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

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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 (Metcalfe & 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

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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, Hemptill, & 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 &

Table 1
Descriptives and sex differences for the Dark Triad and executive functioning.

Variables	Mean (SD)			t	d
	Overall	Men	Women		
<i>Study 1 (N = 259)</i>					
Self-control	3.28 (0.48)	3.35 (0.47)	3.26 (0.48)	1.36	0.17
Future consequences	3.54 (0.58)	3.49 (0.57)	3.56 (0.58)	−0.81	−0.10
Attention deficit	2.78 (0.50)	2.76 (0.52)	2.79 (0.49)	−0.48	−0.06
Machiavellianism	2.79 (0.38)	2.82 (0.32)	2.78 (0.40)	0.87	0.11
Narcissism	14.63 (6.60)	15.99 (7.12)	14.10 (6.33)	2.02*	0.25
Psychopathy	2.21 (0.39)	2.37 (0.44)	2.14 (0.35)	4.36**	0.55
Dark Triad	1.80 (0.22)	1.88 (0.22)	1.77 (0.21)	3.63**	0.45
<i>Study 2 (N = 97)</i>					
Self-control	3.43 (0.46)	3.52 (0.50)	3.39 (0.44)	1.17	0.27
Future consequences	3.48 (0.64)	3.52 (0.56)	3.47 (0.67)	0.31	0.06
Attention deficit	2.71 (0.49)	2.60 (0.53)	2.75 (0.47)	−1.27*	−0.26
Machiavellianism	1.96 (0.78)	2.25 (0.95)	1.85 (0.69)	2.25	0.48
Narcissism	2.20 (0.93)	2.57 (1.07)	2.06 (0.84)	2.42*	0.53
Psychopathy	1.73 (0.58)	1.92 (0.79)	1.66 (0.47)	2.01*	0.40
Dark Triad	2.04 (0.65)	2.35 (0.80)	1.92 (0.55)	2.96*	0.63

Note: d is Cohen's d for effect size.

* p < .05.

** p < .01.

Table 2
Correlations and regression coefficients between the Dark Triad and executive functioning.

Variables	r (β)			
	Machiavellianism	Narcissism	Psychopathy	Dark Triad
<i>Study 1 (N = 259)</i>				
Self-control	.00 (.09)	−.13* (.07)	−.44** (−.48**)	−.28**
Future consequences	−.11 (−.04)	−.09 (.11)	−.36** (−.42**)	−.30**
Attention deficit	.09 (.02)	.07 (−.06)	.28** (.30**)	.22**
<i>Study 2 (N = 96)</i>				
Self-control	−.35* (−.15*)	−.24* (−.02)	−.26* (−.12)	−.31**
Future consequences	−.25* (−.23*)	−.07 (.10)	−.23* (−.17)	−.18
Attention deficit	.25* (.08)	.24* (.08)	.18 (.08)	.26**

Note: Correlations generally robust to the partialing of age variance.

* p < .05.

** p < .01.

Webster, in press). Again, we hope to demonstrate that the Dark Triad is linked to limited self-control.

3.1. Method

3.1.1. Participants

Ninety-seven undergraduate psychology students (73% women) aged 18–46 years ($M = 19.53$, $SD = 3.94$) from New Mexico State University received course credit for participating. Participants were given the complete packets, including informed consent and measures to complete in a laboratory setting. Upon completion of all questionnaires, participants were debriefed and thanked for their involvement.

3.1.2. Measures

To measure self-control, the same measures as in Study 1 were replicated here. Each measure returned good internal consistency (Cronbach's α 's .82–.87). Participants completed the "Dirty Dozen" as a measure of the Dark Triad (Jonason & Webster, in press) by indicating how much they agreed (1 = not at all, 5 = very much) with statements such as, "I tend to want others to admire me", "I tend to lack remorse", and "I have used deceit or lied to get my

way." The Dirty Dozen has three subscales, each composed of four items: narcissism ($\alpha = .83$), Machiavellianism ($\alpha = .76$), and psychopathy ($\alpha = .63$). It can be treated as a composite of the overall Dark Triad with scores on all 12 items averaged together ($\alpha = .83$). Replicating previous findings, the three subscales were positively correlated with one another. The three measures were correlated with one another (r 's .22–.63, p 's < .05).

3.2. Results and discussion

We replicated the sex differences across all four of the Dark Triad measures; with men scoring higher than women did (Jonason & Webster, in press). Women scored slightly higher than men did on attention deficit. Men scored slightly higher than women did on consideration of future consequences and self-control.

In Table 2 (lower panel), we report overall correlations between the Dark Triad and the measures of life history strategy. Reliably, Machiavellianism was correlated with all three measures. Psychopathy was correlated with self-control and future consequences but not correlated with attention deficit. Narcissism was uncorrelated with all three measures of self-control. The Dark Triad composite was correlated with self-control and attention deficit though not significantly with future consequences. However, when all three measures of the Dark Triad were entered into a regression predicting scores on the self-control measures, Machiavellianism was the only component associated with limited self-control. Such a finding adds to prior work and Study 1 in that it suggests Machiavellianism may also be correlated with limited self-control. Such a finding is consistent with prior work on Life History Theory (e.g., Brumbach et al., 2009) but inconsistent with work on Machiavellianism (Christie & Geis, 1970).

When these correlations were assessed across the sexes, only two differed significantly. Machiavellianism was more strongly correlated (Fisher's $z = -2.18$, $p < .01$) with Consideration of Future Consequences in men ($r = -.44$, $p < .01$) than in women ($r = .06$). The Dark Triad composite was more strongly correlated (Fisher's $z = -2.35$, $p < .01$) with Consideration of Future Consequences in men ($r = -.55$, $p < .01$) than in women ($r = -.05$).

4. General discussion

Life History Theory predicts a complex of personality traits will work in concert to form a coordinated and adaptive life strategy

(e.g., Figueredo et al., 2006). For those high on the Dark Triad, it appears as though the coordinated life strategy may be one characterized by limited self-control – a limited ability for self-control, a tendency to not consider future consequences, and high rates of self-reported attention deficit symptoms. Such cognitive systems are expected to facilitate an exploitive and short-term social strategy (Jonason et al., 2009, in press) or as others have put it, an antagonist social strategy (e.g., Figueredo et al., 2006). Using the parlance of Life History Theory, the Dark Triad may be manifestations of a *fast* life strategy.

However, evidence across Study 1 and Study 2 was not completely consistent with one another. In Study 1, it was solely psychopathy that taps into a *fast* life strategy. Such evidence is consistent with work on both Life History Theory (e.g., Gladden et al., 2009) and on research on psychopathy proper (e.g., Mealey, 1995). In contrast, Study 2 demonstrated Machiavellianism may also tap into a *fast* life strategy. Machiavellianism may be one personality trait that is manifested after a harsh and unpredictable childhood (Brumbach et al., 2009). Indeed, psychopathy and Machiavellianism are two parts of the Dark Triad that research on Life History Theory has repeatedly used (e.g., Figueredo et al., 2005). Narcissism has not been well-studied using the Life History Theory paradigm. We were unable to show, in either study, any reason to believe narcissism was linked to limited self-control.

The fact that Machiavellianism was not correlated with self-control in Study 1 but was so in Study 2 deserves further attention. The results in Study 1 are more consistent with Machiavellianism's original conceptualization. Machiavellianism was unrelated to behavioral syndromes and psychological conditions that ADHD would certainly fall (Christie & Geis, 1970). However, in Study 2, Machiavellianism was correlated with ADHD symptoms. This discrepancy may be a function of the different measures used across the study. So unlike psychopathy where the results were internally reliable in these studies despite using two different measures, the MACH-IV and the concise measure may not tap into the same underlying construct. This begs future work on better understanding what Machiavellianism is and how to best measure it. It may be that the concise measure taps into the “darker side” of Machiavellianism through items inquiring about deception and exploitation.

For those interested in the Dark Triad, there is perhaps one important task at hand that needs to be addressed to further cement the Dark Triad as manifest indicators of a *fast* life strategy. Evidence that suggests an unpredictable and harsh childhood (e.g., Brumbach et al., 2009) may set individuals off on a trajectory of “antisociality” and “deviance” as manifested in the Dark Triad may be needed. One of the fundamental and perhaps most important contributions of Life History Theory is it outlines the manner in which personality traits develop over the lifecycle. That is, it outlines the manner in which personality traits are triggered and amplified per life events (e.g., Belsky, Steinberg, & Draper, 1991). Therefore, important questions of when and how these personality traits are activated in individuals are important questions to be addressed.

The current study is limited in a number of ways. First, the correlational/self-report nature precludes any strong inferences. We feel the use of the same measures, arguably, could be a strength of the present studies. By using two measures of the Dark Triad we have provided evidence that extends prior work attempting to link the Dark Triad to Life History Theory. We have not relied on one conceptualization of the Dark Triad, but, instead, utilized both the traditional and the concise measures. We feel this approach allows us to converge on a clearer picture of the manner in which the Dark Triad fits within the Life History Theory. In other words, using the same measures of self-control allows us to make comparisons across studies.

Second, although Study 1 had a reasonably large sample, Study 2 had a comparatively smaller sample. The goal of Study 2 was to

replicate and extend results from Study 1 and therefore, its scope permitted a smaller sample size. However, it is likely the diminished sample size may have affected the correlations and the alphas for the Dark Triad measures in Study 2. In contrast, the alpha for Machiavellianism being as low as it was is one of the reasons why the concise measure (Jonason & Webster, in press) was developed. Although it is reasonable to expect lower-than-ideal estimates of internal consistency from short scales because of the positive relationship between number of items and Cronbach alpha (Carmines & Zeller, 1979), it is less reasonable to expect it of a 20-item measure like the MACH-IV. Other work has had difficulty finding the MACH-IV to have high internal consistency (e.g., Jonason et al., 2010).

In conclusion, we have provided evidence for the cognitive systems that relate to the Dark Triad as would be expected from a Life History Theory paradigm. It appears as though, the short-term exploitive strategy that characterizes the Dark Triad is supported by a system of limited self-control, a tendency to discount future consequences, and attention deficit symptoms. These systems are likely to leave the person with a *fast* life strategy to feel as though they just cannot control themselves, although it is unlikely they want to.

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