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The Short Dark Triad and Giving to Nonprofits

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The Short Dark Triad and Giving to Nonprofits

Cover Page Footnote

Thank you to Paul Story and Charles Elliott for all they did in helping make this study a reality.

The Short Dark Triad and Giving to Nonprofits

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ABSTRACT

The present study examines whether “demonstrable utility,” the belief that giving provides immediate or future tangible benefits (Sargeant, Ford, & West, 2006) significantly correlates to the adverse personality traits Machiavellianism and narcissism as they are defined in the Short Dark Triad (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Two-hundred and twelve participants were gathered from Kennesaw State University to participate in a 20-minute online survey. While other factors were tested, attention was placed on demonstrable utility. Simple linear regression models were used to determine the relationship between demonstrable utility, Machiavellianism, and narcissism. A post-hoc Sobel’s mediation test was used to establish the different relationships that the Short Dark Triad (SD3), a measure of the dark personality traits narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy, had with factors in the model of perceptual determinants of giving to a nonprofit. Demonstrable utility was found predictive of both narcissism and Machiavellianism, and the factors emotional utility, responsiveness, communication quality, and demonstrable utility were found related to the SD3. Studies in the future might take into account adverse personality traits such as Machiavellianism and narcissism when developing constructs of giving behavior, and more studies should focus on the effect of nonprofit marketing appeals centered on these personality traits.

Keywords: narcissism, nonprofits, charity, giving behaviors, donating, Machiavellianism

It is not unusual to consider giving as a generally selfless act where someone else benefits at a cost to yourself. This cost could come in the form of time (e.g., stopping to give somebody directions), resources (e.g., donating money to a charity), or even bodily risk, where helping might put themselves in harm’s way. However, giving, specifically to a nonprofit, might have to do just as much with the promise of selfish gain as with selfless intent.

Take, for instance, The Ice Bucket Challenge, a wildly successful online nonprofit campaign that involved pouring ice water over your head and posting it online,

which attracted both altruistic donators and narcissists (Konrath, Ho, & Zarins, 2016). Understanding why it was so successful is especially important now with increased activity by nonprofits online that give people a constant source of potential attention and praise.

While there are many models of giving, such as those proposed by Wolfenbarger (1990), Bekkers and Wiepking (2011), and Hladka and Hyaneek (2015), few have focused specifically on willingness to donate to nonprofits based on perceptual factors. Social recognition and potential future benefits, for example if someone might

fall victim to the same circumstances in the future, are both linked to nonprofit giving behavior (Andreasen & Kotler, 1991; Beatty, Homer, & Kahle, 1991; Karlan & McConnell, 2014). Alternatively, people may give because someone close to them might benefit from their donation (Sargeant, 1999), or for emotional reasons, like the avoidance of negative feelings (Salekin, Rogers, & Sewell, 1996) or enhancement of positive feelings (Andreoni, 1990). These reasons have been termed demonstrable, familial, and emotional utility, respectively. These selfish reasons for giving may be especially appealing to those who value them, like narcissists.

The Dark Triad, according to Paulhus and Williams (2002), is a measure of three adverse and callous personality traits: Machiavellianism (manipulation and strategic planning), narcissism (egoism and exhibitionism), and psychopathy (emotional detachment and impulsivity). The Dark Triad traits are negatively related to prosocial behavior, such as helping, volunteering, and cooperation, and are related to more destructive behaviors like criminality, violence, lying, and cheating (Aghababaei, Saffarinia & Mohammadtabar, 2014; Azizli et al., 2016; Egan, Boon, & Pailing, 2014; Jones & Paulhus, 2017). However, circumstances that exhibit utility can motivate those with Dark Triad personality traits to participate in prosocial behavior (Bereczkei et al., 2010; Konrath et al., 2016; Mahmut, Cridland, & Stevenson, 2016).

Machiavellianism

Machiavellianism involves having a cynical worldview, manipulative tendencies, and actively engaging in strategic planning (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Those who rate higher in Machiavellianism are less likely to give aid to a stranger; however, they view the

potential increase in social status as a motivation for participating in more normative behaviors (Bereczkei, Birkas, & Kerekes, 2010). When individuals with high Machiavellianism ratings were performing poorly in work settings, recognition by peers boosted performance (Wang, 2017; Smith & Webster, 2017). Bereczkei et al. (2010) show that individuals with high Machiavellianism ratings will switch their behaviors from altruistic when around friends to self-centered when friends are not around. In the same study, for those who were high in Machiavellianism, the potential for recognition by others had an even stronger impact on donating than whether the charity was asking for a small or large donation.

Narcissism

Narcissism is similar to Machiavellianism in that those who rate high in narcissism do not typically act with consideration for others' needs. Narcissists have low empathy and are more concerned with behaviors that boost their ego than those that help others (Campbell, Rudich, & Sedikides, 2002; Watson, Grisham, Trotter, & Biderman, 1984). Additionally, people who rated highly in narcissism were shown to give gifts to their partners as a means of relationship maintenance or future rewards of power rather than out of love (Hyun, Park, & Park, 2016). The motivations behind donating for those rating highly in narcissism are more agentic (concerned with status and power) than communal (warmth and concern for others; Campbell & Foster, 2007). Konrath et al. (2016) found that narcissists were more willing to donate money to a cause when receiving public recognition. This has implications for what kinds of nonprofit campaigns and charitable appeals will attract certain people.

In general, those high in Dark Triad traits engage in prosocial behavior to satisfy a more selfish goal. Specifically, people with Machiavellianism or narcissism are open to giving compliments but use it as a tactic of manipulation (Jonason, Slomski, & Partyka, 2012). People with psychopathy may be motivated to help the opposite sex, supposedly for the purposes of charming them (Mahmut, Cridland, & Stevenson, 2016). Those who rate high in Machiavellianism or narcissism are motivated to give based on recognition and social status (Campbell & Foster, 2007; Bereczkei, Birkas, & Kerekes, 2010; Konrath et al., 2016). For the purposes of this article we will only be interested in Machiavellianism and narcissism described in the SD3.

Currently, a model of giving behavior including Machiavellianism and narcissism has not been fully established. A large sample of students from Kennesaw State University completed both the Short Dark Triad and the Perception of Benefits Construct, which measures charitable giving. The hypotheses of the present study are that in the charitable model of giving proposed by Sargeant et al. (2006), that includes factors like emotional utility (emotional gain) and familial utility (gain to family), the factor demonstrable utility (substantive personal gain) is correlated to Machiavellianism (Hypothesis 1) and narcissism (Hypothesis 2).

Method

Participants

We recruited 212 Kennesaw State University students online to participate in the study. All students were taking entry level undergraduate psychology courses. Eight of these participants had their data removed for not completing or consenting to the study.

The total sample was then reduced to $n = 204$. More women than men participated in the study (108 women; 96 men). The age range varied between 18 and 37 with 86.8% of students identifying between 18 and 21 years of age ($M = 20$, $SD = 2.64$). In terms of race, 58.3% of students reported as White, 26.5% as African American, and 15.2% as mixed, Hispanic, or other. During the time of the study, 67.6% of the participants were employed. Participants were offered half a point of extra credit toward their final grade in the introductory class. All participants were treated in a manner consistent with the American Psychological Association Code of Professional Ethics (APA, 2002).

Measures

Short Dark Triad. The 27-item Short Dark Triad (SD3; Jones & Paulhus, 2014) measures dark personalities based on three facets: Narcissism, Machiavellianism, and Psychopathy. For the purposes of this article, only the narcissistic and Machiavellianism questions were used. Participants responded to each item (e.g., “Payback needs to be quick and nasty”) using a five-point Likert-type scale (1 – *strongly disagree* to 5 – *strongly agree*). The subscales of the SD3 were utilized to measure each facet separately. The reliability of the subscales were calculated as follows: Machiavellianism ($\alpha = .812$) and narcissism ($\alpha = .723$).

Perception of Benefits Construct. The 37-item scale, referred to in this article as the “Perception of Benefits Construct” (POBC; Sargeant et al., 2006), measures perceptual determinants to giving to nonprofits using eight facets: demonstrable utility, emotional utility, familial utility, performance of the organization (how efficient the organization operates), responsiveness of the organization (how well

the organization responds to the needs of its cause), communication quality (how well the organization communicates with donors), commitment (respondents' commitment to the organization), and trust (the respondents' trust in the organization). Participants responded to each item using a five-point Likert-type scale (1 – *strongly disagree* to 5 – *strongly agree*). Each question on the POBC referred to the nonprofit organization the American Red Cross. For example, a question regarding demonstrable utility would be, “When I give to this nonprofit, I receive some benefit in return for my donation.” Reliabilities for each of the eight separate subscales were calculated utilizing Cronbach Alpha Coefficients, and all were above the minimum level of 0.70. Finally, participants answered demographic questions about age, gender, ethnicity, religion, current employment, and their own giving habits.

Procedure

Participants consented to the study via computer session and had their identification number recorded confidentially. Participants filled out the SD3 and POBC via their online computer session. The items of the POBC referred to the American Red Cross. Each session lasted around 15-20 minutes, and afterwards participants were thanked for their participation.

Results

First, the hypothesis related to demonstrable utility's predictive relationship to Machiavellianism was tested. A simple linear regression was calculated to identify any predictive relationship. Demonstrable utility (DU) from the POBC significantly predicted Machiavellianism from the SD3, $F(1, 202) = 25.743, p < .001, R^2 = .113$.

Second, the hypothesis related to demonstrable utility's predictive relationship to narcissism from the SD3 was tested. A simple linear regression was calculated to identify any predictive relationship. DU from the POBC significantly predicted narcissism from the SD3, $F(1, 202) = 35.529, p < .001, R^2 = .150$. Participants' predicted weight is equal to $19.479 + 0.454$ (DU) when narcissism is measured in points. Participants' narcissism significantly increased by a half point ($\beta = .454, SE = .076$) for each point of DU.

The model above was tested with a post-hoc mediation analysis using Sobel's test for mediation. In the model, DU and emotional utility (EU) were mediated by their increasing or decreasing the predictive relationship each had on the SD3. DU was significantly increased by the inclusion of EU inside of the predictive model for SD3 (*Sobel's* = 2.33, $SE = .52, p = .019$). Additionally, responsiveness to organization and communication quality were mediated by their increasing or decreasing the predictive relationship each had on the SD3. Responsiveness to organization was significantly reduced by the inclusion of communication quality within the predictive model for SD3 (*Sobel's* = -2.25, $SE = .43, p = .024$). Each variable within the model acted as a mediator to the other in terms to their predictive relationship to the SD3. Therefore, evidence of mediation within this model exists through the prediction of dark personality using the POBC.

Trust from the POBC was highly positively correlated with commitment ($r = .631, p < .001$), demonstrating a great fit for both in a predictive model. However, contrary to what was suggested by Sargent et al. (2006), commitment from the POBC was not significantly related to demonstrable

utility ($r = .117$, $p = .097$) indicating it may not be a good fit inside of a model. This might be related to the sample of the study; only 7.6% of the participants reported donating often. Over 50% of the college students who participated claimed they “rarely” or “very rarely” donated.

Discussion

Results demonstrated that demonstrable utility was positively correlated to both Machiavellianism and narcissism. This gives evidence to the idea that those rated highly in narcissism and Machiavellianism are more likely to give in circumstances that offer rewards of social recognition, future rewards, and increased status among peers.

While the results did not show the same predictive relationship between commitment and DU, other factors of the POBC -- emotional utility, responsiveness, and communication -- were all individually predictive of the SD3. This suggests that along with considering demonstrable utility, someone with high ratings in dark personality traits will consider whether giving to a nonprofit offers a good feeling, and whether the organization responds to donor questions and actively communicates that the organization is using funds appropriately.

Some of the limitations from the study stemmed from the fact it was completed entirely online; therefore, some answers might have been made in haste or not in total honesty. Future studies should consider a real-life situation that presents participants with different nonprofit marketing appeals and how they react to encountering the organization in person. Research into organizations suggests it is possible to market products to appeal to narcissistic personalities to enhance

purchases (de Bellis, Sprott, Herrmann, Bierhoff, & Rohmann, 2016). Nonprofit marketing appeals can have a similar effect. It is important for research to continue to examine what factors motivate certain people to donate so nonprofits might have better luck marketing their appeals.

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