

Dark Triad Psychopathy

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Dark Triad traits and self-control are considered viable causal precursors to antisocial and criminal outcomes in youth.

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1. Introduction

Delinquent behaviors often manifest prior to adulthood. These behaviors are generally limited to adolescence, but a minority of delinquent youth persist in antisocial or criminal behaviors throughout the life span ^{[1][2][3]}. Thus, many researchers aim to understand the social factors and personality traits that differentially predict persistent engagement in antisocial behavior. Gottfredson and Hirschi's ^[4] general theory of crime proposes that a lack of self-control predisposes people towards antisocial and criminal behaviors. Other perspectives move beyond self-control disposition and articulate that specific personality features increase involvement in conduct problems. For example, personality features such as psychopathy, Machiavellianism, and narcissism have also been associated with antisocial behaviors, to varying degrees ^{[5][6][7]}. In particular, psychopathy is one of the best clinical predictors of violent-crime recidivism ^{[8][9]}. Although low self-control and Dark Triad ^[7] features overlap, they are distinct individual difference markers ^{[10][11]} that independently predict antisocial or criminal outcomes ^[12]. In this study, the researchers investigate the relative strength of the causal associations between self-control, Dark Triad traits, and assorted antisocial outcomes.

In their general theory of crime, Gottfredson and Hirschi ^[4] argue that self-control can explain all delinquent and criminal behavior, and that all other associations with such behavior are spurious and are just other outcomes of low self-control. This theory postulates that self-control reflects a hedonic orientation to maximize pleasure and avoid pain. Popular theories of self-control suggest that there are four primary domains that control thoughts, emotions, impulses, and performance ^{[13][14]}. High self-control can be perceived of as the ability to adapt and fit the self with the environment, and to refrain from behaving in socially undesirable ways ^[15]. Therefore, low self-control, particularly in the performance domain, should be associated with engagement in socially undesirable behaviors, which would include criminal activity.

Studies on the relationship between self-control and crime have indeed found consistent significant associations ^{[16][17][18][19]}. The meta-analysis by Pratt and Cullen ^[17] suggests effect sizes of 0.26–0.28 in low self-control predicting crime. However, this effect size decreased when studies were longitudinal, which suggests that self-control might not be as effective in predicting persistent crime. This suggests that the link between self-control and general antisocial behavior could be attributable to conceptually similar but distinct constructs. For instance, Friehe and Schildberg-Hörsch ^[20] found evidence to suggest that the link between self-control and crime is due primarily to increased risk taking, rather than to engagement in antisocial behavior. However, longitudinal research on adolescents suggests that low self-control is associated with higher levels of aggressive and delinquent behavior ^[21]. Thus, other constructs appear to coexist with self-control in the etiology of conduct problems.

2. Interrelations between Self-Control and the Dark Triad

Despite Gottfredson and Hirschi's ^[4] claim that other associations with crime beyond self-control are spurious, other researchers have found evidence to challenge their general theory. In particular, the Dark Triad of personality has been long associated with antisocial behavior and criminal activity ^{[6][7]}. The Dark Triad, which consists of traits that share a common core of callous manipulation, is comprised of Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy ^[7]. Each of these traits have been individually associated with criminal outcomes. Narcissism is characterized by increased grandiosity, a sense of entitlement, and a sensitivity to ego threat ^[22]. Machiavellianism is characterized by a cynical worldview, a long-term focus, and strategic flexibility ^[23]. Psychopathy is characterized by high dysfunctional impulsivity, behavioral disinhibition, and aggression ^{[10][24][25][26]}. With respect to criminal behavior, narcissism and Machiavellianism have been studied most often for instances of white-collar and financial crime ^{[27][28]}, whereas psychopathy is highly predictive of

generalized criminal behavior ^{[29][30][31]}, and especially of violent crime ^{[8][32][33][34]}. All three are related to distinct types of aggression and antisocial behavior in adolescents ^[35], and to bullying behaviors in adults ^[5].

In adolescents, all three Dark Triad traits are differentially associated with antisocial behaviors. Whereas Machiavellianism was strongly associated with emotional dysregulation, it was not uniquely predictive of delinquency ^[35]. In the same study, both psychopathy and narcissism predicted overt aggression and delinquency. In a study on cyber-aggression in adolescents, Pabian and colleagues ^[36] found that only psychopathy was significantly predictive of cyber-aggression. Other research also finds support for Dark Triad traits, and especially psychopathy, in predicting delinquent behaviors and adolescent aggression ^{[37][38][39]}. Therefore, these traits present an alternate perspective on the causal precursors to antisocial and criminal behavior.

Both the Dark Triad traits and self-control are viable causal precursors to antisocial and criminal outcomes in adolescents. However, this may be due, in part, to overlap between the constructs. Psychopathy, in particular, is consistently related to low self-control and high levels of dysfunctional impulsivity ^{[10][11]}. When correlated with the Big Five traits of personality, both sets of constructs have similar associations with low conscientiousness, high extraversion, and low agreeableness ^{[40][41]}.

Some research on self-control, the Dark Triad, and crime suggests that they are additively predictive. Narcissism and low self-control were both independently and interactively predictive of violence in an adult sample ^[42], as were psychopathy and low self-control in adolescents ^[43]. In a study on both substance use and criminal offending, the Dark Triad and self-control were both additively predictive of offending, but only self-control independently predicted substance use ^[44]. DeLisi and colleagues ^[45] found that, in a head-to-head test, low self-control was associated with more forms of delinquency than psychopathy and was a stronger independent predictor of chronic self-control. However, Wright and colleagues ^[12] found that the Dark Triad outperformed self-control in predicting violent delinquency, and that the variables significantly interacted. Thus, there is mixed evidence as to the nature of the relationship between self-control, the Dark Triad, and criminal outcomes. Dark Triad of personality might be an equally strong, if not stronger, predictor of antisocial and criminal outcomes.

3. Conclusions

One of the important aims of criminology is to influence the capacity to deter future delinquent and antisocial behavior on the basis of scientific findings that can guide the design of preventive and early intervention strategies among youth. It will be fine if the present study contributes to the incentivization of further research on the self-control and the Dark Triad construct among Southern European youth to deter the development of conduct problems and other related psychosocial problems.

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