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The Dark Triad, emotional expressivity and appropriateness of emotional response: Fear and sadness when one should be happy?

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ABSTRACT

In the present study, we looked at the relationships between the Dark Triad (i.e., Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy) and (i) emotional expressivity, and (ii) appropriateness of emotional response to emotion-evoking video clips. In an on-line study (N = 164), participants filled in questionnaires on the Dark Triad and emotional expressivity, and rated their identification with facial expressions of emotions as a response to sadness, happiness, and fear-evoking video clips. Machiavellianism and psychopathy related to lower, and narcissism to higher self-reported emotional expressivity. Emotional expressivity had a positive association with appropriate identification with facial expressions. Narcissism related to feeling happiness after a fearful video clip, and psychopathy to identification with sad and fearful faces after viewing a happy video clip. We discuss the results with a reference to the relationship between the Dark Triad and evolutionary cheater strategy.

1. Introduction

Much recent research has focussed on investigating emotional deficits associated with the Dark Triad (i.e., narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy) personality constellation. The Dark Triad consists of three inter-correlated, yet distinctive personality traits, sharing the core of manipulation and callousness (Jones & Figueredo, 2013). These traits have complicated, multi-faceted, sex-specific relationships with empathy and emotional intelligence (Ali, Amorim, & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2009; Jauk, Freudenthaler, & Neubauer, 2016; Jonason, Lyons, Bethell, & Ross, 2013; Jonason & Krause, 2013; Jonason & Kroll, 2015; Nagler, Reiter, Furtner, & Rauthmann, 2014; Petrides, Vernon, Aitken Schermer, & Veselka, 2011; Wai & Tiliopoulos, 2012; Zhang, Zou, Wang, & Finy, 2015). For example, men often (but not always) score higher on the Dark Triad traits than women do, and low empathy seems to be localised to narcissism in women, and psychopathy in men (Jonason et al., 2013). One of the suggestions is that individuals high in the Dark Triad may *understand* the feelings that other individuals have (i.e., have cognitive empathy), but they don't show an appropriate emotional response to emotion-evoking stimulus (i.e., lack affective empathy; e.g., Wai & Tiliopoulos, 2012). Within the evolutionary framework, the lack of affective empathy could be viewed as skill rather than deficit, providing a useful tool for exploiting others. The Dark Triad has been proposed as a cheater strategy, where individuals high in these traits gain benefits from social interactions by the means lying, deceiving, and manipulating (Baughman, Jonason, Lyons, & Vernon, 2014; Jonason, Lyons, Baughman, & Vernon, 2014; Jonason & Webster, 2012).

In the current research, we were interested in the Dark Triad with respect to appropriateness of emotional response to sad, fearful, or happy stimulus. Previous studies have found that especially Machiavellianism and psychopathy have an association with schadenfreude, feeling happy about other's misfortune (Porter, Bhanwer, Woodworth, & Black, 2014). Further, narcissism relates to feeling positive when viewing sad faces, and psychopathy to feeling positive when viewing fearful faces (Wai & Tiliopoulos, 2012). However, these studies asked participants to rate the valence (i.e., negative vs positive) of photographs. Rather than looking at valence, we wanted to look at more specific emotions- namely, sadness, happiness, and fear as a response to sad, happy, and fearful stimuli. It is possible that the Dark Triad has a relationship with inappropriate emotional responses, for example, feeling happy when one should be feeling sad, or feeling sad and fearful when one should be feeling happy.

Another variable that could be related to both the Dark Triad and emotional response is emotional expressivity. Emotional expressivity is a trait-like individual difference in the extent to which an individual lets their emotions show in their facial expressions. Expressivity has a positive association with agreeableness (Leising, Müller, & Hahn, 2007), as well as higher intensity of felt emotions (Kring, Smith, & Neale, 1994), both of which have a negative relationship with the Dark Triad (Jonason et al., 2013; Paulhus & Williams, 2002). In the present research, we aimed to investigate both (i) the relationship between the Dark Triad and emotional expressivity, and (ii) how these variables

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affect the appropriateness of emotional response. Although emotional expressivity has not, to our knowledge, been studied in relation to the Dark Triad, we would expect that especially Machiavellianism and psychopathy have an association with lower expressivity.

Out of the Dark Triad traits, especially psychopathy and Machiavellianism have been identified as potential cheater-strategies, characterised by low cooperativeness and the propensity to lie in order to get benefits from others (Baughman et al., 2014; Jonason et al., 2014; Mealey, 1995). As emotional expressivity is likely to be an honest signal of cooperativeness (Boone & Buck, 2003), we would expect less cooperative individuals (i.e., those high in Machiavellianism and psychopathy) to show lower trait emotional expressivity. Although we are not aware of studies looking at trait emotional expressivity together with all of the three Dark Triad traits, there is some evidence that that psychopathy is associated with less emotional leakage when lying (Porter, ten Brinke, Baker, & Wallace, 2011), indicating that individuals high in this trait are more in control of their emotional expressions. However, emotional expressivity as a stable individual difference has not been investigated with regards to the three "dark" traits.

In summary, the present study explores the relationship with the Dark Triad and emotional expressivity, with the expectations that Machiavellianism and psychopathy, manifestations of an evolutionary cheater strategy, have an association with a lower expressivity. In addition, we are interested in looking at the contribution of both of the Dark Triad and emotional expressivity to appropriateness of emotional response after exposure to sad, fearful, and happy stimuli. Again, we expect that Machiavellianism and psychopathy, (but not narcissism and emotional expressivity) have a relationship with an inappropriate emotional response (e.g., happy after a sad or fearful stimulus, or sad or fearful after a happy stimulus).

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

Participants were 164 volunteers ($Mean_{age} = 26.51$, $SD = 11.81$; 39 men), entering an on-line experiment titled "Personality and emotional response". The study was advertised to an undergraduate student population who could take part in exchange for course credits, as well as via the researchers' social networks. The front page of the experiment contained ethical information, including a warning about the possibility of unpleasant emotions after watching video clips. The final page had an online debrief with the researchers contact details.

2.2. Measures

The Dark Triad was measured with the 27-item Short Dark Triad-3 (SD3; Jones & Paulhus, 2013). This short measure shows good validity and reliability (Maples, Lamkin, & Miller, 2014), extending to cross-cultural contexts (Atari & Chegeni, 2016). The questions are measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly disagree; 5 = Strongly Agree), and example items include "I'll say anything to get what I want" (psychopathy; Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.75$), "I like to get acquainted with important people" (narcissism; $\alpha = 0.73$), and "Most people can be manipulated" (Machiavellianism; $\alpha = 0.74$). Each Dark Triad traits had nine questions, which were summed and averaged to form an index for each trait.

Emotional Expressivity was measured with the 16-item Berkeley Expressivity Questionnaire, (BEQ; Gross & John, 1997). This self-report questionnaire correlates positively with peer-reports of expressivity, as well as with expressivity whilst watching a video clip (Gross & John, 1997). The questions are measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly disagree, 5 = Strongly agree), and example items include 'I am an emotionally expressive person', or "It is difficult for me to hide my fear". After reversing the reverse-item questions, the questions were summed together to form an index of emotional expressivity (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.87$).

Emotion-evoking video clips were obtained via YouTube, and validation study (with 20 raters) was run to determine that the selected clips elicited the intended emotions of happiness, sadness and fear. The happiness clip had quadruplet babies laughing, the sadness clip had a dog trying to comfort a dead friend; and the fear clip was from the horror movie featuring a knife and a masked creature. The duration of each clip was 50 s long. The validation study asked participants to rate how much each clip made them feel happy, sad, and fearful on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = not at all, 7 = very much so). The results indicate that the fear clip induced more fear ($M = 5.90$, $SD = 1.41$) than happiness ($M = 1.05$, $SD = 1.41$; $t\ (19) = -15.23$, $p < 0.001$) or sadness ($M = 1.85$, $SD = 1.39$; $t\ (19) = -10.13$, $p < 0.001$). The happiness clip was rated as more happy ($M = 6.25$, $SD = 1.16$) than sad ($M = 1.10$, $SD = 0.31$; $t\ (19) = 18.79$, $p < 0.001$) or fearful ($M = 1.20$, $SD = 0.52$; $t\ (19) = 18.30$, $p < 0.001$). Finally, the sadness clip was rated as more sad ($M = 6.25$, $SD = 0.91$) than happy ($M = 2.50$, $SD = 1.43$; $t\ (19) = 8.30$, $p < 0.001$) or fearful ($M = 2.25$, $SD = 1.02$; $t\ (19) = 13.37$, $p < 0.001$).

The emotions evoked by the clips utilised three pairs of Paul Ekman's (Ekman & Friesen, 1975) facial expression images. Each pair featured the same man and a woman side by side, showing the same emotional expression. Participants were instructed to "use the scale below to rate the extent to which you relate to the following expressions after watching the clip" (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree). After viewing each clip, participants rated their identification with sadness, followed by fear and happiness. This resulted in nine ratings by each participant (three for each of the three clips).

2.3. Procedure

After the on-line participant information and consent, participants were directed to a page asking demographic details (age, sex, whether they are students or not), followed by completion of the SD-3, followed by the BEQ. After this, participants were directed to three video-clips, presented in a random order for happiness, fear, and sadness. After each clip, participants were shown three pairs of the emotional faces (randomised for sadness, happiness, and fearful expression), indicating the extent they identified with emotions expressed in each face pair.

3. Results

In Table 1, we present the descriptive statistics and sex differences for the Dark Triad, emotional expressivity, and the ratings of the

Table 1
Descriptive statistics and sex differences for the Dark Triad, BEQ, and identification with emotional responses after emotional stimuli (e.g., fear-sad = ratings of sadness after the fearful stimuli).

	Mean (*SD*)			*t*	*g*
	Overall	Women	Men		
BEQ	51.03 (9.21)	53.33 (7.91)	43.70 (9.44)	5.71**	1.16
Narcissism	2.67 (0.61)	2.61 (0.62)	4.01 (0.59)	2.27*	2.28
Machiavellianism	2.95 (0.61)	2.88 (0.58)	3.15 (0.68)	3.35*	0.44
Psychopathy	2.20 (0.60)	2.09 (0.57)	2.54 (0.59)	4.20**	0.78
Fear-Fear	3.92 (1.11)	4.04 (1.06)	3.54 (1.19)	−2.51*	0.46
Fear-Sad	2.63 (1.12)	2.61 (1.23)	2.69 (1.10)	0.38	0.07
Fear-Happy	1.66 (1.10)	1.50 (0.95)	2.15 (1.37)	3.32**	0.60
Sad-Sad	4.23 (0.92)	4.32 (0.83)	3.92 (1.33)	−2.38*	0.41
Sad-Happy	1.26 (0.17)	1.19 (0.45)	1.49 (1.09)	2.43*	0.46
Sad-Fear	2.06 (1.17)	2.02 (1.16)	2.21 (1.22)	0.88	0.16
Happy-Happy	4.38 (0.91)	4.43 (0.92)	4.21 (1.08)	−1.29	0.20
Happy-Sad	1.57 (0.95)	1.56 (1.01)	1.62 (0.71)	0.32	0.08
Happy-Fear	1.49 (0.92)	1.41 (0.88)	1.77 (1.11)	2.17*	0.32

* $p < 0.05$.
** $p < 0.01$.