



## The dark triad and intimate partner violence

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### ABSTRACT

Psychological abuse within intimate partner violence (IPV) is poorly researched. We investigated the impact of dark triad (DT) traits and personality on psychological, physical and sexual abuse, and whether DT traits have incremental validity over general personality dimensions in the prediction of IPV expressed psychologically, physically, and sexually. IPV was measured via the Multidimensional Measure of Emotional Abuse (MMEA) and the short form of the revised Conflict Tactics Scale, version 2 (CTS2S) in a general community sample ( $N = 128$ ). Correlation and regression analysis indicated that low agreeableness and psychopathy had the strongest associations and most predictive relationships with both psychological abuse and physical/sexual abuse. Low agreeableness was predictive of both the participants' and their partners' perpetration of physical/sexual abuse. A significant positive relationship was also found between high scores on the MMEA and high scores on the CTS2S. A significant positive relationship was found between participants' high psychopathy scores and perpetration of psychological abuse, but this had a smaller effect than a measure of agreeableness alone. We did not find that the DT provides incremental validity for the prediction of either psychological abuse or physical/sexual abuse over basic low Agreeableness.

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### 1. Introduction

The dark triad (DT) of personality comprises three socially aversive personality dimensions: Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). These dimensions are positively correlated and share the common expression of callous manipulation (Furnham, Richards, & Paulhus, 2013). The DT has been used to research antisocial behaviour in sub-clinical populations and provides additional value in predicting antisocial outcomes such as moral disengagement justifying unethical consumer behaviour, community violence, and sexual harassment proclivity (Pailing, Boon, & Egan, 2014; Egan, Hughes, & Palmer, 2015; Zeigler-Hill, Besser, Morag, & Campbell, 2016). The current study explores the influence of the DT and general personality traits on intimate partner violence (IPV), another antagonistic behaviour common in population samples.

The Big Five model of personality comprises five traits; Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Neuroticism and Openness (Costa & McCrae, 1992). The DT traits is based on this foundation, and elements of all the Big Five Personality traits can be found across the three components of the DT, especially low agreeableness (Jakobwitz & Egan, 2006; Egan, Chan, & Shorter, 2014). The DT is well operationalised; Machiavellianism indicates manipulative social behaviour for personal gain, often against the interests of others (Wilson, Near, & Miller, 1996). Psychopathy divides into primary and secondary forms; engaging in antisocial

(but not necessarily illegal) behaviours motivated by a lack of conscience and a fearless temperament, are regarded as primary, whereas secondary psychopathy involves similar behaviours, but driven by neurotic expressions of conflict and impulsivity (Hicks, Markon, Patrick, Krueger, & Newman, 2004). Narcissism is a multidimensional construct that splits into grandiose and vulnerable forms (Wink, 1991; Dickinson & Pincus, 2003; Pailing et al., 2014). Grandiose narcissism involves an exaggerated sense of self-importance, while vulnerable narcissism is characterised by social withdrawal and hypersensitivity (Campbell & Miller, 2011).

There has been much empirical research into the correlation between the DT and aggression and violence (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Paulhus & Williams, 2002; Jones & Paulhus, 2010; Baughman, Dearing, Giammarco, & Vernon, 2012; Pailing et al., 2014; Westhead & Egan, 2015). Some studies have investigated associations between individual DT traits and IPV (Hamberger & Hastings, 1990; Rosen, 1991; Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996; Juodis, Starzomski, Porter, & Woodworth, 2014), but there has been less investigation of the relationship between the full DT and IPV. Understanding the associations between the DT and IPV may help inform treatment programmes for the perpetrators of IPV.

IPV can be expressed as psychological, physical or sexual abuse; all harm the well-being of its victims (WHO, 2012). This study will define IPV as the use of exploitative strategies such as deception, manipulation, coercion, intimidation and violence within an Intimate Partner Relationship (IPR) (Buss & Duntley, 2008; Buss & Duntley, 2011). The majority of literature and research on IPV focuses on the physical and sexual

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elements of the behaviour (Campbell, 2002; Campbell et al., 2002; Abramsky et al., 2011). We extend earlier work on the DT and IPV by also examining associations with psychological abuse. Psychological abuse involves deception, manipulation, coercion and intimidation in the context of IPV, but can also involve the threat of physical or sexual violence; the thought of such violence sometimes has a greater impact on a victim's psychological functioning than the abuse itself (O'Leary, 1999; Pico-Alfonso, 2005), and while increasingly recognised as problematic (Pico-Alfonso et al., 2006; Gentry & Bailey, 2014) is relatively under-researched. Psychological abuse is now addressed by new UK legislation, as "Controlling or coercive behaviour in an intimate or family relationship" was introduced to the *Serious Crime Act, 2015*. This law criminalises behaviours which stop short of serious physical violence but cause extreme psychological or emotional harm (Home Office, 2014).

It was hypothesised that persons who score highly on all aspects of the DT will score higher on measures of psychological and physical/sexual abuse. There were good reasons for anticipating all three elements of the DT could be associated with IPV. Firstly, manipulation of others is a psychological process; secondly, there is a clear previously documented relationship between antagonistic and antisocial qualities and IPV (White & Widom, 2003); and thirdly, due to its association with hostility and verbal aggression, emotional instability would be expected to raise vindictiveness, and so contribute to IPV (Hellmuth & McNulty, 2008; Egan & Lewis, 2012). The current study tests whether or not DT adds to the prediction of IPV over general dispositional traits. We therefore sought to determine: (1) the impact of individual DT traits have on an individual's propensity towards psychological IPV, (2) the incremental validity of the DT on the relationship between general personality characteristics and IPV; and (3) which combination of specific individual dispositional and DT traits, best predicted physical, sexual and psychological IPV.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Participants and procedure

Given a desired moderate effect size (0.15) and a  $p = 0.05$  significance level using a multiple regression, power analysis revealed a minimum of 111 participants required to achieve a power of 0.95. Inclusion criteria were being over 18 years, fluency in English, being currently or previously involved in a relationship of one year or longer, and providing informed consent. The study recruited 128 participants through advertisements (social media, posters and flyers). The sample comprised 105 females and 23 males. Participants were mostly white ( $n = 115$ ), with 6 Black, 6 Asian, and 11 Hispanic participants; 93 persons were involved in an intimate relationship of over one year at the time of testing ( $n = 93$ ), and 35 had previously been involved a relationship of a year or more. These relationships comprised 119 that were heterosexual, 6 homosexual, and 1 polyamorous. Of the relationships, 31 were married, 44 co-habiting, 2 in a civil partnership, and 51 dating.

This study employed a regression design in which psychological and physical/sexual abuse were criterion outcomes, and the predictor variables were gender, age, the DT, and the Big Five personality traits. Participants provided informed consent then completed the background questions and questionnaires listed above (in the following order: BFAS, SD3, MMEA, CTS2S). At the end persons were given information including details of organisations, help lines and charities associated with IPV. The online survey took approximately 15 min to complete.

### 2.2. Measures

All participants completed four psychometric questionnaires, and gave information regarding their gender, age, ethnicity, number of years in education and the status and type of relationship they were in at the time. The scales comprised:

#### 1. The Big Five aspects scale (BFAS) (DeYoung & Quilty, 2007)

The BFAS is a 100-item scale that measures the Big Five domains of personality: Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Neuroticism and Openness (Costa & McCrae, 1992). Responses are made using a 5-point Likert scale. The BFAS has demonstrated good validity, correlating with other measures of the Big Five; the BFAS's individual dimensions show good internal reliabilities: Extraversion  $\alpha = 0.85$ , Agreeableness  $\alpha = 0.84$ , Conscientiousness  $\alpha = 0.84$ , Neuroticism  $\alpha = 0.89$  and Openness  $\alpha = 0.85$  (DeYoung & Quilty, 2007).

#### 2. The revised Conflict Tactics Scale short form (CTS2S) (Straus & Douglas, 2004)

The CTS2S is a 20-item measure of IPV adapted from the longer 39-item measure version of the CTS2 (Straus, Hamby, Buncy-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996). The CTS2S uses an 8-point Likert scale to look at tactics (negotiation, physical assault and psychological aggression) used during conflict within IPRs (Straus & Douglas, 2004). It measures the number of times a particular aspect of IPV has occurred within a relationship and records whether it was instigated by the participant to their partner, or vice versa. The CTS2S has demonstrated good construct and concurrent validity (Archer, 1999; Straus & Douglas, 2004). There are many possible ways to score the CTS2S, this study chose to score based on prevalence. Using this method, if the participant reported the occurrence of any physical violence by the partner in the course of their relationship, they were classified as having been a victim of IPV; if they reported using any of the violent acts they were classified as being a perpetrator of IPV. In the Straus and Douglas (2004) paper it was stated CTS2S reliability cannot be calculated due to their method of scoring. Sachetti and Lefler (2014) scored the CTS2S, and found perpetrator reliability was  $\alpha = 0.59$ , Victim reliability  $\alpha = 0.67$ . The CTS2S does not sample psychological abuse in depth, and for this reason we measured psychological abuse separately. The following are examples of questions in the CTS2S "I/My partner went to see a doctor (M.D.) or needed to see a doctor because of a fight" and "I/My partner used force (like hitting, holding down, or using a weapon) to make the other have sex".

#### 3. The Multidimensional Measure of Emotional Abuse (MMEA) (Murphy & Hoover, 1999)

The MMEA is a 28-item scale that specifically measures emotionally abusive aspect of IPV. It uses a 10-point Likert scale to measure the number of times a particular aspect of emotional abuse (Restrictive Engulfment, Denigration, Hostile Withdrawal, and Dominance/Intimidation) has occurred within a relationship, instigated by either the participant or their partner. The total MMEA score has a Cronbach alpha of  $\alpha = 0.91$  and is statistically valid as an index of psychological aggression for both clinical and research purposes (Murphy & Hoover, 1999). The following are examples of questions in the MMEA "You/your partner belittled the other person in front of other people" and "You/your partner drove recklessly to frighten the other person".

#### 4. Short dark triad (SD3) (Jones & Paulhus, 2014)

The SD3 is a 27-item measure that uses a 5-point Likert scale to look at the personality traits associated with the DT. It is broken down into three parts each with 9 items which examines Machiavellianism, Narcissism and Psychopathy. The SD3 has demonstrated good reliability, with the subscales showing reliabilities of: Machiavellianism  $\alpha = 0.71$ , Narcissism  $\alpha = 0.74$  and Psychopathy  $\alpha = 0.77$  (Jones & Paulhus, 2014).

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