HOW HELPFUL ARE YOU TO ME? THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE DARK TRIAD AND APPRAISING HELP IN PROSOCIAL SITUATIONS

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Abstract

The dark triad is associated with maladaptive interactions in their social and interpersonal relationships. Those with high levels of dark personality traits are also assumed to be defectors in social situations. However, it is unclear whether they are able to assess when others are being helpful to them. The present study aimed at understanding whether these individuals are able to perceive help from others, when provided with situations that differentially benefit them. In a multinational sample from over 40 countries (N = 679), we found that in a situation where others are not very helpful, those with high levels of psychopathy and Machiavellianism uniquely assess others as helpful. On the other hand, in a situation where others are helpful, those with high psychopathy assess others as helpful; Machiavellianism and narcissism did not not have a link with appraising helpfulness. Implications are discussed.

Keywords: Dark Triad; prosocial behaviors; interpersonal relationship; helpfulness; psychopathy; interpersonal perception

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The Dark Triad (DT) constitutes subclinical traits of psychopathy, Machiavellianism, and narcissism (Paulhus & Williams, 2002) within individuals. DT is characterized by tendencies to deceive, manipulate, and exploit others. In other words, they tend to be maladaptive in their social and interpersonal relationships, and be less prosocial (Aghababaei et al., 2014).

Life History Strategies

The fast life strategy entails risky, unpredictable, competitive behaviours in the face of resource scarcity, whereas the slow life strategy includes long-term planning (Kaplan et al., 2009). Those following fast life strategies, including those with high DT, tend to be antisocial and aggressive (Jonason, Koenig, et al., 2010). For instance, McDonald et al. (2012) argue that core elements of the DT are linked to a fast life strategy. Further, across six countries, psychopathy was associated with fast life strategies, and narcissism to slow life strategies (Jonason et al., 2017). The relationship between Machiavellianism and life history is thought to be context-dependent; it is linked to fast life strategies in the context of social strategies (Jonason, Slomski, et al., 2012), but not in the context of mating and romantic relationships (Jonason, Luevano, et al., 2012).

Social Style

Those with high DT also tend to pursue an agentic social style, characterized by persistently trying to extract resources from others; they tend to be highly individualistic, competitive, and are less prosocial (Jonason, Li, et al., 2010). They also perceive others unfavourably or harshly, while perceiving themselves highly (Rauthmann, 2011). Particularly, narcissists overvalue themselves and may disparage others. They also tend to view themselves as intelligent, sociable, and rate themselves high on dominance. Machiavellians view others as

mailable, weak, and low on intelligence, and view themselves as intelligent, sociable, and dominant. Those with high levels of psychopathy are less likely to be agreeable, and view themselves as dominant and open, but as less nurturing and conscientious. However, psychopathy is not related to viewing others negatively Thus, dark personalities see others as having lower agency and view themselves as arrogant and calculating (Rauthmann, 2011).

Dark personalities are also seen to be maladaptive in their selection of social bonds. They tend to be impulsive and may thus, choose and create instability in their social environments. In the context of work, psychopathy and Machiavellianism is related to using assertiveness, manipulation and other hard tactics of social influence, whereas narcissism is linked with reason and other soft tactics (Jonason, Slomski, et al., 2012). In the context of mating, DT is linked to damaging the reputation of competitors, derogating them in contexts such as sports and intelligence, and talking about them in an impolite or offensive manner (Goncalves & Campbell, 2014).

In the context of friendships, those with high narcissism tend to choose friends who they thought were good persons, who may be advantageous for them, and may be potential mates. Psychopathy is negatively related to choosing a friend who may be kind or trustworthy, and Machiavellianism is related to choosing friends who may be advantageous for them, and those who are easily gullible (Jonason & Schmitt, 2012).

Prosocial Behaviours

Considering their impulsivity and short-term orientation, as evidenced by their fast life strategy, DT tends to employ a cheater strategy in prosocial situations. The DT and all of its sub-traits are negatively correlated with prosociality. Particularly, Machiavellianism and psychopathy negatively predicted other-oriented reasoning; narcissism is only negatively related to self-reported altruism (Aghababaei et al., 2014). This might also imply that those with high narcissism

are aware of their selfishness, whereas the other two traits are not. Further, psychopathy and Machiavellianism are also related to defection in cooperative games, whereas narcissism is not (Malesza, 2018).

Reciprocity, a functional theory of prosociality, refers to interchange of mutual benefits. Specifically, direct reciprocity refers to subsequent exchange of benefits (i.e., X helps Y, and Y helps X back; Nowak & Sigmund, 2005). For direct reciprocity, however, it is essential that one realizes that one is being helped (i.e., Y will need to recognize the help, especially the cost accrued by X, in order to acknowledge and choose to help X back).

The Present Study

Given that DT is generally agentic, uses a "cheater" social strategy, and views others negatively, it is unclear how they perceive those who are prosocial towards them. Thus, this study aims to assess the experiences of individuals with dark personalities in the face of prosocial behaviours. In other words, we argue that those with high DT would be unable to perceive others' help towards them. We manipulate vignettes to display behaviours in which others are either beneficial to them or not beneficial to them, and ask them to assess perceived helpfulness of others towards them. The observation of others' behaviours is a key component of prosociality; however, we are interested in understanding what happens if individuals are dispositionally unable to perceive others' acts of altruism.

Thus, we hypothesize that:

H1A: For situations involving low helpfulness, DT negatively predicts perceived helpfulness.

H1B: For situations involving high helpfulness, DT negatively predicts perceived helpfulness.

We also assess how the sub-traits of DT differently affect this relationship.

Method

The present study utilizes partial data from a preregistered study assessing the relationship between DT and gratitude (Puthillam et al., 2021).[1] The sample includes 679 participants (279 Indians, 317 Americans, and 83 belonging to 40 other countries; Women = 514) above the age of 18 years (M_{Age} = 23.37 years, SD = 8.04; Range = 18-68 years).

Measures

The Short Dark Triad (SD3; Jones & Paulhus, 2013). Twenty-seven items were used to measure the Dark Triad traits. Of these, nine items each measure the three traits of Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy, on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree).

The Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding Short Form (BIDR-16; Hart et al., 2015). Sixteen items measure social desirability and its two dimensions: Self-Deceptive Enhancement (SDE) and Impression Management (IM), using a 7-point rating scale format (1 = not true to 7 = very true). SDE refers to over-reporting of positive behaviour; IM refers to under-reporting of negative behaviour. The DT is susceptible toward socially desirable responding, and therefore this measure is used as a statistical control.

Helpfulness Vignettes (Wood et al., 2008). Participants were randomly assigned to read either the set of three vignettes depicting situations where others were helpful or not helpful to them. Following the vignette, participants responded to the following questions, which assessed their perception of the actors' help:

Genuine Helpfulness: "How much was this person motivated by a sincere desire to help you?" (1 = Not at all motivated; 6 = Totally motivated);

Perceived Cost: "How much did it cost the person to help you (in terms of time, effort, financial cost etc.)?" (1 = Nothing; 6 = A great deal);

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[1] Data available from https://osf.io/7ch38/

Perceived Value: "How valuable do you think that this person's help was to you?" (1= Not at all valuable; 6 = Extremely valuable).

In other words, participants were presented with three vignettes wherein others were either not very helpful (i.e., others display low value, low genuine helpfulness, and low cost) or the set of three vignettes depicting help from others (i.e., high value, high genuine helpfulness, and high cost). Perception of helpfulness was calculated by summing the scores on genuine helpfulness, perceived cost, and perceived value across the three vignettes.

Results

Data were analysed in R; the analysis code is available on OSF. Hierarchical regressions were conducted, controlling for age, gender, nationality, and social desirability. To test whether shared variances affect the relationship between each sub-trait and perception of helpfulness, the other two traits were controlled for. That is, to test whether psychopathy uniquely affects perception of help, Machiavellianism and narcissism were also controlled for. Descriptive statistics, reliabilities of the scales, and zero-order correlations are displayed in Table 1.

Less Helpful Situations

When others were less helpful (H1A), dark triad positively predicted perception of help, $b = .12$, $SE = .02$, $R^2 = .05$, $F(1, 446) = 20.381$, $p < .001$. Particularly, psychopathy ($b = .25$, $SE = .06$, $p < .001$; unique: $b = .17$, $SE = .07$, $p = .01$), Machiavellianism ($b = .20$, $SE = .05$, $R^2 = .04$, $p < .001$; unique: $b = .13$, $R^2 = .06$, $SE = .06$, $p = .03$), and narcissism ($b = .14$, $SE = .07$, $R^2 = .02$, $p = .04$) positively predicted perception of help. However, when Machiavellianism and psychopathy is accounted for, narcissism does not predict appraisal of help ($b = .03$, $SE = .07$, $R^2 = .06$, $p = .72$).

More Helpful Situations

When others were helpful (H1B), those with high DT negatively predicted perception of help ($b = -.07$, $SE = .03$, $R^2 = .05$, $F(1, 221) = 4.35$, $p = .04$). Specifically, psychopathy ($b = -.27$, $SE = .07$, $R^2 = .09$, $p < .001$; unique: $b = -.32$, $SE = .08$, $R^2 = .10$, $p < .001$) alone predicted perception of help; Machiavellianism ($b = .02$, $SE = .07$, $p = .82$) and narcissism ($b = -.14$, $SE = .08$, $p = .11$) did not.

Discussion

The present study aimed to understand how those with high levels of DT appraise help provided by others in prosocial situations. We found that DT misperceived others as helpful when they were not. Psychopathy and Machiavellianism were also linked to appraisal of others as helpful when they were not; however, narcissism, when the former two were accounted for, did not positively predict appraisal of help. When others were highly helpful, those with high levels of psychopathy appraised others as less helpful; the other two sub-traits thought them neither more nor less helpful. Thus, Hypothesis 1A was not supported, and 1B was partially supported.

Individuals with high levels of DT tend to view others negatively (Black et al., 2014) and view themselves as superior, including in cooperative tasks(Rauthmann, 2011). We hypothesized that they would not be able to accurately assess non-cooperation or cooperation by others. In a situation where others are not helpful, we found that DT appraised others as inaccurately more helpful. This implies that it is possible that those with high levels of DT assume that others may be obliged to help them, and are unable to grasp when they do not. This is in line with previous work indicating that those with high levels of DT use fewer cues to evaluate others, and that they are unable to distinguish vulnerable others from non-vulnerable others (Black et al., 2014). Thus, it is likely that DT individuals do not attend to enough cues in order to understand whether others are actually being helpful or not.

On the other hand, only those with higher levels of psychopathy were found to inaccurately assess others as less helpful in a highly beneficial situation. This is in line with previous work indicating that psychopathy is linked with impulsivity and risk-taking, along with a callous-unemotionality. Previous work has also indicated that those with high levels of psychopathy assess vulnerable others as higher in emotionality than they actually were (Book et al., 2021). Further, in a Prisoner's dilemma game, they also defected on low-value partners with whom they did not envision a longer-term relationship (Gervais et al., 2013). Thus, it seems that those with high levels of psychopathy might impulsively assess others as easy to exploit, which might explain their inaccurately rating others as not helpful even when they are.

However, those with high levels of Machiavellianism tend to be less impulsive and more strategic in their exploitation of others. Similarly, narcissism is associated only with a grandiose sense of self, overvalue themselves and therefore, might be attuned to cues of others. Thus, it is likely that those with high Machiavellianism and narcissism pay attention to cues of others' benefits to them (e.g., Jonason & Schmitt, 2012).

Thus, the present study adds to the list of work that finds that the three traits are distinct, even if they share the commonality of darkness. Further, the pattern of results show that psychopathy seems to dominate the other two traits in the DT, especially as it relates to their perception of others. The present study also has implications in understanding the DT in the context of reciprocity. Specifically, it seems that those with high levels of the DT, and particularly psychopathy, are unable to accurately assess others' help. Without this assessment, it is difficult to argue whether or not they engage in reciprocity. That is, if one does not accurately assess another person as being of help in the first place, it might be difficult to argue that they do not reciprocate the help. Future work assessing reciprocity in the DT using cooperative games should also assess

whether and how they appraise the aid. For example, it might be that they assess others' help as exploitable weakness.

However, this study is not without its limitations. The present study uses self-report to assess DT as well as benefit appraisals. Future work could also use peer-report to replicate and extend the current findings. It also suffers from the limitations of a vignette study. Self-reported behavioural intentions are likely to differ from actual behaviour (e.g., Eifler & Petzold, 2019). Future work should attempt to replicate this using cooperative games to measure reciprocity and benefit appraisals. Third, the internal consistency of the narcissism sub-scale was not adequate. Future work could use alternate measures, including measures acknowledging the multidimensionality of DT (Miller et al., 2019).

In sum, we found that the dark triad is poor at assessing help from others. This is particularly true for those with high levels of psychopathy, who perceive help from others as not helpful.

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Table 1

Descriptive statistics, reliabilities, and zero-order correlations of relevant variables.

	M	SD	Cronbach's α	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Age	23.37	8.04									
2. Machiavellianism	26.35	6.25	0.76	-0.21***							
3. Narcissism	25.09	4.62	0.5	-0.1**	0.3***						
4. Psychopathy	18.39	5.42	0.71	-0.18***	0.53***	0.3***					
5. Composite Dark Triad	69.84	12.57	0.81	-0.22***	0.84***	0.65***	0.81***				
6. Appraisal of Benefits	36.36	10.1	0.89	0.01	0.05	-0.07	0.03	0.02			
7. Self-Deceptive Enhancement	30.44	7.48	0.67	0.16***	-0.06	0.19***	-0.05	0.02	-0.11**		
8. Impression Management	34.1	8.16	0.69	0.21***	-0.42***	-0.08*	-0.41***	-0.41***	-0.01	0.37***	
9. Composite Social Desirability	64.53	12.94	0.75	0.22***	-0.3***	0.06	-0.29***	-0.25***	-0.07	0.81***	0.84***

Note: *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$