



Short Communication

Risky business: Willingness to be caught in an extra-pair relationship, relationship experience, and the Dark Triad



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ABSTRACT

Little research into the relationship correlates of narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism (i.e., the Dark Triad) has examined experience within various types of relationships nor has research examined risk-tolerance in extra-pair relationships. In a MTurk sample ($N = 210$), psychopathy and narcissism were positively correlated with low-commitment relationship experience, both overall and as extra-pair relationships. Machiavellianism was negatively correlated with overall experience in booty-call relationships, friends-with-benefits relationships, and serious-romantic relationships. Those who would not engage in extra-pair low-commitment relationships, even without chance of detection, were lower in psychopathy and narcissism than those indicating some acceptable chance of detection. Additionally, the amount of detection risk accepted was positively associated with narcissism for one-night-stands and friends-with-benefits relationships, and negatively associated with Machiavellianism for booty-call relationships. These findings further our understanding of the mating strategies of those high in the Dark Triad.

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1. Introduction

The Dark Triad (i.e., Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy) comprises several overlapping traits including a callous disposition, egocentrism, low agreeableness, and low humility (Paulhus & Williams, 2002; Lee & Ashton, 2005). The Dark Triad is associated with impulsivity, risky behavior, a lack of self-control, and taking advantage of others (Crysel, Crosier, & Webster, 2013; Jonason & Tost, 2010; Jones & Paulhus, 2011). These traits, despite their negativity, are associated with mating (especially short-term) success (Jonason, Li, Webster, & Schmitt, 2009).

Those high on the Dark Triad traits have more sexual partners, a less restrictive mating style, and a preference for low-commitment relationships (Jonason, Luevano, & Adams, 2012; Jonason et al., 2009). While preference may stem from an unrealistic ideal, experience provides details regarding relationship acquisition success. Jonason et al. (2012) found differences in preferences for several short-term relationships (i.e., booty-calls, one-night-stands, and friends-with-benefits relationships) in relation to Dark Triad traits. Narcissism, for example, was correlated with preferences for one-night-stands and friends-with-benefits

relationships while psychopathy was correlated with preferences for booty-call relationships. This was not the case with Machiavellianism, which showed no preference for any low-commitment relationship when shared variance was partialled. As such, we would expect to see similar differences in experience with each relationship-type.

Those high in the Dark Triad mate poach, employ deceptive sexual practices within their relationships, and have an increased level of infidelity which may stem from their callous nature (Jonason & Buss, 2012; Jonason, Li, & Buss, 2010). Differences in relationship preferences among the Dark Triad, may similarly equate to differences when engaged in infidelity. For example, those high in narcissism may engage in more one-night-stands allowing them to lean more heavily on their charismatic nature to acquire immediate ego gratification, while those high in Machiavellianism may engage in friends-with-benefits relationships where they could use their charm to manipulate an established friendship to gain sexual favors while also controlling the possibility of discovery.

Given the links between risk-taking and psychopathy and narcissism (Crysel, et al., 2013; Jonason et al., 2010), those high on these traits may be more willing to risk detection for extra-pair relationships. In contrast Machiavellianism, a trait characterized by a longer-term orientation to life, may be associated with detection risk aversion in the context of infidelity (Jones & Paulhus,

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2009). Thus, we expect that psychopathy and narcissism will be positively associated and Machiavellianism will be negatively associated with risk-tolerance for extra-pair relationships.

The current study investigates the association between the Dark Triad and experiences with three low-commitment relationships and serious romantic relationships individually and as an extra-pair relationship. Additionally, we examine the association between detection risk-tolerance for extra-pair relationships and the Dark Triad. By providing details on the behavior individuals have engaged in, as well as their cognitive biases (i.e., risk-tolerance) we hope to provide new details about the adaptive nature of the Dark Triad (Jonason, Koenig, & Tost, 2010).

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Data from this sample have been reported in two previous publications (Jonason et al., 2012; Jonason & Luevano, 2013). As described previously, participants ($N = 210$) consisted of 119 women (56.7%) and 91 men (43.3%), ranging in age from 18 to 68 years old ($M = 33.57$, $SD = 11.37$), recruited through MTurk (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011).

3. Materials and procedure

3.1. Relationship experience

Participants were asked about their experience (i.e., number of partners) with each of four different relationship-types (i.e., one-night-stands, booty-calls, friends-with-benefits, and serious-romantic relationships). Participants were given the following definitions for each relationship-type: *One-night-stands* are primarily sexual relationships that occur one time only. *Booty-call relationships* are relationships where there is solicitation from a non-long-term partner with the explicit or implicit intent of engaging in sexual activity. *Friends-with-benefits* are relationships between friends in which the friends engage in sexual activity, but do not define their relationship as romantic. Finally, *serious-romantic relationships* are committed and presumably monogamous romantic relationships. Additionally, participants were asked to give the number of times they engaged in each relationship-type while in a committed, presumably monogamous, relationship (i.e., as an extra-pair relationship).

3.2. Acceptable risk for extra-pair relationships

For each relationship-type, participants were asked what amount of detection risk would be acceptable to engage in the relationship when already in a committed, presumably monogamous relationship. They indicated this using ten-percent increments from 0% (i.e., no chance of discovery) to 100% (i.e., would certainly be discovered). Participants were also given the option to indicate they would never engage in an extra-pair relationship of that type regardless of detection risk.

3.3. Dark Triad traits

The 31-item Self-Report Psychopathy Scale-III (SRP-III; Paulhus, Neumann, & Hare, in press) assessed psychopathy, the 40-item Narcissistic Personality Inventory assessed narcissism (NPI-40; Raskin & Terry, 1988), and the 20-item MACH-IV assessed Machiavellianism (Christie & Geis, 1970). See Jonason et al. (2012) for details.

4. Results

4.1. Experience with each relationship-type

Negative binomial regression analyses were used to analyze the count data regarding the number of partners experienced for each relationship-type. This type of analysis uses a z-test to examine the significance of the relationship, and is ideal for count data that does not fit a Poisson distribution because of over-dispersion (i.e., the conditional variance being larger than the conditional mean) (Gardner, Mulvey, & Shaw, 1995). That is true of our data because most participants reported low numbers, but some reported having many different partners. We used negative binomial regression with each Dark Triad trait individually to examine the zero-order relationships, and with the three traits simultaneously to examine the unique variance attributed to each trait. Table 1 shows the results of the negative binomial regression analyses of the associations between the Dark Triad traits and the number of partners for each relationship-type.

The number of one-night-stands was positively associated with both psychopathy and narcissism, but only psychopathy had a unique effect controlling for the other traits. The number of booty-call relationships was also positively associated with both psychopathy and narcissism; narcissism had a unique positive effect, and Machiavellianism had a unique negative effect (i.e., those higher in Machiavellianism, when controlling for psychopathy and narcissism, reported fewer booty-call relationships). The number of friends-with-benefits relationships was positively associated with psychopathy and narcissism, but negatively associated with Machiavellianism; Machiavellianism also had a significant negative unique effect. The number of serious-romantic relationships reported was positively associated with narcissism and negatively associated with Machiavellianism.

4.2. Risk-tolerance in extra-pair relationships

We first examined whether those who answered the question regarding the acceptable risk of detection in order to engage in an extra-pair relationship of each type, differed in the Dark Triad from those that indicated they would never engage in such an extra-pair relationship regardless of the risk (Table 2). Those who indicated an acceptable risk to engage in an extra-pair one-night-stand or booty-call relationship were higher in both psychopathy and narcissism than those that would never participate in such an extra-pair relationship. Those who indicated an acceptable risk for an extra-pair friends-with-benefits relationship were higher in psychopathy than those who would never engage in such an extra-pair relationships.

Table 3 provides the zero-order correlation coefficients as well as the unique relationship of each Dark Triad trait while controlling for the others. Those high in narcissism accepted greater risk of detection for extra-pair one-night-stands and booty-call relationships. Those high in Machiavellianism were less willing to accept risk of detection to engage in extra-pair friends-with-benefits relationships, although this relationship was only significant when controlling for the other two traits. Surprisingly, psychopathy was not associated with willingness to accept risk to engage in an extra-pair relationship of any type.

4.3. Experience with extra-pair relationships

We used negative binomial regression to examine associations between the Dark Triad and the number of extra-pair partners for each relationship-type (see Table 4). Psychopathy was positively associated with the number of extra-pair one-night-stands

Table 1
Coefficients and z-tests of significance from negative binomial regression analyses representing the relationship between each Dark Triad trait and the reported number of partners for each relationship-type.

Relationship-type	Psychopathy		Narcissism		Machiavellianism	
	B (SE)	z	B (SE)	z	B (SE)	z
<i>One-night-stands</i>						
Zero-order	0.88 (0.40)	2.22*	0.04 (0.02)	2.22*	0.04 (0.31)	0.13
Unique effects	1.21 (0.60)	2.02*	0.02 (0.02)	0.91	−0.32 (0.47)	−0.68
<i>Booty-call relationships</i>						
Zero-order	1.00 (0.47)	2.11*	0.05 (0.02)	2.50*	−0.48 (0.37)	−1.29
Unique effects	0.82 (0.54)	1.53	0.06 (0.02)	2.59**	−1.03 (0.41)	−2.54*
<i>Friends-with-Benefits</i>						
Zero-order	0.88 (0.43)	2.07*	0.05 (0.02)	2.47*	−1.10 (0.33)	−3.35**
Unique effects	0.91 (0.48)	1.91	0.03 (0.02)	1.57	−1.37 (0.36)	−3.78**
<i>Serious romantic relationships</i>						
Zero-order	−0.07 (0.18)	−0.39	0.03 (0.01)	3.76**	−0.30 (0.14)	−2.24*
Unique effects	−0.13 (0.20)	−0.65	0.03 (0.01)	3.82**	−0.33 (0.15)	−2.23*

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

Table 2
Comparison of Dark Triad traits between those indicating they would never participate in such an extra-pair relationship regardless the risk and those that indicated the acceptable risk.

	Never		Some risk		t	g
	N	M (SD)	N	M (SD)		
<i>One-night-stand</i>						
Psychopathy	135	1.90 (0.31)	77	2.08 (0.39)	3.47**	0.53
Narcissism	135	11.51 (6.84)	76	14.72 (8.68)	2.78**	0.42
Machiavellianism	135	2.90 (0.41)	77	2.91 (0.51)	0.04	0.02
<i>Booty-call relationship</i>						
Psychopathy	149	1.92 (0.31)	63	2.07 (0.41)	2.69**	0.44
Narcissism	149	11.90 (6.84)	62	14.52 (9.23)	2.01*	0.34
Machiavellianism	149	2.90 (0.43)	63	2.92 (0.49)	0.33	0.04
<i>Friends-with-benefits</i>						
Psychopathy	141	1.93 (0.33)	70	2.04 (0.37)	2.05*	0.32
Narcissism	140	12.31 (7.16)	70	13.40 (8.71)	0.96	0.14
Machiavellianism	141	2.88 (0.45)	70	2.96 (0.45)	1.26	0.18
<i>Serious romantic relationship</i>						
Psychopathy	148	1.94 (0.33)	63	2.01 (0.38)	1.28	0.20
Narcissism	147	11.93 (7.07)	63	14.19 (8.72)	1.82	0.30
Machiavellianism	148	2.91 (0.47)	63	2.90 (0.47)	0.13	−0.02

Note: g is Hedges' g for effect size.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

Table 3
Pearson's correlation and standardized beta coefficients (controlling for shared variance among the Dark Triad) representing the relationship between each Dark Triad trait and the acceptable detection risk to engage in an extra-pair relationship of each relationship-type.

	Psychopathy		Narcissism		Machiavellianism	
	r	β	r	β	r	β
One-night-stands	.15	.08	.29*	.29*	−.05	−.18
Booty-call relationships	.17	.14	.23	.23	−.09	−.27*
Friends-with-benefits	.20	.13	.31**	.28*	−.09	−.18
Serious romantic relationship	−.02	−.11	.10	.14	.04	.07

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

and booty-call relationships. Narcissism was also positively associated with the reported number of extra-pair booty-call relationships, but this association was not significant when controlling for the other Dark Triad traits. Machiavellianism was not associated with the number of extra-pair relationships reported for any relationship-type.

5. Discussion

The Dark Triad traits have repeatedly been linked to a short-term mating disposition (Jonason et al., 2009, 2012). In this study,

we replicated and extended what we know about this link. Prior studies failed to document number of experiences, instead, focusing on preferences. Moreover, short-term mating is a “risky-business”, especially in the case of infidelity. We examined each of these aspects of short-term mating in relation to the Dark Triad.

As previously noted, research has indicated varying preferences for relationship-types in association with dark triad traits (Jonason et al., 2012). Despite stated preferences, experience overall and as an extra-pair relationship appears to differ, especially for psychopathy and narcissism. While psychopathy was associated with preference for booty-call relationships, stated experience was

Table 4

Coefficients and z-tests of significance from negative binomial regression analyses representing the relationship between each Dark Triad trait and the number of extra-pair partners for each relationship-type.

Extra-pair relationship-type	Psychopathy		Narcissism		Machiavellianism	
	B (SE)	z	B (SE)	z	B (SE)	z
<i>One-night-stands</i>						
Zero-order	1.27 (0.51)	2.49*	0.04 (0.02)	1.65	0.25 (0.43)	0.59
Unique effects	1.21 (0.60)	2.02*	0.02 (0.03)	0.91	−0.32 (0.47)	−0.68
<i>Booty-call relationships</i>						
Zero-order	1.21 (0.51)	2.38*	0.05 (0.02)	2.10*	0.14 (0.42)	0.33
Unique effects	1.23 (0.60)	2.07*	0.03 (0.03)	1.14	−0.57 (0.47)	−1.23
<i>Friends-with-benefits</i>						
zero-order	0.84 (0.53)	1.59	0.03 (0.02)	1.44	0.01 (1.28)	−0.85
Unique effects	0.93 (0.03)	0.93	0.02 (0.03)	0.93	−0.56 (0.48)	−1.16
<i>Serious romantic relationships</i>						
Zero-order	0.20 (0.58)	0.35	0.04 (0.03)	1.60	−0.23 (0.45)	−0.51
Unique effects	−0.16 (0.68)	−0.24	0.05 (0.03)	1.74	−0.43 (0.52)	−0.83

* $p < .05$.

significant for one-night-stand relationships. Narcissism was associated with preferences for one-night-stand and friends-with-benefits relationships, while stated experience was significant for booty-call and serious romantic relationships. One-night-stand relationships generally require less investment and “face” time which may allow those higher in psychopathy to mask some of their less desirable qualities and have greater relationship success. This may partly explain why differences were found between their preference and experience. Similarly, those higher in narcissism may prefer one-night-stand and friends-with-benefits relationships but have experience with booty-call and serious romantic relationships because they provide a higher opportunity for continuous sexual encounters while keeping options open for participating in preferred relationships if they become available. Interestingly, Machiavellianism was not associated with preference for or experience with any relationship-type. The rationale for this lack of significance is unclear yet may be explained by the elusive nature associated with this population. Additional research is needed to better explain these findings.

In terms of risk-tolerance, results were consistent with our hypotheses. Specifically, psychopathy was linked to accepting detection risk for extra-pair low-commitment relationships, narcissism was associated with accepting detection risk for extra-pair one-night-stand and booty-call relationships; and as expected Machiavellianism was not associated with accepting detection risk for any type of extra-pair relationship, and was actually negatively correlated with acceptable detection risk for extra-pair booty-call relationships. The Dark Triad, especially psychopathy and narcissism, have been linked with greater risk taking behavior (Crysel et al., 2013; Jonason et al., 2010) so it is not surprising that risk taking behavior transfers to relationships. Similarly, Machiavellianism’s cautious and longer-term orientation to life may explain the detection risk aversion for extra-pair relationships.

This study is not without limitations. First, our study relied on a small sample of Americans. More work is needed on the cross-cultural generalizability of correlates with the Dark Triad. Second, MTurk and other crowdsourcing platforms may suffer from selection bias as these participants may have characteristics different from the general population. Finally, while this sample was well below clinical levels in all Dark Triad traits, the manipulative nature associated with the Dark Triad must be taken into consideration with all self-report data.

Overall this study has added to the literature on the Dark Triad; expanded what we know about the differences between practices

and experiences associated with low-commitment and extra-pair copulations within this population; and provided information on which relationships this group is willing to risk detection to participate in. These findings provide additional evidence that research investigating low-commitment relationship as a single group may deserve reexamination.

Authors’ note

The participants and the data for the Dark Triad were used in Jonason, Luevano, and Adams (2012) and Jonason and Luevano (2013).

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