

Affective temperaments and personality traits in couple well-being

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ABSTRACT



Background. The objective of this study is to establish the link between affective temperament traits and maladaptive personality traits, to verify whether the potential presence of elements related to emotional, affective and dysfunctional relational functioning can affect the couple satisfaction, modifying the well-being or discomfort condition. **Materials and Methods.** A data collection questionnaire was developed to investigate the factors associated with dysfunctional emotional, affective, and relational modes of functioning. The sample consisted of 473 subjects. Data were collected including the TEMPS-A questionnaire, The Dirty Dozen Italian Assessment and the Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS). **Results.** The findings of this study showed that the subscales of affective temperament were predictors of dark triad traits. The expressive, irritable and hyperthymic temperamental traits were found to be predictors of trait psychopathy; hyperthymic temperament is also a predictor of narcissistic traits and cyclothymic temperament is a predictor of lower couple satisfaction; men show higher scores than women in Dark triad. **Conclusions.** This study confirmed that temperamental traits can predict maladaptive personality traits belonging to the dark triad and confirms the importance of evaluating maladaptive personality traits to prevent forms of psychological violence in couple.

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Introduction

Psychological violence in couple has been a topic of interest in psychological, sociological and juridical fields for years. In recent years, scientific literature has been very interested in a form of psychological violence insidious, and manipulative behavior into the relation. According to previous study, this form of violence is a systematic denigration and humiliation of a partner (victim), through relational modalities perverse, and victim progressively loses self-confidence, self-esteem, efficacy, internal and external reference points [1]. Step by step this form of violence progressive extinguishing the energy, and vitality of the victim, and gradually destroys her capacity for decision-making. Interesting, the study of Brewer and colleagues (2015) that investigated the influence of Machiavellianism, a personality trait in psychological violence, the authors showed that this trait is characterized by a manipulative interpersonal style and willingness to exploit others, on three areas of sexual behavior [2].

An emotional manipulator's behavior is mainly based on the adoption of an ambiguous and incoherent communication's style, which can cause in the victim the same consequences as physical violence. Type of psychological violence is expressed with disparaging, mortifying, hyper-critical behaviors; it acts on the psychological safety of the victim. The sense of confusion that goes with it is called Gaslighting effect [1,3]. Gaslighting is identified as a personality profile, devious and insidious psychological violence that implements adaptive and strategic manipulation mechanisms. This is a dysfunctional couple relationships, characterized by perverse, manipulation and pathological dynamics of the power [4].

According to previous studies during Covid-19 outbreak, has been recorded an alarming rise of physical, and psychological violence cases.

Forced confinement, induced by the authorities as a precautionary measure to the health emergency, made women exposed a variety of violence in their homes,

obliging them to a forced coexistence with their executioner and depriving them of support from society and their family unit [5,6].

Wissing and others (2017) highlighted the main maladaptive personality traits of manipulator's profile, that match with narcissism, Machiavellianism and psychopathy. In scientific literature, these three constructs are defined the "Dark Triad" [7].

The traits of Dark Triad are layouts that are considered stable enough in time, and their high heritability level has got clinical feedback [8,9]. The five temperaments (depressive, hyperthymic, cyclothymic, anxious, and irritable) assessed with the short version the TEMPS-A Scale (Temperament Evaluation of Memphis, Pisa, Paris and San Diego–Auto questionnaire) are stable across the lifespan, and they unfold into personality characteristics during development [10].

Recently, previous studies established an association between low mentalization capabilities, and abusive relationships' vulnerability [11,12]. There are personality traits that make the victim susceptible to remaining in an abusive relationship [13].

Is important to pay attention that intimate partner violence (IPV) is part of a wide spectrum of possible forms of violence, that are consumed within home, engaging not only in the couple, but frequently the entire family system. Abuse can be psychological, physical, sexual, emotional. The analysis of behavioral sequelae implemented by the violent partner is used by the current research to map the behavior's progression in real cases of IPV. The results indicated the implementation of conducts like physical and psychological abuse and coercive control behavior as Gaslighting, movement restrictions and suppression of freedom [14].

IPV's got numerous clinical implications, intended as consequences in terms of both mental health and physical health. Among the most frequent symptoms we find the depressive-anxious spectrum ones and post-traumatic stress disorder [15].

In the light of this, the purpose of this study is to establish the link between affective temperament traits and maladaptive personality traits and to verify whether the potential presence of elements related to emotional, affective and dysfunctional relational functioning can affect the couple satisfaction, modifying the well-being or discomfort conditions.

Materials and Methods

A data collection questionnaire was developed to investigate the factors associated with dysfunctional emotional, affective, and relational modes of functioning.

The survey was disseminated from July 2021-October 2021, and google forms was created and the link was sent to participants through available social media channels (WhatsApp, Instagram, and Facebook). The data collection

was carried out with total respect for anonymity and privacy according to the current legislation and the data that emerge are only processed for the estimation of the observed phenomenon.

The sample is characterized by 473 participants, aged 16-75 years ($M=29.4$; $SD=8.431$), including 116 males (24.5%) and 355 females (75.1%), 0.4% other, from different area of Italy.

Measures

The following psychological tests were administered:

- Sociodemographic data, such as gender, age, marital status, schooling, occupation, origin, presence and possible number of children, and current involvement or not in a relationship.
- Temperament Evaluation of the Memphis, Pisa, Paris, and San Diego – (TEMPS - A) Short version to assess affective temperaments [16]. The scale yields five affective temperament dimensions: cyclothymic, depressive, irritable, hyperthymic, and anxious. It is a self-report, yes-or-no type questionnaire (my way of being constantly oscillates between liveliness and indolence. Yes; No).
- The Dirty Dozen Italian Assessment [17,18] is a self-report characterized by 12 items, which aims to identify the general latent construct of the dark triad and the three traits related to it, namely Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and narcissism. Is rated the degree of agreement and disagreement (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree) to statements such as, "I tend to manipulate others to get what I want" (Machiavellianism), or "I tend to lack remorse" (Psychopathy), or "I tend to want others to admire me" (Narcissism).
- The Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS) [19] is a questionnaire consisting of 7 items (Does your partner meet your needs) measured on a Likert scale from 1 (low satisfaction) to 5 (high satisfaction). It was designed to measure overall relationship satisfaction, the higher the score, the greater the subject's satisfaction within the relationship.

The latter questionnaire was accessible only to those who - in the first section - had verbalized that they were currently involved in a relationship.

Statistical Analysis

Continuous data were expressed as mean \pm standard deviation and the differences between the groups were assessed using Student's t-test for independent samples. In addition, predictors were assessed using a linear regression. The results for $p < 0.05$ were considered significant. The statistical analysis was performed with the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) 25.0 software (SPSS Inc, Chicago, IL, USA).

Results

The characteristics of the study sample are shown in Table 1. The participants were on average 29.24 years (SD

= 8.43) with an age range of 16 to 75 years. There were 473 participants: 116 males (24.5%) and 355 females (75.1%). Involvement in a couple relationship was investigated: 311 subjects (65.8%) declared that they were currently living in a couple relationship, 162 (34.2%) as not.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the participants

SAMPLE N = 473		
Age (Mean and std. deviation)	29.24 ± 8.43	
Gender (Frequency and std. deviation)		
M	116	24.5%
F	355	75.1%
Other	2	0.4%
Education (Frequency and Valid Percent)		
Secondary School	10	2.1%
High School	142	30%
University	191	40.4%
Post-degree	130	27.5%
Marital Status (Frequency and Valid Percent)		
Married	55	11.6%
Fiancé	169	35.7%
Cohabitant	39	8.2%
Single	199	42.1%
Divorced	9	1.9%
Widowed	2	0.4%
Professional Status (Frequency and Valid Percent)		
Housewife	12	2,5%
Self-employed worker	102	21,6%
Employed worker	183	38,7%
Unemployed	38	8,0%
Student	134	28,3%
Pensioners	4	0,8%

The results in Table 2 show statistically significant gender differences for the Dirty Dozen subscales. Men show higher scores than women.

The overall regression was statistically significant. Linear regression was used to test if temperament traits

significantly predicted the traits of the dark triad and couple satisfaction. Dirty Dozen subscales “Psychopathy”, “Machiavellianism” and “Narcissism”, and “Couple satisfaction” as dependent variables, and TEMPS-A factors “Cyclothymic”, “Depressive”, “Irritable”, “Hyperthymic” and “Anxious”, as independent variables, were analyzed in four linear regression models, to evaluate possible associations among affective temperamental dimension and traits of Dark Triad (Table 3).

Table 3. Linear regression analysis

Dependent variable	Predictors	Unstandardized coefficients		
		B	S.E.	p
“Couple Satisfaction” a (Model 1)	(Constant)	31,929	1,029	,000
	Cyclothymic	-,369	,124	,003
	Depressive	-,120	,185	,517
	Irritable	-,502	,206	,015
	Hyperthymic	-,025	,161	,878
	Anxious	,520	,515	,315
“Psychopathy” b (Model 2)	(Constant)	5,478	,784	,000
	Cyclothymic	,145	,094	,123
	Depressive	,358	,144	,013
	Irritable	1,090	,162	,000
	Hyperthymic	,263	,124	,035
	Anxious	-,187	,247	,450
“Machiavellianism” c (Model 3)	(Constant)	7,352	,679	,000
	Cyclothymic	,349	,081	,000
	Depressive	,212	,125	,090
	Irritable	,527	,140	,000
	Hyperthymic	,130	,108	,229
	Anxious	-,748	,214	,001
“Narcissism” d (Model 4)	(Constant)	7,382	,891	,000
	Cyclothymic	-,059	,107	,582
	Depressive	,861	,164	,000
	Irritable	,544	,184	,003
	Hyperthymic	,903	,141	,000
	Anxious	,121	,281	,666

Adjusted ^a R² = .080; ^b R² = .156; ^c R² = .124; ^d R² = .147;

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of the total sample and gender differences

	Total Sample		Females (n. = 355)		Males (n. = 116)		Student t Test	
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	t	p
Dirty Dozen								
Psychopathy	9,64	5,853	5,41	,287	6,51	,605	5,000	,000
Machiavellianism	9,84	4,96	4,77	,248	5,14	,478	6,056	,000
Narcissism	14,38	6,60	6,46	,343	6,82	,633	2,487	,013
Couple Satisfaction	28,88	5,79	5,78	,376	5,87	,683	,549	,584

Regression analysis evidenced that depressive temperament ($\beta = 0.35$, $p = 0.01$), irritable temperament ($\beta = 1.09$, $p < .0001$) and hyperthymic temperament ($\beta = 0.26$, $p = 0.03$), were predictors of Psychopathy; cyclothymic ($\beta = 0.34$, $p < .0001$) and irritable temperaments ($\beta = 0.52$, $p < .0001$) were direct predictors of Machiavellianism, conversely, anxious temperament ($\beta = -0.74$, $p = 0.01$) were indirect predictor of Machiavellianism; depressive temperament ($\beta = 0.86$, $p < .0001$), irritable temperament ($\beta = 0.54$, $p < .0001$), and hyperthymic temperament ($\beta = 0.90$, $p < .0001$), were predictors of Narcissism. Cyclothymic temperament ($\beta = -0.36$, $p < .0001$), and irritable temperament ($\beta = -0.50$, $p < .0001$) negatively predict couple satisfaction.

Discussions

The findings of this study showed that the subscales of affective temperament were predictors of dark triad traits, and provided important insights about characteristics of maladaptive and abusive personality. This is in line with previous studies, in fact, most of the research in literature focused on the gender violence and manipulative behavior in couples. According to scientific literature, this form of psychological abuse is subtle and insidious. Such as, Heym and colleagues (2019) examined whether impaired empathy indeed represents a common dark core binding Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy, and whether this core explains associations between dark traits and IRA (indirect relational aggression) [20]. Another, recent study of Moshagen and colleagues (2018) specified the common core of dark traits, which they call the Dark Factor of Personality (D) [21]. In our study, depressive, irritable and hyperthymic temperamental traits were found to be predictors of trait psychopathy. Specifically, irritable temperament is a predictor of the trait Psychopathy. This result is in line with previous studies that showed the presence of an irritable temperament predicts high hostility and psychopathic traits and that Psychopathy predicts the most overt and aggressive tendencies among the Dark Triad [22]. Depressive temperament also turns out to be a predictor of psychopathic trait. Previous studies support that there is a positive relationship between these constructs and that externalizing negative mood states such as anxiety or depression can result in antisocial and psychopathic behavior [23].

Although common measures of narcissism emphasize grandiose rather than vulnerable traits, and include both adaptive and maladaptive features, our results indicate that depressive traits are positive predictors of Narcissism. By contrast, empirical research on narcissism and depression has found them to be uncorrelated or even inversely related. Sedikides et. al (2004) conducted five studies that established that normal narcissism correlated with good psychological health [24]. Specifically, narcissism is inversely related to dispositional depression and daily

sadness; inversely related to dispositional loneliness and daily loneliness; positively related to dispositional subjective well-being and couple well-being; inversely related to dispositional anxiety and daily anxiety and related to dispositional neuroticism. Self-esteem fully explained the relationship between narcissism and psychological health; therefore, narcissism is beneficial for psychological health only to the extent that it is associated with high self-esteem [24]. These results are not in line with our study. Another finding is that hyperthymic temperament is a predictor of narcissistic traits: according to the narcissist profile, hyperthymic traits define people with high levels of energy, extroversion, and grandiosity. Horan et al. (2015) showed that dark triad-based personality structure is predictive of conflictual communication within the couple. The overall results of their study described that individuals who reported higher levels of Machiavellianism and psychopathy tended to have higher levels of disagreement with their partners and that conflicts with their partners were more intense and hostile, thus affecting the couple's well-being [25].

Therefore, the hypothesis is confirmed that the presence of elements related to dysfunctional emotional, affective, and relational modes of functioning, such as maladaptive personality traits belonging to the dark triad, may have repercussions on couple satisfaction, compromising the partners' perceived climate of well-being. Our results indicated that cyclothymic temperament is a predictor of lower couple satisfaction. This temperament trait is linked to unpredictable mood instability and the tendency of quick fluctuations in energy levels, impulsiveness, anger, and harm avoidant behaviors [26].

The literature suggests that partner neuroticism is indicative of poor dyadic consensus and that this negatively impacts marital satisfaction; conversely, extroversion is a strong predictor of couple well-being [27,28].

Moreover, on the side of this scientific assessment of impaired couple well-being, a preponderance of male manipulation has emerged, consistent with a majority of psychopathic and Machiavellian traits [29,30]. These personality traits are more represented in men with prevalence rates ranging from 0.6 percent to 4 percent [31,32].

Our research confirmed findings of previous studies, in fact these data as the t-test applied to the Dirty Dozen showed that men have higher mean values than women for the traits of the Dark Triad.

According to previous studies, we found higher psychopathy in men, and this condition is correlated with higher frequency of antisocial behavior due to social or genetic factors [33,34].

Moreover, these findings were not in line with study of Grijalva and colleagues (2015), in fact the authors showed that there were not gender differences regarding narcissism [35].

In our focus related to the phenomenon of Gaslighting, the propensity to become a victim is conditional on the vulnerability characteristics of individuals.

A study by Edwards et al., (2011) suggests that women with psychopathological disorders such as anxiety have a greater propensity to become victims of abusive relationships, and showed a decreased ability to succeed in escaping such relationships [36].

In general, consistent with findings in the literature there are no statistically significant differences in the levels of the couple satisfaction variable with respect to gender [37-40]. It is possible to explain this result since the perception of satisfaction within the couple varies depending on the contribution of various factors that characterize it.

Limitations

Our study is not without its limitations. First, the use of self-report questionnaires, could imply the possible presence of bias such as social desirability.

Second, the online survey was also administered to subjects not currently in a relationship. To get a clearer look at couple satisfaction, it would be appropriate to consider dyadic couples, comparing partners' scores and analyzing the effects that dysfunctional personality traits have on marital satisfaction and similar variables. In addition, our sample was predominantly women (75.1%); in the future, it would be preferable to analyze a more balanced sample. Finally, further experimental studies are needed to confirm the causal direction of the relationships found here.

Conclusions

This study confirmed that temperamental traits can predict maladaptive personality traits belonging to the triad. These can affect couple satisfaction, compromising the overall well-being of the partners. The overall implication of this study is that it is crucial to assess early risk factors that could be responsible for establishing and maintaining a romantic relationship with a gaslighter. The results of this study could be a good starting point for future research aimed at designing prevention and intervention programs aimed at preventing pathological couple bonds that can undermine the balance of people's mental health.

Compliance with ethical standards

Any aspect of the work covered in this manuscript has been conducted with the ethical approval of all relevant bodies and that such approvals are acknowledged within the manuscript. Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Conflict of interest disclosure

There are no known conflicts of interest in the publication of this article. The manuscript was read and approved by all authors.

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