



New Trends
in Psychology

Couple Satisfaction and Dark Triad Personality Traits: An Empirical Study

Brigitte Popa¹

Abstract: This study examines the relationship between couple satisfaction and the Dark Triad personality traits—narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy—while also exploring gender differences in both relational satisfaction and the expression of these traits. Previous research has shown that personality traits shape relationship outcomes, with the Dark Triad increasingly recognized as a cluster of socially aversive traits that may undermine intimacy. Yet, findings remain inconsistent, particularly regarding cultural and gender-related variations. A quantitative design was applied using standardized instruments: the Short Dark Triad questionnaire (SD3) (Jones & Paulhus, 2014) and the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS-32) (Spanier, 1976). Statistical analyses were conducted with SPSS. Results indicated no significant correlations between Dark Triad traits and overall couple satisfaction, contrary to expectations. However, gender differences emerged: men scored higher on psychopathy and Machiavellianism, while women reported greater satisfaction. These findings suggest that the influence of dark personality traits on relationships is more complex than assumed and may be moderated by cultural or relational factors. The study contributes to a nuanced understanding of couple dynamics and offers insights relevant for counseling and therapeutic practice.

Keywords: narcissism; machiavellianism; psychopathy; gender differences; couple dynamics

¹ Student, School of Human Advancement & Life Sciences, Danubius International University of Galati, Romania, Address: 3 Galati Blvd., Galati 800654, Romania, Corresponding author: afterschool.ace@yahoo.com.



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1. Introduction

Mitrofan and Ciupercă (1998) portray the couple as a bio-psycho-social entity with dual polarity, in which partners continuously shape one another by providing support, stimulation, and opportunities for growth, while fulfilling themselves as unique biological, emotional, and social individuals. From the perspective of specialized literature, marital satisfaction is regarded as an emotional state that reflects the degree to which individuals feel content with the interactions, experiences, and expectations they encounter within their relationship (Ward, Lundberg, Zabriskie & Berrett, 2009). Previous studies have pointed out that marital satisfaction represents a global, subjective evaluation of the relationship, closely linked to the sense of happiness experienced by both partners (Bardbury, Fincham & Beach, 2000).

Couple satisfaction plays a central role in individual well-being, exerting significant influence on both psychological adjustment and physical health. However, not all intimate partnerships manage to reach high levels of satisfaction, which has led researchers to explore the extent to which personality traits shape relationship dynamics. Within this line of inquiry, the Dark Triad of personality—narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy—has increasingly drawn attention due to its potential to negatively affect interpersonal functioning.

At the same time, couple satisfaction is recognized as a multidimensional construct that reflects the degree of fulfillment and happiness experienced by partners. In the present study, it is assessed through standardized questionnaires designed to capture several core aspects of relational life, including:

- Harmony – the extent to which the relationship is perceived as balanced and relatively free of major conflicts;
- Communication – the quality and frequency of verbal exchanges, as well as the partners' ability to resolve disagreements constructively;
- Compatibility – the perceived alignment of values, interests, and lifestyles;
- Sexual satisfaction – the level of contentment within the intimate and sexual dimension of the partnership.

2. Literature Review

Couple satisfaction has been extensively studied in psychological research, given its strong associations with both individual well-being and relational stability. Bradbury, Fincham and Beach (2000) emphasized that marital satisfaction is not only an emotional outcome but also a central predictor of mental health. Other studies have shown that satisfaction in romantic partnerships contributes significantly to resilience against stress and to improved life satisfaction (Fincham & Beach, 2010). At the same time, low levels of satisfaction have been linked to higher rates of conflict, separation, and psychological distress (Whisman, 2007).

Research has also highlighted the multidimensional nature of couple satisfaction. Spanier's Dyadic Adjustment Scale (1976), for example, captures dimensions such as consensus, affectional expression, cohesion, and satisfaction, illustrating that relationship quality is a complex construct involving communication, emotional closeness, and shared values. More recent studies have similarly argued for multidimensional approaches, suggesting that focusing only on global evaluations of satisfaction may obscure important variations across relational domains (Funk & Rogge, 2007).

In parallel, interest has grown in the influence of personality traits on relational outcomes. Numerous findings indicate that traits such as neuroticism, agreeableness, and conscientiousness are closely tied to marital quality (Malouff, Thorsteinsson, Schutte, Bhullar & Rooke, 2010). However, beyond the Big Five framework, increasing attention has been directed to the so-called "dark" traits, particularly the Dark Triad, as potential disruptors of intimacy and relational stability.

The Dark Triad, comprising narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy, has been conceptualized as a set of socially aversive traits expressed at subclinical levels (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Narcissism is associated with inflated self-esteem, need for admiration, and hypersensitivity to criticism (Campbell & Foster, 2007). Machiavellianism reflects manipulative strategies, strategic calculation, and emotional detachment (Christie & Geis, 1970). Psychopathy involves impulsivity, lack of empathy, and antisocial tendencies (Hare, 2003). Although distinct, these traits often overlap in their interpersonal consequences, particularly in fostering emotional distance, conflict, and exploitation (Jonason & Webster, 2010).

Empirical evidence suggests that individuals high in Dark Triad traits may experience difficulties in forming and maintaining satisfying relationships.

Narcissism, for example, has been linked to controlling behaviors, reduced empathy, and instability in romantic ties (Campbell, Foster & Finkel, 2002). Machiavellianism has been associated with infidelity, lack of trust, and low commitment (Ali & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2010). Psychopathy, even in its subclinical form, predicts impulsive and exploitative behaviors that undermine intimacy and trust (Furnham, Richards & Paulhus, 2013).

Nevertheless, the literature is not entirely consistent. Some studies have found weak or non-significant associations between Dark Triad traits and certain dimensions of satisfaction, suggesting that contextual factors and partner characteristics may moderate these effects (Kowalski et al., 2018). This underlines the need for further empirical research, particularly in diverse cultural settings, to better understand how these traits manifest in relational contexts.

In sum, the literature suggests that while couple satisfaction is a complex and multifaceted construct with strong implications for well-being, it may be significantly influenced by dark personality traits. However, the evidence remains mixed, and gaps persist, particularly with respect to gender differences and cultural variations. The present study seeks to address these gaps by examining the associations between Dark Triad traits and couple satisfaction, while also considering gender-related differences in both satisfaction and personality expression.

3. Problem Statement and Research Objectives

The primary objective of this study is to examine the relationship between couple satisfaction and the Dark Triad personality traits—narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy. The goal is to determine whether these subclinical tendencies, often associated with egocentric, manipulative, or antisocial behaviors, undermine the quality of intimate partnerships. This analysis is relevant in both theoretical and applied contexts, as it may clarify psychological mechanisms contributing to dissatisfaction or dysfunction in couple relationships.

A second objective is to explore potential gender differences in the perception of couple satisfaction. Previous research suggests that men and women may experience relational happiness in distinct ways, influenced by variations in communication, emotional expressiveness, and sociocultural expectations. By addressing these

aspects, the present study seeks to generate insights that could inform more tailored therapeutic interventions.

The third objective concerns gender-related differences in the manifestation of Dark Triad traits. Personality research indicates that men and women may vary in the extent to which they express narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy, with these patterns shaped by both biological factors and sociocultural influences. Examining these distinctions may offer a deeper understanding of how dark personality characteristics emerge in romantic contexts and how they differentially affect relationship dynamics across genders.

Hypotheses:

- **Couple Satisfaction and Dark Triad Traits:** It is expected that couple satisfaction will be significantly correlated with the Dark Triad personality traits (narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy).
- **Gender Differences in Couple Satisfaction:** It is anticipated that men and women will differ significantly in their reported levels of couple satisfaction.
- **Gender Differences in Dark Triad Traits:** It is proposed that men and women will exhibit statistically significant differences in the expression of Dark Triad traits.

4. Theoretical Framework (Concepts and Terms)



Figure 1. Dark triad of personality

The Dark Triad of personality refers to a cluster of interconnected traits that predispose individuals to manipulative strategies and socially disruptive behaviors. It comprises three distinct, yet related dimensions: narcissism, Machiavellianism,

and psychopathy, each carrying its own psychological features but often exerting similar influences on couple dynamics.

Narcissism is typically marked by an inflated sense of self-importance, a strong need for admiration, and heightened sensitivity to criticism. Individuals with pronounced narcissistic tendencies frequently prioritize their own interests and struggle to fully acknowledge the needs or perspectives of their partner.

Machiavellianism, in contrast, reflects a pragmatic and instrumental orientation in which individuals pursue their goals through manipulation, often disregarding ethical considerations or the impact on others. Those scoring high in Machiavellian traits are strategic, calculating, and emotionally detached.

Psychopathy is most strongly associated with impulsivity, a lack of empathy, and antisocial patterns of behavior. People with psychopathic traits often display emotional coldness and may exploit others to achieve personal aims, rarely experiencing guilt or remorse.

In the present study, the Short Dark Triad questionnaire (Jones & Paulhus, 2014) was employed to assess these traits, while relationship satisfaction was measured using the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS-32) (Spanier, 1976). Both instruments are well established in psychological research and are widely recognized for their reliability and validity.

Narcissism is typically described as an excessive self-focus, coupled with a strong need for admiration and an inflated sense of personal importance. In contrast, Machiavellianism reflects a manipulative and strategic approach, where individuals prioritize their own interests and show little concern for the feelings of others. Psychopathy is distinguished by impulsivity, emotional detachment, and antisocial tendencies. When expressed at subclinical levels, these traits may foster emotional coldness and dysfunctional patterns within couple relationships.

The purpose of this study is to explore the association between Dark Triad traits and couple satisfaction, offering insight into psychological mechanisms that may underlie relational difficulties. By examining these dynamics, the research intends to provide practitioners in couple counseling with relevant knowledge that can support the development of more tailored and effective therapeutic strategies.

5. Methodology

To explore the connection between couple satisfaction and the Dark Triad personality traits, this study relied on two well-established and widely used psychological instruments. The Short Dark Triad questionnaire (SD3) (Jones & Paulhus, 2014) was chosen to assess narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy. This tool, frequently employed in personality research, includes 27 items distributed equally across the three traits and rated on a five-point Likert scale (from strongly disagree to strongly agree). Its design allows for an efficient yet reliable assessment of these personality tendencies as they typically appear in everyday life, without reaching clinical thresholds.

The sample consisted of adults aged between 25 and 55+ from two Romanian counties, Galați and Constanța. Participants were recruited on a voluntary basis, and their responses were collected through paper-and-pencil questionnaires. Before completing the survey, all individuals provided informed consent, and confidentiality was assured. This approach aimed to create a safe and open context in which participants could respond honestly and without pressure.

To assess narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy, the study employed the Short Dark Triad questionnaire (SD3) (Jones & Paulhus, 2014). This instrument includes 27 items, equally divided among the three traits, rated on a five-point Likert scale (from strongly disagree to strongly agree). Widely used in personality research, the SD3 offers an efficient yet reliable way to capture subclinical expressions of these traits as they manifest in everyday life, rather than in pathological extremes.

Couple satisfaction. The quality of relationships was evaluated using the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS-32) (Spanier, 1976). This scale has become a standard tool for measuring relational satisfaction and adjustment. It consists of 32 items that reflect multiple dimensions of couple functioning—such as cohesion, consensus, satisfaction, and affective expression—providing a comprehensive picture of how partners perceive the harmony and balance within their relationship.

Responses were processed using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). The analyses combined correlational procedures (Spearman's rho) to explore associations between Dark Triad traits and couple satisfaction, and group comparison tests (independent-samples t-tests or Mann-Whitney U tests, depending on data distribution) to evaluate gender differences. This combination of methods

ensured that the hypotheses were tested rigorously while also allowing for a nuanced interpretation of the data.

6. Results of the Analysis

Hypothesis 1: Couple Satisfaction and Dark Triad Traits

The first hypothesis predicted significant associations between couple satisfaction and the Dark Triad traits. Correlational analyses using Spearman's rho indicated no significant relationships. Narcissism correlated weakly and negatively with couple satisfaction ($r = -0.045$, $p = 0.615$), Machiavellianism correlated weakly and positively ($r = 0.071$, $p = 0.423$), and psychopathy showed virtually no association ($r = -0.002$, $p = 0.982$). All results were non-significant.

These findings suggest that, within this sample, narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy did not directly influence relationship satisfaction. Consequently, the first hypothesis was not supported. Further research with larger or more diverse samples may be needed to clarify whether contextual or moderating factors influence these associations.

Hypothesis 2: Gender Differences in Couple Satisfaction

The second hypothesis proposed that men and women would differ significantly in reported levels of couple satisfaction. Independent-samples t-tests indicated no significant gender differences ($t = -0.061$, $p = 0.951$). The mean difference between groups was minimal (-0.077), and the 95% confidence interval (-2.577 to 2.422) confirmed the absence of meaningful variation. These results are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Independent-Samples Test for Gender Differences in Couple Satisfaction

| Independent Samples Test | | | | | | | | | | |
|--------------------------|-----------------------------|---|------|-------|--------|-----------------|------------------------------|-----------------------|---|-------|
| | | Levene's Test for Equality of Variances | | | | | t-test for Equality of Means | | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference | |
| | | F | Sig. | t | df | Sig. (2-tailed) | Mean Difference | Std. Error Difference | Lower | Upper |
| Satisfactia in cuplu | Equal variances assumed | 1.218 | .272 | -.061 | 127 | .951 | -.077 | 1.263 | -2.577 | 2.422 |
| | Equal variances not assumed | | | -.058 | 40.477 | .954 | -.077 | 1.327 | -2.758 | 2.603 |

In addition, Mann-Whitney U tests were conducted to further verify gender differences across specific dimensions of couple satisfaction (understanding,

cohesion, and affective expression). As shown in Table 2, no statistically significant differences were found, as all p-values exceeded 0.05.

Table 2. Mann-Whitney U Test Results for Gender Differences in Couple Satisfaction

| Test Statistics^a | | | | |
|------------------------------------|----------------------|-------------|-----------|---------------------|
| | Satisfactia in cuplu | Intelegerea | Coeziunea | Exprimarea afectiva |
| Mann-Whitney U | 1229.000 | 1321.000 | 1413.500 | 1312.500 |
| Wilcoxon W | 6380.000 | 1727.000 | 6564.500 | 1718.500 |
| Z | -1.062 | -.534 | -.003 | -.596 |
| Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed) | .288 | .593 | .998 | .551 |

a. Grouping Variable: Gen

Taken together, both the t-test and the Mann-Whitney U test consistently indicated that men and women in this sample reported comparable levels of satisfaction in their romantic relationships. Consequently, the second hypothesis was not supported.

Therefore, the second hypothesis is not confirmed. Contrary to expectations, men and women in this sample reported similar levels of satisfaction in their romantic relationships.

The third hypothesis predicted statistically significant gender differences in the expression of the three Dark Triad traits: Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy. Results of the Mann-Whitney U test are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Mann-Whitney U Test Results for Gender Differences in Dark Triad Traits

| Trait | Gender | N | Mean Rank | Sum of Ranks |
|------------------|--------|-----|-----------|--------------|
| Machiavellianism | Male | 28 | 57.52 | 1610.50 |
| | Female | 101 | 67.07 | 6774.50 |
| Narcissism | Male | 28 | 58.52 | 1638.50 |
| | Female | 101 | 66.80 | 6746.50 |
| Psychopathy | Male | 28 | 75.14 | 2104.00 |
| | Female | 101 | 62.19 | 6281.00 |

The results revealed a gender-specific pattern: women scored higher on Machiavellianism and narcissism, whereas men scored higher on psychopathy. These findings provide partial confirmation of the third hypothesis. While gender differences were indeed observed, they did not follow a uniform direction across all traits. Instead, the results suggest that the expression of Dark Triad characteristics is differentiated by gender, with women displaying greater tendencies toward

manipulative and self-centered orientations, and men exhibiting higher levels of emotional detachment and antisocial tendencies.

Taken together, the analyses offered mixed support for the proposed hypotheses. The first hypothesis, predicting significant correlations between Dark Triad traits and couple satisfaction, was not confirmed, as all associations proved weak and non-significant. The second hypothesis, which anticipated gender differences in couple satisfaction, was likewise not supported, with both t-tests and non-parametric analyses indicating comparable levels of relational adjustment across men and women. In contrast, the third hypothesis received partial confirmation: while women scored higher on Machiavellianism and narcissism, men reported higher levels of psychopathy. These results point to nuanced gender-specific patterns in the expression of dark personality traits, while suggesting that their direct influence on couple satisfaction may be less straightforward than initially expected.

7. Discussion

The present study set out to examine the relationship between couple satisfaction and the Dark Triad personality traits, while also exploring gender differences in both relational outcomes and the expression of these traits. The findings point to several noteworthy aspects that merit further reflection.

First, the absence of significant correlations between narcissism, Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and couple satisfaction suggests that these traits may not exert a straightforward influence on relational well-being in this sample. While prior studies often reported negative associations between dark traits and intimacy or trust, the present results indicate that such effects may be less direct, possibly moderated by contextual or cultural factors. It is plausible that protective relational mechanisms—such as communication quality, shared values, or mutual support—buffer the potential impact of socially aversive personality tendencies.

Second, no gender differences were observed in reported levels of couple satisfaction. This finding contrasts with strands of literature that emphasize men's and women's divergent expectations or communication patterns in intimate partnerships. One interpretation is that, within the Romanian cultural setting, gender roles in relationships are becoming more flexible, leading to more similar perceptions of satisfaction across men and women. This observation may reflect

broader social transformations that reshape how couples negotiate harmony and adjustment.

Third, gender-related differences emerged in the expression of Dark Triad traits. Women reported higher levels of Machiavellianism and narcissism, while men scored higher on psychopathy. This partially confirms the third hypothesis and adds nuance to the discussion on gender and personality. Although international research has often highlighted men's higher scores across all three traits, the current findings suggest that women may express manipulative or self-centered tendencies in relational contexts, whereas men may display more emotional detachment and impulsivity. Such patterns invite closer examination of cultural and situational influences on the manifestation of dark traits.

From a practical perspective, these results underscore the importance of avoiding overly deterministic assumptions in clinical and counseling settings. The mere presence of dark traits does not necessarily predict relational dissatisfaction. Instead, therapeutic interventions may benefit from focusing on strengthening protective factors such as effective communication, conflict resolution skills, and emotional attunement.

From a research perspective, the study highlights the need to further investigate the interplay between dark personality characteristics and relational outcomes in diverse cultural environments. Future studies could adopt longitudinal designs to capture temporal dynamics, incorporate partner perspectives to reduce self-report bias, and include additional psychological variables such as attachment style, coping strategies, or stress levels. Such approaches would help clarify the conditions under which dark traits may meaningfully shape relational satisfaction.

8. Implications for Practice and Future Research

Although the hypotheses of this study were not fully supported, the findings provide meaningful insights into how relationship satisfaction unfolds in the presence of subclinical Dark Triad traits. The absence of significant associations suggests that such traits may not act in isolation but are shaped by contextual influences such as relationship duration, communication patterns, or educational background.

From a clinical perspective, the results encourage therapists to adopt a nuanced approach when working with couples. Rather than focusing narrowly on maladaptive personality traits, interventions should emphasize strengthening communication,

fostering emotional understanding, and developing constructive conflict-resolution strategies. This perspective reduces the risk of attributing difficulties solely to individual traits and highlights the role of relational processes in maintaining satisfaction.

The findings underline the complexity of relational well-being and suggest that multiple factors jointly shape outcomes. For psychologists, this means moving beyond linear explanations of personality–outcome links and considering broader psychological processes such as emotional regulation, attachment histories, and contextual stressors.

For clinicians, the study reinforces the importance of a holistic assessment of couple dynamics. Dark Triad traits alone cannot account for dissatisfaction, and practitioners are encouraged to integrate variables such as communication style, attachment dynamics, and situational stress into therapeutic interventions.

The observed gender differences—women scoring higher on narcissism and Machiavellianism, men higher on psychopathy—suggest opportunities for more personalized therapeutic strategies. Tailoring interventions to these patterns may enhance their effectiveness and resonance with the lived experiences of couples.

Future research directions: The results call for further investigation into mediating and moderating factors such as attachment style, relationship length, daily stress, and socioeconomic context. Employing longitudinal designs, multi-method assessments, and more sophisticated measures of interpersonal behavior would provide a deeper understanding of how Dark Triad traits interact with other variables over time. Exploring gender-based differences across diverse sociocultural settings would also enrich theoretical models and strengthen the empirical foundation for applied psychology and therapeutic practice.

9. Limits of the Research

Every empirical study is subject to limitations and acknowledging them is essential for a balanced interpretation of the results. In this study, the sampling frame was restricted to adults from two Romanian counties, which limits generalizability to broader populations. Cultural specificity further constrains the applicability of the findings, as perceptions of both couple satisfaction and Dark Triad traits may differ across societies. The cross-sectional design prevents causal inference, leaving open the possibility of bidirectional effects or third-variable influences. Moreover, the

exclusive reliance on self-report questionnaires introduces potential biases, such as social desirability or impression management, particularly relevant when assessing socially sensitive traits like psychopathy or Machiavellianism. Finally, psychometric properties of the instruments within this specific sample were not tested in detail, which may affect the precision of gender comparisons. Taken together, these limitations point to the need for future research using longitudinal designs, multiple data sources, and cross-cultural perspectives.

10. Conclusions

This study examined the relationship between couple satisfaction and Dark Triad personality traits, while also considering potential gender differences. Contrary to the initial assumptions, narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy did not show significant associations with relational satisfaction. Likewise, no gender differences emerged in reported levels of satisfaction, cohesion, understanding, or affective expression.

At the same time, partial support was found for the expectation of gender-related differences in personality expression: women scored higher on narcissism and Machiavellianism, whereas men scored higher on psychopathy. These findings suggest that dark traits may manifest differently across genders, although their direct impact on couple satisfaction remains limited.

Overall, the results indicate that the link between socially aversive personality traits and relational well-being is less straightforward than often assumed. By highlighting this complexity, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of intimate relationships and underlines the need for further research in diverse cultural contexts.

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