**“But it wasn’t really cheating”: Dark Triad traits and perceptions of infidelity**

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**Abstract**

Infidelity constitutes a threat to those in exclusive romantic relationships and may lead to relationship dissolution. There is, however, substantial variation with regards to the acts that are or are not considered to be infidelity. In the present study, we investigate the relationship between Dark Triad traits and the acts perceived to constitute infidelity. Five categories of infidelity are considered; online infidelity, fantasized infidelity, emotional infidelity, sexual infidelity, and hidden attachment. Dark Triad traits (Machiavellianism and primary psychopathy) predicted the extent to which specific acts were perceived to constitute infidelity when controlling for demographic factors and personal experience of infidelity. In particular, those high on Machiavellianism were less likely to perceive fantasizing and expressed emotion as infidelity. Those high on primary psychopathy were more likely to perceive fantasizing and emotional expression as infidelity and less likely to consider sexual acts or hidden attachment as indicators of infidelity.

Keywords: Dark Triad; infidelity; Machiavellianism; narcissism; psychopathy; romantic relationships

**1.0 Introduction**

Infidelity poses a substantial threat to those in committed, exclusive romantic relationships (Mark et al. 2011), reflecting both the proportion of people that engage in infidelity (McAnulty & Brineman, 2007) and the potential consequences of infidelity such as relationship conflict and dissolution (Negash et al. 2014). Though societal disapproval of infidelity is widespread, there is some variation in the specific acts perceived to constitute infidelity. For example, sexual intercourse is generally believed to constitute infidelity though perceptions of sending affectionate texts or emails are more varied (Thompson & O’Sullivan, 2016). The extent to which specific acts are perceived to constitute infidelity may impact on both willingness to engage in these behaviours and responses to a partner’s behaviour. The present study investigates the potential relationship between Dark Triad traits and the acts perceived to constitute infidelity.

Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy are interrelated but distinct personality traits, collectively termed the Dark Triad (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Each Dark Triad trait shares a ‘common core’ of self-centredness and a lack of empathy. Machiavellianism is associated with manipulativeness and a willingness to exploit others (Christie & Geis, 1970), narcissism is characterised by a sense of entitlement and superiority (Emmons, 1984), and psychopathy is associated with impulsiveness and callousness (Hare, 1996). Psychopathy may be further differentiated between primary (callousness) and secondary (risk-taking and impulsivity) psychopathy (Levenson et al. 1995). A substantial body of research has investigated Dark Triad traits in the context of sexual and romantic relationships, establishing a preference for short-term relationships with low levels of commitment in those high on Dark Triad traits (e.g., Jonason et al. 2012; Jonason et al. 2009).

Perhaps unsurprisingly given the preference for less committed relationships, previous research (e.g., Brewer et al. 2015; Jones & Weiser, 2014; Sevi et al. 2020) indicates that those high on Dark Triad traits are more likely to engage in infidelity, with narcissism and psychopathy of particular influence. The relationship between Dark Triad traits and infidelity may reflect a number of factors. For example, Dark Triad traits are associated with greater sexual interest and motivation (Pilch & Smolorz, 2019); greater risk taking and willingness to be caught (Adams et al. 2014), and weaker attachment and a lack of empathy for primary relationship partners (Wai & Tiliopoulos, 2012). Dark Triad traits may also influence sexual attitudes and behaviour (Koladich & Atkinson, 2016). It is, therefore, possible that Dark Triad traits influence perceptions of what constitutes infidelity, and that these perceptions contribute to greater infidelity amongst those high on Dark Triad traits. In the present study, we predict that those high on the Dark Triad traits would have more permissive sexual attitudes and hence be less likely to conceptualize specific acts as infidelity.

It is important to acknowledge that demographic factors (Oberle et al. 2017; Schonian, 2013; Wilson et al. 2011) and personal experience of infidelity (Moreno & Kahumoku-Fessler, 2018) may also influence perceptions of what constitutes infidelity. Therefore, the present study investigates the relationship between Dark Triad traits and the acts perceived to constitute infidelity whilst controlling for demographic factors and personal experience of infidelity. Further, research has typically recruited heterosexual participants only (e.g., Rodrigues et al. 2017) or recruited gay men and lesbian women without considering the experiences of bisexual men and women (Leeker & Carlozzi, 2014). Hence, we sought to encourage recruitment of a more diverse sample.

**2.0 Method**

***2.1 Participants***

Men (*n* =228), women (*n* = 436), and those identifying as another gender (*n* = 12) were recruited online via social networks and a British University participation point scheme. Participants were aged 18 to 73 years (*M* = 29.62, *SD* = 10) and typically self-identified as heterosexual (71.7%) or bisexual (21.9%). Relatively few participants self-identified as gay, lesbian (3.3%) or another sexual orientation (3.1%). As relatively few gay men (*n* = 9), bisexual men (*n* = 25), and lesbian women (*n* = 12) were recruited, subsequent analyses focus on heterosexual men (*n* = 187), bisexual women (*n* = 113) and heterosexual women (*n* = 298). This sample was aged 18 - 73 (*M* = 30.30, *SD* = 10.21). When asked about their personal experience (past or present) with infidelity, 22.7% of the participants disclosed that both they and their partner had been unfaithful, 18.7% that only they had been unfaithful, 29.1% that only their partner had been unfaithful, and 29.4% revealed that neither they nor their partner had been unfaithful.

***2.2 Materials and Procedure***

Participants completed a series of demographic questions (e.g., age, sexual orientation) followed by a series of standardized measures. The Mach IV (Christie & Geis, 1970) is a 20-item measure of Machiavellianism. Participants indicate their agreement with each statement (10 reverse coded) on a five-point scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) such that higher scores indicate higher Machiavellianism. Example items include “*Anyone who completely trusts anyone else is asking for trouble*”.

The NPI-16 (Ames et al. 2006) is a narcissism measure consisting of 16 statement pairs (one narcissistic and one non-narcissistic). Participants select the statement which most closely corresponds to their experience, with narcissistic statements coded as 1 and non-narcissistic statements coded as 0. Example statement pairs include “*I like to be the centre of attention*” (narcissistic response) and “*I prefer to blend in with the crowd*” (non-narcissistic response).

The Levenson Self-Report Psychopathy Scale (Levenson et al. 1995) contains 26 statements (16 assessing primary psychopathy and 10 assessing secondary psychopathy). Participants respond to each statement (7 reverse coded) on a 4-point scale (1 = strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree) such that higher scores indicate higher psychopathy. Example statements 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). In the present study, Cronbachs alphas were Machiavellianism = .78, Narcissism = .70, Primary Psychopathy = .78, and Secondary Psychopathy = .74.

To assess perceptions of infidelity, fifteen items were selected from the Perceived Infidelity Questionnaire (Thornton & Nagurney, 2011) and six items were taken from the Online subscale of the Knight (2010) Infidelity Scale. Some items were amended where appropriate, for example items relating to a sexual conversation and sexting were combined into one item. Example items from the Perceived Infidelity Questionnaire (Thornton & Nagurney, 2011) include “*Having an intimate emotional phone conversation with someone other than your partner*”. Example items from the Knight (2010) Infidelity Scale (Online subscale) include “*Masturbating while in computer contact with someone other than your partner*”. Items on both infidelity measures were answered on a 4-point scale (1 = definitely NOT infidelity to 4 = definitely infidelity) such that higher scores indicate a greater willingness to identify behaviour as infidelity. Instructions focused on infidelity in general rather than assessing own or a partner’s infidelity (i.e., “Please select the response that indicates whether you believe each of the following acts constitutes infidelity”). Further information on item selection available from the authors on request.

**3.0 Results**

Inspection of mean responses identified three heterosexual women who had provided the same response (“definitely NOT infidelity”) to all infidelity questions. Their mean perceived infidelity score was highly unusual (*SD* = -3.98). They were therefore removed from all subsequent analyses reducing the heterosexual female sample to *n* = 295. By their nature, score distribution in most questions was either positively or negatively skewed (see also Wilson et al. 2011 for similar results). Logarithmic (Log10) transformation reduced or eliminated skewness but did not have a significant impact on subsequent analyses and therefore the original data were used.

A principal components analysis with Oblimin rotation (as the factors were not assumed to be independent) was conducted on the perceived infidelity scores. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin value was .85 and Bartlett’s test of sphericity was significant at *p* < .001. Only factors with eigenvalues >1 were retained. All individual items had factor loadings greater than .45. The analysis revealed five factors (see supplementary materials) which explained 63.68% of the variance.

The first factor, *online infidelity*, explained 29.80% of the variance, and includes items relating to online interactions, some of which were overtly sexual (e.g., “*Masturbating while in online contact with another person*”) whereas others are unspecified in terms of intentions and content (e.g., “*Receiving pictures from an online contact*”). The second factor, *fantasized infidelity*, accounted for 14.41% of the variance and refers to mainly solitary, sexually driven behaviours which involve fantasizing about other people (e.g., “*Watching pornographic movies*”). The third factor, *emotional infidelity*, (8.19% of the variance), refers to an expressed emotional attachment to a third person which may not necessarily involve a romantic element (e.g., “*Having an intimate emotional bond with someone other than your partner*”). Factor four, sexual infidelity, (6.10% of the variance), includes interactive and explicit sexual behaviours such as engaging in intercourse and oral sex. The fifth and final factor, *Hidden attachment*, explains 5.19% of the variance,acknowledges feelings of attraction to people other than one’s partner, which, however, remain unexpressed and unfulfilled (e.g., *“Being in a committed monogamous relationship while hiding an emotional attachment*”).

Cronbach’s alphas were acceptable for each factor (Online infidelity (six items) = .84; Fantasized infidelity (five items) = .78; Emotional Infidelity (3 items) = .78; Sexual infidelity (4 items) = .79; Hidden attachment (3 items) = .66) In order to examine the variables that influence perceptions of infidelity, five composite scores were created (one for each factor) representing the means of the items included in each factor. Mean factor composite scores as a function of group (heterosexual men; heterosexual women; bisexual women) and personal experience with infidelity are shown in Table 1. Sexual activities were perceived by most of the participants as infidelity, followed by online activities. Hidden feelings towards another person were next, followed by a strong emotional attachment to a third person. Fantasizing about other people was least likely to be perceived as infidelity.

A series of hierarchical linear regression analyses were performed using each of the five infidelity scores as criterion variables. The demographic and personal experience of infidelity variables identified as significantly correlated with the infidelity type analysed (see supplementary materials) were entered first in Block 1. The Dark Triad traits were entered in Block 2. Multicollinearity statistics were within the accepted range (tolerance > .4; VIF < 2.5). Table 2 displays the full results of the multiple regressions, with a summary of significant findings presented below.

*Online infidelity*: Model 1 was significant (*R*2 = .11, *F*(5, 589) = 15.11, *p* < .001). Model 2 improved prediction (*R*2 change =.02, *F*(9, 585) = 9.76, *p* < .001). Gender, sexual orientation, and personal experience with infidelity emerged as significant individual predictors. Heterosexual women, and those whose partner had been unfaithful were more likely to rate these behaviours as infidelity. None of the Dark Triad traits were individual predictors of perceptions of online infidelity.

*Fantasized infidelity*: Model 1 was significant (*R*2 = .06, *F*(4, 590) = 9.96, *p* < .001). Model 2 improved prediction (*R*2 change = .02, *F*(6, 584) = 6.68, *p* < .001). Age was a significant predictor with younger participants more likely to perceive these acts as infidelity. Participants who have themselves been unfaithful but not their partner were less likely to perceive such behaviours as infidelity compared to participants whose partner had been unfaithful. Those scoring high on Machiavellianism less likely to perceive fantasized behaviour as infidelity whereas those high on primary psychopathy were more likely to perceive such behaviour as infidelity.

*Emotional infidelity*: Model 1 was significant (*R*2 = .08, *F*(4, 590) = 13.29, *p* < .001). Model 2 improved prediction (*R*2 change = .02, *F*(8, 586) = 7.67, *p* < .001). Age, sexual orientation, and personal experience with infidelity were all significant individual predictors. Older participants, heterosexual women, and those who only their partner had been unfaithful were more likely to perceive these acts as infidelity. Similar to fantasized infidelity, higher Machiavellianism scores were associated with lower infidelity ratings whereas higher primary psychopathy scores were linked to higher ratings.

*Sexual infidelity*: Model 1 was significant (*R*2 = .06, *F*(3, 591) = 13.58, *p* < .001). Model 2 improved prediction (*R*2 change = .02, *F*(7, 587) = 7.46, *p* < .001). Age and personal experience with infidelity were significant predictors, with younger adults and people whose partner had been unfaithful were more likely to perceive sexual acts as infidelity. Primary psychopathy was the only Dark Triad trait that emerged as a significant predictor with those higher on the psychopathy scale considering direct sexual behaviours with a secondary partner less likely to constitute infidelity.

*Hidden attachment*: Model 1 was significant (*R*2 = .09, *F*(4, 590) = 13.86, *p* < .001). Model 2 improved prediction (*R*2 change = .01, *F*(8, 586) = 8.33, *p* < .001). Gender and personal experience with infidelity were both significant predictors, with women and people whose partner had been unfaithful more likely to regard these acts as infidelity. Those high on primary psychopathy were less likely to perceive these as indicators of infidelity.

**4.0 Discussion**

The present study identified five types of infidelity; online infidelity, fantasized infidelity, emotional infidelity, sexual infidelity, and hidden attachment. Dark Triad traits (Machiavellianism and primary psychopathy) predicted the extent to which specific acts were perceived to constitute infidelity when controlling for demographic factors and personal experience of infidelity.

Those high on Machiavellianism were less likely to perceive fantasizing as infidelity. Machiavellianism is characterised by a strategic, long-term approach to personal relationships often involving manipulation and exploitation (Christie & Geis, 1970) and those high on Machiavellianism may be less unconcerned if (fantasized) acts do not interfere with their strategic objectives (e.g., to obtain control or status). Those high on Machiavellianism were also less likely to perceive expressed emotion as infidelity. Machiavellianism is associated with attachment avoidance (Brewer, et al. 2018) characterised by a preference for emotional and psychological independence and discomfort with intimacy (Brennan et al. 1998; Hazan & Shaver, 1994). Hence, those whose partner have formed an emotional attachment to others may feel less pressured to display emotional closeness and intimacy themselves and be less distress by such behaviour.

Those high on primary psychopathy were more likely to perceive fantasizing and emotional expression as infidelity. Primary psychopathy is associated with greater emotional jealousy (Massar et al. 2017). Therefore, the association between primary psychopathy and perceiving fantasy and emotional expression as infidelity may, in part, reflect a greater overall sensitivity to infidelity. Further, primary psychopathy is characterised by lower empathy and perspective taking (Ali & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2010; Wai & Tiliopoulos, 2012). As a consequence, it may be difficult for those high on psychopathy to understand their partner’s motivation for sexual fantasy (e.g., sexual release) or emotional relationships with others (e.g., companionship) and separate this from other behaviour that more directly poses a threat to the primary relationship.

Those high on primary psychopathy were less likely to consider sexual acts or hidden attachment as indicators of infidelity. This may reflect the greater tendency for those high on primary psychopathy to engage in sexual infidelity (Egan & Angus, 2004) and facilitate justification of their extra-pair sexual behaviour as not constituting infidelity (Warach et al. 2018). Further, primary psychopathy is associated with the use of self-serving sexual deception (Brewer et al. 2019) and deception typically associated with sexual infidelity or hidden attachment may, therefore, be more acceptable or desirable to those high on primary psychopathy.

*Limitations and Future Research*

The present study utilised self-reported questionnaires, presenting participants with a range of acts that they may or may not perceive as infidelity. This approach allowed the researchers to include a broader range of experiences than participants may have directly experienced. It is important to acknowledge that participants were asked to rate the extent to which specific acts constitute infidelity, without reference to the person engaging in such acts. Indeed, previous research (both general and Dark Triad specific) has often prompted participants to rate the ‘acceptability’ of behaviour without reference to a specific protagonist (e.g., Collisson, Howell, & Harig, 2020; Jonason et al. 2021; Orhan & Collisson, 2022). People may, however, differentiate between the acceptability of behaviour they conduct and the same acts performed by another person. Future research may consider perceptions of acts performed by both the self and others as research indicates an in-group bias such that socially unacceptable behaviour such as deception is perceived as more acceptable when performed by members of the in-group (e.g., Galak & Critcher, 2022). Further, people judge themselves less harshly when engaging in infidelity than they judge others (Warach, Josephs, & Gorman, 2019).

The present study acknowledges the importance of personal experiences of infidelity. Future research should also consider characteristics of the relationship (e.g., commitment and personal experience of infidelity) in relation to what constitutes infidelity and responses to infidelity. For example, relationship commitment and relationship quality are associated with more stringent perceptions of infidelity (Mattingly et al. 2010; Rodrigues et al. 2017; Silva et al. 2017). Researchers may include responses to these acts such as mate retention or mate guarding (Caton & Horan, 2019), partner interrogations (Kuhle, 2011), or revenge (Brewer et al. 2015). Future studies may also access information from both relationship partners, especially as research indicates that Dark Triad traits influence the cognitions and behaviour of both the individual and their partner (Kardum et al. 2019) and there is evidence for assortative mating in relation to Dark Triad traits (Smith et al. 2014).

To conclude, when investigating infidelity, it is important to separate perceptions of what infidelity is, willingness to engage in infidelity, and actual experience of infidelity. In the present study, we considered the extent to which Dark Triad traits are associated with perceptions of five categories of infidelity (online infidelity, fantasized infidelity, emotional infidelity, sexual infidelity, and hidden attachment). Those high on Machiavellianism were less likely to perceive fantasizing and expressed emotion as infidelity whereas those high on primary psychopathy were more likely to perceive fantasizing and emotional expression as infidelity and less likely to consider sexual acts or hidden attachment as indicators of infidelity. In contrast, narcissism and secondary psychopathy did not influence perceptions of infidelity. Future studies should expand these findings to consider perceptions of acts performed by both the self and others.

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