

Why We Love Toxic People: Perceptions of those with Destructive Behaviours

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Background

The concept of leadership is often associated with positive outcomes, and leaders have always been thought to possess particular heroic characteristics.



Recently, researchers have looked into the dark side of leadership, in which the term 'toxic' and other negative labels (e.g. destructive, evil, derailment, abusive, bully) are used to describe this dark side. Such undesirable characteristics are often associated with people with Dark Triad (DT) traits, namely Psychopathy, Narcissism, and Machiavellianism.

In reality people favour toxic leaders as they have the ability to captivate followers. Research on interpersonal relationship has also shown that women tend to fall for "bad men". Toxic people exist because others enable them.

Certain traits are predictive of vulnerability in people who fall victim to manipulation. This study aims to determine the characteristics of those who enable Dark Triad individuals, as well as to explore the processes and mechanisms within these enablers.

Materials and Methods



Vulnerability Scale (VS) is an adapted scale which encompasses two main dimensions: credulity and gullibility. Items reflecting bullying or harassment behaviours have been added for this study. Big Five Inventory (BFI) measures the five domains of personality: Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Neuroticism, and Openness.

Participants completed the VS and BFI. After ranking them according to their VS scores, the top 30 and bottom 30 participants were invited to take part in a vignette study. Five vignettes portraying different scenarios involving characters high on the DT traits and their victims of manipulation were presented. Each vignette contains Likert-type questions and open-ended questions.

References

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Paulhus, D. L., & Williams, K. M. (2002). The Dark Triad of personality: Narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 36, 556-563.
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Results

Cronbach's alpha for the 20-item VS was .80.

	Descriptive Statistics and Correlations		Correlation Matrix					
	Mean	S.D.	VS	BFIE	BFIA	BFIC	BFIN	BFIO
VS	48.01	11.54	1.00					
BFIE	3.11	.94	-.23*	1.00				
BFIA	3.55	.73	.18*	.17	1.00			
BFIC	3.42	.68	-.32**	.22*	.19*	1.00		
BFIN	3.09	.83	.35**	-.33**	-.11	-.44**	1.00	
BFIO	3.58	.64	-.06	.09	.10	.06	.08	1.00

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Total vulnerability scores showed significant negative correlations with Extraversion and Conscientiousness.

Total vulnerability scores showed a significant positive correlation with Agreeableness and Neuroticism.

Vignette 1, 3, 4, and 5:

A Mann-Whitney 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

Vignette 1: $U = 283, p = .005$

Vignette 3: $U = 271, p = .003$

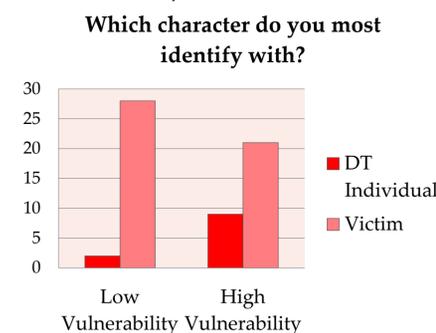
Vignette 4: $U = 293.50, p = .01$

Vignette 5: $U = 299, p = .02$

Vignette 2:

The **low vulnerability group disagrees more strongly that the victim is responsible for his action**, $U = 322, p = .05$.

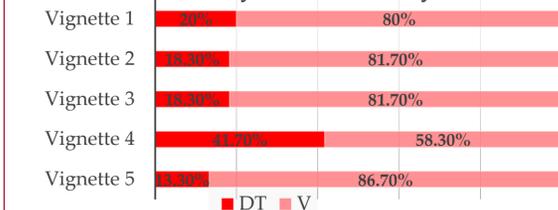
A chi-square test of association showed that there was a significant relation between vulnerability and character identification, $\chi^2(1, n = 60) = 5.46, p = .02$. **The high vulnerability group is more likely to identify with the DT character.**



Vignette 3:

The **low vulnerability group disagrees more strongly that there are good reasons to rationalise and tolerate the DT character's behaviour**, $U = 285, p = .01$.

Which character do you most identify with?



Vignette 4:

More participants identify with the female DT character, particularly when the male victim has demonstrated infidelity in another relationship.

Vignette 5:

The **low vulnerability group agrees more strongly that the DT character should change her behaviour**, $U = 325.50, p = .04$.

Discussions and Conclusions

People who are less vulnerable are more assertive in expressing their opinions; they tend to be significantly more affirmative (or negative) and are likely to select the extreme choice – *strongly agree* or *strongly disagree* – as compared to more vulnerable people.

More vulnerable people identify with DT characters. Low conscientiousness is associated with environmental stressors, e.g. less successful careers, poor marital adjustment, and the inability to make decisions at work. Conscientiousness is associated with morality; vulnerable people may have blurred personal and moral boundaries, which could also possibly lead them to believe that the manipulator has some understandable reasons to be hurtful.

It is generally agreed that infidelity is unacceptable, hence people seem to look past the unpleasant behaviours and identify with the DT person as they cannot justify the victim's marital unfaithfulness.

In conclusion, the milder response style on the Likert scale (neutral option) of more vulnerable people and their identification with DT characteristics may reflect a soften moral judgement and identity.

Acknowledgements

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Further information

If you are interested in taking part, please visit:

<http://kailichung.polladdy.com/perceptionandpersonality>

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