remorse for misbehavior, and poor interpersonal attachments (Barry et al., 2000). Finally, psychopathy-linked narcissism is associated with the propensity to aggressively dominate others in the pursuit for power and prestige (Kerig & Stellwagen, 2010).

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3. Narcissism and Machiavellianism as distinct "points" on the dark triad

Whereas all major models of psychopathy include narcissism as a key element (e.g., Cleckley, 1941; Frick & Hare, 2001; Hare, 2003) it is also clear that narcissistic traits can be identified in individuals that lack the predatory behaviors that help define psychopathy (e.g., Stellwagen, 2010). For example, whereas the APSD narcissism scale assesses the types of overtly dominant, grandiose behaviors that are specific to psychopathy-linked narcissism, Barry, Frick, and Killian (2003) developed a self-report measure of childhood narcissism, the *Narcissistic Personality Inventory-Children* (NPIC), that instead focuses on self-centered, vain attitudes. The NPIC is a downward extension of the "gold standard" measure of adult narcissism typically utilized by personality psychologists, the *Narcissistic Personality Inventory* (NPI; Raskin & Hall, 1979), and therefore is not conceptually related to psychopathy. Nevertheless, the NPIC provides a maladaptive narcissism subscale (comprising exploitiveness, entitlement, and exhibitionism) that is associated with conduct problems (Barry et al., 2003). The maladaptive subscale of the NPIC, therefore, is relevant to narcissism as a distinctive element of the dark triad of personality.

Machiavellianism, the third point of the dark triad, refers to a cynical, deceptive and manipulative orientation that is associated with a lack of concern for conventional morality (Geis & Christie, 1970; Kerig & Sink, 2010). Whereas there is obviously some degree of conceptual overlap between psychopathy and Machiavellianism, the extant literature also indicates some important distinctions. For example, utilizing teacher reports, Kerig and Stellwagen (2010) examined the contributions of Machiavellianism and the factors of psychopathy to the prediction of several forms of childhood aggression. Results indicated that all three factors of psychopathy were associated with physical aggression, while Machiavellianism was unrelated to physical aggression but instead functioned as the strongest predictor of relational aggression. Thus, unlike the frankly overt aggression associated with psychopathy, Machiavellianism appears to be most relevant to the use of "sneaky", emotionally damaging behaviors that are less likely to draw negative attention to the perpetrator (Kerig & Sink, 2010).

4. Theory of mind and interpersonal exploitation

Recent research in developmental psychology (e.g., Miller, 2012) has focused on theory of mind (TOM) abilities as the key precursor of human social skills, based upon the logic that children's ability to impute relevant mental states such as presumptions, intentions, and desires underlies their ability to accurately anticipate and influence the behavior of others. TOM ability is best conceptualized as a neutral social instrument that enables both prosocial behaviors (resolving conflicts peacefully and cultivating friendships) and antisocial behaviors (e.g., interpersonal manipulation and deceitfulness). In fact, because TOM tasks often assess the ability to describe how false beliefs are created and how such beliefs subsequently influence behavior, the available measures are well suited to research that examines interpersonal exploitation (e.g., Sutton, Smith, & Swettenham, 1999). For example, research has shown that ringleader bullying is associated with TOM abilities (Stellwagen & Kerig, 2005; Sutton et al., 1999), suggesting that social acumen allows bullies to successfully manipulate victims, recruit followers, and hide their misbehavior. Moreover, a recent study that indicated that white collar criminals showed increased cortical thickening in multiple brain areas associated with TOM (Raine et al., 2011), indicates that theoretically important linkages between social acuity and antisocial behavior may extend across the lifespan.

5. Theory of mind and the dark triad

Although some studies have failed to find an association between TOM abilities and psychopathy (e.g., Blair et al., 1996; Dolan & Fullam, 2004), prior investigations have utilized global psychopathy scores and have thus left unexplored the possibility that TOM ability may be differentially associated with the subdimensions of the syndrome. The associations among verbal intelligence and the subfactors of psychopathy have been examined in an adolescent population (e.g., Salekin et al., 2004), providing one template for how the dimensions of psychopathy could relate to TOM abilities. More specifically, Salekin and colleagues found that verbal intelligence was positively associated with narcissism, negatively associated with CU traits, and unrelated to impulsivity. Salekin and colleagues noted that their findings were consistent with Cleckley's (1941) seminal case formulations of individuals demonstrating both socially intelligent behavior patterns and prominent psychopathic characteristics. However, whereas intelligence test scores provide some useful data for examining Cleckley's theoretical formulations, intelligence tests focus on academic and analytic abilities and Cleckley's description of psychopathic individuals with sophisticated interpersonal skills is most relevant to the concept of social or emotional intelligence. For example, Cleckley's case examples included a con man described as having a "remarkable knowledge of other people and their reactions" (p. 39) and a petty criminal who avoided responsibility for his crimes through his ability to concoct "ingenious alibis" (p. 65). In essence, Cleckley described the typical psychopath as utilizing feigned honesty in the service of interpersonal manipulation and exploitation. Therefore, there is a need to examine the association between psychopathic traits and social skills utilizing a measure specifically designed to assess interpersonal acuity (e.g., a TOM instrument).

Like psychopathy-linked narcissism, past research with the NPI (the adult self-report of self-aggrandizement) has indicated a positive association with intelligence (e.g., Paulhus & Williams, 2002), suggesting the possibility of a relatively robust relationship between intelligence and narcissism. If TOM performance is found to follow the same positive pattern of association with the differing measures of narcissism utilized in this study, this would reinforce Salekin and colleagues' (2004) conclusion that grandiosity and self-importance may be "kindled" by social cognition and mental abilities. This would further suggest that models of intervention for antisocial behavior that presuppose social skill deficiencies (e.g., McGinnis, 2011) may be a poor fit for children displaying narcissistic characteristics.

Given that most (e.g., Geis & Moon, 1981)—although not all (e.g., O'Hair, Cody, & McLaughlin, 1981)—of the available research indicates that those high in Machiavellianism can effectively deceive and manipulate others, it is somewhat surprising that the small handful of studies conducted have failed to demonstrate a positive association between Machiavellianism and TOM in either children (e.g., Repacholi, Slaughter, Pritchard, & Gibbs, 2003; Slaughter, 2010) or adults (e.g., Lyons, Caldwell, & Schultz, 2010). The extant evidence, therefore, suggests that any competitive advantage associated with Machiavellianism results more from ruthlessness (Geis & Christie, 1970) than from superior social acuity. However, this conclusion should still be considered tentative given the paucity of studies that have assessed the association between Machiavellianism and TOM.

6. The present study

Building upon prior research that showed that narcissism is associated with verbal intelligence (e.g., Paulhus & Williams, 2002; Salekin et al., 2004) and socially adept forms of antisocial

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