Articoli di ricerca

Dark personality and emotional abuse in intimate relationships: the role of gender, jealousy and attitude for violence

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Abstract

The Dark Personality (DP) refers to a combination of three specific traits—narcissism, Machiavellianism, psychopathy—characterized by a focus on self-centered goals, lack of empathy, manipulative behavior, and a tendency for abusive conduct in interpersonal relationships. Recently, sadism has been added to these traits and seems to play a key role in the development of abusive behaviors. DP has been linked to various forms of intimate partner violence (IPV), but the relationship between DP, jealousy, violence tolerance and emotional abuse in the general population is still poorly studied.

Objectives. The aim is to investigate the role of DP, jealousy and attitude toward IPV on the development of emotional abuse in intimate relationships, highlighting gender differences, if any.

Methods. 491 participants (52% female; age 18-62) recruited from social networks, completed an online survey. Participants were provided with socio-demographic information and self-report measures assessing DP, attitudes toward IPV, perpetrated emotional abuse, and jealousy.

Results. Correlational analyses revealed positive associations between DP and emotional abuse, jealousy, and attitude toward IPV. Gender differences in the study variables suggested that men showed higher levels of DP and tolerance for violence, while women scored higher in the jealousy, denigration, and restrictive engulfment scales. Regression Analysis showed that female gender, age, DP, and jealousy accounted for 29% of the variance of the perpetrated emotional abuse.

Conclusion. Our findings emphasize the need for prevention and intervention programs tailored to individual characteristics such as DP, jealousy and the individual's operational functioning, addressing IPV concerns in both women and men.

Keywords: dark personality, emotional abuse, jealousy, attitude toward intimate partner violence, gender differences.

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Dark personality and emotional abuse in intimate relationships: the role of gender, jealousy and attitude for violence

Introduction

In the last twenty years, the idea of a specific "bad" personality has gained more and more attention from scholars and clinicians, as it seems to be related to negative and immoral conduct in different aspects of human life (i.e., leadership, corruption, interpersonal violence) (Mackey et al., 2021; Plouffe et al., 2022; Szabó et al., 2021). Paulhus and Williams (2002) introduced the term "Dark Triad Personality" to denote the combination of socially offensive personality traits, such as Narcissism, Psychopathy, and Machiavellianism.

In its clinical form, narcissistic personality disorder in the DSM-5-TR (American Psychiatric Association, 2022) is "defined as comprising a pervasive pattern of grandiosity (in fantasy or behavior), a constant need for admiration, and a lack of empathy, beginning by early adulthood and present in a variety of contexts". However, regarding psychopathy in the DSM-5-TR it's only possible to make a diagnosis of "antisocial personality disorder". Psychopathy is a personality construct found within PDM – 2. It describes a psychopathic subject as charismatic and charming with a lack of empathy and morality (Lingiardi & McWilliams, 2018). The psychopath, unlike the antisocial, does not experience an open conflict with social rules (De Fazio et al., 2016); many people with this personality style can pursue their own goals, receiving approval and even admiration (Lingiardi & McWilliams, 2018).

Lastly, Machiavellianism refers to a personality characterized by the ability to tactically manipulate circumstances or individuals to achieve personal goals and realize one's desires (Lyons, 2019). It has been confirmed that Machiavellianism consists of two traits, which are: a cynical view of humanity and a tendency to use immoral tactics or means to achieve one's goals (Monaghan et al., 2019).

These personality types commonly share a notable trait of "low agreeableness" (McHoskey et al., 1998). Indeed, these traits have mutual components, such as reduced empathy, insensitivity, or the tendency to exploit and manipulate others (Lyons, 2019). When these traits are present together in non-pathological or "subclinical" form, although they are unpleasant traits that give the subject a degree of consistency of behavior, they may converge into a personality type that Paulhus (2014) called "Dark Personality" (DP) (Paulhus, 2014; Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Moreover, the triad is studied as if it was a continuum, without a clear separation or boundary between what is non-pathological and pathological (Lyons, 2019). Although these personality traits are considered socially offensive, they could also have an adaptive function, in social and biological terms. All dimensions of the dark triad are associated with a fast life history strategy (LHS-F; Gluck et al., 2020) characterized by diminished self-control, a short-term mating disposition, selfishness, and often with high social status and personal success (Chiorri et al., 2019; Jonason et al., 2010). Moreover, literature highlighted that males get higher scores than females in all aspects of the Dark Triad (Jonason & Webster, 2010), and that is consistent with the traditional conceptualization of male gender roles; therefore, one could note a possible relationship between the Dark Triad and hegemonic masculinity, understood as the dominant social position of men over women (Gluck et al., 2020). Furthermore, one possible reason for men adopting a faster life strategy may be their reduced commitment to their offspring (Jonason et al., 2010).

In recent years, the idea of adding sadistic personality traits to the Dark Triad Personality constellation has gained increasing acceptance (e.g., Chabrol et al., 2009; Johnson et al., 2019). The sadistic personality (Plouffe et al., 2017) not only shares low empathy with the Dark Triad (Pajevic et al., 2018; Paulhus, 2014) but adds a unique element: the intrinsic pleasure in hurting others (Nell, 2006), whether through direct actions (direct sadism) or observing harm inflicted on others (vicarious sadism; Paulhus & Jones, 2015).

Due to these specific features, the DP has been studied in association with Intimate Partner Violence and abusive relationships. Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) represents a significant worldwide public health issue (World Health Organization, WHO, 2021). It's estimated that about 27% of women between the ages of 15 and 49 have experienced physical and/or sexual or psychological violence from an intimate partner at least once in their lifetime (WHO, 2021). The findings also suggest that IPV doesn't only affect women and it's now recognized that IPV, in different ways, also frequently occurs bidirectionally, as partners in the relationship engage in reciprocal violence toward one another (Tetreault et al., 2021). As is known in the literature, some of the predictors of IPV include alcohol use/abuse, anger problems, low self-control, and personality traits (Jennings et al., 2017).

One particular form of IPV is emotional abuse, defined as dominance, control, isolation, and the use of intimate knowledge for denigration against the partner (Engel, 2002). However, literature findings about differences in emotional abuse perpetration are controversial. Some authors suggest that emotional abuse isn't only suffered by women, but females actively

perpetrate this type of violence against their partner in the same measure as males. Psychological violence seems to be the most frequent form of bidirectional violence (Machado et al., 2023). Other studies suggested that men are at more risk than women of being victims of emotional abuse in romantic relationships (Karakurt & Silver, 2013), others, instead, suggest the opposite (Vidourek, 2017).

Jealousy has also been shown to be a significant contributor to the perpetration of dating violence, emotional abuse, and IPV among men and women (Brem et al., 2018; LaMotte et al., 2018). Specifically, White (1981) distinguished jealousy's three different components: emotional jealousy, which is the feeling of distress when exposed to situations that evoke jealousy; cognitive jealousy refers to the thoughts that arise in jealous situations, such as rational or irrational thoughts and concerns regarding partner infidelity; and finally, behavioral jealousy represents the process by which an individual engages in investigative behaviors such as monitoring partner check their partners' communications to unearth possible signs of infidelity (Pfeiffer & Wong, 1989). Research further suggests that jealousy might exhibit distinct patterns between men and women, with men's jealousy mostly involving control and possessiveness (Adams & Williams, 2014). Moreover, jealousy has been demonstrated to have a significant role in the development of emotional and psychological abuse in romantic relationships (Mahoney et al., 2022; Ponti et al., 2020).

In light of what has been described so far, violent and abusive conduct within romantic relationships seems to be a widespread phenomenon. Although it is realistic to think that the majority of abuses are perpetrated by men against women, there are studies in the literature in which the hidden phenomenon of physical and psychological violence of women against their partners (male or female) emerges (Fincham et al., 2008a).

In order to understand how the norms reflected in attitudes and behaviors frame the perpetration of deviant conduct and to propose effective prevention and intervention programs, it is necessary to analyze the attitude and tolerance to physical and verbal violence within relationships. According to Fincham and colleagues (2008), for example, a positive attitude toward abusive behaviors in specific situations (e.g. during a fight or in response to infidelity), could be a predictor of physical, sexual, and emotional violence, both perpetrated and experienced, in men and women. However, cases of violence perpetrated by women and bi-directional violence remain hidden, often due to stereotypes and myths about the phenomenon. Males-on-females violence scenarios are also more likely to have police intervention recommended, are rated as more likely to be reported to the police, and are the most likely to receive a recommendation that the victim call the police. In contrast, women's violence toward men is judged less harshly and less likely to be illegal, so it is less reported and, as a consequence, less studied (Hine et al., 2022).

The present research aims to understand the role of DP, jealousy, and tolerance for interpersonal violence in the perpetration of emotional abuse in the general population in Italy. To our knowledge, in fact, the influence of these variables has been studied separately in the literature and more frequently in samples of convicted perpetrators or conflictual couples. Our goals are to assess the influence of the described variables on the development of emotional abusive behaviors and to highlight the differences between males and females, if any, in order to contribute to the implementation and improvement of ad hoc prevention programs and assessment procedures.

Methods

Participants and Procedures

The study sample was composed of 491 participants (238 men, 253 women) with a total average age of 32.95 years (SD = 9.75), aged between 18 –62. Participants filled out a survey on the online platform QUALTRICS and they were recruited through the main social media, in the general population.

Inclusion criteria were being at least 18 years old, understanding the Italian language, and not having a diagnosis of a personality disorder.

Participants filled out a sociodemographic questionnaire and a series of self-reports to assess Dark Triad traits, the presence of sub-clinical traits of sadism, jealousy, attitude to violence, and psychological abuse in the couple in the Italian population. The research protocol was approved by the Institutional Review Board of Psychology of the Department of Psychological, Health and Territorial Sciences of the University "G. d'Annunzio" of Chieti-Pescara (n. 21004). Participants gave their consent for the study by responding to a specific item on the online platform. Each person involved was informed about the aims of the project and privacy policy; they didn't receive any financial compensation for their participation in the study. The entire protocol was anonymous.

Sociodemographic questionnaire

Participants filled out a sociodemographic questionnaire that inquired about their: nationality, educational background (measured in the number of years of study, e.g., 8 years equivalent to a middle school diploma, 13 to a high-school diploma, 16 to a bachelor's degree, 18 to a master's degree, etc.), employment status (categorized as a student, unemployed, or employed etc.), religion (professing or not a faith) and relationship status. The relevant data is documented in Table 1.

	N	%
Qualification		
Secondary school diploma	14	2.8
High school diploma	158	32.2
Bachelor's Degree	98	20.0
Master's Degree	149	30.3
Postgraduate Degree	72	14.7
Employment		
Student	105	21.4
Freelancer	97	19.8
Employed	222	45.2
Unemployed	34	6.9
Occasional worker	29	5.9
Retired	4	0.8
Relationship status		
Single	149	30.4
In a stable relationship	153	31.2
In an open relationship	10	2.0
Cohabiting or married	167	34.0
Divorced or separated	12	2.4

Table 1 – Sample characteristics

Dark Triad traits

The Dark Triad Dirty Dozen (DD; Jonason & Webster, 2010) is a self-report questionnaire with 12 items, 4 items for a trait (Machiavellianism, psychopathy, narcissism) uses a 7-point Likert scale, which 1, indicates "strongly disagree", to 7, which indicates "strongly agree". An example of an item to assess narcissism is "I tend to want others to admire me"; for psychopathy "I tend to lack remorse" and Machiavellianism "I have used deceit or lied to get my way."

The Italian version, validated by Chiorri and colleagues (Chiorri et al., 2019) was used in this study. Like the original version, the Italian adaptation comprised 4 items for the trait, 12 in total, with a high degree of internal consistency. The Cronbach's alpha was for narcissism $\alpha=.80$, for psychopathy $\alpha=.67$ and for Machiavellianism $\alpha=.84$; total scale $\alpha=.85$.

Sadistic Personality

In this study, the *Assessment of Sadistic Personality* (ASP; Plouffe et al., 2017, Kowalski, 2019) was used to screen sub-clinical sadism in our sample. It is a self-report questionnaire, comprising 9 items designed to measure this sub-clinical trait; respondents provide their answers on a Likert scale, ranging from 1 for "strongly disagree" to 5 for "strongly agree". In our study, Cronbach's alpha was $\alpha=.71$.

Attitude and tolerance of IPV

The *Intimate Partner Violence Attitude Scale* (IPVAS-R; Fincham et al., 2008) involves three factors: psychological abuse, with items like "As long as my partner doesn't hurt me, 'threats' are excused", control of the partner, such as "It is okay for me to tell my partner not to talk to someone of the opposite sex" and the use of physical violence, with items like "It would not be appropriate to every kick, bite, or hit a partner with one's fist". Participants responded to all 17 items using a 5-point Likert scale, which spanned from expressing strong disagreement to strong agreement. The Cronbach's alpha from the present study ranged from .67 to .75.

Jealousy

To assess jealousy, we used The *Multidimensional Jealousy Scale* (MJS, Pfeiffer & Wong, 1989, Tani & Ponti, 2016), a self-report questionnaire with 24 items rated on a 7-point scale, designed to provide an evaluation of jealousy's three components: cognitive, emotional, and behavioral. The internal consistency measures for the present research ranged from $\alpha=.60$ to $\alpha=.90$.

Emotional abuse

The *Multidimensional Measure of Emotional Abuse* (MMEA; Bonechi & Tani, 2011; Murphy & Hoover, 1999) was used to assess four subtypes of psychological abuse: Restrictive Engulfment, Denigration, Hostile Withdrawal, and Dominance/Intimidation.

The tool comprised 28 items, participants were asked to indicate, on a 7-point scale, how often they or their partner (or ex-partners), in the past few months have been involved in abusive behaviors. Only the "perpetrator" version was used in this study and Cronbach's alpha was $\alpha=.86$.

Statistical Analysis

All statistical analyses were computed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 26.0 (IBM SPSS Statistics, New York, NY, USA). First, the mean and standard deviation were calculated for each variable. Then, the *T-test* and *Cohen's d* were used to analyze the differences between males and females in the sample and the effect size in the study variables. Pearson's correlation analysis was calculated to examine the relationship between the study variables. Next, stepwise multiple linear regression analyses were conducted to assess the influence of Dark Personality, jealousy, and violence tolerance on emotional abuse behavior. The perpetrated abuse was inserted as a dependent variable. In the first step, age and gender were entered as independent variables, followed by the Dirty Dozen and Assessment of Sadistic Personality in the second step, and lastly, the Multidimensional Jealousy

Scale and The Multidimensional Measure of Emotional Abuse, in the third step.

Results

A t-test was used to assess the differences in the study variables between female and male participants. Results reported in Table 2 show that males score higher in all the traits of Dark Triad personality (t=5.67, p<0.001), e.g. Machiavellianism (t=5.46, p<0.001), psychopathy (t=6.11, p<0.001), and narcissism (t=2.16, p<0.001). In addition, males have more sub-clinical traits of sadism than females (t=7.70, p<0.001) and in the IPVAS-R total score (t= 4.52, p<0.001).

Unexpectedly, the emotional abuse behavior perpetrated as restrictive engulfment and denigration is carried out more by women (t= -3.84, p<0.001 and t= -2.49, p<0.05, respectively). And women are more jealous than men (t= -3.42, p<0.001), especially in the emotional (t= -3.89, p <0.001) and behavioral component (t= -3.16, p <0.01); instead, the difference in cognitive component wasn't significative.

Variables	Males		Females				
	M	Ds	M	Ds	t	p	d
DD Total score	36.35	12.82	30.10	11.53	5.67	<0.001	.51
DD Machiavellianism	11.54	5.67	8.91	4.95	5.46	<0.001	.49
DD Psychopathy	11.08	4.80	8.55	4.31	6.11	<0.001	.55
DD Narcissism	13.73	5.77	12.63	5.56	2.16	<0.05	.19
ASP Total score	16.85	5.65	13.35	4.33	7.70	<0.001	.69
IPVAS Total score	34.23	5.29	31.91	6.02	4.51	<0.001	.41
IPVAS-R Abuse	14.54	3.57	12.86	3.51	5.24	<0.001	.47
IPVAS-R Violence	8.33	1.32	8.49	1.52	-1.24	ns	.11
IPVAS-R Control	11.36	3.29	10.56	3.77	2.49	<0.05	.22
MMEA perpetrated	17.79	16.17	20.11	18.94	-1.45	ns	.13
Restrictive Engulfment	2.85	4.70	4.78	6.25	-3.84	<0.001	.35
Denigration	1.41	2.63	2.26	4.63	-2.49	<0.05	.22
Hostile Withdrawal	10.26	9.49	9.28	8.92	1.17	ns	.10
Dominance/Intimidation	3.27	4.27	3.78	4.54	-1.27	ns	.11
MJS Total score	67.10	16.66	72.84	20.16	-3.42	<0.001	.31
MJS Cognitive	16.57	9.22	17.35	10.85	-0.85	ns	.07
MJS Emotional	37.92	8.76	40.97	8.54	-3.89	<0.001	.35
MJS Behavioral	12.60	5.97	14.52	7.31	-3.16	<0.01	.29

Note: DD: The Dark Triad Dirty Dozen; ASP: Assessment of Sadistic Personality; IPVAS: Intimate Partner Violence Attitude Scale; MMEA: Multidimensional Measure of Emotional Abuse; MJS: Multidimensional Jealousy Scale

Table 2 – Difference between males and females in the study variables

A Pearson correlation analysis was carried out to assess the association between the study variables. The findings of this analysis are presented in Table 3. The Assessment of Sadistic Personality positively correlates with the Dirty Dozen total score (r=.589, p<.01), and all three subscales: Machiavellianism (r=.565, p<.01), psychopathy (r=.444, p<.01), and narcissism (r=.391, p<.01). Moreover, Dirty Dozen total score positively correlates with IPVAS total score (r=.285, p<.01), and two subscales: psychological abuse (r=.359, p<.01) and control of partner (r=.094, p<.05), instead the correlation with physical violence isn't significant. Furthermore, DD positively correlates with the MJS total score (r=.256 p<.01), and the IPVAS-R positively correlates with the MJS total score (r=.308, p<.01). Lastly, the MMEA perpetrated positively correlates with Dirty Dozen (r=.289, p<.01), with ASP total score (r=.275, p<.01), and the MJS total score (r=.471, p<.01) and cognitive, emotional, and behavioral jealousy (r=.386, p<.01; r=.173, p<.01; r=.506, p<.01 respectively).

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19
1	Age	-	-.184**	-.136**	-.144**	-.156**	-.109*	.063	.049	.133**	.000	.027	-.097*	.075	.019	.126**	-.118**	-.129**	-.081	-.029
2	DD Total score		-	.845**	.726**	.795**	.589**	.285**	.359**	.008	.094*	.289**	.215**	.187**	.260**	.179**	.256**	.204**	.144**	.219**
3	DD Machiavellianism			-	.474**	.512**	.565**	.238**	.305**	.017	.069	.237**	.149**	.100*	.258**	.134**	.158**	.151**	.074	.116*
4	DD Psychopathy				-	.317**	.444**	.224**	.245**	.009	.111*	.198**	.129**	.188**	.151**	.151**	.153**	.135**	.058	.147**
5	DD Narcissism					-	.391**	.215**	.296**	-.006	.049	.245**	.225**	.160**	.200**	.140**	.287**	.195**	.197**	.250**
6	ASP Total score						-	.356**	.454**	.056	.093*	.275**	.159**	.189**	.272**	.168**	.191**	.188**	.062	.168**
7	IPVAS-R Total score							-	.734**	.315**	.749**	.276**	.310**	.198**	.188**	.145**	.308**	.237**	.147**	.311**
8	IPVAS-R Abuse								-	.004	.171**	.291**	.255**	.226**	.238**	.150**	.250**	.246**	.063	.244**
9	IPVAS-R Violence									-	.106*	.146**	.144**	.136**	.079	.119**	.022	.023	-.055	.097*
10	IPVAS-R Control										-	.093*	.186**	.037	.032	.036	.237**	.124**	.196**	.217**
11	MMEA perpetrated											-	.710**	.683**	.837**	.761**	.471**	.386**	.173**	.506**
12	Restrictive Engulfment												-	.487**	.356**	.404**	.602**	.480**	.265**	.611**
13	Denigration													-	.344**	.530**	.340**	.259**	.145**	.370**
14	Hostile Withdrawal														-	.515**	.252**	.220**	.068	.282**
15	Dominance/Intimidation															-	.297**	.248**	.090*	.338**
16	MJS Total score																-	.792**	.671**	.721**
17	MJS Cognitive																	-	.201**	.442**
18	MJS Emotional																		-	.263**
19	MJS Behavioral																			-

*p<0.05; **p<0.01

Note: DD: The Dark Triad Dirty Dozen; ASP: Assessment of Sadistic Personality; IPVAS: Intimate Partner Violence Attitude Scale; MMEA: Multidimensional Measure of Emotional Abuse; MJS: Multidimensional Jealousy Scale

Table 3 – Pearson correlations between the study variables

A stepwise linear hierarchical regression was performed to understand the influence of the study variables on emotional abuse levels, using age, gender, dark triad traits, sadism, jealousy, and attitude and tolerance for IPV as independent variables. Table 4 shows the results of a regression analysis in which the dependent variable is the event of perpetrated abuse. The model explains 30% of the total variance. Especially, after the third step age (β = .110, $p<$.01), gender (β = .108, $p<$.05), the presence of Dark Triad traits (β = .130, $p<$.01), the presence of subclinical traits of sadism (β =.143, $p<$.001), jealousy and IPVAS-R (β = .381, $p<$.001 and β = .089, $p<$.05 respectively) were all significant predictors of the perpetration of abuse.

Variables	B	SE B	β	R	R²	ΔR²
1 Step						
Age	0.207	0.075	0.110**	0.072	0.190	0.005
Gender	3.802	1.510	0.108*			
2 Step						
DD Total score	0.182	0.069	0.130**	0.376	0.141	0.136
ASP	0.447	0.167	0.143**			
3 Step						
MJS Total score	0.359	0.041	0.381***	0.538	**0.290**	0.148
IPVAS-R Total score	0.261	0.133	0.089*			

*p<.05, **p<.01; ***p<.001

Note: DD: The Dark Triad Dirty Dozen; ASP: Assessment of Sadistic Personality; IPVAS: Intimate Partner Violence Attitude Scale; MMEA: Multidimensional Measure of Emotional Abuse; MJS: Multidimensional Jealousy Scale. The table reports Beta after the third step.

Table 4 – Stepwise Linear Hierarchical Regression with perpetrated abuse as dependent variable

Discussion

The present study aims to analyze the role of DP, jealousy, tolerance of violence in the onset of emotional abuse behaviors in Italian men and women.

In line with the findings in the literature, differences analysis between the male and the female samples (Chiorri et al., 2019; Plouffe et al., 2017) showed that males score higher in all DP traits, namely Machiavellianism, narcissism, psychopathy, and sadism (Table 2). Males scores higher also in the IPVAS-R total score and in the abuse and control subscale, suggesting that males more than female show a general attitude to accept episodes of emotional abuse and partner control in intimate relations. No differences have been recorder in the physical violence scale between the two genders. Even if means and standard deviations of IPAVS-R widely vary among different populations, these results are in line with previous findings in different countries, where on average, males score higher than females in both the total score and in at least two of the three subscales of the instrument (Alzoubi & Ali, 2021; Evcili & Daglar, 2021; Fincham et al., 2008; Toplu Demirta e al., 2017).

Contrary to the most common finding in the literature on the subject, in our sample females obtain higher scores on the jealousy scale, in both emotional and behavioral jealousy, suggesting that females, more than males, engage in control and mate retention behaviors.

This finding could have several explanations. First of all, intra- and inter-individual variability in the reporting of jealousy appears to be related to personal experience and values, as previous experiences of partner infidelity (Buss, 2013) and quality of the investment in the relationship (Bendixen et al., 2015). Second, it is possible that, as suggested by Hine and colleagues (2022), certain attitudes and behaviors, when enacted by females, may seem more acceptable and less negative, therefore there is a "normalization" of certain conducts that can be expressed without any fear of being judged.

Data on differences in the perpetrated emotional abuse also show that females seem to enact, to a greater extent than males, abusive behaviors within romantic relationships. Females are more likely to denigrate and control (restrictive engulfment) the partner as shown in Table 2. These results are in line with some previous findings in the literature, according to which emotional abuse, in particular humiliation, isolation from friends and family, and possessiveness, are more common in women than in men (Leisring, 2013). The predominant view in the IPV field has been that women's application of violence happens only in terms of self-defense, but to promote efficient prevention and intervention programs as suggested by our results, there should be a shifting in the paradigm toward the idea that also females can be perpetrators.

Hierarchical linear regression reported in Table 3, also supports these findings. Higher levels of DP, jealousy, and tolerance for violence are significant predictors of emotional abuse when associated with the female gender. In particular, jealousy and dark personality traits seem to have a significant role in the development of emotional abusive behaviors in intimate relationships. This relationship may be explained by the role the strong relationship between DP and control, since Machiavellianism, narcissism, psychopathy, and sadism are related to jealousy and mate retention behaviors, in particular, narcissism seems to play a key role in the development of abusive behaviors (Ponti et al., 2020). Moreover, it is well-known in the literature that DP traits are risk factors for interpersonal violence and domestic violence in men (Plouffe et al., 2022). But the fact that in our sample the female gender seems to be associated to the development of emotional abusive conduct more than the male gender, could be explained by the presence of dark personality traits. As the DP traits share common elements of power and control over the partner (Adams & Williams, 2014) it could be hypothesized that in case of ego-threatening situations, such as fear of abandonment or infidelity, women may enact the same violent patterns of dominance as men, but in the form of emotional abuse.

Implications

Our findings have significant implications in both clinical and forensic psychology. First, the analysis of subclinical DP traits is crucial in psychological assessment, proving to be risk factors in the onset of abusive conduct within romantic relationships. Understanding the influence of these traits on violent and abusive behaviors is also useful in the context of designing interventions, with a focus on long-term prevention starting from adolescence. Indeed, the study of DP could be useful in understanding teen dating violence, a growing phenomenon that needs attention from researchers and clinicians (Biancofiore et al., 2020). However, the most significant finding from our research is the confirmation that DP, in association with high levels of jealousy and, to a small extent, with the tolerance of violence, significantly influences the development of emotional abuse behavior, particularly in females. This finding calls for an assessment of personality traits, jealousy and attitudes toward the partner, within the study of violent dynamics in romantic relations, emphasizing the need to consider these aspects both in men and women.

The analysis of violence within relationships should focus on personality characteristics, as dark personality, the individual's operational process and the relational context where the violence take place, in order to overcome the bias that only men can be perpetrator. In fact, the endemic spread of different forms of abuse, from the most identifiable, such as physical abuse, to the more subtle, such as psychological abuse, is due both to personal factors, such as personality and jealousy, but also to contextual and social factors, such as tolerance to violence. It is important to emphasize, that psychological abuse is often poorly recognized, but never even reported by the

victims themselves, especially by males. As conveyed in the literature, men who are willing to report or seek help following their partner's abuse within relationships are still few, and this is probably due to stereotypes and social stigma (Walker et al., 2020). Finally, although we have not directly analyzed the role of sexual orientation, it is safe to assume that abusive dynamics may also exist within same-sex relationships between females. The paucity of studies on the subject may be due to the lack of reporting by the victims, who, for fear of secondary victimization, social judgment and in order not to undermine the stereotype of the 'lesbian utopia' (i.e. a world without male aggression and violence), keep silent about the violence they have suffered in the relation (Harden et al., 2022).

Limitations and future directions

The findings of this research should be viewed in the context of its limitations. Initially, the results ought to be interpreted considering the constraints inherent in a cross-sectional design, future studies should approach the topic with a longitudinal approach. Second, we use self-report questionnaires to assess personal and psychological variables, a multi-informant method could have led to more accurate results. Especially, for example, with regard to the abusive behaviors reported by the participants. In describing their experiences, participants may have modulated some situations, for social desirability, therefore future studies should assess emotional abuse with other informants (convictions or the opinion of their partners, for example) in order to have more objective data. Then, our research focus on the differences between male and female participants, but we did not include a specific analysis on sexual orientation which may reveal important information on same-sex relationship dynamics.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study contributes to the understanding of Dark Personality traits and their impact on abusive behaviors within intimate relations. Our research, in particular, underscores the influential role of dark personality traits and jealousy, in shaping abusive behaviors, both in males and, especially, in females. These findings emphasize the importance of recognizing and addressing gender-specific manifestations of DP traits within the context of abusive behaviors, as a specific part of a general assessment of intimate partner violence. Understanding the nuanced interplay between these psychological factors can inform targeted interventions and preventive measures. As we move forward, it becomes crucial to develop tailored strategies that address the unique dynamics associated with dark personality traits, jealousy, and violence tolerance, fostering healthier and more equitable relationships for both men and women.

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