



The Dark Triad personality: Attractiveness to women



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ABSTRACT

It has been suggested that the Dark Triad (DT) personality constellation is an evolved facilitator of men's short-term mating strategies. However, previous studies have relied on self-report data to consider the sexual success of DT men. To explore the attractiveness of the DT personality to the other sex, 128 women rated created (male) characters designed to capture high DT facets of personality or a control personality. Physicality was held constant. Women rated the high DT character as significantly more attractive. Moreover, this greater attractiveness was not explained by correlated perceptions of Big 5 traits. These findings are considered in light of mating strategies, the evolutionary 'arms race' and individual differences.

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1. Introduction

In light of sex differences in the Dark Triad (narcissism, Machiavellianism and psychopathy), it has been proposed that this trait constellation may represent an evolved male adaptation for short-term mating. If so, this personality should be attractive to women: we test this hypothesis in the present study. Past studies indicate the DT has strong associations with the Big Five personality factors; consequently, it is possible that the increased attractiveness of these men may result not from their DT qualities, but from associated personality correlates. This is also examined.

Short-term mating is considered more evolutionarily adaptive for males than females, due to males' higher fitness variance and lower obligate parental investment (Buss & Schmitt, 1993). Although women may be prepared to engage in uncommitted mating where 'good genes' represent a trade-off for lack of investment (Gangestad, 1993), casual sexual encounters for women involve a number of potential costs (pregnancy; infection; physical injury) resulting in them typically being less predisposed, evolutionarily, to casual sexual congress than men.

Successful pursuit of short-term mating by men is largely dependent on their attractiveness to women. In short-term contexts, women (like men) place a high value on facial and bodily attractiveness (e.g. Van Dongen & Gangestad, 2011), and evidence

suggests the DT and its constituent traits are associated with higher physical attractiveness (Holtzman & Strube, 2010; Visser, Pozzebon, Bogaert, & Ashton, 2010). However, less attention has been paid to the role of DT personality in attractiveness. Outside the laboratory, visual impressions are modified in light of further information, often derived from conversations with the target. In the present study, we therefore hold physicality constant to examine the extent to which women are attracted to the DT personality. We first review the component traits in relation to sex differences and men's mating strategy, before examining the DT itself.

Narcissism is defined by a sense of entitlement, dominance and a grandiose self-view (Raskin & Terry, 1988). Virtually all studies report greater narcissism in men, including cross-culturally (Foster, Campbell, & Twenge, 2003). Holtzman and Strube (2010) propose that narcissism emerged in response to problems posed by the adoption of a short-term mating strategy in men. Adaptive narcissistic solutions include a willingness and ability to compete with one's own sex, and to repel mates shortly after intercourse. Narcissists find it comparatively easy to begin new relationships, perceive multiple opportunities available to them, and are less likely to remain monogamous (Campbell & Foster, 2002; Campbell, Foster, & Finkel, 2002). Narcissistic men also have more illegitimate children than those scoring lower for the trait (Rowe, 1995). Campbell and Foster (2002) report that male narcissists groom and advertise wealth and resource provision in a manner attractive to women (Vazire, Naumann, Rentfrow, & Gosling, 2008). Perhaps as a consequence, other-rated levels of physical attractiveness are positively correlated with narcissism (Holtzman & Strube, 2012).

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Machiavellians are interpersonally duplicitous (McHoskey, 2001a), insincere (Christie & Geis, 1970) and extraverted (Allsopp, Eysenck, & Eysenck, 1991). Men score higher than women on Machiavellian traits (Lee & Ashton, 2005; McHoskey, 2001b). Machiavellianism is associated with social manipulation and opportunism, both beneficial to the pursuit of short-term mating. Machiavellians report a tendency towards promiscuous behaviours and love-feigning (McHoskey, 2001b). Machiavellian men also report more sexual partners (including affairs), earlier sexual activity, and are inclined towards sexual coercion (McHoskey, 2001b).

Psychopathy consists of callousness, a lack of empathy, and antisocial, erratic behaviour (Hare, 2003). Men show higher levels of sub-clinical psychopathy than women (Lee & Ashton, 2005). Reise and Wright (1996) propose that psychopathic traits (lack of morality; interpersonal hostility) are beneficial to a short-term strategy and are correlated with unrestricted pattern of sexual behaviour. Psychopathy is further associated with superficial charm, and a deceitful and sexually-exploitative interpersonal style (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Psychopathy is significantly correlated with a larger number of self-reported sexual partners, long-term relationship breakdown, earlier age of first intercourse, and self- and female-rated physical attractiveness (Visser et al., 2010).

The Dark Triad is the collective term for these moderately inter-correlated, self-interested traits (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Common to all three are extraverted behaviours likely to make a good first impression, such as a tendency to socialise and to talk about friends. All three overlap in exploitation, manipulation and self-importance (Lee & Ashton, 2005). Consistent with findings for the constituent traits, the composite Dark Triad is positively correlated with number of self-reported lifetime sex-partners, preference for an unrestricted, short-term mating style and high rates of mate-poaching (Jonason, Li, & Buss, 2010a; Jonason, Li, Webster, & Schmitt, 2009). It has been suggested that, for men, the Dark Triad “reflects an evolutionarily stable solution to the adaptive problem of reproduction” (Jonason et al., 2009, p. 13; see also Paulhus & Williams, 2002).

However, the majority of studies have employed self-report measures of the DT (or its components) and mating successes. Given the value attached to casual sexual experiences by young men in Western cultures, it is very possible that reported correlations reflect a tendency for DT men to over-report their success in this domain, commensurate with their high self-esteem and willingness to deceive. Studies which have used observer ratings of the DT components have focused exclusively on physical attractiveness (e.g. Holtzman & Strube, 2010). We therefore examine whether women find the Dark Triad *personality* attractive, independent of physical appearance.

Researchers have also considered how the DT may be conceptualised within existing personality frameworks – specifically, the Big Five (Lee & Ashton, 2005). It may be that the DT’s attractiveness to women is a result of correlations with other personality traits, including the Big 5 dimensions. In short, women may simply find DT correlates attractive, rather than the DT itself. However, previous studies of correlations between Big Five scores and DT components do not suggest that the DT personality is a very attractive one. With regard to Agreeableness, evidence to date shows significant negative correlations with narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy (Jakobowitz & Egan, 2006) and the DT as a whole (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Conscientiousness and Neuroticism are negatively correlated with the component traits and the DT as a whole (Jonason, Li, & Teicher, 2010b; Lee & Ashton, 2005; Lee et al., 2012), whilst Openness correlates positively with the DT (Jonason et al., 2010b; Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Extraversion is also positively correlated with the DT, narcissism and psychopathy, but less so with Machiavellianism (Jonason et al., 2010b; Lee & Ashton, 2005; Paulhus & Williams, 2002). These results are

based upon self-reported psychometric assessments, whereas our study will assess the extent to which these correlated traits are apparent to others. It allows clarification of whether the attractiveness of DT men stems from observers’ appraisals of the DT qualities themselves, or from correlated personality dimensions.

Vignettes have previously been used to examine the attractiveness of the three subcomponents of DT personalities (Rauthmann & Kolar, 2013). Participants read about an opposite-sex individual who scored highly on four items associated with narcissism, Machiavellianism or psychopathy on the ‘Dirty Dozen’ measure of the DT (Jonason & Webster, 2010). These bogus characters were rated for attractiveness, as well as perceived Big 5 scores. However, as the authors acknowledge, they do not present low-scoring characters, so their comparison of attractiveness (with higher scores for narcissism than Machiavellianism and psychopathy) is only between component traits. With no comparison character, there are also no manipulation checks to establish if their characters objectively manifest the intended traits, and no evaluation of whether perceived Big 5 traits affect attractiveness ratings.

If the Dark Triad has indeed evolved to facilitate short-term mating in men, their presence must be detectable by prospective mates, in some capacity. Individuals demonstrating the trait constellation should also be perceived as more attractive by women. In order to evaluate this hypothesis, the current study will present participants with one of two self-descriptions, developed to represent either a high DT or control individual. Participants will be asked to rate the personality for attractiveness. Participants will also rate the target individual on the Big Five personality factors to establish whether any enhancement in attractiveness rating remains when the effects of any Big Five correlates are removed. It is anticipated that women will rate the high DT individual as more attractive than the control character, that the results will support existing literature regarding the DT’s relationship to other personality variables, and that higher attractiveness ratings for the DT character will be independent of associated variation in the Big Five traits.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

One hundred and twenty eight female undergraduates at a British university, (mean age, 19.4; range, 18–36) participated in the study, conducted via online questionnaire. Participants were given course credit for taking part.

2.2. Materials

Two self-descriptions were generated to represent high DT and control men. The high DT self-description contained manifestations of the trait descriptors that comprise Jonason & Webster, 2010 ‘Dirty Dozen’ measure (a desire for attention, admiration, favours, and prestige; the manipulation, exploitation, deceit and flattery of others; a lack of remorse, morality concerns and sensitivity, and cynicism). The ‘Dirty Dozen’ is a concise, amalgamated version of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (Raskin & Terry, 1988), Mach-IV (Christie & Geis, 1970) and Psychopathy Scale-III (Paulhus, Hemphill, & Hare, 2012). The control self-description was written to match that of the high DT while omitting these Dark Triad elements (references to pursuits and activities were kept consistent). In order to limit potential bias, the descriptions avoided making reference to attributes found to affect attractiveness ratings, such as resource ownership (Buss & Barnes, 1986) and educational level (Baize & Schroeder, 1995).

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