



Women's sexual competition and the Dark Triad



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ABSTRACT

The Dark Triad (DT) of sub-clinical narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy has been found to be related to competitive attitudes and behaviors, chiefly in men. Using a women-only sample ($n = 439$), we examined the relationship of DT with general and sexual competitiveness. Factor analysis indicated that the distinction between inter- and intra-sexual competition in women may be less clear than previously conceptualized. We found significant positive correlations between DT and both general and sexual competitiveness. Regression analyses indicated that DT, and in particular, narcissism, are significant predictors of general and sexual competitiveness. These findings are discussed in relation to evolutionary theory, and directions for future work on sexual competition and DT are suggested.

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1. Introduction

Darwin (1871, p. 254–255) defined sexual selection as “the advantage which certain individuals have over other individuals of the same sex and species in exclusive relation to reproduction”. This advantage is gained through two forms of competition: intrasexual and intersexual. Intrasexual competition refers to competition between members of the same sex for reproductive advantage (Andersson, 1994). Darwin's view of the female as ‘coy’ in relation to reproduction led to a focus on combat between males for sexual access, with the evolution of male armory such as tusks and horns (‘armaments’, Berglund, Bisazza, & Pilaastro, 1996) seen as a direct result of agonistic intrasexual encounters. ‘Coy’ females nevertheless influenced the evolutionary process by their choice of male suitors, since any preference on the part of females for specific traits would act as a selection factor in males (Darwin, 1871). The term intersexual competition has been used to refer to the evolution and display of traits or attributes that are preferred by females. The classic example of these ‘ornaments’ is the tail of the ornately-plumed peacock, *Pavo cristatus* (Berglund et al., 1996).

Since Darwin's initial observations, it has become clear that biological sex *per se* is less influential in determining reproductive competition than parental investment and the consequent operational sex ratio (Bateman, 1948; Trivers, 1972), as seen in ‘sex role reversed’ species (Jones & Ratterman, 2009). Whilst in most mammalian species, the female is the primary or sole form of support

for new offspring, some species – such as humans – feature bi-parental care, in which both parents typically invest heavily in the care of their progeny (Thornhill & Gangestad, 2008). The advent of bi-parental care in humans (an effect of altricial young and lengthy infant dependency) and human monogamy result in two-way sexual selection. Under two-way sexual selection, both sexes compete for mates. Men become considerably choosier when they make a long-term commitment to a single woman (e.g. Stewart-Williams & Thomas, 2013). This raises issues regarding the roles and relative importance of intrasexual and intersexual forms of competition to men and women.

Intrasexual competition has been widely used as an explanation of male–male aggression. Daly and Wilson (1988) noted the cross-culturally greater proportion of same-sex homicide by men, which they attributed to greater male variance in reproductive success that increased male competition. This, they argued, resulted in a psychological adaptation of combative risk-taking they termed ‘young male syndrome’ (Wilson & Daly, 1985). In respect of female–female aggression, Campbell (1999) proposed that women's reluctance to engage in direct intrasexual competitive aggression resulted from females' greater parental investment. Whilst, as noted, humans are typically bi-parental carers, the greater dependence of offspring on the mother for survival (Sear & Mace, 2008) has selected for greater avoidance of risk-taking and aggression by mammalian females, including women.

Intersexual competition, by contrast, has been widely used as an explanation of women's typically greater preoccupation with their physical attractiveness. The pursuit and advertisement (illusory or honest) of a healthy and fecund body shape, such as a morphologically ideal waist-to-hip ratio (e.g. Singh, 1993) and a desirable body

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mass index (e.g. Puhl & Boland, 2001) are examples. In addition, the use of cosmetic products to ornament certain facial features – darkening eyes or eyebrows, for example, to force tonal contrast – enhances the impression of youth (Russell, 2010). Other forms of make-up, used to mask imperfections (uneven skin tone; acne; rosacea) or suggest fertility (pink cheeks; redder lips) are also often rated as attractive by men (Fink, Grammer, & Matts, 2006; Miller & Maner, 2010).

Despite the appealing simplicity of the distinction between intrasexual and intersexual competition, the two forms may not be as discrete as they seem (Berglund et al., 1996). The distinctiveness of these two forms will be explored in the present study. Daly and Wilson (1988), for example, note that when young men fight, they may do so not to gain direct copulatory access to a desirable mate (intrasexual), but rather to achieve status and respect that may increase their desirability to women (intersexual). The distinction is equally, if not more, questionable in the case of women because of the typically indirect form that their intrasexual aggression takes (Archer, 2004; Björkqvist, 1994; Campbell, 1999). Meta-analyses show that while men exceed women in physical ($d = .39$) and verbal aggression ($d = .30$), the sex difference in indirect aggression is reversed, although the effect size is modest, $d = -.02$ (Archer, 2004). As the riskiness of the form of aggression diminishes, women's willingness to use it rises. Women's indirect aggression has typically been viewed as a form of intrasexual competition (Vaillancourt & Sharma, 2011). Indirect aggression includes stigmatizing rivals (by gossiping to third parties, including men) and tactics of exclusion. Gossip can involve attacks on rivals in areas that are important in men's mate choice, including facial and bodily attractiveness, youthfulness, and sexual restraint (intrasexual competition), but these tactics also enhance a woman's own relative appeal in these areas (intersexual competition). Similarly, excluding a rival from attending a social event where attractive men might be found could be seen as an intrasexual tactic (indirect aggression toward her rival) or an intersexual one (enhancing her likelihood of attracting a mate).

In both the evolutionary and personality literatures (e.g. Fink, Klappauf, Brewer, & Shackelford, 2014; Tooke & Camire, 1991), the term 'intrasexual competition' has been used very broadly, to subsume attitudes and behaviors that pertain to what would be understood as intersexual competition using Darwin's original formulation. This has included the advertisement of an attractive body shape, engaging in displays that indicate interest in mating, and exerting dominance within a group (Buss & Schmitt, 1993). With this past over-inclusive application of the term in mind, and to clarify our present conceptualization, we will consider tactics of intersexual competition as those that are directed at the opposite sex, and intrasexual competition to encompass tactics directed at same-sex rivals.

Four major forms of sexual competition have been identified in past research. Self-promotion and competitor derogation (Buss, 1988; Schmitt & Buss, 1996) were initially considered the primary forms this competition takes. Later, competitor manipulation and mate manipulation were added (Fisher & Cox, 2010). Self-promotion and mate manipulation both focus directly on the relationship between the individual and potential mate. Because they center on the advertisement of desirable traits, indications of sexual interest, and behaviors likely to be viewed positively by potential mates, they can be considered examples of intersexual competition. Competitor derogation and competitor manipulation both focus on the relationship between the self and rivals, acting in ways that undermine members of the same sex. They can thus be seen as expressions of intrasexual competition.

In their paper on sexual competition, however, Fisher and Cox (2010) propose that all four of these competitive strategies represent 'intrasexual' competition. Whilst they present scales for each

tactic that have face validity and good internal consistency, no attempt has yet been made to examine the latent structure of these items using factor analysis. The first aim of the current study is therefore to explore the extent to which, in a large female-only sample, the proposed distinctions in sexually competitive behaviors are supported. Through factor analysis, we seek to assess whether these tactics emerge as four distinct forms, two composite forms (corresponding to intersexual and intrasexual competition) or one overarching sexual competition factor. We ultimately seek to explore whether we can disentangle tactics of human (female) sexual competition from one another, as existing conceptual frameworks suggest.

The second aim of the present study is to consider women's general and sexual competition in relation to the Dark Triad (DT) and its constituent traits. The Dark Triad is the collective term for the three moderately inter-correlated traits of sub-clinical narcissism, Machiavellianism and psychopathy. Narcissists have a pre-occupation with their physical appearance (Campbell, Foster, & Finkel, 2002) and express greater concern over their own attractiveness and beauty than controls (Gabriel, Critelli, & Ee, 1994). They manifest this through expensive clothes and accessories, as well as extensive personal grooming (Vazire, Naumann, Rentfrow, & Gosling, 2008). Machiavellianism is defined, at its core, by fraudulent interpersonal manipulation and exploitation (Wilson, Near, & Miller, 1996). High levels of psychopathy are associated with a lack of empathy and antisocial, callous behaviors; as with Machiavellianism, psychopathy is related to exploitative strategies (Hare, 2003). Those who score highly for the trait can be convivial in initial encounters, but ultimately, are typically hostile towards others (Reise & Wright, 1996).

Each of the DT traits is correlated with competitiveness and competitive tactics (Carter, Campbell, & Muncer, 2014; Jonason, Li, & Teicher, 2010). All three constituent traits are associated with endorsements of social dominance and related inequalities (Hodson, Hogg, & MacInnis, 2009), reflecting an approval of competition and its (potential) rewards. It is plausible to suggest that narcissism would correlate with intersexual competition, since the attitudes endorsed by high scorers center on self-advertisement and behaviors designed to impress others (Holtzman & Strube, 2010). By contrast, Machiavellianism and psychopathy might be expected to correlate with intrasexual competition, since the former is defined by interpersonal manipulation and the latter by low levels of empathy, such that the harmful and destructive consequences of derogative, exploitative actions are of little concern (Paulhus & Williams, 2002).

Much work to date has characterized DT as facilitating a 'male' mating strategy, particularly as regards sexual attitudes and behaviors (Jonason, Li, Webster, & Schmitt, 2009; Jonason et al., 2010). In consequence, the majority of research been performed on men, or the results have not been disaggregated by sex. The present study aims to redress the androcentrism of previous work. In keeping with existing research highlighting the similarity between high-DT men and women in multiple attitudes and behaviors (Carter et al., 2014), we predict that narcissism, Machiavellianism and psychopathy individually, and DT as a composite, will be correlated with competitiveness in our female sample as they are in men. We further predict that DT will be correlated with sexual competitiveness. We will also explore specific correlations contingent on the factor structure that is found.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Four hundred and thirty-nine women, aged 17–40 ($M = 22.85$, $SD = 4.76$) were recruited to complete an online questionnaire

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