Is Social Understanding Related to the Dark Triad?

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Abstract

Theory of mind (ToM) may be linked to negative social personality characteristics, yet little research has examined these links in adults. The findings of this study indicate a negative link between adult’s ToM scores and negative personality characteristics. These findings contribute to the understanding between ToM and negative social personality characteristics, which can help predict bullying.

Introduction

Recent research suggests that children’s theory of mind (ToM) may be linked to negative social personality characteristics, yet little research has examined these links in adults. The findings of this study indicate a negative link between adult’s ToM scores and negative personality characteristics. These findings contribute to the understanding between ToM and negative social personality characteristics, which can help predict bullying.

Methods

The relations among adults’ ToM and negative social-personality characteristics were assessed using a sample of 123 undergraduate students (80 males and 43 females). Participants completed the Imposing Memories Task (IMT, a measure of ToM), and the Dirty Dozen (DD; Jonason & Webster, 2010) measuring negative personality characteristics machiavellianism, narcissism and psychopathy.

Results

Analyses revealed that adults’ ToM scores were inversely related to negative social personality characteristics associated with manipulation (machiavellianism, \( r = -.25, p < .01 \)), and also narcissism (\( r = -.17, p < .05 \)) and psychopathy (\( r = -.26, p < .005 \)).

Conclusion

Adults who scored higher on the ToM tasks were less likely to engage in negative personality characteristics (machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy). This suggests a negative link between children’s ToM and negative characteristics. The present findings contribute to the understanding of adult ToM in relation to important social functions and personality characteristics. This is important because the use of ToM can help understand and predict bullying and other imperative social functions, such as social cooperation. Further research is needed to study the relations among these variables in real life situations.