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Standing out and not fitting in: The Dark Triad traits and social values

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ABSTRACT

We replicated and extended ($N = 207$) work on the social values (i.e., obedience, tradition, security, benevolence, universalism, self-direction, stimulation, hedonism, achievement, and power) linked to the Dark Triad traits (i.e., narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism). Each of the traits was positively associated with values of achievement and power. Psychopathy and narcissism were both negatively correlated with benevolence, and psychopathy and Machiavellianism were negatively correlated with obedience. Psychopathy was also negatively correlated with tradition. Sex differences in the values of tradition, benevolence, and power were mediated by psychopathy. We suggest that high rates of the Dark Triad traits facilitate, for men, holding social values that emphasize *standing out* whereas low rates facilitate, for women, *fitting in*.

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While most of personality psychology for the last 75 years has been concerned with the Big Five traits, there has been a recent movement to examine darker aspects of personality in subclinical samples (Furnham, Richards, & Paulhus, 2013). Most of this attention has been on the Dark Triad traits which are characterized by grandiosity, a sense of superiority (i.e., narcissism), callousness, impulsivity (i.e., psychopathy), and cynicism and deceit (i.e., Machiavellianism). The traits have been linked to social values (Schwartz, 1992); research we hope to replicate and extend here (Jonason, Foster, Kavanagh, Gouveia, & Birkas, 2018; Jonason, Strosser, Kroll, Duineveld, & Baruffi, 2015; Kajonius, Persson, & Jonason, 2015). Prior research on the values linked to the Dark Triad traits is often limited to remunerated samples, a failure to consider potential mediation of sex differences in values by the traits, a lack of a coherent way of interpreting the associations, and a tendency to (somewhat) merely report a list of associations. In this brief report, we replicate and extend work on the relationships between the Dark Triad traits and social values in a sample of college-student volunteers, examining potential mediation effects, and adopting a life history framework. In so doing, we frame values as part of the *fast* life history strategies associated with the Dark Triad traits (Jonason, Koenig, & Tost, 2010; McDonald, Donnellan, & Navarrete, 2012).

Life history theory researchers in psychology suggest that people may be characterized by latent psychological dispositions that enable them to make the fundamental trade-offs in biology of survival and mating (Figueredo et al., 2009). Those who focus on survival are called *slow* life history strategists and are cautious people who form long-term, mutualistic relationships. Those who focus on mating are called *fast* life history strategists and are risk-takers who engage in casual sex and are agentic. The theory describes a coordinated system of traits that are associated with different ways of life. One way of facilitating slow (a.k.a., communal) or fast (a.k.a., agentic) ways of life may be the values people hold. Values may serve as proximal links between personality biases and the actions people take. Dark Triad researchers highlight correlates of these traits like impulsivity (Jones & Paulhus, 2011) and interpersonal

violence (Jones & Olderbak, 2014) as indicative of their hypothesis that the traits might be part of the coordinated systems for the active exploitation of others towards agentic ends – *fast* life history strategies.

If the Dark Triad traits are *fast* life history strategy adaptations, they will need to be linked to lower-order systems that facilitate people characterized by them engaging in this strategy in their day-to-day lives. One such set of lower-order traits might be the values they hold given the motivational nature of values (Maslow, 1954; Rohan, 2000). For the Dark Triad traits to be “adaptive” they should be correlated with value systems that enable their sexual and social agendas. We assert that the Dark Triad traits should be linked to a desire to *stand out* (e.g., power and achievement) and not to *fit in* (e.g., social norms and benevolence). Standing out is more likely to facilitate short-term social and sexual goals than fitting in (Kwang, Crockett, Sanchez, & Swann, 2013), despite the positive societal view of conformity and being nice. Therefore, we expect the traits to be positively correlated with agentic values (Kajonius et al., 2015) and negatively correlated with prosocial values (Jonason et al., 2015).

In addition, it seems likely that men may be more likely than women to try to stand out and women will be more likely to try to fit in, and sex differences in the values might be mediated by individual differences in the Dark Triad traits. Men are both higher in *standing out* values and the Dark Triad traits and women are higher on fitting in values (Jonason et al., 2015). Therefore, we also expect to replicate sex differences in the Dark Triad traits and social values and expect that high rates of the Dark Triad traits will facilitate standing out for men whereas low rates of the traits will facilitate fitting in for women. Psychological systems that encourage men to stand out may have Darwinian fitness payoffs like gaining more status and mates whereas systems that encourage women to fit in may have Darwinian payoffs like safety and security (Jonason & Zeigler-Hill, 2018).

Method

Participants and procedure

Participants were 207 (25% male) equally “black” and “white” (7% other) undergraduate volunteers from the University of West Alabama ($M = 22.56$, $SD = 7.19$, $Range = 18-58$) reported elsewhere (Jonason & Davis, 2018).¹ Participants were contacted through psychology classes and asked to participate and provided a link to follow. If they followed it, they were informed of the nature of the study. If they consented, they proceeded through a self-directed study. Upon completion, they were thanked and debriefed.

Measures

To measure the Dark Triad traits, the Dark Triad Dirty Dozen (Jonason & Webster, 2010) was used. Participants reported their agreement (1 = *Strongly disagree*; 5 = *Strongly agree*) with statements such as: “I tend to want others to admire me” (i.e., narcissism [4 items]), “I tend to lack remorse” (i.e., psychopathy [4 items]), and “I have used deceit or lied to get my way” (i.e., Machiavellianism [4 items]). Specifically, they were asked to indicate their agreement with each item (presented in a randomized fashion) and were reminded that there were no right or wrong answers and that the study was anonymous. Items were averaged together to create an index of narcissism (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .66$), Machiavellianism ($\alpha = .78$), and psychopathy ($\alpha = .65$).

We measured social values with ten items (Sandy, Gosling, Schwartz, & Koelkebeck, 2017). Participants reported their agreement (1 = *Strongly disagree*; 5 = *Strongly agree*) with the items: “It is important to show respect to one’s parents and be obedient” (i.e., Obedience); “Religious belief is important” (i.e., Tradition); “It is important to help others” (i.e., Benevolence); “It is important for everyone to be treated equally” (i.e., Universalism); “Being interested and curious in things is important to me” (i.e., Self-Direction); “Taking risks and seeking adventures appeal to me” (i.e., Stimulation); “Seeking fun and pleasure is important to me” (i.e., Hedonism); “I want to be seen as

a success and to impress people” (i.e., Achievement); “I value being in charge and others doing as I say” (i.e., Power); and “Cleanliness and order are important to me” (i.e., Security). Specifically, they were asked to indicate their agreement with each item (presented in a randomized fashion) and were reminded that there were no right or wrong answers and that the study was anonymous.

Results

For our hypotheses (see Table 1), all three Dark Triad traits were positively correlated with achievement and power; Psychopathy and narcissism were both negatively correlated with benevolence, and psychopathy and Machiavellianism were both negatively correlated with obedience; Psychopathy was also negatively correlated with tradition.^{2,3} Men scored higher on psychopathy and Machiavellianism, and cared more about the power social motive, whereas women valued obedience, tradition, benevolence, and security. Using independent hierarchical multiple regressions (10,000 bootstrapped samples), we found that sex differences (Step 1) in obedience were fully mediated by psychopathy ($\Delta R^2 = .04$, $F(2, 204) = 6.56$, $p < .01$), with participant’s sex dropping out at Step 2 ($\beta = .08$, $p = .31$); Psychopathy fully mediated sex differences in tradition ($\Delta R^2 = .03$, $F(2, 204) = 5.49$, $p < .01$), with participant’s sex dropping out at Step 2 ($\beta = .09$, $p = .24$); Psychopathy fully mediated sex differences in benevolence ($\Delta R^2 = .03$, $F(2, 204) = 7.16$, $p < .01$) with participant’s sex dropping out at Step 2 ($\beta = .12$, $p = .11$); Psychopathy fully mediated sex differences in power ($\Delta R^2 = .13$, $F(2, 204) = 19.73$, $p < .001$) with participant’s sex dropping out at Step 2 ($\beta = -.05$, $p = .41$).

Discussion

A common way to understand the implications of personality traits in people’s lives is to understand the values associated with various personality traits because values are motivational in nature (Maslow, 1954; Rohan, 2000). In this study, we replicated and extended work on the social values associated with the Dark Triad trait (Jonason et al., 2015, 2018; Kajonius et al., 2015). We tested a simple set of predictions based on the social nature of the Dark Triad traits. We showed that the traits were associated with a desire to stand out through the values of achievement and power, and an aversion towards fitting in as seen in limited values of benevolence or tradition. These different values may be part of the coordinated system of mechanisms at work to make personality traits like these adaptive (Figueredo et al., 2009). For personality traits to be adaptations they need to have coordinated, lower-order systems to enable people to pursue their goals. In the case of the Dark Triad traits, if these traits are adaptations for social and sexual exploitation in the form of *fast* or *agentic* life history strategies, people high on these traits should be (1) agentic in values (i.e., standing out) and (2) limited in communal values (i.e., fitting in).

We replicated sex differences in the Dark Triad traits and social values (Jonason et al., 2015) and showed that the former mediated individual differences in the latter, suggesting that high psychopathy (in particular) facilitates standing out in men and low psychopathy (in particular) facilitates fitting in for women. Taken together, an evolutionary framework might be informative here. Standing out is likely to benefit men more than women whereas fitting in is likely to benefit women more than men, in Darwinian terms (Jonason & Zeigler-Hill, 2018). Men who stand out have more mating opportunities, and thus, selection could have shaped traits like the Dark Triad to enable the goals of standing out in men. In contrast, standing out and apart from group members could have been deleterious to women because they have a greater need for others for protection (Ciochon & Fleagle, 2006). That is, ancestral men who valued standing out would have made more offspring and the Dark Triad traits might have been selected to facilitate this in men whereas ancestral women who valued fitting in would have made more offspring and being relatively uncharacterized by the Dark Triad traits would have facilitated this in women.

In conclusion, despite our study being limited by a W.E.I.R.D. (i.e., Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic; Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010) sample, the use of an ultrabrief

Table 1. Descriptive statistics, sex differences, and correlations for the Dark Triad traits and social values.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1. Psychopathy													
2. Narcissism	.42**												
3. Machiavellianism	.54**	.58**											
4. Obedience	-.23**	-.12	-.18*										
5. Tradition	-.21**	.01	.01	.54**									
6. Benevolence	-.23**	-.15*	-.13	.43**	.45**								
7. Universalism	-.12	-.06	-.18	.39**	.32**	.55**							
8. Self-Direction	-.01	.12	-.04	.12	.10	.45**	.36**						
9. Stimulation	.06	.13	.04	.14	.19**	.28**	.25**	.30**					
10. Hedonism	.05	.20**	.07	.10	.13	.26**	.26**	.27**	.50**				
11. Achievement	.22**	.49**	.22**	-.08	-.02	.04	.08	.14*	.14	.15*			
12. Power	.40**	.55**	.41**	-.12	-.11	-.12	-.10	.14*	.13	.12	.39**		
13. Security	-.09	-.01	-.08	.37**	.38**	.50**	.42**	.24**	.22**	.27**	.04	-.08	
Overall: <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	2.39 (0.74)	2.91 (0.74)	2.40 (0.85)	4.24 (1.03)	3.95 (1.21)	4.45 (0.80)	4.41 (0.91)	4.11 (0.87)	3.76 (0.97)	3.87 (0.88)	3.72 (1.12)	2.93 (1.03)	4.17 (0.84)
Men: <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	2.79 (0.62)	3.04 (0.71)	2.77 (0.89)	3.98 (1.16)	3.65 (1.26)	4.20 (0.92)	4.22 (0.99)	4.02 (0.86)	3.75 (0.77)	3.96 (0.72)	3.75 (0.96)	3.24 (1.01)	3.94 (0.81)
Women: <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	2.25 (0.74)	2.86 (0.74)	2.28 (0.80)	4.33 (0.98)	4.05 (1.17)	4.53 (0.74)	4.47 (0.88)	4.13 (0.87)	3.77 (1.03)	3.84 (0.93)	3.71 (1.18)	2.83 (1.02)	4.24 (0.84)
<i>t</i> -test	4.73**	1.54	3.73**	-2.10*	-2.10*	-2.65**	-1.77	-0.82	-0.18	0.97	0.19	2.49*	-2.26*
Cohen's <i>d</i>	0.79	0.25	0.58	-0.33	-0.33	-0.40	-0.27	-0.13	-0.02	0.14	0.04	0.40	-0.36

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

measure of values composed of single-items, a failure to consider sadism and spitefulness (but see Jonason, Zeigler-Hill, & Okan, 2017), weak internal consistency (but see Schmitt, 1996) and dubious validity (Miller et al., 2012) for the Dirty Dozen, and no consideration of what these patterns might translate into in people's lives, we have replicated and extended work on the Dark Triad traits and social values. It appears that those high in the Dark Triad traits might desire standing out over fitting in; a pattern that might be more adaptive for men than women.

Notes

1. We gave ourselves six months to collect about 250 people (Schönbrodt & Perugini, 2013) to avoid the appearance of *p*-hacking and fell slightly short. Participants also completed a sex role inventory as part of Jonason and Davis (2018). The data and materials for the present study can be found at <https://osf.io/dbycp/>.
2. After partialing shared variance in the Dark Triad traits, psychopathy was correlated with obedience ($pr = -.17, p < .05$), tradition ($pr = -.26, p < .05$), benevolence ($pr = -.18, p < .05$), and power ($pr = .19, p < .05$); Narcissism was correlated with self-direction ($pr = .17, p < .05$), hedonism ($pr = .20, p < .05$), achievement ($pr = .44, p < .01$), and power ($pr = .19, p < .01$); Machiavellianism was correlated with universalism ($pr = -.15, p < .05$).
3. Participant's sex moderated (Fisher's $z = 2.10, p < .05$) the correlation between psychopathy and hedonism only; correlated in men ($r = .31, p < .01$) and not in women ($r = -.03, ns$).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Data availability statement

The data described in this article are openly available in the Open Science Framework at <https://osf.io/dbycp/>

Open Scholarship



This article has earned the Center for Open science badges for Open Data and Open Materials through Open Practices Disclosure. The data and materials are openly accessible at <https://osf.io/dbycp/>

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