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Effects of Dark Triad and HEXACO traits on reactive/proactive aggression: Exploring the gender differences

Bojana M. Dinić[a],[*], Anja Wertag[b]

[a] Department of Psychology, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Novi Sad, Dr Zorana Đinđića 2, 21000 Novi Sad, Serbia
[b] Institute of Social Sciences Ivo Pilar, Marulićev trg 19/I, 10000 Zagreb, Croatia

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to analyze the contribution of the Dark Triad (psychopathy, Machiavellianism and narcissism) over HEXACO traits in explanation of two functions of aggression – reactive and proactive aggression. Given the mixed results about gender differences in adult aggression, the relations between aggression and dark and basic personality traits were analyzed separately by gender. A Reactive–Proactive Questionnaire, the Short Dark Triad, and the HEXACO–60 personality inventory were administered on a sample of 632 participants from the general population (49.9% female). Results showed that, while psychopathy highly predicted proactive aggression in males, in females Machiavellianism and HEXACO traits also had a significant contribution. In the case of reactive aggression, psychopathy and Machiavellianism had significant effects, but Agreeableness emerged as the most important predictor, in both males and females. Besides Agreeableness, Emotionality also had a significant effect on reactive aggression, but only among females. The results highlight the importance of a broader personality constellation in explanation of aggression, especially female aggression.

1. Introduction

Aggressive behavior can vary across its forms and functions (Bailey & Ostrov, 2007). Forms refer to the way aggression is expressed (e.g. physically, verbally, indirectly), while functions refer to the intrinsic motivation for the aggression, which could be harming another person (reactive aggression), or gaining some other goal like money, social status, justice, etc. (proactive aggression). Reactive aggression is described as "hot", affective, and impulsive, and it occurs as a response to provocation, while proactive aggression is described as "cold-blooded", instrumental and premeditated, and it occurs regardless of provocation (Poulin & Boivin, 2000).

Previous studies have shown mixed results regarding gender differences in reactive and proactive aggression across a general population: some have concluded that adult (Barlett, 2016) or adolescent males express both reactive and proactive aggression more (Borroni, Somma, Andershed, Maffei, & Fossati, 2014; Fossati, Borroni, Eisenberg, & Maffei, 2010). Others have found that adolescent (Fanti, Frick, & Georgiou, 2009) or younger adult males (Miller & Lynam, 2006) express only proactive aggression more than females.

From the standpoint of personality psychology, the distinction by function is more important than by form, as different functions are related to different personality traits. More specifically, dominant predictors of reactive or provoked aggression are traits positively associated to Neuroticism from the Five Factor model (FFM), while proactive aggression is mostly negatively related to Agreeableness from the FFM (Bettencourt, Talley, Benjamin, & Valentine, 2006; Miller & Lynam, 2006; Miller, Zeichner, & Wilson, 2012). However, the FFM model was recently criticized for being suboptimal in capturing some of the individual differences, indicating that it does not provide a complete model of personality (Lee et al., 2013; Lee & Ashton, 2005; Veselka, Aitken Schremer, & Vernon, 2012). Notably absent from the model are socially malevolent traits that are captured in the Dark Triad (DT) personality cluster (Paulhus & Williams, 2002).

1.1. Dark Triad and aggression

The constellation of socially malevolent personality traits called the Dark Triad (i.e. Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy), share a common core of antagonism – callousness and manipulation (Jones & Figueredo, 2013). Hence, it is not surprising that the DT has consistently shown to be related to aggression, including bullying (Baughman, Dearing, Giammarco, & Vernon, 2012), violence (Pailing, Boon, & Egan, 2014), delinquent behavior (Charbol, Leeuwen, Rodgers, & Séjourneé, 2009), and animal cruelty (Kavanagh, Signal, & Taylor, 2013).

However, due to different underlying motivational processes, it was both hypothesized and empirically shown that each of the dark traits can differentially be linked to specific functions of aggression. More specifically, as psychopathy is the most socially undesirable trait among the DT traits, it shows the strongest relation with both reactive and proactive aggression (Barlett, 2016; Jonason, Duineveld, & Middleton, 2015), as well as violence, followed by Machiavellianism (Pailing et al., 2014). Machiavellianism is characterized by a strategic approach (Jones & Paulhus, 2009), and it could be assumed that it is linked to proactive aggression. However, Machiavellianism showed positive relations to both proactive and reactive aggression (Barlett, 2016), and Machiavellians can act out as psychopaths when ego–depleted (see Furnham, Richards, & Paulhus, 2013). Finally, narcissistic aggression is usually the result of ego provocation or threat (Jones & Paulhus, 2010, 2011), which is linked to reactive aggression.

Men consistently score higher on DT traits (e.g. Jonason, Li, Webster, & Schmitt, 2009; Jones & Weiser, 2014). However, regarding relations between DT and aggression, previous studies fail to examine gender differences in relations between narcissism and aggression (e.g. Fossati et al., 2010; Martinez, Zeichner, Reidy, & Miller, 2008), or suggest gender differences that were not fully examined (Barry et al., 2007). Moreover, in the case of psychopathy factors, measured by Youth Psychopathic Traits Inventory, Orue, Calvete, and Gamez-Guadix (2016) have found that callous–unemotional factor better predict proactive–overt aggression in girls, while grandiose–manipulative factor better predict proactive–overt aggression in boys. These results impose the need for exploration of gender difference in relations between DT and aggression.

Given the above–mentioned connections of the DT and aggression, it is not surprising that DT traits show negative relations most consistently with Agreeableness from the Big Five (BF) or from the FFM (Furnham et al., 2013; Jakobwitz & Egan, 2006), and, even more, with Honesty–Humility from the HEXACO model (Book, Visser, & Volk, 2015; Lee et al., 2013; Lee & Ashton, 2005).

1.2. HEXACO and aggression

The introduction of both the DT and the HEXACO model of personality structure roughly coincided (Lee & Ashton, 2014). The HEXACO model emerged from psycholexical studies in several non–English languages and consists of six factors: Honesty–Humility, Emotionality, Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness and Openness to experience (for details see Ashton & Lee, 2007). While three factors – Extraversion, Conscientiousness, and Openness overlap heavily with the classic BF (Ashton, Lee, & de Vries, 2014), a reconceptualization of the rest of the traits in the HEXACO model had important implications for understanding the functions of aggression. Namely, adjectives that typically define Honesty–Humility include honest, sincere, fair and modest versus greedy, conceited deceitful and pretentious, while Agreeableness and Emotionality represent a rotation of Agreeableness and Neuroticism from BF (Ashton et al., 2014). Results indicated that besides Agreeableness, Honesty–Humility also showed a significant negative relation to aggression (Book, Volk, & Hosker, 2012; Lee & Ashton, 2012). However, those two traits are linked to different functions of aggression. For example, Book et al. (2012) showed that Agreeableness had a higher negative correlation with reactive aggression, while Honesty–Humility had almost the same negative correlation with both reactive and proactive aggression. Moreover, Honesty–Humility was the only significant negative predictor of bullying among HEXACO traits. Based on these results, Book et al. (2012) concluded that Agreeableness represents the predisposition for aggression in general, while Honesty–Humility represents the predisposition for selective and more calculated aggression. In line with that, Lee and Ashton (2012) showed that Agreeableness is more negatively related to immediate retaliation or displaced aggression, while Honesty–Humility is more negatively related to calculated and premeditated aggression,

such as intention to commit vengeful acts. Therefore, it could conceptually be assumed that the opposite pole of Agreeableness is more related to reactive aggression, as it includes affective and impulsive components of aggression such as anger and low patience (Ashton et al., 2014). In contrast, the opposite pole of Honesty–Humility is more related to psychopathy, delinquency, bullying, etc. which are more related to instrumental or proactive aggression (Book et al., 2012; De Vries & Van Kampen, 2010; Gaughan, Miller, & Lynam, 2012; Lee & Ashton, 2005).

1.3. The present study

The purpose of the present study is to extend the understanding of the relation between the DT and HEXACO traits and the two functions of aggression. Previous studies have shown that the DT has a substantial overlap with dishonesty and disagreeableness (Book et al., 2015; Furnham et al., 2013; Lee et al., 2013), which are linked to different functions of aggression (Book et al., 2012; Lee & Ashton, 2012). Although there is a body of research linking the DT and aggression as well as HEXACO traits and aggression, to the best of our knowledge, there is only one study that has explored both HEXACO and the DT in prediction of aggression. In the Pailing et al. (2014) study, which explored the contributions of impulsivity and DT traits above Honesty–Humility, Agreeableness and Altruism in the prediction of violence, Agreeableness emerged as the strongest negative predictor of violence. However, aggression in this study was examined as overall violence (both reactive and instrumental), so it was not possible to explore the contributions of the DT in different functions of aggression. Given that this distinction seems important from the standpoint of personality, in this study we will examine the contributions of the HEXACO and the DT in the prediction of reactive and proactive aggression. We hypothesize that, due to the positive relation of the DT to harmful outcomes (Jones & Figueredo, 2013), its relation to aggression will be positive and its contribution to the prediction of aggression substantial, even above HEXACO traits. However, we expect that psychopathy will be the main predictor of both functions of aggression, while Machiavellianism will be more strongly related to proactive aggression and narcissism to reactive aggression. Out of the HEXACO traits, we hypothesize that Agreeableness and Honesty–Humility will have negative relations with aggression, but only Agreeableness will remain a significant predictor, due to the substantial overlap of the DT and Honesty–Humility. Also, we expect that Agreeableness will be more related to reactive aggression. Finally, given the mixed results in aggressive behavior across genders, we will explore whether the relationships between the basic and dark traits and the two functions of aggression differ in males and females.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

The sample originally included 632 participants (49.9% female) from the general population (age range 18–73, M_{age} = 30.35, SD_{age} = 12.40) from Serbia (96% Caucasian). The majority of participants have higher education (43.1% are university students and 23.6% have a university degree). As a part of pre–exam activities, trained MA psychology students administered the questionnaires in paper form to a specific number of participants based on given age and sex quotas in order to get a heterogeneous sample. Each student collected data on a nonrandom sample of 4 males (2 younger than 25 and 2 older than 25 years) and 4 females (same age distribution). Questionnaires were anonymous and participants signed a consent form before taking a part in the study. All aspects of the study were approved by the Institutional Review Board. Three univariate ($z > \pm 3.29$), and 8 multivariate outliers were excluded (Mahalanobis $\chi^2(11)$ = 21.26, $p < 0.001$; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007), which resulted in 621 participants (316 or