



The Dark Triad and risk behavior[☆]

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ABSTRACT

The Dark Triad traits—Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy—are theorized to facilitate short-term, exploitative social tactics. Thus, the Dark Triad traits should be positively related to (a) similar short-term-focused traits such as impulsivity and sensation-seeking, and (b) risky behaviors. In two studies ($N > 1400$), we examined the relationships among the Dark Triad traits and impulsivity and sensation-seeking. In Study 2, we incorporated risk behaviors, including blackjack betting and temporal discounting of money. Both studies showed positive relationships among the Dark Triad traits and impulsivity and sensation-seeking. Study 2 showed positive relationships among the Dark Triad traits, blackjack betting, and steeper temporal discounting. An experimentally manipulated ego threat in Study 2 marginally moderated the narcissism–discounting relationship; ego-threatened participants had a significantly positive relationship, whereas those who were not threatened showed no relationship. We discuss implications of the Dark Triad traits for understanding risk behavior.

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1. Introduction

1.1. The Dark Triad

The Dark Triad is a constellation of three related personality traits: Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). People with high Dark Triad composite scores have artificially inflated self-views (narcissism) and manipulate others to achieve their goals (Machiavellianism) with little empathy or remorse (psychopathy). We describe each trait below.

Machiavellian policies are justified by their efficacy—“the ends justify the means”. Although Psychopathy and Machiavellianism are distinct constructs (Paulhus & Williams, 2002; Vernon, Villani, Vickers, & Harris, 2008), they share conceptual overlap because both are associated with poor emotional bonds and a lack of concern with morality. Psychopathy is characterized by lack of affect, whereas Machiavellianism is characterized by manipulateness. Psychopathy is also associated with guiltlessness, dishonesty, cynicism, and insensitivity. Narcissism is conceptualized as seeking attention, prestige, or status, and a belief in entitlement and superiority to others; it is measured in several ways (Tamborski & Brown, 2011).

1.2. Dark Triad correlates

Specific to the current investigation, preliminary research has shown associations among the Dark Triad traits, impulsivity, risk

behavior, lack of self-control, and a fast life strategy (Jonason, Koenig, & Tost, 2010; Jonason & Tost, 2010; Jonason, Webster, Schmitt, Li, & Crysel, 2012; Jones, 2012; Jones & Paulhus, 2011). Narcissism has been linked to multiple gambling measures (Lakey, Rose, Campbell, & Goodie, 2008). Regarding risk, although the Dark Triad composite was related to discounting using the question (“You can have \$100 now or \$1000 in a year. Which would you prefer?”; Jonason et al., 2010), this relationship remains poorly understood given that it (a) only emerged after controlling for age, (b) did not replicate in any of the three component traits, and (c) was based on a single item, meaning no discounting parameter could be estimated (concerns we address in Study 2). These findings suggest that the Dark Triad traits may facilitate social behaviors that match a fast life strategy to maximize fitness (Jonason et al., 2010). In the present research, we focus on impulsivity, sensation-seeking, delay-discounting, gambling behavior, and the moderating role of threatened egotism; we discuss each below.

1.2.1. Impulsivity and sensation-seeking

Impulsivity and sensation-seeking are related but distinct concepts. Impulsivity is taking an action without considering the consequences or looking ahead, whereas sensation-seeking involves seeking new and stimulating experiences, and the willingness to take risks for such experiences (Zuckerman, 1994). Sensation-seeking could include trying new foods, partying, skydiving, or recreational drug-use. Any of these actions could be impulsive, but only if the person performs them without considering the potential costs. Researchers have used gambling behavior as a measure of impulsivity because it is an unknown outcome chosen in favor of more secure financial endeavors (Holt, Green, & Myerson, 2003).

[☆] Different analyses of some of the data presented here, which are based on Laura Crysel's master's thesis, appear in Webster and Crysel (in press).

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Nevertheless, gambling could also be considered a sensation-seeking behavior because it is risky and a thrill is experienced with the outcome.

Psychopathy (Jakobwitz & Egan, 2006) and narcissism (Raskin & Terry, 1988) are also linked to impulsivity. A meta-analysis of 23 independent effect sizes found the weighted mean correlation between narcissism and impulsivity to be .41 (95% CI [.38, .44]; Vazire & Funder, 2006). Narcissism and psychopathy are also positively correlated with functional impulsivity (being socially adventurous) and dysfunctional impulsivity (lacking self-control), respectively, whereas Machiavellianism was unrelated to either (Jones & Paulhus, 2011). Psychopathy and narcissism predicted gambling with someone else's money and the amount lost, respectively (Jones, 2012). These findings suggest an association between the Dark Triad and impulsivity/sensation-seeking, particularly among narcissism, psychopathy, and impulsivity.

1.2.2. Balloon Analogue Risk Task

A behavioral measure of sensation-seeking and risk-taking is the Balloon Analogue Risk Task (BART; Lejuez et al., 2002). In the BART, players earn incremental monetary rewards for clicking a balloon until either the balloon pops or the participant chooses to collect or “bank” the money. The BART correlates with impulsivity, risky behaviors (such as gambling), and psychopathy (Hunt, Hopko, Bare, Lejuez, & Robinson, 2005).

1.2.3. Discounting

Delay-discounting measures relate to the risk aspect of impulsivity (Holt et al., 2003; Richards, Zhang, Mitchell, & de Wit, 1999). Discounting reflects the extent to which a person values money or some other reward less because of a time delay. The typical discounting paradigm involves giving participants a series of choices between two amounts of money that would be received at different times. For example, would the person prefer \$3.50 now or \$10 in 180 days? At each step, the amounts of money and time are varied, so that participants develop an individual function representing their choices. The discounting begins when people value the delayed money less because they have to wait for it. The discounting parameter (k) relates to impulsivity and gambling, but with mixed results (Holt et al., 2003; Ostaszewski, 1996; Rachlin, 1990; Rachlin, 1992). Despite a preliminary study linking the Dark Triad to preferring an immediate, small reward (vs. a large reward later; see Jonason et al., 2010), there is no systematic research linking k to the Dark Triad.

1.2.4. Ego threat

Researchers refer to a threat to the self as an *ego threat*, which is when one's favorable self-views are jeopardized, often by social rejection or a negative evaluation of one's performance on a self-relevant task (Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996). In the present research (Study 2), we manipulate ego threat to examine its possible interaction with the Dark Triad trait of narcissism. In prior research, ego threat has interacted with narcissism (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Bushman et al., 2009; Jones & Paulhus, 2010; Konrath, Bushman, & Campbell, 2006; Twenge & Campbell, 2003; cf. Kirkpatrick, Waugh, Valencia, & Webster, 2002) and psychopathy (Jones & Paulhus, 2010) in predicting aggression. Because narcissists attempt to restore their hurt egos following threat (aggression toward an insulter, Bushman & Baumeister, 1998), they should become more risk-seeking following threat to restore their damaged egos via financial gain.

1.3. Overview

The purposes of the present research were to assess (a) the relationships among the Dark Triad traits and risk-related traits and

behaviors and (b) whether a manipulated ego threat would moderate the relationships between narcissism and risk behavior. Theoretically, because a core component of Dark Triad is maximizing short-term gains—either at the expense of others or one's own long-term gains—its traits should relate to both self-report (impulsivity/sensation-seeking) and behavioral (gambling) measures related to risk. Thus, we predicted that the Dark Triad traits would be positively correlated with impulsivity/sensation-seeking (Study 1) and risky behavior (higher blackjack bets, costly BART strategies, and steeper discounting—preferring less money now to more money later; Study 2). Further, theoretical and empirical work suggests that narcissists harbor fragile or unstable self-views, and that they react to ego threats such as negative feedback by pursuing risky strategies such as hoarding resources (Campbell, Bush, Brunell, & Shelton, 2005). Thus, an ego-threat-by-narcissism interaction should resemble a “spreading” interaction; ego-threatened people should show a positive narcissism–risk relationship, whereas those who were not should show no relationship. The present research is both theoretically innovative because it is the first to examine an experimentally manipulated ego-threat-by-narcissism interaction for risk behaviors, which is crucial for inferring a causal process.

2. Study 1: the Dark Triad, impulsivity, and sensations seeking

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Participants

Participants were 1143 undergraduates enrolled in introductory psychology at a large public university in the southeastern US who completed an online prescreening questionnaire for course credit. Because some participants did not complete all measures, 1097 participants were included in the analyses (96.0%), consisting of 702 (64.0%) women and 394 (35.9%) men (and one [0.1%] who declined to answer); ages ranged from 17 to 24 years (Mode = 18, $Mdn = 18.0$, $M = 18.53$, $SD = 0.98$).

2.1.2. Measures and procedure

Participants completed the 12-item Dark Triad Dirty Dozen (Jonason & Webster, 2010) and the 19-item Impulsivity and Sensation-Seeking (ImpSS) Scale (Zuckerman, Kuhlman, Joireman, Teta, & Kraft, 1993). The Dirty Dozen was measured using a 9-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 9 (*strongly agree*); items were averaged together to form a single construct and the three subscales. The ImpSS used a dichotomous, forced-choice response format, scored 1 = true, 0 = false (McDaniel & Mahan, 2008; Zuckerman, 1994; Zuckerman et al., 1993); items were averaged together. See Table 1 for descriptive statistics, scale reliabilities, and correlations.

2.2. Results and discussion

As predicted, the ImpSS and its two impulsivity and sensation-seeking subscales were each positively correlated with the Dark Triad Dirty Dozen composite and its three subscales of Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and narcissism (Table 1, upper triangle). In addition, brief four-item versions of impulsivity (Imp-4; $\alpha = .64$, $M = 0.30$, $SD = 0.31$) and sensation-seeking (SS-4; $\alpha = .63$, $M = 0.60$, $SD = 0.33$) based on the ImpSS (Webster & Crysel, *in press*) were also respectively related positively to the Dark Triad composite (.21, .12), Machiavellianism (.18, .10), psychopathy (.19, .09), and narcissism (.14, .09; $ps < .005$). The Imp-4 and SS-4 were positively correlated ($r = .40$, $p < .001$).

In Study 1, we found the expected positive relationship between the Dark Triad and impulsivity/sensation-seeking, both at the composite and subscale levels. These links are important

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