Vengeance and the Dark Triad: The role of empathy and perspective taking in trait forgivingness

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ABSTRACT

Collectively referred to as the Dark Triad; Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy are subclinical personality traits that have been associated with a number of antisocial behaviours. The present study investigated the relation between each of these traits, vengefulness, empathy, and trait forgiveness. The sample consisted of 219 undergraduate students from Western University in Canada. It was found that Machiavellianism and psychopathy were positively correlated with emotional vengeance, but negatively correlated with justice-fairness and justice-legal decisions. Machiavellianism and psychopathy were also significantly negatively correlated with trait forgivingness, perspective taking, and empathic concern. Multiple regression analyses revealed that Machiavellianism, psychopathy, narcissism, and empathy added significantly to the prediction of trait forgivingness. Empathic concern and perspective taking were each found to partially mediate the relation between Machiavellianism and forgivingness, and between psychopathy and forgivingness. However, when both mediators were entered at once, only empathic concern significantly mediated the relation between Machiavellianism and forgivingness. The implications of these findings are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Personality research has experienced a great shift within the past decade. Traditionally, personality was conceptualized as a categorical construct; however this is beginning to change. Increasingly researchers are describing individual differences in personality along a continuum rather than in discrete categories. This paradigm shift has led to investigation into the previously unexplored area between pathological and normal. In particular, investigations of subclinical maladaptive personality have focused extensively on the "Dark Triad".

First cited by Paulhus and Williams (2002), the Dark Triad refers to a set of three distinct but related antisocial personality traits: *Machiavellianism*, *narcissism*, and *psychopathy*. Each of the Dark Triad traits is associated with feelings of superiority and privilege. This, coupled with a lack of remorse and empathy, often leads individuals high in these socially malevolent traits to exploit others for their own personal gain. In particular, individuals high in Machiavellianism tend to be manipulative and deceitful (Christie & Geis, 1970), while high psychopathy is characterized by impulsive, self-serving, and often harmful actions (Hare, 1985). An erroneously inflated self-view is indicative of narcissism and may explain why these individuals tend to focus largely on themselves (Raskin & Hall, 1981).

Numerous researchers have suggested that a lack of empathy is pivotal to the description of the Dark Triad (Jonason, Lyons, Bethell, & Ross, 2013), and may explain why these socially aversive traits co-occur with such high frequency. Broadly defined, empathy is the tendency to react to the experiences of others (Davis, 1980). Theorists have long speculated that empathy is not a unidimensional construct, but can be further divided into cognitive and emotional/affective empathy (Spencer, 1870). Cognitive empathy is described as the ability to recognize the emotional experiences of others without actually experiencing their emotional state. In contrast, emotional empathy reflects an immediate, involuntary emotional reaction to others' experiences (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2006; Smith, 1759).

The Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) was developed as a multidimensional measure of individual differences in empathy (Davis, 1980). The IRI consists of four subscales: *fantasy*, *perspective-taking*, *empathic concern*, and *personal distress*. The first two subscales assess the cognitive aspects of empathy, with fantasy focusing on the tendency to identify with fictitious characters (e.g., in books or movies) and perspective-taking assessing an

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individual's ability to adopt the point-of-view of other people. In contrast, emotional empathy is measured by empathic concern and personal distress, which assess the tendency of an individual to experience feelings of compassion and concern for others enduring negative experiences, and the tendency to experience distress while witnessing others' negative experiences, respectively.

Although it has been well established that each of the Dark Triad traits is negatively associated with global empathy (Barnett & Thompson, 1985; Watson, Grisham, Trotter, & Biderman, 1984), it was not until Wai and Tiliopoulos (2012) that the relation between the Dark Triad and cognitive and emotional empathy was investigated. These researchers found that Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy were each significantly negatively correlated with affective (or emotional) empathy, but showed only weak associations with cognitive empathy. Further research by Jonason and Krause (2013) showed that each of the Dark Triad traits was associated with unique emotional deficits in empathy and externally oriented thinking. Wai and Tiliopoulos (2012) speculated that the ability to identify and assess the emotional reactions of others, yet refrain from experiencing discomfort at their expense may allow for individuals high on the Dark Triad traits to manipulate others for their own personal gain.

It is evident that the socially malevolent traits that make up the Dark Triad are associated with significant impairments in an individual's ability to feel remorse and empathic concern for others. Interestingly, researchers have found that higher levels of empathy are associated with an increased tendency to forgive others (Macaskill, Maltby, & Day, 2002; Toussaint & Webb, 2005), yet relatively little research has been conducted on the relation between the Dark Triad and forgiveness. Of the few studies to-date, it has been reported that forgiveness of others was not directly related to narcissism (Strelan, 2007). Given that empathy seems to play a key role in forgiveness (Davis & Gold, 2011), and deficits in empathy are more prevalent among psychopathic and Machiavellian individuals than narcissists (Wai & Tiliopoulos, 2012), the lack of a significant association between narcissism and forgiveness is not surprising. Furthermore, the relation between psychopathy, Machiavellianism, empathy, and forgiveness warrants further attention.

2. Vengeance, forgiveness, and the role of empathy

Forgiveness is the ability to absolve transgressions committed against oneself. An inability to forgive, especially when the indiscretion evoked severe anger, can often be associated with a desire to get even or seek revenge (Ho, ForsterLee, ForsterLee, & Crofts, 2002). Vengeance is a personally motivated desire to punish another individual for his/her offence. Rather than attempting to restore equality, as is the goal of justice, vengeance is often sought to bring relief to the avenger (Ho et al., 2002).

Once again, few researchers have investigated the relation between the Dark Triad and vengeance. One study looked at the association between the Dark Triad traits and potential inhibitory factors on the likelihood of seeking revenge in romantic relationships (Rasmussen & Boon, 2014). However, empathy and forgiveness were not considered.

In a study of undergraduate students, vengeance was found to be positively correlated with narcissism, but this association was moderated by forgiveness (Brown, 2004). That is, at low levels of forgiveness, individuals who were high in narcissism were more vengeful. However, narcissism did not impact vengeance levels in individuals who were highly forgiving. In addition to providing evidence of a complex relation between socially aversive personality traits, forgiveness, and vengeance, Brown's (2004) findings offer evidence to dispel the common misconception that forgiveness

and vengeance are simply opposite constructs. Rather, it is clear that the two are in fact related, but distinct constructs.

3. Present study

Given that Machiavellianism and psychopathy are often regarded as the most maladaptive of the Dark Triad traits (Rauthman, 2012), their relative exclusion from the vengeance literature is surprising. There is clear evidence of an association between empathy, forgiveness, and vengeance (Brown, 2003). Given that a lack of empathy is such a defining feature of the Dark Triad, it is logical to expect that each of these antisocial personality traits will show interesting associations with a tendency to seek vengeance. In particular, Machiavellianism and psychopathy are expected to show positive associations with measures of vengeance and negative associations with justice. Any relations between narcissism, vengeance, and justice are expected to be weaker than those with the other Dark Triad traits.

In addition, researchers have found that in many instances the Dark Triad more adequately captures the full range of disagreeable personality traits compared to the conventional Five-Factor Model (Veselka, Schermer, & Vernon, 2012). As such, an investigation of the associations between vengeance, forgiveness, and the Dark Triad seems particularly fruitful.

4. Methods

4.1. Participants

The sample consisted of 219 undergraduate students from the University of Western Ontario (172 female, 46 male, and 1 unspecified). Participants ranged in age from 17 to 53 years ($M = 20.56$, $SD = 6.01$). Participants were recruited through an undergraduate psychology research pool and posters placed around campus. The study was administered online.

4.2. Measures and procedures

4.2.1. Short-D3

The Short-D3 (Jones & Paulhus, under revision) is a concise self-report measure of the Dark Triad. While the Short-D3 has undergone a number of revisions, the 28 item version was used in the present study. Items are measured on a five-point Likert scale, with higher scores reflecting a greater endorsement of maladaptive tendencies. Example items include "Make sure your plans benefit you, not others" (Machiavellianism), "I insist on getting the respect I deserve" (narcissism), and "I'll say anything to get what I want" (psychopathy). Jones and Paulhus (under revision) reported Cronbach alphas ranging from .73 to .80, indicating strong internal consistency.

4.2.2. Trait Forgivingness Scale (TFS)

The TFS (Berry, Worthington, O'Connor, Parrott, & Wade, 2005) assesses individual differences in the tendency to forgive interpersonal transgressions over time and across a variety of situations. The scale contains 10 self-reflective items, to which participants report their agreement on a five-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). An example item is, "I try to forgive others even when they don't feel guilty for what they did." In a series of validation studies, Berry, Worthington, O'Connor, Parrott, and Wade (2005) reported Cronbach alphas ranging from .74 to .80.

4.2.3. Justice-Vengeance Scale (JVS)

The JVS (Ho et al., 2002) is a 16 item self-report measure of attitudes towards justice and vengeance within a criminal context.