



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Personality and Individual Differences

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/paid

Thieves of time? Procrastination and the Dark Triad of personality

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 4 October 2013

Received in revised form 8 December 2013

Accepted 2 January 2014

Available online 24 January 2014

Keywords:

Dark Triad

Narcissism

Machiavellianism

Psychopathy

Avoidance procrastination

Arousal procrastination

Life History theory

ABSTRACT

Procrastination shares many features with the Dark Triad of personality, such as high impulsivity and low conscientiousness. We investigated the Dark Triad of personality (i.e., narcissism, Machiavellianism and psychopathy) in relation to two types of procrastination styles (i.e., arousal and avoidance procrastination) in an on-line survey with 369 participants. We found that avoidance procrastination had a positive relationship with secondary psychopathy and the Entitlement/Exploitativeness facet of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory. Arousal procrastination, in turn, had a negative relationship with the Leadership/Authority facet. Possible reasons for the findings are discussed with a reference to fast and slow Life History strategies.

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1. Introduction

Procrastination, the tendency to put off necessary tasks, has been linked to failure in self-regulation (Steel, 2007), and is typical to individuals who are high in impulsivity. In fact, procrastination could be at the core of impulsivity (Tsukayama, Duckworth, & Kim, 2012), manifested by an inability to delay present gratification in order to achieve future goals (Schouwenburg & Groenewoud, 2001). This hedonistic, live in the moment–attitude to life is related to certain personality and individual differences, such as low conscientiousness (Lay, 1997; Rabin, Fogel, & Nutter-Upham, 2011), high extraversion (Freeman, Cox-Fuenzalida, & Stoltenberg, 2011), low emotional intelligence (Deniz, Traş, & Aydoğan, 2009), and an evening chronotype (Stolarski, Ledzińska, & Matthews, 2013). All the above are connected to Dark Triad of personality (i.e., narcissism, Machiavellianism and psychopathy) (Crysel, Crosier, & Webster, 2013; Jakobwitz & Egan, 2006; Jonason, Lyons, Bethell, & Ross, 2013; Jonason, Jones, & Lyons, 2013; Jonason & Tost, 2010; Jones & Paulhus, 2011; Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Although there has been much recent interest in the Dark Triad, it has not yet been investigated in relation to procrastination.

The Dark Triad consist of separate personality traits, linked by common features such as low agreeableness, and lack of honesty and empathy (for a review, see Furnham, Richards, and Paulhus, 2013). There are several empirical and theoretical reasons to

assume that Dark Triad relates to procrastination. Theoretically, Dark Triad and procrastination can be investigated using evolutionary framework, a Life History (LH) theory. According to LH theory, individuals face trade-offs between investment in reproductive and mating efforts, which relate to behavioural strategies that vary in a continuum from slow to fast. Fast strategies are manifested by increased mating, and decreased parenting effort, and can be adaptive in unpredictable environments (Del Giudice & Belsky, 2010). Dark Triad has been proposed as an exploitive inter-personal strategy supporting fast LH (McDonald, Donnellan, & Navarrete, 2012), and could be especially adaptive for males (Jonason, Li, Webster, & Schmitt, 2009). Fast LH strategies are characterised by low self-regulation (Del Giudice, 2014), and empirical research suggests that both Dark Triad and procrastination are related to behaviours characteristic of a failure to self-regulate.

The failure to self-regulate is demonstrated by dysfunctional impulsivity (Jones & Paulhus, 2011), temporal discounting (Crysel et al., 2013) and gambling (Jones, 2013), which are linked to narcissism and psychopathy. Narcissism and psychopathy seem to share the impulsivity and future discounting features typical to procrastinators. However, another feature of procrastination, low conscientiousness, has been associated with Machiavellianism and psychopathy, but not with narcissism (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Thus, the empirical links between Dark Triad and procrastination are not clear. We believe that the inconsistent picture is down to the fact that most of these studies have not analysed the sub-facets of procrastination and the Dark Triad. Our study investigates two facets of procrastination–avoidance and arousal (Ferrari & Diaz-Morales, 2007), and their relationship to the Dark

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Triad, including the three-factor structure of narcissism (Ackerman et al., 2011; McDonald et al., 2012), and the two-factor structure of psychopathy (McHoskey, Worzel, & Szyarto, 1998). We expect that the fast LH facets of the Dark Triad (e.g., secondary psychopathy, Machiavellianism, and Entitlement/Exploitativeness) are related to higher rates of procrastination.

Although avoidance and arousal procrastination share common features, they are also unique in many ways. Avoidant procrastinators delay aversive tasks in order to concentrate on more pleasurable tasks, or to avoid negative feedback relating to performance (Ferrari & Tice, 2000). Arousal procrastination, in turn, is about delaying tasks because of the positive arousal associated with meeting last minute deadlines. Dark Triad is associated both with thrill-seeking, which is typical to arousal procrastination, and the tendency to delay tasks in order to do more pleasurable things, which is typical to avoidance procrastination (Ferrari & Diaz-Morales, 2007). Thus, we expect both types of procrastination styles to be associated with the Dark Triad of personality.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

Participants were 369 individuals (117 men, $M = 28.34$, $SD = 14.79$) entering an on-line survey on “Personality and Procrastination”. The survey was advertised via researchers’ social networks ($n = 141$), and via a research participation website ($n = 228$). The first page of the survey contained participant information and an on-line consent, and the last page included a full debrief and the researchers’ contact details. On entering the survey, participants first completed the procrastination measures, followed by the Dark Triad instruments.

2.2. Measures

Avoidant procrastination was measured with the 15-item Adult Inventory of Procrastination (AIP) (Ferrari, Johnson, & McCown, 1995). Participants rated their tendency to procrastinate on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *Disagree Strongly*, 5 = *Agree Strongly*), including items such as “*I don’t get things done on time*” and “*I am not very good at meeting deadlines*.” The items were summed and averaged to create an index of avoidance procrastination (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .87$).

Arousal procrastination was measured with the 20-item General Procrastination Scale (GPS) (Lay, 1986), where participants rate their tendency to procrastinate on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *Disagree Strongly*, 5 = *Agree Strongly*), using statements such as “*I generally return phone calls promptly*” or “*I usually buy even an essential item at the last minute*”. The items were summed and averaged to create an index of arousal procrastination ($\alpha = .87$). Both of the procrastination scales were significantly correlated with each other ($r(369) = .69$, $p < .001$).

Narcissism was measured using the 40-item Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI) (Raskin & Terry, 1988), where participants chose between forced-choice items (e.g., “I have a natural talent for influencing people”, or “I am not good at influencing people”). The items were summed and averaged to form an index of Leadership/Authority ($\alpha = .80$), Grandiose Exhibitionism ($\alpha = .77$), and Entitlement/Exploitativeness ($\alpha = .51$), and an overall narcissism index ($\alpha = .88$).

Psychopathy was measured using the 64-item Self-Report Psychopathy Scale-III (Paulhus, Hemphill, & Hare, 2009), where participants rated how much they agreed (1 = *Strongly Disagree*; 5 = *Strongly Agree*) with statements such as: “I enjoy driving at high speeds” and “I think I could beat a lie detector.” The items were

averaged to create indices of secondary ($\alpha = .90$) and primary ($\alpha = .77$), along with overall psychopathy ($\alpha = .91$).

Machiavellianism was measured with the 20-item MACH-IV (Christie & Geis, 1970), where participants were asked how much they agreed (1 = *Strongly Disagree*; 7 = *Strongly Agree*) with statements such as: “It is hard to get ahead without cutting corners here and there” and “People suffering from incurable diseases should have the choice of being put painlessly to death.” The items were summed to create a Machiavellianism index ($\alpha = .75$).

Narcissism had a positive correlation with psychopathy ($r(369) = .49$, $p < .001$) and Machiavellianism ($r(369) = .27$, $p < .001$), and psychopathy correlated positively with Machiavellianism ($r(369) = .59$, $p < .001$). A principal component analysis revealed that all of the three traits loaded on a single factor that explained 64% of variance in the traits (Eigen = 1.91). Thus, we created a composite score for the Dark Triad by summing and averaging the z-scores for the instruments ($\alpha = .71$).

3. Results

In Table 1, we report descriptive statistics and sex differences for all of the variables. Men scored significantly higher than women in all of the Dark Triad measures but the Grandiose Exhibitionism facet of the NPI. There were no sex differences in either of the procrastination measures. In order to investigate the link between the Dark Triad and arousal and avoidance procrastination, we conducted a series of zero-order correlations (see Table 2). Avoidance procrastination was positively correlated with all of the other Dark Triad variables but the Leadership/Authority facet of the NPI. Arousal procrastination was positively correlated with the composite Dark Triad score, total psychopathy, secondary and primary psychopathy, and Machiavellianism.

In order to control for shared variance between the Dark Triad and its sub-facets, we ran four simultaneous multiple regressions where avoidance and arousal procrastination were entered as the outcome variables (see Table 2). In two of the regressions, Machiavellianism, Psychopathy, and NPI-total scores were entered as the predictor variables and in two of them, Machiavellianism, Primary and Secondary Psychopathy, and the three sub-facets of narcissism were entered as predictors. In all of the regressions, sex, age, and the procrastination scale not used as the outcome variable were entered as control variables.

When shared variance between the Dark Triad variables was controlled for, Entitlement/Exploitativeness facet of the NPI ($\beta = .10$, $p < .05$), and psychopathy ($\beta = .14$, $p < .05$), driven by secondary psychopathy ($\beta = .13$, $p < .05$) were linked to avoidance procrastination. For the arousal procrastination, we found a significant negative relationship with narcissism ($\beta = -.11$, $p < .05$), driven by the Leadership Authority facet of the NPI ($\beta = -.10$, $p < .01$).

We also tested sex as a possible moderator between the Dark Triad and procrastination. In women, avoidance procrastination had a positive relationship with primary psychopathy, ($r(252) = .25$, $p < .001$), whereas in men, this relationship was absent ($r(117) = .07$, ns) (Fisher’s $z = -1.61$, $p < .05$). Further, in women, avoidance procrastination had a significant positive relationship with the composite Dark Triad ($r(252) = .20$, $p < .001$), whereas this was absent in men ($r(117) = .06$, ns) (Fisher’s $z = -2.00$, $p < .05$).

Finally, in order to see if the two procrastination styles have different relationships with the Dark Triad variables, we compared the differences in the correlations between Dark Triad variables and avoidance and arousal procrastination. Steiger’s z tests were all non-significant, indicating that arousal and avoidance procrastination had similar relationships with all of the Dark Triad variables.

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