Predicting moral decision-making with dark personalities and moral values

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ABSTRACT

We examined (N = 355; 250 women) how the Dark Tetrad traits (i.e., psychopathy, narcissism, Machiavellianism, and sadism) are associated with moral dilemmas and Moral Foundations. The Dark Triad traits were associated with utilitarian decision-making on moral dilemmas. Sadism did not provide incremental variance above the Dark Triad traits in accounting for responses to moral dilemmas. Consequently, we suggest that compromised moral values within dark personalities result in higher utilitarian decision-making. Men had darker personalities and were more utilitarian than women were, while women were more moral than men. Subsequently, men made more utilitarian decisions as compared to women, which may be a result of their darker personalities and lower concerns for moral values. Collectively, our results add to the discussion about the need to expand the Dark Triad to include sadism and the role of personality in understanding individual differences, morality, and moral decision-making.

1. Introduction

In the past decade, the study of dark personality traits has become important to researchers, psychologists, and philosophers. Of these traits, the Dark Triad of subclinical psychopathy, Machiavellianism, and subclinical narcissism (Paulhus & Williams, 2002) has garnered much attention. These distinct but overlapping traits are characterized by emotional instability (Arvan, 2013) and lower concerns for morality (Djeriouat & Trémolière, 2014; Jonason et al., 2015). Therefore, they have implications in decision-making involving moral repercussions.

While the Dark Triad traits have been studied considerably in recent times, sadism is another dark trait, which research has advocated adding to the cluster, thereby expanding it to a tetrad (Furnham, Richards, & Paulhus, 2013; Reidy, Zeichner, & Seibert, 2011). Sadism shares overlapping characteristics with the Dark Triad traits (Chabrol, van Leeuwen, Rodgers, & Séjourné, 2009), and sadists enjoy opportunities to be cruel and brutal, and are likely to hurt innocents (Baumeister & Campbell, 1999). Some studies, however, have issued caution against expanding the cluster to a tetrad (Bertl, Pietschnig, Tran, Stieger, & Voracek, 2017; Jonason, Zeigler-Hill, & Okan, 2017). In this study, we examine the interplay of dark personality and morality in predicting moral decision-making and test for the utility of including sadism in addition to the Dark Triad traits.

2. The current study

Diminished moral concerns of individuals high on the Dark Triad traits are often manifested in utilitarian decision-making on moral dilemmas (Djeriouat & Trémolière, 2014), such as the Trolley1 and the Footbridge2 dilemmas. Moral dilemmas typically entail two scenarios, in which some form of harm is going to occur, and the individual facing this dilemma has the choice to either let it happen or choose another option which is also harmful but results in overall greater good. The

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dilemmas are segregated into personal and impersonal (Greene, Sommerville, Nystrom, Darley, & Cohen, 2001) in which the latter have lower emotional valence, and individuals are more likely to agree to undertaking the task in impersonal dilemmas but not in personal ones. However, individuals high on dark traits may make utilitarian choices on both types of dilemmas because they are emotionally callous in nature (Bartels & Pizarro, 2011) and have less concern for safety (Djeriouat & Trémolière, 2014) even when they can distinguish between right and wrong (Cima, Tonnaer, & Hauser, 2010).

Moral judgements can be understood in the context of the five basic moral foundations (Graham et al., 2011, 2013; Graham & Haidt, 2011). Harm/care refers to the extent to which individuals exhibit care towards another. Fairness/reciprocity pertains virtues such as justice. Ingroup/loyalty is related to cooperating with the ingroup. Authority/respect is associated with valuing obedience, deference, and/or respect towards authority figures. Purity/sanctity refers to the feelings of disgust towards impure activities, people, or objects. Harm and Fairness are “individualizing” foundations, as they are associated with the protection of an individual’s rights (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009; van Leeuwen & Park, 2009). The remaining are “binding” foundations associated with group-binding values, rather than individual ones (Graham et al., 2009). In this study, we focus only on the higher-order moral foundations for reportorial economy and because we do not have cause to make distinct predictions for each of the five moral foundations.

Individuals high on dark traits typically exhibit lower concerns for individualizing foundations and some binding foundations (Djeriouat & Trémolière, 2014; Jonason et al., 2015). Therefore, utilitarian decision-making of dark personalities on moral dilemmas may be a result of their lower concern for moral values, as the content of these dilemmas encompasses the welfare of others or active or passive harm to others (Bartels & Pizarro, 2011). Therefore, we suggest that lower concerns for individualizing and binding foundations would mediate the relationship between the dark traits, and personal and impersonal moral dilemmas (H1a). Furthermore, subclinical sadism has been linked with defective moral functioning (Trémolière & Djeriouat, 2015). Sadists were willing to work towards hurting an innocent person, as opposed to individuals high on Dark Triad traits, who exhibited unprovoked aggression only when it was easy (Buckels, Jones, & Paulhus, 2013). Thus, individuals with higher sadistic propensities may choose to actively hurt individuals in moral dilemmas, thereby exhibiting a utilitarian-natured response. Therefore, we suggest that the addition of sadism to the Dark Triad cluster would predict utilitarian decision-making beyond the Dark Triad (H1b).

While utilitarian decision-making may be a result of interplay between dark traits and moral values, it may be influenced by sex differences as well. Men score higher on dark traits, whereas women score higher on the individualizing moral foundations (Jonason et al., 2015, Jonason, Zeigler-Hill et al., 2017). Because of their darker personalities, some men may make more utilitarian decisions. Consequently, we expect to replicate sex differences in the dark traits, morality, and moral-decision making (H2a) and expect that dark traits will mediate the relationship between sex and moral dilemmas (H2b).

The Dark Triad traits have previously been studied with moral foundations (e.g., Djeriouat & Trémolière, 2014; Jonason et al., 2015) but less research has examined the importance of including sadism and the relationships that dark traits and moral foundations have on moral decision-making jointly. Assessing actual decisions as opposed to self-reported morality may be important because individuals may act contrary to the foundations they endorse (Suhler & Churchland, 2011). Moral decision-making has sweeping implications for individuals and societies (Bartels & Pizarro, 2011) and, thus, accounting for variance in the decisions people make warrants serious investigation. In this study, we attempt to understand the role of personality and moral values in understanding moral-decision making in men and women.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

Three hundred and fifty-five participants (250 women, $M_{\text{age}} = 24.94$ years, $SD = 10.23$, range: 18–84) were recruited through online multiple-site entry, to provide generalizable findings (Reips, 2002). Data was collected through portals like Social Psychology Magazine, Webexperiment, and on social media groups. The sample included 32% Indian, 40% American, and 28% respondents of 34 other nationalities. Tick-box informed consent was obtained from the participants before participation in the study. All participants were asked to rate their English fluency on a scale of 1–5, and only the responses of those who rated themselves 4 or 5 were included. All participants were entered into a prize draw for an Amazon voucher worth USD 11.50.

3.2. Measures

3.2.1. Moral dilemmas

A subset of personal and impersonal moral dilemmas from Greene et al.’s (2001) study was chosen based on the mean emotional rating of each scenario as given by two raters (1 = extremely unpleasant; 5 = extremely pleasant; $M_{\text{personal moral}} = 1.50$, $SD_{\text{personal moral}} = 0$; $M_{\text{Impersonal moral}} = 2.25$, $SD_{\text{Impersonal moral}} = 0$). The inter-rater correlation for emotional valence of personal and impersonal dilemmas was 0.79. Four personal moral dilemmas (i.e., Vaccine Test, Footbridge, Crying Baby, and Lifeboat; $M = 1.60$, $SD = 1.13$), four impersonal moral dilemmas (i.e., Stock Tip, Standard Trolley, Resume, and Lost Wallet; $M = 1.33$, $SD = 0.81$), and two non-moral dilemmas (i.e., Scenic Route and Jogging; $M = 1.24$, $SD = 0.52$) were used (Koenigs et al., 2007). Participants indicated (yes/no) whether they would engage in the behaviour at the end of every dilemma. The scenarios were culturally neutral. Although each dilemma called for a dichotomous response, we summed them to conduct parametric tests that were insensitive to differences in dilemmas (Range = 0–4).

3.2.2. Moral foundations questionnaire

This was used in its 32-item format (Graham et al., 2011). First, participants assessed the relevance of the five foundations in deciding whether something was right or wrong on a 6-point Likert scale (0 = not at all relevant; 5 = extremely relevant). This part comprised items such as “Whether or not someone suffered emotionally” (i.e., Care), “Whether or not someone acted unfairly” (i.e., Fairness), “Whether or not someone showed a lack of loyalty” (i.e., Loyalty), “Whether or not someone showed a lack of respect for authority” (i.e., Authority), “Chastity is an important and valuable virtue” (i.e., Sanctity). The second part assessed moral judgments along the five foundations, on a 6-point Likert scale (0 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree). This consisted of items like “Compassion for those who are suffering is the most crucial virtue” (i.e., Care), “Justice is the most important requirement for a society” (i.e., Fairness), “I am proud of my country’s history” (i.e., Loyalty). “Respect for authority is something all children need to learn” (i.e., Authority), “I would call some acts wrong on the grounds that they are unnatural” (i.e., Sanctity). Cumulative scores were obtained for individualizing (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.78$; Range = 12–58) and binding ($\alpha = 0.86$; Range = 5–86) foundations, and only these higher-order dimensions were used in the final analyses.

3.2.3. Levenson self-report psychopathy scale

Psychopathy was measured using this scale in its 26-item, 4-point Likert scale format (1 = disagree strongly; 4 = agree strongly; Levenson, Kiehl, & Fitzpatrick, 1995). Items contained statements such as “I am often bored” and were cumulatively scored ($\alpha = 0.87$; Range = 29–91).

3 Results for the lower-order factors are available upon request.
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