



I just cannot control myself: The Dark Triad and self-control

Peter K. Jonason^{a,*}, Jeremy Tost^b

^a Psychology Department, University of West Florida, Bldg 41, Pensacola, FL 32514, United States

^b Department of Psychology, New Mexico State University, P.O. Box 30001/MSC 3452, Las Cruces, NM 88003, USA

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ABSTRACT

Despite the recent flurry of research on the Dark Triad, this work has been atheoretical. In two studies, totaling 358 participants, we attempt to situate the Dark Triad within the larger framework of Life History Theory by correlating them with three measures of self-control. Both psychopathy (Study 1 and Study 2) and Machiavellianism (Study 2 only) were correlated with low self-control, a tendency to discount future consequences, and high rates of attention deficit disorder. Narcissism was not correlated with measures of self-control in either study. Results are consistent with Life History Theory in that these two sets of psychological traits are expected to be part of a *fast* life strategy.

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1. Introduction

Despite the recent flurry of scientific interest in the Dark Triad – narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism (Paulhus & Williams, 2002) – the research has a substantial limitation. The work on the Dark Triad tends to be atheoretical and mostly descriptive in nature (Jakobowitz & Egan, 2006; Jonason, Li, & Buss, 2010; Jonason, Li, & Teicher, in press; Jonason, Li, Webster, & Schmitt, 2009; Lee & Ashton, 2005; Paulhus & Williams, 2002; Vernon, Villani, Vickers, & Harris, 2008). In the present studies, we attempt to integrate the Dark Triad into Life History Theory (see Figueredo et al., 2006) by correlating them with three measures of self-control.

Life History Theory (Wilson, 1975) is a mid-level theory derived from general evolutionary theory. It describes differences in the amount of bioenergetic and material resources allocated for *somatic effort* (i.e., resources devoted to continued survival) and *reproductive effort* (i.e., devoted to mating and/or parenting). Although researchers originally used Life History Theory to account for species-level differences, this theory has proven useful in understanding within-species differences for many *taxa*, including humans (for a review see Rushton, 2004). Systematic, within-species differences are also known as personality traits or individual differences.

Research on life history strategies suggests individuals with indicators of a *fast* life history strategy report more Dark Triad

related traits, including antisocial (Ellis, 1988; Figueredo et al., 2006; Mealey, 1995) and opportunistic personality traits (Figueredo, Vásquez, Brumbach, & Schneider, 2007), manifested as both Machiavellianism (Brumbach, Figueredo, & Ellis, 2009; Figueredo et al., 2005) and psychopathy (Figueredo et al., 2005; Gladden, Figueredo, & Jacobs, 2009). Such a point has been echoed in work on the Dark Triad proper (Jonason et al., 2009, 2010, in press).

Life History Theory also predicts that cognitive systems will co-occur with life strategies (Figueredo & Jacobs, in press). In particular, a *fast* life strategy should not only be manifested in personality traits, but also in lower order traits like self-control. Limited self-control is likely characteristic of those with a *fast* life strategy because these traits will not interfere and may actually facilitate a shorter-term and opportunistic perspective whereas, these tactics are more likely to interfere with the longer-term and delayed-gratification projects pursued by slower life history strategists. We define self-control as the ability to inhibit impulsive responses that undoes one's commitment (Metcalf & Mischel, 1999) and measure it with self-control (Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004), consideration of future consequences (Strathman, Gleicher, Boninger, & Edwards, 1994), and attention deficit disorder symptoms (Kessler et al., 2005). Therefore, because high scores on the Dark Triad and limited self-control are characteristic of those with a *fast* life strategy, the two should co-occur.

In two studies we capitalize on the heuristic power of an adaptationist paradigm (e.g., Buss, 2009) to account for individual differences, predicting the Dark Triad will be positively correlated with limited self-control. Specifically, we expect the Dark Triad to be positively correlated with attention deficit symptoms and

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 860 450 6658.

E-mail address: peterkarljonason@yahoo.com (P.K. Jonason).

negatively correlated with self-control and a tendency to consider future consequences. To do so, we use the same three measures of self-control and two different sets of measures for the Dark Triad. In doing so, we should converge on a more complete picture of the psychological systems that are (1) associated with the Dark Triad and (2) to integrate the Dark Triad into Life History Theory.

2. Study 1

In Study 1, we assess the correlations between the Dark Triad and three measures of self-control. According to Life History Theory, a coherent system of adaptations will allow individuals to better occupy the multidimensional niche-space they are attempting to occupy and exploit. Part of the constellation of traits that should work in concert are systems of self-control and the Dark Triad.

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Participants

Two hundred and fifty-nine psychology students (72% women) aged 18–55 years ($M = 21.12$, $SD = 5.65$) received course credit for participating. Participants were given the complete packets, including informed consent and measures to complete at home and were instructed to bring them back the next day of their class at the University of West Florida (58%), New Mexico State University (38%) and El Paso Community College (7%). On the day participants returned the packets, they were debriefed and thanked.

2.1.2. Measures

Narcissism was assessed with the 40-item Narcissistic Personality Inventory (Raskin & Terry, 1988). For each item, participants chose one of two statements they felt applied to them more. One of the two statements reflected a narcissistic attitude (e.g., “I have a natural talent for influencing people.”), whereas the other statement did not (e.g., “I am not good at influencing people.”). We summed the total number of narcissistic statements the participants endorsed as an index of narcissism (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .86$).

The 31-item Self-Report Psychopathy Scale-III (Paulhus, Hemp-hill, & Hare, in press) was used to assess nonclinical psychopathy. 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.” Items were averaged to create an index of psychopathy ($\alpha = .78$).

Machiavellianism was measured with the 20-item MACH-IV (Christie & Geis, 1970). Participants indicated how much they agreed (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *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 averaged to create a Machiavellianism index ($\alpha = .58$).

We combined the above three scales to create a composite Dark Triad index as has been previously done (Jonason et al., 2009). A Principal Components Analysis indicated the three measures can be combined into a single measure; specifically, on a single factor they accounted for 49.03% of the variance (Eigen >1.47). We standardized (z-scored) participants’ scores on each scale relative to the group means on each of the three scales and then averaged the three scales to create a composite Dark Triad score.

We measured self-control with three measures. Participants completed the 36-item Self-Control Scale (Tangney et al., 2004) by indicating how much they agreed (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *very much*) with statements such as, “I am lazy”, “I have trouble saying no”, and “I am good at resisting temptation.” After reverse-scoring 24 items, the items were averaged to create an index of self-control ($\alpha = .87$).

Participants also completed the 18-item Consideration of Future Consequences Scale (Strathman et al., 1994) by indicating how characteristic (1 = *extremely uncharacteristic*, 5 = *extremely characteristic*) statements like “My convenience is a big factor in the decisions I make or the actions I take”, “I am willing to sacrifice my immediate happiness or well-being in order to achieve future outcomes”, and “I only act to satisfy immediate concerns, figuring the future will take care of itself” are of them. All of the items were averaged to create an index of the consideration of future consequences ($\alpha = .80$).

Participants completed the Adult Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder Self-Report Scale symptom checklist (Kessler et al., 2005) as a means to assess executive functioning. The scale includes 18 items based on the DSM-IV Criterion A symptoms of adult Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. Each item asks how frequently a symptom occurred (e.g., How often are you distracted by activity or noise around you?; How often do you fidget or squirm with your hands or feet when you have to sit down for a long time?; How often do you have difficulty unwinding and relaxing when you have time to yourself?) in the preceding six months and were rated on a five-point scale (1 = *never*, 5 = *very often*). All of the items were averaged to create an index of the rates of attention deficit symptoms ($\alpha = .82$).

2.2. Results and discussion

Sex differences and descriptive statistics are reported in Table 1. We replicated sex differences in three out of the four measures of the Dark Triad; with men scoring higher than women did. The sex difference using the MACH-IV has proven elusive at times (e.g., Jonason et al., 2010), but men did score slightly higher than women did. Women and men scored about the same for measures of self-control.

In Table 2 (upper panel), we report overall correlations between the Dark Triad and the measures of self-control. Reliably, psychopathy was correlated with all three measures of self-control. Neither narcissism nor Machiavellianism were correlated with these measures. The Dark Triad composite was correlated with all three measures, but this correlation is a reflection of the larger correlation for psychopathy, suppressed by the smaller correlations of the other two parts of the Dark Triad.

When these correlations were assessed across the sexes, only two differed significantly. Machiavellianism was more strongly correlated (Fisher’s $z = 2.10$, $p < .05$) with self-control in men ($r = .23$) than in women ($r = -.07$). Machiavellianism and future consequences were positively correlated in men ($r = .17$) and negatively correlated in women ($r = -.19$, $p < .05$), a significant difference ($z = 2.51$, $p < .01$).

In Table 2, we also report the standardized regression coefficients using the Dark Triad to predict rates of self-control. In each case, all three measures of the Dark Triad were entered into a regression to (1) predict the scores on the three measures of executive functioning and (2) to examine the unique contribution of each part of the Dark Triad in accounting for variance in three measures of self-control. Psychopathy was the sole link between the Dark Triad and self-control. These correlations were robust to partialing any variance associated with the age of the participant. Such findings are consistent with Life History Theory (e.g., Figueredo et al., 2006).

3. Study 2

In Study 2, we attempt to replicate our findings from Study 1. In contrast to the long inventories for the Dark Triad we used above, in this study we use a concise measure of the Dark Triad (Jonason &

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