



# Everyday sadism, the Dark Triad, personality, and disgust sensitivity



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## ABSTRACT

Research into dark personalities has advocated for the addition of sadism due to its close relationship with other dark traits (Book et al., 2016). Lower disgust for atavistic and animalistic tendencies may provide an objective marker of the greater predatory tendencies and desire for power represented by everyday sadism. In the present study, we explored self-reported personality and disgust traits underlying non-sexual 'everyday' sadism (Buckels, Jones, & Paulhus, 2013). In line with previous research, it was predicted sadism would be negatively correlated with the honesty-humility, agreeableness and emotionality dimensions of the HEXACO, and positively correlated with psychopathy and Machiavellianism from the Dark Triad. As an added dimension, the study also investigated disgust sensitivity's relationship to sadism. A total of 235 participants (66.4% female, 31.1% male; mean age 31.35 years (SD = 13.97 years)) completed an online survey comprising a series of psychometric measures. Results indicated that extraversion, psychopathy, Machiavellianism and animal reminder disgust were significant predictors of sadism scores. Future studies may want to include a measure of disgust sensitivity (including behavioural indices) to investigate its relationship with sadism and the DT.

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## 1. Introduction

The 'Dark Triad' (DT: psychopathy, Machiavellianism and narcissism) assesses subclinical expressions of disagreeable personality traits. Classically, narcissists have a grandiose sense of self and crave positive attention; Machiavellians manipulate social situations; and psychopaths are callous and lack empathy (Paulhus, 2014). Males typically score higher on DT traits than females, regardless of the DT measure used (Furnham, Richards, & Paulhus, 2013). Whilst the DT dimensions are significantly correlated (Egan, Chan, & Shorter, 2014) they are sufficiently separate to merit individual examination (O'Boyle, Forsyth, Banks, & McDaniel, 2012). Self-reported DT ratings are associated with a variety of antisocial behaviours; delinquency and aggression in children (Muris, Meesters, & Timmermans, 2013); aggression in young adults (Barlett, 2016); violence (Pailing, Boon, & Egan, 2014); intimate partner violence (Carton & Egan, 2017); bullying (Baughman, Dearing, Giammarco, & Vernon, 2012); counterproductive work behaviours (O'Boyle et al., 2012); and risky and sensation-seeking activities (Crysel, Crosier, & Webster, 2013).

### 1.1. The Dark Triad and everyday sadism

It has been suggested sadism be added to the DT, forming a Dark Tetrad (Buckels et al., 2013; Chabrol, Van Leeuwen, Rodgers, & Séjourné, 2009). Sadism is the derivation of pleasure from the distress or harm

of others (Baumeister & Campbell, 1999). Research on this topic typically concerns sexual sadism and sadism in sex offenders, as diagnosis of sadism for sex offenders can be a strong indicator for violent sexual and non-sexual reoffending (Eher et al., 2015). Sexual sadism also occurs at subclinical levels, for instance in a preference for BDSM (bondage-discipline, domination-submission, and sadomasochism), a sexual proclivity where individuals gain pleasure from their own or another's pain or enactment of such activity (Hébert & Weaver, 2014; Richters, Visser, Rissel, Grulich, & Smith, 2008). However, not all sadism is sexual. In a sample of violent offenders, though psychopaths were more sadistic than non-psychopaths, violent and sexually violent psychopaths did not significantly differ in sadistic traits (Holt, Meloy, & Strack, 1999). Non-sexual, subclinical sadism has been labelled 'everyday sadism' (Buckels et al., 2013), and reflects cruelty in everyday life, for example watching violence on TV and in films, or taking pleasure from viewing sports combat involving humans and animals (Baumeister & Campbell, 1999). This is seen where higher levels of everyday sadism are correlated with hours spent playing violent video games (Greitemeyer, 2015). Under certain conditions, traits associated with the DT may be adaptive; psychopathic traits enable guilt-free executive decision-making by professions such as lawyers, businessmen and politicians (Mullins-Sweatt, Glover, Derefinco, Miller, & Widiger, 2010); Machiavellianism may be functional in complex social groups (Castille, Buckner, & Thoroughgood, 2016); narcissism may reduce doubts projected onto romantic partners (Foster & Campbell, 2005); and sadism and cruelty may reflect satisfaction with achieving domination, reflecting an evolved mechanism for human predation and power struggles (Nell, 2006).

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## 1.2. Behavioural measures of Dark Tetrad

Justifying expansion of the DT, Buckels et al. (2013) suggest that while DT aggression tends to be context-dependent, sadists want to aggress sufficiently to expend time and resources on the behaviour, regardless of whether there are any obvious benefits. For example, participants scoring high on Dark Tetrad traits will aggress against innocent opponents if the aggression is easy, but only sadists increase the intensity of a white-noise attack for opponents who can't fight back; in this task sadists were also willing to spend more time and energy hurting their opponents in a behavioural (but factitious) "bug-killing" paradigm, finding higher sadism scores associated with choosing to kill insects; sadistic individuals reported more post-task pleasure after having ostensibly killed insects. A study of violent video games found that while exposure to these kinds of games was significantly associated with Machiavellianism and psychopathy, sadism was the best predictor of their use (Greitemeyer, 2015). Lastly, the Dark Tetrad predicts Internet 'trolling' (destructive and purposeless Internet bullying); sadism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism were significantly higher in individuals who reported trolling as their most enjoyable activity on the Internet (Buckels, Trapnell, & Paulhus, 2014).

## 1.3. The Dark Tetrad and personality

The general HEXACO personality model, with domains of honesty-humility, emotionality, extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness and openness to experience (Ashton & Lee, 2009) outperforms other personality measures for capturing the core personalities of the Dark Tetrad (Book, Visser, & Volk, 2015). Central to the Dark Tetrad is the negative pole of the honesty-humility dimension of HEXACO (the trait's positive pole comprising sincerity, fairness, greed avoidance and modesty; Ashton, Lee, & de Vries, 2014). Honesty-humility is consistently negatively associated with Machiavellianism, narcissism and psychopathy (Lee & Ashton, 2005), and more recently sadism (Book et al., 2016), suggesting individuals with higher Dark Tetrad scores are more likely to manipulate and take advantage of others, flaunt their wealth, and consider themselves superior to others (Ashton et al., 2014). Narcissism is significantly correlated with high levels of extraversion and low levels of agreeableness, congruent with the stereotypical view of narcissists as individuals who crave attention and have a strong need for self-enhancement (Campbell & Campbell, 2009). While narcissists can simply be high in self-regard and not otherwise disagreeable (Egan et al., 2014), Machiavellianism and psychopathy are unambiguously associated with low agreeableness, consistent with their shared manipulative and self-serving nature (Furnham et al., 2013). Psychopathy also has elements of low conscientiousness and low emotionality, underpinning the more specifically callous and irresponsible nature of the trait. Finally, low emotionality and low agreeableness are key predictors of sadism, hence sadistic indifference or pleasure at the suffering or pain of others (Baumeister & Campbell, 1999). Similar results are seen in those with sadistic personality disorder (Hagger-Johnson & Egan, 2011).

## 1.4. Disgust sensitivity

Disgust is an evolutionary mechanism that originated as a response to potential contamination and putrefaction, enabling the rejection of foods that might otherwise expose one to illness (Rozin, Haidt, & McCauley, 1999). It has been argued that the disgust system adapted to inform human mate choice and social morality (Tybur, Lieberman, Kurzban, & DeScioli, 2013). Research concerning disgust sensitivity focuses on three main areas: core disgust, animal reminder disgust, and contamination based disgust (Olatunji, Haidt, McKay, & David, 2008). Core disgust reflects the perceived threat of disease through aversive stimuli such as rotting food and vermin (Rozin, Haidt, & McCauley, 2000). Animal reminder disgust results from an aversion to reminders of our animal origin such as our mortality (Olatunji et al., 2008). Finally,

contamination-based disgust emphasizes disgust arising from potential threat of infection, such as using a public bathroom (Olatunji et al., 2008). Disgust sensitivity alters personality traits: as a way of avoiding infectious individuals, individuals primed to become worried about diseases rate themselves as less agreeable, less extraverted and less open to experience (Mortensen, Becker, Ackerman, Neuberg, & Kenrick, 2010).

Previous studies have investigated the relationship between disgust sensitivity and moral hyper-vigilance. Offences of an immoral nature such as child sexual abuse (as well as such offenders) elicit visceral disgust in some individuals (Jones & Fitness, 2008). Individuals who find another person "disgusting" seek to distance themselves from these individuals and offences. In this context, disgust functions as an emotional response that makes an individual feel superior to others who they view with repulsion and disapproval. Disgust sensitivity also has implications on aggressive behaviour: individuals with higher disgust sensitivity are less physically and verbally aggressive (Pond et al., 2012). In essence, disgust is a 'defensive' behaviour, and disgust-display avoidance may denote important aspects of character (Pond et al., 2012; Richman, DeWall, Pond, Lambert, & Fincham, 2014). Moral hyper-vigilance may occur in individuals sensitive to, or disgusted by offences of a moral nature, who, in turn, are less willing to hurt, and emotionally distance themselves from antagonistic others (Pond et al., 2012). To date, there has only been one study of sadism that has included a measure of disgust sensitivity; Buckels et al. (2013), who found sadism unrelated to disgust sensitivity in undergraduates. The relationship between sadism and disgust sensitivity has not been specifically explored in a more general sample, and therefore warrants further investigation.

## 1.5. The present study

In the present study, we sought to replicate and extend the previous study of personality correlates of non-sexual sadism, seeking to identify the highly correlated predictors of this construct. Based on previous research, we predicted that sadism would have a significant positive relationship with psychopathy and Machiavellianism, but, because of its mixed profile, narcissism's influence on these constructs would be reduced (Hypothesis 1; Greitemeyer, 2015; Buckels et al., 2014). Additionally, in line with previous research, it was predicted that sadism scores would be negatively associated with the honesty-humility, agreeableness and emotionality dimensions of the HEXACO (Hypothesis 2; Book et al., 2016; Baumeister & Campbell, 1999). As an additional predictor, disgust sensitivity was used to shed more light on its possible relationship with sadism in the context of moral-hypervigilance (Hypothesis 3; Richman et al., 2014; Pond et al., 2012).

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

G-Power suggested that for a power of 0.15, an error rate of 0.05, and a power of 0.95, a minimum sample size of 186 would be necessary (Faul, Erdfelder, Buchner, & Lang, 2009). A sample of 236 participants (F:M = 156: 73, mean age = 31.35 years (SD = 13.97 years)) completed the survey. The study had ethical approval by the Faculty of Medicine & Health Sciences (FMHS) Research Ethics Committee.

### 2.2. Procedure

All participants were over the age of 18 and recruited via social media sites, such as Facebook and Reddit.com, as well as participant recruitment sites (callforparticipants.com, and Hanover online research). Participants completed the questionnaire through the Bristol Online Survey website (<https://www.onlinesurveys.ac.uk>). Participants filled out a consent form prior to taking part in the study. The study was quantitative and cross-sectional in nature, and the key outcome was self-reported sadism.

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