



Dominance styles mediate sex differences in Dark Triad traits



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ABSTRACT

We sought to determine what styles of social dominance are associated with Dark Triad traits (i.e., narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism) and whether sex differences in Dark Triad traits are mediated by dominance styles measured by the Dominance and Prestige Scale, and the Rank Styles with Peers Questionnaire. Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and narcissism are strongly associated with dominance-striving, but only narcissism is consistently correlated with prestige-striving. Dark Triad traits are negatively correlated with coalition-building, but positively correlated with dominant leadership and ruthless self-advancement. Sex differences in Dark Triad traits were mediated by various dominance styles, but mainly by dominance-striving and ruthless self-advancement. These results suggest that particular styles of social dominance are utilized by both men and women with Dark Triad traits.

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1. Introduction

The Dark Triad (i.e., subclinical narcissism, Machiavellianism, and subclinical psychopathy; Paulhus & Williams, 2002) represents a self-serving and often instrumental style of social interaction that allows those employing this strategy to mine social groups, or individuals, for things they desire (Jonason & Webster, 2012). Machiavellian individuals are cold and manipulative (Christie & Geis, 1970). Narcissistic individuals are grandiose and entitled, with a sense of superiority (Raskin & Terry, 1988). Psychopathy is characterized by antisocial behavior, superficial charm, a lack of empathy or remorse, and aggressive tendencies (Mealey, 1995). How exactly these individuals gain status in social hierarchies, as well as maintain their positions within them, is a topic of some recent investigation and scrutiny (e.g., Jonason, Slomski, & Partyka, 2012; O'Boyle, Forsyth, Banks, & McDaniel, 2012). Given its unique clustering of self-serving personality traits (Jonason, Li, & Teicher, 2010), the Dark Triad could speciously be considered a marked disadvantage in a species as social as humans, but the growing literature in this area would indicate the opposite, despite any personal or societal level costs (for review see, Jonason, Webster, Schmidt, Li, & Crysel, 2012).

The Dark Triad traits are linked to increased sexual success (Jonason, Li, Webster, & Schmitt, 2009; Jonason, Valentine, Li, & Harbeson, 2011) and social influence (Jonason & Webster, 2012; Jonason et al., 2012), both of which may lead to greater inclusive fitness (Buss & Schmitt, 1993) and the attainment of more proximal goals. Individuals with high scores on Dark Triad measures tend to have a high social dominance orientation, showing a preference for social stratification and inequity, and a strong desire to be at the top of this hierarchy (Lee et al., 2013). We extend upon this work, seeking to understand how individuals with Dark Triad traits might gain social dominance. Human social status comes with increased access to resources and mates (Sadalla, Kenrick, & Vershure, 1987; Van Vugt, 2006) and higher socioeconomic status is typically associated with better health (Sapolsky, 2004). Therefore, in order to bolster the general hypothesis advanced by evolutionary psychologists studying the Dark Triad (Jonason et al., 2012; McDonald, Donnellan, & Navarrete, 2012)—that these traits represent a coordinated system of specialized adaptations for exploiting socioecologies—we examine the link between the Dark Triad and dominance styles.

It is important not to conflate social dominance (i.e., having social rank or status) with the various strategies by which social dominance may (or may not) be attained. Dominance and status have serious reproductive consequences in all social primates (see Campbell, Fuentes, MacKinnon, Panger, & Bearder, 2007). However, unlike non-human primates that tend to rely on more physical strategies (e.g., *Pan troglodytes*; Pusey, Williams, & Goodall, 1997), humans also use prestige to attain rank in social

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groups (Cassidy & Lynn, 1989; Cheng, Tracy, & Henrich, 2010; Henrich & Gil-White, 2001; Maner & Mead, 2010). In this view, “dominance is positively associated with traits such as narcissism, aggression, and disagreeableness, whereas prestige is positively associated with traits such as genuine self-esteem, agreeableness, conscientiousness, achievement, advice-giving, and prosociality” (Cheng et al., 2010, p. 334). In this description, dominance or dominance-striving refers to a strategy rather than an outcome. While dominance-striving is an aggressive and domineering style, prestige-striving is characterized by seeking freely-conferred authority and respect (Henrich & Gil-White, 2001). Given the individualistic and disagreeable (Jonason et al., 2010), as well as aggressive (Jonason & Webster, 2010) nature of the Dark Triad, we hypothesize that the Dark Triad traits are more likely to be associated with attempts to acquire status through dominance-striving rather than prestige-striving.

Attaining rank in social groups might also be achieved through behaviors associated with coalition-building, dominant leadership, and ruthless self-advancement (Zurhoff, Fournier, Patall, & Leybman, 2010). Coalition-building is characterized by concern for the welfare and harmony of the group. We would not expect to find high levels of coalition-building among those with Dark Triad traits, because of the self-serving, agentic, aspects of the Dark Triad (Jonason et al., 2010). Dominant-leadership is a strategy characterized by decisive action and a willingness to take charge in a group. We predict that dominant-leadership will be correlated with Machiavellianism, given that Machiavellian individuals prefer to have power over others (McHoskey, 1999). We also expect narcissism to be correlated with dominant leadership given the central role of superiority and dominance in the narcissism construct (Raskin & Terry, 1988). In contrast, given the limited self-control associated with psychopathy (Jonason & Tost, 2010) and the high conscientiousness associated with dominant leadership (Zurhoff et al., 2010), we do not expect psychopathy to be related to dominant leadership. Last, ruthless self-advancement is characterized by selfish and exploitative behaviors that help the individual, often at the expense of others. We expect ruthless self-advancement to be most correlated with Machiavellianism and psychopathy given their exploitative nature (Rauthmann, 2012), although a lesser connection with narcissism is also likely (Raskin & Terry, 1988).

Men and women differ in their approaches to social influence (Eagly & Johnson, 1990; Zurhoff et al., 2010) and their scores on the Dark Triad (Goncalves & Campbell, 2014; Jonason & Webster, 2010; Jonason et al., 2009). For instance, it has been suggested that men are more likely to have an instrumental, egoistic social strategy that focuses on competition and attaining power, whereas women tend to be more prosocial and value consensus or cooperation (Buss, 1981). This is consistent with evidence that men tend to engage in more overt (and potentially costly) social strategies, whereas women tend to utilize more subtle relational strategies that run less risk of direct conflict or retaliation (see Archer, 2009). These differences do not indicate that men and women have less to gain from status, but simply that status is sought in different ways. Indeed, men tend towards ruthless self-advancement (Zurhoff et al., 2010), and show a greater preference for rigid hierarchical social stratification (Pratto, Stallworth, & Sidanius, 1997). On the other hand, both dominance-striving and prestige-striving strategies lead to increases in peer-evaluated social rank, and the two strategies are equally effective in men and women (Cheng, Tracy, Foulsham, Kinstone, & Henrich, 2013). While it is true that men have historically held more resources and power than women (e.g., Buss, 1996; Pratto, 1996; Whyte, 1978), it is misguided to assume that women would not likewise benefit from enhancing their status or having increased means at their disposal. Rather than assuming that men seek status and resources, and women seek out those men who have status and resources (Buss &

Kenrick, 1998), it is reasonable to assume that women also seek rank and resources for direct benefits as well, due to the fact that there are obvious fitness advantages to *anyone* sitting atop a social hierarchy (Hawley, 1999). Regarding the Dark Triad traits specifically, Honey (2015) has argued that many women high in these traits capitalize on the fact that victims of their exploits (wrongly) assume that females are less likely or less capable of engaging in such cunning manipulation. This creates a situation where, not only do many women enjoy the benefits of greater resources and social rank gained through instrumental behavior, but their actions are viewed with less suspicion than analogous behavior in men. Given the preference that individuals high in Dark Triad traits have for social stratification (Lee et al., 2013), it is likely that these same individuals will try to attain rank in an aggressive domineering manner, regardless of their sex.

Describing sex differences merely constitutes the first stage of an adaptive research program because it demands plausible answers regarding the psychological mechanisms that drive such differences. Jonason and his colleagues have argued that men, in particular, can achieve greater inclusive fitness by adopting the ‘fast’ approach to life that is characteristic of the Dark Triad traits (Jonason et al., 2009, 2011) and there is evidence that men experience more direct mating benefits for having high status (Buss & Schmitt, 1993) than women do. Rather than viewing Dark Triad traits as adaptive for men, but not women, we propose that the sex differences in Dark Triad traits may be mediated by particular dominance strategies associated with the Dark Triad.

In short, using two similar studies, we examined whether those with Dark Triad traits tend toward particular social dominance strategies, and whether particular dominance strategies could help to explain sex differences in Dark Triad traits.

2. Study 1

2.1. Materials and methods

2.1.1. Participants and procedures

Three hundred students (222 women, 78 men) completed a questionnaire for extra credit in their introductory psychology course. The average age of the participants was 20.70 years old ($SD_{age} = 3.92$; $Range = 18-40$). Each participant completed the questionnaire online from a unique IP address.

2.1.2. Measures

The *Rank Styles with Peers Questionnaire* assesses dominance styles in three subscales: dominant leadership, coalition building, and ruthless self-advancement (Zurhoff et al., 2010). The measure has 17 items, such as “I often take initiative and make suggestions”, rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *not at all like me*; 5 = *very much like me*). There was high internal consistency for subscale measures: dominant leadership (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .88$), coalition building ($\alpha = .84$), and ruthless self-advancement ($\alpha = .83$).

The *Dominance and Prestige Scale* measures striving for dominance and/or prestige (e.g., Cheng et al., 2010). Participants were asked how much they agree with 22 statements including “I enjoy having control over others” and, “I am held in high esteem by those I know” (1 = *not at all*; 7 = *very much*). Internal consistency was good: dominance-striving ($\alpha = .83$) and prestige-striving ($\alpha = .80$).

The *Dirty Dozen* (Jonason & Webster, 2010) was used to measure the Dark Triad traits. This scale asks participants how much they agree (1 = *not at all*; 9 = *very much*) with 12 self-referent statements including “I tend to be callous or insensitive”. Internal consistency was good for the subscales and a composite of the three subscales: Machiavellianism ($\alpha = .85$), psychopathy ($\alpha = .84$), narcissism ($\alpha = .84$), composite ($\alpha = .88$). Machiavellianism was

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