



## Mate-selection and the Dark Triad: Facilitating a short-term mating strategy and creating a volatile environment

Peter K. Jonason<sup>a,\*</sup>, Katherine A. Valentine<sup>b</sup>, Norman P. Li<sup>b</sup>, Carmelita L. Harbeson<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup> University of South Alabama, Department of Psychology, Mobile, AL 36688, United States

<sup>b</sup> School of Social Sciences, 90 Stamford Road, Level 4, Singapore 178903, Singapore

<sup>c</sup> University of West Florida, Department of Biology, Pensacola, FL 32514, United States

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### ABSTRACT

The current study ( $N = 242$ ) seeks to establish the relationship between traits known collectively as the Dark Triad – narcissism, psychopathy, Machiavellianism – and mating standards and preferences. Using a budget-allocation task, we correlated scores on the Dark Triad traits with mate preferences for a long-term and short-term mate. Men scoring high on the Dark Triad may be more indiscriminate than most when selecting for short-term mates in order to widen their prospects. Furthermore, those high on the Dark Triad – psychopathy in particular – tend to select for mates based on self-interest, assortative mating, or a predilection for volatile environments. We assessed these correlations when controlling for the Big Five and the sex of the participant. We also tested for moderation by the sex of the participant and mating context. Ramifications and future directions are considered.

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### 1. Introduction

Recent work on the Dark Triad (Paulhus & Williams, 2002) has revealed that this constellation of three traits – narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism – linked by a core of disagreeableness (Jakobwitz & Egan, 2006; Paulhus & Williams, 2002), may not be as maladaptive as traditionally considered (Kowalski, 2001) and are even heritable (Vernon, Villani, Vickers, & Harris, 2008). The Dark Triad seems to constitute an impulsive, aggressive, and opportunistic social style that may facilitate an exploitative – yet effective – short-term mating strategy (Jonason, Li, Webster, & Schmitt, 2009; Jones & Paulhus, 2010). Indeed, being high on the Dark Triad traits is, especially for men, associated with being sociosexually unrestricted, having had more sex partners, currently seeking short-term mates (Foster, Shriram, & Campbell, 2006; Jonason et al., 2009), and being apt to poach those already in relationships (Jonason, Li, & Buss, 2010b). Despite these insights, nothing is known yet about the mating standards and mate preferences of such individuals.

A key dynamic in short-term mating is that women tend to be more reluctant than men are to engage in this type of behavior. For instance, from zero-acquaintance all the way up until 5 years of acquaintance, men are significantly more willing to engage in sexual relations than women are (Buss & Schmitt, 1993). Around the world, men report being more sociosexually unrestricted than women do (Schmitt, 2005). In a classic field study, an opposite-sex

stranger approached students on campus and propositioned them for a sexual encounter. Although over 70% of men agreed, not one woman consented (Clark & Hatfield, 1989).

Given women's reluctance towards casual sex and that both sexes prioritize physical attractiveness over other traits in casual sex partners (Li & Kenrick, 2006), men who successfully pursue a short-term mating strategy may need to be either especially physically attractive or have relatively low mating standards. Indeed, men tend to have lower overall standards than women do for casual sexual partners (Kenrick, Groth, Trost, & Sadalla, 1993). To the extent the Dark Triad traits are centered on short-term mating irrespective of individuals' physical attractiveness, we may expect men who are high on Dark Triad traits to have lower standards for short-term mates than men who are not high on Dark Triad traits. By having low standards, those high on the Dark Triad may create a target-rich mating environment.

Women, however, tend to be similarly selective for both long- and short-term mates (Kenrick et al., 1993; Li & Kenrick, 2006). As a function of the fact that men tend to be eager for casual sex, women do not have to lower their standards in order to attract a short-term mate (Symons, 1979). Thus, the same distinction would not apply for high-Dark Triad versus low-Dark Triad women. Therefore, we predict men who are high on the Dark Triad will have particularly low standards in their short-term mates; and we predict this pattern to hold up across all three of the Dark Triad traits given the near-uniform correlations between the Dark Triad traits and numerous measures of short-term mating (Jonason et al., 2009).

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [pjonason@usouthal.edu](mailto:pjonason@usouthal.edu) (P.K. Jonason).

People's personalities allow them to create or "select" the environments in which they engage (Buss, 1984a, 1987). Individuals may actively structure their environment through mate-choice; mate-choice being an important selection-domain (Buss, 1984a, 1987; Hamilton, 1964). A common effect in mate selection is assortative mating – people tend to match themselves up with others on specific characteristics (Buss & Barnes, 1986; Kenrick et al., 1993) like the Big Five (Buss, 1984b). The Dark Triad traits are correlated with disagreeableness (Paulhus & Williams, 2002), aggressiveness (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998), criminality (Hare, 1996), and manipulateness (Christie & Geis, 1970) – qualities, we would argue, are directly opposite to kindness. In addition, these individuals have a high need for stimulation (Jones & Paulhus, 2010) and risk-taking (Jonason, Koenig, & Tost, 2010a; Jonason & Tost, 2010); they may actually not place a high premium on kindness because they wish to create a volatile environment to stimulate themselves. Therefore, we predict scores on the Dark Triad traits would be negatively correlated with preferences for kindness in mates. However, given that psychopathy is correlated with risk-taking above the other traits (Jonason et al., 2010a), we expect this correlation to be localized to psychopathy when we control for variability in the other two.

Mate selection is not a new topic in social-personality psychology. We know that both the Big Five and the sex of the participant are important variables in understanding mate preferences and selection. The Dark Triad tends to be correlated with all parts of the Big Five (Jakobwitz & Egan, 2006; Paulhus & Williams, 2002), and men tend to score higher on the three traits than women do (Jonason & Kavanagh, 2010; Jonason & Webster, 2010; Jonason et al., 2009). In order to avoid the "jangle fallacy"<sup>1</sup> we checked our results by partialling the variance associated with the sex of the participant in explaining mate preferences, and then partialling the variance associated with the Big Five in explaining mate preferences in line with prior work (Jonason et al., 2009).

The Dark Triad traits tend not to be correlated with interest in long-term relationships (Jonason & Webster, 2010; Jonason et al., 2009). However, human societies are characterized by long-term mateships, and monogamy is held out as a socially desirable state and is socially enforced to some degree (Kanazawa & Still, 1999; McDonald, 1995). In response to such socioecological conditions, individuals who score high on the Dark Triad may still engage in medium- or long-term pair-bonding (Campbell & Foster, 2002). In accordance with prior work (Jonason & Kavanagh, 2010; Jonason et al., 2009, 2010b), we examined the manner in which the Dark Triad traits operate in both short-term and long-term contexts. Based on past research on mate preferences and recent studies that implicate the Dark Triad as aligned with a short-term mating strategy, we expected standards for short-term mates to be lowest for men scoring highest on the Dark Triad. We also investigated how these traits lead individuals to structure their environment to be consistent with their personality traits in both mating contexts.

## 2. Method

We examined how men and women's overall standards for long- and short-term mates related to their scores on the Dark Triad. In addition, we examined correlations between the Dark Triad and mate preferences where we control for the Big Five and then the sex of the participant. Last, we tested for moderation by the mating context and by the sex of the participant.

### 2.1. Participants

Two hundred and forty-two psychology students (108 men; 134 women), aged 17–53 years ( $M = 20.89$ , Median = 19,  $SD = 5.33$ ) located in the Southern US received partial course credit for filling out the surveys described below. Ninety-three percent of the sample was heterosexual, with 3% homosexual and 4% bisexual. Forty-seven percent of the sample self-identified as "single" and the remaining 53% self-identified as "involved" (i.e., married or seriously dating).

### 2.2. Procedures and measures

Participants completed the survey online. Only those participants from unique IP addresses were included to insure the assumption of independence was not violated. The Dark Triad "Dirty Dozen", a 12-item measure of the Dark Triad with four items per subscale, was used (Jonason & Webster, 2010). Participants were asked to what extent they agreed (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *very much*) with statements such as: "I tend to want others to admire me"; "I tend to lack remorse"; and "I have used deceit or lied to get my way." Items were averaged together to create an index of narcissism (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .84$ ), Machiavellianism ( $\alpha = .86$ ), psychopathy ( $\alpha = .74$ ), and an aggregated index of all three ( $\alpha = .90$ ). The three traits were correlated with one another between .49 and .70 ( $p < .01$ ). Men scored higher on these measures than women did on all three dimensions, but the sex differences were not significant.<sup>2</sup>

To measure the Big Five, we used the Ten-Item Personality Inventory (TIPI; Gosling, Rentfrow, & Swann, 2003), which asks two questions for each dimension. Participants were asked, for instance, how much (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *very much*) they think of themselves as "extraverted, enthusiastic" and "quiet, reserved" (reverse-scored) as measures of extraversion. Estimates of internal consistency returned low rates: extraversion ( $\alpha = .48$ ), agreeableness ( $\alpha = .31$ ), conscientiousness ( $\alpha = .26$ ), neuroticism ( $\alpha = .31$ ), and openness ( $\alpha = .39$ ), as is to be expected for scales composed of a small number of items (Kline, 2000); internal consistency estimates are positively related to the number of scale items (Carmines & Zeller, 1979). Nevertheless, because we sought to control for variability in the Big Five and not to directly study the Big Five, we proceeded.

To measure mate preferences and standards, we used a set of traits from previous mate preference papers (Li, Bailey, Kenrick, & Linsenmeier, 2002; Li & Kenrick, 2006; Li, Valentine, & Patel, 2011) – social level, creativity, kindness, liveliness, and physical attractiveness (presented in that order, from left to right). For both a long- and short-term mate (counterbalanced), participants provided their minimum accepted decile (10th percentile, 20th percentile, etc.) for each trait by ticking their answers. Participants were told to treat each decile as indicative of the quality of a hypothetical mate. For instance, a mate who was in the 10th decile was in the bottom 10% of other potential mates in terms of that trait.

## 3. Results

We first ran a General Linear Model analysis using SPSS with trait selections as the dependent variable. Trait and duration (i.e., long-term, short-term) were within-subjects variables and participants' sex was a between-subjects variable. Dark Triad composite scores were entered as a continuous between-subjects variable (i.e., covariate in SPSS). There was an interaction of duration  $\times$  sex  $\times$  Dark Triad ( $F(1, 234) = 5.87$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .02$ ). To inter-

<sup>1</sup> Introducing a new variable that is a clone of another (Block, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> This limitation prohibited us from doing mediation analyses.

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