Pathology, pseudopathology, and the Dark Triad of personality

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A B S T R A C T

The Dark Triad traits (i.e., psychopathy, Machiavellianism, and narcissism) have traditionally been viewed as undesirable and pathological. In contrast, an evolutionary perspective suggests that traits like these might be pseudopathologies; traits that society actively dislikes in that they pose a threat to the collective good. We examined (N = 290) how the Dark Triad traits related to intrapersonal (i.e., behavioral dysfunction), quasibehavioral (i.e., reactive and proactive aggression), and interpersonal (i.e., communal and exchange orientation) factors. Psychopathy predicted high rates of behavioral dysregulation and both forms of aggression. Psychopathy and Machiavellianism showed an aversion towards communalism but an exchange orientation to social relationships. Lastly, individual differences in the Dark Triad traits accounted for part (5–22%) of the sex differences in social strategies and aggression. The theoretical implications of these findings are discussed in, and in support of, an evolutionary paradigm.

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1. Introduction

The Dark Triad traits (i.e., psychopathy, narcissism, and Machiavellianism) are traditionally viewed as undesirable and pathological traits (Campbell & Miller, 2011; Kowalski, 2001). In contrast, an evolutionary perspective (Jonason, Li, Webster, & Schmitt, 2009; Jonason, Lyons, Bethell, & Ross, 2013) suggests the Dark Triad traits might be pseudopathologies where they confer benefits to the person at the cost of the group (Crawford & Anderson, 1989). In this study we adopt the latter position in understanding the relationships between the Dark Triad traits and behavioral dysregulation, aggression, and social strategies. Importantly, we advance a model whereby the Dark Triad traits are characterized by a social strategy that devalues others over oneself (Jonason, Strosser, Kroll, Duineveld, & Baruffi, 2015) which then facilitates aggression and limited self-control.

Most—implicitly or explicitly—treat behavioral dysregulation (e.g., Roth, Lance, Isquith, Fischer, & Giancola, 2013; Slick, Lautzenhiser, Sherman, & Eyril, 2006) and aggression (Baumeister, Bushman, & Campbell, 2000; Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Lykken, 1995) as pathologies. The Dark Triad traits are associated with both of these through limited executive functioning (Gioia, Isquith, Guy, & Kenworthy, 2000) and limited self-control and impulsivity (Jonason & Tost, 2010; Jones & Paulhus, 2011). These links have been observed repeatedly in various ways. The Dark Triad traits have been linked to various forms of aggression (Jonason & Webster, 2010; Jones & Paulhus, 2010), future discounting and drug abuse (Jonason, Koenig, & Tost, 2010), criminal tendencies (Hare, 1985), an exploitive mating strategy (Jonason et al., 2009), and lying (Baughman, Jonason, Vernon, & Lyons, 2014).

Unsurprisingly these traits tend to be thought of as pathologies by most people.1 One way to disentangle the pathological and pseudopathological aspects of these traits is to examine each trait independently (Rauthmann & Kolar, 2012). For instance, psychopathy evidences the most socially undesirable value system: Machiavellianism evidences a moral flexibility; narcissism evidences a socially desirable value system (Jonason et al., 2015). Much of the undesirable aspects of the Dark Triad traits tend to load up on psychopathy. For instance, we expect psychopathy to be related to behavioral dysregulation. While it might be possible this is evidence of some personality disorder, it is also possible they might be part of the suite of tactics and traits that come together to form a fast life history strategy (Glenn & Raine, 2009). Behavioral dysregulation might facilitate the immediate extraction of resources from one’s environment (Jonason & Tost, 2010).

We also expect this to be the case when examining the aggression that characterizes these traits. Unlike prior work we examine it in relation to reactive and proactive aggression (Bobadilla,
associated aggression (Glenn & Raine, 2009). Aggression might be 
manifested in socially undesirable ways (e.g., behavioral dysregulation and aggression) and, thus, they are deemed as 
pathologies (Jonason et al., 2015; Kurt & Paulhus, 2008). Our 
perspective may translate into associations with the distinction of 
communalism (i.e., implicit reciprocity) and exchange (i.e., explicit 
reciprocity) social strategies (Clark & Mills, 1993, 2011; Clark, 
We expect psychopathy and Machiavellianism to be characterized 
by low scores on communalism and high scores on exchange (i.e., 
pseudopathologies) whereas narcissism may only be correlated 
with high scores on communalism. In reference to the former, 
those high in these “darker” aspects of personality may be out 
for themselves and, thus, might be against the group and only 
interact with others if they are overtly getting something in 
exchange. In reference to the latter, narcissism may be “lighter” 
and more socially desirable than the other two (Rauthmann & 
Kolar, 2012) which may manifest in socially desirable approaches 
to the group (Jonason et al., 2015). And finally, we present a Struc-
tural Equation Model that tests our contention that the “undesir-
able” outcomes associated with the Dark Triad traits are 
manifestations of the social strategies that characterize each, 
with psychopathy retaining direct links as it is the most “pathological” 
trait.

Objectively speaking, men are better characterized by the Dark 
Triad traits than women are (Jonason et al., 2009). The pathological 
perspective has little to say as to why this might be the case as 
most of it is not theory driven. In contrast, the pseudopathological 
perspective—an evolutionary perspective—suggests this pattern 
might be a function of the asymmetrical costs between the sexes 
in engaging in social and sexual strategies that place immediate 
outcomes over delayed ones (Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Jonason, 
Valentine & Li, 2012) and the Dark Triad trait may facilitate this 
in men more than in women (Jonason, Koenig, et al., 2010). There-
fore, we expect to replicate these sex differences for the Dark Triad 
traits, but also expect these differences to mediate sex differences 
in social strategies and behaviors (both external manifestations of 
internal qualities). For instance, men may be more aggressive in 
general (Bettencourt & Miller, 1996; Eagly & Steffen, 1986) and less 
 communal (Buhrke & Fuqua, 1987; Jonason, Webster, & Lindsey, 
2008) than women are. Sex differences in aggression and social 
strategies may be facilitated by individual differences in the Dark 
Triad traits.

In this study we try to describe a position that the Dark Triad 
traits are pseudopathologies characterized by a non-communal 
social strategy, behavioral dysregulation, and aggression. We then 
post a model whereby personality traits lead to the adoption of 
particular social strategies, which then predict behavioral out-
comes. Last, we test whether individual differences in the Dark 
Triad traits can account for part of the sex differences in social 
strategies, aggression, and behavioral dysregulation.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

Two hundred and ninety volunteers (35% male) aged 17–65 
(M = 31.16, SD = 10.34) predominantly (89%) from the United 
States were recruited via social networking websites to partake 
in a larger online study. Participants were informed about the nature 
of the study, then proceeded to complete a series of measures 
as described below. Upon completion, participants were thanked 
and debriefed.

2.2. Measures

The Dark Triad traits were assessed using the 27-item Short 
Dark Triad (Jones & Paulhus, 2014). Participants indicated their 
agreement with (1 = Strongly disagree; 5 = Strongly agree) on items 
such as: “It’s not wise to tell your secrets” for Machiavellianism, 
“People see me as a natural leader” for narcissism, and “I like to 
get revenge on Authority” for psychopathy. The relevant items 
were summed to create indexes of narcissism (Cronbach’s 
α = .81), Machiavellianism (α = .80), and psychopathy (α = .81).2

Participants completed the Behavioral Regulation Scale (Roth, 
Isquith, & Gioia, 2005). It is composed of 30 items asking participants 
how often (1 = Never; 7 = Almost always) within the last month they acted with/without self-control such as: “Being impul-
sive”, and “After having a problem, not getting over it easily”’. Items 
were summed to create a measure of individual differences in 
behavioral dysregulation abilities (α = .96).

Participants completed the Communal Orientation Scale (Clark 
et al., 1987) and Exchange Orientation Scale (Clark, Taraban, Ho, 
& Wesner, 1989) combined. On the Communal Orientation Scale 
participants reported how much each item sounded like them 
(1 = Definitely does not sound like me; 5 = Definitely sounds like 
me). It is composed of 14 items that assess one’s orientation to 
the group (i.e., communalism) with items such as: “When I have 
a need that others ignore I am hurt”. The Exchange Orientation 
Scale is composed of nine items that assess one’s orientation towards self-interest (i.e., exchange) with items like: “I usually 
only give gifts to those who have given me gifts in the past”. Items 
on each scale were summed to create indexes for communalism 
(α = .84) and exchange (α = .67).3,4

Participants completed the Reactive-Proactive Aggression Survey 
(Raine et al., 2006). It is composed of 30 items that assess individual 
differences in one’s tendency to react in an aggressive way 
(e.g., “Yelled at others when they have annoyed you”) or a ten-
dency to seek out aggressive exchanges (e.g., “Had fights with oth-
ers to show who was on top”). Participants reported how often 
they have used such behavior (1 = Never; 5 = Always). Items were 
summed to create indexes of reactive (α = .89) and proactive 
(α = .91) aggression.5

2 Machiavellianism correlated with psychopathy (r(289) = .36, p < .01) and narcissism (r(289) = .31, p < .01), whereas narcissism correlated with psychopathy (r(289) = .39, p < .01).
3 While we could have improved Cronbach’s alpha to .72 by eliminating items 5, 17, and 22, we felt it best to retain the established factor structure.
4 These two scales were correlated, but effectively orthogonal (r(289) = -.15, p < .01).
5 These two scales were correlated (r(289) = .64, p < .01).
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