



The emotional deficits associated with the Dark Triad traits: Cognitive empathy, affective empathy, and alexithymia

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Available online 10 June 2013

Keywords:

Dark Triad
Psychopathy
Machiavellianism
Narcissism
Cognitive empathy
Affective empathy
Alexithymia

ABSTRACT

Volunteers ($N = 322$) in an online survey revealed the complex correlational patterns between the Dark Triad traits and two forms of “emotional deficiencies” (i.e., limited empathy and alexithymia) overall and in each sex. Each Dark Triad trait was associated with a unique pattern of emotional deficits. Psychopathy was correlated with limited overall empathy, difficulty describing feelings, and externally oriented thinking. Narcissism was associated with limited affective empathy and difficulty identifying feelings, whereas Machiavellianism was associated with externally oriented thinking. The Dark Triad mediated sex differences in empathy and externally oriented thinking. Structural Equation Modeling suggests that the differential facets of alexithymia predict different forms of limited empathy that in turn predict specific Dark Triad traits. Results are discussed using an evolutionary paradigm.

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1. Introduction

Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy (i.e., the Dark Triad; Paulhus & Williams, 2002) have repeatedly been identified as aversive personality traits (Kowalski, 2001) characterized by entitlement, superiority, dominance (i.e., narcissism), glib social charm, manipulateness (i.e., Machiavellianism), callous social attitudes, impulsivity, and interpersonal antagonism (i.e., psychopathy). Recently, some attention—albeit limited—has been given to the notion that emotional deficiencies, such as a lack of empathy, may be the critical factors underlying these personality traits (Jonason, Lyons, Bethell, & Ross, 2013) and the condition known as alexithymia (i.e., the inability to describe and understand one's own emotions; Nemiah & Sifneos, 1970) might be linked to the Dark Triad (Cairncross, Veselka, Schermer, & Vernon, 2013); both of which are linked (Swart, Kortekaas, & Aleman, 2009).

We hope to address a number of limitations of prior work. First, empathy is considered to be a multidimensional construct consisting of both affective and cognitive components, which have discrete neural and behavioral correlates (Shamay-Tsoory, Aharon-Peretz, & Perry, 2009). However, few studies have examined the Dark Triad's relationship with different facets of empathy (for an exception see Wai & Tiliopoulos, 2012) and the research tends to focus on one of the Dark Triad traits (e.g., Brook & Kosson, 2013).

Second, most studies examining the relationship between the Dark Triad and alexithymia have examined the traits on their own (e.g., Wastell & Booth, 2003). Third, many of these studies used criminal or incarcerated populations (e.g., Glass & Newman, 2006). Fourth, despite these two emotional deficits being linked (Swart et al., 2009), they have not been studied concurrently to date. Fifth, most work on the Dark Triad and on limited empathy or alexithymia treats them in a clinical or disordered framework (Kowalski, 2001; Wastell & Booth, 2003). In contrast, we take a multidimensional, evolutionary account of these traits in a non-clinical population.

Evolutionary psychologists argue that traits and dispositions like the Dark Triad and limited empathy (Jonason, Webster, Schmitt, Li, & Crysel, 2012; Jonason et al., 2013) could be adaptive so long as they afford individuals greater reproductive returns and access to resources (Buss, 2009). Indeed, certain qualities traditionally considered maladaptive may actually provide a competitive advantage by facilitating behavior associated with the attainment of goals that require exploitation of conspecifics (Jonason & Webster, 2012). Despite undesirable outcomes, the Dark Triad traits might facilitate an evolutionary advantageous short-term mating strategy (Jonason, Valentine, Li, & Harbeson, 2011) and the active exploitation of others through a wide range of tactics of influence (Jonason & Webster, 2012). A disregard of one's own or others' feelings may be mechanisms by which this is achieved.

Empathy is central to social awareness, with affective empathy involving the capacity to experience the emotions of another and cognitive empathy encompassing the understanding of others' emotional states (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2006). Empathy deficits

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are considered a fundamental aspect of Dark the Triad traits (Jonason et al., 2013). However, this relationship appears to be localized to the affective component of empathy, with the association between cognitive empathy and the Dark Triad traits more equivocal (Wai & Tiliopoulos, 2012). Thus, while we expect all of the Dark Triad traits to be associated with limited affective empathy—with this relationship particularly strong for psychopathy (Wai & Tiliopoulos, 2012)—cognitive empathy will only be related to psychopathy (Brook & Kosson, 2013).

An emotional deficit related to empathy is alexithymia (Swart et al., 2009), or the inability to describe one's feelings (Nemiah & Sifneos, 1970); this condition literally translates to “no words for emotions”. However, much of the work on this construct comes from the psychoanalytic tradition and lacks a good operational definition. More recent conceptualizations from the socio-cognitive tradition consider alexithymia to have three parts: difficulty identifying feelings, difficulty describing feelings, and externally oriented thinking (Bagby, Parker, & Taylor, 1994). Indeed, these three aspects of alexithymia are correlated with the Dark Triad (Cairncross et al., 2013). We predict these correlations will be positive for all three traits—although localized to different aspects of alexithymia¹—in as much as the Dark Triad traits are imperfect measures of the same or a similar coordinated set of adaptations for exploitation (Jonason et al., 2012).

Although the psychoanalytic and sociocognitive perspectives consider alexithymia to be maladaptive, an evolutionary perspective would suggest alexithymia may be adaptive under certain conditions, in that it could facilitate the exploitative social strategy linked to the Dark Triad. In other words, a rich emotional life and ability to communicate those feelings may actually interfere with the active exploitation of others, similar to limited empathy (Jonason et al., 2013). Therefore, we expect the Dark Triad traits to be correlated with alexithymia and limited empathy and, because psychopathy is considered the darkest of the three traits (Rauthmann, 2012), we expect these relationships to be strongest in psychopathy.

Compared to women, men score consistently higher on Dark Triad traits (Jonason & Webster, 2010) and alexithymia (Wastell & Taylor, 2002), and lower on empathy (Baron-Cohen & Wheelwright, 2004). Identifying sex differences is merely the beginning of a research program, begging the question of the psychological mechanisms and preconditions that underlie sex differences. Both sexes utilize selfish and exploitative goal-directed strategies (Jonason & Schmitt, 2012), but differential evolutionary needs may have created disparate correlates and underlying mechanisms behind these strategies, with varying levels of emotional connectedness being required for men and women to achieve their goals. For instance, past research suggests men may lack empathy through psychopathy and women may lack empathy through narcissism (Jonason et al., 2013). This may represent different adaptive strategies; men adopting an exploitative (riskier) approach, while women adopt a parasitic (less risky) approach (Jonason & Schmitt, 2012). The resulting low empathy in each sex with high scores on these traits might then be a case of convergent evolution for different social adaptations. Therefore, we test for moderation by the sex of the participant for the correlations between the Dark Triad traits and emotional deficits.

Prior research has examined the manner by which the Dark Triad mediates interpersonal behavior. Instead, we examine how emotional deficits might be mediating factors accounting for sex differences in the Dark Triad. That is, the differences between the sexes on Dark Triad scores may emerge because men require less

emotional connection than women do to achieve their goals. In particular, men may be more likely to behave in ways consistent with “darker” traits such as psychopathy, as too much of an emotional connection between prey and predator might interfere with more overt forms of exploitation (Jonason et al., 2013). Therefore, we examine the manner by which emotional deficits might facilitate (i.e., statistically mediate) the Dark Triad in the sexes.

Arguably, the capacity to identify or understand one's own emotions (i.e., alexithymia) may be linked to the capacity to identify or understand others' feelings (i.e., empathy); that is, the ability to “put oneself in someone else's shoes” may be underpinned by the ability to first have knowledge of one's own shoes (Hooker, Verosky, Germine, Knight, & D'Esposito, 2008). In addition, an externally-focused thinking style may reduce the capacity to recognize and attend to both one's own and others' emotional states, thus impacting on empathy. Moreover, cognitive and affective empathy—though dissociable constructs—are also strongly related (Shamay-Tsoory et al., 2009), with affective empathy potentially facilitating one's ability or motivation to understand others' feelings. However, the exact nature of this relationship between the different facets of alexithymia and empathy and their relationship to the Dark Triad is as yet unknown. We propose and test a model whereby Dark Triad scores are indirectly predicted by low empathy, through the mediating role of alexithymia; cognitive empathy deficits should be related to a diminished ability to describe and identify feelings, whereas affective empathy deficits should be related to an external orientation.

In this study we provide much needed nuance to the investigation of the specific emotional deficits associated with the Dark Triad. First, we examine a bidimensional model of empathy to examine the distinction between one's ability to understand one's feelings and one's ability to feel what others feel. Second, we provide the first examination of the relationship between the Dark Triad and different aspects of alexithymia. Third, we examine these relationships overall, and across the sexes, to determine if these deficits statistically mediate the sex differences in the Dark Triad traits.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

Three hundred and twenty volunteers (242 women) aged 17–56 years ($M = 24.24$, $SD = 7.33$) participated in an online study on the Dark Triad. Only those participants who completed the measures from unique IP addresses were included. Participants were informed of the nature of the study and were asked to give consent if they wished to participate; only those who gave consent have been included. They progressed through a series of self-report measures that assessed the variables of interest. At the end of the study, participants were debriefed and thanked.

2.2. Measures

To measure the Dark Triad traits, the Dark Triad Dirty Dozen (Jonason & Webster, 2010) was used. Participants were asked how much they agreed (1 = *not at all*; 5 = *very much*) with statements such as: “I tend to want others to admire me” (i.e., narcissism), “I tend to lack remorse” (i.e., psychopathy), and “I have used deceit or lied to get my way” (i.e., Machiavellianism). Items were averaged together to create an index of narcissism (Cronbach's $\alpha = .84$), Machiavellianism ($\alpha = .81$), psychopathy ($\alpha = .68$), and a composite Dark Triad index ($\alpha = .87$). Machiavellianism was correlated with psychopathy ($r(318) = .61$, $p < .01$) and narcis-

¹ We remain agnostic about the specific associations here given the limited research on alexithymia in nonclinical populations and in relation to normal personality variation.

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