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How the Dark Triad traits predict relationship choices

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ABSTRACT

While previous studies have correlated the Dark Triad traits (i.e., narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism) with a preference for short-term relationships, little research has addressed possible correlations with short-term relationship sub-types. In this online study using Amazon's Mechanical Turk system ($N = 210$) we investigated the manner in which scores on the Dark Triad relate to the selection of different mating environments using a budget-allocation task. Overall, the Dark Triad were positively correlated with preferences for short-term relationships and negatively correlated with preferences for a long-term relationship. Specifically, narcissism was uniquely correlated with preferences for one-night stands and friends-with-benefits and psychopathy was uniquely correlated with preferences for booty-call relationships. Both narcissism and psychopathy were negatively correlated with preferences for serious romantic relationships. In mediation analyses, psychopathy partially mediated the sex difference in preferences for booty-call relationships and narcissism partially mediated the sex difference in preferences for one-night stands. In addition, the sex difference in preference for serious romantic relationships was partially mediated by both narcissism and psychopathy. It appears the Dark Triad traits facilitate the adoption of specific mating environments providing fit with people's personality traits.

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1. Introduction

The Dark Triad traits (i.e., Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy; Paulhus & Williams, 2002) appear to be related to an opportunistic, short-term mating strategy (Jonason, Li, & Buss, 2010b; Jonason, Li, Webster, & Schmitt, 2009; Jonason, Valentine, Li, & Harbeson, 2011). However, this research has, like other research (Forster, Ozelsel, & Epstude, 2010; Greitemeyer, 2007), treated relationship choices in an overly simplistic fashion. Recent evidence (e.g., Garcia & Reiber, 2008; Jonason, Li, & Cason, 2009) suggests there is a much wider spectrum of relationships individuals engage in than previous conceptualizations containing only one-night stands (i.e., primarily sexual relationships that occur one time only; Cubbins & Tanfer, 2000; Fisher & Bryne, 1978) and serious romantic relationships (i.e., committed and presumably monogamous romantic relationships; Christopher & Sprecher, 2000; Li, Bailey, Kenrick, & Linsenmeier, 2002) as exemplars. In this study, we examine the associations of the Dark Triad with preferences for four different types of relationships (i.e., one-night stands, booty-calls, friends-with-benefits, and serious romantic relationships).

Relationships like “hook ups” (Fielder & Carey, 2010; Townsend & Wasserman, 2011), “friends-with-benefits” (i.e., relationships between friends in which the friends engage in sexual activity, but do not define their relationship as romantic; Epstein, Calzo, Smiler, & Ward, 2009; Wentland & Reissing, 2011), and “booty-calls” (i.e., relationships where there is solicitation from a non-long-term partner for the explicit or implicit intent of engaging in sexual activity; Jonason et al., 2009a; Jonason, Li, & Richardson, 2010; Wentland & Reissing, 2011) have come under recent investigation. Although strong, formal, operational definitions have thus far eluded researchers (Epstein et al., 2009; Jonason et al., 2010; Wentland & Reissing, 2011), all of these relationships are characterized by individuals who engage in repeated sexual encounters with someone who is not their committed partner. Between 25% and 75% (Grello, Welsh, & Harper, 2006; Jonason et al., 2009a; Paul, McManus, & Hayes, 2000) of sexual acts committed by adolescents and college-students happen in the context of sexual relationships that lack formal commitment (in contrast to serious romantic relationships) but are recurring acts committed by those with more than a passing acquaintanceship (in contrast to one-night stands).

Given the range of relationships individuals can choose from and that personality traits are instrumental in selecting preferred mating environments (Buss, 1987), we examine how the Dark Triad traits relate to relationship choices. Past research suggests the Dark Triad traits are instrumental in selecting volatile, short-term mating environments by having markedly low standards for

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their short-term partners and preferring a game playing and a pragmatic love style (Jonason & Kavanagh, 2010; Jonason et al., 2011). The Dark Triad traits should be associated with preferring casual relationships of one kind or another. Narcissism in particular should be associated with desiring a variety of relationships. Narcissism is the most social of the three, having an approach orientation towards friends (Foster & Trimm, 2008) and an externally validated “ego” (Buffardi & Campbell, 2008). By preferring a range of relationships, narcissists are better suited to reinforce their sense of self. Therefore, although collectively the Dark Triad traits will be correlated with preferring different casual sex relationships, after controlling for the shared variability among the three traits, we expect that narcissism will correlate with preferences for one-night stands and friend-with-benefits.

In contrast, psychopathy may be characterized by an opportunistic, exploitive mating strategy (Figueredo et al., 2006; Jonason et al., 2009b; Mealey, 1995). Booty-call relationships by their very name denote a degree of exploitation. That is, individuals use others – their booty-call partner – for sex by a late night phone call with the expressed or implied purpose of sex (Jonason et al., 2009). Therefore, we expect that after controlling for the shared variability among the three traits, psychopathy will be correlated with preferences for booty-call relationships. Such a relationship may be consistent with their exploitive mating strategy. Last, although prior work has linked Machiavellianism with a short-term mating style (McHoskey, 2001), more sophisticated analyses controlling for the shared correlation with psychopathy has revealed that Machiavellianism might not be central to predicting short-term mating (Jonason et al., 2011). Therefore, we expect Machiavellianism to not be correlated with preferences for any relationships.

Alternatively, long-term relationships may not be the ideal relationship-context for those high on the Dark Triad traits (Foster, Shrira, & Campbell, 2006; Jonason & Webster, 2010; Jonason et al., 2009, 2010). These individuals are impulsive (Jonason & Tost, 2010; Jones & Paulhus, 2011), think little of long-term consequences (Jonason & Tost, 2010), and are generally disagreeable (Jones & Paulhus, 2010; Lee & Ashton, 2005; Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Therefore, we expect the Dark Triad, most likely narcissism (Foster et al., 2006), to be slightly negatively associated with a preference for serious relationships.

Much has been made of sex differences and similarities in mating psychology (Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Townsend & Wasserman, 2011). Evolutionary psychologists, a la Parental Investment Theory (Trivers, 1972), predict that the sexes have different psychological make-ups as an expression of different recurrent selection pressures related to obligations to offspring and reproduction. In short-term relationships, men pay fewer costs for engaging in sex and thus men are willing and interested in these relationships. In contrast, both sexes (relatively) pay the costs of pregnancy in long-term relationships. Field work confirms such contentions (Clark & Hatfield, 1989). As interesting as sex differences are, they beg the further question of how – psychologically speaking – the sexes differ. One candidate to explain the differences between men and women is the Dark Triad traits, where men reliably score higher than women do (Jonason et al., 2009, 2011). Indeed, mediation tests with the Dark Triad have revealed that the Dark Triad facilitates a short-term mating style in men (Jonason et al., 2009). We suspect that mediation will only be present in relationships that are sexual in nature. That is, because one-night stands and booty-call relationships are more sexual than emotional in nature (Jonason et al., 2010c), we expect the sex differences in preferences to engage in these relationships to be mediated by the Dark Triad.

If personality traits allow individuals to select their optimum environment (Buss, 1984, 1987), then the Dark Triad, as personality

traits, should be related to preferences for mating environments (Jonason et al., 2011). In concert with prior work (Foster et al., 2006; Jonason et al., 2009), we contend that the Dark Triad traits predispose individuals to select short-term mating environments. However, prior research has not examined the apparent nuances in casual sex relationships that have been uncovered recently (Grello et al., 2006; Paul et al., 2000). In this study, we examine individuals’ relationship preferences to add to what we know about the short-term, opportunistic mating strategy that characterizes the Dark Triad.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were recruited through Amazon’s Mechanical Turk system (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011). Mechanical Turk is an online labor market where “requesters” post jobs and “workers” choose which jobs to do for pay. Participation was limited to those 18 years or older who were in the United States. Participants received \$0.50(U.S.) compensation.

Participants ($N = 210$) consisted of 119 females (56.7%) and 91 males (43.3%), ranging in age from 18–68 years old ($M = 33.57$, $SD = 11.37$). Sixty-six were married (31.4%), 68 were single (32.4%), 39 were dating (18.6%), 24 were engaged to be married (11.4%), 12 were divorced (5.7%), and one was widowed (.5%). A majority of the sample was White/Non Hispanic ($n = 176$, 83.8%). Three identified as American Indian/Alaskan (1.4%), 9 as Asian/Pacific Islander (4.3%), 7 as Black/Non Hispanic (3.3%), 8 as Hispanic (3.8%), and 7 identified as “Other” (3.3%). One hundred eighty-one participants identified as heterosexual (86.2%), 17 identified as bisexual (8.1%), and 12 identified as homosexual (5.7%).

2.2. Materials and procedure

We asked participants a series of questions regarding four different relationship-types (i.e., one-night stands, booty-call relationships, friends-with-benefits, and serious romantic relationships). Participants were given the definitions provided above in the introduction for the various types of relationships.

A budget-allocation task (Jonason et al., 2011; Li, Valentine, & Patel, 2011; Li et al., 2002) was used to determine the extent to which participants preferred the four different relationship-types. Participants were asked to build their ideal relationship-life with the four different relationships. Participants were given a budget of 10 mate-dollars to spend on these various types of relationships, where the more points spent on a given relationship-type indicated a greater preference for that type of relationship. Because we are only concerned with relationship priorities, participants’ responses were constrained. Participants were told that they could only allocate these 10 points and that any point given to one relationship is one that cannot be given to another. Last, they were instructed that their total allocations must equal 10.

Participants completed a measure of each of the Dark Triad traits. Machiavellianism was measured with the 20-item MACH-IV (Christie & Geis, 1970). Participants indicated 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 (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .76$).

Narcissism was assessed with the 40-item Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI-40; Raskin & Terry, 1988). For each item, participants chose one of two statements they felt applied to them. One of the two statements reflected a narcissistic attitude (e.g., “I

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