



Dark triad traits and romantic relationship attachment, accommodation, and control



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ABSTRACT

The current studies investigated the influence of Dark Triad traits (Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and narcissism) on women's romantic relationships. For Study 1, women ($N = 122$) completed the Mach IV, Levenson Self-Report Psychopathy Scale, NPI-16, and Experiences in Close Relationships Revised Questionnaire. High secondary psychopathy and low narcissism predicted higher levels of attachment anxiety. High Machiavellianism, primary psychopathy, and secondary psychopathy each predicted higher attachment avoidance. For Study 2, women ($N = 265$) completed Dark Triad trait measures and the Accommodation Scale. Machiavellianism predicted lower active or passive constructive responses to a partner's destructive (or potentially destructive) behavior and lower active destructive responses. Primary psychopathy predicted greater active and passive destructive behavior whereas secondary psychopathy predicted lower active constructive responses. For Study 3, women ($N = 240$) completed Dark Triad trait measures and the Interpersonal Violence Control Scale. Secondary psychopathy was associated with increased levels of each form of control (control through surveillance and threats, control over everyday routines and decision making, and control over autonomous behavior). Machiavellianism and primary psychopathy also predicted increased control over autonomous behavior.

1. Introduction

Dark Triad traits (Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and narcissism) are related but distinct traits characterised by a lack of empathy, exploitation, and manipulation. Previous research has documented the extent to which Dark Triad traits influence sexual and romantic relationships. For example, those with higher levels of Dark Triad traits prefer short-term relationships and avoid relationship commitment (Jonason & Buss, 2012; Jonason, Luevano, & Adams, 2012). The current studies further investigate the influence of Dark Triad traits on romantic relationship dynamics. In particular, Dark Triad traits are considered in relation to attachment, accommodation, and partner control, each of which are related to wellbeing and relationship satisfaction (e.g., Lo et al., 2010).

1.1. Attachment anxiety and avoidance

Early attachments influence the ability to form and maintain successful relationships during adulthood. In particular, internal working

models inform perceptions of the self (e.g., deserving of love), others (e.g., likely to be supportive), and relationships between others and the self. Insecure attachments are characterised by anxiety and avoidance. Attachment anxiety is associated with stronger reactions to perceived romantic rejection (Besser & Priel, 2009), overestimation of relationship threats and underestimation of the partner's commitment (Collins, 1996), and greater distress in response to partner criticism or conflict (Overall, Girme, Lemay, & Hammond, 2014). Attachment avoidance is associated with discomfort when dependent on others. Those with high levels of attachment avoidance prefer emotional and psychological independence (Hazan & Shaver, 1994) and dislike emotional and physical intimacy (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998).

Narcissism is characterised by an elevated sense of self-worth and entitlement (Emmons, 1984; Raskin & Hall, 1981) and overconfidence (Campbell, Goodie, & Foster, 2004). Furthermore, those high on narcissism are less likely to doubt their partner's commitment (Foster & Campbell, 2005). However, those high on narcissism are also sensitive to interpersonal rejection (Besser & Priel, 2010) and more likely to engage in behavior intended to prevent relationship

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dissolution (Jonason, Li, & Buss, 2010). Hence, the relationship between narcissism and attachment anxiety remains unclear. Machiavellianism is associated with a lack of faith in humanity and the belief that others are manipulative (Abell, Brewer, Qualter, & Austin, 2016); hence those high in Machiavellianism prefer emotionally detached relationships (Ali & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2010) and low levels of relationship commitment (Jonason & Buss, 2012). Psychopathy is related to reduced relationship exclusivity (Khan, Brewer, Kim, & Munoz Centifanti, 2017) and callous, self-centred behavior (Hare, 1996). Therefore, women high on Machiavellianism and psychopathy were predicted to display attachment avoidance.

1.2. Accommodation

Destructive or potentially destructive behaviors are a frequent feature of poor quality romantic relationships. The manner in which the partner responds to the potentially destructive behavior is important. Accommodation refers to the tendency to inhibit destructive impulses in response to a partner's potentially destructive behavior in favour of a constructive response (Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovick, & Lipkus, 1991). The use of constructive responses is associated with relationship trust (Wieselquist, Rusbult, Foster, & Agnew, 1999), intimacy (Overall & Sibley, 2008), satisfaction and commitment (Rusbult, Johnson, & Morrow, 1986) whereas destructive responses may further harm a relationship (Rusbult et al., 1986). Constructive responses are particularly beneficial when active rather than passive (Overall, Sibley, & Travaglia, 2010). Rusbult and Zembrodt (1983) identify four potential responses to a partner's behavior, which vary according to two dimensions; destructive versus constructive and active versus passive.

Exit refers to actively harming the relationship (e.g., threatening to leave); voice reflects actively trying to improve the situation (e.g., discussing relationship issues); loyalty is defined as passively but optimistically waiting for the situation to improve (e.g., waiting for conflict to pass); and neglect refers to passively allowing the relationship to deteriorate (e.g., refusing to discuss relationship difficulties). The present study investigated accommodation in romantic relationships which may require self-control and the ability to consider the consequences of constructive or destructive behavior. Women high on psychopathy, characterised by cold callous behavior (Hare, 1996) and the use of criticism and contempt during partner conflict (Horan, Guinn, & Banghart, 2015) were predicted to engage in more destructive behavior. Women high on Machiavellianism, associated with stonewalling (i.e. withdrawal from interaction) during partner conflict (Horan et al., 2015) and the use of avoidance/withdrawal when terminating relationships (Brewer & Abell, 2017a), were predicted to be less responsive to their partner.

1.3. Relationship control

Intimate partner violence may encompass a range of physically, psychologically, sexually, or financially abusive behaviors (Coker, Smith, McKeown, & King, 2000). Though research and policy often focus on physically abusive acts, psychological abuse negatively impacts on physical and mental health (Coker, Smith, Bethea, King, & McKeown, 2000; Straight, Harper, & Arias, 2003; Tiwari et al., 2008). In particular, controlling behavior forms an important aspect of intimate partner violence (Felson & Messner, 2000). The present study investigated women's desire for control over their partner. Based on the emotionally distant, exploitative, and manipulative interpersonal style which characterises Machiavellianism and psychopathy, the increased anger and acceptance of violent behavior displayed by those high on narcissism (Blinkhorn, Lyons, & Almond, 2016; Papps & O'Carroll, 1998), and previous research indicating a relationship between Dark Triad traits and partner violence (e.g., Brewer & Abell, 2017b; Carton & Egan, 2017), we predicted women high on each Dark Triad trait would be more likely to engage in controlling relationship

behavior.

Therefore, Study 1 investigated the influence of Dark Triad traits on attachment anxiety and avoidance. Study 2 investigated the extent to which Dark Triad traits predicted exit (active destructive); voice (active constructive); loyalty (passive constructive); neglect (passive destructive) responses to a partner's destructive (or perceived destructive) behavior. Study 3 investigated the influence of Dark Triad traits on controlling behavior (control through surveillance and threats; control over everyday routines and decision making; and control over autonomous behavior). Dark triad traits, relationship outcomes, and associations between dark triad traits and relationship outcomes display important sex differences (e.g. Jonason, Lyons, Bethell, & Ross, 2013; Jones & Weiser, 2014; Muris, Merckelbach, Otgaar, & Meijer, 2017). In addition, the need for additional research investigating dark triad traits and female relationships has been noted (Carter, Campbell, & Muncer, 2014). Hence, the present studies focused on the manner in which Dark Triad traits influence female relationships only.

2. Study 1 method

2.1. Participants

Heterosexual women ($N = 122$) aged 20–45 years ($M = 24.06$, $SD = 4.82$) were recruited online and from the campus of a British University. All participants were in a romantic relationship of at least 3 months duration at the time of the study. Average relationship length was 3 years and 6 months.

2.2. Materials and procedure

Participants completed initial demographic questions followed by the Mach IV (Christie & Geis, 1970), NPI-16 (Ames, Rose, & Anderson, 2006), and Levenson Self-Report Psychopathy Scale (Levenson, Kiehl, & Fitzpatrick, 1995). Questionnaires were completed online (via social networking sites or websites promoting participation in online research) or offline at a British university campus. All participants provided informed consent prior to participation and questionnaires were completed anonymously. Participants were not paid for their time.

The Mach IV (Christie & Geis, 1970) is a 20 item measure of Machiavellianism. Items are rated on a 7 point scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*). The scale assesses interactions with others, morality, and cynicism. Example items include “*Anyone who completely trusts anyone else is asking for trouble*”. Ten items are reverse coded. The NPI-16 (Ames et al., 2006) is a 16 item measure of narcissism, comprised of items selected from the larger NPI-40 (Raskin & Terry, 1988). Participants are presented with 16 statement pairs and select the statement which most accurately relates to their own feelings. Example items include “*I prefer to blend in with the crowd*” vs “*I like to be the centre of attention*”. Narcissistic responses are coded as 1 and non-narcissistic responses are coded as 0.

The Levenson Self-Report Psychopathy Scale (Levenson et al., 1995) contains 26 items (7 reverse coded) and is intended for use with non-institutionalised samples. The scale is separated into the primary psychopathy subscale (16 items) assessing manipulative, selfish, and uncaring traits and the secondary psychopathy subscale (10 items) measuring anti-social behavior. Example items include “*For me, what's right is whatever I can get away with*” (primary psychopathy) and “*I have been in a lot of shouting matches with other people*” (secondary psychopathy). Items are rated on a 7 point scale (1 = *disagree strongly* to 7 = *agree strongly*). Participants also completed the Experiences in Close Relationships Revised Questionnaire (Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000). The questionnaire is a 36 item measure of attachment related anxiety. The questionnaire contains two subscales; attachment related anxiety and attachment related avoidance. Participants respond to statements on a 5 point scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Example items include “*I'm afraid that I will lose my partner's love*”

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