**Dark Triad Traits and Perceived Quality of Alternative Partners**

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Those high on Dark Triad traits (narcissism, Machiavellianism, psychopathy) report poor quality romantic relationships and greater susceptibility to infidelity. The present study investigated the relationship between Dark Triad traits and the perceived quality of alternative partners. Heterosexual women (*N* = 379) aged 17-63 years (*M* = 26.93, *SD* = 10.78) completed the NPI-16, Mach IV, Levenson Self-Report Psychopathy Scale, and Quality of Alternatives Scale. A multiple hierarchical regression revealed that the Dark Triad traits predicted perceived quality of alternatives when controlling for participant age and relationship length. Narcissism and Machiavellianism were the only significant individual predictors, such that women high on narcissism or Machiavellianism were more likely to acknowledge the availability of alternative relationships. Increased awareness of alternative mates may, in part, contribute to previously reported associations between these traits, poor quality relationships, and infidelity.

Keywords: Dark Triad; narcissism; Machiavellianism; psychopathy; quality of alternatives; romantic relationships

**1.0 Introduction**

Dark Triad traits (narcissism, Machiavellianism, psychopathy) are distinct but related personality traits characterised by emotional detachment, a manipulative interpersonal style, and lack of empathy (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Previous research demonstrates that Dark Triad traits influence partner and relationship preference. In particular, those high on Dark Triad traits are less discriminating when selecting partners and display a preference for short-term relationships with low levels of commitment (e.g., Jonason, Luevano, & Adams, 2012). Those high on Dark Triad traits are also more susceptible to infidelity (e.g., Jones & Weiser, 2014) which could, in part, reflect greater acknowledgement of available partners. The present study examines the relationship between Dark Triad traits and the perceived quality of alternative partners. i.e., the extent to which an individual’s needs could be fulfilled by others.

Narcissism is defined by superiority and entitled self-importance (Krizan & Herlache, 2018). For example, those high on narcissism typically believe that they are more desirable than their relationship partner (Campbell, Rudich, & Sedikides, 2002). Narcissism is also associated with attentiveness to alternative partners and infidelity (Brewer, Hunt, James, & Abell, 2015; Campbell & Foster, 2002), suggesting that women high on narcissism will be more likely to acknowledge that their needs could be met by other mates. In part, this may reflect the desire to attract alternative (higher quality) partners in order to enhance their self-esteem and social status.

Machiavellianism is characterised by cynicism, manipulation, and a willingness to exploit others (Christie & Geis, 1970). The trait is associated with low commitment to romantic partners (Jonason & Buss, 2012), increased willingness to engage in infidelity (Brewer & Abell, 2015), and resistance to a partner’s mate guarding behaviour (Abell & Brewer, 2016). Those high on Machiavellianism also view others as a ‘means to an end’ and engage in sexual behaviour in order to achieve a specific goal, such as an increase in resources or social status (Brewer & Abell, 2015). Hence, Machiavellianism should be associated with an increased awareness and evaluation of potential relationship partners.

Psychopathy is associated with callousness, impulsivity, and self-centred behaviour (Hare, 1996). The trait can be further categorised as primary and secondary psychopathy (Levenson, Kiehl, & Fitzpatrick, 1995). Primary psychopathy relates to emotional coldness and self-interested behaviour whereas secondary psychopathy is characterised by impulsive antisocial behaviour. Those high on primary psychopathy are more likely to engage in mate poaching (as both the poacher and individual being poached) and display a preference for low levels of relationship exclusivity (Khan, Brewer, Kim, & Munoz Centifanti, 2017). Research also indicates that secondary psychopathy is associated with intentions to engage in infidelity and negatively related to intimacy (Ali & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2010; Brewer, Hunt, James, & Abell, 2015).

The present study examines the relationships between narcissism, Machiavellianism, (primary and secondary) psychopathy, and the perceived quality of alternative romantic partners. Previous research has often conceptualised Dark Triad traits as facilitating an exploitative male mating strategy, consistent with higher levels of Dark Triad traits in men compared to women and greater male interest in short-term relationships. However, some studies identify no sex differences in Dark Triad trait levels and Dark Triad traits influence women’s behaviour in both short and long-term relationships (Carter, Campbell, & Muncer, 2014). Hence, there is a need for additional female oriented research and we focus our attention on Dark Triad traits and women’s perceptions of alternative partners. We predict that women high on each Dark Triad trait will be more likely to acknowledge the availability of attractive alternative partners.

**2.0 Method**

*2.1 Participants*

Heterosexual women (*N* = 379) aged 17-63 years (*M* = 26.93, *SD* = 10.78) were recruited online via social networking sites (e.g., Facebook) and a British University participation point scheme. The research received University Ethical Committee approval and all participants provided informed consent. All participants were in a romantic relationship of at least two months duration (*M* = 5.83 years, *SD* = 8.25 years) at the time of the study. No other demographic details were taken.

*2.2 Materials and Procedure*

Participants provided demographic information (i.e., age, relationship status) and completed a series of standardised measures online.

The NPI-16 (Ames, Rose, & Anderson, 2006) contains 16 statement pairs, with participants selecting the statement which most closely corresponds to their own feelings. Example statement pairs include “I like to be the centre of attention” (narcissistic response) vs “I prefer to blend in with the crowd” (non-narcissistic response). Narcissistic responses are scored as 1 and non-narcissistic responses are scored as 0.

The Mach IV (Christie & Geis, 1970) is a 20-item measure of Machiavellianism. Participants respond on a 7-point scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree) with 10 items reverse coded. Example items include “Anyone who completely trusts anyone else is asking for trouble”.

The Levenson Self-Report Psychopathy Scale (Levenson, Kiehl, & Fitzpatrick, 1995) is a measure of psychopathy intended for non-institutionalised populations. The scale measures both primary psychopathy (16 items) and secondary psychopathy (10 items). Seven items are reverse coded. Participants respond to each item on a 7-point scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree). 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).

The Quality of Alternatives Scale (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998) includes five facet statements which prompt the participant to consider whether their needs could be met by an alternative relationship. Five subsequent global items are then answered on a 9-point scale (0 = do not agree at all to 8 = agree completely). Example items include “My sexual needs (holding hands, kissing, etc.) could be fulfilled in alternative relationships” (facet item) and “My needs for intimacy, companionship, etc., could easily be fulfilled in an alternative relationship” (global item).

Cronbach’s alphas were acceptable for all measures: narcissism (α = .76); Machiavellianism (α = .76); primary psychopathy (α = .85); secondary psychopathy (α = .75); and quality of alternatives (α = .82).

**3.0 Results**

Pearson’s correlations revealed that (controlling for participant age, relationship length, and other Dark Triad variables) narcissism and Machiavellianism were positively correlated with perceived quality of alternatives. These data are shown in Table 1.

A two-stage multiple hierarchical regression was conducted to determine whether Dark Triad traits predicted perceived quality of alternatives whilst controlling for participant age and relationship length. At stage one, age and relationship length did not contribute significantly to the perceived quality of alternatives model, *F*(4,318) = .66, *p* = .516. Inclusion of the Dark Triad trait variables at stage two explained 10.1% of the quality of alternatives variance, and this change in R2 was significant, *F*(6,314) = 5.85, *p* <.001. Narcissism (*β* = .18, *t* = 3.05, *p* =.002) and Machiavellianism (*β* = .15, *t* = 2.15, *p* = .032) were significant individual predictors, such that those high on narcissism or Machiavellianism were more likely to acknowledge the availability of alternative relationships. Primary and secondary psychopathy did not predict perceived quality of alternative partners.

**4.0 Discussion**

The present study investigated the influence of Dark Triad traits on the perceived quality of alternative partners. Findings indicate that women high on narcissism and Machiavellianism are more likely to acknowledge the availability of high-quality alternative partners. Increased awareness of alternative mates may, in part, contribute to previously reported associations between these traits, low commitment to relationship partners, and infidelity.

Narcissism is characterised by self-importance (Krizan & Herlache, 2018), confidence, and high self-rated attractiveness (Bleske-Rechek, Remiker, & Baker, 2008). Furthermore, women high on narcissism have a lower waist-to-hip ratio and body mass index (e.g., Jonason & Lavertu, 2017). Confidence and (objective and subjective) physical attractiveness may contribute to women’s belief that they are able to attract alternative mates. Future studies should investigate confidence engaging with alternative partners and the speed with which those high on narcissism seek and secure new relationships.

Machiavellianism is characterised by manipulation, cynicism, and a willingness to exploit others (Christie & Geis, 1970). Those high on Machiavellianism adopt a long-term strategic approach and sexual intimacy is motivated by goal attainment (e.g., the desire for social status and resources) rather than a need for affiliation (Abell, & Lyons, 2016; Brewer & Abell, 2015). Increased awareness of alternative partners may, therefore, allow those high on Machiavellianism to identify potential partners that are of sufficient quality (e.g., high social or financial status) for exploitation. Future research should investigate engagement with alternative partners such as the maintenance of ‘back burner’ relationships which may support these long-term strategic goals (Dibble, Drouin, Aune, & Boller, 2015).

Primary and secondary psychopathy did not predict perceived quality of alternatives. This is perhaps surprising given the wealth of previous research which documents the relationship between psychopathy and infidelity (Jones & Weiser, 2014). Findings may reflect the specific nature of the quality of alternatives items. Those high on primary and secondary psychopathy (characterised by callousness and impulsivity respectively), may not relate to the desire to find partners who provide intimacy and companionship or the need for emotional investment and security. Future studies should consider whether psychopathy predicts the perceived availability of short-term sexual partners specifically rather than long-term mates.

*4.1 Limitations and Future Research*

For the present study, women completed a series of standardised self-report measures. Hence, findings are dependent on the honesty and accuracy of participant responses. Future research should incorporate cognitive, physiological, and behavioural measures. For example, subsequent studies may examine Dark Triad traits and women’s visual attention to attractive alternatives or active pursuit (e.g., flirting) of alternative partners (Maner, Rouby, & Gonzaga, 2008). Research involving both members of the relationship dyad to ascertain the partner’s awareness of relationship threats and mate retention behaviour is recommended. Further, the present findings may not generalise to other populations and future research should investigate the relationship between Dark Triad traits and perceived quality of mates in men.

To conclude, we investigated the relationship between Dark Triad traits and perceived quality of alternative partners. Women high on narcissism or Machiavellianism were more likely to acknowledge the availability of alternative relationships and future research should examine cognitive, physiological, and behavioral responses to these potential mates.

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**Table 1: Correlational Analyses for Dark Triad Traits and Perceived Quality of Alternatives**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Narcissism | Machiavellianism | Primary Psychopathy | Secondary Psychopathy | Quality of Alternatives |
| Narcissism |  | .20\*\* | .22\*\* | .01 | .17\* |
| Machiavellianism |  |  | .29\*\* | .40\*\* | .12\* |
| Primary Psychopathy |  |  |  | .13\* | .02 |
| Secondary Psychopathy |  |  |  |  | .06 |
| Quality of Alternatives |  |  |  |  |  |

\**p* < .05 \*\**p* < .001

All correlations controlling for age, relationship status, and other Dark Triad variables