



Good v. evil: Predicting sinning with dark personality traits and moral foundations



Peter K. Jonason^{a,*}, Virgil Zeigler-Hill^b, Ceylan Okan^a

^a Western Sydney University, Australia

^b Oakland University, United States

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ABSTRACT

Using life history theory, we provided ($N = 1236$) insight into individual differences in the engagement in human vice or sin (e.g., lust) by examining individual differences in dark personality traits and morality. Moral foundations were associated with sin through the individualizing aspects of morality. Dark personality traits accounted for almost six times more variance in individual differences in sinning than the moral foundations which suggests that it is personality rather than morality that is responsible for sinning behaviors. While sadism and spitefulness accounted for unique and significantly more variance, this was a small and specialized amount. We replicated effects suggesting men are more strongly embodied by dark personality traits and behaviors than women are, and women are more morally virtuous than men are, but showed these sex differences were a function of dark personality traits—in particular—and moral foundations. Overwhelmingly, dark personality traits trump participant sex and moral foundations in accounting for variance in sin.

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What causes evil? This question has plagued moral philosophers and psychologists for centuries (e.g., Schimmel, 1997). Morality has been thought to play a vital role in the perpetration of evil acts. That is, a person is evil or commits sin because they are morally compromised. In contrast, a personality psychologist would argue that so-called sinful acts are downstream expressions of internal dispositions like “dark” (e.g., psychopathy), heritable personality traits (Campbell et al., 2009) and external influences like childhood conditions (Brumbach, Figueredo, & Ellis, 2009). Whereas prior research has examined the relationship between dark personality traits and sin (Veselka, Giammarco, & Vernon, 2014) and morality (Jonason, Strosser, Kroll, Duineveld, & Baruffi, 2015), little research has attempted to simultaneously examine the role of personality and morality in understanding individual differences in the commission of cardinal sins or vices (e.g., gluttony) as they have been traditionally conceptualized in the Judeo-Christian-Muslim tradition (Medina, 2000).

The commission of “sin” is generally viewed by researchers as a function of behavioral dysregulation driven by limited executive functioning (Gioia, Isquith, Guy, & Kenworthy, 2000). That is, sinning is considered to be a form of pathology caused by psychological or physiological dysfunction. However, evolutionary psychologists might conceptualize sin as pseudopathologies (Crawford & Anderson, 1989)

where they confer benefits to the person at the cost of the group. Sinning, then, may be behavioral manifestations of a *fast* life history strategy that is geared toward the immediate extraction of resources, pleasure (Kajonius, Persson, & Jonason, 2015), and mating success at the cost of long-term sexual and physical health. Life history theory (Wilson, 1975) describes between- and within-species differences in the way individuals allocate and tradeoff energy and time toward survival and reproduction. The engagement in apparent sinning or vice may be manifestations of a life history strategy that is geared more toward the former (i.e., fast, *r*-selected) over the latter (i.e., slow, *K*-selected).

In the last ten years, considerable attention has been drawn to socially undesirable personality traits in subclinical populations (e.g., Jonason, Webster et al., 2012). While originally conceptualized as a triad (i.e., the Dark Triad; narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism; Paulhus & Williams, 2002), researchers have been expanding the list of “dark” personality traits to include sadism (i.e., enjoyment of the suffering of others; Buckels, Jones, & Paulhus, 2013) and spitefulness (i.e., willingness to incur costs in order to inflict harm on others; Marcus, Zeigler-Hill, Mercer, & Norris, 2014). These darker aspects of personality are meant to better account for elements of human nature that are not adequately addressed by other personality taxonomies (e.g., the Big Five, the HEXACO).

One reason for the new found interest in the dark aspects of personality—the Dark Triad in particular—is their successful integration into the life history paradigm. These traits have been identified as indicators of a pseudopathological (Jonason, Duineveld, & Middleton, 2015)

* Corresponding author at: School of Social Sciences and Psychology, Western Sydney University, Penrith, NSW 2751, Australia.

E-mail address: p.jonason@westernsydney.edu.au (P.K. Jonason).

fast life history strategy that is correlated with behavior and attitudes that resemble the seven vices such as selfishness (Jonason et al., 2015), short-term and exploitive mating strategies (Jonason, Li, Webster, & Schmitt, 2009), and aggressiveness (Jones & Neria, 2015). In addition, the Dark Triad traits have been found to be directly associated with individual differences in the seven deadly sins—with the exception of a null correlation between sloth and narcissism (Veselka et al., 2014).

However, the work linking dark personality traits with individual differences in vice and morality is limited. First, work that directly linked the Dark Triad traits and the seven deadly sins (Veselka et al., 2014) used a shortened measure of the Dark Triad traits as opposed to longer measures, failed to examine any strong theoretical arguments and, instead, was more descriptive and psychometric in nature. Second, in work that examined traits and behaviors that resemble the seven deadly sins (e.g., lust; Jonason et al., 2009) and morality (Jonason et al., 2015), the researchers failed to provide a particularly comprehensive account of how dark aspects of personality relate to vice and morality. And third, given recent attempts to expand the dark taxonomy of human personality to include spitefulness (Marcus et al., 2014) and sadism (Buckels & Paulhus, 2013), prior researchers were incapable of testing whether the inclusion of these traits is particularly worthwhile in accounting for individual differences in morality and vice, especially given that the Dark Triad traits appear, on their own, to account for apparent sadism in the form animal cruelty (Kavanagh, Signal, & Taylor, 2013) and schadenfreude (James, Kavanagh, Jonason, Chonody, & Scrutton, 2014).

Given our life history framework, we make a number of predictions. First, we expect dark aspects of personality and self-interested (i.e., individualizing) morality (both of which are likely manifestations of a fast life history strategy) to be associated with the commission of the seven deadly sins, but we expect personality to be more important than morality as the likely proximal predictors of behavior with morality being antecedent conditions to both. Second, as men benefit more and pay fewer costs than women do for engaging in a fast life history strategy, we expect (1) men to score higher than women do on the Dark Triad traits and the vices (Jonason, Li, & Czarna, 2013) and (2) women to be more morally virtuous than men are (Jonason et al., 2015), in accordance with their life history strategies, and (3) that these sex differences should be accounted for (i.e., mediated) by individual differences in personality and morality. And third, we expect, the addition of sadism and spitefulness to account for a small-yet-significant amount of variance beyond the Dark Triad traits in individual differences in morality and vice.

1. Method

1.1. Participants and procedure

We used a sample of 1236 undergraduates (24% male) at a university in the Midwestern region of the U.S., who were enrolled in psychology courses and participated in return for partial fulfillment of a research participation requirement. The mean age of our participants was 19.96 years ($SD = 3.04$, Range: 18–55). The majority of the sample was European American (76%), followed by African American (10%), Hispanic (2%), American Indian (6%), Asian (5%), Pacific Islander (<1%), and other (6%). An equal proportion of the sample reported being in their Freshman (35%) and Sophomore (32%) year of college, followed by Junior (21%) and Senior (11%) years. Participants characterized themselves as single (44%), seriously dating (39%), casually dating (10%), cohabitating (3%), married (2%), engaged (2%), or divorced (<1%). The majority of the sample identified as heterosexual (93%) with the remainder identifying as bisexual (3%), homosexual (2%), or Other (2%).

Table 1
Descriptive statistics and sex differences.

	Mean (SD)			<i>t</i>	<i>d</i>
	Overall	Men	Women		
Dark personality					
Narcissism	9.62 (4.72)	11.17 (4.90)	9.13 (4.56)	−6.57**	−0.43
Machiavellianism	2.65 (0.41)	2.76 (0.39)	2.61 (0.41)	−5.25**	−0.37
Psychopathy	1.97 (0.52)	2.27 (0.58)	1.87 (0.47)	−12.24**	−0.76
Sadism	1.75 (0.60)	2.19 (0.66)	1.61 (0.50)	−15.85**	−0.99
Spitefulness	1.83 (0.68)	2.06 (0.73)	1.76 (0.65)	−6.78**	−0.43
Vices and virtues					
Anger	2.33 (0.71)	2.40 (0.70)	2.31 (0.71)	−1.64	−0.13
Envy	2.23 (0.75)	2.38 (0.75)	2.18 (0.75)	−4.03**	−0.27
Gluttony	2.37 (0.55)	2.43 (0.59)	2.35 (0.53)	−2.11*	−0.14
Pride	2.17 (0.67)	2.43 (0.65)	2.09 (0.65)	−7.37**	−0.52
Sloth	2.51 (0.65)	2.64 (0.62)	2.46 (0.66)	−4.00**	−0.28
Lust	2.19 (0.76)	2.50 (0.73)	2.09 (0.75)	−8.01**	−0.55
Greed	2.45 (0.67)	2.62 (0.64)	2.40 (0.67)	−4.77**	−0.34
Moral foundations					
<i>Individualizing</i>	3.46 (0.83)	3.16 (0.88)	3.55 (0.79)	7.07**	0.47
Harm	3.50 (0.91)	3.13 (0.96)	3.62 (0.86)	7.98**	0.54
Fairness	3.41 (0.84)	3.18 (0.90)	3.48 (0.80)	5.24**	0.35
<i>Binding</i>	2.94 (0.75)	2.84 (0.77)	2.97 (0.73)	2.53*	0.17
Ingroup	3.00 (0.84)	2.91 (0.90)	3.03 (0.82)	2.11*	0.14
Authority	3.02 (0.79)	2.92 (0.83)	3.06 (0.78)	2.47*	0.17
Purity	2.79 (0.94)	2.69 (0.92)	2.82 (0.94)	2.00*	0.14

Notes. Italicized variables are higher-order dimensions; *d* is Cohen's *d* for effect size.

* $p < 0.05$.

** $p < 0.01$.

1.2. Measures

Narcissism was assessed with the 40-item Narcissistic Personality Inventory (Raskin & Terry, 1988). For each item, participants were asked to select between two statements. One of the statements embodies a narcissistic attitude (e.g., “I have a natural talent for influencing people”), whereas the other does not (e.g., “I prefer to blend in with the crowd”). The number of narcissistic responses were summed to act as an index of narcissism (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.83$).

The MACH-IV (Christie & Geis, 1970) is a 20-item measure of Machiavellianism. Participants rate their agreement (1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*) with statements such as “It is wise to flatter important people”. Items were summed to create an overall score of Machiavellianism ($\alpha = 0.73$).

The Self-Report Psychopathy Scale-III (Paulhus, Hemphill, & Hare, 2009) is a 34-item measure of psychopathy. Participants are asked to indicate their agreement (1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*) with statements such as “Rules are made to be broken”. Items were summed to create an overall score of psychopathy ($\alpha = 0.90$).

The Comprehensive Assessment of Sadistic Tendencies (Buckels & Paulhus, 2013) is an 18-item measure of everyday sadism. Participants rate their agreement (1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*) with statements such as, “I enjoy physically hurting people”. Items were summed to create an overall score of sadism ($\alpha = 0.88$).

The Spitefulness Scale (Marcus et al., 2014) is a 17-item instrument designed to capture individual differences in spitefulness. Participants rate their agreement (1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*) with statements such as, “I would be willing to take a punch if it meant that someone I did not like would receive two punches”. Items were summed to create an overall score of spitefulness ($\alpha = 0.91$).¹

Individual differences in morality were measured with the 30-item Moral Foundations Questionnaire (Graham et al., 2011). It assessed the degree to which participants felt different considerations were relevant (1 = *not at all relevant*; 5 = *extremely relevant*) when making

¹ Correlations among the dark personality traits are reported in Appendix A.

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