The HEXACO model of personality and Dark Triad in relational aggression

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ABSTRACT

Relational aggression has been linked to many forms of psychological maladjustment. Identifying the personality traits associated with the perpetration of relational aggression offers promise in improving our ability to understand, prevent, and treat relationally aggressive behaviors. Much of the research to date has utilized the Five Factor Model; however, the HEXACO model of personality (Ashton et al., 2004) may offer some advantages in studying aggression. Moreover, the manipulative and often covert nature of relational aggression suggests that the Dark Triad personality traits are likely to be relevant. This study explored the utility of the HEXACO model and Dark Triad in predicting relational aggression in college students' ($N = 442$) peer relationships. Honesty-Humility, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, and Openness predicted proactive and reactive relational aggression, and Emotionality also predicted reactive relational aggression. Pathological narcissism and psychopathy predicted proactive and reactive relational aggression while taking respondent gender and the full HEXACO model into account, with vulnerable narcissism and psychopathy serving as positive predictors and grandiose narcissism serving as a negative predictor. Findings support the utility of both the HEXACO and Dark Triad models in understanding peer relational aggression among emerging adults.

1. Introduction

Relational aggression (RA) involves damaging or threatening to damage one's social standing, reputation, or relationships through socially manipulative means (Werner & Crick, 1999). Examples include threats to withdraw friendship, intentional ignoring, and group exclusion. RA can be further divided based on its function (Burton, Hafetz, & Henninger, 2007). Proactive RA is planned and has a goal-directed end (e.g., spreading rumors to make oneself more popular); reactive RA is impulsive and done out of anger, usually in retaliation for a perceived offense (e.g., uninviting someone from a social event following a perceived insult). Most research on RA has been conducted with children and adolescents; however, there is growing evidence that RA remains salient into emerging adulthood. Adverse correlates among emerging adults include anxiety, depression, loneliness, stress, academic burnout, misuse of alcohol and other substances, poor impulse control, dysfunctional anger, disordered eating, and peer rejection (Dahlen, Czar, Prather, & Dyess, 2013; Miller & Lynam, 2003; Ostrov & Houston, 2008; Werner & Crick, 1999).

The social nature of RA suggests that a variety of normal and pathological personality traits may have utility in understanding why some people are more likely to engage in these behaviors. The successful perpetration of RA likely requires some level of status in one's peer group and interpersonal skill. At the same time, the intentional and often manipulative infliction of harm through RA suggests that these behaviors are most likely to occur when empathy is lacking (Ojanen, Findley, & Fuller, 2012). Lack of empathy, the desire to manipulate others, and/or the conviction that one is entitled to punish those who deviate from one's expectations may facilitate RA and can be found in certain pathological personality traits (e.g., the Dark Triad).

The Five Factor Model (FFM; Costa & McCrae, 1992) has proven useful in understanding how normative aspects of personality are associated with aggression (Burton et al., 2007). High Neuroticism and low Agreeableness have been most consistently linked to RA and overt aggression (Hines & Saudino, 2008; Miller, Zeichner, & Wilson, 2012). Still, the 6-factor HEXACO model (Ashton et al., 2004) may have some advantages over the FFM (Gaughan, Miller, & Lynam, 2012). The HEXACO model includes Honesty-Humility, Emotionality, Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, and Openness to Experience. The HEXACO and FFM share three similar factors: Extraversion, Conscientiousness, and Openness; however, HEXACO Agreeableness and Emotionality differ in three important ways from their FFM counterparts. First, FFM Neuroticism assesses negative affect broadly, including both internally-directed and externally-directed emotions; HEXACO Emotionality includes only internally-directed affect (Gaughan et al., 2012). Thus, Lee and Ashton (2004) described this factor as having more to do with emotionality than emotional stability (i.e., low Neuroticism). Second, HEXACO Emotionality includes aspects of sensitivity

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and sentimentality found in FFM Agreeableness but not in FFM Neuroticism, while HEXACO Agreeableness includes the traits of tolerance and patience associated with high FFM Neuroticism (Lee & Ashton, 2012a). The most obvious difference is the addition of the HEXACO Honesty-Humility factor, which includes traits such as fairness, sincerity, and (low) entitlement.

Despite a lack of research examining the HEXACO model in the context of RA, there is reason to suspect it may be useful. The additional content assessed by Honesty-Humility (i.e., fairness and sincerity vs. the exploitation or manipulation) is likely to be inversely related to RA. Among college students, scores on Honesty-Humility have been shown to be positively related to a reluctance to exploit others and inversely related to engaging in acts of vengeance (Lee & Ashton, 2012a). Additionally, some of the differences between HEXACO Agreeableness and FFM Agreeableness may translate into differences in their predictive utility. Lee and Ashton (2012b) found an inverse relationship between HEXACO Agreeableness and displaced aggression and vengefulness in a college sample.

The Dark Triad refers to a constellation of three personality traits: Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy. Narcissistic and Machiavellian traits have been found to predict aggression among adolescents (Lau & Marsee, 2013; Pursoo, 2013); however, little is known about their potential utility for understanding RA among emerging adults. Moreover, while there appears to be some merit in dividing narcissistic traits into grandiose and vulnerable forms (Pincus et al., 2009), few studies of RA have explored both forms of narcissism. *Grandiose narcissism* describes features such as inflated self-esteem, entitlement, exploitative behavior, arrogance, and conceit; *vulnerable narcissism* refers to low self-esteem, feelings of emptiness, negative affect, shame, and excessive interpersonal sensitivity (Pincus & Lukowitsky, 2010). While a connection between grandiose narcissism and RA may seem obvious because of the entitlement and exploitative components, vulnerable narcissism has been linked to threatened egotism (Gore & Widiger, 2016) and aggression (Okada, 2010) and is more central to the concept of "narcissistic rage," which has long been associated with anger, hostility, and aggression (Krizan & Johar, 2015). Thus, both forms of narcissism are worth investigating in the context of RA. There is more evidence supporting the role of psychopathic traits in RA, although findings have been mixed. Schmeelk, Sylvers, and Lilienfeld (2008) found that the social deviance factor but not the emotional/interpersonal factor predicted RA among college students. In contrast, both factors were found to predict RA in other studies using college student samples (e.g., Czar, Dahlen, Bullock, & Nicholson, 2011). There is also evidence that some of the callous-unemotional traits associated with psychopathy (i.e., callousness and uncaring tendencies) predicted proactive RA more than reactive RA among college women (White, Gordon, & Guerra, 2015).

The present study examined the utility of the HEXACO model of normal personality and Dark Triad model of abnormal personality in predicting RA in college students' peer relationships. As Aghababaei and Blachnio (2015) noted, it is important to demonstrate that the Dark Triad traits provide useful information beyond broad models of personality. Thus, we sought to determine whether the Dark Triad traits would predict proactive and reactive RA beyond the factors represented in the HEXACO model. We predicted that (1) HEXACO Honesty-Humility and Agreeableness would be inversely related to RA and (2) the Dark Triad traits would explain additional variance in RA while taking respondent gender and the full HEXACO model into account. Among the Dark Triad traits, we expected that psychopathy and vulnerable narcissism would likely have the greatest predictive utility.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

The initial data set included 512 college student volunteers

recruited through the online research system used by the Department of Psychology at a mid-sized public university in the southeastern United States. Potential participants read a brief description of the study and were directed to a secure online survey host containing the consent form and all study measures. After providing informed consent, participants completed a demographic questionnaire followed by the study instruments, the order of which was counterbalanced. Consistent with recommendations for addressing careless responding in online survey research (e.g., Meade & Craig, 2012), two directed response items (e.g., "Answer 'agree' to this question") were blended into the study questionnaires. Data from the 70 participants who failed either item were removed, resulting in a final sample of 442 (306 women, 135 men, 1 unspecified; *Mdn* age = 19). Most reported identifying as White (65%) or Black (32%), with the remaining 3% identifying as Hispanic/Latino, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, American Indian/Alaska Native, Asian, or other. Participants received course credit for their participation, and the procedure was approved by the university's institutional review board.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Self-Report of Aggression and Social Behavior Measure (SRASBM)
The Peer-Directed Proactive Relational Aggression (5 items) and Peer-Directed Reactive Relational Aggression (6 items) subscales from the SRASBM (Morales & Crick, 1998) were used to assess proactive and reactive RA. Items were rated on a 7-point Likert scale from 0 ("not at all true") to 7 ("very true"). These scales have demonstrated adequate internal consistency (αs = 0.69–0.76) in college student samples and have shown evidence of construct validity through relationships with other measures of RA and related constructs (Czar et al., 2011).

2.2.2. HEXACO-60
The HEXACO model of personality was assessed with the HEXACO-60 (Ashton & Lee, 2009), a 60-item short version of the HEXACO Personality Inventory-Revised (HEXACO PI-R). The HEXACO-60 includes six 10-item scales: Honesty-Humility, Emotionality, Extraversion, Agreeableness, Consciousness, and Openness to Experience. Response options range from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 5 ("strongly agree"). The HEXACO-60 scales have adequate internal consistency (αs = 0.77–0.80) and are closely related to the full HEXACO PI-R (Gaughan et al., 2012; Lee & Ashton, 2009).

2.2.3. MACH-IV
Machiavellian traits were assessed using the 20-item MACH-IV scale (Christie & Geis, 1970). Items are scaled on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 ("strongly agree") to 7 ("strongly disagree"). The MACH-IV total score has demonstrated acceptable internal consistency (αs = 0.70–0.82; Christie & Geis, 1970; Paulhus & Williams, 2002), and was found to correlate with similar, well-established scales and manipulation tactics common among Machiavellians (Rauthmann, 2013).

2.2.4. Pathological Narcissism Inventory (PNI)
The 52-item PNI (Pincus et al., 2009) was used to assess maladaptive expressions of narcissism. Items are scaled on a 6-point Likert scale from 0 ("not at all like me") to 5 ("very much like me"). The PNI includes seven subscales which underlie two higher order factors: Narcissistic Grandiosity and Narcissistic Vulnerability. Scores of the two higher-order composites were used in present study. These composites have demonstrated impressive internal consistency (αs = 0.89–0.96) and have been found to be related to a variety of normal and pathological personality traits in expected directions (Thomas, Wright, Lukowitsky, Donnellan, & Hopwood, 2012; Zeigler-Hill & Besser, 2013).

2.2.5. Self-Report of Psychopathy Scale-III (SRP-III)
Psychopathic personality traits were assessed with the 64-item SRP-III (Williams, Paulhus, & Hare, 2007). Items are scaled from 1