



Short Communication

Malicious mouths? The Dark Triad and motivations for gossip



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ABSTRACT

There are several reasons for why people may be motivated to engage in gossip, such as group protection, status enhancement, and social bonding. In an on-line study ($N = 372$), we investigated how individual differences affect gossiping behaviour by examining the relationship between the Dark Triad (i.e., primary and secondary psychopathy, narcissism and Machiavellianism) and motivations to gossip. Correlational analyses indicated that psychopathy and narcissism had a positive relationship with social enjoyment, group protection, and negative influence gossip, whereas Machiavellianism was positively correlated with only negative influence gossip. When we controlled for shared variance between the Dark Triad traits, secondary psychopathy emerged as a positive predictor of group protection gossip. The findings are discussed within an evolutionary framework, along with directions for future research.

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1. Introduction

Gossiping (i.e., talking about absent third parties; Foster, 2004) is an interesting, although in many ways paradoxical social phenomenon, characterised by a constellation of positive and negative features. From an ultimate perspective, gossip is thought to have evolved as a tool for controlling free-riders (Dunbar, 2004). According to this idea, gossip is a prosocial act that can be used for gathering and distributing reputational information about others in order to distribute the information to group members (Feinberg, Willer, Stellar, & Keltner, 2012), and is an accepted form of behaviour when framed as an instrument for group protection (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012). However, gossip can also take the form of malicious, false information used in bullying, isolating, and ostracising others (McAndrew, 2014). This kind of gossip may enhance one's status within the group (McAndrew, Bell, & Garcia, 2007), although if too explicit, it can lead to perceptions of low status of the gossipier (Farley, 2011). Gossip may also serve as a tool for social bonding (Dunbar, 2004; McDonald, Putallaz, Grimes, Kupersmidt, & Coie, 2007), strengthening the relationship between friends and strangers alike, especially when negative information is shared (Bosson, Johnson, Niederhoffer, & Swann, 2006). Furthermore, gossiping can take place for social enjoyment. For example, people

have been found to gossip for the purpose of providing satisfaction and amusement (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012). Despite the obvious importance of gossip in social interactions, there has been very little psychological research on gossip (Foster, 2004), and even fewer studies investigating how individual differences may affect the motivations to gossip (although see Watson, 2011).

The Dark Triad (i.e., narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy) is a constellation of personality traits, characterised by callousness and the tendency to manipulate others to one's own benefit (Jones & Figueredo, 2013). Individuals high in narcissism are vain, seek for admiration, and view themselves superior to others (Raskin & Terry, 1988). Machiavellianism relates to deceitfulness, manipulateness, misanthropy and cynicism about human nature (Christie & Geis, 1970). Psychopathy can be divided into two sub-components, primary psychopathy (i.e., superficial charm, callous affect, lack of guilt and remorse), and secondary psychopathy (i.e., impulsivity and risk-taking tendencies; Paulhus, Neumann, & Hare, in press). The Dark Triad has been suggested as an evolutionary cheater strategy (Baughman, Jonason, Lyons, & Vernon, 2014), adaptive when the manipulation strategies for achieving social goals are subtle, and not easily detected (Jonason & Webster, 2012). Previous studies have found a relationship between the Dark Triad and bullying (Baughman, Dearing, Giammarco, & Vernon, 2012), on-line trolling (Buckels, Trapnell, & Paulhus, 2014), as well as diverse positive and negative social influence tactics (Jonason & Webster, 2012). Although the Dark Triad has been associated with indirect aggression, including

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spreading rumours (Baughman et al., 2012; Carter, Montanaro, Linney, & Campbell, 2015), research has not yet investigated how the Dark Triad may relate to different motivations for gossiping. It is possible that individuals enacting a cheater strategy use gossiping as a tool for status enhancement, rather than as a pro-social strategy aimed at protecting others. We aim to fill this gap in research by examining possible links between the Dark Triad and multiple functions of gossip.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Students and community members ($N = 372$; 76 men; $M_{age} = 24.88$, $SD = 10.94$) were invited via email and social media advertisements to take part in an online study looking at “personality and information exchange”. The first page of the survey contained details about the study, including relevant ethical information. Participants provided an on-line consent, and were given a full debrief at the end of the survey.

2.2. Measures

Gossiping was measured using the 22-item Motives to Gossip questionnaire (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012). This questionnaire contains four subscales: information gathering (9 items; $\alpha = .95$), negative influence (5 items; $\alpha = .88$), social enjoyment (5 items; $\alpha = .89$) and group protection (3 items, $\alpha = .71$). Participants were instructed that “sometimes people engage in conversation about other people in the absence of those people. Please rate your agreement for different reasons why you might have done this in the past”. All items were preceded with the opening phrase “For me a reason to instigate this conversation was...”, and the statements included items such as “to engage in an enjoyable activity” (i.e., social enjoyment gossip), “to damage the reputation of the person we talked about” (i.e., negative influence gossip), “to check whether my image of the person we talked about was correct” (i.e., information gathering gossip), and “to protect the person I was talking with against the person we were talking about (i.e., group protection gossip). Responses were rated on a 7-point Likert Scale (1 = completely disagree; 7 = completely agree), and items for each subscale were summed and averaged.

Psychopathy was measured on a 5-point (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree), 64-item Self-Reported Psychopathy Scale (Paulhus et al., *in press*). Items included statements such as “I never cry at movies” and “I have tricked somebody into giving money to me”. These items were summed to create indexes of primary ($\alpha = .90$) and secondary ($\alpha = .84$) psychopathy.

Machiavellianism was measured on a 7-point (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree), 20-item Mach IV scale (Christie & Geis, 1970). Items included statements such as “Never tell anyone the real reason you did something unless it is useful to do so” and “It’s hard to get ahead without cutting corners here and there”. Items were summed to create a Machiavellianism index ($\alpha = .78$).

Narcissism was measured using the 40-item forced-choice Narcissistic Personality Inventory (Raskin & Terry, 1988). Items included statements related to high narcissism, (e.g., “I know that I am good because everybody keeps telling me so”) as well as statements related to low narcissism (e.g., “When people compliment me I sometimes get embarrassed”). Participants choose one of the two statements. For each high narcissism choice, a score of 1 was given, whereas a score of 0 was given for each low narcissism choice. These scores were summed to create an overall narcissism index ($\alpha = .87$).

3. Results

Descriptive statistics are presented in Table 1, showing that men scored significantly higher on measures of primary and secondary psychopathy, narcissism and Machiavellianism compared to women. There were no significant differences in scores between men and women on the four gossiping variables.

We conducted bivariate correlations (Bonferroni-corrected, $p < .003$) in order to explore the relationships between the Dark Triad, and each of the four gossiping variables (Table 2). Both psychopathy subtypes and narcissism were correlated with social enjoyment, group protection, and negative influence gossip, and Machiavellianism was correlated with negative influence gossip. In order to control for the shared variance among the Dark Triad, multiple regression analyses were also conducted to determine the relative contribution of each Dark Triad trait (Table 2). Secondary psychopathy emerged as a positive predictor of group protection gossip. All of the correlations were similar in both sexes (all Fisher’s z p ’s $> .05$), indicating that the Dark Triad operates in a similar way irrespective of the sex of the individual.

4. Discussion

Our findings suggest that especially psychopathy and narcissism relate to diverse motivations for gossiping, including social bonding, group protection, and negative influence gossip. Previous research has suggested that psychopathy and narcissism (but not Machiavellianism) are associated with strive for dominance (Rauthmann & Kolar, 2013), which could be a reason why these traits linked with gossip (McAndrew et al., 2007). Interestingly, a recent study found that individuals high in primary psychopathy had high levels of conversational dominance (i.e., greater number of words during a conversation; Manson, Gervais, Fessler, & Kline, 2014). It is possible that having multiple conversation topics facilitates the agentic, competitive inter-personal orientation typical to individuals high in psychopathy and narcissism (Rauthmann & Kolar, 2013), explaining why these traits were associated with more diverse gossip motivations. Future studies should investigate the Dark Triad traits in naturalistic conversation groups, analysing the content of the conversations, and revealing how each trait may link to different types of gossip (see also Kniffin & Wilson, 2005).

When shared variance between the Dark Triad was controlled for, unexpectedly, secondary psychopathy emerged as a positive predictor of group protection gossip. Although psychopathy has been traditionally associated with reduced empathy and guilt, this may be more typical of primary, rather than secondary psychopathy (Jonason, Lyons, Bethell, & Ross, 2013; Lyons, 2014). It is possible that individuals high in secondary psychopathy have other-oriented emotions intact, especially with regards to people who are considered as in-group members. In fact, experimental evidence suggests that individuals high in psychopathy can be induced to feel concern towards in-group members (Arbuckle & Cunningham, 2012). Perhaps in-group benefiting behaviours, including group protection gossip, are more typical of secondary psychopathy. Interestingly, Gervais, Kline, Ludmer, George, and Manson (2013) found that individuals high in secondary psychopathy were successful in eliciting cooperation from others. Gossip may be an effective tool for promoting altruism (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2011), and could be a form of social influence strategy (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012) associated with secondary psychopathy. The role of group protection gossip and secondary psychopathy certainly warrant further investigation.

Our study has some limitations, such as the possibility that people lack insight into their own gossiping behaviour (Foster, 2004). Rather than using questionnaire measures, gossip and personality

Table 1
Descriptive statistics and sex differences for the Dark Triad and gossiping variables.

	Mean (SD)			t	g
	Overall	Women	Men		
Primary psychopathy	72.54 (17.37)	69.06 (15.41)	86.11 (18.00)	8.30*	1.06
Secondary psychopathy	64.71 (14.88)	62.53 (14.01)	73.21 (15.22)	5.82*	0.75
Narcissism	13.13 (7.06)	12.18 (6.61)	16.86 (7.57)	5.33*	0.69
Machiavellianism	72.70 (15.25)	70.99 (14.73)	79.33 (15.51)	4.35*	0.56
Information gathering gossip	4.18 (1.58)	4.22 (1.61)	4.01 (1.46)	1.05	0.13
Social enjoyment gossip	3.70 (1.54)	3.64 (1.55)	3.92 (1.46)	1.41	0.18
Group protection gossip	2.91 (1.40)	2.89 (1.39)	2.96 (1.44)	.361	0.05
Negative influence gossip	2.45 (1.29)	2.39 (1.31)	2.68 (1.16)	1.73	0.23

* $p < .001$.

Table 2
Relationship between the Dark Triad and gossiping variables.

	r (β)			
	Primary psychopathy	Secondary psychopathy	Narcissism	Machiavellianism
Information gathering gossip	.06 (–.07)	.07 (.04)	.07 (.08)	.10 (.10)
Social enjoyment gossip	.17* (.14)	.13 (.03)	.16* (.09)	.10 (–.03)
Group protection gossip	.12 (.01)	.21* (.20)	.15* (.09)	.04 (–.06)
Negative influence gossip	.25* (.12)	.19* (.04)	.21* (.11)	.21* (.08)

* $p < .001$.

might be best investigated in naturalistic settings in order to discover how the Dark Triad strategies are manifested in their natural habitats. There has been criticism for the overt use of questionnaire measures in personality research (Baumeister, Vohs, & Funder, 2007; Mehl, Gosling, & Pennebaker, 2006), and social behaviours such as gossiping would benefit from more diverse methods, such as observational studies and controlled experiments (Foster, 2004). Further, we encountered a problem common in psychology research (Dickinson, Adelson, & Owen, 2012): an imbalance between the sexes, with nearly five times more female than male participants. However, the sample had enough power for the analyses, and should be reliable enough to draw conclusions from.

Despite the limitations, we have provided a useful insight into how manipulative aspects of personality link to using gossip as a behavioural strategy in diverse settings. Our results also give tentative suggestions for the possibility that aspects of psychopathy may be adaptive within in-group context, and could have a function in protecting group members. Rather than viewing these traits as a harmful tool for exploitation, some aspects of manipulative personalities may, in fact, be useful within-group adaptations, increasing the success of the group, as well as the individuals within it.

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