Paulina Wardawy-Dudziak
University of Silesia, Katowice, Poland

Irena Pilch
University of Silesia, Katowice, Poland

The Triarchic Psychopathy Domains and Romantic Relationship Quality: The Role of Boldness

Abstract

The study aimed to investigate associations between psychopathic traits (disinhibition, boldness, and meanness) and indicators of relationship quality (satisfaction, commitment, feelings toward the partner, closeness, and relationship costs) using a variable-centred and a person-centred approach. A total of 1,292 participants completed measures assessing psychopathic traits and relationship quality. Correlation analysis indicated that boldness was positively, while disinhibition and meanness were negatively correlated with relationship quality. Subsequently, cluster analysis was conducted to identify groups of participants with different combinations of psychopathic traits. Three clusters were extracted: "disinhibited", "callous", and "brave-resistant". The last cluster had an elevated level of boldness and was relatively "positive" regarding relationship quality. The results seem congruent with the presumption of a different role of boldness, compared to meanness and disinhibition, in the domain of close relationships.

Keywords: *boldness, disinhibition, meanness, personality, psychopathy, romantic relationship quality*

Introduction

The dimensional approach to psychopathy opened the way to new opportunities for understanding the role of psychopathy in everyday life. One of the most promising research areas for researchers studying this phenomenon is the field of close

relationships. It is because psychopathic traits can have many important negative consequences for psychopathic persons and their partners (Robertson et al., 2020).

Psychopathy can be examined as a part of the Dark Triad of personality traits (Čopková & Šafár, 2021). However, the triarchic conceptualisation of psychopathy enables a more nuanced view of the problem of the effects of psychopathy. On this basis, it can be assumed that not all psychopathic features have a similar and adverse impact on the outcomes of a psychopathic individual, and this also applies to establishing and maintaining close relationships. To capture these potential differences, this study aimed to investigate associations between psychopathic traits and the quality of romantic relationships using a triarchic psychopathy model, which constitutes the theoretical basis of this study.

The triarchic conceptualisation of psychopathy (Patrick, 2009) describes psychopathy as a set of three constructs: disinhibition (tendency to impulsiveness, self-control problems, irresponsibility, and hostility), meanness (low empathy, cruelty, callousness, aggression, and destructive sensation seeking) and boldness (striving for domination, low anxiousness, self-confidence, stress resistance, and it can be regarded as a relatively "positive" or adaptive aspect of psychopathy).

Research Problem

Previous research showed positive correlations of boldness with three components of the triangular theory of love (Bourbonnais & Durand, 2018; Mejia et al., 2020), whereas, for meanness and disinhibition, these relationships were negative. Moreover, boldness (in contrast to meanness and disinhibition) in men predicted higher relationship satisfaction in their female partners (Pilch et al., 2022). The studies provided preliminary evidence for a different role of boldness compared with the remaining psychopathic traits (i.e., meanness and disinhibition) in romantic relationships. However, there is no direct evidence that boldness can positively relate to the self-reported quality of the romantic relationship. In this study, we attempt to fill this gap by investigating relationships between triarchic psychopathy domains and indicators of relationship quality (satisfaction, commitment, feelings toward a partner, closeness, and relationship costs) measured from an actor's perspective.

Research Methodology

General Background of Research

The study aims to investigate associations between psychopathic traits and the quality of romantic relationships using variable-centred and person-centred approaches. So far, mainly the variable-centred approach (that focuses on relationships between variables and does not consider the within-person variability) has been used in research on the functioning of psychopathic individuals in romantic relationships. In this study, the triarchic model of psychopathy was used to assess psychopathic traits.

First, we will examine relationships between psychopathic traits and romantic relationship quality in a variable-centred approach using correlation analysis. It is predicted that: (H1) *disinhibition and meanness would correlate negatively with relationship satisfaction, commitment, romantic feelings toward the partner, and closeness, and positively with relationship costs;* (H2) *boldness would correlate positively with relationship satisfaction, commitment, romantic feelings toward the partner, and closeness, and negatively with relationship costs.*

Psychopathy domains do not operate in isolation but rather work together. These configurations of traits (or variants of psychopathy) are not considered in variable-centred analyses. It encourages us to supplement correlational analyses with a person-centred approach. Assuming heterogeneity within a population, such a person-centred approach may complement the widely used variable-centred approach to investigating relationships between psychopathy and interpersonal functioning, as it provides a different perspective focused on existing differences between individuals. We addressed the following questions:

(1) Is it possible to distinguish distinct groups (clusters) of psychopathic persons sharing similar profiles of psychopathic traits?

(2) Do these potential clusters differ with regard to relationship quality?

In this study, cluster analysis will be used to identify groups of participants with different configurations of psychopathic traits. Following the recommendation (Hicks & Drislane 2018, p. 309), we will include only participants with relatively higher psychopathy

because we are interested in obtaining clusters corresponding to different psychopathy variants rather than clusters of psychopathic and non-psychopathic persons. The current study is exploratory because the number of profiles is not a priori determined. Considering prior studies, it is anticipated that two to four profiles of psychopathy may be obtained (Hicks & Drislane, 2018). We predict

that the obtained clusters would differ with regard to relationship outcomes. It is anticipated that (H3) *the cluster(s) of individuals with elevated levels of boldness would report higher relationship quality compared to the remaining clusters.*

Sample

A total of 1,292 participants from Poland (475 male) were recruited to participate in the study. One case was completely removed from the analysis due to incomplete answers. The study was approved by the local Ethics Committee. We gathered data via social media using an online survey tool and snowball sampling. The sample ranged from 18 to 71 years of age (M = 24.3, SD = 5.8). The participants reported secondary (51.7%) or higher (45.1%) education.

Instruments and Procedures

Participants were asked to give their written consent to participate and were told that participation was voluntary, anonymous, and without compensation. Then they provided information about their demographic data and completed measures of psychopathy and romantic relationship quality. Additionally, sexuality-related variables not reported here were measured. The dataset is available at https://osf.io/24ebj?view_only=6156eba93fef4966b597d9b3e4853a8a.

Psychopathy was measured with the TriPM-41 (Pilch et al., 2015), the Polish adaptation of the Triarchic Psychopathy Measure. The scale consists of 41 items rated on a 4-point scale (0-false; 3-true). It includes three subscales: boldness (15 items; α = .83), meanness (10 items; α = .84), and disinhibition (16 items; α = .81).

Relationship satisfaction ("Are you satisfied with your current romantic relationship?"), relationship commitment ("How committed are you to maintaining your current relationship?"), and romantic relationship costs ("What were the costs that you incurred in your romantic relationship with your partner?") were assessed with one-item measures developed for this study. The answers were rated on a 10-point scale (1-not at all; 10-completely).

Feelings toward the partner were measured with the feeling thermometer scale. The respondents answered the question "How intense are your romantic feelings toward your partner?" using a scale referring to temperature (0-very cold; 100-very warm).

Relationship closeness was assessed with the Inclusion of Other in the Self Scale (IOS; Aron et al., 1992). The respondents answered the question "How close do you

feel to your partner?" by choosing one from seven pictures with overlapping circles (1-no overlap; 7-most overlap).

Data Analysis

Statistical analysis was performed using the IBM SPSS software (version 27). Correlation analysis using the *r*-Pearson correlation coefficient was performed first. A two-step cluster analysis was performed to identify homogenous groups of participants based on their psychopathic traits. The procedure determined the optimal number of clusters using the Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC) as a clustering criterion and log-likelihood as a distance measure. The average silhouette was used to evaluate clustering validity. As we planned to extract clusters of psychopathic individuals, a sub-group of participants whose scores on overall psychopathy were above the 66.6 percentile was separated (*N* = 446), and their scores on disinhibition, boldness, and meanness were used in the cluster analysis. The control (non-psychopathic) group was also divided from the sample: the participants whose scores on overall psychopathy were below the 33.3 percentile were treated as a comparison group (*N* = 447).

To compare the psychopathy clusters (and the control group) in terms of scores on the clustering variables, the multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was performed. After that, the Games-Howell post-hoc test and the Kruskal-Wallis test were used.

Results

Descriptive statistics and correlations are displayed in Table 1. Disinhibition and meanness were negatively associated with relationship satisfaction, commitment, romantic feelings, and closeness toward the partner, whereas only disinhibition was positively related to relationship costs. This result is mainly in line with H1. However, contrary to the predictions, meanness was not associated with relationship costs. Boldness was positively related to relationship satisfaction and closeness, which confirms H2, but it was not associated with commitment, relationship feelings and costs, which is not congruent with H2.

The two-step cluster analysis revealed three clusters. The average silhouette coefficient was 4, suggesting satisfactory separation and cohesion between the clusters. Table 2 presents mean scores on the cluster variables for the three-profile model. Cluster 1 (89 persons, 47 men, 42 women; "brave-resistant") has relatively

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and correlations between study variables (N = 1,292)

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Psychopathy	1.13	.32	1							
2. Disinhibition	.82	.46	.63**	1						
3. Boldness	1.63	.53	.64**	-.03	1					
4. Meanness	.87	.58	.62**	.20**	.12**	1				
5. Satisfaction	6.94	2.93	-.05	-.14**	.10**	-.07*	1			
6. Commitment	7.73	2.74	-.14**	-.17**	.05	-.17**	.69**	1		
7. Feelings	7.64	2.70	-.11**	-.12**	.03	-.14**	.75**	.81**	1	
8. Costs	4.05	2.94	.08**	.15**	.00	-.01	-.29**	-.05	-.12**	1
9. Closeness	4.38	1.85	-.06*	-.09**	.07*	-.10**	.65**	.57**	.61**	-.24**

* p < .05; ** p < .01

the highest boldness accompanied by moderate levels of meanness and relatively the lowest disinhibition. Cluster 2 (148 persons, 66 men, 82 women; "disinhibited") is characterised by relatively the highest disinhibition accompanied by moderate boldness and relatively the lowest meanness. Cluster 3 (208 persons, 107 men, 101 women; "callous") has relatively the highest meanness, high disinhibition and less elevated boldness. There were no significant differences between the clusters in age ($H = 6.59$, $p = .086$) and sex ($\chi^2 = 2.13$, $p = .345$).

Table 2. Means for psychopathic traits and relationship quality variables for three clusters and the control group

	Cluster 1 "brave-resistant" N = 89	Cluster 2 "disinhibited" N = 148	Cluster 3 "callous" N = 208	Control group "non-psychopathic" N = 447
Disinhibition	0.60a	1.32b	1.24b	0.57a
Boldness	2.48a	2.06b	1.70c	1.24d
Meanness	1.31a	.80b	1.62c	.50d
Satisfaction	7.81a	6.68bc	6.40b	7.12ac
Commitment	8.18ac	7.39bc	6.80b	8.11a
Feelings	7.87a	7.32b	7.00b	7.94a
Costs	4.01ab	4.58a	4.19ab	3.77b
Closeness	4.58	4.39	4.15	4.55

Note. Superscripts indicate between-groups differences. Groups with the same superscripts do not differ significantly. * p < .05; ** p < .01
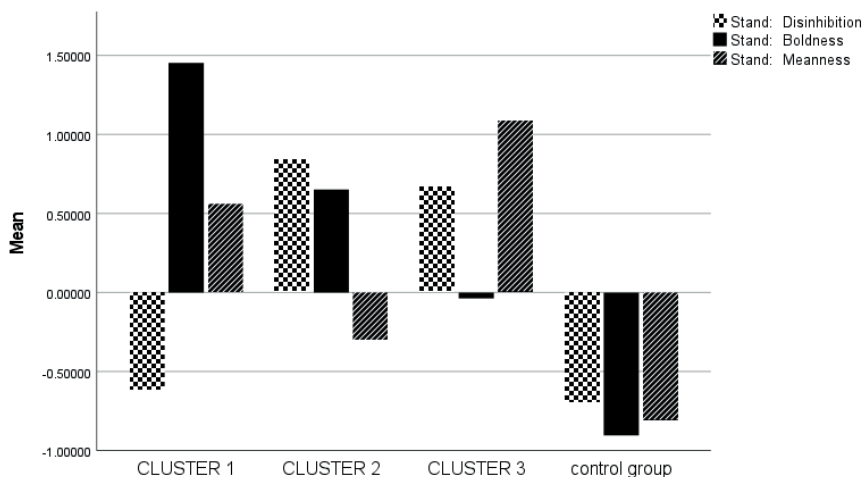
Figure 1. Mean z-scores on psychopathic traits for each of the sub-groups

A one-way MANOVA (Wilk's λ = 0.103, F [9,2156.4] = 370.89, p < .001, partial η^2 = .53) showed significant differences between the groups analysed, i.e., the three clusters and the control group on the clustering variables (i.e., disinhibition, boldness and meanness).

Post-hoc tests showed that Cluster 1 and the control group had significantly lower disinhibition than Clusters 2 and 3 (p < .001). Boldness was significantly higher in participants in Cluster 1 compared to the other groups (p < .001), and it was significantly lower in participants in the control group compared to the other groups. Cluster 2 was significantly higher in boldness than Cluster 3 (p < .001). Cluster 3 had significantly higher meanness than the other groups (p < .001). Participants in the control group had significantly lower meanness than the other groups (p < .001). Cluster 1 had also significantly higher meanness than Cluster 2 (p < .001).

The Kruskal-Wallis test revealed significant differences between the four groups (the three clusters and the control group) on relationship quality dimensions: relationship satisfaction (H = 23.82, p < .001), commitment (H = 43.34, p < .001), emotions toward a partner (H = 30.37, p < .001) and relationship costs (H = 11.35, p = .010). There were no differences between the groups on closeness (H = 6.67, p = .083). Post-hoc tests (with Bonferroni correction for multiple comparisons) showed that Cluster 1 had significantly higher relationship satisfaction than Clus-

ter 2 (p = .009) and Cluster 3 (p < .001). This result is in line with H3. The control group had significantly higher relationship satisfaction than Cluster 3 (p = .001). Cluster 3 had significantly lower commitment than Cluster 1 (p < .001) and the control group (p < .001). Cluster 2 had significantly lower commitment than the control group (p = .023). Participants in the control group declared significantly higher feelings toward a romantic partner than Cluster 2 (p = .002) and Cluster 3 (p < .001). Cluster 2 had significantly higher relationship costs than the control group (p = .009).

Discussion

The study aimed to seek associations between psychopathic traits in the triarchic model and the quality of romantic relationships using variable-centred and person-centred approaches. As expected, disinhibition correlated negatively with relationship satisfaction, commitment, romantic feelings and closeness toward the partner and positively with the costs attributed to the romantic relationship. Meanness presented the same pattern of correlations (except for the lack of the expected association with the costs of the relationship). This result suggests that higher levels of disinhibition and meanness can be associated with lower quality of romantic relationships as perceived by the psychopathic individual. In turn, boldness correlated only with relationship satisfaction and closeness toward the romantic partner. The direction of these correlations followed the predictions, but the associations were weak. Nevertheless, in this study, participants higher on boldness evaluated their romantic relationships at least as positive as persons with lower levels of this trait.

In the cluster analysis conducted on a subgroup of people with relatively the highest psychopathy (33% of the sample), we extracted three clusters ("brave-resistant", "disinhibited", and "callous") with a different configuration of psychopathic traits. These results align with the findings of Bronchain et al. (2020), who identified three clusters similar to those obtained in the current study.

Our clusters varied significantly in three of the five indicators of romantic relationship quality. Cluster 1 ("brave-resistant") was composed of people with the highest boldness and the lowest disinhibition and was characterised by the relatively highest level of relationship satisfaction, commitment and feelings toward a partner – significantly higher compared to Cluster 2 ("disinhibited") and Cluster 3 ("callous"). Moreover, there were no differences in relationship quality indicators between Cluster 1 and the control group (i.e., participants with low

levels of psychopathy). This result offers evidence that people with the "brave-resistant" variant of psychopathy can maintain more satisfied romantic relationships than people with different configurations of psychopathic traits. It is worth noting that the configuration of traits in this cluster (higher boldness, lower disinhibition, and moderate levels of meanness) is congruent with the characteristic referred to as a "successful" psychopath (Persson & Lilienfeld, 2019). This result is also congruent with a study by Du and Templer (2022) which found that boldness may be a protective factor that mitigates the negative effects of meanness. Cluster 2 comprised participants with the highest disinhibition and relatively the lowest meanness. Cluster 3 contained persons with the highest meanness and relatively the lowest boldness. There were no significant differences between these clusters in terms of relationship quality indicators.

This study provides new data on the functioning of psychopathic individuals in close relationships. In general, psychopathy is associated with negative traits, egoism and difficulties maintaining positive relationships with others. The results of our research provide more detailed conclusions thanks to the triarchic conceptualisation of psychopathy. These results are congruent with studies indicating the negative role of meanness and disinhibition in close relationships (Bourbonnais & Durand, 2018; Mejia et al., 2020; Pilch et al., 2022). Our results suggest also that the role of boldness could be different. Boldness is the manifestation of a fearless temperament that can be viewed as a mix of non-adaptive (venturesomeness, inappropriate fear processing) and adaptive (emotional resilience, assertiveness) features. Therefore, boldness can be seen as a relatively harmless component of psychopathy, even in romantic relationships. It turns out that relationship quality may depend on the configuration of psychopathy dimensions which an individual has. Considering the relationship between personality and relationship quality may be useful in psychotherapy, especially in couples therapy, when diagnosing the problem and adjusting the intervention. Therapists should be sensitive to specific configurations of psychopathic traits in patients. "Disinhibited" (the highest disinhibition, moderate boldness, and the lowest meanness) and "callous" (the highest meanness, high disinhibition, and the lowest boldness) variants of psychopathy can be harmful and may contribute to relationship difficulties. They can predispose to partner mistreatment, for instance, manipulative behaviour or even intimate partner violence. Instead, the "brave-resistant" variant (the highest boldness, moderate meanness, and the lowest disinhibition) can be treated as a more beneficial configuration – related to more satisfying relationships. Thus, especially "disinhibited" and "callous" variants may require more attention from the therapist.

The current study also has some limitations. First, the sample consisted of volunteers who constitute a specific group, e.g., they are more prone to social approval. Second, the study is based on self-report measures; hence the results depend on the respondents' honesty and the ability to distinguish between internal states. Third, we used one-item measures, which may be unreliable. In future research, more detailed measurements could be used. Moreover, further studies are needed to analyse more closely the dimensions of psychopathy and their impact on romantic relationships, especially in experimental designs. It would also be valuable to research psychopathic persons and their partners.

Conclusions

We found a significant relationship between triarchic components of psychopathy and romantic relationship quality. In the first analysis, higher disinhibition and meanness were associated with lower relationship satisfaction, commitment, closeness, and romantic feelings toward the romantic partner. Meanness, unlike disinhibition, was not correlated with relationship costs. In contrast, boldness was positively associated with relationship satisfaction and closeness. In the second analysis, we extracted three clusters with different configurations of psychopathic traits. "Brave-resistant" psychopathy (with an elevated level of boldness) was the most "positive" cluster in terms of relationship quality – it was characterised by higher relationship satisfaction, commitment and feelings toward the partner. These results suggest that the positive role of boldness, considered a more "adaptive" psychopathic trait, may also be visible in romantic relationships. Overall, the possibility of using these results in couples therapy underlines the importance of our findings.

References

Aron, A., Aron, E. N., & Smollan, D. (1992). Inclusion of Other in the Self Scale and the structure of interpersonal closeness. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 63*(4), 596–612. DOI: 10.1037/0022-3514.63.4.596

Bourbonnais, K., & Durand, G. (2018). Using the Triarchic model of psychopathy to replicate "Greed is good? Student disciplinary choice and self-reported psychopathy." *The Quantitative Methods for Psychology, 14*(1), 1–7. DOI: 10.20982/tqmp.14.1.r001

Bronchain, J., Raynal, P., & Chabrol, H. (2020). Heterogeneity of adaptive features among psychopathy variants. *Personality Disorders: Theory, Research, and Treatment*, *11*(1), 63–68. DOI: 10.1037/per0000366

Čopková, R., & Šafár, L. (2021). Psychometric Properties of the Slovak Version of Short

Dark Triad. *European journal of investigation in health, psychology and education*, *11*(3), 649–666. DOI: 10.3390/ejihpe11030047

Du, Y. Y. L., & Templer, K. J. (2022). The Happy Subclinical Psychopath: The Protective Role of Boldness in Successful Psychopathy. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, *23*(3), 1143–1168. DOI: 10.1007/s10902-021-00444-8

Hicks, B. M., & Drislane, L. E. (2018). Variants ("subtypes") of psychopathy. In *Handbook of psychopathy, 2nd ed.* (pp. 297–332). The Guilford Press.

Mejia, C. Y., Donahue, J. J., & Farley, S. D. (2020). Mean, uncommitted, and aggressive: Divergent associations between triarchic psychopathy, elements of love, and caustic relationship behaviors. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, *37*(4), 1193–1215. DOI: 10.1177/0265407519890414

Patrick, C., Fowles, D., & Krueger, R. (2009). Triarchic conceptualization of psychopathy: Developmental origins of disinhibition, boldness, and meanness. *Development and Psychopathology, 21*(3), 913–938. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954579409000492

Persson, B. N., & Lilienfeld, S. O. (2019). Social status as one key indicator of successful psychopathy: An initial empirical investigation. *Personality and Individual Differences, 141,* 209–217. DOI: 10.1016/j.paid.2019.01.020

Pilch, I., Lipka, J., & Gnielczyk, J. (2022). When your beloved is a psychopath. Psychopathic traits and social status of men and women's relationship and sexual satisfaction. *Personality and Individual Differences*, *184*, 111175. DOI: 10.1016/j.paid.2021.111175

Pilch, I., Sanecka, E., Hyla, M., & Atłas, K. (2015). Polska adaptacja skali TriPM do badania psychopatii w ujęciu triarchicznym. [The Polish adaptation of the TriPM scale measuring psychopathy]. *Psychologia Społeczna [Social Psychology]*, *10*, 435–454. DOI: 10.7366/1896180020153506

Robertson, E. L., Walker, T. M., & Frick, P. J. (2020). Intimate partner violence perpetration and psychopathy: A comprehensive review. *European Psychologist, 25*(2), 134–145. DOI: 10.1027/1016-9040/a000397

AUTHORS

PAULINA WARDAWY-DUDZIAK

MA, Institute of Psychology, Faculty of Social Sciences,
University of Silesia, Katowice, Poland
E-mail: paulina.wardawy@us.edu.pl
ORCID: 0000-0001-9135-9809

IRENA PILCH

PhD, Institute of Psychology, Faculty of Social Sciences,
University of Silesia, Katowice, Poland
E-mail: irena.pilch@us.edu.pl
ORCID: 0000-0002-4471-1993