



# Which personality traits are related to traditional bullying and cyberbullying? A study with the Big Five, Dark Triad and sadism



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## ABSTRACT

Studies have shown that both Big Five and Dark Triad (Machiavellianism, narcissism, psychopathy) personality traits are related to traditional bullying and cyberbullying behaviors in adolescents as well as in adults. Increasingly, scholars call for sadism as an addition to the Dark Triad in the study of antisocial and delinquent behaviors. In the current study we analyze whether the Big Five, Dark Triad and sadism predict traditional bullying and cyberbullying. The sample consisted of 1568 participants (61.9% female), ranging in age from 16 to 21 years. Using hierarchical linear regression analyses, controlling for age and gender, it was found that agreeableness, Machiavellianism, psychopathy and sadism were significantly related to traditional bullying, and agreeableness and sadism were related to cyberbullying. Taken together, the results more firmly establish that sadism could be a predictor of antisocial behaviors, by establishing its relations with bullying and cyberbullying.

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## 1. Introduction

Bullying is a subtype of aggressive behavior wherein a relatively powerful perpetrator repeatedly harasses a weaker victim, in a physical, relational or verbal manner (Olweus, 1994). A recent study conducted in 79 countries found that about 30% of adolescents experienced victimization from bullying (Elgar et al., 2015). Such victimization is related to psychosomatic symptoms (Gini & Pozzoli, 2013), internalizing and externalizing problems (Reijntjes, Kamphuis, Prinzie, & Telch, 2010; Reijntjes et al., 2011), sleeping problems (Van Geel, Goemans, & Vedder, 2016), and suicidality (Holt et al., 2015). Negative effects are not restricted to the victims of bullying; perpetrators have been found to smoke more and drink more alcohol (Nansel et al., 2001), and to be more likely to carry a weapon than uninvolved children (Van Geel, Vedder, & Tanilon, 2014a). Cyberbullying, a form of bullying wherein the perpetrator uses digital means such as internet or mobile telephones, has more recently attracted the attention of researchers. The effects of cyberbullying may be just as negative (Kowalski, Giumetti, Schroeder, & Lattanner, 2014), or potentially worse (Van Geel, Vedder, & Tanilon, 2014b) for victims than the results of traditional bullying. Perpetration of cyberbullying is related to higher rates of depression, anxiety, and alcohol use (Kowalski et al., 2014). Personality researchers have explained and studied potential individual difference variables as contributors to both traditional bullying and cyberbullying in past literature (Goodboy & Martin, 2015; Mitsopoulou & Giovazolias, 2015;

Sutton & Keogh, 2000). In the current article we analyze how Big Five and Dark Triad personality traits, and sadism are related to the perpetration of traditional bullying and cyberbullying.

Several studies have examined the relation of Big Five personality traits to bullying. The Big Five includes the personality traits extraversion (talkative, assertive, gregarious), neuroticism (emotionally unstable, anxious, worrisome, insecure), agreeableness (good-natured, forgiving, tolerant) conscientiousness (careful, thorough, organized, dependable) and openness to experience (imaginative, curious, artistic) (Barrick & Mount, 1991). A meta-analysis on Big Five traits and traditional bullying points out that particularly lower scores on agreeableness are related to bullying perpetration. Bullying perpetration was also found to be related to lower scores on openness and conscientiousness, and higher scores on extraversion and neuroticism, though effect sizes for these personality traits were small (Mitsopoulou & Giovazolias, 2015). Research on cyberbullies and Big Five personality traits is scarcer, but it has been found that more cyberbullying corresponds to higher scores on extraversion, and lower scores on agreeableness and conscientiousness (Festl & Quandt, 2013). Given the scarcity of available research, the link between cyberbullying and Big Five personality constructs should be further examined.

A second set of personality constructs that has been connected to bullying and cyberbullying is the Dark Triad. The Dark Triad consists of three related but independent personality traits, namely Machiavellianism, narcissism and psychopathy (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Machiavellianism refers to interpersonal strategies that advocate coldness, deceit, calculation and manipulation to achieve goals. Narcissism can be seen as a pathological form of self-love, characterized by feelings of grandiosity, entitlement, dominance and superiority. Psychopathy

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refers to low feelings of empathy, thrill seeking and fearlessness (Jakobwitz & Egan, 2006; Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Studies on adults have found Dark Triad traits related to workplace bullying (Baughman, Dearing, Giammarco, & Vernon, 2012). For youth Machiavellianism (Andreou, 2004; Sutton & Keogh, 2000), narcissism (Fanti & Kimonis, 2012; Reijntjes et al., 2016; Stellwagen & Kerig, 2013), and psychopathy (Fanti & Kimonis, 2012; Ragatz, Anderson, Fremouw, & Schwartz, 2011) have all been found related to traditional bullying behaviors. A study on cyberbullying and the Dark Triad found that only psychopathy was uniquely related to cyberbullying (Goodboy & Martin, 2015). A study on the broader construct of cyber-aggression and the Dark Triad similarly found that only psychopathy was uniquely related to cyber-aggression (Pabian, De Backer, & Vandebosch, 2015).

Increasingly, research suggests that the Dark Triad should be expanded to a Dark Tetrad, by adding the trait sadism (Buckels, Trapnell, & Paulhus, 2014; Chabrol, Van Leeuwen, Rodgers, & Séjourné, 2009). Sadism can be defined as the tendency to take pleasure in the suffering of others, and it has been found a construct distinct from the Dark Triad (Chabrol et al., 2009). Sadism may uniquely predict antisocial behavior because over and above callousness towards the suffering of others (i.e., psychopathy), calculated aggression (i.e., Machiavellianism), or lashing out because of a threatened ego (i.e., narcissism), sadists would simply enjoy the suffering of others (Buckels, Jones, & Paulhus, 2013; Paulhus, 2014). In line with this, sadism has been found uniquely related to internet trolling (Buckels et al., 2014), the willingness to hurt innocent people (Buckels et al., 2013), and juvenile delinquency (Chabrol et al., 2009) when Dark Triad traits were controlled for in the analyses. Furthermore, sadism was related to violent video game preferences when Big Five personality traits were controlled for (Greitemeyer, 2015). No empirical studies exist on the relation between bullying and sadism, but in a qualitative study with eight and nine year old children, the children suggested that sadism was a driving factor behind bullying behaviors (Bosacki, Marini, & Dane, 2006), and given recent studies showing unique explained variance of sadism over the Dark Triad, a study on the relations between sadism, traditional bullying and cyberbullying is warranted.

The purpose of the current study is to analyze the relations between Big Five traits, the Dark Triad, and sadism and traditional bullying and cyberbullying in a large sample of late adolescents and emerging adults. Based on the meta-analysis by Mitsopoulou and Giovazolias (2015) we hypothesize that agreeableness negatively predicts traditional bullying. Based on the study by Festl and Quandt (2013) we hypothesize that extraversion positively predicts cyberbullying, and that agreeableness and conscientiousness negatively predict cyberbullying. Based on earlier studies we hypothesize that Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy positively predict traditional bullying (Andreou, 2004; Reijntjes et al., 2016; Stellwagen & Kerig, 2013), and that psychopathy positively predicts cyberbullying (Goodboy & Martin, 2015). There are no previous studies on sadism and traditional bullying or cyberbullying, but because sadism is related to the willingness to hurt innocent people (Buckels et al., 2013), we expect that sadism positively predicts traditional bullying and cyberbullying when Big Five and Dark Triad traits are controlled for.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

Senior vocational high schools were invited to participate in a study about personality and bullying using a purposive sampling approach. A total of 17 senior vocational high schools agreed to participate. In consenting schools, students were asked to complete a questionnaire. The sample consisted of 1568 participants (61.9% female), ranging in age from 16 to 21 years ( $M = 17.58$ ,  $SD = 1.39$ ). The majority (90.7%) of the participating students were born in the Netherlands. Only 1.1%

of all data was missing; we used listwise deletion to deal with missing data (Allison, 2002).

### 2.2. Measures

For the current study the originally English Dark Triad, sadism, traditional bullying and cyberbullying scales were translated to Dutch by using a translation back translation protocol. Three researchers with good Dutch and English language proficiency translated the scale from English to Dutch independent of one another and then selected the best translations together. Three other researchers with good language proficiency in Dutch and English back-translated the selected Dutch items to English independent of one another, and then selected the best English translations of the Dutch items. The back-translation was done by researchers who had not seen the original questionnaire. A researcher, who did not participate in the translation efforts, compared the back-translation and the original scale and judged them sufficiently similar.

#### 2.2.1. Traditional bullying

The Bullying Participant Role Questionnaire (Summers, Demaray, & Becker, 2010) was used to measure traditional bullying. The bullying scale contains 12 items. Respondents were asked to answer these items for the past 30 days, and items were answered on a five-point scale ranging from “never” to “seven times or more.”

#### 2.2.2. Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying was measured with the European Cyberbullying Intervention Project Questionnaire (Del Rey et al., 2015). The cyberbullying perpetration scale consists of 11 items answered on a five-point scale ranging from “never” to “7 times or more” during the last 30 days.

#### 2.2.3. Big Five

The Big Five Inventory (BFI) measures extraversion, neuroticism, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness (Denissen, Geenen, Van Aken, Gosling, & Potter, 2008; John & Srivastava, 1999). It has 44 items answered on a five-point scale ranging from “completely disagree” to “completely agree”.

#### 2.2.4. Dark Triad

The Short Dark Triad Questionnaire (Jones & Paulhus, 2014) measures the so called Dark Triad of personality consisting of Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy. Each of the three subscales consists of nine items answered on a five-point scale ranging from “completely disagree” to “completely agree.”

#### 2.2.5. Sadism

To measure sadism the Varieties of Sadistic Tendencies Scale (VAST) was used (Paulhus & Jones, 2014). The VAST consists of 13 items that measure direct (enjoyment derived from hurting or humiliating others) and indirect (enjoyment derived from witnessing other peoples' suffering) sadism. Items are answered on a five-point scale ranging from “completely disagree” to “completely agree.”

### 2.3. Procedure

Senior vocational high schools in the western part of the Netherlands were invited to participate in a survey about bullying and personality. Prior to the data collection research assistants were trained in the administration of the questionnaires. The questionnaires were administered during school hours under the supervision of two research assistants and a teacher. Prior to participation, all participating students signed a letter consent wherein students were informed that participation was voluntary and anonymous. On the first page of the questionnaire, we provided students with the HBSC definition of bullying

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