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Narcissism Moderates the Relationship between Provocation and Intergroup Aggression

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Introduction

Intergroup aggression may be defined as any behavior that is intended to hurt another person because of his or her group membership. Hate crimes, for example, are perpetrated because of bias toward a particular race, religion, sexual orientation, ethnicity, national origin, or physical or mental disability.

We tested a theoretical model of intergroup aggression that considers both personality traits and situational variables.

Hypotheses

1. Aggressive responses will be greater after provocation, as social norms prohibit unjustified aggression (Otten, 1996).
2. More aggression will be expressed in an intergroup condition than an interpersonal condition (Wildschut, et al., 2003).
3. Participants with “dark” personalities -- high levels of narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism – will have significantly exaggerated responses to intergroup provocation.

Method

Participants were 212 American introductory psychology students (74 males, 138 females, mean age = 19.94).

They 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*)

Participants then, ostensibly, exchanged essays with an online partner (actually a computer program), who was characterized as an international student (outgroup condition) or a local student (ingroup condition) (determined by random assignment).

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

Then, participants completed a measure of affect (the PANAS-X, Watson & Clark, 1994).

Finally, aggression was assessed using the tangram paradigm (Barlest & Anderson, 2011):

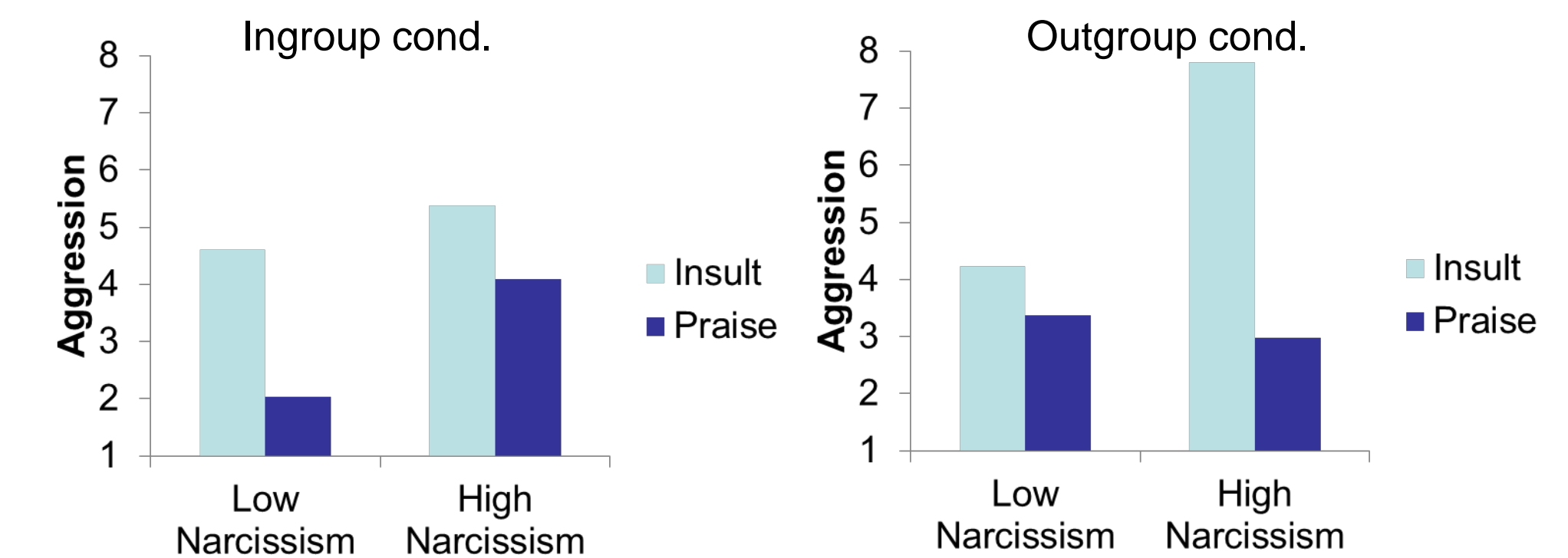
- Participants were then told that if their “online partner” could solve 10 tangram puzzles he or she (the partner) would win \$25.
- Participants selected 11 tangram puzzles for their partner to solve out of a pool of 10 easy, 10 medium, and 10 hard puzzles.
- Aggression was defined as the number of hard tangrams selected, an act intended to hurt the partner’s chances of winning the prize.

Results

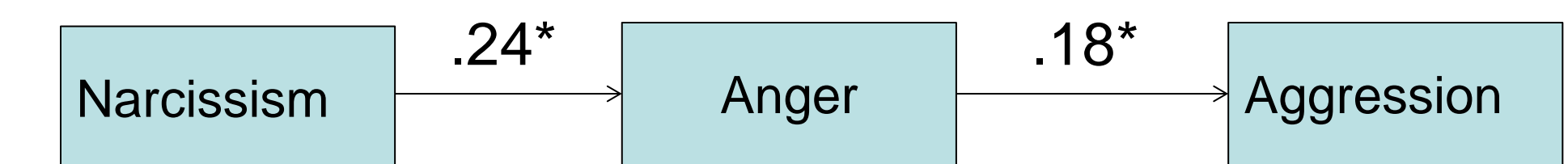
Participants were defined as low or high on the Dark Triad traits if they scored ½ standard deviation below or above the mean. A series of 3-way Analyses of Variance (ANOVAs) was performed with Group (ingroup or outgroup), Feedback (insult or praise) and Trait (low or high) as independent variables and aggression (total number of hard tangrams assigned to the partner) as the dependent variable.

- There was a main effect for Feedback. Consistent with Hypothesis 1, participants in the insult condition were more aggressive than those in the praise condition, respective Means = 5.42 ($SD = 3.25$) vs 3.16 ($SD = 3.22$), $F(1, 149) = 24.61, p < .001$.
- Contrary to Hypothesis 2, there was not a main effect for the group condition. Although the means were in the predicted direction, participants were not significantly more aggressive toward an outgroup member ($M = 4.32, SD = 3.31$) than an ingroup member ($M = 3.73, SD = 3.50$).
- Of the three Dark Triad traits, only Narcissism had a main effect. Highly narcissistic participants were more aggressive than their low-scoring counterparts, respective M s = 4.53 ($SD = 3.76$) vs 3.46 ($SD = 2.91$), $F(1, 149) = 7.60, p < .005$.
- There was a narcissism x feedback interaction effect, $F(1, 149) = 2.52, p < .05$. After receiving praise, participants with high and low Narcissism scores were equally nonaggressive (respective M s = 3.57 and 2.58, *ns*), but after insult the high narcissists were significantly more aggressive than the low narcissists (respective M s = 4.44 and 6.96, $p < .005$).

- There was a 3-way narcissism x feedback x group interaction effect, $F(1, 149) = 5.91, p < .01$. As shown in Figure 1, the means are consistent with Hypothesis 3. Narcissistic participants were especially aggressive after being insulted by an outgroup member.



- Structural Equation Modeling determined that the relationship between narcissism and aggression following insult was mediated by anger (PANAS variables hostile, irritable, upset). The results are shown in Figure 2. This model was a good fit to the data, ($\chi^2 = 2.59, p = .11, GFI = .98, NFI = .81, RMSEA = .12$).



Discussion

The results support a person x situation approach to intergroup aggression and have implications for integrating personality and social psychological approaches to this important social issue. Our results suggest that there are some distinct factors that influence intergroup aggression, including the dynamics of ingroup bias, individual-group discontinuity, and certain personality dispositions, most notable narcissism.

Methodologically, our study is unique because it is one of the few studies of intergroup aggression carried out in controlled laboratory settings using experimental procedures. Such procedures allow greater confidence in establishing causal relationships, a primary goal of science.