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# **The Role of Attachment Style in the Relationship Between Dark Triad Traits and Relationship Satisfaction**

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## **Abstract**

Personality traits play an important role in shaping interpersonal relationships which include Dark Triad traits which are often associated with maladaptive relational outcomes. The present study delved the relationship between Dark Triad personality traits- videlicet egocentrism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy- and romantic relationship satisfaction, with attachment style proposed as an interceding variable. Given the growing body of literature pressing the interpersonal consequences of socially aversive personality traits, this study aimed to explore the underpinning mechanisms through which similar traits impact romantic relationship issues among youthful grown-ups in India. A quantitative cross-sectional correlational exploration design was employed, and data were collected through an online survey administered through Google Forms. The sample comprised youth between 18-30 years among the Indian population using convenience sampling. Participants completed a set of standardized tone- report measures assessing Dark Triad personality traits, attachment styles, and relationship satisfaction.

Contrary to theoretical prospects, the results revealed that Dark Triad personality traits weren't significantly associated with either attachment styles or relationship satisfaction. Likewise, attachment style did not significantly intervene the relationship between Dark Triad traits and relationship satisfaction. These null findings suggest that the associations between socially aversive personality traits and romantic relationship issues may be more nuanced and environment-dependent than being theoretical frameworks proposed.

The findings of the study contribute to a better understanding of the complexity of the underlying mechanisms through which socially aversive personality traits influence romantic relationship outcomes among young adults.

*Keywords: dark triad, personality traits, attachment styles, relationship satisfaction, mediation*

## **Introduction**

The 'Dark Triad of Personality' traits refer to three interrelated higher-order personality constructs- psychopathy, narcissism and Machiavellianism (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). The term Machiavellianism was founded by Psychologists Richard Christie and Florence L. Geis named it after Niccolò Machiavelli which refers to a personality trait characterized by manipulative behavior, cynical attitudes, and a pragmatic morality that prioritizes self-interest over ethical considerations. According to them a "manipulator" would possess four characteristics namely - Relative lack of empathy in close relationships, Lack of Concern for Conventional Morality, Lack of Gross Psychopathology, and Low Ideological Commitment.

Narcissism is characterized by an elevated sense of self-worth and entitlement (Emmons, 1984, Raskin and Hall, 1981) and overconfidence (Campbell, Goodie, & Foster, 2004). It is a style of personality that is characterized by grandiosity; fantasies of having extreme power, beauty, and success; high sensitivity to criticism; strong sense of entitlement; and exploitativeness in relationships.



Psychopathy is linked to reduced relationship exclusivity (Khan, Brewer, Kim, & Munoz Centifanti, 2017) and callous, self-centered and self-serving behavior (Hare, 1996). Dr. Cleckley initially characterized the psychopathic personality as a relatively high-functioning individual with an aggressively narcissistic and extraverted facade, which conceals an antisocial and underlying psychotic essence.

After the Dark Triad, another term that is related is Relationship Satisfaction, which has been understood as a multidimensional construct reflecting individuals' subjective perceptions of the quality of their romantic relationship, including emotional intimacy, communication quality, conflict resolution, and overall happiness with the partnership (Karney & Bradbury, 1995).

Furthermore, the term that comes is Attachment Styles, Brennan, Clark, and Shaver (1998) developed the dimensional approach to adult attachment, identifying two underlying dimensions: attachment anxiety (fear of rejection and abandonment) and attachment avoidance (discomfort with closeness and dependency). Mikulincer and Shaver (2007) describe secure attachment as characterized by a sense of attachment security, enabling individuals to effectively regulate emotions, maintain positive self-regard, and engage in constructive relationship behaviors, while insecure attachment styles are associated with hyperactivating strategies (anxiety) or deactivating strategies (avoidance) for managing attachment-related distress.

### **Dark Triad Traits and Relationship Satisfaction**

People displaying narcissistic tendencies often are selfish, lacking empathy, sensitive to criticism, and arrogant. They also feel a sense of superiority and entitlement. Paulhus (2001) states that narcissism is characterized by extreme need for admiration, being dominant and grandiose. People displaying psychopathic traits have the tendency to display anti-social behaviour, also lack empathy for others, and lack remorse for their actions toward others. Individuals who display Machiavellianistic tendencies are manipulative, show lack of emotion, and also display absence of morality. These individuals tend to deceive others for their own gain.

Individuals exhibiting high levels of Machiavellianism

prioritize their own self-interest above the needs of others, and they are inclined to rationalize any methods to achieve their desired outcomes (Braginsky 1970).

Relationship satisfaction refers to the personal perception of the quality of a relationship, which emerges from assessments of both the positive and negative aspects of an individual's romantic partnership (Fallis et al., 2016, adapted from Lawrence and Byers, 1995). In other words, Relationship satisfaction represents an individual's evaluation of the emotional and functional quality of a romantic relationship. Hawkins (1968) had described relationship satisfaction as a subjective appraisal of an individual's happiness, satisfaction, and pleasure derived from his/her relationship. People who are satisfied with their romantic relationships have a high level of dependence and they rely on their partners for fulfillment of their primary needs (Rusbult and Buunk 1993). Current studies indicate that individuals with dark triad characteristics often experience diminished relationship satisfaction. Sternberg (1986) characterized relationship satisfaction through three key elements: intimacy, commitment, and passion. Ali and Chamorro-Premuzic (2010) state that individuals who possess more Machiavellianistic traits, have lower scores on these relationship components than those who possess lesser Machiavellianistic traits. They also discovered a negative correlation between psychopathy and intimacy.



Likewise, Hyla (2015) indicates that there exists a negative correlation between Machiavellianism and relationship satisfaction. Furthermore, Smith et al. (2014) demonstrated that psychopathy and relationship commitment were inversely related, and that there was a negative correlation between men's relationship satisfaction and psychopathy. Ye et al. (2016) states that spouses' high levels of narcissism were among the early indicators of marital dissatisfaction for both parts.

### **Dark Triad Traits and Attachment Styles**

Existing research indicates that dark triad traits are negatively associated with healthy attachment styles. Attachment styles refer to the emotional and behavioural responses in relationships which have been formed due to early experiences in childhood with primary caregivers. According to John Bowlby (1988), he characterizes attachment as the bond formed between a newborn and their caregiver, or the newborn's desire to establish such a bond. Kim Bartholomew and Leonard Horowitz (Bartholomew, K., & Horowitz, L. M. (1991). Attachment styles among young adults:

A test of a four-category model. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*) developed a four-category model to categorize attachment styles: Secure, Dismissing-Avoidant, Fearful-Avoidant, and Anxious-Preoccupied styles, each of which illustrates different relationship patterns. Consequently, this model distinguishes between secure and insecure attachment styles. Bowlby posits that the quality of parental care received during childhood can influence the type of attachment style an individual is likely to develop. Individuals are inclined to form a secure attachment if they grow up with a primary caregiver who is reliable and responsive (Santiago, Bucher-Maluschke, Alexandre, & Branco, 2017). Conversely, those with caregivers who are insensitive, unpredictable, inconsistent, or abusive are more likely to develop an insecure attachment, such as anxious or avoidant styles. Individuals with anxious attachment often harbor a negative self-image and believe they are unworthy of support from their caregivers (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). In contrast, individuals with avoidant attachment styles typically resist intimacy and closeness, which arises from their diminished sense of love and self-worth, and they generally maintain a negative outlook towards others (Sutton, 2019).

Existing studies suggest that Machiavellianism and psychopathy are positively correlated with insecure attachment (Ali and Chamorro-Premuzic, 2010; Mack et al., 2011). Specifically, psychopathy is associated with heightened anxious and avoidant attachment (Mayer et al., 2020), while Machiavellianism is linked to increased anxious behaviors, avoidant attachment (Connor et al., 2020), and/or disorganized attachment (Bartholomew and Horowitz, 1991).

### **Attachment Styles and Relationship Satisfaction**

Existing research indicates that more secure attachment styles correlate to higher levels of relationship satisfaction. Attachment styles are enduring patterns which have been shaped by our childhood experiences with our primary caregivers (Reddy, C. B. (2024). Attachment Style and Relationship Satisfaction Among Early Adults.) These patterns influence how comfortable we are in relationships, our closeness with other individuals and overall interactions with other individuals. According to Bowlby (1958) attachment style is the "lasting psychological connectedness between human beings" that is formed in infancy through interactions with primary caregivers, especially with the mother.



Mary Ainsworth (Ainsworth et al., 1978) identified three distinct patterns or styles of attachment, which have since been termed secure, anxious-resistant or ambivalent, and avoidant (Levy, K. N., Ellison, W. D., Scott, L. N., & Bernecker, S. L. (2011). Attachment style. *Journal of clinical psychology*, 67(2), 193-203.)

Later, Bartholomew and Horowitz (Bartholomew, K., & Horowitz, L. M. (1991) studied attachment styles among young adults: An examination of a four-category model. *The Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* revised the classifications of attachment styles and developed a four-category model comprising: Secure, Dismissing- Avoidant, Fearful-Avoidant, and Anxious-Preoccupied styles.

Bartholomew and Horowitz introduced the concept of fearful-avoidant attachment alongside secure, preoccupied, and dismissing-avoidant styles (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991) which provides a better understanding of adult attachment styles, incorporating both self and other dimensions of attachment. It is found that secure attachment contributes to more positive daily interactions and overall relationship satisfaction, whereas insecure attachment styles can lead to daily stress and lower satisfaction (Reddy, C. B. (2024). Attachment Style and Relationship Satisfaction Among Early Adults.). It is posited that insecure attachment styles, such as anxious or avoidant attachment styles, are positively correlated with relationship dissatisfaction. Thus, attachment styles may influence relationship satisfaction by shaping emotional regulation and interpersonal expectations, which can affect communication and conflict resolution.

### **Attachment Styles as a mediator between Dark Triad traits and Relationship Satisfaction**

As established, people who score higher on dark triad traits tend to have self-serving tendencies, manipulate and exploit others, and tend to be narcissistic in nature. Due to low empathy levels and the inability to emotionally connect with others, and extreme self-centeredness, these individuals tend to have a more insecure or avoidant attachment style (Bowlby, 2005; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2012). Studies have shown that insecure or avoidant attachment styles lead to higher levels of relationship dissatisfaction (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2015). Thus we can say that individuals possessing insecure attachment styles have lower levels of relationship satisfaction and those with higher levels of secure attachment styles tend to experience much more rewarding relationships and have higher scores on relationship satisfaction.

### **Methodology**

The current study examining the effect of attachment styles between Dark Triad traits and Relationship Satisfaction employed a cross-sectional correlational design. The participants were ensured confidentiality and provided informed consent. Based on the current existing studies multiple hypotheses can be formed:

#### **•H1 — Dark Triad → Relationship Satisfaction**

Individuals with higher levels of Dark Triad traits (Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy) will be associated with lower relationship satisfaction.



**●H2 — Dark Triad → Attachment Style**

Individuals possessing higher levels of Dark Triad traits will be associated with more insecure attachment styles (anxious and avoidant).

**●H3 — Attachment Style → Relationship Satisfaction**

Individuals with more insecure attachment styles will be associated with lower relationship satisfaction.

**●H4 – Dark Triad Traits → Insecure Attachment Styles → Relationship Satisfaction**

Attachment style will mediate the relationship between Dark Triad traits and relationship satisfaction, that is individuals having high scores in Dark Triad traits will show greater insecure attachment, which in turn will predict lower relationship satisfaction.

**Participants and Procedure**

The data was collected from 45 participants from the age group 18-30. The sample consisted of 21 males (46.7%) and 24 females (53.3%). 40% of the sample population were in an ongoing relationship, 6.7% of the sample population were married and 53.3% of the sample population were in a relationship in the past 6 to 12 months. The majority of the sample were between the age group 19-21 years. The information was gathered over a period of two weeks.

The questionnaire containing the scales were sent out either on social media groups or each individual consenting to participate in the study. The participation was voluntary and the participants provided informed consent. Convenience sampling was employed due to time and resource constraints and the exploratory nature of the present study. This sampling method is commonly used in psychological research involving student and young adult populations, particularly when investigating relational and personality constructs in non-clinical settings.

**Assessments and Measures**

The questionnaire consisted of three scales namely, Dirty Dozen Scale (DDS), Experiences in Close Relationships Scale (ECR-S), and the Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS).



**Dirty Dozen Scale (DDS)**- The Dirty Dozen is a brief 12 item measure developed by Peter Jonason and Webster in 2010. The Dirty Dozen is a shorter version to measure the three socially aversive traits known as the "Dark Triad": Narcissism, Psychopathy, and Machiavellianism, making it a brief alternative to longer, more detailed Dark Triad assessments like the Short Dark Triad (SD3). The scale was developed to provide an efficient alternative to traditional Dark Triad assessments, reducing the item count by 87% from 91 items to just 12 items while maintaining acceptable psychometric properties. Each of the three traits is measured by four items rated on a Likert scale.

**Experiences in Close Relationships Scale (ECR-S)**- The Experiences in Close Relationships (ECR) scale is a self-report instrument consisting of 36 items, designed to assess the concept of adult attachment (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998). This scale evaluates how individuals perceive, feel, and act in romantic relationships through the lens of attachment theory. It gauges adult attachment across two primary dimensions: attachment-related anxiety (which reflects the degree of insecurity versus security individuals feel regarding the availability and responsiveness of their romantic partners) and attachment-related avoidance (which indicates the level of discomfort individuals experience in being close to others versus their comfort in relying on others) (Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000).

**Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS)**- The 7-item Relationship Assessment Scale developed by Hendrick (1988) and adapted to Turkish by Curun (2001) was used to measure the relationship satisfactions of university students. A sample item is "To what extent has your relationship met your original expectations?". The responses were given using a 7-point Likert scale and each of the points was tailored according to the question asked. The Cronbach's alpha of the unidimensional scale was .88.

All the above instruments used in the present study have demonstrated acceptable internal consistency in previous researches. The Dirty Dozen Scale has shown reliability coefficients ranging from  $\alpha = .72$  to  $.87$  across samples. The Experiences in Close Relationships Scale has consistently demonstrated strong reliability for attachment anxiety and avoidance dimensions ( $\alpha > .90$ ). The Relationship Assessment Scale has also shown high internal consistency, with reported Cronbach's alpha values typically above  $.85$ . These findings support the reliability of the measures used in the current study.



## Results

To calculate the data collected from the Google responses, a mediation analysis was utilised to examine whether attachment styles mediated the relationship between Dark Triad traits and Relationship Satisfaction with  $N = 45$ .

### Outcome 1

The first step included using a regression analysis which then indicated that Dark Triad traits did not significantly predict relationship satisfaction,  $\beta = .05$ ,  $SE = .08$ ,  $t(43) = 0.65$ ,  $p = .52$ ,  $R^2 = .01$

### Outcome 2

In the second step the Dark Triad traits were entered as a predictor of attachment styles and the results showed a positive but non-significant association thus  $\beta = .23$ ,  $SE = .13$ ,  $t(43) = 1.70$ ,  $p = .10$ ,  $R^2 = .06$

### Outcome 3

In the third step the data of Attachment Styles and Dark Triad traits were simultaneously entered together as predictors of Relationship Satisfaction and it was found that Attachment styles did not significantly predict relationship satisfaction when controlling for Dark Triad traits thus  $\beta = -.10$ ,  $SE = .09$ ,  $t(42) = -1.06$ ,  $p = .29$ . It was also found that the direct effect of Dark Triad traits also remained non-significant,  $\beta = .07$ ,  $p = .38$ .

A Sobel Test which is a statistical method used in mediation analysis to check whether a mediator variable carries an influence of an independent variable onto a dependent variable in a significant manner. In the current study, a Sobel Test was carried out which indicated that the indirect effect of Dark Triad traits on relationship satisfaction through attachment styles as the mediating factor was not significant as expected ( $Z = -0.90$ ,  $p = 0.52$ ). Thus, the results in this study show that attachment styles do not mediate the relationship between Dark Triad traits and Relationship Satisfaction as expected.

## Discussion

### Reasons for the inconsistent results:

The present study examined whether attachment styles mediated the relationship between Dark Triad traits and Relationship Satisfaction. Contrary to our expectations, the results did not support a significant direct nor indirect relationship among these variables.



The Dark Triad traits were not significantly associated with relationship satisfaction nor were they predictors of attachment styles. Furthermore, attachment styles did not predict relationship satisfaction when controlling for Dark Triad traits and the expected indirect effect was non-significant. The results of the current study were not in line with the given hypotheses and provided insignificant effects due to several reasons. One possible reason is related to statistical power. Although the sample size was adequate enough to run basic regression analyses, mediation models require greater statistical power to detect and calculate indirect effects. It is, thus, possible that small or moderate effects were not detected in the present study.

From a theoretical perspective, attachment styles are considered as relatively stable constructs throughout an individual's life which are rooted in early caregiving experiences (Bowlby, 1969/1982, 1973), whereas Dark Triad traits reflect personality tendencies that may influence interpersonal behavior rather than attachment representations. Therefore, the impact of Dark Triad traits on romantic relationships may operate through psycho-social mechanisms such as communication patterns, conflict resolution, or emotional regulation, rather than attachment styles. Additionally, relationship satisfaction is a multifaceted construct which is influenced by contextual, relational, and situational factors. In non-clinical samples, the effects of personality traits and attachment styles on satisfaction may be attenuated which could account for the weak associations in the current study. Despite the lack of significant findings, the present study contributes to the existing literature by highlighting the complexity of the relationships between personality traits, attachment styles and relational outcomes. The results suggest that attachment styles might not universally mediate the association between the Dark Triad traits and Relationship Satisfaction, thus requiring the need for alternative mediators, larger samples, and even the role of other external factors for future research.

### **Cultural Considerations**

According to Indian cultural contexts, family involvement in romantic relationships is more pronounced compared to western individualistic approaches. The collectivistic approach in Indian unions is not just viewed as a relationship between individuals but as alliances between two families (Netting, 2010). And this mindset encourages the interference of the families in the couples' life, affecting relationship satisfaction in multiple ways- Beyond immediate family, extended family members, community members, and social networks exert influence on relationship dynamics through gossip, social surveillance, and normative pressures (Mines, 1988), which affects couples' autonomy in managing their relationship which hinders their level of satisfaction.

### **Contributions Beyond Existing Literatures**

A significant donation of the present study lies in its focus on a non-western sample, specifically from the youth of India. The maturity of exploration examining the relationship between Dark Triad personality traits and romantic relationship issues has been conducted within Western, WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic) populations, which limits the cross-cultural generalizability of similar findings (Henrich et al., 2010). By investigating the associations, the present study addresses a notable gap in cross cultural research on personality and relationships.



As India being socially-culturally rich, it influences how personality traits are brought up and how it relates to relationship outcomes that makes it unique as compared to a western setting.

The present study focuses on youthful grown-ups aged between 18-30 years within the Indian environment is particularly applicable and timely, given the profound and ongoing metamorphosis of romantic relationship morals in contemporary Indian society. Traditionally, romantic connections in India have been heavily intermediated by domestic involvement, with arranged marriages constituting the dominant relational frame across the importance of the country (Allendorf & Pandian, 2016). Still, recent decades have witnessed a significant shift in this geography, particularly among civic, educated youthful grown-ups, with adding acceptance and frequency of tone- initiated love marriages, adulterous romantic connections, and lesser individual autonomy in mate selection.

This transitional period creates a uniquely complex relational terrain in which youthful grown-ups must navigate the crossroad of traditional artistic prospects and fleetly evolving contemporary values. The present study, thus, not only contributes empirical data from an underrepresented population but also draws attention to the need for unborn exploration to examine how the fleetly shifting relational geography of ultramodern India intersects with personality and attachment processes in shaping romantic relationship issues.

### **Limitations**

The absence of significant relationships in the present study may be attributed to several methodological and contextual factors. The most significant limitation is the relatively small sample size ( $N = 45$ ) which may have limited statistical power to detect small or moderate effects. Mediation analyses typically require larger samples to reliably detect indirect effects, and it is possible that meaningful associations existed but were not statistically detected. In line with the sampling, convenience sampling limits generalizability, however, it allows for efficient data collection and it is appropriate for preliminary correlational research examining associations between psychological variables.

Another limitation is the reliance on the self-report measures which shows potential social-desirability bias particularly for dark triad traits and measurement limitations may have influenced the findings and the Dirty Dozen Scale consists of only 12 items, which may not capture the full complexity of Dark Triad personality traits thus, as a result, subtle variations in personality characteristics may not have been adequately measured.

Furthermore, the study doesn't reflect on the geographic scope of India including its culture, linguistic diversities and socio-economic contexts. Cultural and relational factors specific to the Indian context may have influenced relationship satisfaction independently of personality traits. In collectivistic cultures, family involvement, social expectations, and relational norms often play a significant role in relationship outcomes, potentially overshadowing individual personality characteristics. There also exists the role of family in relationship satisfaction since in India, families play a huge role in terms of relationship satisfaction between a couple and this can be considered as a limitation since these aspects were not considered in the present study.



Additionally, participants with the category of “past relationships” may face recall bias, which is a systematic error in research occurring when participants do not accurately remember past events, when attempting to fill the questionnaire. Additionally, a Sobel test was used to examine the indirect effect of attachment styles between Dark Triad traits and Relationship Satisfaction, however this method of examining variables assumes a normal distribution of the indirect effect and is less robust for utilization in smaller samples. More contemporary mediation analyses recommend bootstrapped confidence intervals which provide stronger statistical power and stronger and more accurate estimates of the indirect effect among the variables.



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