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Dark personality and intimate partner relationships in young adults

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ABSTRACT

People with dark personality traits tend to be unsympathetic, manipulative, and violent, and this can affect their intimate partner relationships. The objective of this research is to analyze how the presence of the dark personality traits affects young people's intimate couple relationships. Sociodemographic variables, sexual practices, and tendencies towards the partner, moral disengagement (PMD), and the dark personality traits were assessed in 308 participants, all of them aged between 18 and 25, of whom 78.3% were women and 21.2% were men. Men obtained higher scores than women both in moral disengagement and dark personality traits, as did people who were unfaithful or who consumed pornographic content, which conditions the quality of couple relationships. Consistent with this, men with higher levels of dark personality traits and higher use of a moral disengagement mechanism also presented a greater tendency towards infidelity, especially repeated infidelity. Infidelity is highly related to the presence of dark personality traits, unrestricted socio-sexuality, and having more sexual partners. These results aid in the design of interventions to prevent sexual harassment and abuse in young people and their intimate partner relationships.

1. Introduction

The Dark Triad of personality, introduced by Paulhus and Williams (2002), comprises three socially malevolent traits: subclinical narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism (see also Buckels, Trapnell, & Paulhus, 2014; Buckels, Trapnell, Andjelovic, & Paulhus, 2019; Jones & Paulhus, 2014). People with high levels of Machiavellianism are characterized by their cynical attitudes and adopting strategies whose sole purpose is to benefit their own interests. People with high levels of subclinical narcissism tend to focus on themselves, fantasize about having unlimited power, and need others' admiration. Subjects with high levels of subclinical psychopathy show a lack of empathy, are often very manipulative, unreliable, and uninterested in others' feelings. In general, they usually cause problems and even harm to others. All three dimensions imply emotional coldness.

Although the concept of the dark triad refers to a series of personality traits that define what we would commonly call being a "bad person", a series of researchers (for example, Brewer, Erickson, Whitaker, and Lyons (2020)) expressed that there was an aspect not contemplated. Thus, while people who score high on narcissism tend to be self-focused, fantasize about unlimited power, and need the admiration of others, those who score high on psychopathy tend to be manipulative, unreliable, and uninterested in the feelings of others, and those who score high

in Machiavellianism tend to present cynical attitudes and adopt strategies whose sole purpose is to achieve their own interests, among these components the tendency to engage in cruel, degrading or aggressive behaviors in search of pleasure is not contemplated or domination. This dimension is what is known as sadism, that is, enjoying causing suffering to others. Thus, the dark personality traits was expanded by adding to its three dimensions that of everyday sadism (Buckels, Jones, & Paulhus, 2013; Paulhus, Buckels, Trapnell, & Jones, 2020; Paulhus & Jones, 2015; Paulhus & Williams, 2002). As many components of the so-called dark personality traits manifest concomitantly, authors like Moshagen, Hilbig, and Zettler (2018) proposed the existence of a "dark factor" or "D". Characteristics such as selfishness, resentment or sadism share the same common denominator. Thus, if a person exhibits a specific malevolent behavior (such as liking to humiliate others), he or she will be more likely to engage in other malevolent activities as well (such as cheating, lying, or stealing). That is, the dark traits have much more in common than what differentiates them. Thus, D factor or the general tendency to maximize one's own individual utility is conceptualized, without taking into account how these behaviors affect others. The D factor is the habit of placing our own goals and interests before those of others, sometimes giving pleasure to those who score high on the same pleasure for hurting others, in those who get high scores. Some research has shown that the so-called D factor is stable regardless of age and

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gender (Hartung, Bader, Moshagen, & Wilhelm, 2021; Kowalski, Rogoza, Saklofske, & Schermer, 2021; Navas et al., 2020).

Concurrently, some other characteristics are linked to the dark personality traits, such as moral disengagement, which allows people with this type of personality to perform cruel and even inhuman actions (Clemente, Padilla-Racero, & Espinosa, 2019b, 2020). All this influences the relationships of the people who present these characteristics, and retaliations are commonly generated (Clemente & Espinosa, 2021; Clemente, Padilla-Racero, & Espinosa, 2019a, 2019b). Given the fact that intimate partner violence has become a public health problem, and that the judicial system often does not adequately protect the victims, some instruments have been created to measure institutional harassment (Clemente, Padilla, Espinosa, Reig-Botella, & Gandoy-Crego, 2019).

1.1. Partner relationships

The Dark Personality traits affects individuals' social relationships, in particular, intimate relationships. The characteristics of the dark personality traits include jealousy, infidelity, violence, and high levels of moral disengagement, which can affect these people's relationships with others (Clemente & Espinosa, 2021). The presence of a dark personality traits is directly related to having more than one sexual partner, unrestricted socio-sexuality, and a clear preference for short-term relationships (Jonason, Li, Webster, & Schmitt, 2009). Unrestricted sexual behavior is related to psychopathy, and it facilitates finding another partner (Jia, Ing, & Lee, 2016; Moore, Ross, & Brosius, 2020).

People with dark personalities traits can establish short-term relationships more easily because they generally have low expectations about their future partners, especially in the case of men. Moreover, even if their initial expectations are high, they are willing to reduce them to have more partner options (Brewer et al., 2015). Jonason, Luevano, and Adams (2012) proposed four different types of short-term relationships in their study: one-night stands, "booty-calls" (where you contact the person with whom you are having a short-term relationship to have sex), "friends with benefits" (friends who have sex but do not define their relationship as romantic), and serious romantic relationships. The first three have in common that they all involve a sexual encounter with someone who is not the stable partner (Jonason et al., 2012; Jonason, Valentine, Li, & Harbeson, 2011; Koladich & Atkinson, 2016). Due to the ease with which people with dark personalities traits establish short-term relationships and attract partners from other couples, they employ a series of partner-retention techniques to ensure their partner's permanence (Jonason, Li, & Buss, 2010; Lambart & López, 2017).

In addition to partner-retention techniques, people with dark personality traits tend to be unfaithful to their partners. This occurs as a consequence of their being more prone to brief relationships and not because of a lack of self-control when opportunities arise (Brewer, Hunt, James, & Abell, 2015; Jia et al., 2016). As a result of infidelity, a desire for revenge frequently arises (Clemente & Espinosa, 2021; Clemente, Padilla-Racero, & Espinosa, 2019a, 2019b). In the case of people with dark personalities traits, revenge does not consist of abandoning the partner because it is quite common for them to change partners (Brewer et al., 2015; Jones & Weiser, 2014).

People with dark personality traits tend to be violent, and relationships are one of the main areas where they can exercise such violence. Taking into account the characteristics and personality behaviors of each of these disorders, it is common for this type of partner violence to be invisible (Carton & Egan, 2017; Clemente & Espinosa, 2021; Jonason et al., 2011). Control over one's partner is an important aspect within this form of psychological violence, and people with high scores in primary psychopathy are more likely to exercise such control as are those with high levels of Machiavellianism (Hudek-Knezevic, Kardum, & Banov, 2021; Yu, Wu, Wang, & Wang, 2020). Currently, one of the most prevalent forms of interpersonal aggression is sexting, and there is

empirical evidence that sexting behaviors are predicted by dark personality traits (Morelli et al., 2021).

The work of Jonason et al. (2009) showed how dark personality traits correlated with various dimensions of short-term mating, but not with the formation of long-term couples, and this was manifest more in males. The authors explain this by arguing that men tend to take advantage of female partners in the short term, but not vice versa (i.e., women do not tend to take advantage of mala partners). Expanding on this question, Jonason, Lyons, and Blanchard (2015) pointed out how both men and women preferred partners with low scores in Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy to maintain a long-term relationship. The work of Burtăverde, Jonason, Ene, and Istrate (2021) also focused on promiscuity.

1.2. Moral disengagement

The concept of moral disengagement was created by Bandura, following his social cognitive theory. Bandura tried to answer the question of how "nice" people, who are well socialized and respectful of others can, at some point in their life, commit inhuman and genuinely cruel acts. Bandura thought that certain circumstances forced people to try to justify actions they rejected, even though they had performed them. Thus, moral disengagement can be defined as a mechanism through which people who have committed actions that threaten their self-image defend themselves, and thus preserve their self-esteem (Bandura, 1986, 1990; De Caroli & Sagone, 2014; Detert, Treviño, & Sweitzer, 2008). The mechanisms of moral disengagement include eight processes of cognitive restructuring of objectionable behavior, facilitating the disinhibition of moral reasoning. These mechanisms are grouped into four domains according to the locus where they exert their influence: behavior, action, result, and receptor of actions. The mechanisms are: moral justification, euphemistic labeling, and advantageous comparison are included in the behavioral locus; the locus of action includes the displacement of responsibility and the diffusion of responsibility; within the locus of result is the distortion of consequences; lastly, at the locus of the receptor of actions are the attribution of blame and dehumanization. Bandura (1986) proposed the concept of moral disengagement as a buffer between a person's moral principles and their actual behavior. This concept refers to a psychological schema through which moral authorizations can be disconnected from harmful behaviors, making harmful acts acceptable and allowing immoral and antisocial behaviors to be carried out (Caprara et al., 2014).

People who show high moral disengagement tend to be irritable, more prone to revenge, the exercise of physical and verbal violence, and conflict with others, they feel less anticipatory guilt because of their harmful behavior, are more antisocial, and less able to resist peer pressure to carry out activities that may be harmful (Paciello, Fida, Tramontano, Lupinetti, & Caprara, 2008). Moral disengagement is directly related to aggressive and violent behaviors (Espejo-Siles, Zych, Farrington, & Llorent, 2020). It allows carrying out harmful behaviors without blaming oneself or feeling unpleasant emotions (Caprara et al., 2014). In sum, moral disengagement is associated with the dark personality traits (; Clemente & Espinosa, 2021; Clemente, Padilla-Racero, & Espinosa, 2019b; Erzi, 2020) and antisocial behaviors (Sijtsema, Garofalo, Jansen, & Klimstra, 2019).

1.3. Objectives and hypotheses

Other previous works have focused on couples' personal and intimate treatment in their relationship but not on each partner's behaviors towards the other, and how they act in the personal relationship itself. This work aims to address these relationships, as they help to develop intervention programs to promote couples' well-being. This work aims to study the influence of a series of independent variables related to the partners' socio-affective relationship (sex, number of partners, infidelity, repetition of infidelity, and pornographic consumption), and

dependent variables related to dark personality traits, including the dimensions of moral disengagement (Machiavellianism, narcissism, psychopathy, sadism, moral justification, euphemistic labeling, advantageous comparison, displacement of responsibility, diffusion of responsibility, distortion of consequences, dehumanization, and attribution of blame).

It is hypothesized that people who present dark personality traits will also present moral disengagement, that men will present more dark personality traits and moral disengagement than women, and that people who have had more relationships, short-term relationships, and have been unfaithful (but only the first time, not the following times) will show more dark personality traits and moral disengagement.

If our hypotheses are verified, intervention programs can be designed to help young people to establish more pleasant relationships without the emergence of violent behaviors and attitudes.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Participants

A total of 308 subjects participated in this study, all of them aged between 18 and 25 ($M = 22.12$, $SD = 0.934$), of whom 78.3% were women and 21.7% were men. They were all students from a university in NW Spain. The sample was obtained following the snowball technique, through social networks, with a direct link to the questionnaire (see the subsection Procedure). The participation rate is unknown, as when information is collected with a questionnaire sent through social networks, this datum is not recorded. Data were collected until more than 300 participants had been reached. All the collected questionnaires were valid, as they were designed in such a way that it was mandatory to answer all the questions. Regarding the level of studies of the participants, 3.8% had completed primary studies, 15.9% had completed secondary studies, 59.5% had unfinished university studies, and 20.8% had completed university studies.

2.2. Procedure

The questionnaire was created through the Google Forms application. The Short Dark Tetrad questionnaire (SD-4) and the Propensity to Morally Disengage Scale (PMD) were translated into Spanish. These questionnaires were translated for use in previous research carried out by the authors of this work through this procedure: two native translators created the Spanish version. They met to agree on a single version, despite that the differences were very small. Then, a third translator rendered this version in English, and its coincidence with the original version was confirmed, again observing minimal differences. The corresponding reliability indices were calculated. As the study only targeted people who had or had had a partner, those who replied no to both questions were excluded from the study. In addition, both in the SD-4 and the PMD, control questions were mingled with the items of the questionnaire to detect random responses and ensure that the responses were valid.

The data were then exported to the Excel Program, and subsequently to the IBM-26 SPSS Statistics Program. This analysis provided the following data: reliability of the SD-4 and PMD with Cronbach's alpha coefficient; frequency percentages of the alternatives of the sociodemographic questions and couple relationships (descriptive statistics); descriptive statistics of the SD-4 and PMD; inferential statistics (one-way ANOVA), with the items related to couple relationships as the independent variable and the factors measured by the SD-4 and PMD as the dependent variables; Pearson correlations between the factors measured by the SD4 and PMD.

Concerning the ethical aspects, participants read a brief description of the study and gave their informed consent. Some key questions were included to verify that participants had read the questions and responded appropriately (for example, "This question is to verify that you are

attentive to each issue. Please indicate alternative 1"). Participants were required to answer every item and the study did not allow missing responses. Before performing the investigation, permission was requested from the Research Center Ethics Committee of the corresponding author. The research also meets the ethical criteria of the Helsinki protocol and the American Psychological Association. This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies of the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

2.3. Instruments

A questionnaire was created that comprised four parts: participants' sociodemographic data, questions about coping with problems within the couple, the Short Dark Tetrad questionnaire (SD-4), to measure the Dark Tetrad of Personality, and the Propensity to Morally Disengage Scale (PMD), which measures moral disengagement.

In the questionnaire about couple relationships, participants were asked about their sexual orientation, their partner's sexual practices, whether they currently had a partner and if so, what type of relationship they had, the duration of their longest relationship, and their behaviors within the couple, such as the consumption of pornographic content or infidelity. To design the questionnaire, a group session was held with 4 participants (2 men and 2 women) in which they were asked about the practices they thought could break up a couple's relationship by hurting the other member. This group agreed on 20 items. Next, a sample of 4 people (2 men and 2 women) was asked to indicate 5 items that they considered the most serious, and pairwise agreement rates were calculated. If the agreement did not exceed 95%, the items were eliminated, so only 4 items were selected (all of them with 100% agreement): number of partners they have had, counting the current partner; having been unfaithful to one of the partners; reiteration of infidelity; and consumption of pornography.

To obtain information about the dark personality traits, we used the Short Dark Tetrad (SD-4) questionnaire, which measures Machiavellianism, subclinical narcissism, subclinical psychopathy, and sadism. This questionnaire was created by Paulhus et al. (2020). It consists of 28 items that are rated on a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*completely disagree*) to 5 (*completely agree*). Each subscale has seven items. An example of an item is: "It's not wise to let people know your secrets" (Item 1, Machiavellism subscale). The reliability of each subscale was determined with Cronbach's alpha index and was acceptable in all of them: 0.62 for Machiavellianism, 0.76 for Narcissism, 0.75 for Psychopathy, and.73 for Sadism.

To obtain information about moral disengagement, the Propensity to Morally Disengage (PMD) questionnaire was used. The PMD scale, created by Moore, Detert, Treviño, Baker, and Mayer (2012), has 24 items, 3 items for each mechanism of moral disengagement (Moral Justification, Euphemistic Labeling, Advantageous Comparison, Displacement of Responsibility, Diffusion of Responsibility, Distortion of Consequences, Dehumanization, and Attribution of Blame). Items are rated on a seven-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*completely disagree*) to 7 (*completely agree*). Each subscale has seven items. An example item is: "It is okay to spread rumors to defend those you care about." (Item 1, Moral Justification subscale). The reliability of the subscales was determined with Cronbach's alpha index: Moral Justification $\alpha = 0.61$, Euphemistic Labeling $\alpha = 0.62$, Advantageous Comparison $\alpha = 0.48$, Displacement of Responsibility $\alpha = 0.54$, Diffusion of Responsibility $\alpha = 0.43$, Distortion of Consequences $\alpha = 0.49$, Dehumanization $\alpha = 0.57$, and Attribution of Blame $\alpha = 0.25$. Therefore, only the correlation between the factors that measure moral justification and euphemistic labeling is reliable. The mean of the reliability coefficients was 0.50, which is somewhat low due to the size and homogeneity of the sample.

The calculation of Cronbach's alpha coefficient is carried out to calculate the reliability of the components of the scales in this specific case, so the mechanisms of moral disengagement described herein are

merely descriptive, used to provide face validity to the construct. We do not intend to determine the factorial structure of the scale or to validate the instruments in Spanish.

3. Results

Next, for simplicity, only the variables that are relevant to the study will be discussed.

What are young people's relationships like?

The descriptive analysis of the items about this issue indicated that 54.9% of the participants have had one to three partners, 9.1% have had three to five partners, and 2.3% have had more than five partners. Furthermore, 24.7% claimed to have been unfaithful to their partners at some time, and of them, 40.8% had been unfaithful more than once. In addition, 47.4% of the people surveyed consumed pornographic content, and 7.5% of the people who completed the questionnaire had been forced to perform sexual practices by their partner.

Descriptive statistics were calculated for all variables considered dependent. This information is shown in Table 1. The minimum score for each variable is 1, and the maximum score for the dark personality traits variables is 5, and 7 for those of moral disconnection. As can be seen, all the variables scored below the midpoint of each rating scale, or almost at the midpoint, except for psychopathy, where the scores were very low. The justifications for moral disengagement also obtained mean scores below the midpoint of the scale, with the lowest score in attribution of blame (1.55), and the highest score in moral justification (2.66).

The correlations between all the measured scales were then calculated. This information can be seen in Table 2. All the correlations were significant at the significance level of $p < .010$, except for the correlation between Displacement of Responsibility and Narcissism, which was significant at $p < .050$.

Table 3 shows the significance levels found after applying the non-parametric tests the Mann-Whitney U (when the item had two response alternatives) or the Kruskal-Wallis test (when the item had more than two response alternatives). The independent variables are the questions of the questionnaire created ad hoc, and the dependent variables are those measured by the SD4 and PMD questionnaires.

All the dark personality traits, except for narcissism, and all the mechanisms of moral disengagement, except for advantageous comparison, displacement of responsibility, and distortion of consequences, presented significant values as a function of sex, with males scoring consistently higher than females.

Next, we analyzed the influence of the number of partners on the scores of the dependent variables dark personality traits and moral disengagement (Table 2). The values of the independent variable (number of partners) were: 1, 2, 3, or 4. The results indicated that sadism was significant. Specifically, people who had had three or more partners obtained the highest significance the Scheffé test was applied, but the

Table 1
Descriptive statistics of the variables of the dark personality traits and moral disengagement.

Variables	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard deviation
Machiavellianism	1.14	4.43	2.63	0.66
Narcissism	1.00	4.86	2.46	0.72
Psychopathy	1.00	4.29	1.69	0.61
Sadism	1.00	4.71	1.95	0.70
Moral justification	1.00	6.00	2.66	1.23
Euphemistic labeling	1.00	7.00	2.28	1.03
Advantageous comparison	1.00	5.33	1.89	0.90
Displacement of responsibility	1.00	6.00	2.18	0.97
Diffusion of responsibility	1.00	5.67	2.00	0.94
Distortion of consequences	1.00	5.33	1.99	0.86
Dehumanization	1.00	6.33	2.45	1.20
Attribution of blame	1.00	4.00	1.55	0.61

Table 2
Pearson correlations between the variables of the scales.

	Machiavellianism	Narcissism	Psychopathy	Sadism	Moral justification	Euphemistic labeling	Advantageous comparison	Displacement of responsibility	Diffusion of responsibility	Distortion of consequences	Dehumanization
Narcissism	0.35										
Psychopathy	0.27	0.38									
Sadism	0.43	0.35	0.60								
Moral justification	0.40	0.21	0.41	0.49							
Euphemistic labeling	0.47	0.19	0.27	0.38	0.64						
Advantageous comparison	0.31	0.21	0.26	0.29	0.43	0.45					
Displacement of responsibility	0.25	0.14	0.14	0.23	0.32	0.38	0.3				
Diffusion of responsibility	0.36	0.25	0.33	0.48	0.54	0.51	0.46	0.53			
Distortion of consequences	0.36	0.23	0.20	0.31	0.50	0.57	0.45	0.33	0.57		
Dehumanization	0.38	0.21	0.29	0.52	0.45	0.44	0.23	0.30	0.40	0.38	
Attribution of blame	0.32	0.24	0.25	0.35	0.40	0.43	0.39	0.35	0.46	0.56	0.35

Note: * $p < .050$. ** $p < .010$.

Table 3

Significance of the Mann-Whitney U or the Kruskal-Wallis tests of SD4 and PMD.

Variables	Sex	Number of partners	Infidelity	Repetition of infidelity	Pornographic consumption
Machiavellianism	0.01	0.38	0.01	0.11	0.03
Narcissism	0.65	0.24	0.04	0.40	0.38
Psychopathy	0.01	0.22	0.12	0.02	0.02
Sadism	0.01	0.03	0.02	0.01	0.01
Moral justification	0.01	0.59	0.01	0.29	0.01
Euphemistic labeling	0.01	0.71	0.01	0.12	0.01
Advantageous comparison	0.33	0.55	0.01	0.02	0.01
Displacement of responsibility	0.81	0.19	0.01	0.80	0.22
Diffusion of responsibility	0.01	0.72	0.01	0.40	0.02
Distortion of consequences	0.31	0.88	0.01	0.39	0.12
Dehumanization	0.02	0.83	0.02	0.75	0.18
Attribution of blame	0.01	0.92	0.01	0.78	0.01

results are not included due to lack of space.

Regarding infidelity, unfaithful partners scored higher in all the variables of the dark personality traits except for psychopathy, as well as in all the dimensions of moral disengagement.

Participants were also asked whether they had been unfaithful more than once. The data (Table 3) show that the comparison is significant in two of the variables of dark personality traits, psychopathy, and sadism, and, in one of the mechanisms of moral disengagement, advantageous comparison.

In the case of pornography consumption, many variables were significant. All the components of the dark personality traits, except for narcissism, were significant. Also, all the mechanisms of moral disengagement, except for displacement of responsibility, dehumanization, and distortion of consequences, were significant (see Table 1).

4. Conclusions and discussion

In response to the objectives established in this research and after interpreting the results, it can be concluded that men obtain higher scores than women in the four variables of the dark personality traits and the eight mechanisms of moral disengagement. These results are consistent with all the existing literature on the matter, and it is shown that people with high scores in the dimensions of dark personality traits and moral disengagement have highly conflictive relationships with others, especially with their intimate partners (Clemente & Espinosa, 2021). It has also been shown that people who have had more partners obtain higher scores in sadism and subclinical psychopathy. At the same time, people who are unfaithful in a relationship, and within them, those who are repeatedly unfaithful, present higher levels of the four variables of the dark personality traits, as well as higher scores in all the mechanisms of moral disengagement. Finally, it is verified that the consumption of pornography is more common in young people with higher scores in Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and sadism. In addition, young pornography consumers use the mechanisms of moral disengagement to a greater extent, except for the displacement of responsibility, the distortion of consequences, and dehumanization. In general, the statement by Jonason et al. (2010) is true: Dark personality traits displays tend to alienate the partner.

The main objective of this study was to determine the presence of dark personality traits and moral disengagement in young people between 18 and 25 years of age and to analyze their influence on their relationships. The analyses indicate that the features that make up the dark personality traits and the mechanisms of moral disengagement appear concomitantly, and our results agree with those of other authors (Brugués & Caparrós, 2021; Clemente, Padilla-Racero, & Espinosa, 2019a).

This study also coincides with the works of other authors verifying higher scores in men than in women in the variables of dark personality traits and the mechanisms of moral disengagement. Consistent with this, men with higher levels of dark personality traits and higher use of a moral disengagement mechanism also present a greater predisposition

towards infidelity, especially when it occurs repeatedly. These results are far from those obtained by Moore et al. (2020), who observed a greater predisposition towards infidelity in women. Infidelity is highly related to the presence of dark personality traits, unrestricted sociosexuality, and having more sexual partners (Alavi et al., 2018), which sometimes translates into more couples. According to the results of this study, people who presented traits of psychopathy and sadism had had more than three partners throughout their adolescence, which is significant, considering the youth of the sample. Additionally, the dark personality traits are associated with men's greater success in short-term relationships. People who show greater impulsiveness and a need to experience new sensations practice casual sex more frequently, as is the case of psychopaths and sadists.

Concerning the relationship between the dark personality traits and the mechanisms of moral disengagement, we emphasize that other personality traits participate in the sociocognitive processes that give rise to these mechanisms of moral disengagement, such as antisocial behavior, creating a relationship between such behavior and the dark personality traits (Brugués & Caparrós, 2021). In addition, people with high scores in the dimensions of moral disengagement and dark personality traits, as pointed out by Lambart and López (2017), develop abusive tactics towards their partners, such as, for example, monopolizing the partner's time, inducing jealousy, punishing the partner's threats of infidelity, emotional manipulation, and denigrating potential competitors.

Furthermore, and taking into account that the main objective of this study was to analyze how the presence of the dark personality traits and moral disengagement could influence couple relationships, we note that antisocial behavior is a predictor of the use of violence (Brugués & Caparrós, 2021). Given that the dark personality traits are related to insensitivity and manipulation, the influence of antisocial behavior should not be overlooked (Jones & Neria, 2015). Psychopathy and sadism are the components of the dark personality traits that are most closely related to antisocial behavior. Insensitivity, impulsivity, or pleasure in dominating and harming others are part of antisocial behavior in young adults (Chabrol et al., 2017), the sample targeted by this research. Our results are consistent with those of Jonason et al. (2011), who referred to the fact that, as dark personality traits are associated with aggressive behaviors, it is common for people who present them to accept these traits in their partners.

At the same time, sadism can lead to sexual violence. Sexual sadism, which is related to impulsivity and antisocial behavior, is a paraphilia characterized by a preference for sexual activities that include pain and humiliation of the partner, following a pattern of sexual arousal due to another person's suffering, which is manifested through fantasies, impulses, and behaviors (Eher et al., 2016).

Pornographic consumption does not contribute to ending this type of behavior, as, according to the results obtained in this work, all the components of the dark personality traits, except for narcissism, are clearly related to the consumption of pornography, as are five of the eight mechanisms of moral disengagement. The sexual acts that are

represented in pornography are, in most cases, of a violent nature, representing aggression, abuse, humiliation, and even rape. As a consequence, many consumers of pornography may carry out these forms of violence in their relationships, whether they are short-term, casual, or long-term relationships. Pornography portrays people continually changing partners, that is, promiscuity and partner exchange is normal. These data are consistent with the works of Jonason et al. (2009), who stated that the presence of the dark personality traits is directly related to having more than one sexual partner, unrestricted socio-sexuality, and a clear preference for short-term relationships. Jonason et al. (2010) also referred to the fact that their partners are attracted to other people. Therefore, this disposition towards both modes of pairing increases the variety of couples they may have, favoring short-term relationships. In general, this work also agrees with the findings of Jonason et al. (2015), who pointed out how both men and women preferred partners with low scores in Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy to maintain long-term relationships but partners with high levels of these dimensions were preferred for one-night stands.

The results of this study also reveal differences as a function of participants' sex. This is consistent with the works presented in the introduction, which show that short-term relationships (Jonason et al., 2009), infidelity (Jia et al., 2016; Moore et al., 2020), and lying to a partner (Moore et al., 2020), among other behaviors, are carried out to a greater extent by men. Strangely, lying is frequently how men with high scores on dark traits can maintain long-term relationships (Jones & Weiser, 2014).

We believe that an important contribution of this work is to verify how the most positive assessment of antisocial behavior leads to the appearance of violence within the couple, and how young people share certain behaviors, such as infidelity and the consumption of pornography, which despite their higher presence in people with higher levels of the dark personality traits, are manifested in many couples. Also, people who are unfaithful to their partner and who consume pornography use more justifications to disengage morally.

This work was not intended to specifically address the question of whether measures of dark personality traits, including moral disengagement, should be encompassed within a single Dark Factor, or whether the various measures should continue to be treated independently. However, the fact that many measures show a similar trend and that some results are difficult to explain (especially concerning narcissism) provides support for the possible existence of a general Dark Factor (see, in this regard, the work of Kowalski et al., 2021). On another hand, violence in the couple has a specific characteristic: the aggressor attacks their loved one. This means that aggressors should theoretically be more associated with psychopathy, and they attempt to manipulate and manage who is less They are likely to perceive such behavior, mainly because loving feelings will prevent manipulation from being perceived. Hence, we consider that future studies should relate the components of said Dark Factor to the typologies of love.

This study has some limitations. The sample should have been larger. It was not as representative as expected. As a result, the reliability indices of some of the PMD scales were excessively low, and their mean was 0.50, an aspect also due to the homogeneity of the sample. The data collection system (Google Form) presents drawbacks, common to works that collect data through social networks, especially due to the incidental procedure of the snowball technique. There is also some sex bias in the composition of the sample as women predominated, although this bias is also commented on by the creators of the questionnaire. If the sample had been larger, the data could have been analyzed with more powerful statistical techniques. As a final limitation, we point out that it would have been appropriate to construct a more complete questionnaire on socio-affective relationships in the couple, and that would allow us to find stronger links between these relationships and the variables of the dark personality traits.

The strength of this study lies in the verification of the value of the

variables of the dark personality traits and moral disengagement as predictors of a poor couple relationship, an issue raised but not verified as such by previous studies (Clemente & Espinosa, 2021). Many of the studies on the association between the dark personality traits variables and couple relationships hardly analyze the couple relationship. As mentioned, future studies should include variables related to love and the typologies of love.

Even with its limitations, this study has responded satisfactorily to the objectives and underlines the need to continue working on similar studies, to create policies for the prevention of violence and sexual abuse in young people. We believe that it can help to develop intervention programs that, among other issues, show how infidelity and the use of pornography have a negative influence on couple relationships, generating mechanisms of moral disengagement that justify harmful actions and attitudes. On another hand, future studies should include the analysis of the different ages of the young people, as well as of different cultural traditions, issues that, due to the homogeneity of our sample, could not be addressed.

Data availability statement

The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

Ethical consent

Ethics Comitee of the Research Group in Criminology, Legal Psychology and Penal Justice (Universidade da Coruna, Spain). Date: 2020/10/03. Ref.: ECRIM/21/20.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Conceptualization, LF and MC; methodology, LF and MC; validation, LF and MC; formal analysis, LF and MC; data curation, LF and MC; writing—original draft preparation, LF and MC; writing—review and editing, LF and MC. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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