



Spitefulness and moral values



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ABSTRACT

The relationship between spitefulness and an individual's sense of morality or lack thereof has been neglected in studies of personality. It seems probable that individuals with higher levels of spitefulness exhibit fewer moral concerns relative to those with lower levels of spite. To examine associations between spitefulness and moral concerns, 436 community participants completed self-report measures concerning their spitefulness, basic personality dimensions, and moral concerns. Spitefulness was negatively associated with individualizing values (i.e., sensitivity to harm and fairness) such that spiteful individuals were less concerned about issues related to avoiding harm or injustice to others when making moral judgments. However, spitefulness was not simply associated with a general reduction in moral concerns as it was not significantly associated with binding values (i.e., concerns about ingroup loyalty, authority, and purity).

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1. Introduction

Spitefulness is generally defined in behavioral economics and evolutionary biology as the willingness of an individual to incur a cost to oneself in order to inflict harm on another even in the absence of any direct benefits for doing so (Fehr & Fischbacher, 2005; Smead & Forber, 2013). One of the reasons for interest in spite is that – at least on the surface – it appears to contradict some of the basic assumptions of economics and evolutionary theory (see Marcus & Norris, *in press*, for an extended discussion). Spiteful individuals will sometimes sacrifice benefits or incur costs in order to harm someone else, which suggests that the motivations of these individuals are more complex than simply accruing immediate benefits and avoiding immediate costs. Moral concerns may contribute to the motivation to behave spitefully in that spiteful individuals may be willing to suffer harm to themselves in order to harm others because they believe that they are righting a wrong or upholding a moral precept. For example, the phrase “cutting off your nose to spite your face” has its origin in medieval nuns who literally cut off their own noses in order to spite invading barbarians who had intended to rape them.

Although spitefulness has been largely neglected by the psychological literature, Marcus, Zeigler-Hill, Mercer, and Norris (2014) recently developed a self-report measure of spitefulness in order to better understand individual differences in spitefulness. Scores on this Spitefulness Scale have been found to be associated with a range of outcomes including aggression, low levels of guilt, and “dark” personality features such as psychopathy (e.g., Marcus et al., 2014). Taken together, these studies suggest that individuals who report high levels of spitefulness often behave in an aggressive and antagonistic manner with minimal apparent remorse. This pattern may be at least partially explained by the fact that individuals with high levels of spitefulness experience limitations in their capacity for understanding the mental states of other individuals (Ewing, Vonk, Mercer, Noser, & Zeigler-Hill, 2014). For example, spitefulness was negatively associated with performance on various measures of perspective-taking, empathy, and emotional intelligence. Deficits in perspective-taking may contribute to the behavioral patterns that accompany spitefulness.

1.1. Moral concerns

Spite has been referred to as “the shady relative of altruism” (Smead & Forber, 2013, p. 698), and it is the presumed moral dimension of spitefulness that may distinguish it from other antagonistic or aggressive traits. Therefore, research on morality and moral concerns may be directly relevant to understanding

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spitefulness. Studies concerning moral judgments and decision-making have largely focused on issues of harm or fairness. Morality, however, extends beyond issues of harm or fairness to also encompass concerns such as loyalty, respect, and spiritual purity (see Graham et al., 2011, for a review). This broadening of the conceptualization of morality has led to the development of the Moral Foundations Theory (Haidt & Graham, 2007; Haidt & Joseph, 2004), which argues that individuals make moral judgments based on the relative importance that they place on two forms of moral values: *individualizing values* and *binding values*. Individualizing values are the “traditional” moral concerns that pertain to the rights and welfare of individuals. The individualizing value system is composed of two basic moral foundations referred to as *harm/care* (i.e., minimizing harm to other individuals) and *fairness/cheating* (i.e., maximizing justice and equality). In contrast, binding values refer to concerns that are related to the maintenance of social order and group cohesion. The binding value system is composed of three basic moral foundations referred to as *ingroup/betrayal* (i.e., emphasizing the importance of ingroup loyalty), *authority/disrespect* (i.e., respect for social hierarchy and status), and *purity/degradation* (i.e., avoiding biological or social contaminants). Individualizing values serve to suppress selfish behavior by focusing on individuals as the source of moral values, whereas binding values function to limit selfishness by emphasizing the importance of roles and duties. These values can thus serve an adaptive function in promoting group cohesion which is an important component of cooperative societies. It is important to note that individualizing and binding values are not mutually exclusive. Rather, individuals simply differ in the extent to which they rely on these values when they consider moral issues.

Much of the previous research concerning Moral Foundations Theory has focused on political issues (e.g., Haidt & Graham, 2007). However, studies have recently begun to examine the connections between moral values and personality traits. For example, neuroticism is positively associated with both individualizing and binding values, whereas other Big Five personality dimensions are either positively associated with individualizing values (i.e., agreeableness and openness) or binding values (i.e., extraversion and conscientiousness; Hirsh, DeYoung, Xu, & Peterson, 2010; Lewis & Bates, 2011).

Researchers have also become interested in the associations that “dark” personality features have with moral values (e.g., Djeriouat & Trémolière, 2014; Noser et al., 2015). These dark personality features refer to a wide range of potentially aversive aspects of personality such as the tendency to manipulate, deceive, or exploit others (see Zeigler-Hill & Marcus, *in press*, for a review). Taken together, the results of these studies have shown that many dark personality features (e.g., psychopathy) are negatively associated with individualizing values, which suggests that individuals who possess these aversive personality features have relatively little concern for protecting others from harm or injustice when they are considering moral issues. Given the positive associations between self-reported spitefulness and other dark personality features (e.g., psychopathy, Machiavellianism, narcissism) as well as its negative association with agreeableness (Marcus et al., 2014), we hypothesized that spitefulness will also be negatively associated with individualizing values, especially those involving harm/care.

1.2. Overview and predictions

The present study examined the associations that spitefulness has with both individualizing and binding values. The participants completed measures concerning their spitefulness, basic personality dimensions, and moral concerns. We included basic personality dimensions to assess whether spitefulness explained unique

variance in moral values beyond that which is accounted for by basic personality dimensions as assessed using 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) closely resemble 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). We expected to replicate previous results such that emotionality would be positively associated with both individualizing and binding values, agreeableness and openness would be positively associated with individualizing values, and extraversion and conscientiousness would be positively associated with binding values (Hirsh et al., 2010; Lewis & Bates, 2011). Previous research has not examined the connection between the honesty-humility dimension of the HEXACO model and moral values, but we expected that honesty-humility would be positively associated with individualizing values because this personality dimension concerns fairness and sincerity and has been shown to be positively associated with political liberalism (Chirumbolo & Leone, 2010), which, in turn, is linked with individualizing values (e.g., Hirsh et al., 2010).

One advantage of using the HEXACO model is that there has been considerable speculation concerning the likely adaptive trade-offs for higher and lower levels of each dimension during the course of human evolution (e.g., Ashton & Lee, 2007). For example, agreeableness and honesty-humility have close ties with reciprocal altruism and cooperation (e.g., Ashton & Lee, 2007; Lee & Ashton, 2012). Agreeableness captures the extent to which an individual is willing to cooperate with someone else even if that person is not fully cooperative or even possibly exploitative (Ashton et al., 2014). In contrast, honesty-humility reflects a willingness to cooperate with another person even if the individual has the opportunity to exploit or dominate others in their social environments (Ashton et al., 2014). For example, individuals with high levels of honesty-humility have been shown to be less likely to engage in mate retention tactics that involve manipulating, deceiving, or exploiting their romantic partners (Holden, Zeigler-Hill, Pham, & Shackelford, 2014). In addition to its connection with reciprocal altruism, honesty-humility is associated with sensitivity to sexual and moral disgust (Tybur & de Vries, 2013) which may additionally contribute to moral sensibilities in a societal context. Thus, the HEXACO model may have a considerable advantage over the Big Five model when examining moral values.

The prediction that spitefulness would be negatively associated with individualizing values is consistent with previous research indicating that spiteful individuals are hostile, antagonistic, and experience relatively low levels of guilt (Marcus et al., 2014), which are features that have been shown to be associated with relatively little concern about situations that involve suffering and unfairness for others (e.g., Djeriouat & Trémolière, 2014; Noser et al., 2015). This prediction is also consistent with the way spite has been operationalized in previous studies. For example, the spiteful strategy in the Ultimatum Game is for a participant to make only unfair offers to one's partner but to reject unfair offers that are made by the partner (e.g., Smead & Forber, 2013). That is, spiteful individuals may be very concerned with how they are treated with regard to fairness and lack of harm, but they may have relatively little concern for the treatment of others. Although we were uncertain about the potential connection between spitefulness and binding values, we thought that spitefulness may be positively associated with binding values due to a desire to enforce these individuals'

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