



# More or less than the sum of its parts? Mapping the Dark Triad of personality onto a single Dark Core



Bianca Bertl<sup>a,b,\*</sup>, Jakob Pietschnig<sup>c</sup>, Ulrich S. Tran<sup>b</sup>, Stefan Stieger<sup>b,d</sup>, Martin Voracek<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> School of Health and Education, Middlesex University Dubai, United Arab Emirates

<sup>b</sup> Department of Basic Psychological Research and Research Methods, Faculty of Psychology, University of Vienna, Austria

<sup>c</sup> Department of Applied Psychology: Health, Development, Enhancement and Intervention, Faculty of Psychology, University of Vienna, Austria

<sup>d</sup> Research Methods, Assessment, and iScience, Department of Psychology, University of Konstanz, Germany

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## ABSTRACT

The Dark Triad of personality has received considerable attention since its introduction to the literature. However, this personality configuration has been assumed to be merely based on observed positive intercorrelations between narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy, whereas the underlying factorial structure has not yet been thoroughly investigated. This study set out to test the factorial structure of the Dark Triad, and further examined one proposed conceptual extension, namely the Dark Tetrad, with trait sadism included. A large, community-based sample ( $N = 2463$ , 56% women, mean age = 41.4 yr.) completed self-report measures of the adverse personality traits narcissism, Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and sadism. Structural equation modelling indicated a better fit for a single latent Dark Core, as compared with assuming the Dark Triad traits as independent constructs. Adding sadism did not improve the explanatory value of the construct. These findings suggest that aversive personalities may best be represented by a single Dark Core of personality.

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## 1. Introduction

Research into antagonistic traits has gained momentum with the introduction of the Dark Triad of Personality in 2002 (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). The Dark Triad has been proposed as an extension of extant personality theories and has attracted considerable attention in the scientific community. As for just one indicator, as of this writing, the above, initial article introducing the Dark Triad concept has been cited >1400 times according to Google Scholar.

The Dark Triad comprises three aversive traits, namely narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism. Narcissism is expressed through exhibitionism, entitlement, and interpersonal exploitation (Raskin & Hall, 1979). Machiavellianism is characterized by emotional coldness, the use of interpersonal strategies to manipulate others, lack of concern with conventional morality, and low ideological commitment (Christie & Geis, 1970). Psychopathy is characterized by callousness, lack of remorse, high impulsivity, and stimulation-seeking (Hare, 1991; Paulhus & Williams, 2002).

The construct of the Dark Triad has been based on the observation that its three constituents (narcissism, Machiavellianism, psychopathy) exhibit moderate positive correlations among each other, but contribute

unique increments of variance explanation vis-à-vis investigated target traits. It thus appears that these traits share common elements as well as specific independent components (Paulhus, 2014; Paulhus & Williams, 2002). In accordance with this idea, research including the Dark Triad traits has revealed differentiated patterns of relations between the three traits and a number of variables of interest (e.g., Furnham, Richards, & Paulhus, 2013; Petrides, Vernon, Schermer, & Veselka, 2011).

In contrast, other researchers have advocated to merge the three traits into a single dimension because of their close relationships, instead of treating them as independent traits (Jakobwitz & Egan, 2006; Jonason, Li, & Teicher, 2010b). Following this rationale, Jonason, Li, Webster, and Schmitt (2009) proposed a composite Dark Triad measure, which aimed to represent such a common Dark Core. Psychometric evidence for the utility and validity of such an approach is still warranted.

Indeed, the incremental validity of the Dark Triad has not yet been satisfactorily established. For instance, it has been argued that psychopathy may sufficiently represent the core of the Dark Triad (Glenn & Sellbom, 2015). According to this idea, most self-report measures of psychopathy also gauge facets of narcissism and Machiavellianism. It has also been argued that Machiavellianism and psychopathy largely comprise identical content, thus representing just different labels for one and the same trait, as originating from separate subdisciplines of psychology (McHoskey, Worzel, & Szyarto, 1998).

\* Corresponding author at: School of Health and Education, Middlesex University Dubai, United Arab Emirates.

E-mail address: [b.bertl@mdx.ac.ae](mailto:b.bertl@mdx.ac.ae) (B. Bertl).

In similar vein, there seems to be no general consensus in the literature regarding the interpretation of narcissism as a dark trait. Rather, narcissism is seen as a trait possessing both adaptive and maladaptive facets (Ackerman et al., 2011). This ambiguity is rooted in the observation that positive associations of narcissism with psychopathy and Machiavellianism have not been unequivocally observed (Lee & Ashton, 2005). However, most researchers seem to stick with the original conceptualization of the Dark Triad as being composed of distinct, but overlapping, constructs. This assumption deserves further evaluation.

As of yet, the factorial structure of the Dark Triad has been examined via a brief measure of the Dark Triad (i.e., the Dirty Dozen scale) and by testing one-factor, bifactor, and hierarchical models (Jonason & Luévano, 2013; Jonason & Webster, 2010). Corresponding evidence suggested that, based on the Dirty Dozen scale, model fit was best for a bifactor model, worse for hierarchical model, and worst for a one-factor solution (Jonason & Luévano, 2013; Jonason & Webster, 2010). However, these results might not be widely generalizable, as criticism has been raised with regards to the psychometric properties of the Dirty Dozen measure (e.g., Miller et al., 2012).

Consequently, although past research oftentimes has interpreted the Dark Triad at face value, presently it seems to be less clear than desired whether the originally postulated structure of three correlated, but distinct, traits adequately describes the dimensionality of the latent construct (or constructs). Arguably, a common Dark Core may represent a more suitable conceptualization of dark personalities. The idea of a Dark Core, as opposed to a Dark Triad, seems plausible, considering strikingly similar correlational patterns of individual Dark Triad traits with the Big Five dimensions, taken as broad measures of personality (e.g., Jakobwitz & Egan, 2006), and with further target traits, including the HEXACO model of personality (Jonason & Kavanagh, 2010; Jonason, Koenig, & Tost, 2010a; Lee & Ashton, 2005).

Interest into other dark personality traits has motivated proposals to extend the Dark Triad by additional aversive traits, in order to enhance the incremental predictive power of the construct. Perhaps most interestingly, moderate positive correlations between Dark Triad traits and trait sadism have led to the idea to extend the construct to a Dark Tetrad of personality (Chabrol, Van Leeuwen, Rodgers, & Séjourné, 2009). Seemingly in line with other antagonistic personality traits, sadistic personalities show cruel behaviors, tend to inflict psychological, sexual, or physical pain on others, and enjoy hurting others.

Initial evidence suggests unique contributions of sadism to variance explanation of cruel behavior, when controlling for the Dark Triad (Buckels, Jones, & Paulhus, 2013). Likewise, a recent study investigating correlational patterns of the Dark Tetrad with personality traits has suggested to include sadism in this framework (Mededović & Petrović, 2015), but the factorial validity of the Dark Tetrad model has yet to be established.

In the light of these apparent inconsistencies and variants of prior related research, the present study addressed three aims: First, we evaluated the Dark Triad as a three-dimensional hierarchical model. Conceptually, this model is directly related to the assumption of the Dark Triad consisting of three overlapping, yet distinct, traits. Second, we investigated the evidence for a Dark Core of personality, as opposed to the commonly assumed three-factor structure of the Dark Triad. Third, we compared model fits of the Dark Triad, the Dark Core, and the Dark Tetrad.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

A sample of 2463 German-speaking volunteers was recruited from the general population, using an age-stratified sampling approach. In all, 56% of participants were women, 40% men, and 4% provided no gender information; 66% of participants were from Austria, 26% from Germany, and 7% from other countries (1% did not provide country

information). Participant age ranged from 14 to 93 yr. ( $M = 41.4$ ,  $SD = 17.2$  yr.).

### 2.2. Procedure

Participants were recruited by students enrolled in research seminars. Potential participants were approached in various public locations and through personal contacts. After participants provided written informed consent, participants were briefed (informed parental consent was obtained for participants younger than 18 yr. of age). Subsequently, participants filled in questionnaires in the below order. Study participation was voluntary and participants were thanked and debriefed after completing the questionnaires.

### 2.3. Materials

#### 2.3.1. Narcissistic personality inventory (NPI-15; Schütz, Marcus, & Sellin, 2004)

The NPI measures narcissism in non-clinical populations. This measure is a short version of the original NPI-40 (Raskin & Hall, 1979) and consists of 15 items. Higher scores indicate higher narcissism. Following recommendations of prior research (Kubarych, Deary, & Austin, 2004), instead of forced-choice categories 6-point scales were used, indicating differential preference for one of two contrasting statements. Sample Cronbach  $\alpha$  was 0.90 and 0.89 for the leadership (adaptive narcissism) and exhibitionism/entitlement (maladaptive narcissism) subscales, and 0.96 for total NPI-15 scores.

#### 2.3.2. Machiavellianism inventory-version IV (MACH-IV; Christie & Geis, 1970)

The MACH-IV assesses Machiavellianism with 20 items. Higher scores indicate higher Machiavellianism. Responses are given on 6-point scales (1: Strongly disagree; 6: Strongly agree). Cronbach  $\alpha$  was 0.68 and 0.54 for the manipulative tactics and cynical worldviews subscales, and 0.75 for total MACH-IV scores. A German translation of the instrument was created via the parallel blind technique (Behling & Law, 2000), i.e., after independent translation by two researchers, translation drafts were compared and differences therein discussed and resolved. The same procedure was used to translate the SRP-III and the SSIS (see below).

#### 2.3.3. The self-report psychopathy scale-III (SRP-III; Hare, 1991)

The SRP-III measures psychopathy in non-clinical populations with 31 items. Higher scores indicate higher psychopathy. Responses are given on 5-point scales (1: Strongly disagree; 5: Strongly agree). Cronbach  $\alpha$  was 0.64, 0.14, 0.81, and 0.73 for the manipulation, callousness, erratic lifestyle, and antisocial behavior subscales, and 0.86 for total SRP-III scores.

#### 2.3.4. The short sadistic impulse scale (SSIS; O'Meara, Davies, & Hammond, 2011)

The SSIS measures sadistic tendencies in non-clinical populations. Higher scores indicate higher sadism. Responses are given on 6-point scales (1: Strongly disagree; 6: Strongly agree). Internal scale consistency was  $\alpha = 0.72$ .

### 2.4. Analysis

Univariate statistical analyses were performed using SPSS 21, and structural equation models were run in MPlus (Muthén & Muthén, 2015). MLMV (maximum likelihood estimator, mean- and variance-adjusted) and WLSMV (weighted least-squares means and variance) estimators were used for examining model fit of the structural equation models. The MLMV is a mean- and variance-adjusted  $\chi^2$  test statistic and robust to non-normality (Brown, 2006). Because univariate normality assumptions of variables were not met, we assumed multivariate

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