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Abstract: The 'Dark Triad' of socially aversive personality traits
(Machiavellianism, Narcissism, and Psychopathy) is typically associated
with grandiosity, callousness, and exploitation. Despite this, people
with such traits can be very successful in life, especially in the
occupational context. This study investigated the characteristics of
individuals who enable and abet people high on Dark Triad traits (e.g.
through tolerating unpleasant behaviours, not challenging unethical
conduct, etc.). High Dark Triad individuals may be able to identify
individuals who are susceptible to social manipulation and who are
therefore less likely to challenge their behaviours. This study used a
20-item Vulnerability Scale to capture the characteristics of individuals
who fall victim to people high on the Dark Triad traits. Cronbach's
alpha for the Vulnerability Scale was .80. Pearson's correlation between
total vulnerability scores and each of the Big Five personality traits
revealed that predictors of vulnerability to social manipulation include
low extraversion, low conscientiousness, high neuroticism, and high
agreeableness. The vignette method was used to elicit perceptions of
Dark Triad behaviours from those who are found to demonstrate signs of
social vulnerability. Differences in response styles on Likert-type
statements and open-ended questions were found between the high and low
vulnerability groups.

Running head: PERCEPTIONS OF DARK TRIAD BEHAVIOURS

Giving the Benefit of the Doubt:

The Role of Vulnerability in the Perception of Dark Triad Behaviours

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Highlights

- A Vulnerability Scale was devised to identify vulnerability to social manipulation.
- Vulnerability was negatively correlated to extraversion and conscientiousness.
- Vulnerability was positively correlated to neuroticism and agreeableness.
- Response styles between high and low vulnerability groups differed significantly.

1. Introduction

The Dark Triad (DT) refers to a set of conceptually distinct but empirically overlapping personality constructs – Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Underlying these traits are socially aversive behaviours such as self-centeredness, manipulation, and control (Lee & Ashton, 2005). Machiavellianism is characterised by insincerity, deceitfulness, and cold-heartedness. Machiavellians are "pragmatists" who are willing to depart from ethical standards to pursue self-interests realistically (Christie & Geis, 1970; Jones & Paulhus, 2009). Individuals with higher levels of psychopathy exhibit high impulsivity, emotional coldness, and low empathy (Salekin, Leistico, & Mullins-Nelson, 2006). Narcissism at a subclinical level presents as self-centeredness, a constant need for admiration, and a sense of entitlement (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001).

2. The Allure of Destructive People

'Leadership' can evoke heroic representations of renowned leaders (Ashby & Miles, 2002; Bligh & Kohles, 2009). However, recent years have seen a growing body of research on the dark side of leadership (Pelletier, 2010; Jonason, Slomski & Partyka, 2012), in which negative labels are commonly used, e.g. destructive, evil, bad, abusive, bullying – terms associated with people with DT personalities. National leaders such as Hitler, Mao, and Stalin were destructive tyrants responsible for the death of millions but, by their own terms, their regimes were successful in some of their political, economic, and social aims, and they continue to have adherents who see them as national heroes (e.g. Lipman, Gudkov, & Bakradze, 2013,

Waldron, 2005). Lipman-Blumen (2004) proposed that people may not merely endure such people – they may favour, and sometimes even create destructive leaders. Leaders exhibiting DT behaviours may exercise dictatorial control over others because people have certain psychological needs which these destructive leaders are able to exploit. Lipman-Blumen (2005) reasoned that humans can be susceptible to grand illusions, and sometimes followers can be captivated by leaders who deliver visions exploiting that susceptibility.

Despite their generally aversive nature, DT traits may be desirable under some circumstances as they have been associated with sought-after characteristics such as charisma, boldness, and impression-management abilities (Ames, 2009; Paunonen, Lönnqvist, Verkasalo, Leikas, & Nissinen, 2006). Leaders who are assertive and dominant can be valued by organisations for their ruthlessness, especially in turbulent times (Van Vugt & Ahuja, 2010).   DT traits can be adaptive, if 'adaptive' is furthering organisational goals ahead of any concern for their negative collateral effects. People with such traits may also thrive in the entertainment industry (Young & Pinsky, 2006) and be sexually 'successful' (Jonason, Li, Webster, & Schmitt, 2009).

Victims of psychopathy have suggested that affinity groups such as religious or support groups attract psychopaths because members often possess virtues such as acceptance of newcomers from diverse backgrounds and the willingness to forgive past wrongdoings (Aftermath: Surviving Psychopathy Foundation, 2011). Victims have also observed that the structure of many religious institutions places spiritual

leaders in positions of power, allowing these sometimes psychopathic individuals to use the organisation to prey on the vulnerable.

3. Traits Predictive of Vulnerability

There have been few attempts to operationalise vulnerability (Sparks, 1981; Dussich, 2006). Within the literature on bullying, vulnerability can be understood as being susceptible to physical or psychological harm (Olweus, 1993b). Some studies have tended to focus on age and gender as proxies for vulnerability (Crick & Bigbee, 1998; Kim & Geistfeld, 2008), but research looking into violent crimes has indicated that victims have been targeted because they displayed other signs of vulnerability, e.g. walking style (Gunns, Johnston, & Hudson, 2002; Book, Costello, & Camilleri, 2013; see also Book, Volk, & Hosker, 2012; Naylor, Cowie, Cossins, de Bettencourt, & Lemme, 2006).

Symptoms of depression, low self-regard, social withdrawal, gullibility, readiness to trust others, and low assertiveness are some of the characteristics commonly associated with vulnerability to victimisation (D'Esposito, Blake, & Ricco, 2011; Hawker & Boulton, 2000). Anxious children have been known to be submissive and less likely to retaliate when assaulted (Shorey, Sherman, Kivisto, Elkins, Rhatigan, & Moore, 2011; Olweus, 1995). These characteristics are presented as outcomes of harassment, and are said to reinforce and attract further attacks against the victims, i.e. a cycle of vulnerability develops (Rubin, Coplan, & Bowker, 2009). The negative consequences of having been harassed as a child may continue into adulthood. Olweus (1993b; 1993c) reported a significant relationship between the

degree of adult depressive symptoms and the severity of childhood victimisation. It appears, therefore, that displaying such vulnerabilities can affect people's interpersonal relationships in adulthood, putting them at risk of victimisation by social predators in intimate and/or workplace relationships. Bandura (2002) and Zimbardo (2004) suggest that people may develop an inclination for immoral behaviours when placed in institutional climates that encourage its practice; there may be a two-way relationship between the individual with DT traits and the person on the receiving end of their behaviour.

The present study sought to determine the traits of individuals who may unwittingly enable people high on DT traits, as well as examining the perceptions of these 'enablers'. In light of the bullying and work harassment literature, it is hypothesised that low extraversion, high agreeableness, high conscientiousness, high neuroticism, and low openness are predictors of vulnerability to interpersonal manipulation. Given that people who possess high levels of the DT qualities are skilled when it comes to taking advantage of their targets' desires and fears, it must be noted that destructive individuals cannot exist without the enablers' compliance. This interaction was explored using vignettes. In response to vignettes depicting interpersonal exploitation, it is anticipated that vulnerable individuals will perceive characters in the vignettes differently from those who are less vulnerable, as measured by their ratings on a series of Likert-type statements. Vulnerable people are also expected to identify with the victimised characters in the vignettes.

4. Method

4.1   Participants

Sixty participants (17 males, 43 females) were purposely selected from a sample of 144 participants (40 males, 104 females) who completed the Vulnerability Scale and Big Five Inventory. Of the 60 participants, 40 (66.7%) were aged between 21 to 30 years, six (10%) between 31 to 40 years, five (8.3%) between 41 to 50 years, six (10%) were 51 or over, while only three (5%) were between 18 to 20 years. Participants were recruited online through Psychology research websites and from a university.

4.2   Materials

4.2.1   Vulnerability Scale (VS). The VS was adapted from the Social Vulnerability Scale (Pinsker, Stone, Pachana, & Greenspan, 2006), a scale which includes two main factors: credulity and gullibility. Credulous and gullible behaviours are thought to encourage social exploitation from manipulators (Greenspan, Loughlin, & Black, 2001). DT constructs also yield significant links to social manipulation behaviours (Baughman, Dearing, Giammarco, & Vernon, 2012). This 20-item questionnaire aimed to capture the characteristics of individuals who fall victim to people high on the DT traits. Premised on the literature discussed above, vulnerability to exploitation in the present study was defined as *a physical, psychological, or social condition whereby a person fails to detect or avoid potentially harmful interpersonal interactions*.

The original Social Vulnerability Scale was used with older adults and designed as an informant-based behaviour rating scale, with a focus on acts of financial exploitation. For the current study, the scale was modified to a self-report measure. Some items of a financial nature were removed (e.g. *How often has he/she been persuaded to purchase unneeded products or services*) and some items were revised to reflect general harassment behaviours and to be more applicable to a wider population (e.g. *I am frequently subjected to nit-picking and trivial fault-finding*, *I will retaliate if I am a target of offensive and inappropriate language*). Respondents rated to what extent each statement describes them on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (very untrue of me) to 5 (very true of me). Possible scores range from 20 to 100. Higher scores reflect higher levels of vulnerability to exploitation. Cronbach's alpha for the VS ($N = 144$) is .80, indicating a good internal consistency of the items in the scale (George & Mallery, 2003).

4.2.2   Big Five Inventory (BFI). The BFI is a 44-item questionnaire that measures the five domains of personality (extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness). In previous studies, the BFI has reported good reliability, a clear factor structure, strong convergence with other Big Five measures, and significant self-peer agreement (Benet-Martínez & John, 1998; John, Naumann, & Soto, 2008; Soto, John, Gosling, & Potter, 2008).

4.2.3   Vignettes. Five case stories were constructed, each depicting one character with high levels of DT traits along with his/her victim of manipulation. To avoid gender bias, both males and females represented DT characters and victims across the vignettes. There were three male and two female DT characters, along with two male

and three female victims. The vignettes were selected and adapted from real-life cases found in public forums and articles. The vignettes were revised several times, drawing upon literature and case study materials in order to establish internal validity. Vignettes have been regarded as robust means of exploring sensitive topics, as they allow individuals some detachment (Hughes, 1998).

Each vignette contained eight 5-point Likert-type statements, with scales running from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree):

1. *Victim* is fully responsible for how *DT character* has been treating him/her.
2. *DT character* is fully responsible for how he/she has been treating *Victim*.
3. The ways in which *Victim* reacted to *DT character*'s behaviour were understandable.
4. There are good reasons to rationalise and tolerate *DT character*'s behaviour.
5. *Victim* should change his/her behaviour.
6. *DT character* should change his/her behaviour.
7. If given a chance, *Victim* can make an effort to change his/her behaviour.
8. If given a chance, *DT character* can make an effort to change his/her behaviour.

Three open-ended questions were included:

1. What are your impressions of *DT character*?
2. What are your impressions of *Victim*?
3. Which character in the story do you most identify with, and why?

4.3   Procedure

Informed consent was obtained. Participants completed the VS and the BFI. After ranking participants ($N = 144$) according to their VS scores from the highest to the lowest ($M = 47.69$, $SD = 11.22$, range 21-81), the top 30 participants (high vulnerability group) and bottom 30 participants (low vulnerability group) were invited to take part in a vignette-based study. An independent-samples t-test confirmed that there was a significant difference in the VS scores between high ($M = 57.90$, $SD = 6.48$) and low ($M = 35.67$, $SD = 5.54$) vulnerability groups, $t(58) = -14.29$, $p < 0.001$.

5. Results

5.1   VS and BFI

As presented in Table 1, total vulnerability scores ($M = 47.69$, $SD = 11.22$) showed significant positive correlations with Agreeableness ($M = 3.52$, $SD = .71$), $r(142) = .19$, $p < .05$, and Neuroticism ($M = 3.10$, $SD = .83$), $r(142) = .26$, $p < .01$. Vulnerability scores also showed significant negative correlations with Extraversion ($M = 3.07$, $SD = .92$), $r(142) = -.19$, $p < .05$, and Conscientiousness ($M = 3.38$, $SD = .67$), $r(142) = -.24$, $p < .01$.

Table 1
Mean, standard deviation and Pearson's correlation between Vulnerability Scale scores and the five personality domains of the Big Five Inventory (N = 144)

	M	SD	Correlation Matrix					
			V	E	A	C	N	O
Vulnerability (V)	47.69	11.22						
Extraversion (E)	3.07	.92	-.19*					
Agreeableness (A)	3.52	.71	.19*	.13				
Conscientiousness (C)	3.38	.67	-.24**	.25**	.19*			
Neuroticism (N)	3.10	.83	.26**	-.31**	-.13	-.44**		
Openness (O)	3.62	.62	-.06	.07	.04	.01	.10	

Note. $^{*}p < .05$, $^{**}p < .01$

5.2   Vignettes

5.2.1   Likert-Type Statements

Individual Likert items were ordinal-scale and hence were analysed using nonparametric tests.

5.2.1.1 Vignettes 1, 3, 4, and 5. A Mann-Whitney U test showed that the low vulnerability group agrees more strongly that the DT character is responsible for his/her actions as compared to the high vulnerability group, with $U = 297.50$, $p = .01$ for Vignette 1; $U = 277.50$, $p = .004$ for Vignette 3; $U = 267$, $p = .004$ for Vignette 4; and $U = 307.50$, $p = .02$ for Vignette 5.

5.2.1.2 Vignette 2. The low vulnerability group disagrees more strongly that the victim is responsible for his actions, $U = 311$, $p = .03$. A chi-square test of association found a significant relation between vulnerability and character identification, $\chi^2(1, n = 60) = 5.46$, $p = .02$, $\phi = 0.3$. The high vulnerability group is more likely to identify with the DT character, where participants from the high

vulnerability group comprise 81.8% of those who identify with the DT character as compared to only 18.2% from the low vulnerability group.

5.2.1.3 Vignette 3. The low vulnerability group disagrees more strongly that there are good reasons to rationalise and tolerate the DT character's behaviour, $U = 306$, $p = .04$.

5.2.1.4 Vignette 4. As a whole, 43.3% of participants identify with the DT character, whilst only about 20% of participants identify with the DT character in Vignettes 1, 2, 3, and 5. The presence of infidelity in the victim's behaviour appears to have had an influence on which character participants identify with. The low vulnerability group disagrees more strongly that how the victim reacted to DT character's behaviour was understandable, $U = 327.50$, $p = .05$, disagrees more strongly that there are good reasons to rationalise and tolerate the DT character's behaviour, $U = 296$, $p = .02$, and agrees more strongly that the victim should change his behaviour, $U = 327.50$, $p = .05$.

5.2.1.5 Vignette 5. The low vulnerability group agrees more strongly that the DT character should change her behaviour, $U = 313.50$, $p = .03$.

5.2.2   Open-Ended Questions

The responses for the open-ended questions were analysed by means of text analysis. Words and phrases with similar meaning were coded into the same category (e.g. "psychopath", "sociopath", "narcissist" were coded as personality disorder) to

represent a common theme. Neuendorf (2002) stated that this systematic form of data

extraction focuses on linking frequency counts of apparent features (positive/negative

keywords) to clusters of characteristics (general impressions).

Tables 2 and 3 show the themes that emerge based on the most frequently

used descriptions employed by high and low vulnerability groups with regard to the

DT characters and Victims, along with sample phrases to illustrate the written

responses. Overall, both high and low vulnerability groups viewed the perpetrators

negatively, employing words such as irresponsible, selfish, manipulative, whilst

acknowledging that the victims were being victimised. However, there is a difference

in the way both characters were described: the low vulnerability group were more

derogatory, whereas the high vulnerability group were less harsh.

Table 2
***Themes that emerged based on occurrences of words and phrases used to describe DT
character by high and low vulnerability groups, with example phrases.***

Themes	Example sentences
Low Vulnerability	
Personality disorder	"*He is clearly a **sociopath**"*
Will never change	"*He **will never change**, is parasitic and blames everyone else for whatever happens to him*"
Derogatory descriptions	"*A total **douchebag**"*
Typical	"*He's also a **typical lecher** who would sweet-talk and use his position to lure women*"
High Vulnerability	
Opportunist/Go-getter	"***Does what he needs** to get where he wants to get to*"
Successful/Effective	"*A man of **prestige and influence**"*
Intelligent	"*She's **smart** to use her own advantage to benefit herself*"
Problems stem from childhood	"*Must have had **unhappy childhood**"*

Table 3
Themes that emerged based on occurrences of words and phrases used to describe Victim by high and low vulnerability groups, with example phrases.

Themes	Example sentences
Low Vulnerability	
Naïve	"***Naive, easily convinced***"
Weak/Does not take a stand	"***Her soft and weak attitude*** *would hinder her wellbeing*"
High Vulnerability	
People pleaser	"*She **feels responsible for everyone being happy**"*
Blinded by love	"*Too **deep in love***"

6. Discussion

6.1   Vulnerability and the Big Five

The correlations between vulnerability scores and personality traits were consistent with the bullying literature. In the current study, high neuroticism and agreeableness scores were predictors of vulnerability. Victims of bullying have been found to score higher on neuroticism (Georgesen, Harris, Milich, & Young, 1999; Tani, Greenman, Schneider, & Fregoso, 2003). This is in accordance with the view that victims exhibit higher levels of distress and negative affect (Perry, Hodges, & Egan, 2001), which in turn reinforces further victimisation. Those higher on agreeableness are less likely to behave aggressively or retaliate (Gleason, Jensen-Campbell, & Richardson, 2004). They are also more trusting of others and perceive others positively (Jensen-Campbell & Graziano, 2001). Although agreeableness is linked to positive interpersonal relationships, high agreeableness may be one of the reasons people fall victim to DT individuals, as highly agreeable people are more forgiving and tend to react to hostility in a more temperate manner (Smart Richman & Leary, 2009). Low extraversion scores amongst the high vulnerability group were

consistent with previous research reporting victims of bullying to be less extraverted (Mynard & Joseph, 1997; Coyne, Seigne, & Randall, 2000; Glasø, Matthiesen, Nielsen, & Einarsen, 2007). Introverts will tend to be more isolated and less assertive and more likely to be targeted as a result.

Studies have found high conscientiousness to be antecedents of workplace bullying (Lind, Glasø, Pallesen, & Einarsen, 2009). Zapf and Einarsen (2003) suggested that highly conscientious individuals are overachievers who are more rigid and literal-minded, and with such qualities they are more likely to incite others' aggression. In the present study, however, the high vulnerability group reported significantly lower conscientiousness scores. Bollmer, Harris, & Milich (2006) argued that those who are more conscientious are more determined, making them better able to ward off potential threats by perpetrators. Furthermore, lower conscientiousness is associated with greater anger and negative affect in peer conflicts. People high on neuroticism and low on conscientiousness may have difficulty regulating their behaviour during conflict situations.

The results indicate that people who are vulnerable to victimisation should not be viewed as homogeneous and undifferentiated. There are different ways in which personality factors may be associated with vulnerability.

6.2 Response Styles and Identification with Characters

The present findings show differences in the responses to the Likert-type statements between the high and low vulnerability groups. Across all vignettes, the

less vulnerable were more assertive in their opinions; they were more affirmative (or negative) and more likely to select the extreme option (i.e., strongly agree or strongly disagree). In contrast, vulnerable people had a milder response style and their responses clustered around neutral. The high vulnerability group identified with the DT character in one of the vignettes, contrary to the study's prediction. As conscientiousness is associated with morality, such tendencies may suggest that vulnerable people possess blurred or uncertain personal and moral boundaries, which possibly lead them to believe that the manipulator has some understandable reasons to be unpleasant.

Researchers have attempted to explain why people identify with literary characters, which occurs frequently when one is reading a book or story. According to Kaufman and Libby (2012), people are inclined to engage in a phenomenon termed "experience-taking", in which they subconsciously take on the behaviours, internal thoughts, emotions, and feelings of fictional characters they relate to. This is said to be immersive; readers forget themselves and identify with the character. In the present study, vulnerable people perceived the DT character in Vignette 2 in socially desirable ways such as confident and dominant. On one hand, the DT traits may represent an evolutionarily successful strategy (Jonason, Webster, Schmitt, Li, & Crysel, 2012), and these traits appear desirable at first glance. On the other hand, it can be argued that vulnerable people aspire to such traits. Experience-taking allows them temporarily to forget themselves and their own self-concept, with which they may be dissatisfied.

In the situation where a male victim encounters a female DT character as illustrated in Vignette 4, more than one-third of participants in the second phase identified with the DT character. The vignette portrayed the male victim as behaving in a morally questionable way by having an extramarital affair with the DT character. It is generally agreed that infidelity involves a breach of trust and is unattractive (Mileham, 2007), thus people seem to be able to look past the unpleasant behaviours and identify with the DT individual, as they cannot justify the victim's marital unfaithfulness. Bartels (2008) argued that people are highly driven to abide by their moral beliefs in their judgements and choices, however these belief systems are flexible and complicated. Paradoxically, despite considering morality as rigid and objective, moral judgement processes are highly context-sensitive (Bartels, Bauman, Cushman, Pizarro, & McGraw, 2015). The present findings reinforce this view that nuanced influences are involved in these judgements, and that people, particularly those who are more vulnerable, tend not to evaluate the roles of the aggressor and the victim in isolation.

7. Limitations

The vignettes in this study were developed through adapting scenarios based on real-life situations, underpinned by theoretical concepts of perceptions of DT and vulnerability. A main limitation is the validation of scenarios in the vignettes. External validation to examine how the responses on hypothetical situations reflect people's actual behaviour when making similar decisions under real-world conditions would have been valuable. Therefore, another avenue for future research may be to

compare the results obtained using these vignettes to results from other objective

measures in order to assess internal consistency.

8. Conclusion

The Vulnerability Scale developed for this study shows good alpha reliability

and the items correlate as one would expect with the five personality dimensions. The

scale may be useful in providing a better understanding of vulnerability and the

psychological mechanisms underlying it. It may also help in identifying those who

are susceptible to manipulation.

Vulnerable individuals seem to be less certain when responding to Likert-type

statements and possibly see grey areas in DT behaviours, whereas less vulnerable

individuals perceive more readily that DT personalities are detrimental. It seems a

paradox remains – whilst people complain about malevolent individuals, victims of

such people may have a tendency to excuse them.

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