The role of the Dark Triad traits and two constructs of emotional intelligence on loneliness in adolescents

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ABSTRACT

The social–emotional functions associated with the Dark Triad traits have recently been widely examined. However, no study has explored the relationship between the Dark Triad traits and loneliness in adolescents. The present study aimed to examine the direct and indirect contributions of the Dark Triad traits and both trait and ability emotional intelligence (i.e., EI) to feelings of loneliness in a Chinese adolescent sample ($N = 396$). Results indicated that both the latent Dark Triad factor and the three Dark Triad traits contributed to loneliness among adolescents. While narcissism was negatively related to loneliness, Machiavellianism and psychopathy were positively associated with loneliness. With regard to trait and ability EI, individuals high in Machiavellianism and psychopathy demonstrated significantly lower levels of trait EI, while those with high Machiavellianism showed greater deficits on ability EI. In contrast, narcissism was associated with impaired ability EI and higher trait EI. The EI associated with each Dark Triad trait could explain some variance of loneliness. The mediation analyses for each of the Dark Triad traits revealed that ability EI fully mediated the effect of Machiavellianism on loneliness, and trait EI partially mediated the effect of narcissism on loneliness.

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1. Introduction

The "Dark Triad" of traits, which consists of Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy, are considered to be socially aversive personalities (Kowalski, 2001). These three traits represent behavior tendencies toward deception, self-promotion, and aggressiveness (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Although the Dark Triad traits are linked by a common core of disagreeableness, they are distinct constructs (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Machiavellianism is characterized by manipulative behaviors, insincerity, and callousness (Christie & Geis, 1970). Those who score high on Machiavellianism tend to employ deception and manipulation for self-benefit (Jakobwitz & Egan, 2006). Narcissism is exhibited by an excessive love for one's self, a sense of superiority, attention-seeking behaviors, and exploitation in interpersonal relationships (Lee & Ashton, 2005). Psychopathy is characterized by impulsive, thrill-seeking behaviors combined with low empathy, remorse, and anxiety (Hare, 1985).

There has been growing debate on the adaptive value of the Dark Triad from an evolutionary perspective. According to life history theory, individuals with Dark Triad traits manifest a fast life strategy characterized by short-term thinking, little social support, disregard for social rules, and extensive risk-taking (Figueredo et al., 2006; Jonason, Koenig, & Tost, 2010a). These characteristics have been associated with several adaptive outcomes, such as greater reproductive returns and access to resources (Buss, 2009). For adults, the Dark Triad traits have been positively associated with number of sexual partners and more reproductive success (e.g., Jonason, Li, Webster, & Schmitt, 2009), as well as more promotion opportunities in organizational domains (Furnham, 2010; Spain, Harms, & Lebreton, 2013). For adolescents, prior research has documented that individuals with Dark Triad characteristics often achieve high peer status; although these adolescents tend to be vulgar, academically disengaged, and exhibit overt and relational aggression, they are viewed as leaders by their peers (e.g., Cillessen & Rose, 2005; De Bruyn & Cillessen, 2006).

Of course, different life history strategies are associated with different short-term and long-term cost-benefit trade-offs (Figueredo et al., 2006). Although Dark Triad traits have been shown to facilitate an exploitative, short-term mating strategy

via increased reproductive fitness (Jonason et al., 2009), they also create potential long-term costs of less secure relationships via the loss of mates to others (Jonason, Li, & Buss, 2010b). Similarly, high peer status may not protect adolescents from experiencing emotional pain, as those with Dark Triad characteristics tend to use social influence tactics (e.g., taking a "whatever-it-takes" approach) in order to gain popularity in peer groups (Jonason & Webster, 2012). Therefore, these individuals may have less secure relationships, regardless of their peer status. Given the significant social changes that take place during adolescence, it is no surprise that failure to successfully navigate these developmental changes increases their risk of experiencing loneliness, a consequence of social competence deficits (Heinrich & Gullone, 2006). Although a normative experience, loneliness has the potential to interfere with one's psychosocial functioning, mental health, and physical health, especially during adolescence (Heinrich & Gullone, 2006). Because adolescence may serve as an opportunity for interventions (Romeo & McEwen, 2006), it is important to identify risk factors for loneliness during this developmental period.

Characteristic theories of loneliness propose that personality traits could directly affect individuals' social relationships and effectiveness in alleviating loneliness through three possibilities: (1) reducing one's social attractiveness or desirability, (2) influencing one's own interactional behaviors, and (3) affecting one's reactions to actual changes in social relationships (Perlman & Peplau, 1982). Although no study has directly examined the role of the Dark Triad on loneliness among adolescents, a wide variety of negative social and emotional outcomes have been associated with the Dark Triad traits (e.g., Jonason et al., 2010b; Wai & Tiliopoulos, 2012). It is therefore plausible that higher scores on the Dark Triad traits are accompanied by more intense experiences of loneliness, though it is likely that mediator variables account for this relationship.

It is important to consider potential mechanisms by which the Dark Triad may contribute to loneliness. For example, deficits in processing emotional information necessary for effectively managing the social world, such as a lack of empathy, may be critical factors underlying these personality traits (Jonason, Lyons, Bethell, & Ross, 2013). Given the diverse indices of emotional intelligence (EI), which is defined as the ability to perceive emotions in one's self and in others (Brannick et al., 2009), it is no surprise that there has been mixed findings between EI and the Dark Triad traits in the extant literature. For example, those high on the Dark Triad traits have been shown to have broad emotional deficits (Jonason & Krause, 2013), while other studies have indicated that all three Dark Triad traits are associated with impairment in affective empathy but not cognitive empathy (Wai & Tiliopoulos, 2012). With regard to specific traits, previous research has demonstrated that individuals with higher scores on psychopathy pay less attention to their own emotions; they are less able to regulate their moods, and have difficulties repairing negative emotions. High Machiavellian individuals have been consistently found to possess low trait EI and empathy (Ali, Amorim, & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2009; Austin, Farrelly, Black, & Moore, 2007). In line with psychopathy and Machiavellianism, higher scores on narcissism have been correlated with lower levels of empathic concern and perspective-taking (Wai & Tiliopoulos, 2012). However, narcissism has also been positively associated with several other facets of trait EI, including assertiveness, happiness, optimism (Farwell & Wohlwend-Lloyd, 1998), and success in relationships (Campbell & Foster, 2007).

It is possible that differentiating trait EI from ability may clarify emotional abilities of the Dark Triad. Two schools characterize the current literatures on EI: ability model vs. mixed model (Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2000). Although many researchers advocate for the most promising field of ability EI model, there are still some

features of EI that have not been considered in this model. In addition, most items of the performance-based EI test represent performance in assumptive situations, not actual response (Mayer et al., 2000). Thus, Petrides and Furnham (2000) proposed a clear conceptual distinction between trait EI and ability EI as a compromised strategy. Trait EI refers to a constellation of behavioral dispositions and self-perceptions concerning one's ability to recognize, process, and utilize emotion-laden information; it is measured through self-report questionnaires. Ability EI refers to one's actual ability to recognize, process, and utilize emotion-laden information. It requires the use of maximum performance tests with correct and incorrect responses (Petrides, Frederickson, & Furnham, 2004). Both trait EI and ability EI may contribute to understanding the role of emotional abilities in social functioning from different levels. Based on prior studies, we expect that adolescents high on the Dark Triad traits have overall emotional dysfunction through trait and ability EI, except those with high narcissism traits due to their positive associations with some facets of trait EI.

Whereas personality theory emphasizes temperamentally driven dispositions, the conception of EI emphasizes acquired competencies that help people to regulate emotions and manage social interactions. Competencies and dispositions thus provide distinct and complementary perspectives for understanding social and emotional function (Lopes, Salovey, & Straus, 2003). Therefore, the current study was the first to examine both EI and the Dark Triad as predictors of adolescents' loneliness. We further expect that different associations of the three dark traits with trait and ability EI could alleviate or elevate adolescents' loneliness. Specifically, individuals with high Machiavellianism and psychopathy possessed low level of trait and ability EI, which was one explanation about their higher risk of loneliness during adolescent period. Even though narcissism as one of the Dark Triad may demonstrate emotional deficiency in performance-based EI, their positive correlation with trait EI was able to alleviate their loneliness to some extent.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

Three hundred ninety-six adolescents (172 boys and 199 girls, 25 with gender information missing) who ranged in age from 13 to 19 ($M = 15.82$, SD = 4.56) participated in the current study. After obtaining informed assent from the adolescent and informed consent from the adolescent's parent and teacher, adolescents completed the self-administered measures within 50 min in the following order: the Performance-based Emotional Intelligence Test, the Self-report Emotional Intelligence Scale, the Loneliness and Social Dissatisfaction Questionnaire, the Dark Triad questionnaires, and demographics. At the end of the study, each participant was given stationery set as a reward.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. EI measures
Ability EI. As an emotional intelligence performance measure, we administered the Chinese Youth Version of Mayer–Salovey–Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test (MSCEIT; Mayer, Salovey, Caruso, & Sitarenios, 2003) to assess adolescents' abilities of resolving emotion-laden problems, including emotional perception, emotional use, emotional understanding, and emotional management. We selected four tasks (42 items, one task for each factor) with relatively better reliability. We adopted expert scoring method, which relies on experts in emotional domain to indicate