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The Dark Triad and the derogation of mating competitors



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ABSTRACT

The present study investigated the relation between the Dark Triad and tactics used to derogate mating rivals. Three hundred and thirty-one participants (213 males, 118 females) living in the United States were recruited online through Amazon Mechanical Turk. Correlations between study variables revealed significant associations between indicators of the Dark Triad and three types of mate derogation tactics. Furthermore, when competing with rivals for a mate, high scores on (a) Machiavellianism was associated with a rude derogation style, (b) Narcissism was associated with a derogation style where individuals tried to outshine their competitor in different situations (e.g., sports, dominance, and strength), and (c) Psychopathy was linked with endorsing tactics that damaged their rival's reputation. Implications for considering subtle differences in the use of mate derogation tactics across the three indicators of Dark Triad are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Individuals reporting relatively high scores on the three personality traits collectively known as the Dark Triad (i.e., machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy; Paulhus & Williams, 2002) tend to use strategies such as manipulation and exploitation to remain in a position of power and dominance, which is used for personal gain (Lee & Ashton, 2005). These selfish and exploitive tendencies have recently been found to play an important role in romantic relationship contexts, with individuals scoring higher on the Dark Triad adopting more self-interested mating strategies, such as a preference for short-term sexual relationships (Jonason, Li, Webster, & Schmitt, 2009; Jonason, Luevano, & Adams, 2012), lowering mate standards to facilitate the successful implementation of these short-term mating preferences (Jonason, Valentine, Li, & Harbeson, 2011), as well as being more likely to attempt to “poach” mates that are currently in committed relationships with someone else (Jonason, Li, & Buss, 2010).

The process of attracting mates, however, is inherently competitive given that many individuals can be simultaneously attracted to the same person (Alexander, 1979; Buss, 1988). One way to compete with rivals to generate favorable evaluations from potential mates is to derogate the traits and attributes of competitors (e.g., Buss & Dedden, 1990), an option that should be particularly favorable to individuals scoring high on the Dark Triad given their

penchant for manipulating and exploiting others. To date, though, the growing body of research focusing on the Dark Triad in a relationship context has not considered how individual differences on the Dark Triad are associated with competitive tactics used with rivals when attempting to enact their preferred mating strategies, a topic addressed by the present research.

1.1. The Dark Triad

The Dark Triad comprises three personality traits: Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Individuals with Machiavellian personalities possess a manipulative personality style. They are often described as charmers (Wilson, Near, & Miller, 1996), but tend to be arrogant and conniving and will scheme their way through any situation for personal gain, regardless of whom it may hurt (Leary, Knight, & Barnes, 1986). Therefore they are less willing to help others who are in need (Wolfson, 1981), and also gain the trust of others by using tactics of deception and exploitation in order to achieve their goals (Leary et al.).

Individuals who score high on narcissism tend to exhibit characteristics of dominance, grandiosity, and superiority compared to others. Narcissists feel a sense of entitlement, have an overbearing need to succeed, and enjoy being the center of attention. They are interested in their accomplishments only and as a result of this egotism they do not work well with others. Like individuals who are high in Machiavellianism, the narcissist also uses manipulation and deception to accomplish his or her goals and does not think about how his or her actions may impact others (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Although narcissists appear to have an inflated

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sense of self-worth, their self-esteem is easily threatened by others (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). The appearance of grandiosity, therefore, is often used as a facade by narcissists to hide their low self-esteem and feelings of inferiority (Kernberg, 1975; Kohut, 1966).

Individuals who score high on traits of psychopathy have cold, impulsive and emotionally void personalities. Like the narcissists and Machiavellians, these individuals are manipulative and conning and use their superficial charm to lie to others and get their way. These individuals have little or no empathy and concern for other people and therefore they do not feel remorse or guilt when they have deceived and manipulated others (Hare, 2003). Psychopaths often engage in thrill seeking and reckless activities (Hare), which is usually a result of their impulsive and irresponsible behaviour style (Cooke & Michie, 2001).

1.2. The Dark Triad and sexual behaviour

Overall, individuals who score high on Machiavellianism are more inclined to have promiscuous sexual attitudes and engage in unsafe sexual practices (McHoskey, 2001), and Machiavellian men also tend to have more mating success (Linton & Wiener, 2001). Narcissists have been found to have an unrestricted socio-sexuality orientation (Foster, Shrira, & Campbell, 2006), and when in a relationship are more likely to engage in infidelity (Campbell, Foster, and Finkel, 2002). Narcissists usually express less commitment and interest in continuing the partnership (Foster et al.) and seek to find better relationship alternatives since they find starting new relationships relatively easy to do (Bradlee & Emmons, 1992). Like individuals high in narcissism, those high in psychopathy tend to have more promiscuous sexual behaviours and attitudes (Barnes, Malamuth, & Check, 1984) and engage in sexual behaviours at an earlier age (Visser, Pozzebon, Bogaert, & Ashton, 2010). Their lack of knowledge on sexual diseases leads to their engagement in unsafe sexual practices (McCown, 1992).

1.3. The Dark Triad and competition

In a competitive context, individuals scoring high on Machiavellianism use exploitative tactics to excel (Harrel, 1980). Ryckman, Thornton, and Bulter (1994) found that Machiavellians maximize self-interest and winning a competition at all costs. In doing so, they have a disregard for community and family (McHoskey, 2001). This could be explained by their willingness to win a competition, regardless of how ethical their tactics for winning are (Mudrack, Bloodgood, & Turnley, 2012). One of the few studies on narcissism and competition by Bushman and Baumeister (1998) found that when narcissists were placed in a competitive context and were insulted they were overcome by exceptionally high levels of aggression towards the individual who offended them. Lastly, Smith (1978) argued that many descriptors of the psychopath commonly resemble that of the Machiavellian and therefore the Machiavellian should be likely to express similar behaviours in a competitive context.

1.4. Mate derogation in intrasexual competition

A central theme in intrasexual competition for mates is making oneself more attractive to the opposite sex or making one's same-sex rival less appealing to the individual one is pursuing. Buss and Dedden (1990) tested the notion that both men and women employ competitor derogation tactics by asking large samples of men and women, across a few studies, to rate how likely they would be to use a variety of derogation tactics in a mate attraction context. A number of derogation tactics were endorsed by men and women equally, such as spreading rumors about the competitor,

derogating the competitor's intelligence, and calling the competitor boring. Some gender differences also emerged, with men being more likely to endorse tactics focused on derogating their competitor's financial resources, achievements, and strengths, and women being more likely to endorse tactics focused on derogating their competitor's appearance and sexual fidelity. The research by Buss and Dedden was concerned with creating a list of competitor derogation tactics typically used by men and women, and to show differences in the employment of some of these tactics between men and women, but not on individual differences with respect to the use of these competitor derogation tactics.

1.5. Present study

Guided by prior research demonstrating differences in mating strategies, and in overall competitive behaviors of individuals scoring higher versus lower on markers of the Dark Triad, in the current study we tested the hypothesis that individuals scoring higher on the Dark Triad would be more likely to endorse the use of tactics aimed at derogating competitors for potential mates compared to individuals scoring low on the Dark Triad. We also explored potential differences between the three traits that make up the Dark Triad in the types of derogation tactics endorsed.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

The present study consisted of 331 participants (213 males, 118 females) aged 18–70 ($M = 29.33$, $SD = 9.76$) living in the United States, recruited via Amazon's Mechanical Turk. Fifty-four percent of participants indicated that they were currently involved in a romantic relationship, 44% of participants indicated they were single, and 1.8% of participants preferred not to disclose their relationship status.

2.2. Materials

2.2.1. Short-D3

Machiavellianism, narcissism, and subclinical psychopathy were measured using the Short-D3 questionnaire, which is comprised of 27 items (9 items for each personality trait) measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *Strongly Disagree*, 5 = *Strongly Agree*) (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). The Short-D3 contains three subscales, one for each of the three personality traits: Machiavellianism, ("It's wise to keep track of information that you can use against people later", $\alpha = .78$), narcissism, ("Many group activities tend to be dull without me", $\alpha = .77$), and psychopathy, ("It's true that I can be cruel", $\alpha = .78$). Cronbach's alpha for the scale overall was .83.

2.2.2. Tactics for derogating competitors

Competitor derogation was measured using tactics taken from Buss and Dedden (1990). The scale was composed of 12 items answered on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *Very Unlikely* and 7 = *Very Likely*). We selected four tactics that men in Buss and Dedden's research were particularly likely to endorse (e.g., "How likely are you to outshine the competitor in sports?" and "How likely are you to dominate your competitor?"), four tactics that women were particularly likely to endorse (e.g., "How likely are you to call your competitor a tease?" and "How likely are you to question your competitor's fidelity to a potential mate?"), as well as four tactics endorsed equally by men and women (e.g., "How likely are you to call your competitor boring?" and "How likely are you to spread rumors about the competitor?").

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