



Pathology, pseudopathology, and the Dark Triad of personality



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ABSTRACT

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,

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¹ We use a liberal definition of word “pathology” in this study because we (1) are measuring sub-clinical levels of these traits and (2) we feel social perceptions define what is considered a pathology or not (i.e., community standards).

Wampler, & Taylor, 2012; Dodge & Coie, 1987). This is an important distinction in understanding aggression. Each evidences different estimates of genetic and environmental influence (Tuvblad, Raine, Zheng, & Baker, 2009) and different correlates (Bobadilla et al., 2012; Raine et al., 2006). For instance, reactive but not proactive aggression, might be linked to self-regulation problems (White, Jarrett, & Ollendick, 2013; Winstok, 2009). Psychopathy is associated with self-control problems (Jonason & Tost, 2010) and neurological antecedents that may relate to the associated aggression (Glenn & Raine, 2009). Aggression might be one of the standard tactics of influence used by those who score high in psychopathy (Jonason & Webster, 2012). Proactive and reactive aggression may serve different functional, adaptive purposes (Raine et al., 2006), but as those characterized by psychopathy adopt aggression as a global approach to getting what they want, we expect psychopathy to be correlated with reactive and proactive aggression.

An evolutionary perspective on these traits suggests the Dark Triad traits are not pathologies but are, instead, “alternative” social strategies (Jonason & Webster, 2012). These social strategies often manifest themselves 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, Ouellette, Powell, & Milberg, 1987; Trapnell & Paulhus, 2012). 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 Structural Equation Model that tests our contention that the “undesirable” 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). Therefore, 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 posit a model whereby personality traits lead to the adoption of

particular social strategies, which then predict behavioral outcomes. 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 $\alpha = .81$), Machiavellianism ($\alpha = .80$), and psychopathy ($\alpha = .81$).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 impulsive”, and “After having a problem, not getting over it easily”. Items were summed to create a measure of individual differences in behavioral dysregulation abilities ($\alpha = .96$).

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 ($\alpha = .84$) and exchange ($\alpha = .67$).^{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 tendency to seek out aggressive exchanges (e.g., “Had fights with others 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 ($\alpha = .89$) and proactive ($\alpha = .91$) aggression.⁵

² Machiavellianism correlated with psychopathy ($r(289) = .56$, $p < .01$) 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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