Short Communication

Externalizing and internalizing, but not rationalizing: Some psychodynamic biases associated with the Dark Triad traits[☆]

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A B S T R A C T

In American MTurk workers (N = 288), we examined the psychodynamic biases of *externalizing* (i.e., turning against the object, projection), *internalizing* (i.e., turning against the self), and *rationalizing* (i.e., principalization, reversal) in relation to the Dark Triad traits (i.e., narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism). The traits had an externalizing bias, none were associated with a rationalizing bias, and only psychopathy and Machiavellianism were associated with an internalizing bias. We found that women had a more internalizing bias than did men and psychopathy and Machiavellianism may buffer women from internalizing disorders (i.e., suppression). We contend that psychodynamic biases are outputs of personality traits.

Personality researchers have become increasingly interested in the Dark Triad traits of narcissism (i.e., grandiosity and self-centeredness), Machiavellianism (i.e., manipulation and cynicism), and psychopathy (i.e., callous social attitudes and impulsivity). The traits have been studied in relation to exploitive sexual attitudes (Jonason, Girgis, & Milne-Home, 2017), callousness (Jones & Figueredo, 2013), and self-regulatory problems (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). Recent research has examined potential psychodynamic biases associated with these traits (Richardson & Boag, 2016), suggesting the Dark Triad traits might be associated with "immature" defense mechanisms. However, this work is limited in that (1) participants only reported agreement with a series of self-report items, (2) defenses may be more than "immature" and "mature", and (3) participant's sex may be an important variable to consider. In this brief report, we examine how the traits are associated with three psychodynamic biases captured from assessments of defenses to hypothetical scenarios.

To capture psychodynamic biases, we measured the defense mechanisms of *Turning Against the Object*,[1] *Principilization*,[2] *Turning Against the Self*,[3] *Reversal of Affect*,[4] and *Projection*[5] (Gleser & Ihilevich, 1969).

Because, we are not able to induce stress and measure genuine defense mechanisms, we treated these as manifestations of the larger psychodynamic processes of *externalizing* (i.e., a tendency to project and punish those around them), *internalizing* (i.e., a tendency to punish oneself), and *rationalizing* (i.e., a tendency to alter one's cognitions/emotions about events). In general, the measurement of defense mechanisms is problematic (Cramer, 2015; Davidson & MacGregor, 1998) and often relies on self-reports to Likert-style items (Andrews, Singh, & Bond, 1993). To provide new information about some of the potential psychodynamic processes associated with the Dark Triad traits, we adopt this framework, which, using responses to scenarios, should produce novel information relative to self-reports. These psychodynamic biases are likely to have implications for understanding behavior, resulting in important clinical implications (Jun et al., 2015).

Primarily, we contend that the Dark Triad traits bias people towards externalizing behavior, resulting in a tendency, especially when under threat, to avoid blame and punish others for their wrongdoings. This allows for the pursuit of their often self- and other-destructive goals. If those high on the traits felt guilt for what they did, their exploitive

[1] Focused on general aggressiveness where one attacks a real or presumed external frustrating object.
[2] Rationalization, where one unconsciously responds in a way that ameliorates stress.
[3] An inward attack on one's self, akin to depression.
[4] Creating new emotions to counter threat, and these emotions may be opposing or neutral to the painful emotion.
[5] Attributing the source of one's difficulties onto others, for instance, blaming another individual suggests a projection of malicious intent in order alleviate one's own anxieties.

abilities would be undermined. Externalizing is an aggressive response (Juni & Masling, 1980), making the associations with the Dark Triad traits particularly likely. Secondarily, psychopathy and Machiavellianism may predict an internalizing bias, in the form of self-blame, because, unlike narcissism, these traits might be more prone to depression – an ostensible internalizing tendency – where narcissism is not (Jonason, Baughman, Carter, & Parker, 2015). Third, we expect men to be more likely to externalize than women and women to be more likely to internalize than men given, men's greater aggressiveness (Jonason et al., 2017) and women's proclivity towards depression (Nolen-Hoeksema, 1990). Lastly, we expect sex differences in psychodynamic biases to be mediated by individual differences in the Dark Triad traits because responses to threats are outputs of psychological systems.

In hopes of understanding the Dark Triad traits better, we examined how the Dark Triad traits were associated with individual differences in three Freudian responses to stress; externalization, internalization, and rationalization. We did so using a scenario-based measure of psychodynamic biases. And last, we examined the role of participant's sex in understanding these associations.

1. Method

1.1. Participants and procedure

Participants were 288 (48% male) American workers on Amazon's Mechanical Turk who were paid US$1 for completing a series of self-report measures via a secure website as previously reported (Jonason & Fletcher, 2018). The mean age of our participants was 35.47 years ($SD = 11.03$, $Range = 18–71$) and most participants were European American (70%). Participants were informed of the nature of the study, completed measures if they consented, and were thanked and debriefed. The sample size minimum was set based on power analysis (> 0.80) for the average effect size in social and personality psychology ($r \approx 0.20$; Richard, Bond Jr., & Stokes-Zoota, 2003) and guidelines ($N \approx 250$) set for reducing estimation error in personality psychology (Schönbrodt & Perugini, 2013).

1.2. Measures

We used the Short Dark Triad (Jones & Paulhus, 2014), asking participants to rate their agreement ($1 = $ *disagree strongly*; $5 = $ *agree strongly*) with statements assessing *Machiavellianism* (9 items; e.g., "Make sure your plans benefit yourself, not others" [$\alpha = 0.77$]), *Narcissism* (9 items; e.g., I like to get acquainted with important people" [$\alpha = 0.71$]), and *Psychopathy* (9 items; e.g., "It's true that I can be mean to others" [$\alpha = 0.86$]). The items were averaged to create the three scales.[6]

To capture psychodynamic biases, we used the 80-item Defense Mechanisms Inventory (Zhang, 2016), an adaptation of the original (Gleser & Ihilevich, 1969). Participants were given four scenarios describing conflict situations and four sets of questions to assess (1) proposed actual behavior, (2) impulsive behavior, (3) thoughts, and (4) affect/feelings. Within each set, there were five statements indicating five groups of defense mechanisms: *Turning Against the Self* (16 items; e.g., "How could I be so dumb as to let things slide?" [$\alpha = 0.82$]), *Turning Against the Object* (16 items; e.g., "Break the neck of each and every member of the board of directors" [$\alpha = 0.90$]), *Projection* (16 items; e.g., "I'd blame my superior for having made up his mind against me even before the visit" [$\alpha = 0.88$]), *Reversal of Affect* (16 items; e.g., "Congratulate my assistant on the promotion" [$\alpha = 0.82$]), and

Principalization (16 items; e.g., "I'd accept my dismissal gracefully, since my superior is only doing his job" [$\alpha = 0.60$]). After reading each story, participants were asked to respond to each statement in the four sets, and rate how much ($1 = $ *not at all well*; $7 = $ *extremely well*) the statement describes them. The items were averaged to create the five scales. However, because we found that turning against the object and projection were well correlated ($r = 0.84$, $p < .01$) and reversal of affect and principalization were well correlated ($r = 0.64$, $p < .01$), we ran a secondary principal components analysis on the five defense mechanisms. A three-factor structure emerged that resembled prior tests (Woodrow, 1973). From our interpretation (slightly different than Woodrow, 1973), we labeled these factors *externalizing* (Eigen = 2.18), *rationalizing* (Eigen = 1.77), and *internalizing* (Eigen = 0.64) which accounted for over 92% of the variance in total.[7]

2. Results

Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and narcissism were linked to an externalizing bias ($rs = 0.50$, 0.43, 0.21 respectively, $p < .01$) but not a rationalizing bias ($rs - 0.06$ to 0.03), and psychopathy and Machiavellianism were associated with internalizing ($rs = 0.19$, 0.25 respectively, $p < .01$) as well. These correlations did not differ across the sexes (Fisher's $zs = -1.04$ to 1.16). As previously reported (Jonason & Fletcher, 2018), men scored higher on the Dark Triad traits than women did (Cohen's ds 0.31 to 0.62). There were no sex differences for the externalizing or rationalizing biases ($ds = -0.10$ and 0.06, respectively) but women ($M = 2.28$, $SD = 0.63$) were more likely than were men ($M = 2.12$, $SD = 0.62$) to have an internalizing bias (t (292) $= -2.16$, $p < .05$, $d = -0.25$). Given these sex differences, we tested whether sex differences ($\beta_{Step1} = 0.13$) in internalizing could be a function of individual differences in the Dark Triad traits. We found evidence for suppression in Machiavellianism ($\Delta R^2 = 0.08$, $p < .01$; $\beta_{Step2} = 0.18$) and psychopathy ($\Delta R^2 = 0.06$, $p < .01$; $\beta_{Step2} = 0.20$), suggesting the removal of the traits makes women *more* likely to internalize. There were no other suppression or mediation effects.

3. Discussion

How might we best conceptualize personality traits beyond the descriptive approach? One way is to frame them as dispositions that bias people to respond and act in certain ways (e.g., Jonason & Fletcher, 2018). These biases come in many forms and may be motivational in nature, leading people to adopt particular ways of life, to perceive the world in specific ways, and to deal with conflict in adaptive or maladaptive ways. In this study, we explored three potential psychodynamic biases in relation to the Dark Triad traits. We found that the Dark Triad traits have an externalizing psychodynamic bias. This bias may be part of the larger, antisocial and selfish social strategy characterized by exploitation of others for physical and psychological needs. In contrast, none of the traits were linked with a rationalization bias which may reflect a relatively action-oriented approach to the world. And last, psychopathy and Machiavellianism revealed a tendency to internalize which may be related to their association with depression as compared to narcissism (Jonason et al., 2015). Collectively, these biases are likely influential in how men and women high in the Dark Triad traits interact with the world leading to meaningful life outcomes.

In addition, we confirmed that women, compared to men, were more likely to have an internalizing psychodynamic bias. This bias was characterized by a tendency to blame oneself which is reminiscent of depression which women are also more likely to suffer from (Nolen-Hoeksema, 1990). However, we also revealed two interesting

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[6] Machiavellianism was associated with narcissism ($r = 0.42$, $p < .01$) and psychopathy ($r = 0.67$, $p < .01$) and narcissism was associated with psychopathy ($r = 0.48$, $p < .01$).

[7] Externalizing was associated with rationalizing ($r = -0.15$, $p < .01$) and internalizing ($r = 0.37$, $p < .01$) and rationalizing was associated with internalizing ($r = 22$, $p < .01$).

suppression effects that suggested women who were more psychopathic and Machiavellian might turn on themselves less and, therefore, might suffer depression less as well. Although suppression effects are notoriously hard to trust and replicate, these effects provide an interesting psychosocial benefit for these traits in the sex that tends to be less characterized by them. In this case, Machiavellianism and psychopathy may act as protective buffers for some women from the self-recriminations characteristic of depression.

3.1. Limitations and conclusions

Our study was characterized by several limitations. First, our data is Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010). Second, we adopted short measures throughout to reduce participant fatigue, which may undermine our ability to conduct finer grained analyses. Third, there remain some limitations associated with the defense mechanisms measure. For example, content validity may only be adequate for three of the five focal scales (i.e., turning against the self, reversal of affect, and principalization), meaning that these conclusions need to be treated carefully, but one we may have offset by our secondary principle components approach. Fourth, we have used a limited number of psychodynamic processes—ones revealed in the factor analysis only—when there are likely many more. Fifth, while our assessment of defense mechanisms might be better than other assessments (Richardson & Boag, 2016) our measure relied on hypothetical threats only, meaning future work might need to experimentally manipulate threat. Future work should endeavor to address these limitations in more cross-culturally diverse samples using more methodological diversity and rigor.

In conclusion, we assert that the Dark Triad traits are linked by an externalizing not a rationalizing psychodynamic bias. In addition, psychopathy and Machiavellianism are associated with an internalizing psychodynamic bias unlike narcissism. Women are more characterized by an internalizing bias, especially for women who are low on psychopathy and Machiavellianism. Future work on the psychodynamic systems associated with the Dark Triad traits is warranted.

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