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Bright lights, big city: The Dark Triad traits and geographical preferences[☆]

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ABSTRACT

There are many niches people can occupy and some people may fit better in certain niches than others as a function of their personality. Two simple questions were considered presently. Are people characterized by the Dark Triad traits also characterized by a bias towards living in the city and if so as they are, what features of the city-living draw them towards such geographical preferences? Study 1 ($N = 753$, students) assessed the correlations between population density and size and the Dark Triad traits. Study 2 ($N = 270$, MTurk) asked participant's where they lived and compared rates of the Dark Triad traits. Study 3 ($N = 273$, MTurk) assessed where people wish they lived based on location (e.g., city, suburbia) and features of that environment and related that to the Dark Triad traits. Across three studies, there was a tentative-yet-methodologically robust bias of those who are high in the Dark Triad traits—especially psychopathy—towards city life. In Study 3, sex differences in the features people want in where they live and how the Dark Triad traits correlated with the featural preferences were examined and suggested effects consistent with life history theory. Results are discussed using life history and selection-evocation-manipulation paradigms.

Folklore holds that “evil” people live in the city. Modern movies are replete with stories about how the young rural/suburban-boy/girl yearns to move to the exciting city, sometimes with dire consequences. In at least one famous movie—*Footloose*—a city-boy moves to the country and seriously shakes up the town. Might there be something to this old wisdom; do people characterized by “evil” traits prefer to live in the city? If so, what features of city-living draw them in? In three studies, these questions were examined in relation to the Dark Triad traits as indicative of individual differences in what most would consider “evil” given their exploitive (Jonason & Webster, 2012) and selfish (Jonason, Strosser et al., 2015) nature along with their links to the commission of sin (Jonason, Zeigler-Hill, & Okan, 2017).

There has been a recent spate of interest in the Dark Triad traits (see Furnham, Richards, & Paulhus, 2013) to compliment the work in personality psychology on the Big Five traits (see McCrae, 2002). The Dark Triad traits are characterized by vanity and self-centeredness (i.e., narcissism), manipulation and cynicism (i.e., Machiavellianism), and callous social attitudes and amorality (i.e., psychopathy). The traits capture some of the darker aspects of personality traits in non-clinical populations (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). However, because these traits are typically considered social pathologies (Kowalski, 2001), many questions about their non-clinical functioning in people's day-to-day life

remain. Most work on these traits has examined questions related to their origin (Vernon, Villani, Vickers, & Harris, 2008), their interpersonal functionality (Jonason, Li, Webster, & Schmitt, 2009), the best way to measure them (Miller et al., 2012), and the effects they have on society (Jones, 2013). Personality traits—when viewed as dispositional biases composed of motivation features (Jonason & Ferrell, 2016) that influence how they view the world (Jonason et al., 2018)—may orient individuals to having various preferences. One potential preference in the Dark Triad traits is examined here; a preference for living in the city.

1. Personality and place preferences

For all species, the correct choice of habitat is fundamentally important because such habitats contain mating opportunities, food, and mortality threats (Chase & Leibold, 2003). Ancestral, hunter-gatherers, living in small scale, highly interconnected societies, were likely to not have much room for niche specialization or diversification because selection (i.e., mortality) pressures were stronger compared to subsequent generations. Humans now occupy a wider geographic distribution than any other species and may have done so since the agrarian revolution 12,000 years ago (Diamond, 1999). Within those

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geographies, there has been a diversification of micro-niches over the past 300–500 years, of which cities is one (Figueredo et al., 2007). As individuals specialize in particular solutions to life's great challenges—mating and survival—certain psychological features will provide greater success than others (MacDonald, 1995, 1998). Some of the psychological features are personality traits (Buss, 1987; Oishi, 2014). For example, introverts prefer rural/mountainous living conditions (Oishi, Talhelm, & Lee, 2015) which may reflect their need to minimize social interactions. Alternatively, those high in narcissism live close to the equator (Jonason & Schmitt, 2017) which may reflect why physical attractiveness is so central to narcissism (i.e., more diseases exist around the equator and physical attractiveness signals health) or, because more people live around the equator than farther from it, living in population dense areas might better serve the narcissist's ego-needs of external validation than less densely populated areas. As people gravitate towards new micro-niches, those better at exploiting those niches (i.e., surviving and reproducing) will pass on their preferences for that niche—paired with the traits that afforded greater success—to their offspring.

The contention here is that people characterized by the Dark Triad traits may be especially well-suited to city-living. Unlike traditional conditions which mirror rural conditions (Oishi, Talhelm, & Lee, 2015), cities present conflicts (e.g., strangers, diseases like the Plague) for a species that tends to want to form long-term bonds, to build trust, and to invest heavily in a few number of offspring or mates. Even in modern cities, this (default) “slow” life history strategy is evident (Sng, Neuberg, Varnum, & Kenrick, 2017) because this is the characteristic life history strategy of *Homo sapiens* (Wilson, 1975). Moreover, many people are “forced” to live in cities by accident of birth or for economic reasons. Nevertheless, some people might be better suited for city living and, therefore, prefer it. There is some evidence that those high in the Dark Triad traits occupy and exploit specific mating niches that are likely to (1) be characterized by others high in those traits and (2) be where they can satisfy their short-term mating and hedonistic agendas (Jonason, Foster, McCain, & Campbell, 2015). The basic prediction here is that those high in the Dark Triad traits should prefer to live in the city.

But why might those high in the Dark Triad traits prefer to live in the city? At their heart, evolutionary models of personality are functionalist in nature. This means, the city must serve certain functional goals (Chase & Leibold, 2003; MacDonald, 1995, 1998). When selecting one's preferred niche, people high on the Dark Triad traits should prefer features in that location that serve their goals of casual sex (Jonason et al., 2009), social exploitation (Jonason & Webster, 2012), hedonism (Kajonius, Persson, & Jonason, 2015), and a fast pace of life (Jonason, Koenig, & Tost, 2010). In contrast, they are likely to be biased against places they might deem as boring by virtue of ruralness or naturalness, proximity to water and work, and pleasantness (i.e., indicators of the primitive ecology for people). Such naturalistic and even primitive socioecologies would be more strongly linked to slow life history strategies given their approximation with the environment for evolutionary adaptations for the species as opposed to some specialist niche like the city. That is, personality traits may be drawn to and pushed away from particular environments that are congruent and incongruent (respectively) with their life history strategy. And last, as ostensible adaptations, as opposed to pathologies, they might want a place that is far from family given the externalities pursuing an exploitive social strategy can place on those near them.

Finally, there are pervasive sex differences in the Dark Triad traits, suggesting men are better characterized by these traits than women are (Jonason et al., 2017). The life history interpretation of these sex differences suggests that because the cost-benefit ratio for being socially antagonistic was and is more favorable for men than for women (Figueredo et al., 2006; Jonason & Lavertu, 2017), selection will lead men to being better characterized by these traits than women are over time. What is more interesting here, however, is that there might be

potential *sequela* of being high on the Dark Triad traits in terms of geographical preferences. If men are higher on the Dark Triad traits than women are and those high in these traits have specific preferences in the features of the places they live, one might expect that sex differences in featural preferences should be mediated by individual differences in the Dark Triad traits. For instance, men, as a function of their fast (e.g., *r*-selected; focused on mating and immediate satisfaction of needs) life history strategies should want to live in places that contain more mates, more excitement, a faster pace, a large population, opportunities for exploitation, and proximity to night life (i.e., stereotypical features of city-living). These features would lead men to be more successful in their mating and social goals than if they lived elsewhere and those men who were higher on the Dark Triad traits should be particularly interested in these features. In contrast, women, with their slower (i.e., *K*-selected; survival-focused, delayed needs) life history strategies, should prefer locations that are safe and reflective of primitive ecologies (i.e., pleasant and near nature) and low scores on the Dark Triad traits in women should facilitate this preference.

There has been considerable attention to the Dark Triad traits in the past ten years. Three studies assess the geographical preferences associated with the Dark Triad traits. Such associations seem reasonable at the proximal level whereby personality traits influence how people select and structure their environments (Buss, 1987) and at the ultimate level whereby personality traits can best afford Darwinian fitness when paired with specific socioecological preferences (MacDonald, 1995, 1998). However, to date, the research on geographical preferences has been confined to non-humans like the Great tit (*Parus major*; Serrano-Davies, O'Shea, & Quinn, 2017) and the Big Five traits (Oishi, Talhelm, & Lee, 2015) or was too specific in relation to mating niches and the Dark Triad traits (Jonason, Foster et al., 2015). These studies represent the first attempts to understand the geographical living preferences of those characterized by the Dark Triad traits.

2. Study 1

In Study 1, zip codes, provided by a large sample of Texan undergraduates, were paired with data on population size and population by square miles. These factors were then correlated with the individual-level Dark Triad traits. Tests for sex differences and moderation were also conducted to test whether the correlations differed in the sexes. Primarily, the Dark Triad traits should be positively correlated with population rates and population density.

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Participants and procedure

A sample of 735 (503 women) undergraduates from the University of Texas at Austin completed several measures in a mass-testing session. Participants were aged between 17 and 45 years of age ($M = 18.77$, $SD = 1.62$). Participants identified as 55% White/Caucasian with 71% living in a dormitory.¹ No stipulations were set on sample size in this study. Participants were informed of the nature of the study, took a series of self-report measures, and were thanked for their participation.²

2.1.2. Measures

The Dark Triad Dirty Dozen (four items per facet) was used to measure the Dark Triad traits (Jonason & Webster, 2010). When data was collected (2012), no other short measure of the Dark Triad traits had been published. Participants were asked how much they agreed (1 = *Not at all*; 5 = *Very much*) with statements such as: “I tend to want

¹ Results were not affected by the living circumstances of participant's living conditions.

² This represents cleaned data from Jonason (2014) that only contains those who provided zip codes.

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