"Evil" intentions: Examining the relationship between the Dark Tetrad and victim selection based on nonverbal gait cues

Mary B. Ritchie[a,*], Julie Blais[b], Adelle E. Forth[b]

[a] Department of Psychology, Western University, Canada
[b] Department of Psychology, Carleton University, Canada

ABSTRACT

The current study sought to examine the association between the Dark Tetrad traits and accuracy in assessing a target's vulnerability using nonverbal gait cues. In a sample of 126 undergraduates, accuracy was positively associated with psychopathy, Machiavellianism, and everyday sadism, while narcissism was unrelated to accuracy. A hierarchical linear regression analysis also suggested that there is considerable overlap between these constructs, as Machiavellianism and everyday sadism did not add incrementally to the prediction of accuracy over and above psychopathy. Overall, this study provides support for previous research associating psychopathy with accuracy in perceiving other's vulnerability based on gait cues and raises questions about the construct validity of the Dark Tetrad. While the fault of victimization lies solely on the perpetrator, it is important to explore whether vulnerability cues can be modified to reduce predatory behavior.

1. Introduction

Studies have established that nonverbal cues such as gait (i.e., the way in which people walk) can be accurate indicators of vulnerability to victimization (Grayson & Stein, 1981; Gunns, Johnston, & Hudson, 2002; Murzynski & Degelman, 1996). Using these nonverbal cues, individuals higher in psychopathic traits appear to be more accurate in identifying victim vulnerability in both student (Ritchie, Blais, Forth, & Book, 2018; Wheeler, Book, & Costello, 2009) and offender samples (Book, Costello, & Camilleri, 2013) than individuals with fewer psychopathic traits. As psychopathy is not the only personality disorder associated with increased victimization, manipulation, and deception, it is possible that the Dark Tetrad, consisting of psychopathy, Machiavellianism, narcissism (Paulhus & Williams, 2002), and more recently, everyday sadism (Buckels, Jones, & Paulhus, 2013), may also be related to increased accuracy in perceiving vulnerability to victimization. As such, the present study sought to examine whether the relationship between psychopathy and accuracy in perceiving vulnerability extends to the other Dark Tetrad dimensions beyond psychopathy.

1.1. Nonverbal cues to victimization

In assessing specific nonverbal cues, movement or gait has been identified as an important indicator of vulnerability to victimization (Grayson & Stein, 1981; Gunns et al., 2002; Murzynski & Degelman, 1996). Grayson and Stein (1981) asked offenders imprisoned for assaults perpetrated against strangers to view a series of video clips of people walking and to determine the degree of vulnerability to an assault. Offenders were consistent in identifying those they perceived as easy targets, and those that they would avoid assaulting. Differences in gait were noted between these two groups, where potential victims differed in terms of stride length (short or long vs. medium), weight shift (up and down vs. lateral), movement (laterally vs. contralaterally), and feet placement (lifted feet vs. swung feet) resulting in a non-synchronous gait. These gait cues have been further validated in both university students and police officers (Murzynski & Degelman, 1996).

1.2. Psychopathy

Given that vulnerability is consistently associated with movement cues, it is possible that certain characteristics of observers may actually increase the accuracy in perceiving others' vulnerabilities. Research has demonstrated such effects for people higher in psychopathic traits (Book et al., 2013; Ritchie et al., 2018; Wheeler et al., 2009). Psychopathy encompasses four distinct characteristics: (1) interpersonal (i.e., manipulation), (2) affective (i.e., lack of remorse), (3) behavioral (i.e., impulsivity), and (4) antisocial (i.e., early onset of diverse criminal behaviors; Hare, 2003).

Research has suggested that an impaired ability to share emotions (i.e., affective empathy) may underlie the empathic deficits in individuals with psychopathy and subsequently lead to antisocial or violent behavior (e.g., Blair, 2004; Jones, Happe, Gilbert, Burnett, & Viding, 2010). Research has also demonstrated that individuals with psychopathic traits show deficits in interpreting fear responses (e.g., Decety, Skelly, Yoder, & Kiehl, 2014; Marsh & Cardinale, 2012). These deficits, however, do not necessarily indicate a general inability to identify the thoughts and emotions of others. For example, individuals scoring higher on measures of psychopathy have shown an equal ability in recognizing intensity of emotions in others (Book, Quinsey, & Langford, 2007) and in attributing motives to others' behaviors (Blair et al., 1996) compared to those with lower scores on psychopathy.

Research has also suggested that psychopathic individuals may have a heightened sensitivity to nonverbal cues indicative of vulnerability (Book et al., 2013; Ritchie et al., 2018; Wheeler et al., 2009). Wheeler et al. (2009) examined the relationship between psychopathy and accuracy in perceiving vulnerability to victimization (i.e., vulnerability to being mugged) through the use of target videos. These videos depicted 12 female targets (i.e., six victims and six non-victims) walking with their backs to the camera, unaware that they were being filmed (participants consented to the use of their videos after a full debriefing). Each video lasted approximately 10 s. The gait of each target was coded according to Grayson and Stein's (1981) criteria and it was confirmed that past victimization (i.e., any victimization equal to or greater than bullying) was related to vulnerable gait cues. Wheeler et al. (2009) then demonstrated that observers' (i.e., university students) Factor 1 psychopathy scores (and not Factor 2 psychopathy scores) were positively related to increased accuracy in perceiving target vulnerability. These results were later replicated in a male offender sample using the same walker stimuli (Book et al., 2013).

More recently, Ritchie et al. (2018) sought to examine the impact of observer gender on the association between psychopathy and accuracy in perceiving vulnerability to victimization. For this study, a new set of eight female walker videos (i.e., four victims and four non-victims), lasting approximately 10 s each, was created using a more specific definition of victimization than had been used in previous studies. Specifically, walkers were asked to indicate whether they had experienced violent victimization (i.e., robbery, threats, physical abuse, sexual assault/abuse, stalking) in the past five years. University students were provided with the same definition when judging vulnerability. Among male observers, Ritchie et al. (2018) identified an association between psychopathy (i.e., total, Factor 2, antisocial and the behavior facet) and accuracy in perceiving vulnerability to violent victimization. Among female observers, however, no significant associations were identified. Overall, these findings confirm that males with psychopathic traits have an enhanced ability to detect nonverbal cues signalling vulnerability to potential victimization. That is not to say, however, that psychopathic traits are the only dark personality attribute that may facilitate accurate perceptions of vulnerability.

1.3. The Dark Tetrad

Among community populations, psychopathy, combined with Machiavellianism (e.g., manipulative, calculating, self-interested; Jones & Paulhus, 2011), and narcissism (e.g., entitled, grandiose, egotistic, lack of empathy; Rhodewalt & Peterson, 2009) are referred to as the Dark Triad (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). More recently, a fourth personality trait – referred to as "everyday sadism" – was added to this constellation of dark personalities (e.g., Buckels et al., 2013; Mededovic & Petrovic, 2015) forming the Dark Tetrad. According to Buckels et al. (2013), everyday sadists are individuals who gain pleasure from hurting others and are often willing to go out of their way to hurt others. All four Dark Tetrad traits have been associated with aversive behaviors such as antisociality (Buckles, Trapnell, & Paulhus, 2014), online trolling (Buckles, 2014), bullying (Book, Volk, & Hosker,

2012), and gaining pleasure from others' misfortune (Porter, Bhanwer, Woodworth, & Black, 2014).

Currently, there is little research on whether people higher in Dark Tetrad traits (beyond psychopathy) are able to accurately perceive vulnerability in others or whether they simply see all individuals as potential victims (Black, Woodworth, & Porter, 2014). Black et al. (2014) examined whether university students higher on the Dark Triad traits were able to accurately perceive vulnerability in others by viewing short clips of people engaged in conversation that scored high and low on assertiveness (used as a proxy for vulnerability). Notably, sadism was not examined. Black et al., (2014) found that Dark Triad traits were more strongly associated with a negative person bias (i.e., the tendency to view everyone as having the potential to be victimized), as opposed to an ability to identify specific vulnerability. When assessing the cues used to form their opinions, those scoring higher on the Dark Triad tended to rely on their own intuition rather than cues specific to the potential victim. With evidence that gait cues are accurate indicators of vulnerability (e.g., Grayson & Stein, 1981), and that individuals higher in psychopathic traits are perceptive to these cues (e.g., Book et al., 2013), the results of Black et al. (2014) may be limited as gait cues were not available to observers when making vulnerability judgements.

1.4. Current study

Despite the positive relationship between psychopathy and increased accuracy in perceiving vulnerability to victimization based on gait cues (Book et al., 2013; Ritchie et al., 2018; Wheeler et al., 2009), it is unclear whether this association would extend to other manipulative personality patterns such as the Dark Tetrad. Although Black et al. (2014) provide evidence that individuals scoring higher on measures of the Dark Triad traits have a negative person bias, gait cues were not included and everyday sadism was not examined. Given associations between psychopathy, Machiavellianism, narcissism, and everyday sadism (e.g., Book et al., 2015; Porter et al., 2014), a positive association was expected between Dark Tetrad traits and accuracy in perceiving vulnerability to victimization based on gait cues in the current study.

Notably, there is some inconsistency in the literature regarding the Factor level associations between psychopathy and accuracy. That is, studies utilizing a broader definition of victimization (i.e., anything equal to or greater than bullying; Book et al., 2013; Wheeler et al., 2009) identify Factor 1 psychopathy as more salient to the prediction of accuracy, while those utilizing a more specific definition of victimization (e.g., physical abuse, sexual abuse/assault) identify Factor 2 psychopathy (specifically antisocial behavior) as more salient (Ritchie et al., 2018). The current study sought to both replicate the findings of Ritchie et al. (2018) while also extending the findings to the Dark Tetrad; the same specific definition of victimization was therefore used.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The sample comprised 126 undergraduate students (43 men and 83 women; 27 participants were removed for failing an attention check question [$n = 14$], or for having more than 50% missing data [$n = 6$]). Participant age ranged from 17 to 47 ($M = 20.27$, $SD = 4.8$) and the majority identified as Caucasian (57.3%).

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Self-Report Psychopathy Scale (SRP-III; Paulhus, Neumann, & Hare, 2016)

The SRP-III is a 64-item self-report measure of psychopathy. The SRP-III produces a total score, two factor scores, and four facet scores: