



## Looking under the hood: The psychogenic motivational foundations of the Dark Triad☆☆☆



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### ABSTRACT

The Dark Triad traits (i.e., psychopathy, narcissism, & Machiavellianism) have become a popular topic in personality psychology and in the media and may have important evolutionary significance. To provide new insight into the Dark Triad traits, we present four studies ( $N = 2506$ ) with two measures of the Dark Triad traits, in two volunteer, one mTurk, and one American undergraduate sample using three frameworks of individual differences in psychogenic motives (i.e., achievement, power, and affiliation). Although results were not fully robust to method and sampling variance, all three traits were associated with motivations towards trying to be dominant and powerful, but only narcissism was motivated by affiliation or intimacy needs. Sex differences in the Dark Triad traits were often accounted for by individual differences in the intimacy and power motives. The Discussion highlights the utility of evolutionary models to improve our understanding of the motivational systems “under the hood” of those characterized by the Dark Triad traits.

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Traditionally the Dark Triad traits (i.e., psychopathy, narcissism, and Machiavellianism) have been considered socially undesirable and maladaptive in people's lives (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). The traits are characterized by vanity and self-centeredness (i.e., narcissism), manipulation and cynicism (i.e., Machiavellianism), and callous social attitudes and amorality (i.e., psychopathy). The traits have implications for organizational psychology (Spain, Harms, & Leberton, 2014), social psychology (Hodson, Hogg, & MacInnis, 2009), and health (Jonason, Baughman, Carter, & Parker, 2015). Most research on them is characterized by psychopathological assumptions and clinical methods and samples (Cleckley, 1976; Hare, 1985). For example, these traits predict variance in community, online, and college-student samples in risk-taking (Crysel, Crosier, & Webster, 2013; Jonason, Koenig, & Tost, 2010), impulsivity, limited self-control, and ADHD symptoms (Jones & Paulhus, 2011; Jonason & Tost, 2010), limited empathy and alexithymia (Giammarco & Vernon, 2014; Jonason & Krause, 2013; Wai & Tiliopoulos, 2012), heightened competitiveness (Carter, Campbell, &

Muncer, 2014), and “risky” sexuality (Adams, Luévano, & Jonason, 2014; Jonason, Li, Webster, & Schmitt, 2009).

However, in the last decade there has been a surge of research on these traits because they have begun to be examined in subclinical samples using the methods of personality and evolutionary psychology (Jonason, Webster, Schmitt, Li, & Crysel, 2012). Such work suggests that despite the socially undesirable nature of these traits, they may have serious adaptive consequences in the form of mating (Jonason et al., 2009) and the extraction of resources from one's socioecology (Jonason & Webster, 2012). To date, three main questions predominate this burgeoning research on the Dark Triad traits: (a) how best to measure them (e.g., Jones & Paulhus, 2014; Küfner, Dufner, & Back, 2015), (b) what do the traits predict (e.g., Jonason & Webster, 2012; Jones, 2013), and (c) what is causally behind them (e.g., Jonason, Lyons, Bethell, & Ross, 2013; Jones & Figueredo, 2013). In the current study, we provide new insight into the third question by viewing them through a motivational psychology lens.

According to psychologists who study motivations, there may be three innate and universal psychological motivations (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Sheldon, 2004; Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013). These motivations are (a) *competence* or the perceived effectiveness and sense of confidence with environmental interactions; the universal desire to feel like one can control the outcomes in their lives (Deci, 1975; White, 1959), (b) *autonomy* or the perceived choice and sense of internal source of behavior; a universal urge to act as the author of one's destiny and in harmony with one's self-image but not to be separate from others (deCharms, 1968; Deci & Ryan, 1985), and (c) *relatedness* or the perceived connection with people and sense of

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social belongingness; the universal desire to engage in social interactions, to feel socially connected, and to care for others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Bowlby, 1979). These motivations may act as fundamental aspects of psychology that should exert downward (albeit indirect and weak; Bernard, 2010; Elliot & Thrash, 2001; McHoskey, 1999) influence on personality and individual differences like the Dark Triad traits.

We propose a hierarchical system of individual differences where motivational foundations lay above individual differences in theoretical space and it is individual differences in these motivations that partially account for individual differences in personality traits like the Dark Triad. We conceive of personality traits as descriptive, mid-level traits to account for systematic biases in motivational, cognitive, and affective systems. Indeed, work on attachment systems (i.e., need for intimacy) has relevance in all primates (and likely all mammals) and dysfunctions in those systems result in the very antisocial behaviors we associate with the Dark Triad traits (see Bowlby, 1979; Harlow & Zimmermann, 1958). In addition, we would argue that selection pressures have not acted on personality traits themselves, but, instead individual differences in motivational, cognitive, and affective systems. By examining the relationship between motivations and the Dark Triad traits, we offer hitherto unknown detail about the motivational foundations of these socially undesirable-but-potentially adaptive suite of individual differences (Jonason, Webster et al., 2012; Jonason et al., 2009). Linking individual differences in motivations to the Dark Triad traits is important because both approaches postulate motivational explanations for social behavior in its pathological form or not (McClelland, 1985; McClelland, Koestner, & Weinberger, 1989).

## 1. Current project

There are reasons to expect the Dark Triad traits to be associated with motivational processes. At least two studies have examined motivational systems associated with some (but not all) of the Dark Triad traits (Elliot & Thrash, 2001; McHoskey, 1999). For instance, psychopathy is characterized by disagreeableness and dishonesty, diminished health, antisocial social strategies, and compromised morality whereas narcissism is associated with relatively prosocial values and moral systems and improved health outcomes (Lee & Ashton, 2005; Jonason, Baughman et al., 2015; Jonason, Strosser, Kroll, Duineveld, & Baruffi, 2015). This might translate into different associations between psychopathy and narcissism in reference to fundamental motives. Said another way, individual differences in these fundamental motives may be the distal predictors of the various outcomes associated with the Dark Triad traits and reveal differences and similarities among the traits.

Theoretically speaking, linking motivational systems to the Dark Triad traits is important because we view many behaviors to be the result of internal motivations. If we treat the Dark Triad traits as behavioral regularities and attitudinal biases, we expect motivations to underlie these as antecedent conditions. While this might contrast with motives research that treats motives as mediators/moderators or experiential outcomes (e.g., Cooper, Agocha, & Sheldon, 2000; Sheldon, Abad, & Hinsch, 2011) we see personality traits being composed of a multitude of primitive (in the evolutionary sense) moral, cognitive, physical, hormonal, and neurological systems. One of those underlying systems might be latent and evolved differences in motivational processes. From an evolutionary, functional perspective (Buss, 1991, 2009; Confer et al., 2010), the needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness might have evolved to provide an adaptive advantage in a heavily social world,<sup>1</sup> and can motivate behaviors that provide psychological well-being through integration of intrapersonal and interpersonal processes (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Bernard, Mills, Swenson, & Walsh, 2005; Ryan, 1995; Sheldon & Gunz, 2009). If we are correct, personality traits are the phenotypic expressions of the

average or interaction of various underlying systems. What researchers call “personality traits” might be descriptions of these recurrent patterns within people.

Considerable insights have been gleaned about the Dark Triad traits using Life History Theory (McDonald, Donnellan, & Navarrete, 2012; Mealey, 1995), Social Exchange Theory (O’Boyle, Forsyth, Banks, & McDaniel, 2012; Spain et al., 2014), the selection-evocation-manipulation paradigm (Jonason & Schmitt, 2012; Jonason, Valentine, Li, & Harbeson, 2011), traditional personality psychology (Jakobwitz & Egan, 2006; Kavanagh, Signal, & Taylor, 2013), and behavioral genetics (Petrides, Vernon, Schermer, & Veselka, 2011; Vernon, Villani, Vickers, & Harris, 2008). By adopting alternative theoretical “hats” we might learn more detail about the Dark Triad traits by adopting the methods and measures of that paradigm. In a series of studies, we provide the first large-scale analysis of the motivational foundations associated with the Dark Triad traits.

We make a number of general predictions.<sup>2</sup> We expect psychopathy to be negatively correlated with motivations to connect to others given its antisociality (Cleckley, 1976; Hare, 1985; Harpur, Hare, & Hakstian, 1989; Levenson, Kiehl, & Fitzpatrick, 1995) and to be positively correlated with the power motive given its dominance-striving (Semenya & Honey, 2015). We expect narcissism to be associated with a need for power and achievement given its core of leadership, dominance, and authority and need for affiliation as a means to feed their ego needs for admiration (Campbell, Brunell, & Finkel, 2006; Lee et al., 2013; Raskin & Terry, 1988). And last, we expect Machiavellianism to resemble psychopathy in antisociality given the high correlation between the two (Lee & Ashton, 2005; Paulhus & Williams, 2002) but to also be associated with motivational systems related to power and achievement given the apparent desire for power located within the trait (Christie & Geis, 1970; Machiavelli, 1532/2004; Semena & Honey, 2015). In so doing, we hope to highlight the commonality (with zero-order correlations) and the unique features of the Dark Triad traits (with regression coefficients).

In addition, we expect to replicate sex differences in the Dark Triad traits (Jonason, Li, & Czarna, 2013) and motivational foundations (Bernard, 2010). Men tend to score higher than women do on the Dark Triad traits and women score higher than men do on need for intimacy/affiliation. However, if individual differences in motivational foundations are associated with the Dark Triad traits then it is possible that sex differences in the Dark Triad traits are confounded by individual differences in the motivational systems. Just as individual differences in empathy appear to mediate sex differences in the Dark Triad traits (Jonason, Lyons et al., 2013), we tested for confounding mediation. For example, sex differences in psychopathy might be a function of individual differences (and selection pressures) in men (and males) that undermine intimacy and affiliation and intimacy motives; such motives may undermine various aggressive, competitive, and opportunistic tasks that men benefit more from (evolutionarily speaking) than women can. If one conceptualizing motivations as the underlying systems that account for individual differences in personality and that selection pressures will act on these motivational systems, such a hypothesis seems reasonable.

## 2. Study 1

We begin with a general and basic assessment of the motivational foundations associated with the Dark Triad traits. We assess the Dark Triad traits in relation to the three basic psychogenic motives: competence, autonomy, and relatedness. We replicate sex differences and test whether motivational foundations can account for some of the sex differences in the Dark Triad traits.

<sup>2</sup> Given the wide net we cast in this study to measure motives and the Dark Triad traits, we avoid making specific predictions and focus on thematic predictions.

<sup>1</sup> The primary niche of humans may be social in nature.

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