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Personality Traits Associated with Reactive and Proactive Aggression
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Introduction
Aggression may be defined as any behavior that is intended to hurt another person.

This study was designed to examine the role of personality, with a particular focus on the Dark Triad (narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism), in determining levels of aggressive behavior in provoked and unprovoked experimental conditions. In particular, this study sought to explore the situations under which this behavior is observed, and the mechanisms through which this relationship operates.

Hypothesis:
Individuals with dark personalities will react more aggressively in response to provocation versus no provocation, and this relationship will be mediated by anger.

Method
Participants were 117 American introductory psychology students (42 men, 75 women, Mage = 20.342).

After being told that they would be interacting with an anonymous online partner, participants were seated in isolated computer cubicles and completed a 12-item measure of the "Dark Triad" (Jonason & Webster, 2010):

- Narcissism (e.g., I tend to want others to admire me)
- Subclinical Psychopathy (e.g., I tend to be callous or insensitive)
- Machiavellianism (e.g., I tend to manipulate others to get my way)

Each statement was responded to on a 7 point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree)

Participants then, ostensibly, exchanged essays with an online partner (randomly determined).

They then evaluated each other’s essays. To manipulate provocation, participants received either insulting feedback or positive feedback from their partner (randomly determined).

Method (continued)
After the feedback, participants completed a three-item measure of anger (based on the PANAS-X, Watson & Clark, 1994). They indicated the extent to which they were feeling hostile, upset, and irritable on a scale ranging from 1 to 5 (1 being not at all; 5 being very much so or extremely)

Aggression was assessed using a modified Noise Blast Paradigm (Taylor, 1967):
- Participants were told that they would play a reaction time game with their “online partner”, where they clicked a button as fast as possible once a certain shape appeared on the screen.
- The “winner” of each trial set the noise level and duration of a noise blast that the “loser” of each trial received. The blasts ranged from 1 (extremely mild) to 10 (extremely harsh).
- Aggression was defined as the first blast intensity the participant selected for their partner to receive. Higher blast intensities indicated higher levels of aggression.

Results
The measure of the dark triad was found to have good internal reliability (α = .80 for the total scale). Scores could range from 12 (extremely low) to 84 (extremely high).

To test our hypothesis we conducted an analysis of moderated mediation using Process (Hayes, 2012).

- The results determined that under provocation, dark triad scores predicted higher levels of aggression, and this relationship was mediated by anger, effect = .058 (SE = .025), LCI = .017 and UCI = .115.
- However, under the condition of no provocation, scores on the dark triad were unrelated to aggression, effect = -.003 (SE = .016), LCI = -.036 and UCI = .028.
- The index of moderated mediation was significant, effect = -.061 (SE = .031), LCI = -.128 and UCI = -.010.
- These results are presented in Figures 1 and 2

Discussion
Consistent with predictions, individuals with dark personalities reacted more aggressively when provoked, and this relationship was mediated by anger. This study has several limitations, including a relative lack of ecological validity, and the fact that we have not yet replicated the findings. The findings are, however, consistent with studies showing a similar pattern among people with inflated levels of self-esteem (e.g., Baumeister, et al., 2000).

These findings have important implications, including the need to integrate personality into models of aggression. It’s notable that the dark traits we studied are normal dimensions of personality and were not related to random aggression. They were related only to reactive aggression. In everyday life, personal slights are not always explicit.

In the future, it may be beneficial to examine if people with “dark” personalities have a hostile attribution bias (interpret ambiguous behaviors as an affront). Continued efforts along these lines may help us better understand and prevent interpersonal aggression.