



## Lifetime offspring and the Dark Triad

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### ABSTRACT

There is a paucity of literature investigating the extent to which human personality predicts lifetime (age-controlled) offspring. The present study contributes to this field in assessing whether the inter-related 'dark' personalities that have been linked to mating success (i.e., narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy: the 'Dark Triad') predict number of children. Analyses from an online sample ( $N = 314$ ) revealed that for men, psychopathy was a negative predictor, and narcissism a positive predictor of lifetime offspring. For women, psychopathy emerged as a negative predictor of lifetime offspring. Results are discussed in respect of the importance of these traits to fitness-related outcomes, including reproduction, and the need to consider sex differences, as these traits may have a different function in men and women.

### 1. Introduction

The Dark Triad is a trio of sub-clinical personality traits, encompassing narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). These traits are moderately intercorrelated, and share a disagreeable, callous, and self-interested core, yet each also has unique defining aspects, correlates, and outcomes. Narcissism is defined by an exaggerated sense of self-importance and need for success in competition with others (Raskin & Terry, 1988). Machiavellianism is characterised by behavioural flexibility and the use of interpersonally manipulative and exploitative tactics (Christie & Geis, 1970). Psychopathy represents a cold, emotionless inter-personal orientation, coupled with a tendency for risk-taking, impulsive behaviour (Hare, Neumann, & Widiger, 2012).

Although historically considered to be maladaptive (e.g., McHoskey et al., 1999), evolutionary psychologists have articulated multiple ways in which the Dark Triad relate to beneficial mating outcomes. All three Dark Triad traits are associated with success in short-term mating (Jonason, Li, Webster, & Schmitt, 2009), which could be achieved via inter- or intra-sexual selection, or sexually-coercive strategies. Indeed, although individuals high in the Dark Triad are considered initially attractive (e.g., Aitken, Lyons, & Jonason, 2013; Jauk et al., 2016), it is well-documented that they also engage in coercive and exploitative mating (Blinkhorn, Lyons, & Almond, 2015; Holtzman & Strube, 2012; Jonason et al., 2009; Jones & Olderbak, 2014; Muñoz, Khan, & Cordwell, 2011). Further, the Dark Triad is also associated with higher degrees of intra-sexual competition for mates (Brewer & Abell, 2015a; Carter, Montanaro, Linney, & Campbell, 2015) and mate poaching

(Jonason, Li, & Buss, 2010). The elevated interest in short-term mating and the use of diverse mating tactics should, theoretically, have a positive impact on reproductive success.

However, relatively little work has addressed the extent to which manipulative attitudes and behaviour translate into increased lifetime offspring. Ample empirical evidence in non-human animals suggests that boldness and aggression, especially in males, has a positive correlation with fitness (e.g., Smith & Blumstein, 2008). In humans, high extraversion (Alvergne, Jokela, & Lummaa, 2010; Jokela, Alvergne, Pollet, & Lummaa, 2011), delinquency (Wei, Loeber, & Stouthamer-Loeber, 2002), and leadership (Jokela & Keltikangas-Järvinen, 2009) have a positive relationship with number of children. This suggests that traits that are associated with status-seeking and risk-taking may correlate with number of lifetime offspring. The Dark Triad is characterised by boldness, aggression (Jones & Paulhus, 2010), and increased search for status and power (Lee et al., 2013), hence these traits may also have an association with increased fitness as measured by the number of offspring.

Much of the research on the Dark Triad has focussed on reproductive success as measured by the number of matings, reflecting that individuals high in these traits prioritise mating over parenting effort (Jonason, Valentine, Li, & Harbeson, 2011). However, to our knowledge, there are few studies investigating the Dark Triad in relation to actual number of offspring produced, something that we intend to address in the present study. One exception is a study by Mededović, Petrović, Želeskov-Đorić, and Savić (2017), who investigated psychopathy and reproductive success in a sample of male prisoners in Serbia. They found that the "lifestyle" (i.e., impulsive, irresponsible) facet of

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psychopathy had a relationship with having fewer offspring, and interpersonal-facet (i.e., manipulation and dishonesty) was associated with an increased number of children. Interestingly, the interpersonal facet has also been suggested to be part of “successful psychopathy”, which could facilitate an evolutionarily adaptive cheater strategy (Lyons, 2015). However, Mededović et al. (2017) also found that another aspect of successful psychopathy (i.e., affective) had a negative correlation with the number of children. Thus, at least in a sample of Serbian prisoners, the associations between psychopathy and the number of offspring is related to different facets of psychopathy in a very specific manner.

Another relevant study looked at outpatients at a personality disorder unit in Spain, and found no association between the number of children and psychopathy-like traits (antagonism, asociality, impulsive sensation seeking; Vall et al., 2016). This study would imply that the impulsivity aspect of psychopathy is not a relevant factor in determining reproductive success. However, the participants for these two studies come from forensic and clinical settings, which may not be generalizable to other populations (e.g., student or community samples). Thus, these confusing findings could be partially due to sample characteristics. It would be beneficial to extend the research to non-incarcerated, non-clinical populations, using all three Dark Triad measurements simultaneously to control for the shared variance between the traits.

With regards to narcissism and Machiavellianism, we are not aware of any studies that have looked at the offspring number of people high in these traits. Narcissism seems to be the most adaptive trait in the Dark Triad constellation, demonstrated by an association with increased self-reported physical and mental health (Jonason, Baughman, Carter, & Parker, 2015), physical attractiveness (Holtzman & Strube, 2010), and higher current and childhood socio-economic status (Jonason, Icho, & Ireland, 2016). Further, using a facial morphing methodology, Marcinkowska, Lyons, and Helle (2016) demonstrated that those women who had a higher number of children had also an increased preference for high narcissistic facial morphs. It is possible that having offspring with narcissistic men is beneficial to women's reproductive success, and supports the idea that narcissism serves an adaptive function for men in relation to mating (e.g., Holtzman & Strube, 2012). Thus, we would expect that narcissism has a positive relationship with offspring number, especially in men. Machiavellianism, in turn, has been associated with a more cautious approach to short-term mating (e.g., Jones & de Roos, 2017). If short-term mating orientation is a reasonable proxy for the number of children produced, we would expect that Machiavellianism has either no association, or has a negative association with the number of children.

In summary, the present study adds to the existing literature by investigating the association between the Dark Triad traits and self-reported number of children in a community sample of heterosexual male and female participants. This study is important in terms of looking at the actual number of children, rather than proxies for reproductive success (e.g., mating interests) that have been used in previous studies. We hope to highlight the possible adaptive functions of the Dark Triad in both sexes, rather than focussing on the traits as “male mating adaptations” (Jonason et al., 2009). On the bases of previous research on short-term mating orientation, we would expect that psychopathy and narcissism are associated with higher number of offspring, and Machiavellianism is either negatively related, or has no association with the number of children.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants, materials, and procedure

Following ethical approval, we recruited 314 heterosexual participants (174 men), primarily from the United Kingdom, United States, and Canada (95%), via advertisement on participant-recruitment

websites and snowball sampling. Participant age ranged from 18 to 69 years ( $M_{AGE} = 35.04$ ;  $SD = 11.18$ ). We asked participants whether they were partnered ( $n = 170$ ), single ( $n = 142$ ), or other ( $n = 2$ ), and their socio-economic status (SES) based on their annual income before tax (grouped into ten categories, varying between 1 = less than £10,000 and 10 = more than £100,000).

Following demographic questions (as above), participants were asked “how many children do you have?”, which was used as an outcome variable in the analyses. Number ranged from 0 to 4 children ( $M = 0.56$ ,  $SD = 0.97$ ). Participants then completed the Short Dark Triad (SD3) inventory (Jones & Paulhus, 2014). The SD3 assesses each of the Dark Triad traits across three nine-item subscales. Participants respond on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*) to statements including “I insist on getting the respect I deserve” (narcissism), “Make sure your plans benefit you, not others” (Machiavellianism), and “People who mess with me always regret it” (psychopathy). Items were averaged to create indices of narcissism (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.80$ ), Machiavellianism ( $\alpha = 0.65$ ), and psychopathy ( $\alpha = 0.83$ ). Participants were subsequently debriefed, and thanked for their time.

### 2.2. Data analysis

Data were first explored with cross-correlational analyses separately for each sex. This was followed by step-wise linear multiple regression analyses, where the number of offspring was entered as the outcome variable. We entered SES, age, and relationship status as predictor variables at Step 1, and the three Dark Triad traits as predictors at Step 2. We decided to add SES, age, and relationship status as control variables in regression analyses, as they each had a significant relationship with number of offspring (SES  $r = 0.19$ ,  $p < .001$ ; age  $r = 0.54$ ,  $p < .001$ ; relationship status  $F(2, 311) = 11.92$ ,  $p < .001$ ; We created dummy variables for the categorical variable of relationship status, where 1 = in a relationship ( $n = 170$ ), and 0 = single or other ( $n = 144$ ).

## 3. Results

Men scored higher for each of the Dark Triad traits, in keeping with existing findings (e.g., Jonason et al., 2009). There was no significant difference for lifetime offspring between the sexes. Descriptive statistics and sex differences are provided in Table 1.

To calculate the relationship between the Dark Triad traits and lifetime offspring, we conducted a series of correlation and regression analyses. Analyses were undertaken separately for men and women. Relationships between the Dark Triad lifetime offspring are presented in Table 2, which shows the Pearson's cross-correlations and standardised regression coefficients (controlling for age, SES, relationship status, and the shared variance between the Dark Triad variables).

The cross-correlations indicate that psychopathy has an inverse association with number of children in both sexes, and narcissism had an association with fewer children in women. The correlation co-efficients

**Table 1**  
Descriptive statistics and sex differences for Dark Triad traits and lifetime offspring.

	M (SD)			t	d
	Overall (N = 314)	Women (n = 140)	Men (n = 174)		
Narcissism	2.67 (0.75)	2.43 (0.75)	2.87 (0.69)	5.32**	0.61
Machiavellianism	3.09 (0.57)	3.00 (0.57)	3.12 (0.57)	2.36*	0.20
Psychopathy	2.38 (0.78)	2.19 (0.94)	2.54 (0.72)	4.08**	0.42
Lifetime offspring	0.56 (0.97)	0.66 (1.00)	0.48 (0.94)	-1.70	0.18

\*  $p < .05$ .

\*\*  $p < .001$ .

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