



Psychopathic personality traits predict competitive wins and cooperative losses in negotiation



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ABSTRACT

Corporate corruption has recently called attention to the relevance of psychopathic personality traits—the absence of conscience, remorse, or scruples—in business settings; yet, little is known about how these personality traits affect business practices. We present two studies testing whether psychopathic personality traits are related to social perspective and cognitive decision-making biases relevant to negotiation, and whether those traits affect outcomes in a negotiation simulation. Psychopathic personality features were associated with a competitive world-view, including selfish social motivations and illusions of conflict with others. In mixed-motive negotiations, psychopathic traits predicted greater personal monetary gains when success favored competitive actions, but predicted monetary loss when success depended on cooperation. Results suggest that psychopathic personality traits can both bolster and hinder success in business.

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1. Introduction

In an effort to understand individuals who engage in unethical, antisocial (sometimes illegal) business practices, the fields of forensic psychology and organizational behavior have begun a scientific conversation (Babiak, 1995). The topic of this conversation is the role of the psychopathic personality, which has long needed to be taken out of the prison and into the boardroom (Smith & Lilienfeld, 2013). Individuals possessing psychopathic tendencies fall on a spectrum and are present not only in clinical and criminal populations, but also in society more generally. Those with high levels of psychopathy are characterized by empathic deficits, a manipulative interpersonal style, and impulsive behavior, and there is increasing recognition of the relevance of this construct in the world of business, along with the related personality characteristics of Machiavellianism—master manipulators who seek power over others—and narcissism—entitled egomaniacs convinced of their superiority—together, forming the Dark Triad (Babiak, Neumann, & Hare, 2010; Paulhus & Williams, 2002). It has been proposed that the cutthroat world of business is an environment in which some psychopathic personality traits (e.g., callousness, fearlessness) might breed success (Mullins-Sweatt, Glover, Derefinco, Miller, & Widiger, 2010).

Success in business may be achieved by those with psychopathic personality traits, who experience little remorse at using deception, exploitation, and ambiguously dishonest or immoral behavior to reach their goals—normally discouraged, these tactics are overlooked if not rewarded in contexts such as Wall Street, Madison Avenue, and Silicon Valley (Boddy, 2006). Emerging research finds that individuals with psychopathic personality traits use their charisma and charm to attain management roles despite their poor performance reviews, where evidence suggests they bully subordinates and may perpetrate vast amounts of organizational misbehavior (Boddy, 2006; Mathieu, Neumann, Hare, & Babiak, 2014). Here, we examine how psychopathic personality traits may influence the outcome of business-related negotiations.

1.1. Negotiation: a primer

Negotiating with a competitor, supplier, or partner is a delicate process through which the two parties seek to maximize value (Bazerman, Curhan, Moore, & Valley, 2000; Thompson, 1990). While monetary value is often the focus of novice negotiators, a successful negotiation can also confer social benefits; exercising fairness and concern for one's partner in a negotiation can foster current and future deals, and a positive business relationship, while selfishness can destroy future value (Ganesan, 1994). Negotiations are complex problem-solving endeavors. Parties are likely to have different, sometimes opposing, interest in multiple issues

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that may be combined, traded off, or taken off the table completely. In all negotiations, the challenge is to communicate one's interests clearly and realize the optimal solution, which maximizes value for both parties (e.g., Weingart, Bennett, & Brett, 1993).

In negotiation parlance, to-be-resolved issues tend to fall into three classes: “compatible,” “integrative,” or “distributive.” Compatible issues occur when both parties desire the same outcome; in this instance, no compromise is necessary and both parties can achieve their preferred outcome simultaneously. The challenge of resolving compatible issues is in recognizing that interests are aligned. Since most individuals enter negotiations with the expectation that compromise will be necessary, compatibility sometimes remains uncovered and both parties compromise unnecessarily—leaving value “on the table”. Consistent with that expectation, however, are distributive issues on which negotiation partners seek the exact opposite outcomes. Distributive issues are zero sum; in this instance, the optimal solution is to split the difference—reaching a fair compromise that engenders trust in the relationship. Finally, where partners have different priorities on multiple issues, it is possible to find an integrative solution. That is, one party may give up some value on one issue, in return for value on another, greater priority issue, and vice versa. The optimal solution for two or more integrative issues is to give and take according to one's priorities such that maximum value is extracted and evenly split between the parties (Pruitt, 1981). Overcoming false expectations, sharing information freely and proposing creative multi-issue compromises, are challenges not easily overcome, but may be particularly difficult for those with psychopathic personality features. Indeed, recognizing the importance of preserving social value in negotiations is a concept that may be lost on the more callous and manipulative among us.

1.2. Psychopathy and competition in negotiation

Optimal negotiation outcomes require that both parties value the relationship and seek to cooperate to find a shared-value solution. Psychopathic personality traits, however, are better correlated with the selfish manipulation of others, callousness, and impulsive behavior (Hare, 2006). Indeed, Curry, Chesters, and Viding (2011) found that psychopathic personality traits were associated with offering less money in an ultimatum game. Where offering half of the money to the partner is considered fair in this context, those possessing psychopathic personality features offered less than that amount to their anonymous partner. In addition to a disregard for norms of fairness, psychopathic personality traits are associated with a competitive, or even predatory, approach to interpersonal interactions (Porter & Woodworth, 2007; Ross & Rausch, 2001), and an expectation that others will approach social interactions in the same way (Mahaffey & Marcus, 2006). Further, individuals with psychopathic personality features see others as highly vulnerable to manipulation and instrumental victimization—as pawns to be used in pursuit of their own goals (Black, Woodworth, & Porter, 2014). These interpersonal dispositions further suggest that they may be competitive and selfish negotiators (see also Dual Concern Theory; Pruitt & Rubin, 1986). Competitive negotiators are likely to be distrustful of others and exchange less information regarding their interests, choosing instead to keep their cards close to their chest (Tjosvold, 1997). As a result, both parties are less informed and optimal solutions may not be realized. In particular, this strategy is detrimental to integrative negotiations where an open exchange of information about preferences and priorities is necessary to reveal the optimal outcome (e.g., Weingart et al., 1993).

1.3. The present study

Study 1 examined the hypothesis that individuals with high levels of psychopathic traits will endorse selfish (“proself”, not “prosocial”) social motivations. Further, we expected that psychopathic traits would be positively related to illusions of competition, including beliefs that others are likely to hold goals and perspectives that oppose their own, and that issues up for negotiation are likely to be distributive (i.e., zero sum) in nature. We expected that such robust illusions of competition would influence the outcome of negotiations involving individuals with psychopathic tendencies. Study 2 examined the impact of psychopathic personality traits in an actual negotiation, with the expectation that a competitive world-view, coupled with the disinterest in social relationships and lack of empathy, would enhance personal monetary achievements in competitive, but not cooperative situations. Specifically, we predicted that psychopathic personality features would be associated with personal success in distributive bargaining, allowing them to take home a larger piece of the pie than their partner, without regard for cooperative fairness. While it was unclear how psychopathic personality traits might affect compatible bargaining, we predicted that individuals with psychopathic personality features would be poor integrative bargainers. We hypothesized that psychopathic personality traits would result in less personal gain on integrative issues as a result of behaving selfishly on a task which requires trust, communication, cooperation, and compromise. Indeed, this selfish and competitive approach was expected to have a negative impact on the dyad more generally, decreasing the total value that the dyad would be able to extract from integrative bargaining, and overall.

2. Study 1

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Participants

One hundred and forty-nine (74 male, 75 female) participants with a mean age of 34.73 ($SD = 12.02$; range: 18–70) years completed an online survey in return for \$2 USD. Subjects were required to be at least 18 years of age and located in the United States, and were recruited using Amazon's Mechanical Turk. Although no further demographics were gathered for this sample, research suggests that the median American on Mechanical Turk has a Bachelors degree, earns an income of \$40,000–60,000 annually, and participates in online research out of intrinsic interest and as a source of secondary income (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011; Ipeirotis, 2010). Ethical approval was received from an independent review board for this study.

2.1.2. Materials

Psychopathy was measured using the Dirty Dozen (Jonason & Webster, 2010), a 12-item measure that provides scores for each of the Dark Triad traits: psychopathy, Machiavellianism, and narcissism. Psychopathic personality traits were measured on 9-point Likert scale responses (1 – strongly disagree to 9 – strongly agree) to the following questions: I tend to lack remorse, I tend to be unconcerned with the morality of my actions, I tend to be callous or insensitive, and I tend to be cynical. The measure was created by choosing items from longer, well-validated measures of each of the Dark Triad traits. It effectively quantifies levels of psychopathy, Machiavellianism and narcissism, as found in community and student populations, and each subscale has shown good reliability ($\alpha = .63-.79$), and convergent and divergent validity in previous research (Jonason & Luévano, 2013; Jonason & Webster, 2010). In particular, subscales have been shown to differentially predict self-reported aggression and mating preferences (Jonason, Valentine, Li, & Harbeson, 2011; Jonason & Webster, 2010). In the present sample,

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