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Do Narcissists Tend to Create a Physically Attractive Veneer?

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in

Psychology

By

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Under the mentorship of *Dr. Nicholas Holtzman*

Abstract

Are people high in the Dark Triad are inherently attractive or are they simply more likely to dress up in ways that make themselves more attractive? This study is a partial replication of Holtzman and Strube (2013). We photographed participants (valid N = 65) in the state in which they entered the lab (Adorned Condition). The participants changed into standard gray attire provided for them (Unadorned Condition). Females removed their make-up and jewelry as well as pulled their hair back. Males shaved their beards. After being photographed, participants were asked to complete several Dark Triad surveys. Consistent with Holtzman and Strube (2013) the results indicated that narcissism correlated positively—although not significantly—with effective adornment ($r = .185$; $p = .144$). The magnitude of this effect is consistent with theories of narcissism that emphasize self-enhancement (e.g., narcissists self-regulate their appearances in order to strategically garner admiration), although caution must be exercised in interpreting the results based on this sample size.

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People vary in the extent to which they adorn themselves to manipulate attractiveness. Most people brush their teeth, comb their hair, and wash their clothes. Some people get their teeth straightened, get a haircut at the barber shop, and iron their clothes. Fewer people get their teeth whitened, groom their hair an hour each day, and purchase clothes from the finest stores. Clearly, there are individual differences in the degree to which people invest in their appearance to make themselves attractive. One of the main purposes of the current research is to determine who does well at the task of making themselves more attractive: Who adorns themselves well?

In a recent addition to the literature identifying which people engage in these types of adornment, Holtzman & Strube (2013) demonstrated that people high in the Dark Triad—Machiavellianism (e.g., manipulativeness), narcissism (e.g., arrogance), and psychopathy (e.g., callousness)—tend to adorn themselves well. Specifically, they demonstrated that people high in the Dark Triad tend to adorn themselves in ways that make them significantly more attractive than their counterparts. In order to unpack this finding, it is necessary to understand three core concepts: adorned attractiveness, unadorned attractiveness, and effective adornment.

Adorned attractiveness is our level of attractiveness when we are fully groomed—hair done, make up done, teeth brushed, and our finest clothes donned. In this study, it is simply captured by the attractiveness ratings assigned to people who are dressed “as is” when they arrive at the lab. *Unadorned attractiveness* is our level of attractiveness when we do not have make up on, nor our hair done, nor or our best clothes on. In this study, it is simply captured by the attractiveness ratings assigned to people who are dressed in

neutral gray clothes, as given to them by the researcher. Unadorned attractiveness is attractiveness in a state that simulates a natural state, without adornments. *Effective adornment* is a person's ability or inability to make themselves more attractive (partialing out and controlling for one's unadorned attractiveness). See Holtzman and Strube (2013) for details. These effects—and knowing with certainty whether they exist—are important because it is important to understand how individuals high on the Dark Triad operate in daily life (e.g., whether they adorn themselves effectively).

The purpose of the current study is to conduct a direct replication of Holtzman and Strube (2013). Replication studies have become increasingly popular in psychological science (Makel and Plucker, 2014) and for good reason—replication is the foundation for confidence about the direction and size of observed correlations. Reasons to be conservative about the findings by Holtzman and Strube (2013) include that (a) the study only included 111 participants, (b) it was conducted with a group of wealthy, mostly white, private school students from the Midwest; thus there are generalizability concerns. Furthermore, some of the effects were inconsistent (e.g., for narcissism). The current replication aimed to examine whether the results originally obtained by Holtzman and Strube (2013) hold up in a sample that is not particularly wealthy, not mostly white, and not based on private university students; one additional difference is that this sample is based in the Southeastern United States. Thus, broadly speaking, we aim to test the replicability and generalizability of these effects.

Method

Participants: Targets

A total of 75 students from undergraduate psychology courses at Georgia Southern University participated to partially fulfill a course requirement or for extra credit. Participants were recruited from an online subject pool. Of these participants, 65.8% were White, 24.7% were African-American, 2.7% were Asian, 1.4% were Hispanic, 1.4% were Afro-Caribbean, and 1.4% were mulit-racial. The sample was 68.5% female, and the mean age was 19.00 ($SD = 1.42$). Participants who completed the survey in under 15 minutes were excluded from all analyses. This left a modestly sized sample ($N=65$).

Participants: Observers

The targets were rated on attractiveness by unacquainted observers who are also students of Georgia Southern University. They participated to partially fulfill a course requirement or for extra credit. Participants were two ($N=2$) individuals recruited from an online subject pool; both were white, 1 was a woman, and the mean age was 20.5 ($SD = 1.0$). Observers provided ratings of each target shown in full-length photographs in both conditions and rated them on a eleven-point scale ranging from 0 (not at all attractive) to 10 (very attractive). The observers withheld ratings of known targets. The reliability was acceptable; $ICC(2,k) = .764$.

Procedures

To differentiate attractiveness components, two types of photographs were taken: adorned and unadorned. In the adorned condition, participants were photographed in the state in which they entered the lab. In the unadorned condition, participants changed into gray sweatpants and a gray t-shirt. Each person was instructed to remove make up (using

remover) and set aside adornments (e.g., jewelry, eye glasses). Participants with long hair were also asked to pull their hair back behind their head to decrease hairstyle effects. Men shaved their beards. Participants were asked to give a neutral facial expression and look straight into the camera. This was done to put the participants in the most neutral and unadorned state possible, minimizing their ability to manipulate their physical attractiveness. These photographs were then shown to unacquainted observers who rated the physical attractiveness of the targets. This allowed us to define effective adornment as the residual of how adorned attractiveness is related to unadorned attractiveness. Holtzman and Strube (2013) define effective adornment as “the attractiveness in the adorned state, controlling for attractiveness in the unadorned state.”

Measures

Big Five Personality Traits. The Big 5 traits were assessed using the Big Five Inventory (BFI; Pervin & John. [1999]). This 44 question self-report survey is on a Likert-type five point scale. The anchors range from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). This assessment requires participants to answer questions on how they see themselves. For example “I see myself as someone who is tense” or “I see myself as someone who perseveres until a task is finished.” Internal reliabilities of the BFI subscales are reliable from past research, reaching Chronbach’s alphas of .77, .70, .78, .79, and .76 for Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Neuroticism, and Openness. Our alphas for Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Neuroticism, and Openness were .55, .72, -.09, -.2, and .1 ,respectively.

Machiavellianism. Machiavellianism was assessed with the 20-item self-report survey called the *Mach-IV* (Christie & Geis, 1970), a Likert-type six point scale. The anchors are 1 (*disagree strongly*) to 6 (*agree strongly*). A sample item is, “Never tell anyone the real reason you did something unless it is useful to do so.” as Another item is, “It is wise to flatter important people.” Internal reliability of this scale reaches a Chronbach’s alpha of .70 in previous research (McHoskey, 2001). Our data yielded a Chronbach’s alpha of .25.

Narcissism. Narcissism was assessed in two ways. First, it was assessed with the Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) subscale of the Multisource Assessment of Personality Pathology (MAPP; Oltmanns & Turkheimer, 2006), which itself was based on the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders—IV (Rodebaugh, Gianoli, Turkheimer, and Oltmanns, 2010). This measure consists of eleven items and is a 4 point Likert-type scale ranging from “None of the time” to “All of the time.” Sample questions include “I think I am better than most people” and “I am jealous of others.” Chronbach’s alpha from past research ranges from reaches .87 (Rodebaugh, Gianoli, Turkheimer, and Oltmanns, 2010). Chronbach’s alpha for our data was .67.

Narcissism was also assessed with The Narcissistic Rivalry and Admiration Questionnaire (NARQ; Back et al, 2013). This assesses self-perspectives on narcissism and does not distinguish between the assertive and antagonistic aspects of narcissism. It includes 18 questions with an 11 point Likert type scale ranging from “0% of the time” to “100% of the time.” Sample questions include “I enjoy for others to be inferior to me” and “I deserve to be seen as a great personality.” In past research the NARQ has been a stronger predictor of narcissistic behavior than the NPI and has strong internal reliability

and consistency, reaching scores of .80 (Scherer, 2013). Our Chronbach's alpha showed strong reliability with .81.

Psychopathy. Psychopathy was assessed with the Self-Report Psychopathy scale (SRP; Paulhus, Neumann, & Hare, 2007). This scale was developed from the Psychopathy Checklist and has shown good convergent and discriminate validity (Mahmut, Menictas, Stevenson, and Homewood, 2011). It consists of 64 items to which participants respond "Yes" or "No". A sample item is "I never feel guilty hurting others." Alphas tend to be found reliable with most current research reaching .88. Our alpha was low, reaching only .46.

Psychopathy was also assessed using the *Levenson Psychopathy Scale-Revised* (Levenson, M.; Kiehl, K.; Fitzpatrick, C. (1995) was developed from the Psychopathy Checklist as a 19 item survey with a four point Likert type scale ranging from "*disagree strongly*" to "*agree strongly*." Sample questions include "I think I could beat a lie detector test" and "Most people are wimps." In past research, the Levenson Scale has been found to be a strong predictor of psychopathic behavior, reaching a Chronbach's alpha of .79 in current research. Our data produced a Chronbach's alpha of .63.

Results

The internal consistency reliabilities were unacceptable for all of the scales except for the narcissism scales; therefore, we focus on narcissism in the results.

Preliminary Analysis

Participants' responses to the scales were averaged, with higher scores indicating higher narcissism. Narcissism scores on the NPD ranged from 1.5 to 4.09 ($M = 2.94$, $SD = .55$) whereas scores on the NARQ ranged from 2.56 to 8.61. ($M = 4.70$, $SD = 1.24$). Independent Samples t -test was conducted to determine any sex differences in the scores. Male participants scored lower in narcissism on the NPD ($M = 2.72$, $SD = 0.64$) than did females ($M = 3.04$, $SD = 0.49$), $t(62) = -2.14$, $p = .036$, Cohen's $d = .955$. This trend was not significant on the NARQ (females: $M = 4.77$, $SD = 1.14$) than males (males: $M = 4.5$, $SD = 1.49$), $t(62) = -0.745$, $p = .459$, Cohen's $d = .869$. Thus, although there was a sex-difference on the NPD measure, there was not a sex-difference on the NARQ.

Tested Hypotheses

To test our hypothesis regarding effective adornment, we ran a Pearson Correlation linking the narcissism scales to the standardized residuals representing Adorned Attractiveness Regressed on Unadorned Attractiveness. We define *effective adornment* as the "increment in attractiveness strictly due to dressing up" (Holtzman & Strube, 2013; see also Diener, Wolsic, & Fujita, 1995). We predicted that those higher in narcissism would exhibit higher effective adornment.

Consistent with the findings of Holtzman and Strube (2013), effective adornment and narcissism, as measured by the NPD and NARQ, were positively correlated ($r[65] = .205$, $p = .101$; $r[64] = .121$, $p = .339$). Consistent with Holtzman and Strube (2013), narcissism, as measured by the NPD sub-scale of the MAPP, resulted in a trivial correlation with unadorned attractiveness, $r(65) = .097$, $p = .442$; it produced a non-significant correlation with adorned attractiveness $r(65) = .194$, $p = .122$. This is similar

to correlations reported by Holtzman and Strube (2013). Likewise, the NARQ was virtually unrelated to unadorned attractiveness, $r(64) = .097, p = .787$; the NARQ was not significantly related to adorned attractiveness $r(64) = .104, p = .415$, although the magnitude of this effect approximates the magnitude that is typically found (Holtzman & Strube, 2010).

In order to measure narcissism as comprehensively as possible, we calculated Z-scores for the NPD sub scale as well as the NARQ, and then we averaged the Z-scores. We related this narcissism composite to unadorned attractiveness, adorned attractiveness, and effective adornment. Consistent with Holtzman and Strube (2013), composite narcissism scores were not significantly related to unadorned attractiveness $r(64) = .053, p = .678$; consistent with Holtzman and Strube (2010), there was trend indicating a correlation between the narcissism composite and adorned attractiveness $r(64) = .211, p = .094$; finally, consistent with Holtzman and Strube (2013), the effective adornment link was positive $r(64) = .185$; however, it is important to emphasize that this was not statistically significant, $p = .144$. Thus, the magnitudes of the effects linked to the composite narcissism scores largely replicate the narcissism results from Holtzman and Strube (2013); the direction and magnitude of the effects are comparable.

Discussion

The objective of this study was to replicate the study by Holtzman and Strube (2013), which constituted a first attempt at determining why people high in the Dark Triad tend to be more attractive. Our first hypothesis was that those who scored high on the Dark Triad were born beautiful (i.e., they have higher unadorned attractiveness).

Since many of our scales yielded low reliability, but the narcissism scaled yielded high reliability, we decided to focus on narcissism. Unadorned attractiveness was non-significantly correlated to Narcissism as measured by the NPD sub scale of the MAPP, by the NARQ, and by the composite narcissism score. These findings are consistent with the Holtzman and Strube paper (2013). Our second hypothesis stated those who scored high on the Dark Triad were more effective at dressing up (i.e., the have higher effective adornment). Our results indicate a positive yet non-significant correlation between narcissism and effective adornment. Albeit not statistically significant, this correlation magnitude was very similar to the findings revealed in Holtzman and Strube (2013); the correlation in the present study was .19, whereas it was .18 in the study by Holtzman and Strube (2013).

These results incrementally strengthen the likelihood that self-enhancement theories of narcissism hold greater weight than evolutionary approaches—at least insofar as explaining why narcissists are attractive. Morf and Rhodewalt (2001) suggest that when individuals high in Dark Triad traits dress up, they experience a boost in their self-esteem or gain greater satisfaction from the attention they receive, leading them to continue dressing well. It is also quite possible that narcissists dress up in order to facilitate their short-term mating strategies; the lack of correlation, however, between unadorned attractiveness and narcissism suggests that it is incorrect to argue that dark personalities evolved because they were selected due to their higher levels of unadorned attractiveness (Holtzman & Strube, 2011).

Limitations

Beyond having a low sample size, the limitations of this study include a lack of reliability for the measures used. It was found that there was low reliability for the Big Five Inventory, Levenson Self-Report Psychopathy Scale, Self-Reported Psychopathy Scale III, and the MACH-IV. For this reason these scales were not analyzed in the results.

Another possible limitation is that we were unable to reach a diverse population to score attractiveness for the targets. We had two observers who were the same race and similar in age, this could account for the strong similarity in ratings.

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Table 1

Summary of Intercorrelations, Means, and Standard Deviations for Scores on the NPD sub scale of the MAPP, NARQ, Effective Adornment, and Unadorned Attractiveness.

Measure	1	2	3		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
NPD	-	.653**	0.205	0.097	2.94	0.55
NARQ	-	-	0.121	0.034	4.70	1.24
Effective Adornment	-	-	-	-	0.00	0.664
Unadorned Attractiveness	-	-	-	-	2.44	1.05

Note. **. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* Correlation is significant at the 0.005 level (2-tailed).