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# Understanding Relationships Among the Dark Triad Personality Profile and Romantic Partners' Conflict Communication

Sean M. Horan, Trey D. Guinn, & Scott Banghart

*Consistent with calls from prior research, the aim of this study was to understand how reports of the Dark Triad (e.g., subclinical narcissism, subclinical psychopathy, and Machiavellianism) related to conflict communication in romantic relationships. Results indicated that individuals reporting higher levels of the Dark Triad personality structure also reported more frequent disagreement that was also intense and hostile. Moreover, Dark Triad personality reports were directly related to the use of contempt, criticism, stonewalling, and defensiveness, messages collectively known as the Four Horsemen as they predict relational termination (e.g., Gottman, 1993; Gottman & Levenson, 1992). Machiavellianism and subclinical psychopathy were better predictors of conflict communication compared to subclinical narcissism. Findings reinforce that personality is important in understanding conflict communication. Implications, limitations, and future directions are discussed.*

**Keywords:** Conflict; Contempt; Criticism; Dark Triad; Defensiveness; Four Horsemen; Stonewalling

How one communicates is partially a function of his/her personality, explaining why communication researchers have often studied psychological processes. As Beatty, McCroskey, and Valencic (2001) explained, "...it simply is not realistic to

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believe that valid explanations of communication can ignore psychological principles. Communication depends on psychological processes” (p. 5). Consistent with that claim, the purpose of this study was to better understand the relationships among “psychological processes” and communication. Specifically, relationships among the Dark Triad personality profile (Paulhus & Williams, 2002) and conflict communication in romantic relationships were explored.

The Dark Triad personality is composed of subclinical narcissism, subclinical psychopathy, and Machiavellianism (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). The traits are considered to be unique from one another but do share some similarities. In general, “To varying degrees, all three entail a socially malevolent character with behavior tendencies toward self-promotion, emotional coldness, duplicity, and aggressiveness” (Paulhus & Williams, 2002, p. 557). These commonalities suggest that those exhibiting Dark Triad personality characteristics may be influential in conflict communication, supporting its exploration in the present conflict inquiry. Hence, the next section provides an overview of the Dark Triad personality profile, followed by a review of the conflict communication studied and associated rationales.

### The Dark Triad

An individual fitting the Dark Triad personality profile is Machiavellian as well as a subclinical narcissist and subclinical psychopath. A *subclinical narcissist* exhibits “grandiosity, entitlement, dominance, and superiority” (Paulhus & Williams, 2002, p. 557); a *subclinical psychopath* can be described as one with “high impulsivity and thrill-seeking along with low empathy and anxiety” (Paulhus & Williams, 2002); and, finally, a *Machiavellian* personality can be described “in short, [as] the manipulative personality” (Paulhus & Williams, 2002, p. 556; see also Christie & Geis, 1970). In comparison to psychopathic and Machiavellian targets, narcissistic targets tend to be better perceived by individuals (Rauthmann & Kolar, 2012, 2013). Although commonly related, research supports that these are three distinct constructs (Paulhus & Williams, 2002).

These personality structures are important to explore because studies suggest that they influence relational communication behaviors. For example, all three Dark Triad personality dimensions were negatively related to reports of agreeableness (Paulhus & Williams, 2002), empathy (e.g., Jonason & Krause, 2013; Jonason, Lyons, Bethell, & Rose, 2013), and honesty/humility (Lee, Ashton, Wiltshire, Bourdage, Visser, & Gallucci, 2013). Moreover, reports of the Dark Triad were related to higher levels of sensation-seeking and impulsivity (Crysel, Crosier, & Webster, 2013). When examining love styles, those with Dark Triad personalities reported love styles of pragma and ludus (Jonason & Kavanagh, 2010). Collectively, such studies provide illustrations of how this personality structure is influential in relational communication.

Within relational communication, researchers have examined how the Dark Triad personality structure relates to mate selection and retention. Jonason, Li, Webster, and Schmidt (2009) found that individuals who exhibited higher levels of this

personality structure reported a higher number of sexual partners as well as a stronger desire for short-term, compared to long-term, mates. Men in their sample exhibited a stronger connection between Dark Triad personality reports and short-term mating. Replicating such findings, Lee et al. (2013) recently found a relationship between Dark Triad personality reports and short-term mating preferences. As one part of this short-term mating process, individuals with Dark Triad personality structures avoid entangling commitments (Jonason & Buss, 2012). Despite this, some have argued for mating benefits of Dark Triad personality structures: Namely, they are able to poach mates and be poached (Jonason, Li, & Buss, 2010).

Based on the aforementioned descriptions, navigating a romantic relationship with a person exhibiting these personality dimensions would be complicated. Part of this complication may, potentially, come from conflict communication, which is reviewed in the section that follows.

### **Nature of Conflict**

Conflict is important to examine, as it is inherently communicative: Communication causes conflict, and individuals communicate about conflict. Such conflict typically stems from the perception of incompatible goals or interference in goal achievement (see, for one example review, Roloff & Chiles, 2011). Importantly, conflict is related to a number of relational and psychological factors such as attachment (e.g., Domingue & Mollen, 2009), stress (e.g., Malis & Roloff, 2006a), and equity (e.g., Bippus, Boren, & Worrsham, 2008). Although the aforementioned processes are important to study, the present inquiry adopted a message approach to understanding conflict by specifically focusing on the nature of conflict (a perception developed from the communicative aspects of conflict) and the Four Horsemen (e.g., Gottman, 1993; Gottman & Levenson, 1992, 1999, 2000).

Understanding conflict and how it operates in relationships is crucial to making sense of relational communication processes. As one example, Birnbaum, Mikulincer, and Austerlitz (2013) examined conflict communication and its effects on sexual motivations and attraction in Israeli couples. In the conflict condition, compared to the control group, discussing relational problems resulted in men rating their female partners as more sexually attractive, whereas the discussion resulted in women rating their male partners as less sexually attractive. Moreover, participating in conflict communication decreased reports of wanting to have sex to nurture one's romantic partner; the remaining sexual motives were not influenced (e.g., emotional value, stress relief, to feel valued, and feeling pleasure). Thus, engaging in conflict communication influences both partner attraction and motivations for sex.

Although the study of romantic partner conflict is robust, a review would be incomplete without acknowledging the programmatic work examining demand-withdraw patterns. Demand-withdraw is a conflict pattern wherein one partner typically initiates a request, often stemming from a desire for partner change (Caughlin & Vangelisti, 1999), and another partner withdraws from the conflict (see, for example, Malis & Roloff, 2006a). Studies repeatedly document that demand/withdraw patterns are

related to aversive outcomes (e.g., Malis & Roloff, 2006a, 2006b; Siffert & Schwarz, 2011; Uebelacker, Courtnage, & Whisman, 2003; Weger, 2005), such as intrusive thoughts, avoidance, and disruption of daily activities (Malis & Roloff, 2006a).

The effects of demand-withdraw stem beyond that of romantic partner relationships. Within the family, levels of demand-withdraw between parents and adolescents were related to low self-esteem and high levels of substance abuse (Caughlin & Malis, 2004). Collectively, then, the body of work exploring demand-withdraw demonstrates that *how* people communicate during conflict relates to individuals' well being, underscoring the importance of studying psychological constructs that predict the nature of conflict communication.

In the present inquiry, the frequency of romantic partner conflict as well as the level at which conflict episodes were emotionally upsetting (e.g., intense and hostile) were examined. Recent research revealed that conflicts with high levels of positional and personal attacks were viewed as more emotionally troubling and hostile (DiPaola, Roloff, & Peters, 2010). Conversely, highly humor-oriented communicators reported a lower level of overall partner conflict as well as less intense and hostile conflict episodes; these relationships were mediated by the use of humor as a coping mechanism (Horan, Bochantin, & Booth-Butterfield, 2012). Collectively, then, how individuals communicate during conflict is important, and the previously reviewed studies reinforce that personality is important in understanding this process.

### Communication During Conflict: Four Horsemen

Four conflict messages that have received academic attention are contempt, criticism, stonewalling, and defensiveness. *Contempt* involves "statements that come from a relative position of superiority... 'You're an idiot'"; *Criticism* entails "stating one's complaints as a defect in one's partner's personality... 'You always talk about yourself. You are so selfish'"; *Stonewalling* describes "the listener's withdrawal from interaction;" and *defensiveness* describes self-protection in the form of "righteous indignation or innocent victimhood." Example: "It's not my fault that we're always late; it's your fault" (Gottman, 1993, p. 62). Such behaviors can work together, wherein there is "process cascade in which criticism leads to contempt, which leads to defensiveness, which leads to stonewalling" (Gottman, 1993, p. 62). Collectively, these conflict messages are known as *The Four Horsemen* (Gottman, 1993).

Although the name for these conflict messages may appear a bit extreme, considerable academic research underscores their importance in conflict communication, as they are indicative of relational termination. For example, in summarizing his longitudinal work examining relational termination, Gottman explained:

There were some negative acts that were more predictive of dissolution than others. For example, anger was not predictive of separation or divorce, but the husband's defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling (the listener's withdrawal from interaction) were predictive of divorce... whereas the wife's criticism was predictive of separation... and her criticism, defensiveness, and contempt were predictive of divorce. By means of a global specific emotions coding system, the

wife's contempt and disgust were found to be particularly predictive of marital separation. (1993, p. 62; see also Gottman & Levenson, 1992)

Of the four, contempt is the largest indicator of termination (The Gottman Institute, 2013), as it is a key in diminishing feelings of fondness and admiration (Gottman & Levenson, 1999). Such findings illustrate that *how* couples communicate during conflict is more important than *what* they are debating.

Subsequent studies by Gottman and colleagues demonstrate the importance of the Four Horsemen in studying romantic relationships (e.g., Gottman & Levenson, 2000, 2002). Based on their 14-year study of married couples, Gottman and Levenson (2000) concluded that, "It is clear that divorce prediction with a high level of accuracy is possible" (p. 743), as their findings replicated earlier work revealing that the presence of contempt, criticism, stonewalling, and defensiveness were key indicators of termination.

Recently, Fowler and Dillow (2011) examined how attachment orientations predicted the enactment of Four Horsemen. They found that attachment anxiety predicted an increased use of the Four Horsemen and attachment avoidance predicted the use of stonewalling. Their findings underscore the importance of studying individual personality traits, or predispositions, in conjunction with the Four Horsemen; a similar approach was adopted here by studying the Dark Triad.

## Rationale

The purpose of this study was to explore how the Dark Triad personality structure related to conflict communication, specifically focusing on the nature of conflict and the Four Horsemen. The first set of predictions pertained to the frequency of romantic partner conflict, as well as the intensity and hostility of such conflict. Based on prior work, it was predicted that individuals fitting the Dark Triad personality profile would report higher amounts of overall disagreement and that conflict communication should be more intense and hostile. Empirical studies provide support for such speculation, including Paulhus and Williams (2002), who found that reports of the Dark Triad personality structure were negatively related to agreeableness; a lower level of agreeableness suggests higher levels of overall disagreement. This disagreement may stem from, or work in conjunction with, game playing manifested through the ludic love style of Dark Triad personalities (Jonason & Kavanagh, 2010). Such a profile of disagreement and game playing, combined with short-term mating preferences (Jonason et al., 2009; Lee et al., 2013) and commitment avoidance (Jonason & Buss, 2012), suggests that conflict should be more frequent and upsetting in relationships wherein a person exhibits the Dark Triad personality profile compared to those relationships where individuals report lower levels of narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism. Formally:

- H1a: Individuals who report high levels of subclinical narcissism, subclinical psychopathy, and Machiavellianism will report more frequent disagreement compared to those who report lower levels of the Dark Triad.

- H1b: Individuals' reports of subclinical narcissism, subclinical psychopathy, and Machiavellianism will be directly related to the intensity of romantic partner conflict.
- H1c: Individuals' reports of subclinical narcissism, subclinical psychopathy, and Machiavellianism will be directly related to the hostility of romantic partner conflict.

These initial hypotheses investigated the general nature of conflict, and the second hypothesis adopted a specific message focus exploring problematic conflict behaviors. Such an exploration answers calls from relational communication scholars, who argued that, "Given the relational damage resulting from these behaviors [The Four Horsemen], an essential task facing scholars is to develop an understanding of what may predict their enactment" (Fowler & Dillow, 2011, p. 18). The Dark Triad personality profile, then, potentially helps researchers and clinicians further understand what "may predict...enactment" of contempt, criticism, stonewalling, and defensiveness; this study answers their call.

It was predicted that individuals reporting frequent use of the Four Horsemen would also report higher levels of the Dark Triad personality structure. As relational partners fitting the Dark Triad personality profile are less agreeable (Paulhus & Williams, 2002), more likely to play games (Jonason & Kavanagh, 2010), desire short-term mates (Jonason et al., 2009; Lee et al., 2012), and avoid commitment (Jonason & Buss, 2013), it is only logical to expect such actors to utilize negative conflict messages. Behaviors such as stonewalling and defensiveness allow one to avoid commitment and their partner. Equally, behaviors like contempt and criticism could result from being less agreeable and/or the desire to play games. Collectively, the four messages allow a partner to avoid commitment escalation and, consistent with their mate selection preferences, likely result in a short-term, rather than a long-term, relationship. Formally:

- H2: Individuals' reports of subclinical narcissism, subclinical psychopathy, and Machiavellianism will be directly related to their use of criticism, contempt, stonewalling, and defensiveness in romantic partner conflict.

## Method

### *Participants*

To participate, individuals had to be 18 years of age and currently in a non-married, self-defined romantic relationship that has lasted at least three months (similar criteria are regularly used to study romantic relationships; see, for examples, Birnbaum et al., 2013 or Horan & Booth-Butterfield, 2011). Two hundred and twenty-six individuals participated from the three areas: 144 individuals were recruited from a large, private university located in one of America's largest cities, 70 individuals from a large university located in between two major cities in the South, and 12 individuals from a large, urban southern university. Given the three different sample locations, it was important to test for differences among the variables based on location. Based on the small sample drawn from the major southern city ( $n = 12$ ) and the fact that the

two southern universities are located 33 miles apart from one another, they were combined into one southern sample for analyses ( $n = 82$ ). The personality reports and conflict messages did not differ based on location, and therefore, the two samples were combined.

One hundred and fifty-one participants were female (66.8%; 73 male, 32.3%; 2 declined to report sex, 0.9%) reporting on 147 male (65%) and 72 female (31.9%) romantic partners (7 declined to report partner sex, 3.1%) who described their relationships as seriously dating (77%; 13.3% casually dating; 4.9% engaged; and 4.9% other). Participants ranged in age from 18 to 49 years old ( $M = 21.85$ ,  $SD = 3.46$ ) and reported dating their partners for an average of 22.70 months ( $SD = 21.28$ ). One hundred and fifty-three participants (67.7%) described themselves White/Caucasian, 33 as Hispanic/Latino (14.6%), 20 as African American (8.8%), 10 as Asian (4.4%), 1 Native American (0.4%), and 9 as other (4.0%).

### *Instrumentation*

To measure the Dark Triad personality structure, Jonason and Webster's (2010) three-factor self-report scale was used. Three four-item scales gauge levels of Machiavellianism (e.g., *I tend to manipulate others to get my way*), subclinical psychopathy (e.g., *I tend to lack remorse*), and subclinical narcissism (e.g., *I tend to want others to admire me*). Participants utilize a 5-point Likert-type scale with responses ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. These scales have been reliable in previous research (see Jonason and Webster [2010] for their four study analysis) and in the current study (Machiavellianism  $\alpha = 0.70$ ;  $M = 2.47$ ,  $SD = 0.83$ ; narcissism  $\alpha = 0.82$ ;  $M = 2.86$ ,  $SD = 0.94$ ; psychopathy  $\alpha = 0.76$ ;  $M = 1.94$ ,  $SD = 0.86$ ). Machiavellianism was directly related to subclinical psychopathy ( $r = 0.44$ ,  $p = 0.01$ ) and subclinical narcissism ( $r = 0.52$ ,  $p = 0.01$ ); subclinical psychopathy and narcissism were also directly related ( $r = 0.26$ ,  $p = 0.01$ ).

To gauge the nature of conflict, the frequency of conflict was first assessed. The item, from Horan et al. (2012), asks "In general, how often do you and your partner disagree?" Participants categorize their frequency of conflict by selecting *never* (3.0%), *rarely* (31.5%), *sometimes* (47.0%), *often* (18.0%), or *always* (0.5%).

The remaining assessments of the nature of conflict assessed how emotionally upsetting conflict episodes were perceived to be by examining the general *hostility* and *intensity* of romantic partner conflict. Originally designed by DiPaola et al. (2010) to gauge a specific conflict episode, recent research has modified the scale to examine the general nature of conflict communication in romantic relationships (Horan et al., 2012). That is, directions were changed so that participants based their responses on "the general nature of the conflict discussions you have with your romantic partner." Participants utilized a 7-point Likert scale with 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*). Hostility ( $M = 2.93$ ,  $SD = 1.36$ ) items gauged how explosive and heated conflict is perceived to be, whereas intensity items ( $M = 3.47$ ,  $SD = 0.97$ ) gauged the level of disturbance, arousal, emotions, and hurt during conflict. Prior research demonstrates both their distinct factor structure (DiPaola et al., 2010) as well as their

reliability (DiPaola et al., 2010; Horan et al., 2012). Both scales were reliable here (intensity  $\alpha = 0.78$ ; hostility  $\alpha = 0.91$ ).

To measure the Four Horsemen, Fowler and Dillow's (2011) scale was used. The scale utilizes eight items for stonewalling (e.g., "When my partner complains, I feel that I just want to get away from the situation"), eight items for contempt (e.g., "When we talk, I quite often find myself putting my partner down"), seven items for defensiveness (e.g., "It sometimes seems that all my partner can do is find fault with me") and seven items for criticism (e.g., "When my partner and I disagree, it is important to me to show them that he/she is at fault"). Participants' responses range from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) on a Likert-type scale. The scale was reliable in previous (see Fowler and Dillow) as well as the present inquiry (contempt  $\alpha = 0.86$ ,  $M = 2.65$ ,  $SD = 1.21$ ; criticism  $\alpha = 0.82$ ,  $M = 3.67$ ,  $SD = 1.23$ ; stonewalling  $\alpha = 0.83$ ,  $M = 3.46$ ,  $SD = 1.30$ ; defensiveness  $\alpha = 0.82$ ,  $M = 3.23$ ,  $SD = 1.23$ ).

## Results

Hypothesis 1a predicted that individuals reporting higher levels of the Dark Triad personality structure would report greater instances of romantic partner conflict. Results of a Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) revealed a significant model identifying differences between frequency of reported conflict (*never*, *rarely*, *sometimes*, or *often*; *always* removed from analysis as it had less than 2 cases and prevented any post-hoc test) based on personality reports (Wilks'  $\lambda = 0.87$ ,  $F [9, 467] = 3.17$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.47$ ). Univariate effects were significant for Machiavellianism ( $F [3, 197] = 6.72$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.09$ ), subclinical psychopathy ( $F [3, 197] = 4.74$ ,  $p = 0.003$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.07$ ), and subclinical narcissism ( $F [3, 197] = 3.36$ ,  $p = 0.02$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.05$ ). Post-hoc analyses (Scheffe) revealed that Machiavellian individuals reported significantly more conflict (*often*  $M = 2.76$ , *sometimes*  $M = 2.45$ , *rarely*  $M = 2.23$ ) than those lower on Machiavellianism (*never*  $M = 1.33$ ); similarly, individuals reporting high levels of psychopathy reported significantly more conflict (*sometimes*  $M = 1.97$ , *often*  $M = 2.21$ ) compared to those with lower levels of psychopathy (*never*  $M = 1.21$ ; *rarely* did not significantly differ from the other groups,  $M = 1.70$ ); and individuals reporting high levels of narcissism reported significantly higher levels of conflict (*rarely*  $M = 2.78$ , *often*  $M = 3.11$ ) compared to those reporting lower levels of narcissism (*never* = 1.96; *sometimes* did not differ from the other groups,  $M = 2.78$ ). Hypothesis 1a was supported.

Hypothesis 1b purported that reports of the Dark Triad would be directly related to the intensity of romantic partner conflict and, similarly, Hypothesis 1c reported that Dark Triad reports would be directly related to the hostility of romantic partner conflict. The degree to which conflict was intense was directly related to subclinical narcissism ( $r = 0.21$ ,  $p = 0.002$ ), subclinical psychopathy ( $r = 0.28$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), and Machiavellianism ( $r = 0.40$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Similarly, the degree to which conflict was hostile was directly related to narcissism ( $r = 0.18$ ,  $p = 0.01$ ), psychopathy ( $r = 0.37$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), and Machiavellianism ( $r = 0.33$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Hypotheses 1b and 1c were supported.

Hypothesis 2 forecasted that reports of the Dark Triad personality structure would be directly related to the use of the Four Horsemen during romantic partner conflict. Reports of Machiavellianism were directly related to the reported use of contempt ( $r = 0.46, p < 0.001$ ), defensiveness ( $r = 0.35, p < 0.001$ ), stonewalling ( $r = 0.26, p < 0.001$ ), and criticism ( $r = 0.37, p < 0.001$ ). Similarly, reports of subclinical psychopathy were directly related to the reported use of contempt ( $r = 0.44, p < 0.001$ ), defensiveness ( $r = 0.25, p < 0.001$ ), stonewalling ( $r = 0.25, p < 0.001$ ), and criticism ( $r = 0.39, p < 0.001$ ). Equally, reports of subclinical narcissism were directly related to the reported use of contempt ( $r = 0.24, p < 0.001$ ), defensiveness ( $r = 0.26, p < 0.001$ ), and criticism ( $r = 0.21, p = 0.001$ ). Narcissism was unrelated to stonewalling ( $r = 0.16, ns$ ). Hypothesis 2 was mostly supported.

### *Post Hoc Analyses*

Although the Dark Triad describes a personality profile, the three personality dimensions are distinct (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). That said, and with the significant results obtained here in mind, a series of regressions were conducted to better understand which component(s) of the Dark Triad best predicted the intensity and hostility of conflict as well as the use of contempt, criticism, stonewalling, and defensiveness. An initial regression was conducted with conflict intensity serving as the criterion variable and components of the Dark Triad as predictor variables; a significant model was obtained  $F(3, 210) = 15.00, p < 0.001$ , accounting for 18% ( $R^2 = 0.176$ ) of the variance in *intensity*; Machiavellianism (Beta = 0.330,  $p < 0.001$ ) and psychopathy (Beta = 0.079,  $p = 0.024$ ) were significant predictors (narcissism Beta = 0.001, *ns*). A similar model was obtained for hostility,  $F(3, 209) = 14.90, p < 0.001$ , accounting for 18% ( $R^2 = 0.176$ ) of the variance in *hostility*; Machiavellianism (Beta = 0.225,  $p = 0.004$ ) and psychopathy (Beta = 0.111,  $p < 0.001$ ) were significant predictors (narcissism Beta = -0.006, *ns*). Collectively, Machiavellianism and psychopathy appear to play key roles in understanding the intensity and hostility of romantic partner conflict.

A similar series of regressions were conducted to discover the unique variance accounted for by the Dark Triad personality profile in reported use of the Four Horsemen. A significant model was obtained for *criticism*,  $F(3, 214) = 17.39, p < 0.001$ , accounting for 20% ( $R^2 = 0.196$ ) of the variance: Machiavellianism (Beta = 0.238,  $p = 0.002$ ) and psychopathy (Beta = 0.268,  $p < 0.001$ ) were significant predictors (narcissism Beta = 0.027, *ns*). A similar model was obtained for *contempt*,  $F(3, 217) = 28.04, p < 0.001$ , accounting for 28% ( $R^2 = 0.279$ ) of the variance: Machiavellianism (Beta = 0.330,  $p < 0.001$ ) and psychopathy (Beta = 0.293,  $p < 0.001$ ) were significant predictors (narcissism Beta = 0.000, *ns*). Equally, a significant model was obtained for *defensiveness*,  $F(3, 219) = 11.42, p < 0.001$ , accounting for 14% ( $R^2 = 0.135$ ) of the variance: Machiavellianism (Beta = 0.267,  $p = 0.001$ ) was the only significant predictor (psychopathy Beta = 0.115, *ns*; narcissism Beta = 0.062, *ns*). As narcissism was previously unrelated to stonewalling (see results of H2), it was left out of the final regression. A significant model was obtained for *stonewalling*,

$F(2, 219) = 12.44$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , accounting for 10% ( $R^2 = 0.102$ ) of the variance: Machiavellianism (Beta = 0.236,  $p = 0.001$ ) was the only significant predictor (psychopathy Beta = 0.136, *ns*). Although psychopathy did add to understanding of criticism and contempt, it appears that Machiavellianism is the reliable predictor of the use of the Four Horsemen during romantic partner conflict.

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to better understand how personality structure related to communication during romantic partner conflict. Results document that the Dark Triad personality structure adds to scholars' understanding of conflict communication: Findings suggest that this personality structure is predictive of antisocial conflict communication. Studies, such as the one conducted here, answer prior calls for us to better understand the Four Horsemen (e.g., Fowler & Dillow, 2011). Similarly, results further illustrate the interdependency of communication and psychology (e.g., Beatty, McCroskey, & Valencic, 2001; Hornsey, Gallois, & Duck, 2008).

Hypotheses 1a–1c examined the relationships among the Dark Triad personality structure and general nature of romantic partner conflict. Results demonstrated that individuals reporting higher levels of Machiavellianism, subclinical psychopathy, and subclinical narcissism tended to have higher levels of romantic partner disagreement and that such conflict discussions were both intense and hostile. Regressions further informed this finding, revealing that Machiavellianism and subclinical psychopathy are key predictors of hostile and intense romantic partner conflicts.

Hypothesis 2 explored the relationships among the Dark Triad personality structure and use of the Four Horsemen during romantic partner conflict. Correlations revealed that individuals reporting higher levels Machiavellianism and subclinical psychopathy also reported greater use of contempt, criticism, stonewalling, and defensiveness. A similar picture was painted for narcissism, with the exception of stonewalling. Regressions provided a better understanding of these relationships, with Machiavellianism emerging as a reliable predictor of the Four Horsemen (though psychopathy was a predictor of contempt and criticism).

### *Implications for Research and Relationships*

Although all three measures of the Dark Triad personality structure were related, on some level, to the conflict measures of interest here, the combined results indicate that Machiavellianism is key in understanding romantic partner conflict. Recall that the Machiavellian personality is described as “manipulative” (Paulhus & Williams, 2002, p. 556), suggesting that such individuals will do whatever they can during conflict to “win”—findings here help explain *how* they may go about achieving goals. Despite engaging in a conflict discussion with someone the actor cares about, he/she willingly chooses problematic conflict messages. Potentially these messages are chosen as one way to manipulate their partners.

Findings here, along with existing communication research, paint a troubling picture of the Machiavellian communicator. Consider that Machiavellian individuals report being assertive but not responsive (Johnson & McCroskey, 2010) and less communicatively flexible (Martin, Anderson, & Thweatt, 1998). Such research reveals that the Machiavellian defends his or her position (e.g., assertive) but is not overly considerate of the needs of his/her partner (e.g., responsiveness and flexibility findings). Rather than using prosocial conflict messages, results implicate that the Machiavellian individual utilizes the Four Horsemen in his/her attempts to remain assertive.

Noticeably absent from the conflict regressions was subclinical narcissism, as subclinical psychopathy and Machiavellianism were more reliable predictors. Despite narcissists exhibiting “grandiosity, entitlement, dominance, and superiority” (Paulhus & Williams, 2002, p. 557), narcissists are in fact viewed as popular and attractive in initial interactions (Back, Schmukle, & Elgoff, 2010). Potentially, then, this explains why narcissists report a greater number of Facebook friends (McKinney, Kelly, & Duran, 2012). However, there is a darker side to narcissism in romantic relationships. For instance, narcissists report higher levels of acceptability of obsessive relational intrusion (Asada, Eunsoon, Levine, & Ferrara, 2004). Departing from a purely psychological perspective, communication research examining conversational narcissism helps further understand findings. Vangelisti, Knapp, and Daly (1990) explained conversational narcissism as those things “people do, conversationally, when they appear narcissist to others” (p. 251). Their focus on narcissism differs slightly from the focus here—they focused on the interactive and “presentation” features that help create the perception that a person is a narcissist (p. 251). In interactions, conversational narcissism emerges through the use of “boasting, asking questions to demonstrate superior knowledge, ‘one-upping’ others’ disclosures, ‘shifting’ the conversational focus to the self, and overusing ‘I’ statements. Other strategies include abbreviated responses and displaying impatience when others speak” (pp. 269–270). The aforementioned characteristics shed light on why narcissism may have played little role in predicting the use of criticism, contempt, stonewalling, and defensiveness. Consider that none of conversational narcissism behaviors directly implicate the Four Horsemen. Likewise, the aforementioned descriptions portraying a self-focus and impatience for listening suggest that conflict episodes would be more focused on the narcissist rather than on the partner (e.g., less use of the Four Horsemen). Interestingly, and troubling for romantic partners, individuals report primarily employing passive responses to narcissism (Vangelisti et al., 1990), suggesting partners tolerate such behavior.

Together, results help explain *why* conflict involving one person who fits the Dark Triad personality profile is intense and hostile: They express more criticism, contempt, and defensiveness while also stonewalling. These messages are important to understand, as they are clear predictors of termination (e.g., Gottman, 1993; Gottman & Levenson, 1992, 2000). Relational communication researchers would be wise to design studies aimed at better understanding these messages. Rather than focus on topics of conflict, it is important to focus on *how* relational partners communicate during conflict.

### *Future Research*

This investigation aimed to understand the communicative expressions of the Dark Triad personality profile during the communication of conflict. As one's personality is manifested through verbal and nonverbal messages, it is important for communication researchers to further explore the Dark Triad structure and associated interactive behavior. The manner in which individuals manage conflict, whether prosocially (e.g., Stafford, Dainton, & Haas, 2000) or destructively (Dainton & Gross, 2008), has been identified as a relational maintenance behavior. As typologies of both positive and negative maintenance exist, future studies should examine how the Dark Triad personality operates within the context of maintenance. Such an investigation is warranted given evidence connecting dimensions of Machiavellianism and maintenance (e.g., Ragsdale & Brandau-Brown, 2005).

Future studies of Dark Triad personalities should move toward obtaining paired partner data. For example, a couple should be surveyed where each person provides a self report of his or her Dark Triad profile while also reporting on the communicative behaviors of their romantic partner. This would allow researchers to have a self-report of personality but also an other-report of romantic partner communication.

This study addressed how personality relates to antisocial conflict messages via contempt, criticism, stonewalling, and defensiveness. Subsequent research should further explore prosocial messages expressed during conflict. As one point of departure, researchers should continue to study the role of humor during conflict. Existing research indicates that humor use is related to attraction (e.g., Didonato, Bedminster, & Machel, 2013), and within conflict discussions, sources' humor attempts were negatively related to perceived conflict escalation (Bippus, Young, & Dunbar, 2011). Given the importance of humor in both mate selection and conflict, additional conflict studies should work to further understand the role of humorous messages.

### *Limitations*

As with any inquiry, limitations must be acknowledged. Some limitations are typical to the design of this study, including the cross-sectional nature of the study. That said, when considering the Dark Triad personality structure the cross-sectional design may be less of a concern. Personality traits are considered stable, and Jonason et al. (2010) provided evidence of temporal stability through test-retest analyses. A second limitation refers to the correlational nature of this study, yet it is impossible to design a true experiment in which you manipulate someone's psychological profile.

A third limitation of this study is the age of the sample in that it represents traditional young adults' romantic relationships. Despite this fact, though, the goal of this study was to better understand young adults' romantic relationships; thus findings are informative for the population of interest. Given that personality traits are consistent and stable over time, it is probable that results would be replicated in older adults.

Finally, an unrelated sample consideration relates to sexual orientation. Although sexual orientation was not explicitly assessed, demographics suggest a small portion of the sample engaged in same-sex relationships. This is somewhat of a limitation as it was an uneven sample breakdown (e.g., most of the sample reported on cross-sex relationships). Still, this should be less of a concern as observational studies document that same- and cross-sex couples manage conflict similarly (Julien, Chartrand, Simard, Bouthiller, & Begin, 2003).

### Conclusion

The goal of this investigation was to better understand how personality structures predict relational communication processes. Findings here provide support for the notion that personality is a significant predictor of how individuals behave during romantic partner conflict discussions. Jonason et al. (2010) argued that retaining mates who fit the Dark Triad personality profile is challenging. The reported results provide additional explanatory power to their claim, specifically identifying the problematic conflict interactions that occur in these relationships that are directly related to relational termination (e.g., Gottman, 1993; Gottman & Levenson, 1992, 2000).

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