Meet your public relations team: People with dark traits may help you manage your image

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ABSTRACT

Although previous research suggests that people with high levels of Dark Triad (DT) traits (grandiose narcissism, Machiavellianism, psychopathy) are typically responsible for a disproportionate amount of harm, we propose that such individuals are more likely to help others self-present desired images (i.e., engage in beneficial-impression-management; BIM). In Study 1, participants completed indices of the DT and vulnerable narcissism, and they self-reported their likelihood of using various BIM tactics. DT traits and vulnerable narcissism related to enhanced anticipated use of BIM tactics for both friends and enemies. In Study 2, participants had the opportunity to exaggerate a friend's qualifications on a mock job application under conditions of either high or low self-gain. Each dark trait related to exaggerated ratings of the friend's qualifications, and these effects were particularly pronounced under high self-gain. Findings provided insight on how DT traits and vulnerable narcissism relate to a form of social benevolence but also highlight that such benevolence seems, in part, selfish.

1. Introduction

People who score high (vs. low) in Dark Triad (DT) traits (narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy) are often regarded as more malevolent individuals (Furnham, Richards, & Paulhus, 2013). Narcissism involves feeling superior and entitled and comes in at least two forms: grandiose and vulnerable. The grandiose form—a component trait within the DT (Furnham et al., 2013)—is associated with extraversion and high explicit self-esteem (Miller et al., 2011). Vulnerable narcissism—which is not within the DT—is associated with introversion, neuroticism, and low explicit self-esteem (Hendin & Cheek, 1997; Miller et al., 2011). Machiavellianism encompasses power striving, cynicism, and moral expediency (Christie & Geis, 1970; Rauthmann & Will, 2011). Psychopathy encompasses thrill-seeking, fearlessness, impulsivity, and, relative to the other dark traits, may be associated with more marked deficiencies in empathy (Jonason & Krause, 2013; Jonason & Tost, 2010; Jones & Paulhus, 2014). The dark traits unite on selfishness, dishonesty, disagreeableness, deficiencies in empathy, and tendencies to exploit others (Furnham et al., 2013).

This constellation of socially-undesirable characteristics suggests the traits should be met with disrepute, yet the traits are sometimes associated with thriving in group settings (Amernic & Craig, 2010; Furnham et al., 2013). Such a paradox raises questions about how people high in dark traits can thrive in groups. One idea is that dark traits may be associated with *only* short-term benefits but long-term

costs (Jonason, Koenig, & Tost, 2010); another idea is that dark traits are associated with self-presentation skill that leads to concealing negative characteristics (Jonason & Webster, 2012); yet another idea is that the traits are sometimes outcomes (not causes) of interpersonal success (Campbell & Foster, 2007). Although these ideas may have merit, here we propose an alternative perspective suggesting that people with dark traits are prone to providing an important form of helping that might make these people occasionally helpful and, therefore, somewhat valuable group members.

People are undoubtedly concerned with the way they come across (Schlenker, 2003). To obtain positive treatment and avoid negative treatment, people seek to present images of the self (e.g., successful, moral, intimidating, sick/weak) that secure valuable resources controlled by others or reduce provision of punishment by others. This task of "self-presentation" can be expensive, time-consuming, challenging, and anxiety-provoking (Leary, 1995), but Schlenker and Britt (1999) proposed that, sometimes, others *help* us with this daunting task via "beneficial impression management" (BIM). For example, people might put in a "good word" for a friend or justify a friend's bad behavior. BIM is a broad form of prosocial behavior (i.e., behavior designed to help others; Schlenker & Britt, 1999), and, as with any class of prosocial behavior, it can be motivated by altruism or selfishness (Schlenker & Britt, 1999), and it need not always be considered helpful or be desired by the recipient.

Some evidence has indicated that people spontaneously engage in

BIM for friends. In one study (Schlenker & Britt, 1999), participants described their friend's personality to someone their friend viewed as a desired or undesired date. Participants described their friend's personality as consistent with the preferences of the desired date and inconsistent with the preferences of the undesired date. Put differently, people changed their descriptions of their friend's personality to help them obtain desired treatment. Other studies have produced conceptually-similar effects and suggest that BIM is more likely when potential helpers (a) are led to believe their friends desire making a good impression (Schlenker & Britt, 1999, 2001), (b) feel closeness and empathy toward their friend (Pontari & Schlenker, 2004; Schlenker & Britt, 2001), (c) anticipate little personal cost of engaging in BIM (Pontari & Schlenker, 2004), and (d) are *not* highly concerned about honesty (Schlenker, Lifka, & Wowra, 2004).

There are at least three reasons to assume that dark traits might relate to *enhanced* BIM. First, people high (vs. low) in dark traits might assume the self can benefit more from BIM. Indeed, people high in some of these dark traits are "selfish" (non-altruistic) helpers (Konrath, Ho, & Zarins, 2016; White, 2014). In this context, numerous benefits can be anticipated from BIM. People might (a) expect reciprocity; (b) realize that BIM supports an image of likability (Pontari & Schlenker, 2006) that facilitates power acquisition (Schlenker, 1980); and (c) anticipate that others' resources accrued via BIM can be obtained by the self. Second, because people high in dark traits are unlikely to experience concerns about honesty (Muris, Merckelbach, Otgaar, & Meijer, 2017) or, more generally, worry about their ability to effectively execute manipulative tactics, these BIM inhibitors are relaxed in them. Third, logically, people will provide BIM to the extent they assume others could benefit from BIM (Schlenker & Britt, 2001). In this light, people high (vs. low) in dark traits might assume others can benefit more from BIM. Indeed, some dark traits seem related to prizing appearance over substance and are associated with enhanced anticipated benefit from strategic impression management (Hart, Adams, Burton, & Tortoriello, 2017).

2. Study 1

Participants completed indices of two narcissism forms (grandiose and vulnerable), psychopathy, and Machiavellianism. We predicted that people high (vs. low) in these dark traits would indicate a greater likelihood of engaging in BIM. We asked participants their likelihood of engaging in *various* BIM tactics for "friends" and "enemies" (within-subjects). Two features of this method deserve discussion. First, a variety of tactics can help others cultivate beneficial identities. Indeed, theorists of self-presentation (i.e., the strategic presentation of the *self;* Jones & Pittman, 1982; Schlenker, 1980, 2003) have differentiated up to 12 tactics used to cultivate desired self-identities (Lee, Quigley, Nesler, Corbett, & Tedeschi, 1999). BIM, in theory, would encompass the same logic embodied by these *self*-presentation tactics (e.g., "exemplary" people get special treatment) but would be used to present *others* (i.e., presenting others as "exemplary"). Hence, here, we adapted the tactics included in the Self-Presentation Tactics Scale (Lee et al., 1999) to reference the tactical presentation of *others* (not the self).[1] The BIM tactics we included were comprehensive (see Table 1). Our theorizing (i.e., dark traits should relate to enhanced likelihood of BIM) links dark traits to BIM; as such, we reasoned that the best test of the theory would involve summating across the likelihood of using all the BIM tactics to arrive at a "multiple-act" index of BIM that encompasses its conceptual scope (Ajzen, 2005).[2]

Second, although BIM is often studied in the context of friends (vs.

strangers), the examination of enemies seemed particularly worthwhile in our study. For people with dark traits, BIM offers a unique opportunity to capitalize on their impression-management orientation and skills to (a) maintain or build ties with friends and (b) smooth over relations with enemies. Indeed, given their offensive and antagonistic nature, people with dark traits should tend to agitate others (Furnham et al., 2013), resulting in a proliferation of enemies. Yet, because they must rely on others to fulfill selfish interests, they must maintain some level of amicability in their relationships. Indeed, dark traits are associated with strategically building alliances as a self-serving tactic (Jonason, Slomski, & Partyka, 2012) and projecting a charming image (Jonason et al., 2012; Rauthmann, 2012). Hence, we reasoned we were studying a phenomenon that would extend across friend and foe groups. We predicted dark traits would relate to enhanced application of BIM across *both* "enemy" and "friend" groups.

Participants completed two additional indices. First, participants indicated the extent to which they endorsed BIM tactic-facilitating beliefs, such as viewing BIM tactics as beneficial (for the self and others) and easy to execute. We speculated that the dark traits might relate to a network of interrelated beliefs that facilitate BIM such as anticipating ease of production and greater self- and other-benefit from BIM. All told then, we anticipated that dark traits would be associated with enhanced BIM tactic-facilitating beliefs for friends and enemies.

Second, we assessed concern for friends and enemies. BIM is facilitated, in part, by concern for the BIM target (Schlenker & Britt, 2001); dark traits inversely relate to measures of empathy and agreeableness (Furnham et al., 2013). Hence, although the traits might generally facilitate BIM, it is still plausible that relations between dark traits and BIM can be suppressed by their relation to reduced concern for others.

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Participants

Four-hundred-ninety United States participants were recruited from Mechanical Turk (MTurk) and paid $0.60 for participation; 69 participants failed to complete the study and were removed from analyses ($N = 421$; $M_{age} = 36.43$; 64.1% females; 75.5% White).[3] MTurk is an online platform for data collection that is useful to researchers for various reasons. First, it allows researchers to collect large samples quickly and inexpensively (Miller, Crowe, Weiss, Maples-Keller, & Lynam, 2017); second, data provided from MTurk samples seems of high quality relative to other samples (Miller, Crowe, et al., 2017); third, MTurk samples are more diverse (on age, race, life experience, ethnicity, region) than college samples, so they better approximate US population demographics (Miller, Crowe, et al., 2017).

2.1.2. Materials and procedure

After consent and an attention-check (preventing participation if not passed), participants completed the following five measures in a randomized sequence[4]: (a) the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Terry, 1988) to index grandiose narcissism ($\alpha = 0.90$; $M = 12.49$; $SD = 8.13$); (b) the psychopathy subscale of the Short Dark Triad (SD3; Jones & Paulhus, 2014; $\alpha = 0.82$; $M = 2.09$; $SD = 0.73$); (c) the Machiavellianism subscale of the SD3 (Jones & Paulhus, 2014; $\alpha = 0.83$; $M = 2.88$; $SD = 0.76$); (d) the Hypersensitive Narcissism Scale (HSNS; Hendin & Cheek, 1997) to index vulnerable narcissism ($\alpha = 0.80$; $M = 2.84$; $SD = 0.72$); and (e) a social-desirability-response bias index (Reynolds, 1982; $\alpha = 0.74$; $M = 6.20$; $SD = 3.09$).

Next, participants completed measures assessing their feelings and behaviors toward both *friends* and *enemies* (a within-subjects

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[1] We excluded some tactical presentations identified by Lee et al. (1999) because they seemed less relevant to BIM. Specifically, we excluded "self-handicapping" and "disclaimers." We added "denial" tactics.
[2] Summating across different BIM behaviors can result in missing nuanced patterns. Hence, we also present analyses involving each tactic.

[3] Attention-check questions were included in both Studies 1 and 2 that would either prevent participation (before beginning the study) or prevent full study completion (during the study) if not passed.
[4] All psychometric properties of measures reported in this paper pertain to the present samples, not the validation samples.