



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Personality and Individual Differences

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/paid

Dark Triad traits, infidelity and romantic revenge



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 13 February 2015

Received in revised form 3 April 2015

Accepted 4 April 2015

Available online 17 April 2015

Keywords:

Dark Triad
 Infidelity
 Machiavellianism
 Narcissism
 Psychopathy
 Revenge

ABSTRACT

Dark Triad traits (narcissism, Machiavellianism and psychopathy) are characterized by manipulation, emotional coldness, and a lack of empathy. The current studies investigated the influence of Dark Triad traits on heterosexual women's infidelity and romantic revenge. For Study 1, women ($N = 102$) completed the Mach IV, NPI-16, Levenson Self-Report Psychopathy Scale, bespoke Infidelity Experience Scale, Intentions Towards Infidelity Scale, and Susceptibility to Infidelity Instrument. Findings demonstrated that Dark Triad traits predict prior experience of infidelity, intentions to engage in infidelity and perceived susceptibility to a partner's infidelity. Narcissism and secondary psychopathy were the most influential traits. For Study 2, women ($N = 108$) completed the aforementioned Dark Triad trait measures and responded to a hypothetical scenario describing a partner's infidelity. Dark Triad traits predicted each type of revenge assessed except willingness to terminate the relationship. Secondary psychopathy was the only Dark Triad trait to emerge as a significant individual predictor. Together, these studies demonstrate that Dark Triad traits predict women's own infidelity, their perceived vulnerability to a partner's infidelity and revenge in response to this infidelity. Findings also highlight the importance of distinguishing between primary and secondary psychopathy.

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1. Introduction

Dark Triad traits (narcissism, Machiavellianism and psychopathy) are distinct but related personality traits characterized by manipulation, exploitation, emotional coldness, and a lack of empathy (Jonason, Lyons, Bethell, & Ross, 2013; McHoskey, Worzel, & Szyarto, 1998). Previous research indicates that Dark Triad traits influence platonic, romantic and sexual relationships (Brewer & Abell, 2015; Brewer, Abell, & Lyons, 2014; Ragsdale & Brandau-Brown, 2005). The current studies extend these findings and investigate the influence of each Dark Triad trait on infidelity (including susceptibility to a partner's infidelity) and willingness to engage in romantic revenge.

1.1. Infidelity

Previous research indicates that Dark Triad traits are associated with greater personal experience of infidelity (e.g., Adams, Luevano, & Jonason, 2014; Campbell, Foster, & Finkel, 2002; Visser, Pozzebon, Bogaert, & Ashton, 2010). This is consistent with the lower levels of

relationship commitment (Ali & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2010) displayed by those with high levels of Dark Triad traits and the increased use of deception (Paulhus & Williams, 2002), exploitation of trust (Leary, Knight, & Barnes, 1986) and interest in alternate partners (Campbell et al., 2002) exhibited. It is unclear however whether those with high levels of Dark Triad traits intend to engage in infidelity, or if other factors associated with the Dark Triad such as attractiveness (Holtzman & Strube, 2010), charisma (Christie & Geis, 1970), impulsivity (Vazire & Funder, 2006) and risk taking (Crysel, Crosier, & Webster, 2013) present greater opportunities for infidelity or influence reactions to those opportunities. Recent research (Brewer & Abell, 2015) indicates that one Dark Triad trait (Machiavellianism) is associated with greater intentions to engage in infidelity, suggesting that intent contributes to the relationship between Dark Triad traits and infidelity.

Previous studies investigating Dark Triad traits and infidelity have focused on the manner in which Dark Triad traits may influence the propensity to be unfaithful, rather than vulnerability to a partner's infidelity. Dark Triad traits are associated with poor quality relationships (e.g., low levels of commitment and intimacy, Ali & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2010) which may increase the likelihood of a partner's infidelity. Furthermore, Dark Triad traits influence perceptions of other people's behavior. In particular, Machiavellianism is associated with cynicism and distrust (Christie & Geis, 1970), suggesting a greater perceived susceptibility to infidelity. In

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contrast, narcissism is characterized by an elevated sense of self worth and entitlement (Emmons, 1984; Raskin & Hall, 1981) which may lead to the belief that a partner would not seek alternative partners. Hence, the present studies also consider the extent to which Dark Triad traits influence vulnerability to a partner's infidelity.

1.2. Revenge

Those confronted with a partner's infidelity may display a range of behavioral responses including distress, forgiveness and revenge (targeted at either a partner or rival). Whilst a number of situational factors influence the propensity to seek revenge, dispositional factors such as personality (Brown, 2003; Emmons, 2000) are also important. Dark Triad traits in particular, may increase the likelihood of revenge as all traits are related to anger and envy (Veselka, Giammarco, & Vernon, 2014). Furthermore, a lack of empathy, central to Dark Triad traits (Jonason et al., 2013), reduces the tendency to forgive (Fincham, Paleari, & Regalia, 2002). Psychopathy may be especially influential. Revenge can lead to a range of negative consequences such as guilt, reputational damage and risks to personal safety (Boon, Alibhai, & Deveau, 2011; Cota-McKinley, Woody, & Bell, 2001; Fitness, 2001). Those with high levels of psychopathy underestimate negative and overestimate positive consequences of their actions (Ferrigan, Valentiner, & Berman, 2000). Combined with greater impulsivity and risk taking behavior (Crysel et al., 2013; Hare, 1985), these findings suggest that those with high levels of psychopathy may be most likely to seek revenge, regardless of the risk.

Narcissists are also susceptible to revenge. Narcissistic entitlement is positively associated with motivation to protect reputation, and seeking retribution and negatively related to forgiveness (Exline, Baumeister, Bushman, Campbell, & Finkel, 2004). Those with high levels of narcissism react with greater aggression when offended by others (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998) and engage in impulsive behavior that provides short-term benefits but leads to long-term costs (Vazire & Funder, 2006). Thus explicit (i.e., direct) forms of revenge are most likely. Furthermore, while narcissists display elevated self-worth and entitlement, their self-esteem is easily threatened (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001) and they are motivated to outperform competitors (Goncalves & Campbell, 2014), suggesting that these individuals may seek revenge against romantic rivals. In contrast whilst Machiavellianism is negatively related to forgiveness and positively related to emotional vengeance (Giammarco & Vernon, 2014), those with high levels of Machiavellianism display a long-term orientation (Jones & Paulhus, 2009). Thus, those with high levels of Machiavellianism may respond to infidelity in a manner that reduces the risk of retaliation (e.g., adopting indirect rather than direct aggression).

Therefore, Study 1 investigated the influence of Machiavellianism, primary and secondary psychopathy and narcissism on previous incidence of infidelity, intentions to engage in infidelity and perceived likelihood that a partner will be unfaithful. It was predicted that women with higher levels of Dark Triad traits would report greater prior incidence of infidelity and intentions to engage in infidelity. It was further predicted that women with higher levels of Machiavellianism and narcissism would report higher and lower susceptibility to a partner's infidelity respectively. No prediction was made for the relationship between psychopathy and perceived vulnerability to a partner's infidelity. Study 2 investigated the influence of Machiavellianism, psychopathy and narcissism on likelihood of revenge in response to a partner's infidelity. It was predicted that women with higher levels of each Dark Triad trait would be most likely to engage in romantic revenge directed at both the partner and rival.

2. Study 1 method

2.1. Participants

Heterosexual women ($N = 102$) aged 18–42 years ($M = 22.53$, $SD = 4.99$) were recruited online and from the campus of a British University. All participants were in a (casual: 6.9%; serious: 93.1%) romantic relationship at the time of the study. Average relationship length was 3 years and four months.

2.2. Materials and procedure

Participants completed initial demographic questions followed by the Mach IV (Christie & Geis, 1970), NPI-16 (Ames, Rose, & Anderson, 2006), Levenson Self-Report Psychopathy Scale (Levenson, Kiehl, & Fitzpatrick, 1995), bespoke Infidelity Experience Scale, Intentions Towards Infidelity Scale (Jones, Olderbak, & Figueredo, 2011), and Susceptibility to Infidelity Instrument (Buss & Shackelford, 1997).

The Mach IV (Christie & Geis, 1970) is a 20 item measure of Machiavellianism. Items are rated on a 7 point scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*). The scale assesses interactions with others, morality and cynicism. Example items include "Anyone who completely trusts anyone else is asking for trouble". Ten items are reverse coded. The NPI-16 (Ames et al., 2006) is a 16 item measure of narcissism, comprised of items selected from the larger NPI-40 (Raskin & Terry, 1988). Participants are presented with 16 statement pairs and select the statement which most accurately relates to their own feelings. Example items include "I prefer to blend in with the crowd" vs "I like to be the centre of attention". Narcissistic responses are coded as 1 and non-narcissistic responses are coded as 0. The Levenson Self-Report Psychopathy Scale (Levenson et al., 1995) contains 26 items (7 reverse coded) and is intended for use with non-institutionalized samples. The scale is separated into the primary psychopathy subscale (16 items) assessing manipulative, selfish, and uncaring traits and the secondary psychopathy subscale (10 items) measuring anti-social behavior. Example items include "For me, what's right is whatever I can get away with" (primary psychopathy) and "I have been in a lot of shouting matches with other people" (secondary psychopathy). Items are rated on a 5 point scale (1 = *disagree strongly* to 5 = *agree strongly*).

To assess previous experience of infidelity a bespoke Infidelity Experience Scale was created. Participants were asked to report whether they had engaged in five behaviors (e.g., gone on a date with another person, had a one night stand) whilst in a committed romantic relationship. Participants responded to each item on a Yes (scored as 1) or No (scored as 0) basis and these were summed to provide a total infidelity experience score. The Intentions Towards Infidelity Scale (Jones et al., 2011) contains 7 items (1 reverse coded) answered on a 7 point scale of -3 (*not at all likely*) to $+3$ (*extremely likely*). The scale measures intentions to be unfaithful and example items include "How likely do you think you are to be unfaithful to future partners". Finally, participants reported the likelihood that their partner would engage in six forms of extramarital behavior using the Susceptibility to Infidelity Instrument (Buss & Shackelford, 1997). For each behavior type, participants report the probability (0–100%) that the event will occur during the next year, and the probability that if the event occurred, they or their partner would end the relationship.

Higher scores indicate greater levels of each Dark Triad trait measured (Machiavellianism, narcissism, primary and secondary psychopathy) and infidelity (experience, intentions, susceptibility). In the present study, Dark Triad measure reliabilities were: Machiavellianism: $\alpha = .59$; narcissism: $\alpha = .89$; primary psychopathy: $\alpha = .72$; secondary psychopathy: $\alpha = .72$. Infidelity measure

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