



Romantic revenge and the Dark Triad: A model of impellance and inhibition



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ABSTRACT

Based on I³ theory, the present study investigated a model in which the Dark Triad of personality traits (Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy) influence the rated likelihood of engaging in revenge against a romantic partner. We presented participants with a hypothetical act of infidelity, hypothesizing that the Dark Triad would relate positively to factors that could impel revenge (perceptions of revenge effectiveness and endorsement of goals related to power and justice) and negatively to factors that could inhibit revenge (perceptions of revenge costliness and endorsement of goals related to relationship maintenance). Although the Dark Triad bore substantial indirect relationships to the rated likelihood of taking revenge through our postulated impelling factors, our hypothesized inhibiting factors did not substantially inhibit revenge. Implications of these findings are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Individuals in romantic relationships have the capacity to inflict interpersonal harm on their partners (Metts & Cupach, 2007) and those partners have the capacity to respond by inflicting harm in return (Boon, Alibhai, & Deveau, 2011). Although not always destructive, such vengeful behavior has the potential to harm individuals, relationships, and property (Fitness, 2001).

Recent research has examined the connection between broad personality traits and attitudes toward romantic revenge (Sheppard & Boon, 2011). The present study extends this research by examining the Dark Triad of narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism, which has emerged as an important set of traits for predicting destructive and anti-social behaviors including revenge (Nathanson, 2008). Although these traits appear to work together to encourage bad behavior, the specific processes through which they influence revenge, and romantic revenge in particular, remain unexplored.

I³ (I-cubed) theory may help explain those mechanisms. This theory postulates that three main constructs—instigation, impellance, and inhibition—determine whether someone is likely to aggress (Finkel, 2007). The process begins with an *instigation*, an event that serves to provoke an aggressive response. Certain

factors, such as feelings of anger, may then *impel* an individual to aggress whereas other factors, such as love for or commitment to the offender, may *inhibit* aggression. A strong instigation, combined with strong impelling and weak inhibiting factors, can thus create a ‘perfect storm’ that renders the individual susceptible to behaving aggressively (Finkel et al., 2012). To the extent that impelling and/or inhibiting factors mediate the influence of the Dark Triad on romantic revenge, I³ theory offers researchers new tools with which to predict the occurrence of revenge among intimates.

In the present study, we presented participants with a hypothetical instigation—a romantic partner’s infidelity—and tested an I³ model linking the Dark Triad to participant’s ratings of the likelihood they would take revenge in that situation. Our model predicted that Dark Triad traits would both positively relate to factors that impel revenge and negatively relate to factors that inhibit revenge. The Dark Triad would thus help create the perfect storm mentioned above through strengthening impellance and weakening inhibition.

1.1. Goals and outcomes related to the Dark Triad

An individual’s goals following a provocation may serve to either impel or inhibit revenge behavior. For instance, responding to a partner’s injury or offense with revenge may cause harm to a relationship (Boon et al., 2011). Those wanting to preserve or repair their relationship might thus be inhibited from taking revenge for fear of the relational harm it may cause. On the other hand,

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those seeking other outcomes—such as a restoration of justice or the balance of power—might feel impelled to get even as these outcomes are linked to revenge conceptually (Frijda, 1994) and are among the positive consequences of romantic revenge (Boon et al., 2011; Yoshimura, 2007).

In the present model, we posit that the Dark Triad may motivate people to seek particular kinds of goals. For instance, individuals high in Machiavellianism are oriented toward maintaining power over others (Paulhus & Williams, 2002) and are sensitive to justice concerns when they fall victim to unfair treatment (Schmitt, Gollwitzer, Maes, & Arbach, 2005). When provoked, we might thus expect individuals high in Machiavellianism to seek outcomes related to power and justice, such as maintaining dominance over a partner, making a partner suffer, or seeing a partner get what he or she deserves.

Narcissism, on the other hand, is defined by advancement of the self to the detriment of others (Miller, Widiger, & Campbell, 2010). Because goals related to restoring or repairing the relationship (hereafter labeled relationship-oriented goals), such as reconciling with a partner or working out a compromise, can be personally costly (Lewicki & Bunker, 1996) and because relationship-oriented goals are characterized by other-oriented feelings and behavior (Worthington, Witvliet, Pietrini, & Miller, 2007), narcissism may be negatively related to seeking relationship-oriented outcomes in the aftermath of a provocation. Accordingly, narcissism might serve to weaken a factor (i.e., the endorsement of relationship-oriented goals) that could inhibit revenge.

1.2. The Dark Triad and the perceived consequences of revenge

Perceptions of the effectiveness and the costliness of revenge as a means of responding to injury or offense may also serve to impel or inhibit revenge. Such perceptions may be tied in important ways to the consequences of revenge. For example, the more individuals believe revenge is likely to provide desired outcomes, the more they should perceive revenge as an effective response to provocation (Rasmussen, 2013). This perception may serve to impel an individual to take revenge even though revenge may not ultimately provide the desired outcomes (Boon et al., 2011). At the same time, revenge might also lead to undesired outcomes—or costs—that individuals may wish to avoid (e.g., social stigma, feelings of guilt and shame, loss of or damage to the relationship; see Boon et al., 2011, and Fitness, 2001). The more individuals associate revenge with such costs, the more they should perceive revenge as a costly response to provocation, which should inhibit them from taking revenge.

The present model contends that the Dark Triad may be tied to how individuals perceive revenge's consequences. In particular, psychopathy is characterized by an inability to accurately predict the consequences of one's actions, with a tendency to underestimate negative and to overestimate positive consequences (Ferrigan, Valentiner, & Berman, 2000). Accordingly, we would expect psychopathy to be negatively related to perceptions of revenge's negative consequences (i.e., its costliness) and positively related to perceptions of its positive consequences (i.e., its effectiveness).

1.3. The present study

Participants read a hypothetical scenario regarding an act of infidelity committed by a romantic partner and rated their endorsement of goals they might pursue following that provocation. They then rated how effective and costly they believed revenge would be as a response to the infidelity and the likelihood that they would take revenge. Based on the literature, we tested the following model connecting the Dark Triad to the

rated likelihood of taking revenge against a romantic partner (see Fig. 1):

H1. As Machiavellianism and psychopathy scores increase, the rated likelihood of taking revenge will increase through paths that involve increased impellance.

- (a) As Machiavellianism scores increase, the endorsement of power or justice related goals will increase.
- (b) In turn, the greater the endorsement of power and justice goals, the more revenge will be perceived as effective.
- (c) As psychopathy scores increase, revenge will be perceived as more effective.
- (d) As the endorsement of power and justice goals increases, individuals will rate themselves as more likely to take revenge.
- (e) As revenge is perceived as more effective, individuals will rate themselves as more likely to take revenge.

H2. As psychopathy and narcissism scores increase, the rated likelihood of taking revenge will increase through paths that involve weakened inhibition.

- (a) As narcissism scores increase, endorsement of relationship-oriented goals will decrease.
- (b) In turn, as endorsement of relationship-oriented goals decreases, revenge will be perceived as less costly.
- (c) As psychopathy scores increase, revenge will be perceived as less costly.
- (d) As the endorsement of relationship-oriented goals decreases, individuals will rate themselves as more likely to take revenge.
- (e) As revenge is perceived to be less costly, individuals will rate themselves as more likely to take revenge.

As our hypotheses reflect, our model postulates that the Dark Triad exerts its influence on the likelihood of revenge-taking indirectly through its effects on goal endorsement (i.e., people's inclinations to seek power and justice versus relationship-oriented goals in the aftermath of a provocation) and perceptions of revenge as effective and costly in attaining those goals. It is also possible, however, that the Dark Triad may affect the rated likelihood of revenge directly. We thus constructed a second model that included direct relationships between the Dark Triad traits and rated likelihood of revenge. We compared the results for this alternative model to the results of our proposed model to test our final hypothesis that:

H3. The fit of our hypothesized model will not be significantly improved by the addition of direct paths between Dark Triad traits and the rated likelihood of getting even.

By testing these models, we hoped to gain a greater understanding of the mechanisms that promote or discourage revenge-taking in romantic relationships. In particular, we sought to clarify the role the Dark Triad plays in predicting romantic revenge and whether that role is mediated by specific impelling and inhibiting factors.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

Psychology undergraduates ($N = 199$, 77 males, 122 females) at a large university in western Canada completed an online survey in

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