



Spitefulness and deficits in the social–perceptual and social–cognitive components of Theory of Mind



Demitrus Ewing, Virgil Zeigler-Hill ^{*}, Jennifer Vonk

Oakland University, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 3 September 2015

Received in revised form 21 November 2015

Accepted 23 November 2015

Available online 28 November 2015

Keywords:

Spite

Theory of mind

Personality

ABSTRACT

The relationship between spitefulness and Theory of Mind (ToM; the ability to represent and reason about the mental states of others) has been neglected in studies of personality. However, we expected that deficits in ToM would be more likely to occur in individuals with higher levels of spitefulness compared to those with lower levels of spitefulness given their tendency to behave aggressively and their lack of concern for the well-being of others. To examine the associations between spitefulness and ToM, we conducted two studies. In Study 1, we examined the connection between spitefulness and a single indicator of ToM in a sample of 450 community members. In Study 2, we examined the link between spitefulness and multiple indicators of ToM in a sample of 696 undergraduates. Across these two studies, spitefulness was found to be negatively associated with both social–perceptual and social–cognitive components of ToM such that individuals with spiteful tendencies exhibited greater difficulties understanding the mental states of other people.

© 2015 Published by Elsevier Ltd.

1. Introduction

Spitefulness is characterized by the willingness to incur a cost in order to inflict harm on someone else (Fehr & Fischbacher, 2005; Fehr & Schmidt, 2006; Hamilton, 1970; Smead & Forber, 2013). For example, a man may suddenly apply his brakes on the highway when he feels that the driver behind him is tailgating him even though this action puts his own safety – as well as the safety of the other driver – at risk. Spitefulness has been a topic of interest in other disciplines (e.g., economics and evolutionary biology) for various reasons including the role that costly punishment is believed to have played in the emergence of cooperation (e.g., Fehr & Gächter, 2002; Rockenbach & Milinski, 2006). Despite the importance of spitefulness, it has been largely overlooked by psychologists until recent years. A potential reason for psychologists to invest in the examination of spitefulness is that the willingness of an individual to sacrifice benefits or incur costs in order to harm others suggests that the motivations of individuals with spiteful tendencies may be more complex than simply accruing immediate benefits and avoiding immediate costs (see Marcus & Norris, *in press*), for an extended discussion). Various explanations have been offered for spitefulness such as inclusive fitness (Hamilton, 1970), reputational benefits for the individual engaging in the spiteful act (Kurzban, DeScioli, & O'Brien, 2007), links between the administration of punishment and reward-related neural circuitry (de Quervain et al., 2004),

and relative gains for the individual when the costs that he or she incurs are less than the harm inflicted on the other individual (Jensen, 2010).

Spiteful actions involve inflicting harm on other individuals so it is not surprising that individual differences in spitefulness have been found to be associated with the Dark Triad personality traits (i.e., psychopathy, narcissism, and Machiavellianism; Marcus, Zeigler-Hill, Mercer, & Norris, 2014), a hostile interpersonal style (Southard, Noser, Pollock, Mercer, & Zeigler-Hill, 2015), low levels of guilt (Marcus et al., 2014), and little concern for avoiding harm to others when making moral decisions (Zeigler-Hill, Noser, Roof, Vonk, & Marcus, 2015). These findings provide preliminary insight into the nature of spitefulness and suggest that individuals with high levels of spitefulness tend to behave in ways that are aggressive or antagonistic and appear to feel relatively little remorse for their actions. The characterization of individuals with spiteful tendencies that is beginning to emerge from these recent studies – such as their apparent lack of concern for the welfare of others – led us to consider the possibility that spitefulness may be linked with difficulties in understanding the mental states of other people. That is, the lack of concern may result directly from an inability to accurately perceive the mental states of others. In addition, the inability to accurately assess the intentions of others may result in misplaced aggression. As with other aversive personality traits (e.g., psychopathy), difficulties understanding the mental states of others may contribute to the behaviors that characterize spiteful individuals.

We believe that understanding the specific cognitive abilities that are associated with spitefulness may provide additional insight into the nature of individuals with spiteful tendencies. For example, a recent study found that children with high levels of fluid cognitive ability were

^{*} Corresponding author at: Department of Psychology, Oakland University, 212A Pryale Hall, Rochester, MI 48309, United States.

E-mail address: zeiglerh@oakland.edu (V. Zeigler-Hill).

more likely to display spiteful behavior than other children (i.e., they were willing to forego their own payoff in order to reduce the payoff of another player; Bügelmayer & Spiess, 2014). This pattern is consistent with speculation suggesting that certain cognitive abilities (e.g., inhibitory control) must exist in conjunction with spitefulness because the benefits, costs, and risks associated with spiteful behaviors must be calculated (Hauser, McAuliffe, & Blake, 2009). Theory of Mind (ToM) is a key component of the social cognitive toolkit that enables people to behave appropriately in social contexts. Broadly, ToM refers to the ability to represent and reason about the mental states of others – including emotions, knowledge states, motivations, intentions, and beliefs (Premack & Woodruff, 1978). ToM is considered to be a highly adaptive social cognitive skill because it allows perceivers to predict the subsequent behavior of others based on their inferred internal states (e.g., Esperger & Bereczkei, 2012), which enables perceivers to respond appropriately in both competitive and cooperative situations (Baron-Cohen, Leslie, & Frith, 1985). ToM has received considerable attention due to its connections with developmental disorders such as autism spectrum disorder (Baron-Cohen et al., 1985) as well as its links with personality pathology (Vonk, Zeigler-Hill, Ewing, Mercer, & Noser, 2015). Importantly, previous research involving a range of ToM indicators has shown that there is considerable variability in ToM performance within samples of typical adults (Kinderman, Dunbar, & Bentall, 1998) which suggests that it may be expected to vary along with other known parameters – such as personality features – even in non-clinical samples.

It has often been argued that antagonistic aspects of personality (e.g., narcissism, psychopathy) may have shared deficits in the capacity for ToM (e.g., Ali & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2010; Bateman & Fonagy, 2008; Dziobek et al., 2011; Gardner, Qualter, & Tremblay, 2010; Preißler, Dziobek, Ritter, Heekeren, & Roepke, 2010; van Zwieten et al., 2013; Vonk et al., 2015; Vonk, Zeigler-Hill, Mayhew, & Mercer, 2013) which may explain, at least in part, the willingness of individuals with these personality features to harm others through strategies such as manipulation and exploitation (Jones & Paulhus, 2011; Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Given the positive associations that spitefulness has with other antagonistic personality traits (Marcus et al., 2014), the lack of concern for others that has been shown to characterize individuals with spiteful tendencies (Zeigler-Hill et al., 2015), and the known associations between aggression and lack of concern for harming others and ToM (Leslie, Knobe, & Cohen, 2006; Renouf et al., 2010), we reasoned that individuals with high levels of spitefulness may be likely to possess impaired ToM skills. The tendency to misread or dismiss the feelings or intentions of others may provide at least a partial explanation for the aversive behaviors that characterize individuals with high levels of spitefulness. It is possible that difficulties understanding the mental states of others may be linked to spitefulness because of the increased ambiguity surrounding social situations (e.g., individuals with spiteful tendencies may be more likely to misperceive hostile intentions in others).

2. Overview and predictions

The present studies examined the associations that spitefulness had with various indicators of ToM. We predicted that spitefulness would be negatively associated with ToM. We also examined the possibility that the association between spitefulness and ToM may be moderated by sex in both studies. Our rationale was that sex differences have been observed for both spitefulness (Marcus et al., 2014) and various indicators of ToM (e.g., Baron-Cohen, Wheelwright, Hill, Raste, & Plumb, 2001) such that men tend to behave more spitefully than women and have lower levels of ToM than have been observed among women. Further, the links between spitefulness and cognitive skills in children that were observed by Bügelmayer and Spiess (2014) were largely driven by boys in the sample, which suggests that it is important to examine

whether there are sex differences for any links that exist between spitefulness and ToM.

3. Study 1

The purpose of Study 1 was to examine the association that spitefulness had with ToM as captured by the Reading the Mind in the Eyes Test (RMET; Baron-Cohen, Wheelwright, & Hill, 2001). The RMET is the most commonly used task to assess the ability to read emotions. The RMET is considered to be a relatively low-level measure of ToM because it assesses only first-order ToM (i.e., understanding the mental state of another person) and focuses on only a single mental state (i.e., emotion). We expected that spitefulness would have a negative association with the RMET.

We included basic personality dimensions in Study 1 to determine whether spitefulness explained unique variance in ToM beyond that which is accounted for by the HEXACO model of personality (Ashton & Lee, 2007, 2009; Lee & Ashton, 2004). The HEXACO is a six-factor model of personality that includes variants of the Big Five dimensions of personality as well as an honesty–humility dimension that captures the degree to which individuals exhibit fairness, sincerity, and modesty. Three of the HEXACO dimensions (i.e., extraversion, conscientiousness, and openness) are very similar to their Big Five counterparts, whereas emotionality (which is equivalent to “neuroticism” in the Big Five model) and agreeableness reflect slightly rotated versions of their Big Five counterparts (Ashton, Lee, & de Vries, 2014; Lee & Ashton, 2012). The inclusion of basic personality dimensions in Study 1 allowed us to examine whether spitefulness and ToM were linked with each other beyond their shared associations with basic personality dimension such as agreeableness (e.g., Marcus et al., 2014; Nettle & Liddle, 2008).

4. Method

4.1. Participants and Procedure

Participants were 450 community members (225 men, 225 women) from the United States who were recruited using Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk). The costs and benefits of collecting data via MTurk have been clearly documented in previous studies (e.g., Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011). Participants completed measures concerning spitefulness, basic personality dimensions, and ToM – along with other measures that are not relevant to the present study (e.g., self-esteem level) – via a secure website. The mean age of the participants was 35.48 years ($SD = 10.68$; age range: 19–73 years) and their racial/ethnic composition was 75% White, 8% Black, 8% Asian, 6% Hispanic, and 3% other.

4.2. Measures

4.2.1. Spitefulness scale

Spitefulness was assessed using the Spitefulness Scale (Marcus et al., 2014). The Spitefulness Scale is a 17-item instrument designed to measure the willingness of participants to engage in behaviors that would harm another but that would also entail harm to oneself (e.g., “I would rather no one get extra credit in class if it meant that others would get more credit than me”). Participants were asked to rate their level of agreement with the items on a scale that ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The Spitefulness Scale has been shown to possess adequate psychometric properties (e.g., Marcus et al., 2014) and the internal consistency for this instrument was $\alpha = 0.92$ in the present study.

4.2.2. HEXACO-60

Basic personality dimensions were assessed with the HEXACO-60 (Ashton & Lee, 2009), which is a 60-item measure designed to assess six dimensions: *honesty–humility* (10 items; e.g., “I wouldn't use flattery

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/7250505>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/7250505>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)