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## Differential infidelity patterns among the Dark Triad

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### ABSTRACT

The Dark Triad traits (Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and narcissism) are overlapping but distinctive. Although all three traits have been independently linked to relationship infidelity, differences among the traits may exist when examined simultaneously. Moreover, consequences resulting from infidelity have not been explored. A large retrospective survey found that all three traits correlated with reporting an infidelity at some point in a current (or most recent) relationship. Among women, however, only psychopathy and Machiavellianism were unique predictors of infidelity, whereas only psychopathy uniquely predicted infidelity among men. However, infidelity committed by psychopathic individuals led to relationship dissolution, whereas infidelity committed by Machiavellian individuals did not. These findings suggest mindset and long-term goals impact situations to create differences in Dark Triad destructive relationship behaviors.

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### 1. Introduction

The Dark Triad consists of three overlapping but empirically and conceptually distinguishable personality traits (psychopathy, Machiavellianism, and narcissism), which are prone to engage in malevolent behavior (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Note that all three variables are investigated presently in their subclinical form, as found in non-institutionalized samples (LeBreton, Binning, & Adorno, 2005). In such samples, the Dark Triad variables are normally distributed (Williams, Paulhus, & Hare, 2007). Conceptually, the Dark Triad traits share the same location in interpersonal space, which is high agency and low communion (Jones & Paulhus, 2011a). In addition, all Dark Triad traits are callous and manipulative (Jones & Figueredo, *in press*). Importantly, Jones and Figueredo (*in press*) also found that once callous-manipulation was extracted from the core of the Dark Triad traits, they were almost completely unrelated.

The common core of the Dark Triad has been linked to short-term sexual relationships (Jonason & Buss, 2012; Jonason, Li, Webster, & Schmitt, 2009). For example, callous personality traits (e.g., disagreeableness, psychoticism) are associated with high rates of sexual activity and infidelity (Eysenck, 1976; Schmitt, 2004a). Callousness is related to short-term sexual encounters because individuals are unconcerned with hurting others or forming long-term bonds (Jonason, Lyons, Bethell, & Ross, 2013). In addition, manipulative behaviors and dishonesty also seem to facilitate

short-term sexual approaches through mechanisms such as insincere commitment, feigned mate value, and other forms of sexual deception (Jonason & Buss, 2012; Seto, Khattar, Lalumiere, & Quinsey, 1997; Tooke & Camire, 1991). Many individuals (particularly women) tend to be attracted to individuals with high levels of dominance and traces of antisocial tendencies (Holtzman & Strube, 2013; Holtzman & Strube, 2010).

Despite their common manipulation and callousness, the Dark Triad traits are unique (Furnham, Richards, & Paulhus, 2013). For example, Machiavellians are long-term oriented (Jones & Paulhus, 2009), developmentally sensitive to contextual cues (Vernon, Villani, Vickers, & Harris, 2008), difficult to provoke into aggression (Jones & Paulhus, 2010), have intact executive functioning (Jones, *in press*) and are instrumental in misbehavior (Kerig & Stellwagen, 2010). Additionally, Machiavellians will only steal when there is little chance of getting caught (Cooper & Peterson, 1980), cheat in strategic ways (Williams, Nathanson, & Paulhus, 2010), and exert effort to resist cheating when short-term goals undermine long-term investments (Jones, *in press*). These distinguishing features of Machiavellianism should also be evident in how they approach relationships. Machiavellian individuals are prone to infidelity (McHoskey, 2001), but should use caution in how they execute affairs. In sum, Machiavellian individuals will manage partners and interlopers in a way that is maximally advantageous to their selfish goals.

By contrast, those high in psychopathy are highly aggressive (Reidy, Zeichner, & Martinez, 2008), steal even when the payoff is small and risk is large (Hare, 1999), and cheat in impulsive ways (Jones, 2013; Williams et al., 2010). As a result, psychopathic individuals will be indiscriminately unfaithful, undermining

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self-interests. Like psychopathy, those high in narcissism are easy to provoke into aggression, but only when the provocation constitutes an ego-threat (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Jones & Paulhus, 2010). Those high in narcissism are also irrational when it comes to their self-image (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001), often engaging in self-destructive behavior (Vazire & Funder, 2006).

## 2. Infidelity

In spite of its destructive impact on both partners and the relationship between them, infidelity remains commonplace. Although often symptomatic of a larger relationship problem (Weeks, Gambescia, & Jenkins, 2003), the persistence of sexual infidelity also may implicate a deeper reproductive drive (Simpson & Belsky, 2008). Specifically, some individuals seem to be predisposed to infidelity regardless of their relationship satisfaction (Weeks et al., 2003). Schmitt (2004b) found that personality correlates of infidelity include callousness, antisocial dispositions, and a lack of empathy. Given their callous-manipulative tendencies, it is not surprising that the Dark Triad traits have each been correlated with committing infidelity, or at least the intention to do so (Buss & Shackelford, 1997; Harris, Rice, Hilton, Lalumiere, & Quinsey, 2007; McHoskey, 2001).

In addition to the common core, psychopathic impulsivity (Newman, 1987) most likely contributes to infidelity, as would narcissistic entitlement (Emmons, 1987). In addition, narcissism is associated with relationship dissatisfaction (Campbell & Foster, 2002) which is predictive of infidelity as well (Weeks et al., 2003). Partners of narcissistic individuals never live up to expectations (Foster, Shrira, & Campbell, 2006), leading narcissistic individuals to seek alternatives (Campbell & Foster, 2002). Furthermore, individuals high in narcissism tend to be impulsive in an overconfident way (Jones & Paulhus, 2011b) and self-destructive (Vazire & Funder, 2006), just like those high in psychopathy (Cleckley, 1976; Hare, 1999). As a result, both traits are likely correlated with extradyadic behavior.

Many individuals engaging in infidelity fully intend to maintain their primary relationships simultaneously. Evolutionary psychologists argue that this form of infidelity is often linked to a hedge-betting strategy, the goal of which is to provide a diversified genetic profile of one's offspring (Belsky, Steinberg, & Draper, 1991). Individuals trying to maintain a primary relationship yet also have sexual or romantic affairs must be strategic. If maintaining the primary relationship is important to the unfaithful partner, then indiscriminate pursuits of risky affairs is an unlikely strategy. Instead, such individuals would opt for a strategy of secrecy and selectivity of a few calculated partners.

Secrecy and forethought are characteristics that are consistent with the Machiavellian disposition. Because of their strategic planning, individuals high in Machiavellianism have the impulse control (Jones & Paulhus, 2011b) and calculating nature (Williams et al., 2010) necessary to deceive while reducing the likelihood of consequences. In other words, Machiavellian individuals should be most likely to be able to commit infidelity yet do so in a manner without undermining a primary relationship.

In addition, Machiavellian individuals take situational issues into account when engaging in misbehavior (Cooper & Peterson, 1980). If Machiavellian individuals do commit infidelity, it is likely to be for strategic reasons not impulsive ones (Jones & Paulhus, 2011b). For example, among women, one reason may be the cultivation of good genes from an interloping man and good resources from the primary investing partner (i.e., "gene capturing," Blobel, 1985). However, Machiavellian individuals are not impulsive, and are unlikely to engage in infidelity when consequences are likely or when future consequences are salient.

## 3. Theoretical summary

Given that all three traits of the Dark Triad are high in callousness and manipulative tendencies, it is likely that each type of individual will engage in infidelity. From a theoretical perspective, if narcissistic individuals are controlled by egotistical needs, Machiavellian individuals by long-term agendas, and psychopathic individuals by impulsive thrill-seeking, then each should engage in infidelity for different reasons. Most importantly, Machiavellian individuals should be flexible in their pursuit of infidelity. Machiavellian individuals think in the long-term and are unlikely to do things that would undermine their long-term goals (Jones & Paulhus, 2009). As a result, Machiavellian strategies are likely to fluctuate with situational constraints.

## 4. Method

### 4.1. Participants

A sample of 884 individuals were recruited from MTurk's website (457 men; 427 women; 60% Caucasian, 19% East Asian, 10% South Asian, 11% mixed ethnicities) for a study on "sexual behavior". No restrictions were included and the study was open to all MTurk workers. MTurk is a reliable data source that allows for greater diversity compared to student samples (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011; Paolacci, Chandler, & Ipeirotis, 2010). The sample ranged in age from 18 to 74 ( $M$  age = 30.53,  $SD$  = 9.38) and 72% reported currently being in a romantic relationship.

### 4.2. Measures

All questions were presented online in an anonymous format. All scales utilized a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *Strongly Disagree* to 5 = *Strongly Agree*) unless otherwise noted. All appropriate items were reverse scored prior to being averaged into a composite.

#### 4.2.1. Psychopathy

Psychopathy was assessed using the Self-Report Psychopathy Scale (SRP; Paulhus, Neumann, & Hare, in press). The 64-item SRP measures the four main facets of psychopathy, which are interpersonal manipulation (Cronbach's  $\alpha$  = .87), callous affect ( $\alpha$  = .77), erratic lifestyle ( $\alpha$  = .80), and antisocial behavior ( $\alpha$  = .81). SRP was also internally consistent as a composite ( $\alpha$  = .93), and positively correlated with Machiavellianism ( $r$  = .57,  $p$  < .001) and narcissism ( $r$  = .48,  $p$  < .001).

#### 4.2.2. Machiavellianism

Machiavellianism was assessed through the Mach-IV (Christie & Geis, 1970). The Mach-IV is a 20-item Likert style questionnaire. The Mach-IV was internally consistent ( $\alpha$  = .79), and positively correlated with narcissism ( $r$  = .32,  $p$  < .001).

#### 4.2.3. Narcissism

Narcissism was assessed using the 16-item Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI-16; Ames, Rose, & Anderson, 2006). The NPI-16 questionnaire uses a forced choice format (2 = narcissistic option, 1 = non-narcissistic option), which was internally consistent ( $\alpha$  = .74).

#### 4.2.4. Infidelity

Participants were asked two questions with respect to infidelity: "Have you ever been unfaithful to your current (or most recent) partner?" and "Did the infidelity cause the end of the relationship?" Responses were scored "2" if they reported having committed an

infidelity and “1” if they had not. Among participants who had committed an infidelity, relationship dissolution responses were scored “2” if infidelity had not caused the relationship to end and “1” if it had. Overall, 22.0% of participants reported they had committed infidelity, and among those individuals, 21.8% indicated their relationship ended as a result of infidelity whereas 78.2% reported that the infidelity did not cause their breakup.

## 5. Results

See Table 1 for descriptive statistics and gender comparisons for Dark Triad variables. Overall, the infidelity rates of men (24%) and women (20%) did not differ significantly, ( $\chi^2(839) = 2.17, p = .14$ ). These rates are slightly lower than previously reported lifetime statistics (Buss, 2000), however, in the present study, the time-range of infidelity was restricted to current or most recent partner.

All three traits significantly correlated with having committed an infidelity in a present (or most recent) relationship. In addition, all four facets of the SRP scale significantly correlated with having committed an infidelity (Interpersonal Manipulation = .18; Callous Affect = .12; Erratic Lifestyle = .19; Antisocial Behavior = .18, all  $p \leq .001$ ). Moreover, these overall patterns did not change with gender.

A binary logistic regression with the Dark Triad variables as predictors was conducted on the full sample (see Table 2 for all statistics including zero-order correlations). Psychopathy emerged as the only unique predictor of having committed infidelity. To explore possible gender differences, three regressions were run examining an interaction between gender and each Dark Triad trait. The results indicated that the gender  $\times$  narcissism interaction was significant ( $B = 0.38, SE = 0.29, Wald = 4.51, Exp(B) = 1.46, p = .034$ ). Thus, the sample was split by gender and regressions were re-run to further explore the role of gender.

Among men, psychopathy was the strongest correlate of infidelity, although Machiavellianism and narcissism had small but significant correlations as well. Among women, however, psychopathy and Machiavellianism were correlated equally with having committed infidelity, and narcissism had no relationship. Binary logistic regressions revealed that for men, only psychopathy was uniquely associated with infidelity (see Table 2), narcissism and Machiavellianism were unrelated. For women, however, both psychopathy and Machiavellianism were significant and independent predictors of infidelity, and narcissism was *negatively* related to committing an infidelity. This result is not surprising, given the non-significant bivariate relationship between narcissism and infidelity among women, coupled with the high correlation between narcissism and psychopathy.

### 5.1. Predicting dissolution

In order to predict who experienced relationship dissolution, we first isolated the sample of participants who had committed an infidelity. Zero-order correlations were run and relationship dissolution was associated with psychopathy ( $r = -.33, p = .003$ ) but not narcissism ( $r = .13, p = .238$ ) or Machiavellianism ( $r = -.01,$

**Table 1**  
Descriptive statistics for key variables in men and women.

Variable	Total Sample Mean (SD)	Men Mean (SD)	Women		
			Mean (SD)	t-test	d
Psychopathy	2.85 (0.45)	2.63 (0.43)	2.29 (0.44)	11.35*	0.78
Narcissism	1.33 (0.21)	1.38 (0.21)	1.29 (0.20)	6.15*	0.44
Machiavellianism	2.47 (0.46)	2.91 (0.43)	2.79 (0.47)	4.11*	0.27

\*  $p < .05$ .

**Table 2**

Binary logistic regressions in predicting infidelity in current (or most recent) relationship.

	r	B	SE	Wald	Exp(B)	p
<i>Total sample (n = 884)</i>						
Psychopathy	.21*	0.49	.11	19.10	0.62	<.001
Narcissism	.07*	-0.10	.10	1.13	1.11	.288
Machiavellianism	.16*	0.17	.10	2.69	0.84	.101
<i>Men only (n = 457)</i>						
Psychopathy	.21*	0.50	.16	10.24	0.61	.001
Narcissism	.12*	0.09	.13	0.51	0.91	.476
Machiavellianism	.12*	0.05	.14	0.14	0.95	.712
<i>Women only (n = 427)</i>						
Psychopathy	.19*	0.49	.18	7.41	0.62	.006
Narcissism	.00	-0.36	.15	5.50	1.44	.019
Machiavellianism	.19*	0.33	.16	4.61	0.72	.032

\*  $p < .05$ .

$p = .920$ ). Utilizing logistic regression, results indicated that psychopathy was a significant predictor of relationship dissolution following an infidelity ( $B = -0.57, SE = .27, Wald = 4.46, OR = .57, p = .035$ ). Relationship dissolution was unrelated to narcissism ( $B = -0.24, SE = .24, Wald = 0.96, OR = .79, p = .328$ ) and Machiavellianism ( $B = 0.43, SE = .30, Wald = 2.12, OR = 1.54, p = .146$ ). Next, we conducted a series of binary logistic regressions with the Dark Triad traits, gender, and the Dark Triad  $\times$  gender interactions. This time, no interactions were significant; therefore gender differences were not explored further. On a final note, multicollinearity was assessed for all preceding regression analyses and was not found to be an issue as VIF values ranged from 1.06 to 1.79.

## 6. Discussion

Consistent with expectations, each of the Dark Triad traits was positively associated with having committed infidelity in a present (or most recent) romantic relationship. Previous studies found that all three Dark Triad variables are associated with infidelity in some way (Buss & Shackelford, 1997; Harris et al., 2007; McHoskey, 2001). However, no previous research, has studied associations among the Dark Triad traits and infidelity simultaneously. Previous research also had not examined how each trait may relate to relationship consequences following an infidelity.

Across the Dark Triad traits, these associations are different for men and women. Among men, psychopathy had a moderate sized correlation with infidelity, whereas Machiavellianism and narcissism had small (but still significant) correlations with infidelity. In contrast, among women, psychopathy and Machiavellianism were equal and moderate correlates of infidelity, whereas narcissism had no relationship with having committed infidelity (in a bivariate relationship).

One explanation for the strong relationship between psychopathy and infidelity (in both men and women) has to do with the fact that psychopathy is a reproductive strategy in its own right (Mealey, 1995). Psychopathic individuals may pursue sex irrespective of consequences, relationship context, or outcome. Thus, psychopathy is a strategy that closely aligns with a fast life history strategy and benefits men in gene dissemination (Jonason, Koenig, & Tost, 2010). It is possible that the impulsive, antisocial, and callous-manipulative nature of psychopathy predisposes such individuals to commit infidelity. In the current study, psychopathy is also linked with relationship dissolution following infidelity indicating that these individuals may engage in particularly destructive forms of infidelity.

Machiavellianism, however, was only a unique predictor of infidelity among women. Machiavellianism as a strategic trait is most

beneficial for committing malevolent acts in a calculated way that maximizes selfish benefits. One explanation as to why Machiavellianism predicted infidelity among women, and not men, may be that women are likely to suffer greater consequences following infidelity. For example, relationships are more likely to end as a result of a woman's infidelity (Brand, Markey, Mills, & Hodges, 2007). Machiavellian women may be more likely to engage in infidelity because they believe they are able to successfully negotiate infidelity behaviors with fewer consequences.

A second and related explanation has to do with a larger strategy of gene cultivation (Blobel, 1985). Women may seek to cultivate the genes of a more dominant and attractive man and get a more nurturing and fiscally fit man to raise a child. This strategy, referred to as "gene capturing" may exclusively benefit calculating and long-term strategic women. This strategy, however, requires that the primary partner is unaware of the infidelity. It should be noted that social and evolutionary forces are not mutually exclusive, and that some combination of these explanations, or others that stem from social learning and evolution, are also likely.

In the current study, Machiavellian individuals did not ruin their relationship as a result of the infidelity, whereas psychopathic individuals did. There are several possible explanations for these findings. The first is that Machiavellians do not act impulsively (Jones & Paulhus, 2011b). Machiavellian individuals may delay gratification, plan alibis, and hide their behaviors in ways that make their infidelity difficult to detect. In addition, Machiavellian individuals are manipulative and may be able to convincingly "confess," "apologize," or "show remorse" in ways that repair a primary relationship after infidelity, despite not actually feeling any genuine remorse. Finally, Machiavellian individuals may see the benefit to their primary partner (e.g., status, resources) and be motivated to stay in that stable relationship. This motivation would stand in stark contrast to erratic psychopathic individuals (who move from relationship to relationship anyway) or overconfident narcissistic individuals (who assume they will find someone better).

One issue that stands in contrast to previous literature was the lack of association between narcissism and infidelity, especially among women. One possible explanation for this finding may stem from the relationship choices that narcissistic women make (Jonason, Luévano, & Adams, 2012). Because narcissistic individuals may only commit to extremely high quality partners, infidelity may not bring the ego strokes that narcissistic individuals require. In general, men and women view infidelity negatively (Wiederman, 1997), so narcissistic individuals may not wish to engage in infidelity unless an extradyadic partner brings sufficient ego rewards. Additionally, women are socialized to be more chaste than men in western culture, suggesting that infidelity (much like casual sex) is met with particular disapproval (Jonason & Fisher, 2009), so there is no social incentive.

## 7. Future research and limitations

Future research should focus on the situational influences of relationships and how these influences may interact with malevolent traits. For example, Jones and Paulhus (2010) found that it takes different provocations to evoke aggression in narcissistic vs. psychopathic individuals, even though both traits have been previously linked to aggression (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Reidy et al., 2008). The same may be true for infidelity. Certain situations may entice a narcissistic individual to stray from a relationship (e.g., entitlement, high status interlopers), while the same situation may have no impact on Machiavellian or psychopathic individuals. However, Machiavellian individuals may have motives for infidelity (e.g., gene capturing, blackmail, status acquisition) as

may psychopathic individuals (e.g., revenge, exploitation), that are absent among narcissistic individuals. Moreover, gender may interact with situation and traits. Social dominance may also be a trait belonging to the Dark Triad cluster (Jones & Figueredo, *in press*). This trait may have its own unique provocation pushing such men (e.g., feeling "disrespected", asserting "dominance") vs. such women (e.g., feeling one's partner is not a "man's man") towards infidelity.

There is now a substantial literature on the interpersonal dynamics of trust (e.g., Clark & Waddell, 1985; Kenrick, Groth, Trost, & Sadalla, 1993; Simpson, 2007). That literature has elucidated the processes involved in trusting others. To date, there is less clarity on what types of people are trustworthy, such as individuals high in Dark Triad traits. All three are related to betraying trust because they lack a fundamental concern for the welfare of others. However, this untrustworthiness plays out differently in the traits – psychopaths, because they are so impulsive; narcissists, because their entitlement justifies exploitation of others. The hidden agendas of Machiavellians, we would argue, make them the least trustworthy of the three (Jones & Paulhus, 2009).

There were two primary limitations to the present study. The first was the retrospective nature of the data. Ideally, tracking individuals over time would be ideal for *predicting* infidelity using Dark Triad traits *prior* to or at the beginning of a relationship. Although self-report in nature, the present data have several advantages over the typical student samples. Our participants were adults representing a wide age range and education. As such, their experiences are more broad and stable than those reported by students just beginning their mating lives. Accordingly, we believe that our results provide a more accurate picture of dating strategies. A second limitation was that the NPI-16 was used rather than the full NPI. Concerns stemming from the NPI-16, however, are minimal given that the NPI-16, when used as a single composite, has sufficient validity and reliability estimates (Ames et al., 2006).

## 8. Summary and conclusions

Although all three Dark Triad traits correlated with infidelity, the patterns of correlations differed for men and women. Psychopathy was the primary predictor of infidelity in men, whereas psychopathy and Machiavellianism equally predicted infidelity in women. Among all participants, however, Machiavellianism did not predict dissolution after the infidelity whereas psychopathy did. Thus far, it seems that Machiavellian individuals are likely to maintain a relationship irrespective of infidelity, possibly due to their strategic (cautious and flexible) nature. This strategic nature may help Machiavellian individuals avoid detection, and even when caught, allow them to smooth over conflicts as Machiavellians tend to thrive when tensions are hot and emotions are strong (Christie & Geis, 1970).

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