



# No empathy for people nor for God: The relationship between the Dark Triad, religiosity and empathy



Paweł Łowicki, Marcin Zajenkowski \*

Faculty of Psychology, University of Warsaw, Poland

## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 18 December 2015

Received in revised form 3 February 2016

Accepted 5 February 2016

Available online 11 February 2016

### Keywords:

Empathy

Religion

Dark Triad

Psychopathy

Machiavellianism

Narcissism

## ABSTRACT

Religiosity has been linked to low levels of antisocial personality traits. In the present study ( $N = 661$ ), we examined the relationship between various aspects of religious beliefs (general religiosity, intrinsic and extrinsic religious orientation), empathy, and the Dark Triad. We found that both empathy and general religiosity were negatively associated with psychopathy and Machiavellianism, and that religious beliefs were positively associated with empathy. Further analyses revealed that empathy partially mediated the inverse relation between dark traits and religious beliefs. These results were discussed in the context of recently emerging concepts suggesting that empathic skills and mentalization are crucial factors for religion. The capability to attribute mind to another being (human or supernatural) is argued to be an essential condition for developing religious beliefs as people usually think of deities as intentional agents with their own mental states. Additionally, the results indicated that psychopathy and Machiavellianism were negatively associated with intrinsic orientation, whereas grandiose and vulnerable narcissism were positively associated with extrinsic orientation.

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## 1. Introduction

Religiosity has been linked to various positive outcomes in psychological functioning including decreased aggression (Huesmann, Dubow, & Boxer, 2011), better health (Maltby et al., 2010), and greater subjective well-being (Ellison, 1991). Likewise, research indicates a positive correlation between religious beliefs and adaptive personality structure, such as higher agreeableness, conscientiousness, and lower psychoticism (e.g. Saroglou, 2002). In line with these results, there are findings concerning the less favorable personality traits, especially negative correlations between some aspects of religiosity and antisocial characteristics, such as the Dark Triad. The latter system has been introduced by Paulhus and Williams (2002) to describe three sub-clinical and non-pathological personality traits: narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism, which represent socially undesirable characteristics of grandiosity, callousness, and tendency to manipulate other people. These traits are generally inversely related to various aspects of religious beliefs (Aghababaei, Mohammadtabar, & Saffarinia, 2014; Kämmerle, Unterrainer, Dahmen-Wassenberg, Fink, & Kapfhammer, 2014).

### 1.1. Religiosity, the Dark Triad and empathy

Although previous studies have shed some light on a possible link between the Dark Triad traits and religiosity, none of them has

attempted to search for possible mechanisms underlying the observed association. In the current study, we looked for factors that may potentially explain the inverse relationship. Recent data suggest that the Dark Triad and religious beliefs may be related to the same psychological phenomena. It is widely suggested that deficits in empathy or mentalizing abilities (to perceive and attribute mind to other beings) are core aspects of dark personality traits (Jonason & Krause, 2013; Jonason & Kroll, 2015). Moreover, high levels of such skills seem to be crucial for religious beliefs (Gervais, 2013; Norenzayan, Gervais, & Trzesniewski, 2012). Specifically, the capability to attribute mind to another being (human or supernatural) is argued to be an essential condition for developing religious beliefs as people usually think of deities as intentional agents with their own mental states (Gervais, 2013). This concept is supported by empirical evidence showing that religiosity correlates positively with empathy and mentalizing ability (Gervais, 2013; Willard & Norenzayan, 2013). Further, autistic individuals are less likely to believe in a personal God because of their poorer mentalizing skills (Norenzayan et al., 2012). In light of these findings, we decided to examine whether differences in empathy might be responsible for the negative relation between the Dark Triad and religious beliefs.

### 1.2. The Dark Triad and specific aspects of religiosity

Even though general religious beliefs demonstrate positive correlates with socially desirable traits and negative correlates with antisocial personality, the results may require a more nuanced interpretation when one considers various aspects of religious experience. An important

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [zajenkowski@psych.uw.edu.pl](mailto:zajenkowski@psych.uw.edu.pl) (M. Zajenkowski).

distinction has been made between intrinsic and extrinsic religious orientation (RO) by Allport and Ross (1967). Intrinsically religious individuals treat religion as an end in itself, whereas those extrinsically motivated use their religious beliefs as means to achieve other goals. Both religious orientations can be seen as motivational constructs; however, they represent different role which religious beliefs occupy in one's life. Within intrinsic RO religion is regarded as a 'master motive' in the individual's hierarchy, whereas extrinsic RO assumes more peripheral role of religion, important only when it can bring some benefits to a believer (Allport & Ross, 1967). Intrinsic RO is usually strongly positively related to other measures of religious commitment (e.g. general beliefs, religious practice and participation), while extrinsic RO in the same context shows modest positive and sometimes even negative associations (Maltby, Lewis, & Day, 1999; Paek, 2006). Similarly, these two attitudes are associated with different psychological outcomes. Intrinsic RO demonstrates positive, desirable correlates, whereas extrinsic RO is, in general, connected to personal difficulties and distress (Wiebe & Fleck, 1980). The one study that took into consideration the Dark Triad and both religious orientations revealed a negative link between intrinsicness and the dark traits (Aghababaei et al., 2014). In the case of extrinsic attitude, though, the data are rather equivocal. For instance, Machiavellianism showed a negative association with the extrinsic – personal RO sub-dimension (e.g. 'What religion offers me most is comfort in times of trouble and sorrow'), but was positively connected to the extrinsic – social RO subscale (e.g. 'I go to the mosque or religious community mainly because I enjoy seeing people I know there'; Aghababaei et al., 2014). Higher psychopathy was also related to a lower extrinsic – personal tendency, but was not connected to the social extrinsicness (Aghababaei et al., 2014).

Moreover, there is certain evidence that religious/spiritual well-being (RSWB), defined as 'the ability to experience and integrate meaning and purpose in existence through a connectedness with self, others or a power greater than oneself' (Unterrainer, Ladenhauf, Wallner-Liebmann, & Fink, 2011; p. 14) correlates negatively with psychopathy and Machiavellianism (Kämmerle et al., 2014). Narcissism demonstrates an insignificant yet positive association with RSWB. This result may stem from narcissistic tendency to seek self-enhancement (Kämmerle et al., 2014). However, it is also possible that a narcissistic inclination may vary more strongly among believers as some researchers have discovered that only intrinsic religiosity relates inversely to narcissism (Watson, Jones, & Morris, 2004). Altogether, these results indicate that the relation between socially averse personality traits and religious beliefs may be complicated and may require further exploration.

### 1.3. The current study

We examined the relationship between various aspects of religious beliefs (general religiosity, intrinsic and extrinsic RO), empathy and the Dark Triad. In the case of the latter, we decided to include two types of narcissism – grandiose and vulnerable – as many researchers emphasize that although these constructs share some basic phenomena (sense of entitlement, disregard of others), they also differ in many other aspects (Miller et al., 2011). Grandiose narcissism is characterized by an inflated positive self-image and high self-esteem, whereas vulnerable narcissism is characterized by high hypersensitivity, vulnerability, and low self-esteem (Miller et al., 2011). It would be interesting to see how these two forms of narcissism relate to religion. Given all the research cited above, one can hypothesize that a general level of religious beliefs as well as intrinsic RO should be negatively correlated with psychopathy, Machiavellianism and narcissism. Furthermore, it might be expected that greater empathy would be linked to lower levels of the Dark Triad and greater declared religious beliefs. Possibly, empathy may also mediate the relationship between religious beliefs and a less favorable personality structure.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

The online study was completed by 661 volunteer participants (530 female, 131 male) recruited via publicly accessible social networking websites. They were native Polish and their mean age was 22.05 ( $SD = 3.07$ , range 18–52). A total of 432 individuals (65.4%) declared themselves as affiliated with certain religions, as opposed to 229 who were not so affiliated (34.6%). The structure of the affiliated group with regard to denomination was as follows: Roman Catholics (86.8%); Protestants (3%); other Christian believers (4.9%); Buddhists (4.4%); Others (0.9%). Only participants who determined their religious membership were asked to complete an additional measure of religiosity in accordance with the Religious Orientation Scale, which asks participants about their experiences related to a specific denomination (e.g. attending church, praying).

### 2.2. Measures<sup>1</sup>

#### 2.2.1. General religiosity

To measure the level of declared religious beliefs, we used a Polish version of the questionnaire compiled by Willard and Norenzayan (2013) that consisted of 3 items ('I believe in God'; 'I believe in a divine being who is involved in my life'; 'There is no god or higher power in the universe') with an 8-point Likert response scale (from 1 – 'Completely disagree' to 8 – 'Completely agree'). The measure is intended to capture general attitude towards religion regardless of religious affiliation. It presents a high level of overall internal consistency, and has proven good construct validity (Willard & Norenzayan, 2013).

#### 2.2.2. The Dark Triad

The Dirty Dozen by Jonason and Webster (2010) is a 12-item scale assessing grandiose narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism. In this study, a Polish translation of the Dirty Dozen by Jonason, Li & Czarna (2013) with a 5-point rating scale (from 1 – 'Extremely untrue for me' to 5 – 'Extremely true for me') was applied.

#### 2.2.3. Vulnerable narcissism

We used the Hypersensitive Narcissism Scale (HSNS) by Hendin and Cheek (1997) as translated into Polish by Czarna, Dufner, and Clifton (2014) to evaluate vulnerable narcissism. The measure consisted of 10 items with a 5-point Likert scale for each item (from 1 – 'Completely disagree' to 5 – 'Completely agree').

#### 2.2.4. Empathy

The measure of empathy was based on our translation of 8 items (e.g. 'I feel others' emotions'; 'I anticipate the needs of others') similar to those by Cloninger, Przybeck, Svrakic, and Wetzel (1994) obtained via the International Personality Item Pool by Goldberg et al. (2006). Participants responded using a 5-point Likert scale (from 1 – 'Completely disagree' to 5 – 'Completely agree'). The measure captured general empathic tendency and concern.

#### 2.2.5. Religious orientations

The Religious Orientation Scale (ROS; Allport & Ross, 1967) as adapted into Polish by Socha (1999) was used to assess intrinsic religious orientation in which religion is seen as an end in itself (e.g. 'I try hard to carry my religion over into all my other dealings in life'; 'I read literature about my faith or church'), and extrinsic religious orientation which treats religion as means to other aims (e.g. 'The primary purpose of prayer is to gain relief and protection'; 'The church is most important as a place to formulate good social relationships').

<sup>1</sup> Additionally, Ten Items Personality Inventory has been used to assess the Big Five, however it was not included to the final analyses.

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