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Four shades of sexual fantasies linked to the Dark Triad



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ABSTRACT

The present study explored the links between the Dark Triad traits (i.e., narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy) and sexual fantasies in a sample of Canadian undergraduates ($N = 643$). Among the Dark Triad traits, psychopathy was the most strongly correlated with overall sex drive as well as fantasies containing exploratory, impersonal, and sadomasochistic themes. Further, individuals who scored high on narcissism reported engaging in intimate sexual fantasies more frequently. The Dark Triad, psychopathy in particular, facilitated overall sexual desire in men. Overall, these findings were consistent with the view that the Dark Triad facilitates an exploitative, short-term mating strategy. Implications are discussed in the context of an evolutionary framework.

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As evidenced by this special issue and some meta-science (Jonason, Webster, Schmitt, Li, & Crysel, 2012), the Dark Triad traits (i.e., psychopathy, Machiavellianism, and narcissism; Paulhus & Williams, 2002) are becoming an increasingly popular set of sub-clinical personality traits under investigation by social (Jones, 2013), personality (Lee & Ashton, 2005), and evolutionary psychologists (Jonason, Li, Webster, & Schmitt, 2009). These traits are characterized by entitlement, superiority, dominance (i.e., narcissism); glib social charm, manipulateness (i.e., Machiavellianism); callous social attitudes, impulsivity, and interpersonal antagonism (i.e., psychopathy). Combined, these traits have been linked to empathy deficits (Jonason & Krause, 2013), short-term mating (Jonason et al., 2009), and a selfish/agentive social style (Jonason & Webster, 2012). In this study, we examine the links between various sexual fantasies and the Dark Triad traits and how these traits might facilitate the engagement in different sexual fantasies in men and/or women.

Similar to research on the Dark Triad traits (Kowalski, 2001), studies on sexual fantasies tend to focus on individual differences in sexual pathologies (Williams, Cooper, Howell, Yuille, & Paulhus, 2009) among, for instance, sexual offenders (Baumgartner, Scalora, & Huss, 2002). However, a fundamental premise of modern psychology is that individual differences are best measured on a continuum. That is, it is inappropriate to treat those high or low on the Dark Triad and those who engage in different sexual fantasies as belonging to different categories. Therefore, instead of treating either as pathologies, we examine how a range of sexual

fantasies—or shades—relate to individual differences in the Dark Triad traits.

We investigate four types of sexual fantasies in relation to the Dark Triad (Wilson, 1978). Intimate fantasies are marked by a sense of attachment and familiarity; exploratory fantasies involve the commission of diverse acts; impersonal fantasies are characterized by emotional detachment and disinterest; and sadomasochistic fantasies involve inflicting or submitting to physical or emotional abuse. We make four predictions about the relationships between the Dark Triad and individual differences in sexual fantasies.

First, we predict psychopathy will exhibit the strongest correlation with overall sex drive. Evolutionary psychologists (e.g., Jonason, Koenig, & Tost, 2010; Jonason, Webster, Schmitt, Li, & Crysel, 2012) suggest the Dark Triad traits may be adaptive towards the engagement in a fast life history strategy that focuses on mating (e.g., Rushton, 1995; Wilson, 1975). There is evidence to suggest that those high on the Dark Triad, psychopathy in particular (Jonason et al., 2009), may be predisposed to lower their standards considerably for short-term mating. This being said, a high sex drive may be part of the motivational forces that encourage an individual to lower their standards when deciding with whom to engage in sexual activity. Indeed, psychopathy and unrestricted sociosexuality—the tendency to engage in uncommitted sexual relations—are positively correlated (Jonason et al., 2009; Reise & Wright, 1996).

Second, we predict that psychopathy will be correlated with a wider range of sexual fantasies in comparison to the other Dark Triad traits. The Dark Triad might facilitate an exploitive social (Jonason & Schmitt, 2012) and sexual strategy (Jonason & Kavanagh, 2010). In fact, when asked about their preferences for

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a variety of relationships, those high on psychopathy had a wider range of preferences than did those scoring highly on the other Dark Triad traits (Jonason, Luévano, & Adams, 2012). Psychopathy has also been linked to a range of deviant sexual fantasies, such as fetishism, sadism, and pedophilia (Williams et al., 2009). Because psychopathy reflects an inclination to seek stimulation and to take advantage of immediate opportunities to have sex (Jonason, Webster et al., 2012), we would expect those scoring highly on this trait to fantasize about a broader range of sexual themes relative to those scoring highly on the other Dark Triad constructs.

Third, we predict that narcissism will be primarily correlated with individual differences in intimate sexual fantasies. Intimate fantasies are on the “lighter” end of the spectrum of individual differences in sexual fantasies through markedly more emotional and less aggressive content than do impersonal and sadomasochistic fantasies, respectively (Wilson, 1978, 1997). Of the Dark Triad traits, narcissism is considered the least socially aversive and perceived as the “lightest” of the trio (Rauthmann, 2012), being related to sociability in a way the other traits are not (Jonason & McCain, 2012). Narcissists may seek social approval in ways the other traits do not. Narcissists may be unique in that they want to connect with others as long as it serves their ego needs (Bogart, Benotsch, & Pavlovic, 2004; Raskin & Terry, 1988). Therefore, it seems reasonable that narcissism would be correlated with individual differences in fantasies of this kind.

Lastly, we predict that Machiavellianism will exhibit minimal associations with specific sexual fantasy themes. This particular trait has shown no significant relations with a variety of deviant sexual fantasies including voyeurism, fetishism, and sadism (Williams et al., 2009) and no association with one’s tendency to fantasize (Watson, Biderman, & Sawrie, 1994), suggesting a disinterest in such behaviors. It therefore seems reasonable to predict limited links between Machiavellianism and different sexual fantasies in as much as sexual behavior is, in part, shaped by one’s sexual fantasies (Leitenberg & Henning, 1995). We also expect that Machiavellianism will be positively related to sex drive, given that previous research has found high scores on this trait to be associated with unrestricted sociosexuality, promiscuity, and infidelity (e.g., McDonald, Donnellan, & Navarrete, 2012; McHoskey, 2001).

In addition to the overall links between individual differences in the Dark Triad traits and sexual fantasies, there is reason to believe that sex differences in sexual fantasies will be facilitated (i.e., statistically mediated; Baron & Kenny, 1986) by individual differences in the Dark Triad. In Western and Eastern samples, men are better characterized by the Dark Triad traits than are women (Jonason, Li, & Czarna, 2013). In addition, men (compared to women) desire more sex partners (Schmitt, 2003), are more willing to have sex with strangers (Clark & Hatfield, 1989), have less restricted sociosexual orientation (Schmitt, 2005), and have a stronger sex drive as well as fantasies pertaining to exploratory and impersonal themes (Wilson, 1981). Assuming the Dark Triad traits are linked to sexual fantasies, the Dark Triad might mediate sex differences in these sexual fantasies. Arguably because being “bad” provides more benefits (e.g., mates, status, resources) and comes with fewer costs (e.g., damage to reputation, death of offspring, loss of social support) for men than it does for women (Figueredo et al., 2006), having personality traits like the Dark Triad and an accelerated mating strategy might be more adaptive for men than for women (Jonason et al., 2009; Jonason, Webster et al., 2012).

Although the links between sexual fantasies and personality have been studied (e.g., Baumgartner et al., 2002; Williams et al., 2009), the existing literature tends to view sexual fantasies as pathological or deviant, and has, therefore, been assessed extensively by those with clinical leanings. This approach ignores the possibility that there is a range of individual differences in sexual fantasies ranging from “normal” or “common” sexual fantasies to

“abnormal” or “deviant” ones. Moreover, what is “normal” or “abnormal” is notoriously hard to define given the ever-changing sexual norms (Petersen & Hyde, 2010). Therefore, instead of making any moralistic judgments, we define sexual fantasies as manifestations of individual sexual agendas and relate them to the Dark Triad—a set of personality traits that may characterize individual differences in the adoption of an exploitive, short-term mating strategy.

1. Method

1.1. Participants and procedure

A sample of 643 undergraduate students (29.5% male), aged 16–54 years ($M = 18.56$, $SD = 2.50$) at the University of Western Ontario participated in an online mass-testing session that took approximately one hour to complete. Upon completion, participants were thanked, debriefed, and awarded course credit for their contribution.

1.2. Materials

The Short-Dark Triad (Jones & Paulhus, 2014) is a concise measure of narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy. It contains 28 items asking participants to rate their agreement (1 = *Strongly Disagree*; 5 = *Strongly Agree*) with statements reflecting narcissism (e.g., “I have been compared to famous people.”), Machiavellianism (e.g., “Most people can be manipulated.”), and psychopathy (e.g., “I like to get revenge on authorities.”). Items were averaged to create indices of Machiavellianism ($\alpha = .73$), narcissism ($\alpha = .70$), and psychopathy ($\alpha = .76$). Low-to-moderate correlations were found between the Dark Triad traits.¹

Individual differences in sexual fantasies were measured with the Wilson Sex Fantasy Questionnaire (Wilson, 1978). This measure contains 40 items that assess how frequently (0 = *Never*; 5 = *Regularly*) individuals fantasize about a range of sexual acts from “normal” to “deviant”. The measure can be reduced into four themes of sexual fantasies: Intimate (e.g., kissing passionately, oral sex), Exploratory (e.g., mate swapping, promiscuity), Impersonal (e.g., sex with a stranger, fetishism), and Sadomasochistic (e.g., hurting someone, being forced to have sex). Items were averaged to create an index of Intimate ($\alpha = .90$), Exploratory ($\alpha = .76$), Impersonal ($\alpha = .69$), and Sadomasochistic ($\alpha = .86$) fantasies. In addition, when all 40 items are averaged, they can be treated as a measure of overall sex drive (Wilson, 1988). Therefore, we averaged all of the items to obtain an overall sex drive measure ($\alpha = .92$).

2. Results

Descriptive statistics and sex differences for the Dark Triad traits and sexual fantasies are reported in Table 1. Consistent with previous research (Jonason et al., 2009), men scored significantly higher than did women on all facets of the Dark Triad. Men also reported significantly higher scores on Intimate, Exploratory and Interpersonal fantasy themes, as well as an overall sex drive in comparison to women. Given the unequal ratio of men to women in our sample, we report Hedge’s g for effect size instead of Cohen’s d , although the interpretation is the same for both.

Zero-order correlations between the Dark Triad and sexual fantasies are presented in Table 2. Consistent with our hypotheses, psychopathy was most strongly correlated with overall sex drive,

¹ Narcissism ($r(641) = .20$, $p < .01$) and Machiavellianism ($r(641) = .45$, $p < .01$), and narcissism was correlated with Machiavellianism ($r(641) = .10$, $p < .05$).

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