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What's so right about Mr Wrong?

Why are some of us so attracted to men who are bad for us? Shaoni Battacharya explores new research that suggests a dangerous blend of personality types can drive us to love

15 SEPTEMBER 2011 } by *Psychologies*

Single man, 40s, extremely physically attractive, enjoys risk-taking, WLTM young woman with supermodel looks, fond of international travel and

 promiscuity, for short-term fling, no strings attached.'

If you read these words on a dating website, would you say this was the profile of an ideal husband? Research findings tell us that what women most desire in a romantic partner are dependability, security and fidelity. Yet a brief overview of our fantasy men paints a different picture. From [Rhett Butler](#) and [James Bond](#), to [Don Draper](#) and [Stringer Bell](#), the men who fill our fantasies are anything but Mr Nice. Is this simply because character flaws make for interesting drama, or does our lust for these fictional characters reveal something deeper about the nature of attraction?

According to [Peter Jonason](#), a professor of psychology at the University of West Florida, our attraction to such men – in the movies and in reality – could be because they possess a potent mix of more malign personality traits, referred to as the ‘dark triad’. We may be familiar with personality tests for the ‘Big Five’ characteristics – Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness and Neuroticism. To some degree, our individual blend of these five traits determines how we see the world, and how the world sees us. But, psychologists argue, there is another dimension to our personality – the extent to which we exhibit more negative characteristics. The dark triad refers to three of these traits in particular – Machiavellianism, narcissism and psychopathy.

According to Jonason, we all have elements of the dark triad within us. For example, he says we all lie, and being a little selfish or manipulative can be useful. People high in the dark triad traits tend to be low on anxiety and have good self-esteem. They don't get thrown by failures and pick themselves up quickly - often good skills to possess.

However, each dark triad characteristic exists on a spectrum - and people at the extreme ends of these spectrums can be difficult to deal with. Machiavellian types lie and can be highly manipulative. Narcissists believe themselves superior to others and seek attention, often to an unhealthy degree. Those with psychopathic tendencies have little empathy and their behaviour is often out of control. Although they are distinct character traits, they can influence an individual's attitude to relationships in similar ways - dark triad types are often highly unco-operative and disagreeable.

Despite this, Jonason's research suggests that dark triad men, in particular, are very successful in attracting new partners. They are likely to have had more lovers than the average population. So why are many of us so powerfully drawn to them?

Sarah, 32, met Bernie through mutual friends. He was ‘probably the most charming man I have ever met’, she says. ‘He had the ability to make you feel like the most important person in the room. At first it felt like the best relationship of my life. He’d make the kind of grand romantic gestures that you only see in films – filling my bedroom with flowers, kidnapping me for romantic weekends away.’ After a few blissful months, Sarah started pushing Bernie to meet her parents, or book a holiday together, but he wouldn’t commit. ‘I realised that everything we did was on his terms. I wanted the normal, boring bits of a relationship, too.’

The more she pushed, the more distant he became, until she ended the affair. ‘He remained gorgeous and charming and I couldn’t work out what was wrong with me – why was I spoiling things?’

Bernie’s manipulative behaviour is typical of a Machiavellian personality type – someone extremely adept at persuading others to do his bidding. But it was partly this ability to take charge, as she saw it, that drew Sarah to him. ‘There’s a theory that we’re drawn to qualities that we lack, that make us feel whole,’ suggests counselling psychotherapist [Jacqui Marson](#). ‘Many women are drawn to self-interested, driven, competitive men because we can’t quite bear those qualities in ourselves. But when the first hormonal rush of attraction falls away, the qualities that attracted us become a source of discomfort.’

We might hope that our partner will change to please us, but are we right to expect that they will? ‘I think it’s quite embedded in the female psyche that men will change if they love us, but it’s not necessarily realistic,’ says Marson. ‘Your partner might argue that he had never pretended to be anything different, that you knew what you were getting into. But in a sense, you’ve colluded with him, because you wanted him precisely for those qualities you now want to change.’

Research by Jonason’s team suggests that dark triad personality types are more attractive to some of us than others. Jonason says that women with so-called ‘avoidant-attachment’ patterns are more likely to be drawn to dark triad men. ‘Women who are low on self-esteem and had unstable and unpredictable family lives are drawn to these wild cards,’ he explains.

But there may be another reason why some of us find dark triad types irresistible – we think their flaws give us the opportunity to ‘fix’ them. ‘There’s a powerful cultural mythology around this idea,’ says Marson. ‘We’ll find an arrogant Mr Darcy type, and we will transform him. So many romances rely on this notion that the woman has redemptive power.’ It’s not the ‘bad boy’ we love, but his potential to become good, with our help.

Dark triad relationships can be lasting – although not happy – if the other partner is very dependent, says Avi Shmueli, couples psychotherapist at the [Tavistock Centre For Couple Relationships](#). ‘You get situations where people are deeply unhappy in a relationship, and say “he’s a bastard, but I love him”. But it’s more that they just can’t leave, than that they actually love him.’

Can we, should we, ever hope that a relationship with a dark triad partner can be successful in the long term? ‘Even dark triad types reach tipping points in their lives, and if that’s when they get together with their partner and their partner is very tolerant, it might just work,’ speculates Jonason. But most psychologists agree that the costs of holding together such a relationship can be high for women, to the point where they have to subjugate themselves. ‘It means constantly feeding the man’s ego,’ says Jonason. ‘Because these types get bored easily, you need to work hard at keeping things fresh, and to be creative about making things different. The illusion women sell to themselves is that they want a bad boy – bad to everyone else but her. But it’s like expecting a lion not to eat you.’



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