



The Dark Triad and sexual harassment proclivity[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Recent research concerning sexual harassment has highlighted important individual differences in the tendency to engage in these behaviors. The present studies extend these findings by examining the connections between the Dark Triad of personality traits (i.e., narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism) and sexual harassment proclivity. Study 1 ($N = 642$ Israeli community members) revealed that the Dark Triad traits had unique positive associations with sexual harassment tendencies. Similar results emerged for Study 2 ($N = 1909$ Israeli community members) such that each of the Dark Triad traits had a unique positive association with the proclivity to engage in sexual harassment. In addition, Study 2 revealed differences in the connections that the Dark Triad traits had with perceived likelihood estimates concerning whether targets would be victims or perpetrators of sexual harassment. Discussion focuses on the implications of these results for understanding the links between Dark Triad personality traits and sexual harassment.

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It is unfortunately common for individuals to experience sexual harassment (i.e., unwanted and inappropriate sexual behaviors that range from verbal comments to rape; see McDonald, 2012, for a review). Sexual harassment is prevalent in both employment contexts (e.g. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 1999, United States Merit Systems Protection Board, 1995) and educational settings (e.g., American Association of University Women, 2001). For example, 44% of female and 19% of male federal employees report that they have been sexually harassed at work (United States Merit Systems Protection Board, 1995). The negative consequences of sexual harassment have been clearly documented and include issues such as poor psychological adjustment, physical health problems, low levels of job satisfaction, and low levels of organizational commitment (e.g., Fitzgerald, 1993). The consequences of sexual harassment are not confined to the individual targets of these acts because there are substantial organizational and societal costs as well. For example, it was estimated that sexual harassment cost the United States government more than \$320 million between 1992 and 1994 (United States Merit Systems Protection Board, 1995).

Researchers have attempted to expand our understanding of sexual harassment in recent years by examining the potential causes of this behavior including beliefs (e.g. Key & Ridge, 2011, Pryor, 1987), cognitive mechanisms (e.g., Pryor & Stoller, 1994), and organizational practices (e.g., Fitzgerald, 1993) that may promote sexual harassment. One approach to understanding sexual harassment is to examine personality features that are shared by those who have either engaged in these behaviors in the past or demonstrate a willingness to consider engaging in these behaviors in the future (e.g., Lee, Gizzarone, & Ashton, 2003). For example, individuals who possess low levels of honesty-humility (according to both self-report and peer-report) tend to be more likely to engage in sexual harassment (Lee et al., 2003). This avenue of research is important because it may help identify risk factors that increase the likelihood that individuals will engage in these behaviors which may, in turn, lead to particular intervention strategies. Research concerning the links between personality features and sexual harassment may also have theoretical implications for our understanding of sexual harassment (i.e., what are the psychological processes that contribute to sexual harassment?) as well as shedding new light on the function of the personality features involved (e.g., Lee et al., 2003).

Given the connection between sexual harassment and the willingness to exploit others (e.g., Lee et al., 2003), we focused our investigation on the Dark Triad of personality (i.e., narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism; Paulhus & Williams, 2002). This constellation of personality traits is characterized by a willingness to exploit and manipulate others, callousness, disagreeableness, deceitfulness, egocentrism, lack of honesty-humility, empathy deficits, and a focus on agentic goals (e.g., Jones & Paulhus, 2011). The Dark Triad predicts a

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wide array of behaviors and interpersonal tendencies (see [Furnham, Richards, & Paulhus, 2013](#), for a review). Although the Dark Triad traits are usually viewed as socially undesirable and often linked with poor moral development ([Arvan, 2013](#); [Campbell et al., 2009](#)), counterproductive work behaviors ([O'Boyle, Forsyth, Banks, & McDaniel, 2012](#)) and problematic interpersonal relationships (e.g., [Rauthmann, 2012](#)), it is important to note that these traits may be at least somewhat beneficial in certain areas of life (e.g., short-term mating; [Holtzman & Strube, 2011](#); [Jonason, Li, Webster, & Schmitt, 2009](#)). Previous results suggest the intriguing possibility that the Dark Triad traits may represent specialized psychological adaptations that allow individuals to exploit particular niches within society (e.g., [Jonason, Foster, McCain, & Campbell, 2015](#); [Jonason, Jones, & Lyons, 2013](#)). For example, individuals with high levels of the Dark Triad traits tend to report relatively high numbers of sexual partners and preferences for relationships that require little commitment (e.g., [Jonason, Luévano, & Adams, 2012](#); [Jonason et al., 2009](#)). The Dark Triad traits have also been found to be associated with deceptive and manipulative mating behaviors such as mate poaching and infidelity (e.g., [Jonason & Buss, 2012](#); [Jonason, Li, & Buss, 2010](#)). The unique aspects of narcissism (i.e., malevolent behaviors associated with a grandiose identity), psychopathy (i.e., malevolent behaviors associated with impulsivity), and Machiavellianism (i.e., malevolent behaviors associated with long-term strategies) may increase reproductive fitness within “dark niches” through their links with particular forms of exploitive strategies (e.g., [Jonason & Buss, 2012](#); [Jonason & Kavanagh, 2010](#); [Jonason, Valentine, Li, & Harbeson, 2011](#); [Jonason et al., 2009](#)).

Relatively little is known about the connections between the Dark Triad personality traits and sexual harassment but previous research has established that these traits are connected with aspects of sexual aggression (e.g., [Figueredo, Gladden, Sisco, Patch, & Jones, 2015](#); [Jones & Olderbak, 2014](#)). For example, each of the Dark Triad traits is associated with sexual coaxing ([Jones & Olderbak, 2014](#)). However, only narcissism (e.g., [Bushman, Bonacci, van Dijk, & Baumeister, 2003](#)) and psychopathy (e.g., [Jones & Olderbak, 2014](#)) have been found to be associated with sexual coercion. Taken together, these results suggest that individuals with high levels of narcissism are sometimes willing to resort to sexual coercion when they believe they have been deprived of a “deserved” sexual experience, whereas individuals with high levels of psychopathy are willing to use antisocial tactics (including aggression) to take advantage of perceived sexual opportunities. The connections that narcissism and psychopathy have been found to have with sexual coercion are consistent with the argument that these personality traits may be psychological adaptations that promote the use of behaviors such as sexual aggression.

Research has found important similarities between sexual aggression and sexual harassment which includes considerable overlap in the perpetrators of these acts ([Pryor, 1987](#)). It has also been suggested that both sexual aggression and sexual harassment may have similar antecedents (e.g., [Lee et al., 2003](#)). This suggests that the Dark Triad traits may facilitate exploitive social and sexual strategies that include sexual harassment. For example, sexual harassment may be conceptualized as an opportunistic mating strategy that involves manipulation and exploitation. The similarities between sexual coaxing and sexual harassment suggest that each of the Dark Triad personality traits may be associated with the proclivity to engage in sexual harassment.

Previous research has often suggested that the Dark Triad traits facilitate a “male” mating strategy focused on short-term encounters and exploitation (e.g., [Jonason et al., 2009](#); [Jonason et al., 2010](#)). Similarly, sexual harassment is often considered in terms of male perpetrators and female targets even though research has clearly shown that women also engage in sexual harassment, although less often than do men (e.g., [American Association of University Women, 2001](#)). Given the relative lack of research concerning the factors that may help us understand which women are likely to engage in sexual harassment, we decided to examine the associations that

Dark Triad personality traits have with sexual harassment proclivity in both men and women.

1. Overview and predictions

Our goal for the present studies was to examine the associations that the Dark Triad personality traits had with sexual harassment proclivity for both men and women. We expected narcissism and psychopathy to be associated with sexual harassment proclivity given their established connections to sexual aggression (e.g., [Figueredo et al., 2015](#); [Jones & Olderbak, 2014](#)). Our prediction concerning the link between Machiavellianism and sexual harassment proclivity was less certain because Machiavellianism is often not associated with sexual attitudes and behaviors after controlling for its overlap with narcissism and psychopathy (e.g., [Jonason et al., 2012](#)). However, there are some indications that Machiavellianism may be related to sexual aggression ([McHoskey, 2001](#)) even though it may not explain or predict it ([Champion, 2002](#)). Although we did not have a clear prediction for Machiavellianism, we included it for exploratory purposes and reportorial completeness.

2. Study 1

Study 1 focused on the associations that the Dark Triad traits had with sexual harassment proclivity. Instead of focusing on actual perpetrators of sexual harassment, we measured the proclivity of community members to engage in sexual harassment and correlated this proclivity with the Dark Triad traits. This allowed us to identify connections between the Dark Triad traits and sexual harassment proclivity in a relatively broad sample of Israeli community members.

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Participants and procedure

Our sample consisted of 642 Israeli community members (285 men, 357 women) who responded to personal requests posted by undergraduate research assistants at a university in Israel. These requests were made via social media (e.g., Facebook) and asked for volunteers to take part in a study concerning personality. Participants were adults with an average age of 28.86 years ($SD = 9.45$) and all of the participants had more than 12 years of formal education with the average number of years being 13.02 ($SD = 1.81$). Participants completed measures of the Dark Triad personality features and sexual harassment proclivity via a secure website. All of the questionnaires used in the present study were administered in Hebrew after being translated from the original English versions using the back-translation method.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Narcissism

The current study employed the 40-item version of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; [Raskin & Hall, 1979](#)). The NPI is a well validated measure of narcissistic personality features in the general population ([Paulhus & Williams, 2002](#)). Items on the NPI are presented in a forced-choice format such that participants must choose between a narcissistic and a non-narcissistic statement for each item (e.g., “I really like to be the center of attention” vs. “It makes me uncomfortable to be the center of attention”). The score for the NPI was calculated by the summing the items for which participants selected the narcissistic option. The internal consistency for the NPI was $\alpha = .86$ for the present study.

2.2.2. Psychopathy

Psychopathy was measured via the Self-Report Psychopathy Scale (SRP-III; [Paulhus, Hemphill, & Hare, 2012](#)) which is intended to serve as a measure of psychopathy in the general population. The version of

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