



The costs and benefits of the Dark Triad: Implications for mate poaching and mate retention tactics

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ABSTRACT

The Dark Triad – narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy – have traditionally been considered to be undesirable traits. However, emerging work suggest that not only may there be a positive side to possessing these traits but they may also serve important adaptive functions, even if the strategies associated with them are viewed as socially undesirable. In an online survey ($N = 336$), we investigated the costs and benefits of the Dark Triad within the domain of mating psychology. The social style and lower order personality traits of the Dark Triad traits facilitated increased mateships in the form of poaching mates from others and being poached oneself to form mateships, pointing to possible benefits of possessing the Dark Triad traits. However, the costs side was evidenced with rates of mates abandoning their current relationship for a new one. Mate retention is a problem faced by those with these traits and the tactics used to retain mates were characteristic of the Dark Triad: aggressive and narcissistic. Results are discussed using an adaptationist paradigm.

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1. Introduction

Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy – collectively known as the Dark Triad – are traits that are linked to negative personal and societal outcomes and have been considered undesirable (e.g., Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Hare, 1996; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). However, the persistence of these traits over time (Foster, Campbell, & Twenge, 2003) and across various world regions like North America, Oceania, and Asia (Schmitt, 2008), as well as links to positive traits such as emotional stability (Paulhus & Williams, 2002), resilient self-esteem (Sedikides, Rudich, Gregg, Kumashiro, & Rusbult, 2004), and increased sexual success (Jonason, Li, Webster, & Schmitt, 2009) suggest that the Dark Triad can also be potentially advantageous to individuals, especially for mating purposes. Therefore, in the current study we attempt to understand both the benefits and the costs associated with the Dark Triad within the mating domain.

The Dark Triad is characterized by low rates of conscientiousness (Jonason, Li, & Teicher, in press) and at least two parts of the Dark Triad – narcissism and psychopathy – are associated with high rates of impulsivity (Mealey, 1995; Vazire & Funder, 2006) and risk-taking (Jonason, Koenig, & Tost, in press). It may be that individuals who are high on the Dark Triad pursue novelty in their

lives. Indeed, with regards to mating, high scorers on the Dark Triad have more sexual partners and a less restricted mating style (Jonason et al., 2009). The possession of these traits may translate to a particular mating style. First, when in relationships, high scorers on the Dark Triad may be especially likely to leave mating relationships to begin relations with new mates (Foster, Shrira, & Campbell, 2006). Second, disagreeableness, duplicitousness, and aggressiveness link all three of the Dark Triad traits (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Accordingly, to satisfy both novelty and the competitive and aggressive nature that underlie these traits as well (Jonason et al., in press), scores on the Dark Triad may be correlated with one's tendency to adopt a strategy of mate poaching (Schmitt & Buss, 2001).

Although these strategies may increase access to new partners, the novelty-seeking and aggression that characterize the Dark Triad may come at the expense of relationship costs. Research on macaques, baboons, and chimpanzees suggests that “acquisition and maintenance of high rank [narcissism] is a costly reproductive strategy” (Rodriguez-Llanes, Verbeke, & Finlayson, 2009, p. 643). First, mating effort allocated elsewhere creates lapses in mate guarding, which could open up opportunities for infidelity by current mates. Second, to the degree that romantic partners are aware that mating effort is being allocated elsewhere, they may be less committed and prone to desert the relationship. Third, to the degree that assortative mating occurs, the mates of opportunistic maters should themselves be more inclined to infidelity (Simpson

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& Gangestad, 1992). Therefore, we predicted that scores on the Dark Triad would be correlated with rates of losing mates.

Although the Dark Triad is linked by a short-term, exploitive sexual style (Jonason et al., 2009), individuals live in a world where monogamy is held out as a socially desirable state and is socially enforced to some degree (Kanazawa & Still, 1999; McDonald, 1995). Thus, such individuals may engage not only in short-term but also medium-term or long-term pairbonding (Campbell & Foster, 2002). Consequently, they face the adaptive problem of mate retention (Buss, 1988; Buss & Shackelford, 1997). Narcissism is associated with attempts to influence others in close relationships (Buss, 1992). Given that mate retention is a form of such influence, we expected scores on the Dark Triad to be positively associated with the use of tactics for mate retention. More specifically, because the Dark Triad is associated with an agentic and aggressive manner (Paulhus & Williams, 2002), we expected the Dark Triad to be related to aggressive (i.e., punishment and threats) and narcissistic-style tactics (i.e., self-enhancement and resource display).

In the current study we explored the costs and benefits imposed by the Dark Triad in people's sexual and romantic lives. We assessed how scores on the Dark Triad are correlated with scores on mate poaching and mate retention scales. We interpret these results through the lens of an adaptationist program (Buss, 2009) to attempt to further understand the role that not only the Dark Triad, but individual differences in general, play in solving adaptive goals like mating.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

Volunteers ($N = 336$) from unique IP addresses completed an online survey that informed them of the nature of the study, asked demographic questions, and asked the self-report items described below. The sample consisted of 114 men ($M_{\text{Age}} = 28$, $SD_{\text{Age}} = 11.14$) and 222 women ($M_{\text{Age}} = 26$, $SD_{\text{Age}} = 9.12$). The majority of the sample (92%) was heterosexual, 4% was homosexual, and 4% was bisexual. Thirty-eight percent were single and 62% were involved in a serious relationship, including both married and dating relationships. Upon completion, the participants were debriefed and thanked.

2.2. Measures of the Dark Triad

Narcissism was assessed with the 40-item Narcissistic Personality Inventory (Raskin & Terry, 1988). For each item, participants chose one of two statements that they felt applied to them more. One statement reflected a narcissistic attitude (e.g., "I have a natural talent for influencing people"), whereas the other did not (e.g., "I am not good at influencing people"). We summed the total number of narcissistic statements the participants endorsed to measure overall narcissism (Cronbach's $\alpha = .87$).

The 31-item Self-Report Psychopathy Scale-III (Paulhus, Hemptill, & Hare, in press) was used to assess subclinical psychopathy. Participants rated how much they agreed (1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*) with statements such as: "I enjoy driving at high speeds" and "I think I could beat a lie detector." The items were averaged to create an index of psychopathy ($\alpha = .74$).

Machiavellianism was measured with the 20-item MACH-IV (Christie & Geis, 1970). Participants were asked how much they agreed (1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*) with statements such as: "It is hard to get ahead without cutting corners here and there" and "People suffering from incurable diseases should have the choice of being put painlessly to death." The items were averaged to create a Machiavellianism index ($\alpha = .57$).

We also treated the three Dark Triad measures as a composite measure (Jonason et al., 2009). We first standardized overall scores on each measure. Then we averaged all three together to create a composite Dark Triad score. All three measures loaded well ($>.54$) on a single factor that accounted for 53.46% of the variance (Eigen > 1.60).

2.3. Mate retention tactics and mate poaching rates

Rates of mate retention efforts were measured with the Mate Retention Inventory-Short Form (Buss, Shackelford, & McKibbin, 2008). Participants indicated how frequently (0 = *never*; 3 = *often*) they performed a series of 38 acts in the last year. Because the measure was originally designed for participants currently in a relationship, we slightly altered the instructions so that participants either answered about their current partner or their most recent one.

Mate poaching was measured with a 38-item instrument (Davies, Shackelford, & Hass, 2007) that assesses rates of attempt and success (1 = *not at all*; 5 = *very much*) in poaching others' mates, having been poached by others, and having had their own mates poached. Rates of attempt and success in each of these areas were assessed for the separate contexts of short-term mating (STM), long-term sexual affairs (LTA), and long-term mating (LTM). Two single-item measures asked: "If you are currently in an exclusive relationship, did your current partner obtain you by knowingly poaching you?" and "...did you obtain your current partner by knowingly poaching her/him?"

3. Results

Rates of internal consistency should, at a minimum, be above .50 (Schmitt, 1996) but ideally above .70 (Nunnally, 1978). Because of the low level of internal consistency for some of the measures in our study, we corrected for attenuation in any case where at least one internal consistency estimate was below .70. Where correlations were corrected, we reported both the uncorrected and the corrected correlations. Table 1 contains descriptive statistics and gender differences tests.

Table 2 contains correlations between the Dark Triad and measures of mate poaching. First, scores on the Dark Triad were correlated with all measures of poaching mates from others. Having been poached by others and having had mates poached by others. Thus, being high on the Dark Triad was related to not only a higher overall incidence of but also higher success rates for poaching, having been poached, and having had mates poached in short-term relationships, long-term affairs, and long-term relationships.

Table 3 contains correlations between the Dark Triad and rates of overall mate poaching and the use of individual mate retention tactics. Scores on the Dark Triad were associated with most tactics for mate retention, and were associated with ones that should characterize the Dark Triad: *punishing the mate's infidelity threat, resource display, appearance enhancements, verbal possession signals, and violence against rival*.

Additionally, we conducted correlational tests by participant's gender (men vs. women), relationship status (single vs. married/dating), and sexual orientation (heterosexual vs. homosexual/bisexual). The coefficients across these moderator variables generally did not differ from one another. These results were omitted to save space but can be obtained by contacting the first author.

The possibility arises to test two theoretical models through mediation analyses, albeit in a *post hoc* fashion. In the first model (Fig. 1a) we tested whether increased mate poaching mediates the relationship between the Dark Triad and overall mate retention. In the second model (Fig. 1b) we tested whether overall rates

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