



## A life history approach to understanding the Dark Triad

Melissa M. McDonald\*, M. Brent Donnellan, Carlos David Navarrete

Department of Psychology, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI 48824, USA

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### ABSTRACT

Researchers adopting an evolutionary perspective have conceptualized the Dark Triad as an exploitative interpersonal style reflective of a fast life history strategy. However, not all research has supported this claim. We posit that different elements of the constructs associated with the Dark Triad may reflect different life history strategies. Our results indicate that the measures of the Dark Triad and other indicators of life history strategies form two distinct factors: (1) a *fast* life strategy factor that includes the impulsive antisociality facet of psychopathy, the entitlement/exploitativeness facet of narcissism, Machiavellianism, unrestricted sociosexuality, and aggression, and (2) a *slow* life strategy factor that includes the fearless dominance facet of psychopathy and both the leadership/authority and grandiose exhibitionism facets of narcissism. These factors differentially correlate with established measures of life history strategy. These findings add to the literature by clarifying how the Dark Triad fits into a life history framework.

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### 1. Introduction

The Dark Triad refers to the personality constructs of psychopathy, narcissism, and Machiavellianism (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Recent research has attempted to ground the Dark Triad within life history theory by suggesting that the three components are indicators of a fast life history strategy (Jonason & Tost, 2010). However, attempts to link each component of the Dark Triad to other indicators of a fast life strategy have yielded inconsistent results (e.g. Gladden, Figueredo, & Jacobs, 2009; Jonason, Koenig, & Tost, 2010; Jonason & Tost, 2010). We suggest that some of these inconsistencies may be driven by the fact that psychopathy and narcissism are multifaceted constructs. Psychometric investigations often indicate that commonly used measures of these constructs contain a mixture of personality attributes (e.g. Ackerman et al., 2011; Benning, Patrick, Hicks, Blonigen, & Krueger, 2003; Blonigen et al., 2010; Cooke & Michie, 2001; Emmons, 1984; Harpur, Hare, & Hakstian, 1989; Raskin & Terry, 1988; Smith, Edens, & Vaughn, 2011). Although some of these attributes may be diagnostic of a fast life strategy as previous researchers have hypothesized, others may indicate a slow life strategy. Accordingly, our research seeks to clarify the associations between the personality attributes associated with the Dark Triad and indicators of life history strategy.

#### 1.1. Life history theory

Life history (LH) theory is a mid-level evolutionary theory that describes the trade-offs individuals make in energy allocation toward different life tasks including bodily growth and maintenance, mating effort, and parenting/kin investment (Kaplan & Gangestad, 2005). The particular pattern of energy allocation depends on the harshness and unpredictability of the environment (Ellis, Figueredo, Brumbach, & Schlomer, 2009). Unpredictable environments with high mortality risk tend to produce fast life history strategies in which individuals mature early, produce more offspring, but invest less in each offspring. This strategy is adaptive because it increases the probability of producing at least some surviving offspring. Alternatively, relatively predictable environments with low mortality risk tend to produce *slow* life history strategies where individuals mature and reproduce at a later age, producing fewer offspring in which they invest heavily. Increased allotment of energy to development may therefore be associated with greater ability to obtain resources, status, and long-term mates.

Outcomes related to sexual attitudes and behaviors are frequently linked with life history strategies. Fast life history strategies are expected to be associated with a greater number of sexual partners and more permissible attitudes toward casual sex. The extent to which individuals engage in aggressive or antisocial behavior is also a relevant outcome of one's life history strategy. Fast strategies typically arise in environments in which the risk of mortality is high and resource availability is unpredictable. These environments tend to favor risky and impulsive behaviors.

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 (989) 859 2456; fax: +1 (517) 353 1652.

E-mail addresses: [mcdon348@msu.edu](mailto:mcdon348@msu.edu) (M.M. McDonald), [donnel59@msu.edu](mailto:donnel59@msu.edu) (M.B. Donnellan), [cdn@msu.edu](mailto:cdn@msu.edu) (C.D. Navarrete).

As a result, individuals faced with these challenges may be more prone to using criminality and violence to obtain material resources, status, and mates. Consistent with this, aggression (Jonason & Webster, 2010), antisocial behavior (Jonason, Koenig, & Tost, 2010), and unrestricted sexual attitudes (Jonason, Li, Webster, & Schmitt, 2009) have been shown to be associated with the Dark Triad traits. This collection of findings is a major reason why researchers have postulated that the Dark Triad represents a fast life strategy (Figueredo et al., 2005; Harpending & Sobus, 1987; Jonason, Koenig, & Tost, 2010; Jonason et al., 2009; Jonason & Tost, 2010; Mealey, 1995). It is worth noting that although the outcomes associated with fast life strategies are often viewed by society as undesirable, life history theory views them as strategic responses to environmental conditions. Thus, behaviors associated with a fast life strategy may be adaptive with respect to individual fitness regardless of whether the behaviors impose costs on society.

### 1.2. The elements of the Dark Triad

A complicating issue surrounding the Dark Triad is that measures of its three elements do not all capture unitary constructs. Psychopathy was originally described as a combination of impulsive and antisocial tendencies accompanied by low levels of anxiety, fear, and remorse (Cleckley, 1941). Measures of psychopathy have often been constructed with these ideas in mind and, as a result, frequently yield two factors (e.g. Benning et al., 2003; Harpur et al., 1989): one that reflects the interpersonal and affective traits, and a second that reflects the antisocial lifestyle. These factors have been labeled Fearless Dominance (FD) and Impulsive Antisociality (IA), respectively (Benning et al., 2003). Interestingly, these factors tend to exhibit relatively distinct patterns of associations with criterion-variables. Although IA is associated most consistently with antisocial behavior and externalizing psychopathology, FD is associated with a variety of seemingly positive outcomes (Blonigen et al., 2010). For example, FD has been shown to be positively associated with educational achievement and positive emotionality (Benning et al., 2003). In contrast, IA is negatively correlated with educational achievements, income, verbal intelligence, and impulse control (Benning et al., 2003). These correlates suggest that FD may be associated with a slow life strategy whereas IA is likely to be associated with a fast life strategy.

Narcissism is typically associated with arrogance, entitlement, grandiosity, and a willingness to exploit others to bolster the self (Rhodewalt & Peterson, 2009). However, there is ongoing debate about the factor structure of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Terry, 1988; see Ackerman et al., 2011 for a review), a commonly used measure of narcissism in the social/personality literature. The NPI appears to assess multiple constructs ranging from attributes that could be described as socially desirable, such as leadership skills and social influence, to attributes that could be described as socially toxic, such as entitlement and exploitativeness. Empirically, these factors tend to exhibit differential patterns of association with criterion variables. For example, the leadership/authority facet is associated with higher self-esteem, and lower neuroticism, anxiety, and depression. In contrast, the entitlement/exploitative facet is associated with lower well-being (Hill & Roberts, 2011) and interpersonal difficulties (Ackerman et al., 2011). These patterns of associations suggest that some components of narcissism may map onto a fast life strategy (entitlement/exploitativeness), whereas others may be more akin to a slow life strategy (leadership/authority).

Machiavellianism has been described as a manipulative and calculating interpersonal style (Christie & Geis, 1970) that appears to reflect a fast life history strategy. There is relatively little active

debate about the factor structure of the most commonly used measure of Machiavellianism, the MACH-IV (Christie & Geis, 1970; but see Hunter, Gerbing, & Boster, 1982) as the items seem to straight-forwardly capture an exploitative interpersonal style. Indeed, some have even concluded that the MACH-IV is a measure of psychopathy (McHoskey, Worzel, & Szyarto, 1998, but see Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Consistent with this claim, the MACH-IV has been shown to be associated with the impulsive antisociality facets of psychopathy (Witt, Donnellan, Blonigen, Krueger, & Conger, 2009b). Thus, Machiavellianism is the one construct associated with the Dark Triad that we expect to have an unequivocal association with a fast life strategy.

### 1.3. The present research

Although previous research has argued that psychopathy, narcissism, and Machiavellianism can be conceptualized as indicators of a fast life strategy, not all findings in the literature consistently support this perspective. In a recent factor analysis of life history strategy indicators and psychopathic attitudes, rather than converging on a single life history strategy factor, two orthogonal factors were formed: a slow life history factor and a psychopathic attitudes factor (Gladden et al., 2009). These findings were interpreted as being “inconsistent with the LH-based prediction that psychopathy is a frequency-dependent ‘cheater’ strategy characterized by short-term mating tactics” (Gladden et al., 2009, p. 273). However, a psychopathy total score was used in these analyses rather than scoring the measure for a two- or three-factor model. Given that FD and IA exhibit divergent correlations with a variety of variables, an examination of the lower order facets may be an important exercise. Likewise, recent attempts to situate the Dark Triad within the broader framework of life history theory by evaluating associations between the Dark Triad and self-control have received inconsistent support. Although psychopathy and Machiavellianism were shown to be associated with a lack of self-control in one study, this was not replicated in a second study, and Narcissism was unrelated to self-control across both studies (Jonason & Tost, 2010).

These inconsistencies may be clarified by an examination of the lower-order measures associated with the Dark Triad constructs. Given that fast life strategies are associated with greater allocation of energy toward mating and reproduction as well as a reduced ability to delay gratification, we predicted that Dark Triad measures reflecting impulsivity, manipulative and exploitative interpersonal styles, aggression, and unrestricted sociosexuality would be associated with a fast life history strategy. In contrast, the increase in energy allocated to growth and development in a slow life strategy has been linked to a greater ability to obtain desired resources, social status, and mating opportunities. As such, we predicted that Dark Triad measures reflecting social dominance, leadership, and reduced fear and anxiety would be associated with a slow life history strategy. We tested these ideas using a combination of factor analytic and correlational approaches.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants and procedure

Participants were 296 students from Michigan State University who participated in exchange for course credit (51% male; 84.1% White). Participants completed the study anonymously via an online survey consisting of the measures described below. Unless otherwise noted, all items were measured using a 5–7 point Likert-type scale ranging from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree” and were averaged to create composite scores.

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