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Birds of a “bad” feather flock together: The Dark Triad and mate choice

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ABSTRACT

Previous research on the Dark Triad traits (i.e., Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and narcissism) has focused solely on the role the Dark Triad traits played in mate choice of actors. The current study ($N = 336$) extends this by manipulating the apparent levels of Dark Triad traits in targets and correlating mate choice in these targets with individual differences in the Dark Triad traits in actors. As expected, both sexes preferred partners low in the Dark Triad traits for long-term mating, while those high in these traits were preferred for one-night stands. However, women high in psychopathy considered the Dark Triad traits in potential male partners more physically attractive and desirable for an one-night stand, as well as a potential husband. Men who were high on psychopathy were likewise attracted to psychopathy in potential mothers. Our findings are discussed from an evolutionary personality paradigm.

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1. Introduction

Poets, play-writes, philosophers, and professors have spent considerable time, money, and pages in hopes of ascertaining what individuals want in mates and why. Two important observations have emerged. People's personality plays a role in who they select and if they are selected as mates (Rammstedt & Schupp, 2008). For instance, individuals have mate preference related to a mate's religiosity (Koenig, McGue, & Iacono, 2009), chronotype (Randler & Kretz, 2011), and personality (Watson et al., 2004). In the current study we provide new detail about the role of personality traits in mate choice.

One area of personality research that has received considerable recent attention in relation to mating psychology is the work examining the Dark Triad traits (i.e., narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism). These traits are characterized by entitlement, superiority, dominance (i.e., narcissism), glib social charm, deceit, manipulateness (i.e., Machiavellianism), erratic, antisocial behavior, impulsivity, and interpersonal antagonism (i.e., psychopathy). The mating psychology associated with these traits tends to be short-term in nature (Jonason, Li, & Buss, 2010; Jonason, Li, Webster, & Schmitt, 2009) in both sexes. Evolutionary psychologists have argued these traits might be adaptive because they facilitate fitness-relevant choices/behaviors. There appears

to be a mating advantage for men characterized by these traits, at least in the short-term (Jonason et al., 2009; Jonason, Valentine, Li, & Harbeson, 2011), and women may benefit from having these trait through gene capturing (Carter, Campbell, & Muncer, 2014; Lyons, Marcinkowska, Helle, & McGrath, 2015).

However, this work tends to be limited by at least four shortcomings. First, the studies do not always examine men and women simultaneously (Aitken, Lyons, & Jonason, 2013; Carter et al., 2014). From an evolutionary perspective, participant's sex is an essential variable to consider when studying mate preferences (Buss & Schmitt, 1993) and psychometrically, having both sexes provides an assessment of relative effects. Second, the studies rarely manipulate potential mate's traits and, instead, tend to rely on descriptive methods. This simply creates a profile of mate preferences. Third, the studies tend to focus on mate preferences or mating psychology (e.g., Jonason, Li et al., 2010) instead of mate choice. It is possible that mate preferences (i.e., who we are attracted to) do not relate to actual mate choice (i.e., who we chose to partner with; Todd, Penke, Fasolo, & Lenton, 2007). Fourth, researchers tend to examine the role the Dark Triad traits play in mate choice in only one side of the mate choice equation. Researchers have missed the opportunity to examine the role of the Dark Triad traits from both sides. In the present study, we aim to address these limitations using the dating advertisements paradigm.

It is clear that individuals do form relationships with people who are characterized by traits like sensation-seeking (Glicksohn & Golan, 2001), antisocial behavior (Knight, 2011), and the Dark

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Triad traits (Smith et al., 2014). However, the work tends to rely on established couples. Pre-existing relationships do not allow us to understand mate choice in relation to the Dark Triad traits. First, it is possible that couples feed off each other, changing their personality. Second, it is possible that someone characterized by these traits lied/obscured these aspects of their personality in order to get into a relationship meaning their partner did not actually/overtly choose someone characterized by these traits.

It is unclear, however, whether the tendencies associated with the Dark Triad traits such as aggression (Keller et al., 2014), social dominance (Jonason, 2015), competitiveness (Jonason, Wee, & Li, 2015), and a need to be “number 1” (Raskin & Terry, 1988) will diminish relationship stability thereby decreasing reproductive success in both sexes (Bereczkei & Csanaky, 1996), or whether dating, especially in the short-term, a like-minded other who enjoys a drama-filled life (Jonason et al., 2011), thriving on the excitement of risk-taking, drug use, and alcohol consumption (Jonason, Koenig, & Tost, 2010) is preferable. Indeed, there is evidence in support of the former (Smith et al., 2014) and the latter (Keller et al., 2014). In this study, we try to disentangle these.

In addition, there is good reason to think the sex of the participant might be an important factor in understanding mate choice (Buss & Schmitt, 1993) and the Dark Triad traits (Jonason, Li, & Czarna, 2013). Men may pay fewer costs and reap more benefits for engaging in risk-taking, including short-term mating which is associated with the Dark Triad traits. Psychopathy may facilitate the most exploitive form of mating among the Dark Triad traits (Jonason, Luévano, & Adams, 2012), possibly accompanied by cognitive distortions that lead them to mistake a partner who is “good fun” for a “good mom”. In contrast, narcissism in men may be accompanied with an implicit desire to reproduce (i.e., “I am so great I should make copies of me”), and consequently be attuned to who would be a good mother, thereby seeing similar women as potential mothering risks and undesirable marriage partners. Indeed, narcissism appears to be linked to a more opportunistic than an exploitive mating strategy (Jonason et al., 2012) and is the most socially desirable and sensitive aspect of the Dark Triad (Rauthmann & Kolar, 2012).

As men and women have different reproductive psychologies, we would expect women to have different cognitive distortions created by the Dark Triad traits that are constrained by their reproductive realities. Young women (like our sample) may have a preference for “bad boys” as embodied in these traits (Aitken et al., 2013). This preference might not necessarily be a function of psychopathology, but instead, an effect whereby young women who are characterized by these traits are simply not entertained sufficiently by men who are not also high on these traits. This should translate into these women seeing men who are high on the Dark Triad traits—not men likely to commit or to be particularly good long-term investments—as attractive partners, globally. That is, the Dark Triad traits in young women may actually create cognitive distortions in how they evaluate risk in the context of mating, making them believe that sexy “cads” would not only be good for tonight but is the kind of man who would still be there in the morning.

In the current study we document the first data to examine mate choice among actors characterized by the Dark Triad traits in targets who are characterized by the Dark Triad traits using the dating advertisement paradigm. We expect to confirm the primary contention from evolutionary psychologists that the Dark Triad traits prove and advantage in the short-term but not in the long-term mating contexts. We examine how individuals characterized by the Dark Triad traits may structure their romantic/sexual lives.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

Participants were 159 female and 177 male volunteers who took part in one of three on-line surveys, advertised as “Personality and dating advertisements” for students at a UK university ($n = 70$), in an on-line participation website ($n = 192$), through a crowd-sourcing company ($n = 43$), and via social media advertising ($n = 31$). First, participants were informed about the nature of the study, including relevant ethical issues. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions based on each of the Dark Triad traits. Participants filled in a measure for the Dark Triad, and reported their responses to the target’s vignettes that were manipulated to represent the corresponding Dark Triad trait.

2.2. Measures

We created 10 dating advertisements that reflected a person who was high or low on the Dark Triad traits; using items from the respective instruments (see Appendix A). In the advertisements, we manipulated characteristics such as cold social attitudes and deceit in line with the Dirty Dozen (Jonason & Webster, 2010) measure of Machiavellianism (i.e., Machiavellian profiles); leadership, vanity, and self-admiration as in the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (Raskin & Terry, 1988) measure (i.e., narcissistic profiles); and risk-taking, erratic behavior, and impulsivity as in the Self-Reported Psychopathy (Paulhus, Neumann, & Hare, 2009) measure (i.e., psychopathic profiles).¹ Participants rated the profiles for attractiveness as a short-term (viz., physical attractiveness and desirability as a one-night stand) and a long-term (viz., marriage partner and potential father/mother to their future children) partner (1 = *not attractive at all*; 5 = *extremely attractive*). All five advertisements in each category had acceptable-to-good internal consistency (Cronbach’s α ’s = .69–.91).

Participants (Women $n = 59$, $M_{Age} = 24.84$, $SD_{Age} = 9.84$; Men $n = 50$, $M_{Age} = 25.22$, $SD_{Age} = 8.57$) who rated the Machiavellian opposite-sex advertisements completed the 20-item Mach IV scale (Christie & Geis, 1970). Participants were asked how much they agreed (1 = *strongly disagree*; 7 = *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.” Responses were summed to create an index of Machiavellianism ($\alpha_{Women} = .79$; $\alpha_{Men} = .56$).

Participants (Women: $n = 54$, $M_{Age} = 25.50$, $SD_{Age} = 9.70$; Men: $n = 72$, $M_{Age} = 26.14$, $SD_{Age} = 9.48$) who rated the psychopath opposite-sex advertisements completed the 64-item SRP-III scale (Paulhus et al., 2009). Participants rated how much they agreed (1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*) with statements such as: “I enjoy driving at high speeds” and “I think I could beat a lie detector”. Responses were summed to create an index of psychopathy ($\alpha_{Women} = .91$; $\alpha_{Men} = .90$).

Participants (Women: $n = 46$, $M_{Age} = 22.11$, $SD_{Age} = 3.79$; Men: $n = 55$, $M_{Age} = 27.78$, $SD_{Age} = 11.08$) who rated the narcissistic opposite-sex advertisements completed the 40-item Narcissistic Personality Inventory (Raskin & Terry, 1988). For each item, participants chose one of two statements they felt applied to them more. One statement reflected a narcissistic attitude (e.g., “I have a natural talent for influencing people”), whereas the other did not (e.g., “I am not good at influencing people”). Responses were summed to create an index of their narcissism scores ($\alpha_{Women} = .88$; $\alpha_{Men} = .86$).

¹ Similar vignettes were used in prior studies (Aitken et al., 2013; Rauthmann & Kolar, 2012).

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