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 & Tilipoulos, 2012). However, this empathy deficit could impair their ability to spot signs of emotional vulnerability in others. For example, psychopathy is
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.
Observers answered these three questions after being presented with each of the eight clips, for a total of 24 open-ended questions. Analyses were conducted on the first cue reported by each observer, as it was deemed most salient. Dark Triad total and subcomponent scores each were correlated with both the number and type of cues used to assess vulnerability in targets. A coding system was created after analyzing 10 (10%) participant answer booklets (containing all eight of the participant’s Emotional and Personality Traits Evaluation Form). A total of seven possible cue categories were created to account for all of the types of cues reported, six specific categories and the seventh an “other” category that often included cues such as “what the person was wearing.” The six categories created include vocal tone (the way in which the person spoke including pitch and volume), verbal cues (what the person said, the words used to describe themselves), body language (posture, bodily movement throughout the clip), gaze (where the target was looking, gaze change throughout the clip), facial expressions (smiling, or specific emotions reported), and intuition (how the target seemed, or the observer’s instinct; see Section 3.1).

Prior to analysis of the relationship between the Dark Triad and subcomponent scores for judgment accuracy for traits, accuracy scores were calculated for each observer by correlating self-reported levels of each of the 10 personality and emotional features with target-rated levels of the same traits. These correlations were aggregated across each trait, so that each observer had 10 trait accuracy scores. Overall accuracy was determined by calculating the mean of all trait accuracy scores for each observer. After accuracy scores were calculated, they were transformed from correlations to z scores using Fisher’s r to z formula. This formula has been used to convert correlational accuracy scores in previous personality judgment studies (e.g., Beer & Watson, 2010).

3. Results

The three Dark Triad measures were scored individually according to their respective scoring requirements before being standardized using z scores and averaged to create an overall Dark Triad composite score. Mean overall scores for the scales and scores broken down by gender are shown in Table 1. The three constructs were significantly correlated at .37 (NPI and MACH-IV), .69 (MACH-IV and SRP-III), and .52 (NPI and SRP-III; ps < .05); the highest correlation was .69, supporting that they are distinct constructs. Further, scale reliabilities were 0.82, 0.83, 0.83 (Cronbach’s alpha) respectively, above the commonly used acceptable cutoff of 0.7 (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994); so all scales were used as variables in further analyses.

3.1. Dark Triad scores and cues used

Dark Triad scores were negatively correlated with the number of cues reported (r = -0.20, p = 0.05) across all three of the open-ended questions. A similar trend was found for both SRP-III (r = -0.22, p = 0.03) and MACH-IV (r = -0.22, p = 0.03) scores in relation to number of cues used. When assessing personality and emotional traits, those scoring high on the Dark Triad reported using verbal cues most often (M = 7.32, SD = 4.23) followed by intuition (M = 6.98, SD = 5.21). When assessing vulnerability specifically, those scoring higher on the Dark Triad reported using intuition most (M = 3.7, SD = 2.37) followed by verbal cues (M = 1.8, SD = 1.71).

3.2. Dark Triad scores and general perception of targets

Dark Triad scores were negatively correlated with scores given for target agreeableness (r = -0.21, p = 0.04) and self-esteem (r = -0.31, p = 0.01), and positively correlated with scores given for neuroticism (r = 0.30, p = 0.003), anxiety (r = 0.29, p = 0.004), and depression (r = 0.32, p = 0.001). That is, dark personalities perceived targets as being less agreeable and having low self-esteem and being highly neurotic, anxious, and depressed. SRP-III scores were negatively correlated with scores given for target agreeableness (r = -0.20, p = 0.05) and positively correlated with scores given for neuroticism (r = 0.29, p = 0.003), anxiety (r = 0.26, p = 0.01), and depression (r = 0.33, p = 0.001). This suggested that psychopathic individuals had a bias to perceiving targets as being generally less agreeable, and more neurotic, anxious, and depressed. MACH-IV scores were positively correlated with scores given for target neuroticism (r = 0.25, p = 0.01), anxiety (r = 0.27, p = 0.01), and depression (r = 0.23, p = 0.02), suggesting that Machiavellians held a general perception of targets as being more neurotic, anxious, and depressed. NPI scores were negatively correlated with scores given for target openness to new experiences (r = -0.23, p = 0.02), conscientiousness (r = -0.21, p = 0.03), and extraversion (r = -0.28, p = 0.02) and positively correlated with scores given for depression (r = 0.22, p = 0.03). That is, narcissism was correlated with perceiving targets as boring, irresponsible, introverted, and depressed.

3.3. The Dark Triad and accuracy

The mean scores for both overall accuracy and individual trait accuracy can be found in Table 2. There were no significant relationships between the Dark Triad total score, SRP-III, MACH-IV, and NPI scores and overall trait accuracy, respectively (all ps > 0.05). The relation between Dark Triad scores and accuracy for each personality and emotional trait also was examined and a few significant relationships were found. Specifically, Dark Triad scores were negatively correlated with judgment accuracy for agreeableness (r = -0.24, p = 0.02). Negative correlations also were found between SRP-III scores (r = -0.23, p = 0.02) and NPI scores (r = -0.23, p = 0.02) with judgment accuracy for agreeableness. These relationships were further examined through regression analyses; while analyses showed that both SRP-III (B = -0.23, p = 0.02) and NPI (B = -0.23, p = 0.02) were independent predictors of agreeableness.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>SRP-III (M)</th>
<th>SRP-III (SD)</th>
<th>NPI (M)</th>
<th>NPI (SD)</th>
<th>MACH-IV (M)</th>
<th>MACH-IV (SD)</th>
<th>Dark Triad (M)</th>
<th>Dark Triad (SD)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall M (SD)</td>
<td>2.15 (.50)</td>
<td>14.64 (6.30)</td>
<td>48.33 (16.24)</td>
<td>0 (0.83)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Range</td>
<td>1.13–3.64</td>
<td>3–55</td>
<td>12–88</td>
<td>-1.60–3.64</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Males M (SD)</td>
<td>2.48 (.57)</td>
<td>16.45 (7.11)</td>
<td>52.55 (18.10)</td>
<td>0.40 (0.95)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Range</td>
<td>1.53–3.64</td>
<td>5–35</td>
<td>12–83</td>
<td>1.42–2.64</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females M (SD)</td>
<td>2.01 (.38)</td>
<td>13.84 (5.78)</td>
<td>46.46 (15.11)</td>
<td>-1.18 (0.70)</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Range</td>
<td>1.13–3.17</td>
<td>3–30</td>
<td>15–88</td>
<td>-1.60–1.82</td>
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</table>

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trait</th>
<th>Mean (SD)</th>
<th>Range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assertiveness</td>
<td>0.00 (.35)</td>
<td>-79.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Esteem</td>
<td>-0.31 (.35)</td>
<td>-86.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal Trust</td>
<td>-0.01 (.35)</td>
<td>-85.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxiety</td>
<td>-0.30 (.31)</td>
<td>-79.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depression</td>
<td>-0.04 (.36)</td>
<td>-87.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Openness to new experiences</td>
<td>-0.07 (.29)</td>
<td>-54.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extraversion</td>
<td>-0.19 (.33)</td>
<td>-86.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neuroticism</td>
<td>-0.01 (.40)</td>
<td>-85.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conscientiousness</td>
<td>-0.04 (.37)</td>
<td>-77.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agreeableness</td>
<td>-0.09 (.39)</td>
<td>-85.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>-0.03 (.15)</td>
<td>-38.35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

judgment accuracy when both variables were included in the model, they both became non-significant (SRP-III $B = -.15$, $p = .17$; NPI $B = -.15$, $p = .18$).

3.4. Dark Triad scores and modality

Accuracy as a function of modality was analyzed using a series of 2 (Dark Triad score: median split high and low) × 4 (modality) mixed ANOVAs. Difference scores then were calculated for each assessed trait by subtracting the scores given by the observer for a particular trait from the self-reported score given by the target for the same trait within each of the four modalities. Larger difference scores represent a large incongruence (less accuracy) between the observer’s score and the self-reported score given by the target, and vice versa.

Although there were no significant interactions between Dark Triad scores and any of the modalities across all 10 traits (all $p > .05$), there were a number of main effects of modality found for individual traits. Specifically, a modality effect was found for self-esteem, $F(1, 3) = 6.67$, $p = .005$, $\eta^2 = .66$. Post-hoc tests revealed that observers were more accurate at assessing self-esteem in video clips than all other modalities (all $p < .01$). There was a modality effect for depression, $F(1, 3) = 12.44$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .29$ with post-hoc testing revealing higher accuracy for video clips than audio/video clips ($p = .03$), and lower accuracy for transcripts than from all other modalities (all $p < .01$). A main effect of modality was found for anxiety, $F(1, 3) = 4.56$, $p = .004$, $\eta^2 = .40$ with post-hoc tests revealing lower accuracy from transcripts than from all other modalities (all $p < .03$).

A main effect of modality also was found for two of the Big 5 traits, openness to new experiences, $F(1, 3) = 3.78$, $p = .01$, $\eta^2 = .40$, and conscientiousness, $F(1, 3) = 5.26$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = .65$. Post-hoc tests for openness revealed increased accuracy for video clips than all other modalities (all $p < .05$). Finally, post-hoc tests for conscientiousness showed less accuracy from transcripts than from all other modalities (all $p < .007$).

4. Discussion

This study examined whether dark personalities used specific cues to come to their conclusions about the personality and emotional traits of targets, and whether they were able to accurately assess these traits related to vulnerability in targets. The results indicate that although they may be prolific exploiters of others, they are not skilled at identifying emotional vulnerability. Instead, it appears that they may perceive everyone as being weak and emotional and, therefore, potentially vulnerable.

Dark personalities were more likely to perceive targets as being disagreeable, as having low self-esteem, and as being highly neurotic, depressed, and anxious. Similar results were found for each of the individual subcomponents. For example, psychopathic observers generally perceived targets as being less agreeable, and highly neurotic, depressed, and anxious, Machiavellian observers perceived targets as more neurotic, anxious, and depressed and narcissistic observers perceive targets as low on openness to new experiences, conscientiousness, extraversion, and high on depression.

A possible explanation for these findings is that dark personalities are unable to distinguish emotional states in others (e.g., Wai & Tilipoulos, 2012) and perceive any communication of emotion as a sign of weakness. Another is that they hold a negative other bias, a tendency towards evaluating targets negatively in general (Ball, Schmukle, & Egloff, 2011). Individuals prone to this bias often are low in agreeableness, and feel superior to others, both traits associated with dark personalities (Miller, Gaughan, Maples, & Price, 2011). Rauthmann (2012) had dark personalities work with a partner on a cooperative task and then rate the attributes of the partner. In line with the negative other bias, narcissists reported partners as being less conscientious, and Machiavellians rated partners as being low on openness to new experiences, intelligence, and interpersonal skill. In addition to their hyper-perception of vulnerability in others, here dark personalities reported using what we might refer to as a superficial evaluative strategy, using fewer evaluative cues than others. They reported relying most heavily on what the targets were saying and on their “intuition”. Given their lack of emotion, low emotional intelligence (e.g., Wai & Tilipoulos, 2012), and facial expression recognition deficit, they may be more attuned to body language or obvious signs of physical weakness (such as gait; Grayson & Stein, 1981), which they reported as “intuition”.

These biased perceptions of others contributed to impairments in accuracy in assessing the traits of targets speaking about themselves in the clips. This finding is incongruent with the small number of studies that have found that offenders, psychopaths, and the general public can somewhat accurately assess low assertiveness and vulnerability to criminal victimization by watching targets walking on video (e.g., Wheeler et al., 2009). Future studies might examine whether dark personalities are able to pick up on overt signs of physical vulnerability relating to gait or aliments. Clearly from this research they have no advantage in reading subtle signs of emotional weakness from facial expressions or speech.

Despite their inability to differentiate vulnerable from non-vulnerable targets, dark personalities remain successful exploiters of others. It may be the case that they use active strategies to manipulate and exploit others unrelated to signs of emotional weakness, but perhaps focus more on what the target has to offer in terms of money or sex (e.g., Hancock, Woodworth, & Porter, 2013). From impression management and enhanced physical attractiveness to active deception, dark personalities have a number of manipulation tactics/advantages at their disposal (Jonason & Webster, 2012; Holtzman & Strube, 2013). For example, as employees they use both soft and hard threats to get promotions, often forcing co-workers to do their work or cover for them (Jonason, Slomski, & Partyka, 2012). This study had a number of limitations. For example, the observers and targets were undergraduate students. Future studies might use a clinically vulnerable population as targets as they may provide more cues to vulnerability than our sample. Similarly, this study should be conducted with other samples that score higher on measures of the Dark Triad, such as offenders or corporate executives. These samples may have more experience with manipulation and exploitation and may be more skilled at interpersonal perception. Finally, while the use of a median split has certain limitations (e.g., reducing power; see MacCallum, Zhang, Preacher, & Rucker, 2002) it was required to assess the role of modality in the evaluation of others due to the manner in which the study was designed (i.e., each observer evaluating two targets in each modality). As such, future research should consider examining the possible interaction between scores on measures of the Dark Triad and the role of presentation modality using additional methods of analysis.

Understanding the manner in which humans read one another is key to understanding human interaction. Although interpersonal assessment is used in all social interactions, it can be detrimental if employed by those who are likely to exploit others, such as individuals with dark personalities. This study provided a unique look into the processes involved in the interpersonal assessment of traits related to vulnerability by dark personalities. The results suggest that they generally hold negative other perceptions, and perceive others to possess traits, such as being highly emotional, that have been related to vulnerability. This bias is reflected in their impairment in accurately assessing the personality and emotional.
traits of others. Thus, it is likely that the prolific exploitation used by dark personalities relies on quantity over quality of potential victims regardless of their emotional traits. This work suggests that researchers in this area should focus on the features of vulnerable individuals who are drawn to dark personalities, and the manner in which the dark personalities actively exploit them.

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References


