



Dark side of impulsivity – Associations between the Dark Triad, self-report and behavioral measures of impulsivity



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 5 January 2015

Received in revised form 7 September 2015

Accepted 11 September 2015

Available online 22 September 2015

Keywords:

Dark Triad

Impulsivity

Self-report measures

Behavioral measures

ABSTRACT

Associations between the Dark Triad (psychopathy, narcissism, and Machiavellianism) with two self-report personality measures (i.e., BIS-11 and I₇) and two behavioral tasks (i.e., Stop-Signal task and Delay-Discounting task) of impulsivity in 298 healthy adult volunteers were examined. The strong correlations between psychopathy, narcissism, and self-report measures of impulsivity were reported. Moreover, the variables of the Dark Triad mentioned above have shown weak correlations with behavioral tasks of impulsivity. Contrary, Machiavellianism was unrelated to either type of impulsivity assessment. When testing the association between the self-report and behavioral measures of impulsivity, analysis revealed only two significant correlations. There was a positive correlation between Motor Impulsivity of the BIS-11 and stop-reaction time on the Stop-Signal task, and the Impulsivity scale from I₇ was negatively related to the AUC value from Delay-Discounting task. Reliably, these results support other recent findings suggesting that self-report and behavioral tasks probably measure different constructs, perhaps unrelated components of impulsive behavior.

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1. Introduction

Considering the possibility that individuals might have a dispositional tendency to show impulsive behavior bears considering the traits of the Dark Triad (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). The Dark Triad, comprising of psychopathy, narcissism, and Machiavellianism, represents a set of three distinct, but related subclinical maladaptive and socially aversive personality characteristics. Psychopathy is defined by high callousness, thrill-seeking, interpersonal antagonism and manipulation, and by low empathy, remorse, and anxiety (Hare & Neumann, 2008). Individuals with a high degree of Narcissism focus largely on themselves and are characterized by self-absorption, dominance, and feelings of entitlement (Emmons, 1987). Machiavellianism is characterized by self-interest and the tendency toward deception, manipulation and the exploitation of others (Christie & Geis, 1970).

1.1. Impulsivity

The construct of “impulsivity” has been defined as an inability to inhibit inappropriate behaviors, to wait and to act with forethought (e.g., Barratt & Patton, 1983; Eysenck, Pearson, Easting, & Allsopp, 1985). Impulsivity encompasses a range of maladaptive characteristics that are often linked to constructs studied in the field of psychopathology, such

as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD; e.g., Barkley, 1997) and substance abuse (e.g., deWit, 2008). In order to assess behaviors that are considered impulsive, a variety of measurement methods have been developed. These methods can be categorized as (1) self-report questionnaires, that assess an individual's self-perception of their own behaviors across a variety of contexts, and (2) laboratory behavioral tasks, which assess specific behavioral processes (Reynolds, Ortengren, Richards, & de Wit, 2006; Reynolds, Richards, Horn, & Karraker, 2004).

Moreover, previous research tried to identify different dimensions of impulsive behavior that has differed across two methods of impulsivity assessment – self-report and laboratory behavioral methods. For example, there has been considerable research to explore discrete categories of impulsivity using self-report procedures, which usually results in as few as three (e.g., impulsiveness, empathy, venturesomeness; Eysenck, Daum, Schugens, & Diehl, 1990), or as many as six different subfactors of impulsive behavior (e.g., motor impulsivity, attention, self-control, cognitive complexity, perseverance, cognitive instability; Barratt & Patton, 1983). On the other hand, research using laboratory behavioral measures of impulsivity identified two subfactors: “impulsive disinhibition” (in which individuals were expected to inhibit motor behaviors; measures like the Stop-Signal task; Logan, Schachar, & Tannock, 1997) and “impulsive decision-making” (measures that involved participants making decisions about delayed versus immediate outcomes, i.e., Delay-Discounting task; Reynolds et al., 2006).

Finally, both self-report and laboratory behavioral measurement methods of impulsivity have been studied extensively in their own research context. However, some recent studies indicate that self-report

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and behavioral assessments are not, or are only weakly correlated (e.g., Lane, Cherek, Rhodes, Pietras, & Techeremissine, 2003; Reynolds et al., 2004, 2006). Consequently, these findings indicate that the tendency for impulsive behaviors assessed by laboratory behavioral procedures may not be the same as those detected by self-report assessments.

1.2. Dark Triad and impulsivity

Two “dark” personality traits linked to impulsivity are narcissism (Raskin & Hall, 1981) and psychopathy (Jakobwitz & Egan, 2006). Given the differential pattern of associations with the self-reported impulsivity, Jones and Paulhus (2011) showed that narcissism was correlated with functional impulsivity whereas psychopathy was most closely associated with dysfunctional impulsivity. Crysel, Crosier, and Webster (2013) concluded that self-reported impulsivity moderately correlated with the Dark Triad Dirty Dozen composite and its three subscales of psychopathy, narcissism, and Machiavellianism. On the other hand, the association between Machiavellianism and self-reported impulsivity was inconsistent, with one sample showing a weak positive correlation (Crysel et al., 2013) and the other showing no significant relation (Jones & Paulhus, 2011). The lack of associations indicates that, although Machiavellians have no *better* impulse control than non-Machiavellians, they certainly have the advantage over narcissists and psychopaths. Machiavellians are manipulators who possess (at least) a modicum of self-control. Their moderate impulse control allows Machiavellians to refrain from counterproductive behaviors despite their selfish intentions (Jonason & Tost, 2010; Jones & Paulhus, 2011).

Furthermore, in case of behaviorally assessed impulsivity, the narcissism component of the Dark Triad was positively related to steeper delay discounting (Crysel et al., 2013). Delay (temporal) discounting is recognized as a possible mechanism of impulsive behavior (for a review, see Madden & Bickel, 2010). Discounting refers to decrease of the subjective value of money or another reward as a delay to its receipt increases. Specifically, if someone chooses a smaller sooner reward over a larger but more delayed reward, this behavior is termed impulsive, whereas if someone forgoes a smaller sooner reward to receive a larger later reward, this behavior is termed self-controlled (Reynolds et al., 2004). Thus, people with a high level of narcissism preferred less money immediately to more money later (Crysel et al., 2013). Also, a marginally significant positive correlation also appeared for psychopathy and temporal discounting. These results suggest that the relationship between delay discounting may be driven by narcissism and, to a lesser degree, by psychopathy. However, Machiavellianism was not significantly associated with steeper temporal discounting (Crysel et al., 2013). Despite the study linking the Dark Triad with steeper discounting rate of delayed outcomes, there is no systematic research linking the behavioral inhibition of impulsivity to the Dark Triad.

One limitation of previous Dark Triad research on impulsivity is that typically, various measures of impulsivity have not been simultaneously administered. Instead, most studies have relied on a single measure. No studies have explicitly combined self-report approaches with behaviorally-based approaches of impulsivity. Consequently, the relations among self-report and behavioral measures of impulsivity together with the Dark Triad concept are not well understood. This kind of focused approach does not allow for comparisons between different impulsivity tasks and the “dark” personality, and as a result, provides an incomplete view of impulsive characteristics. To date, the most comprehensive study on both self-reported and behavioral impulsivity and their associations with the Dark Triad (Crysel et al., 2013) used only a brief measure of the Dark Triad (i.e., Dirty Dozen scale; Jonason & Webster, 2010). Unfortunately, the scale appears to be too short, containing only four items per each construct measured by the Dark Triad. As a result, the instrument has been criticized in several recent reports (Lee et al., 2013; Miller et al., 2012).

1.3. Hypothesis

Consistent with the findings of Crysel et al. (2013), we expected to find significant strong positive associations between the self-reported impulsivity and the Dark Triad traits of narcissism and psychopathy (*Hypothesis 1*), and a weaker positive correlation between behavioral impulsivity and narcissism and psychopathy (*Hypothesis 2*). Whereas, Machiavellianism may be slightly correlated with self-reported measures of impulsivity (*Hypothesis 3*). There are also conceptual reasons to subdivide into separate components of impulsivity self-report and behavioral measure methods that are thought to represent different underlying processes. Several other previous studies demonstrated that self-report measures of the trait of impulsivity were not related to performance on the behavioral tasks (e.g., Lane et al., 2003; Reynolds et al., 2004, 2006). Consequently, we predicted that the association between impulsivity measured by self-report and behavioral tasks will be weakly correlated or not correlated significantly (*Hypothesis 4*).

2. Methodology

The study was designed and conducted using a within-subjects design, with each participant exposed to all of the conditions. Research participation involved the completion of the three Dark Triad inventories, two personality measures of impulsivity (Barratt Impulsiveness Scale-11 and I₇), and two behavioral tasks of impulsivity containing a measure of behavioral inhibition (Stop-Signal task) and a delay-of-reward task (see below). The order of the tasks was counterbalanced across individuals. Data were collected in an online study administered via a tool for online surveys: www.soscsurvey.de. We ran the experiment using WebExp (Keller, 1999), a software package for running psychological experiments online. WebExp is implemented in Java and uses a client-server architecture which gives the experimenter maximal control over stimulus presentation and collection of responses. A strong point is WebExp's timing component, which includes both the timing of the presentation of stimulus, and the measurement of response times. The web-based data collected previously in several experiments provided a close match with the data collected under controlled laboratory conditions (Keller, Gunasekharan, Mayo, & Corley, 2009).

2.1. Participants and procedure

298 German university students participated in the experiment (138 men and 160 women, ranging in age from 18 to 29 years, $M = 21.8$, $SD = 1.52$). Individuals were recruited from a volunteer database. Inclusion criteria included being over 18-years-old, and having no history of psychological illness. All participants provided informed consent after the nature of the study had been explained to them.

2.2. Materials

2.2.1. Dark Triad measures

Psychopathy was assessed with a 30-item version of the Self-Report Psychopathy Scale-III (Williams, Nathanson, & Paulhus, 2003; authors' own translation to German). Answers were given on a five-point Likert-type scale (from 0 = *not at all like me* to 4 = *totally like me*; Cronbach's $\alpha = .93$). Narcissism was measured with the 17-item Narcissistic Personality Inventory (German version by von Collani, 2008) with a five-point Likert-type scale (from 0 = *not at all like me* to 4 = *totally like me*; Cronbach's $\alpha = .85$). Machiavellianism was assessed with an 18-item scale (German version by Henning & Six, 2008). Answer format was a six-point Likert-type scale (from 0 = *not at all like me* to 5 = *totally like me*; Cronbach's $\alpha = .76$).

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