The role of the dark triad in perceptions of academic incivility

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ABSTRACT

Academic incivility is defined as behavior incongruent with the welfare of the classroom community and may take a number of forms and levels of intensity. This study seeks to determine the relationship between the Dark Triad personalities (Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy) and perceptions of appropriateness and frequency of academic incivilities. A sample of 519 university students indicated the degree to which each of 20 uncivil academic behaviors was perceived appropriate and how often students perceived those behaviors in the classroom. Factor analysis of the academic incivilities produced six factors: Low Class Engagement, Poor Class Presence, Student Retaliation, Cheating, Class Disruption, and Attempted Domination. Hierarchical linear regression analysis showed that Machiavellianism, and to a lesser extent, narcissism, predicted both perceptions that academic incivilities were appropriate and the frequency of observations of incivilities. Psychopathy had no relationship with either perceptions of appropriateness or frequency of observation.

1. Introduction

Colleges are feeling the deleterious effects of incivility, as disrespectful, rude and disruptive classroom behaviors are on the rise (e.g., Boice, 1996; Bjorklund & Rehling, 2010; Rawlins, 2017). Although research into academic incivility has increased recently, the majority of study has focused on its effects, with relatively little empirical study devoted to the causes. The personalities of the Dark Triad are predisposed to engage in exploitative interpersonal behavior (Jones & Paulhus, 2017), and we propose that the aversive personalities are associated with perceptions and recognition of uncivil academic behaviors. Therefore, the goal of the present research is to empirically examine this connection.

2. Academic incivility

Academic incivility is defined as behavior "contrary to the well-being of the classroom community, including behaviors that distract the instructor or other students, disrupt classroom learning, discourage the instructor from teaching, discourage other students from participating, and derail the instructor's goals for the period" (Bjorklund & Rehling, 2010, p. 75). These behaviors can be categorized on a spectrum of intensity as follows (Burke, Karl, Peluchette, & Evans, 2014).

First, the most frequently occurring types of incivility are low intensity annoyances and irritating behaviors (Burke et al., 2014).

Annoyances include matters of etiquette or decorum such as reading a newspaper or sleeping during class and wearing inappropriate clothing. Irritating behaviors include coming to class late or leaving early and texting during class.

Second, moderately intense incivilities are terrorism in the classroom, challenging behaviors, and practicality challenges (Burke et al., 2014). Terrorism in the classroom includes attempts to dominate the instructor's class time, intolerance of others' views, and complaining about the class and grades. Challenging behaviors include student challenges of the evaluation process, grades, the implicit and explicit course norms, and the teacher's expertise. Practicality challenges include student challenges of the relevancy of class assignments or even the course as a whole.

Finally, the highest intensity incivilities are bullying, threats, intimidation, harassment, and assaults (Burke et al., 2014). Although less frequent than other types of academic incivilities, these severe types of uncivil behavior can have a considerable impact on an entire class (Boice, 1996).

3. The dark triad

The Dark Triad is comprised of three overlapping, though distinct, socially aversive personalities: Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and narcissism (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Defining characteristics of individuals high in Machiavellianism are deceit and strategic

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Table 1
Perceptions of uncivil classroom behaviors.

	Is this behavior appropriate? (%)				How often do you observe this behavior? (%)			
	Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Always	Never	Seldom	Occasionally	Often
1. Sleeping in class	79	19	2	0	34	42	20	4
2. Acting bored or disinterested	32	44	22	2	8	17	31	45
3. Not attending class	22	48	28	2	11	21	18	50
4. Challenging instructor	28	35	31	6	37	51	9	3
5. Dominating class discussion	22	39	35	4	27	49	20	4
6. Not taking notes in lecture	8	23	54	15	6	16	31	48
7. Disapproving groans & sighs	78	18	3	1	44	38	13	5
8. Intimidating instructor/students	94	4	1	1	78	17	4	2
9. Unwarranted complaining	58	27	13	5	73	22	3	2
10. Punitive teaching evaluations	28	34	34	5	34	43	16	7
11. Cheating on exams	92	6	2	0	52	34	9	14
12. Using cell phones in class	14	38	43	5	4	12	24	60
13. Computers for non-class activities	25	40	28	7	52	13	18	64
14. Side conversations in class	39	46	13	2	9	27	29	34
15. Not participating	28	40	28	4	11	25	27	37
16. Plagiarizing	92	7	1	1	54	30	10	6
17. Unprepared for class	44	42	12	2	16	33	27	23
18. Make unreasonable demands	42	39	16	3	32	42	17	9
19. Late to class/leave early	24	48	25	3	15	30	33	22
20. Leaving class for calls, etc.	16	33	43	9	25	49	16	9

Note. $N = 519$.

manipulation to achieve personal gain (Christie & Geis, 1970), as well as duplicity, externalization of blame, and emotional coldness (Fehr, Samson, & Paulhus, 1992). Machiavellians are generally considered ego-centric, cold, exploitative, pragmatic, and immoral thinkers (Rauthmann, 2012). Machiavellianism is positively correlated with bullying among adults (Baughman, Dearing, Giammarco, & Vernon, 2012).

Psychopathic individuals are irresponsible, thrill-seeking, aggressive, low on empathy, exhibit antisocial behavior (Hare, 2003), and lack guilt, regret, and remorse (Williams & Paulhus, 2004). The callous, impulsive, unemotional traits characteristic of psychopathy have been linked to reactive and proactive aggression (Fanti, Frick, & Georgiou, 2009). Psychopaths use charm and manipulation of others for personal gain, with no concern for those being manipulated, and tend towards immoral, inappropriate and violent behavior (Hare, 1999). Psychopathy is substantially positively correlated with both direct and indirect bullying (Baughman et al., 2012).

Individuals high in narcissism are arrogant, self-absorbed, extremely vain, and entitled (Raskin & Terry, 1988). Narcissists often have relatively low self-esteem (Baughman et al., 2012). For example, the Theory of Threatened Egoism proposes that narcissism is a direct contributor to aggression (Washburn, McMahon, King, Reinecke, & Silver, 2004) and may be a defense mechanism that protects a fragile self-esteem. Narcissists tend to have feelings of entitlement, perceive others as a means to attain their needs for admiration and reinforcement of their self-perceptions, and lack empathy (Rhodewalt & Peterson, 2009). They exhibit an overly enhanced, aggrandized self, but tend to devalue others (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). Narcissism is also moderately positively correlated with bullying (Baughman et al., 2012).

4. The present study

4.1. Perceived appropriateness of academic incivilities

Individuals high in Machiavellianism and narcissism tend to be morally disengaged (Jones & Paulhus, 2017), and therefore readily pursue their self-interests without censure. Such morally disengaged, self-serving individuals may perceive behaviors generally considered uncivil as appropriate. Furthermore, the self-centered impulsivity and fearlessness of individuals high in psychopathy may result in uncivil behaviors being perceived as appropriate, as these individuals seek

thrills, act impulsively and irresponsibly without concern for consequences, disregard dangers, and have little or no self-control. As levels of Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and narcissism increase, the perceptions of appropriateness are expected to increase.

4.2. Perceived frequency of academic incivilities

Personality may impact whether an individual appraises incivility (Sliter, Withrow, & Jex, 2015), and individuals high in the Dark Triad personalities may be predisposed to labeling others' classroom behaviors as uncivil. The Dark Triad personalities generally have negative other-models that cause them to judge others unfavorably or dislike them (Rauthmann, 2012). Consequently, as levels of Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and narcissism increase, the propensity to label others' behaviors as uncivil are expected to increase.

5. Method

5.1. Participants and procedure

Our sample of 519 volunteer student participants, (49% male), with an average age of 21.4 years (SD = 2.5), was recruited at two southern U.S. universities. Students were informed about the nature of the IRB approved study and then completed the study measures.

6. Measures

6.1. Academic incivility

Based on previous research (Bjorklund & Rehling, 2010; Boice, 1996), we created an academic incivility scale comprised of 20 classroom behaviors generally considered rude or uncivil (Table 1). Participants rated their perception of the "appropriateness" ("Is this behavior appropriate for a university classroom"), and frequency of observation ("How often do you observe this behavior") of each behavior. Appropriateness responses ranged from 1 (*never appropriate*) to 4 (*always appropriate*), and frequency of observation responses ranged from 1 (*never*) to 4 (*often, it's common*).

Factor analysis of the 20 "appropriateness" items with varimax rotation reduced the scale to six factors, each having eigenvalues greater than one and contributing more than 5% to the variance (Table 2). A