

Dark desires: The Dark Tetrad and relationship control

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1. Introduction

Healthy romantic relationships are important for increasing health and well-being (Gomez-Lopez, Viejo & Otego-Ruiz, 2019). Of increased concern is intimate partner violence, resulting from physical, sexual and psychological abuse (Brewer, Bennett, Davidson, Ireen, Phipps, Stewart-Wilkes & Wilson, 2018). A plethora of research exists on victims and perpetrators of intimate partner violence, but researchers have tended to focus more heavily on physical and sexual abuse (Brewer et al., 2018). More recently however, personality researchers have placed additional focus on psychological abuse in relation to the Dark Triad personality traits (psychopathy, narcissism, Machiavellianism).

Although distinct, the Dark Triad personality traits share characteristics such as callousness, (Paulhus, Curtis & Jones, 2018) low agreeableness, low empathy (Book, Visser, Blais, Hosker-Field, Methot-Jones, Gauthier, & D'Agata, 2016) and low honesty-humility (Lee & Ashton, 2014). Yet each trait demonstrates their own uniqueness. Dark Triad psychopathy refers to individuals with superficial charm, increased risk-taking tendencies and a lack of guilt and remorse (Lyons & Hughes, 2015). Narcissism is characterised by superiority, self-entitlement, grandiosity, and leadership qualities. Individuals high in Machiavellianism are recognised as strategic manipulators who are distrustful and cynical in nature (Jones & Paulhus, 2017).

Desired partner control is a form of psychological abuse and plays a significant role in intimate partner violence (Brewer et al., 2018). Different forms of desired control have been

recognised (Bledsoe & Sar, 2011). First, control via surveillance and threats involves monitoring one's romantic partner via social media, emails and telephone calls, as well as using threats to encourage partners to accommodate one's desires. Second, control over every day routines refers to control over who a partner socialises with. Finally, control over autonomous behaviour refers to control in everyday settings such as using shared items without asking for permission. Although some research exists on these different forms of control and the Dark Triad (Brewer et al., 2018) personality traits, we are not aware of research investigating links between these forms of desired control and everyday sadism.

Everyday sadism is a later addition to the original dark trio and is characterised by low empathy and experiencing enjoyment from observing both the psychological and physical suffering of others (Tsoukas & March, 2018). Previous research has however revealed positive correlations between sadism and cyberstalking (Smoker & March, 2017), indicating that individuals high in sadism utilise online sources to monitor romantic partner activities. It is further suggested however, that individuals high in sadism cyberstalk strangers only, not romantic partners (Sheridan & Boon, 2002). Furthermore, sadism is linked with bullying and physical aggression (Greitemeyer, 2015), which is often mediated by the need for control. Sadism also shares many features with psychopathy, such as insecure attachment styles (Persson, Kajonius, & Garcia, 2017) and characteristics such as violent tendencies and deficits in emotion (Mededović, 2017). As such, everyday sadism appears a strong candidate to be associated with increased levels of relationship control. Despite such overlaps with psychopathy, the inclusion of everyday sadism has received sufficient support from researchers, arguing that sadism is also a unique construct that should be included in the modified tetrad of dark personality traits (Plouffe, Wilson & Saklofske, 2020). We therefore suggest that everyday sadism should also be explored within the context of relationship control.

The Present Study

We aimed to extend previous research investigating the Dark Triad personality traits and relationship control by including the newest arrival of everyday sadism (Dark Tetrad). We predicted that all four traits would positively correlate with all three forms of desired control. However, as psychopathy is generally considered the most dominant and central dark trait (Dinic, Wertag, Tomašević & Sokolvska, 2020) and shares many characteristics with sadism, we predicted that sadism and psychopathy would emerge as stronger predictors of all three forms of desired control than narcissism and Machiavellianism.

2. Method

2.1 *Participants and Procedure*

Participants ($N = 318$; 172, women, 146 men, mean age, 27, $SD = 8.84$) were recruited via Prolific data collection platform, to take part in an online survey exploring personality and romantic relationships. Participants were paid the average rate for their time. This rate was set by the Prolific data collection platform. As two participants completed the survey in less than 6 minutes, these participants were removed from the overall analyses to avoid potentially invalid responses. The first page of the survey included information about the study and required all participants to provide consent before accessing the survey. Participants were eligible if they were over 18 years of age and had been in a relationship for over 3 months. During the survey, participants were asked to answer questions based on their current relationship, rather than past relationships. We defined romantic relations as a relationship that involves social and sexual monogamy, which possess a high level of commitment (Jonason & Balzarini, 2016).

2.2 Measures

Sadism was measured using the 10 - item self-report Short Sadistic Impulse Scale (SSIS; O'Meara, Aisling, Davies, & Hammond, Sean, 2011). Using a (1 = totally disagree to 5 = totally agree) scale, participants rated their agreement with each statement. For example, "Hurting people would be exciting". This scale has previously demonstrated reliable internal consistency: $\alpha = .86$ (O'Meara & Hammond, 2016). All items were summed to create a total sadism index. The Dark Triad traits were measured using Short Dark Triad (SD3; Jones & Paulhus, 2014). Using a (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = totally agree) scale, participants rated their agreement with statements on each trait. Psychopathy: "I like to get revenge on authorities". Narcissism: "I know that I am special because everyone keeps telling me so". Machiavellianism: "Make sure your plans benefit you and not others". This scale has previously shown reliable internal consistency. Narcissism: $\alpha = .79$; Psychopathy: $\alpha = .81$; Machiavellianism: $\alpha = .85$ (Maples, Lamkin & Miller, 2014). All items were summed to create total indexes for psychopathy, Machiavellianism and narcissism.

Desired control was measured using the 16 item Interpersonal Violence Control Scale (Bledsoe & Sar, 2011). Subscales include: Control via surveillance and threats, control over autonomous behaviour and every-day routines. Participants read statements from each subscale (e.g., "I wish I could always keep track of my partner's whereabouts") and indicated how much they agree with each one using a (1 = never to 5 = very often) Likert scale. This questionnaire has previously presented reliable internal consistency; $\alpha = .86$ (Bledsoe & Sar, 2011). Items from each subscale were summed to create total scores for control via surveillance and threats, control over autonomous behaviour and control over every-day routines.

3. Results

Descriptive statistics, correlations and reliability estimates are presented in [Table 1](#). To reduce the probability of type 1 errors, we conducted multiple path analyses using AMOS (Schumacker & Lomax, 2004) to explore links between the Dark Tetrad traits and different forms of desired control. In the first model, we included all Dark Tetrad traits as exogenous variables with all forms of desired control as endogenous variables. Indices revealed a model fit of: $\chi^2(3) = 18.98$, RMSEA = 0.08, NFI = 0.94, CFI = 0.94, TLI = 0.79. In subsequent analyses we explored the Dark Tetrad traits separately to avoid obtaining potentially unmeaningful relationships when traits are analysed at the residual level (Russell & King, 2016). At the residual level, sadism and psychopathy positively predicted all three forms of desired control. Narcissism also positively predicted all three forms of desired control, however revealing small effects. Machiavellianism revealed no significant effects on desired control ([Table 2](#)). When separate paths were conducted for each trait individually, sadism and psychopathy remained as positive predictors of all three forms of desired control, as did narcissism, however still revealing smaller effects for control over autonomy and everyday routines. When analysed separately, Machiavellianism revealed the most changes and positively predicted all three forms of relationship control ([Table 2](#)).

Using the model comparison function in AMOS, we explored whether the Dark Tetrad traits were operating differently in men and women. We found no significant differences between men and women across each form of desired control ($\chi^2(12) = 18.73$, $p = .114$), suggesting that the Dark Tetrad traits were operating similarly in men and women in the context of relationship control.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics, correlations and Cronbach's Alpha for all study variables.

Variables	Mean	SD	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.
1. Sadism	17.61	5.69	(0.86)						
2. Psychopathy	19.40	5.39	0.67**	(0.75)					
3. Machiavellianism	27.70	4.49	0.41**	0.44**	(0.74)				
4. Narcissism	24.30	4.82	0.23**	0.40**	0.22**	(0.69)			
5. Control via Surveillance and threats	9.14	4.74	0.43**	0.45**	0.22**	0.32**	(0.82)		
6. Control over autonomous behaviour	7.17	3.62	0.51**	0.51**	0.24**	0.29**	0.74**	(0.88)	
7. Control over every-day routines	9.51	3.77	0.46**	0.43**	0.31**	0.26**	0.77**	0.75**	(0.91)

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.001$, reliability estimates (Alphas) are presented in parentheses.

Table 2. Standardised regression weights for all path analyses.

Parameter estimates	Residual model	Individual trait models
Narcissism → surveillance and threats	0.17*	0.32**
Narcissism → autonomous behaviour	0.12*	0.20**
Narcissism → everyday routines	0.11*	0.26**
Psychopathy → surveillance and threats	0.23*	0.45**
Psychopathy → autonomous behaviour	0.27**	0.51**
Psychopathy → everyday routines	0.15*	0.43**
Machiavellianism → surveillance and threats	0.01	0.24**
Machiavellianism → autonomous behaviour	- 0.03	0.24**
Machiavellianism → everyday routines	0.10	0.31**
Sadism → surveillance and threats	0.23**	0.43**
Sadism → autonomous behaviour	0.31**	0.51**
Sadism → everyday routines	0.30**	0.46**

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.001$.

4. Discussion

We explored links between the Dark Tetrad personality traits and different forms of desired partner control. Machiavellianism emerged as a non-significant predictor of all desired control variables at the residual level. However, subsequently emerged as a positive predictor of control via surveillance and threats, control over autonomous behaviour and revealed a stronger effect on control over everyday routines when analysed individually. As Machiavellianism also shares many characteristics with psychopathy, particularly strategic manipulation tactics and abusive leadership styles (Kavish, Jones, Rock, Johnson & Anderson, 2019), it has been suggested that psychopathy renders Machiavellianism redundant in certain contexts (Dinić, Wertag, Tomašević & Sokolvska, 2020). This is because despite such similarities, psychopathy is considered the most dominant and central dark trait. Our results point towards the possibility that relationship control may be one such context. Future research could therefore explore centrality and redundancy amongst Dark Tetrad traits within the context of relationship control.

Psychopathy and sadism emerged as positive predictors of all three forms of desired control at both the residual and individual level. Although sadism and psychopathy share many overlapping characteristics, each may be associated with unique motivations for relationship control. For example, individuals high in sadism experience enjoyment from observing the suffering of others. Observing the negative consequences associated with controlling their romantic partners may elicit additional enjoyment for these individuals. This is plausible given previously reported links between sadism, increased boredom and intentional conflict seeking (Lee, 2019). In contrast, individuals high in psychopathy may exert control to accomplish certain goals (Carton & Egan, 2018), such as financial success and securing material possessions, as well as to feel increased power. Future research should explore sadism and psychopathy further with a focus on individual motivations for relationship control. Our findings provide evidence

strengthening previous suggestions that individuals high in sadism utilise online sources to track romantic partners also (Smoker & March, 2017) rather than strangers only (Sheridan & Boon, 2002).

Narcissism also positively predicted all three forms of desired control at both the residual and individual level. The current findings may however be better explained by considering different facets of narcissism. For example, links between narcissism and control via surveillance and threats may be more suggestive of vulnerable narcissism (characterised by hypersensitivity) as tracking the whereabouts of others online has been associated with an intolerance for uncertainty (Stiff, 2019). These individuals may therefore experience heightened insecurity and feel the need to monitor partner activity via such surveillance. In contrast, due to an inflated sense of superiority and self-importance, individuals high in grandiose narcissism may feel confident that their partner would also appreciate their importance and would therefore remain committed to the relationship. Thus, grandiose narcissists may feel less need to control their partner's daily routines and who they spend their time with, potentially providing one explanation for the small effects for narcissism and control over every-day routines.

The original Dark Triad traits are commonly reported to exert stronger influences on men than women, particularly in relation to sexual coercion, aggression, promiscuity and increased risk taking (Jonason, Valentine & Harbeson, 2011). The current findings however show that the Dark Tetrad traits were operating similarly across men and women for each form of relationship control. The current findings may, in part, be explained by different types of relationships. In the current study we investigated the Dark Tetrad in established relationships, whereas these traits are commonly associated with short-term and uncommitted relationships. From an evolutionary perspective, adopting short-term and uncommitted mating patterns is more beneficial to men than women due to differences in reproductive costs (Buss, Larson, Westen & Semmelroth, 1992).

Therefore, increased promiscuity, sexually coercive tendencies and aggression are likely more beneficial for facilitating short-term mating patterns in men. In the context of longer-term and established relationships however, women may benefit from controlling and manipulating their partners (Lyons et al, 2020). Therefore, the current forms of relationship control may be equally beneficial to women high in these dark traits. Although there has been a recent surge of interest in the original Dark Triad traits in female romantic relationships, further research should investigate everyday sadism in an all-female sample.

Limitations and future research

The current study has several limitations. First, the use of a shorter measure (SD3) to assess psychopathy, narcissism and Machiavellianism prevented us from providing a more comprehensive discussion of the different facets of narcissism (e.g., vulnerable, grandiose, collective narcissists) and different components of psychopathy (e.g., primary and secondary). Future research could therefore focus on these distinct characteristics and the different forms of desired control. Nevertheless, our main aim was to explore everyday sadism in relation to the different forms of relationship control. Second, we specified that participants must have been in a relationship for over three months but did not ask participants to state the actual length of their current relationship. Participants in the earlier stages of their relationship may feel more secure and desire less control over their partners as opposed to longer lasting relationships. There is, however, some evidence to suggest that relationship length has little influence on desired control (Brewer et al., 2018). Furthermore, we did not assess relationship type (i.e., same sex, heterosexual, open relationships) and it is possible that the Dark Tetrad traits may operate differently across distinct relationship types (Okutan, Buyuksahin, & Sakalli, 2017). Finally, due to the cross-sectional nature of the present study, future research may benefit from considering

longitudinal methods and strengthening current measures by obtaining responses from both relationship partners.

5. Conclusion

Overall, we add to the current literature exploring Dark Triad traits and relationship control. We highlight the importance of considering everyday sadism in relation to different forms of romantic partner control, as sadism positively predicted desired control via surveillance and threats, desired control over autonomous behaviour and control over every-day routines. It is possible that the negative consequences associated with these forms of partner control may provide additional enjoyment for individuals high in everyday sadism. Due to the preliminary nature of our findings, further research is needed to determine the replicability of these results in relation to everyday sadism and relationship control. Future research should also investigate different types of romantic relationships to determine whether the Dark Tetrad personality traits operate differently across distinct relationship types.

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