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There is a dearth of research investigating what characteristics individuals high in the Dark Triad look for in long-term partners. We explored the role of the Dark Triad traits on the parental styles that individuals find important in a future spouse. Men ( $n = 179$ ) and women ( $n = 181$ ) completed a short Dark Triad measure, and a questionnaire measuring desirability of parental care and control in future partners. Narcissism predicted higher preference for spouses with controlling parenting styles. Men and women high on Machiavellianism were more and less likely to prefer a caring partner, respectively. Individuals high on psychopathy were less likely to favour a partner displaying parental care. The findings are discussed in terms of assortative mating and social learning.

Keywords: care; control; Dark Triad; narcissism; Machiavellianism; mate choice; parenting; psychopathy

## Introduction

A substantial body of research has documented the influence of the Dark Triad traits (i.e., narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy) in romantic relationships. The majority of studies have shown that dark personality traits relate to a preference for short-term, non-committed relationships (e.g., Jonason, Lyons, & Blanchard, 2015; Koladich & Atkinson, 2016). These traits could facilitate an adaptive fast life history strategy, where reproductive focus is on seeking mating opportunities with multiple partners (Csathó & Birkás, 2018). Less is known about what kind of characteristics individuals high in the Dark Triad traits prefer when entering a long-term committed relationship.

Long-term relationships are often formed with the intention of producing and rearing offspring, which has a major impact on reproductive success in species with bi-parental care. Parenting practises are not crucial just for offspring survival and well-being, but they also guide the formation of the future reproductive strategies of the child. In unpredictable socio-ecological environments, parents employ harsher parenting practises, which influences development of fast life history strategies in the offspring (Belsky, Schlomer, & Ellis, 2012). It is possible that in order to aid the development of fast reproductive strategies in the offspring, high Dark Triad individuals prefer harsher parenting styles in their future spouses.

Indeed, the few studies that have investigated the Dark Triad and long-term mate choice found that in women, psychopathy was related to a lower preference for kindness (see Atari & Chegeni, 2017 for an Iranian sample), and Machiavellianism to a lower preference for warmth and trustworthiness (see Birkás, Láng, & Meskó, 2018 for a Hungarian sample). These characteristics could also be a proxy for the kind of parenting practises the future spouse might engage in. Based on these findings, it is likely that high Dark Triad individuals do not place much importance on warm and sensitive parenting (a superfluous ‘luxury’), and are unlikely to demand it from partners. Indeed, the opposite might be the case- cold and

uncaring parenting could nudge offsprings' future reproductive approach towards fast life history strategies, which could be adaptive, and increase the reproductive success of the parent in the following generation (an evolutionary 'necessity'). There are no previous studies that have investigated the relationship between the Dark Triad and long-term preferences for characteristics relevant in parenting in both men and women.

As well as evolutionary explanations, social learning offers a proximate theory explaining how the Dark Triad could relate to choice for parental styles in future spouses. During childhood, individuals learn templates of parenting behaviour from their own parents, and may apply this later in their own parenting (Van Ijzendoorn, 1992). The Dark Triad relates to recollections of uncaring and controlling parenting in childhood, which could also explain the development of these traits in adulthood (e.g., Abell, Lyons, & Brewer, 2014; Horton & Tritch, 2014; Jonason, Lyons, & Bethell, 2014). Although it is somewhat unclear what parenting styles high Dark Triad individuals employ (but see Cox et al., 2018 for a study on psychopathy and parenting), it is likely that they use similar strategies as their parents, characterised by high control and low care. We predict that high levels of Dark Triad traits relate to preferences for partners who are uncaring and controlling as parents, as this reflects the model of parenting that individuals with high levels of these traits were exposed to in childhood.

In summary, the present study explores associations between the Dark Triad and long-term mate preferences in parenting styles of future partners. Based on predictions from life history and social learning theories, we expect that individuals high in the Dark Triad prefer partners who will be cold and controlling towards future offspring.

## Method

### Participants

Men ( $n = 179$ ) and women ( $n = 181$ ) aged 18 - 70 years ( $M = 30.16$ ,  $SD = 11.22$ ) were recruited for an online study via social media and on-line participation forums. The study was advertised as “parenting and personality”. Participants were predominantly in a serious relationships (69.7%) and heterosexual (88.1%).

### Materials

The Short Dark Triad (SD3) measure (Jones & Paulhus, 2014) contains 27 items, nine items per Dark Triad trait subscale. Participants indicate the extent to which they agree with each statement on a five point scale (1 = disagree strongly to 5 = agree strongly). Example items include “I insist on getting the respect I deserve” (narcissism;  $\alpha = .71$ ), “You should wait for the right time to get back at people” (Machiavellianism;  $\alpha = .78$ ), and “People often say I’m out of control” (psychopathy;  $\alpha = .81$ ).

The original Parental Bonding Instrument (Parker, Tupling, & Brown, 1979) was modified to measure the extent to which the participant would like the future mother/father of their children to show parental care (rejection / acceptance) and control (degree of autonomy / overprotection). Participants responded to 25 items on a four point scale from 0 = not at all important to 4 = extremely important. Example items include “Speaks to our child in a warm and friendly voice” (parental care;  $\alpha = .88$ ) and “Tries to control everything our child does” (parental control;  $\alpha = .53$ ).

## Results

Pearson’s correlations revealed significant associations between Dark Triad traits and preference for parental care and control. For men, narcissism was positively correlated with a preference for partners who are controlling as mothers, and psychopathy was significantly related to preference for partners displaying low maternal care and high maternal control. For

women, narcissism was positively related to preference for control. Machiavellianism and psychopathy were each negatively related to preference for parental care and positively related to preference for control (see Table 1). We tested the significance of sex differences between the correlations using the Fisher's  $r$  to  $z$  transformation. The only significant difference was between Machiavellianism and preference for caring parents (Fisher's  $z = -2.79, p < .001$ ).

We conducted a series of two stage hierarchical regressions to determine whether Dark Triad traits (narcissism, Machiavellianism, psychopathy) predicted preference for partners displaying parental care and control, controlling for participant age, sexual orientation, and number of children. At stage one, age, sexual orientation, and number of children predicted men's preference for parental care,  $F(3,175) = 3.15, p = .026$ , (Adj  $R^2$  .04). Inclusion of the Dark Triad traits at stage two was also significant,  $F(6,172) = 3.96, p = .001$ , (Adj  $R^2$  .09). When all predictor variables were entered into the model, Machiavellianism ( $\beta = .18, t = 2.12, p = .036$ ) and psychopathy ( $\beta = -.30, t = -3.42, p = .001$ ) were the only significant predictors.

For women, the stage one model was not significant,  $F(3,176) = .28, p = .837$ . The stage two model, including the Dark Triad traits was significant,  $F(6,173) = 3.19, p = .005$ , (Adj  $R^2$  .07). When all variables were entered into the model, Machiavellianism ( $\beta = -.20, t = -2.38, p = .018$ ) and psychopathy ( $\beta = -.18, t = -2.06, p = .041$ ) were the only significant individual predictors. Men and women high on Machiavellianism were more and less likely to prefer a caring partner, respectively. Men and women high on psychopathy were less likely to favour a partner displaying parental care.

At stage one, age, orientation, and number of children predicted men's preference for parental control,  $F(3,175) = 2.93, p = .035$ , (Adj  $R^2$  .03). Inclusion of the Dark Triad traits at stage two was also significant,  $F(6,172) = 4.21, p = .001$ , (Adj  $R^2$  .10). When all predictor

variables were entered into the model, narcissism ( $\beta = .25, t = 3.22, p = .002$ ) was the only significant predictor.

For women, both the stage one model,  $F(3,176) = 7.90, p < .000$ , ( $\text{Adj } R^2 .10$ ) and stage two models were significant,  $F(6,173) = 9.01, p < .001$ , ( $\text{Adj } R^2 .21$ ). When all predictors were entered into the model, age ( $\beta = -.22, t = -2.78, p = .006$ ), orientation ( $\beta = -.14, t = -2.02, p = .045$ ), number of children ( $\beta = .34, t = 4.42, p < .001$ ), and Narcissism ( $\beta = .26, t = 3.52, p = .001$ ) were significant individual predictors. Men and women high on narcissism were more likely to prefer controlling parents for their children. Further, younger women, heterosexual women, and women with children preferred more controlling parents.

## **Discussion**

Our study investigated the Dark Triad traits and the parental styles preferred in a future spouse. Narcissism predicted a preference for partners with controlling parenting styles, and psychopathy predicted a preference for partners with low care. Previous studies have found associations between recalled high parental control and narcissism (Horton & Tritch, 2014), and low parental care and psychopathy (Blanchard, Lyons, & Centifanti, 2016; Jonason et al., 2014). It is possible that these aspects of parenting not only relate to personality development in adulthood, but also influence partner preferences for parenting styles.

The results for Machiavellianism were more complicated and sex-specific. Men high in Machiavellianism had a preference for future spouses who are warm and caring as mothers, and women high in Machiavellianism for spouses who are uncaring as fathers. This is consistent with findings that have suggested that Machiavellianism in women has an association with low paternal care (Birkás, Láng, & Bereczkei, 2015), which could shape future preferences for similar fathering characteristics in a future spouse. The results for men are harder to interpret. Machiavellian men's preferences for spouses displaying high parental

care may reflect the exploitative and strategic nature of Machiavellianism (Christie & Geis, 1970), with highly Machiavellian men strategically seeking a long-term partner that will compensate for their own limited care.

Those high on Dark Triad traits prefer relationships with low levels of commitment, and are less likely to trust their partners (e.g., Adams, Luevano, & Jonason, 2014). Thus, they may be more likely to expect separation and unequal division of parenting responsibilities. Future research should investigate preferences for partners displaying specific parenting styles both among those with high and low expectations of relationship dissolution. Further, children are influenced not only by their parents' behaviour, but also by the support provided by grandparents and other members of the social support network. Future research should consider the extent to which Dark Triad traits influence the recruitment of additional childcare support and whether grandparents (whose own behaviour may have influenced the emergence of Dark Triad traits) are believed to be appropriate sources of childcare.

The present study should be considered as a preliminary study into the Dark Triad, long-term mate choices, and implications for parenting. The majority of the Dark Triad literature has focussed on mating strategies (Lyons, 2019), with a dearth of studies investigating long-term relationships, family functioning, and parenting practises. Our results suggest that individuals high in the Dark Triad traits may have a preference for partners who employed similar parenting practices as their parents. It is possible that the Dark Triad traits relate to assortative mating for parenting styles, although the actual parenting styles of high Dark Triad individuals remain to be investigated in future studies.

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*Table 1: Correlations for Dark Triad Traits and Preference for Parental Care and Control*

	Narcissism	Machiavellianism	Psychopathy	Care	Control
Narcissism		.32**	.39**	-.08	.34**
Machiavellianism	.25**		.51**	-.27**	.21**
Psychopathy	.25**	.46**		-.26**	.22**
Care	-.12	.02	-.27**		-.34**
Control	.28**	.13	.22**	-.41**	

Note: Data for men are displayed in the bottom left section of the table, data for women are displayed in the top right section. \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$