



The fundamental social motives that characterize dark personality traits

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ABSTRACT

A useful way of understanding personality traits is to examine the motivational nature of a trait because motives drive behaviors and influence attitudes. In two cross-sectional, self-report studies ($N = 942$), we examined the relationships between fundamental social motives and dark personality traits (i.e., narcissism, psychopathy, sadism, spitefulness, and Machiavellianism) and examined the role of childhood socio-ecological conditions (Study 2 only). For example, we found that Machiavellianism and psychopathy were negatively associated with motivations that involved developing and maintaining good relationships with others. Sex differences in the darker aspects of personality were a function of, at least in part, fundamental social motives such as the desire for status. Fundamental social motives mediated the associations that childhood socio-ecological conditions had with the darker aspects of personality. Our results showed how motivational tendencies in men and women may provide insights into alternative life history strategies reflected in dark personality traits.

1. Introduction

Personality traits reflect individual differences in how and why people interact with others in their social lives (Neel, Kenrick, White, & Neuberg, 2016). However, most research concerning the motivations associated with personality traits is characterized by limitations such as overemphasizing “lighter” aspects of personality such as the Big Five traits (Cooper, Agocha, & Sheldon, 2000); focusing mostly on the psychogenic motives of competence, power, and affiliation (Deci & Ryan, 2000); reporting relatively weak effects (Elliot & Thrash, 2001); and being based on a potentially shaky theoretical framework of motivational systems (e.g., Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs; Kenrick, Griskevicius, Neuberg, & Schaller, 2010). In this study, we attempt to understand the motivational priorities associated with the darker aspects of personality through an adaptationist lens.

As a highly social species, social groups and interactions will have acted as recurrent adaptive challenges that will have shaped motivational systems in people (Neel et al., 2016). The fundamental social motives that have been identified so far include: self-protection, disease avoidance, group affiliation, exclusion concern, independence, status, mate seeking, mate retention, and kin care. These motives reflect biases in motivational priorities that characterize the average person's (i.e., species-level) solution to problems related to finding and keeping a mate (Buss & Schmitt, 1993), the importance and benefits of group-living (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), and personal survival goals (Schaller, Park, & Mueller, 2003).

However, we should not assume that everyone has the same motivational priorities. There are individual differences in how people “choose” to solve adaptive tasks based on the (implicit) timeline they are working on or the nature of their life history tradeoffs. Those who are *now-focused* (i.e., likely to trade long-term survival for immediate sexual and social gains) may have a different motivational system than those who are *tomorrow-focused* (i.e., more interested in long-term outcomes than immediate sexual and social gains; Jonason, Sitnikova, & Oshio, 2018). Life history theory (Wilson, 1975) allows us to understand how organisms make tradeoffs of limited metabolic energy and time to solve their mating and survival goals which are often in conflict. Effort spent mating (including seeking mates and status) cannot be spent on somatic effort to protect one's kin and avoiding threats. When this theory is applied to people (Figueredo et al., 2006), it suggests that personality traits may reflect coordinated systems that allow individuals to solve adaptive problems in specific ways that include motivational biases (Jonason & Ferrell, 2016; Jonason & Fletcher, 2018). That is, personality traits may bias people towards investing more in mating effort or somatic effort. Most people prioritize motives that involve their safety and helping family over mating and status (Neel et al., 2016), but this may be diagnostic of the rather “slow” life history speed (i.e., *K*-selected) that characterizes the average *Homo sapiens* (Mace, 2000). In contrast, others, like those characterized by traits like psychopathy, may have different motivational priorities. To better understand the role of personality traits in defining alternative solutions to life history problems (which are often considered to be

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deviant), we examine individual differences in “dark side” personality traits.

Antisocial or “dark side” personality traits may reflect a distinct system of solutions to adaptive problems that are characterized by limited mutualistic motives (e.g., kin protection) and enhanced individualistic motives (e.g., status seeking). Specifically, we focus on Machiavellianism (i.e., manipulation and cynicism), narcissism (i.e., grandiosity and self-centeredness), psychopathy (i.e., callous social attitudes and impulsivity), sadism (i.e., enjoyment in the suffering of others), and spitefulness (i.e., punitive sentiments). These traits reflect individualistic behaviors such as intimate partner violence (Jones & Olderbak, 2014) and counterproductive workplace behavior (Spain, Harms, & LeBreton, 2014). Although traditionally viewed as indicators of psychopathology, we suggest these dark traits may simply reflect adaptive solutions to the sorts of recurring social problems faced by humans that differ from the species-typical solutions of mutualism and safety (Jonason, Koenig, & Tost, 2010). As such, we make two broad predictions. First, we expect dark personality traits to be negatively correlated with mutualistic and survival motives because investing in long-term relationships is costly and may not pay-off in the (perceived to be) shortened timeline, whereas sacrificing survival and taking risks are essential features of engaging in a *fast* (i.e., *r*-selected) life history strategy. Second, we expect dark traits to be related to individualistic motivations for mate seeking given their interest in casual sex (Jonason, Li, Webster, & Schmitt, 2009) and their limited interest in mate retention (Jonason, Li, & Buss, 2010). Further, dark traits are associated with status seeking (Semenya & Honey, 2015), perhaps, because status and power have repeatedly translated into better access to mates and food.

In addition to providing a unique way of understanding personality effects, life history theory also provides strong, *a priori* reasons to expect sex differences in both personality traits and fundamental social motives. It is already well established that men are more Machiavellian, narcissistic, psychopathic, sadistic, and spiteful than women are (e.g., Jonason, Zeigler-Hill, & Okan, 2017); men are more motivated by mate seeking and status seeking than women are (Jonason et al., 2009; Semanya & Honey, 2015); and women are more motivated to help kin, avoid threats, and help others than men are (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Neel et al., 2016). These may reflect sex-related asymmetries in the costs and benefits for how ancestral men and women solved life history tradeoffs when taking their individual, physiological, and psychological characteristics into account. Because ancestral women paid more costs for engaging in fast approaches to life, natural selection would have shaped motivational biases to better protect women from threats and form stronger bonds with other members of the species. In contrast, ancestral men would have experienced more benefits from mating opportunities and the accrual of status than women (Buss & Schmitt, 1993) so natural selection would have shaped the motivational and behavioral biases of men to be more strongly oriented towards mate and status seeking compared with the motivational and behavioral biases of women. We suggest that natural selection has operated on deep motivational systems (Jonason & Ferrell, 2016; Neel et al., 2016), systems that humans are likely to share with other highly social species that have similar life history profiles (e.g., African bush elephant [*Loxodonta Africana*] and evolutionary histories (e.g., chimpanzee [*Pan troglodytes*])). Personality traits are – at least in part – phenotypic expressions of the underlying motivational systems in men and women (i.e., behavioral syndromes; Sih, Bell, Johnson, & Ziemba, 2004). Therefore, we expect sex differences in dark traits to be mediated by individual differences in the fundamental social motives.

If personality traits and social motives are adaptive responses, then they should be sensitive to stressful and unpredictable childhood conditions (Brumbach, Figueredo, & Ellis, 2009). Indeed, social motives

and dark personality traits are sensitive to variability in the quality of childhood conditions (Jonason, Icho, & Ireland, 2016; Neel et al., 2016). We explore the possibility that childhood conditions might play a role in the associations between the fundamental social motives and the dark personality traits. For example, an indirect association between sex and psychopathy, that operates through the status seeking motive, may be especially strong when the individual has experienced a harsh or unpredictable childhood (e.g., men raised in harsh or unpredictable environments may prioritize the status seeking motive which, in turn, may predict high levels of psychopathic personality traits). It is not that all people will turn to antagonistic solutions to problems. Instead, those with a fast orientation who experience a harsh/unpredictable environment will “press the gas” whereas those with a slow orientation in the same contexts will “push the breaks”.

We contend that a powerful way to understand and organize personality traits is to understand the motivational biases that characterize each trait (Jonason & Ferrell, 2016; Jonason & Fletcher, 2018). In two studies, we examine how individual differences in fundamental social motives are related to darker aspects of personality. As alternative social strategies, darker aspects of personality are easily ignored when researchers are more concerned with documenting species-level traits. In contrast, we take an individual differences (i.e., within-species) approach to understand the social nature of darker aspects of human psychology.

2. Study 1

We began by assessing the relationships between five dark traits (i.e., narcissisms, Machiavellianism, psychopathy, sadism, and spitefulness) and individual differences in fundamental social motives. We tested whether these correlations differed in men and women. And last, we tested whether the fundamental social motives mediated the associations that sex had with the traits.

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Participants and procedure

A sample of 300 (154 women) community members from the United States of America were paid US\$3 to participate in an online study through MTurk. The average age of the participants was 33.15 years ($SD = 10.48$), with a range of 18–65 years. Most of the sample was of a “white” ethnicity (76%), had a college degree (34%), were married (34%), and were heterosexual (91%). Participants were informed about the nature of the study before completing several self-report measures. The minimum sample size was determined based on power analysis (> 0.80) for the average effect size in social and personality psychology ($r \approx 0.20$; Richard, Bond Jr., & Stokes-Zoota, 2003) and guidelines ($N \approx 250$) set for reducing estimation error in personality psychology (Schönbrodt & Perugini, 2013).

2.1.2. Measures

Machiavellianism was measured using the MACH-IV (Christie & Geis, 1970) which consists of 20 items that capture manipulative and deceitful tendencies as well as cynical and immoral beliefs (e.g., “It is wise to flatter important people” [$\alpha = 0.72$]). Participants rated their level of agreement with each item on the MACH-IV using scales that ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Responses to these items were averaged to create an overall index of Machiavellianism.

Narcissism was assessed with the 40-item version of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (Raskin & Hall, 1979). Items for the NPI are presented in a forced-choice format such that participants must choose between a narcissistic and a non-narcissistic statement for each item (e.g., “I really like to be the center of attention” vs. “It makes me

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