



The relationship between the Dark Tetrad and a two-dimensional view of empathy



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ABSTRACT

Although a disturbance in empathy has been related to all personality traits comprising the Dark Tetrad (i.e. Machiavellianism, narcissism, psychopathy, sadism), the relationship between different aspects of empathy and these dark traits measured jointly has not been empirically scrutinised. Therefore, the aim of the present study was to examine the associations between the Dark Tetrad, the two-dimensional (cognitive vs affective) model of empathy, and the ability to recognize emotions. Participants (N = 576; 250 males) for this online study were recruited using the snowball sampling method via social networking sites. Results revealed that all personality traits were inversely related to both affective and cognitive empathy, except for a positive correlation between narcissism and cognitive empathy. The regression analyses showed that the unique aspects of the Dark Triad negatively predicted affective empathy, whereas only Machiavellianism (negatively) and narcissism (positively) predicted cognitive empathy. Although both psychopathy and sadism were inversely correlated with the performance in the emotion recognition task, only sadism remained as a significant negative predictor once the shared variance was accounted for. The findings established different empathic profiles of each dark trait, thus supporting the construct of the Dark Tetrad as a set of overlapping, yet distinctive traits.

1. Introduction

A pivotal study by Paulhus and Williams (2002) has brought considerable attention to the Dark Triad: a subclinical constellation of socially aversive personality traits consisting of Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and narcissism. Since the publication there has been an abundance of research showing that these personalities represent similar and overlapping, but still distinct constructs with unique features (Furnham, Richards, & Paulhus, 2013). This set of malevolent traits was subsequently expanded into the Dark Tetrad by including a subclinical sadism (Chabrol, Van Leeuwen, Rodgers, & Séjourné, 2009), which has proven to be a distinct construct closely linked to the Dark Triad (Mededović & Petrović, 2015; Plouffe, Saklofske, & Smith, 2017).

Psychopathy is characterized by affective deficits, manipulative interpersonal style, overt antisocial behaviour, and impulsivity (Hare & Neumann, 2008), which differs from other dark members in terms of impulsive antisocial behaviour (Jones & Figueredo, 2013). Machiavellianism includes cynical worldview, manipulativeness, amorality, callousness, and strategic-calculating behaviour, with the latter being its unique quality (Jones & Paulhus, 2014). Narcissism features

grandiosity, sense of entitlement, and exploitative interpersonal style, and is distinguished from the other dark personalities by a self-promoting behaviour driven by a need for ego-reinforcement (Jones & Paulhus, 2014). Finally, sadism applies to a person characterized by a cruel and vicious behaviour, who deliberately humiliates and hurts others in order to assert dominance or just for the pure pleasure of it (O'Meara, Davies, & Hammond, 2011).

A lack of empathy has been suggested as one of the essential features all four dark personalities have in common (Paulhus, 2014). Indeed, research confirmed the link between low empathy and the core of the Dark Tetrad, as it accounted for about two thirds of the variance in the Tetrad variables (Book et al., 2016). However, empathy represents a complex construct which involves both understanding and sharing of another's emotional state, and can be therefore divided into two types. Affective empathy refers to an observer's concordant emotional response to the affective state of another, whereas cognitive empathy involves understanding the feelings of others (including by means of perspective-taking) and inferring their mental state (Baron-Cohen & Wheelwright, 2004; Cohen & Strayer, 1996). Despite the importance of disturbed empathy as one of the core features of the Dark Tetrad, no

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study thus far has explored the associations between these traits measured together and the two types of empathy. There is an abundance of research concerning the empathic abilities of individuals who manifest traits within the Dark Triad domains, studied either individually or in concert, but the associations between the cognitive and affective components of empathy and the Dark Tetrad remain under-researched. Moreover, the studies regarding the Dark Triad and empathy have yielded partially conflicting results: it is unclear whether empathic disturbances refer only to the affective or to the cognitive component as well, and whether narcissism is associated with enhanced or diminished empathy (Giammarco & Vernon, 2014; Jonason & Krause, 2013; Jonason & Kroll, 2015; Wai & Tiliopoulos, 2012). Therefore, we sought to address the aforementioned gaps within the literature by exploring the affective and cognitive empathy of the Dark Tetrad.

1.1. Psychopathy and empathy

A lack of empathy represents an important part of the theoretical description of psychopathy and this link has been confirmed in a number of studies (Ali & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2010; Flight & Forth, 2007). However, studies which made a distinction between different types of empathy have yielded inconsistent results, namely regarding cognitive empathy. It seems that the relationship between cognitive empathy and psychopathy remains inconclusive, as studies have presented evidence of both intact and impaired cognitive empathy in psychopathic individuals (Brook & Kosson, 2013; Oliver, Neufeld, Dziobek, & Mitchell, 2016). Empirical findings regarding the ability of psychopathic individuals to accurately recognize emotions are also inconsistent, with some indicating general or selective impairments (Ali & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2010; Hastings, Tangney, & Stuewig, 2008), whereas others have concluded that psychopathy is not associated with such deficits (Glass & Newman, 2006; Richell et al., 2003).

1.2. Narcissism and empathy

As in psychopathy, a lack of empathy has also been traditionally considered as a hallmark of narcissism, although it was largely based on a consensus between clinicians and patient observations (Ritter et al., 2011). While there are findings suggesting that narcissism is indeed related to impairments in general or affective empathy (Hepper, Hart, & Sedikides, 2014; Ritter et al., 2011; Vonk, Zeigler-Hill, Mayhew, & Mercer, 2013), studies which applied more rigorous methodological designs found little support for the inverse association between narcissism and affective empathy (Lishner, Hong, Jiang, Vitacco, & Neumann, 2015). Moreover, recent studies implied that narcissists, while lacking motivation for the cognitive empathy, are in fact capable of empathic responding under certain conditions (Hepper et al., 2014; Ritter et al., 2011). Narcissistic individuals usually show unimpaired ability in emotion recognition tasks (Ritter et al., 2011; Wai & Tiliopoulos, 2012; although see Marissen, Deen, & Franken, 2012).

1.3. Machiavellianism and empathy

Studies have showed that Machiavellianism is negatively associated with empathy assessed via self-report and physiological measures (Ali & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2010; Massey-Abernathy & Byrd-Craven, 2016). Findings on emotion identification performance and Machiavellianism are somewhat mixed, with some studies showing lack of the association and others reporting negative correlations (Ali & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2010; Lyons, Caldwell, & Shultz, 2010; Wai & Tiliopoulos, 2012). Another study showed that Machiavellianism, although demonstrating negative correlation, positively predicted performance in an emotion recognition task once the overlap among other personality features was accounted for (Vonk, Zeigler-Hill, Ewinga, Mercer, & Noser, 2015).

1.4. Sadism and empathy

Due to the paucity of research on subclinical (everyday) sadism, little is known regarding its empathic features. Although it has been hypothesized that sadists lack empathy, some authors have argued that a sadist may at least possess an unimpaired cognitive empathy to be able to successfully hurt another (Baumeister, 1997; O'Meara et al., 2011). Although Buckels, Jones, and Paulhus (2013) found inverse correlations between sadism, and perspective-taking and empathic concern, another study indicated that sadists did not differ from those low on sadism in the ability to understand the emotions of others (O'Meara et al., 2011). A recent study reported negative correlations between sadism, and affective empathy and social skills, whereas the link with cognitive empathy was nonsignificant (Sest & March, 2017).

1.5. Dark Triad and empathy

There are many empirical findings regarding empathic features of the dark traits studied individually, but these should be interpreted with caution as they may reflect the uncontrolled overlap with another dark trait. Despite this, only recently researchers have begun to investigate the relationship between empathy and the Dark Triad traits measured jointly.

The first study examining this issue showed that although all Dark Triad traits showed lower affective empathy and unaffected cognitive empathy, with narcissism even showing a positive link with the latter, only primary psychopathy emerged as a negative predictor of affective empathy and narcissism as a positive predictor of cognitive empathy (Wai & Tiliopoulos, 2012). Individuals with primary psychopathic traits and Machiavellianism demonstrated poorer performance on an emotion identification task, whereas narcissistic individuals were better at identifying angry facial expressions. However, a subsequent study showed that the Dark Triad traits negatively correlated with both affective and cognitive empathy, except for the lack of association between narcissism and affective empathy. Finally, only psychopathy predicted both types of empathy and narcissism emerged as a positive predictor of affective empathy (Jonason & Krause, 2013).

Another study confirmed that all Dark Triad traits were negatively associated with empathy, but did not make a distinction between the types of empathy (Jonason, Lyons, Bethell, & Ross, 2013). Studies employing the multidimensional model of empathy assessed with the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI; Davis, 1983), also reported mixed results (Giammarco & Vernon, 2014; Jonason & Kroll, 2015).

A recent study explored the associations between the Dark Triad and Theory of Mind (ToM), a concept closely related to cognitive empathy (Vonk et al., 2015). The results demonstrated both psychopathy and Machiavellianism had negative correlations with ToM, although only psychopathy showed most consistent unique associations with ToM deficits, whereas grandiose narcissism was related to ToM skills in two out of five tasks.

In sum, the Dark Triad traits are negatively associated with certain aspects of empathy, but the question remains as to whether these associations are limited to the affective empathy, or apply to cognitive empathy as well. Additionally, the relationship between narcissism and empathy is particularly unclear, with studies reporting mixed results, including positive associations.

1.6. The present study

The current study was set out to clarify the aforementioned inconsistencies in the literature, and to address the research gap regarding associations between two-dimensional empathy and the Dark Tetrad. Some of the discrepancy in findings might stem from differences in employed methodology, such as sample variations (e.g. adult male offender sample vs dominantly female student sample), different conceptualizations and measurements of both empathy (e.g. definition of

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