



## Interpersonal Guilt and the Dark Triad<sup>☆</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

Research on the Dark Triad of personality has supported the notion that Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy represent distinct but related traits. This study investigated the relation between each of the Dark Triad traits and scores on the Interpersonal Guilt Questionnaire (IGQ; O'Connor, Berry, Weiss, Bush, & Sampson, 1997). Each of the Dark Triad traits was found to have significant negative associations with survival and omnipotent responsibility guilt. Interestingly, Machiavellianism and psychopathy were found to be positively associated with self-hate guilt, while narcissism was negatively correlated with self-hate. Rumination was found to mediate the relation between Machiavellianism and self-hate, whereas the relation between psychopathy and self-hate was only partially mediated by rumination. Multiple regression analyses revealed that narcissism, psychopathy, and rumination each significantly added to the prediction of self-hate guilt, Machiavellianism and narcissism added to the prediction of survival guilt, and psychopathy and rumination added to the prediction of omnipotent responsibility guilt. These results provide further support for the distinct but related nature of the Dark Triad. They also offer greater insight into the behaviours associated with these subclinical antisocial tendencies.

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For decades the Five-Factor Model of personality (FFM; Costa & McCrae, 1992) has dominated individual differences research. While this theory has greatly advanced our understanding of normative personality traits, the FFM has also been the subject of much criticism in recent years (Paunonen & Jackson, 2000). In particular, researchers have argued that the FFM is not able to capture adequately the full range of personality traits, especially those that reflect socially malevolent behaviours (Veselka, Schermer, & Vernon, 2012). For this reason, alternative models, such as the Dark Triad, have been proposed for investigation of such antisocial personality traits.

### 1. The darker side of personality

First cited by Paulhus and Williams (2002), the Dark Triad describes a set of three subclinical maladaptive personality traits: *Machiavellianism*, *narcissism*, and *psychopathy*. In general, these traits are reflective of deceptive and self-serving tendencies. In particular, Machiavellianism is characterized by being manipulative of others (Christie & Geis, 1970), whereas narcissistic individuals tend to possess grandiose self-views and display a sense of entitlement

(Raskin & Hall, 1979). Finally, impulsive behaviour and a lack of remorse are highly indicative of psychopathy (Hare, 1985).

Numerous studies have investigated the association between these Dark Triad traits and a series of antisocial behaviours, including cruelty against animals (Kavanagh, Signal, & Taylor, 2013), gambling (Crysel, Crosier, & Webster, 2013), aggression (Muris, Meesters, & Timmermans, 2013), bullying (Baughman, Dearing, Giammarco, & Vernon, 2012), and preference for short-term mating strategies, including one-night stands (Jonason, Li, Webster, & Schmitt, 2009; Jonason, Luevano, & Adams, 2012). Attempts to explain these malevolent tendencies have focused largely on the role of empathy (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Research suggests that a lack of empathy is characteristic of individuals high in the Dark Triad traits, especially Machiavellianism and psychopathy (Jonason, Lyons, Bethell, & Ross, 2013). In particular, Wai and Tiliopoulos (2012) found that Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy were associated with deficits in emotional aspects of empathy, but not cognitive. That is, it seems that these individuals are able to identify and assess the emotional reactions of others, but they refrain from experiencing emotional discomfort caused by another person's suffering. Wai and Tiliopoulos (2012) argue that this may allow for these antisocial individuals to manipulate others for their own personal gain, without feeling remorse for whoever is hurt in the process.

A recent study by Giammarco and Vernon (2014) found partial support for this hypothesis. Self-report measures administered to a

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sample of undergraduate students revealed that each of the Dark Triad traits was negatively correlated ( $r = -.22$  to  $-.57$ ) with empathic concern, as measured by the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI; Davis, 1980). Empathic concern is defined as the tendency to report feelings of concern for others who have experienced a negative life event. As expected, Machiavellianism and psychopathy had the strongest associations. However, they were also significantly negatively correlated with perspective-taking, defined as the tendency to recognize another's point of view, which appears to be a more cognitive aspect of empathy. As such, these results support the notion that those with Dark Triad tendencies do not experience personal distress at the expense of others, but it remains unclear whether or not they also experience cognitive deficits. Furthermore, whether or not this leads these "dark" individuals to manipulate others for their own benefit remains untested.

## 2. The role of empathy in guilt

Traditional psychoanalytic perspectives on guilt (Freud, 1940 as cited in O'Connor, Berry, Weiss, Bush, & Sampson, 1997) theorized that guilt stemmed from an unconscious desire to hurt others for various reasons (e.g., jealousy, anger, revenge). Consequently, it was believed to be one of the largest contributors to pathology and emotional distress and (Modell, 1965). However, a more modern approach to guilt focuses on the emotions that arise from concern about others and altruistic tendencies (O'Connor et al., 1997). This view highlights the interpersonal nature of guilt, and points to its importance for the maintenance of relationships. Defined as "a painful affect arising from the belief that one has hurt another" (O'Connor et al., 1997, p. 74), researchers have proposed that guilt can serve as a useful mechanism for maintaining relationships. That is, when an individual does something to hurt a friend or family member, and the action cannot be undone, the transgressor experiences guilt for their actions and they are led to apologize. In this way, guilt may increase the likelihood of attempts to repair the relationship. Howell, Turowski, and Buro (2012) found preliminary support for this argument when they noted that individuals who expressed higher levels of guilt reported a greater generalized willingness to apologize.

Howell et al. (2012) also found that empathy was positively associated with the willingness to apologize. An examination of the basic definition of guilt will reveal that this result is not surprising. According to O'Connor et al. (1997) guilt may arise because of the belief that you have hurt someone. It can be argued that a certain level of empathy is necessary to experience guilt because in order to believe you have hurt someone you would need to take their perspective in the situation and imagine how they would feel. This is the very definition of perspective-taking, a component of empathy, provided by Davis (1980). Indeed researchers have found that elements of empathy, including empathic concern, are positively related to experiences of guilt (Joireman, 2004). Therefore, it is evident that empathy plays a very important role in the experience of guilt.

## 3. The measurement of guilt

There is a general consensus among researchers that guilt is largely an interpersonal construct. As such, a common assessment of the tendency to experience feelings of guilt is the Interpersonal Guilt Questionnaire (IGQ; O'Connor et al., 1997). The IGQ is a self-report measure that assesses four distinct types of guilt: *survivor*, *separation*, *omnipotent responsibility*, and *self-hate*.

Traditionally, survivor guilt was a term used to describe those individuals who experienced distress at the fact that they survived

some terrible event while others did not (Glover, 1984). Although this is still a valid definition for the construct, within the context of the IGQ survivor guilt is a more general term used to describe the experience of those who feel bad for their own successes because others do not experience their same good fortune. Modell (1971) suggested that in some cases, individuals who experience survivor guilt may engage in self-destructive behaviours to limit their own success in an attempt to pacify their guilty feelings.

Separation guilt refers to the feelings of guilt that may arise when one is away from, or considers themselves different from, people who are important to them (e.g., parents). According to Weiss (1986) and Bush (1989) this type of guilt arises because the person believes they are harming their loved ones by separating from them. In turn, they experience distress at the notion of being disloyal to family or friends.

An individual who experiences omnipotent responsibility guilt tends to possess an exaggerated sense of responsibility for the success and happiness of others. When these individuals feel they have failed others, they experience strong feelings of guilt. Researchers hypothesize that this type of guilt is derived from a strong sense of altruism (O'Connor et al., 1997). Because of this, individuals high in omnipotent responsibility guilt would be motivated to reduce their personal distress by helping others.

Finally, self-hate guilt arises when individuals comply with a severely critical evaluation of themselves from someone, often a parent, who feels hatred or contempt for them. Although survivor, separation, and omnipotent guilt are directly based on empathy and are largely "other-focused", self-hate guilt can be considered to be indirectly related to empathy and is "self-focused". That is, an individual may adopt these critical evaluations out of loyalty (an empathy-driven experience) to a significant person in their life that holds these negative evaluations. Researchers have found that self-hate guilt tends to be highly elevated among adolescents with anorexia nervosa, compared to non-affected peers (Berghold & Lock, 2002). It has also been noted that this type of guilt is associated with negative thoughts about the self and shame (O'Connor et al., 1997). Since there is little evidence of any social benefit to self-hate, it would seem to be best classified as a maladaptive form of guilt.

## 4. Present study

It is well established that deficits in empathy are associated with each of the Dark Triad traits (Jonason & Krause, 2013) and that empathy is an important aspect of guilt (Joireman, 2004). As such, the goal of the present study is to examine the relation between the Dark Triad and interpersonal guilt at both the dimension and facet level. It is expected that when a series of self-report measures are administered to a sample of undergraduate students, those participants who report a high tendency towards each of the Dark Triad traits will also report a lower tendency to experience overall interpersonal guilt, as assessed by a composite score on the IGQ.

When examining associations with the subscales of the IGQ, it is expected that each of the Dark Triad traits will demonstrate unique patterns of association. In particular, because Machiavellianism and psychopathy have been shown to have stronger negative associations with perspective-taking and empathic concern than narcissism (Giammarco & Vernon, 2014) these two Dark Triad traits are expected to have stronger negative associations than narcissism will with subscales of the IGQ that are directly related to empathy, namely separation and omnipotent responsibility guilt. Because researchers have found a strong relation between guilt and rumination (Orth, Berking, & Burkhardt, 2006), we also assessed the mediating effect of rumination on any significant

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