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The Big Bad Wolf? the relation between the Dark Triad and the interpersonal assessment of vulnerability



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ABSTRACT

Although it is recognized that “dark personalities” engage in a high level of interpersonal manipulation and exploitation, little is known about whether or how they assess a target’s potential vulnerability prior to such behavior. This study examined the relation between the Dark Triad (psychopathy, Machiavellianism, and narcissism) and strategies used in the assessment of personality and emotional states related to vulnerability in others. Participants ($N = 101$) were asked to form impressions of stranger “targets” (with either high or low known vulnerability features) describing themselves across thin slice video, audio, or transcript modalities. Results indicated that dark personalities engaged in a relatively superficial interpersonal analysis and exhibited a “negative other” heuristic by which they generally perceived all targets as being weak and vulnerable to victimization. This negative other heuristic led to impairments in their ability to accurately assess certain features of others. We propose that instead of being keen “readers” of others, dark personalities may rely on their own personality and physical features (e.g., charm, good looks) to draw in vulnerable victims or adopt a “quantity over quality” strategy to find victims and then use active manipulation tactics to exploit them.

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1. Introduction

Upon meeting a stranger, observers rapidly make inferences about the person’s state and trait characteristics (e.g., Martelli, Majib, & Pelli, 2005) based on “thin slices” of behavior (e.g., Willis & Todorov, 2006) and quick decision rules, or heuristics. The ability to rapidly assess the personality, emotion, and intentions of others would have been evolutionarily adaptive in making decisions about whether someone was a friend or foe, or whether he/she might confer opportunities for mating or resource attainment (e.g., ten Brinke & Porter, 2011). Despite the advantages that a rapid interpersonal evaluation could provide, the accuracy of the perception of many traits such as the Big 5 or states such as self-esteem are moderate at best (e.g., Rauthmann, 2013). However, there may exist a subset of observers who are relatively skilled in some forms of interpersonal perception. Specifically, people with “dark” personality traits (e.g., those possessing characteristics of the Dark Triad including psychopathy, Machiavellianism, and narcissism) – who frequently engage in the manipulation and exploitation of others – may be better able to target their victims based on an enhanced ability to evaluate the personality and

emotional traits characteristic of vulnerability in others (e.g., Book, Quinsey, & Langford, 2007). Little is known about the exploitative strategies used by dark personalities; are they highly attuned predators who can spot the “weak gazelle”, or rather do they use their own characteristics to bring the “fish to the bait”, or do they simply attempt to exploit as many others as possible (i.e., quantity over quality)?

Dark personalities have an inclination for short-term exploitative relationships and appear to rely on varied tactics for this exploitation. Jonason and Webster (2012) found that they are selfish and cutthroat in their manipulation strategies. Specifically, they use social influence to exploit others and may use charm or “playing hardball” to get their way. These strategies are “self-oriented” and relate to the use of their own features to manipulate others, somewhat independently of the features of the potential targets (i.e., they are not necessarily targeting vulnerable individuals). Further, dark personalities reliably used the same types of influence tactics regardless of the target, suggesting that they may not tailor their method of manipulation to suit their target. Indeed, some work suggests that they may possess features that would limit their ability to “read” others’ internal states. Dark Triad scores are negatively correlated with global empathy and “affective empathy” in particular, enabling them to exploit others while not feeling empathy for their victims (Wai & Tiliopoulos, 2012). However, this empathy deficit could impair their ability to spot signs of emotional vulnerability in others. For example, psychopathy is

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associated with an impairment in identifying certain facial expressions such as fear (e.g., Brook & Kosson, 2013).

Conversely, other research suggests that some criminal offenders (not necessarily dark personalities) may be attracted to a number of visible victim-centric traits that identify someone as vulnerable to victimization (e.g., Stoody, 2000), in particular physical features or “demeanour”. For example, Grayson and Stein (1981) presented offenders convicted of assault with thin slice videos of women walking on a sidewalk. There was strong agreement between the violent offenders about who would be the most vulnerable to being mugged. An analysis of the non-verbal behavior of the targets revealed that those who were considered most vulnerable moved their body in a similar (and more unilateral) way. A more recent re-creation of this study revealed that non-offender male observers agreed upon whom they would choose as potential victims of sexual exploitation based on a similar set of non-verbal gait cues (Sakaguchi & Hasegawa, 2006). Richards, Rollerson, and Phillips (1991) extended this line of research by also asking male observers to identify and assess the personality attributes related to the vulnerability of the targets. In their study, participants were asked to rate female targets’ levels of submissiveness (dominance/submissiveness being the proxy measure of vulnerability). Participants were presented with video clips (with and without sound) of either a highly dominant or highly submissive woman being interviewed about controversial topics. For the first time, analyses were conducted to determine whether the participant’s ratings of dominance/submissiveness were in line with the self-reported ratings provided by the targets. Results demonstrated that participants were able to distinguish between the dominant and submissive women through video clips with and without audio cues, and that they relied primarily on non-verbal behavior.

None of the above research considered whether dark personalities have any special advantage in identifying psychological weakness in others. However, Wheeler, Book, and Costello (2009) had male students rated on psychopathy view thin slice clips of targets walking in a hallway, and then identify which of the targets would be vulnerable to being mugged. Men scoring high on psychopathy were able to accurately identify targets that had previously been victimized (previous victimization being the proxy measure of vulnerability). An analysis of the clips again revealed that vulnerability was associated with the unique non-verbal cues identified in the Grayson and Stein study. Similarly, Book et al. (2007) revealed that both offender and community participants scoring higher in psychopathy were more accurate at evaluating a target’s degree of assertiveness after viewing a video of them interacting with a confederate.

In summary, the literature is unclear on whether dark personalities are skilled at “reading” others. However, psychopaths may be proficient at reading physical vulnerability and low assertiveness in others. The current study examined whether this extends to individuals with similar personality traits and a shared penchant for exploiting others – individuals characteristic of the Dark Triad. A second goal of this study was to determine the manner in which dark personalities formulate their assessments of targets. To date, only one study (Wheeler et al., 2009) has considered which cues observers use to come to their conclusions about an individual’s degree of emotional vulnerability.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

Participants (“observers”) were 101 undergraduate students, 31 men and 70 women (aged 18 to 26, $M = 19.25$, $SD = 1.59$) from a

Canadian university who participated in the study in return for course credit.

2.2. Materials

2.2.1. Video

Fifteen videotaped clips were used as the stimuli for the study. Each clip consisted of an individual (the “target”); who was selected to be videotaped based on an extremely high (top 5%) or low (bottom 5%) score on the Rathus Assertiveness Scale (Rathus, 1973), our proxy measure of vulnerability and one of many traits assessed including Big 5 traits, interpersonal trust, self-esteem, depression, and anxiety describing him/herself for approximately one minute. Participants were instructed to imagine meeting someone for the first time and telling that person about themselves for approximately one minute. Clips were filmed in the same room by the same research assistant. The length of each clip varied (ranging from 27 to 132 s) but clips were not altered, despite the lack of standardization being a potential issue, as the researchers believed that the amount of information that each target chose to share was relevant to the assessment of his/her traits. Each clip then was partitioned into four distinctive modalities including an audio-video clip, only the video portion, only the audio portion, and a written version (transcript; creating 60 possible clips).

2.2.2. Dark Triad measures

The Dark Triad subcomponents psychopathy, Machiavellianism, and narcissism were measured using well-validated tools including the Self-Report Psychopathy Scale-III (SRP-III; Paulhus, Neumann, & Hare, in press), the MACH-IV (Christie & Geis, 1970), and the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Hall, 1979), respectively.

2.2.3. Emotional and personality traits evaluation form

This form, created specifically for use in the current study, was comprised of ratings (out of 5) for the personality and emotional traits (assertiveness, self-esteem, interpersonal trust, extraversion, openness to new experiences, conscientiousness, agreeableness, and neuroticism) and emotional traits (anxiety and depression) of the target in the clip. In addition to scoring the personality and emotional traits, the form included questions about the target’s vulnerability to being exploited and open-ended questions that require the observer to describe the cues he/she used to determine the personality and emotional traits and the degree of vulnerability of the targets in the videos. The observers completed a form about the target in the clip after each of the eight clips.

2.3. Procedure

Observers watched/listened to/and read 8 of the possible 60 clips (the clips were randomly selected, but observers were never presented with the same target twice). They were exposed to all four of the modalities, so that each participant watched two video clips with sound, watched two video clips without sound, listened to two audio clips, and read two transcripts. The personality/emotional traits that the observers were asked to assess are a direct reflection of the personality trait measures that the targets in the clips completed about themselves prior to filming. After completing the clip/personality rating portion of the task, observers filled out the Dark Triad measures.

2.4. Data preparation

Included in the evaluation form were three open-ended questions asking observers to describe the cues used to determine the targets’ personality/emotional traits and degree of vulnerability.

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