



## “I’ll teach you differences”: Taxometric analysis of the Dark Triad, trait sadism, and the Dark Core of personality

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### ABSTRACT

The Dark Triad of personality (Machiavellianism, narcissism, psychopathy) is widely considered conceptually important for individual differences research into personality and interpersonal behavior. Recent research suggests to add trait sadism to its defining constructs (i.e., to form a Dark Tetrad), and that a single common dimension (the Dark Core) underlies these dark personality traits. Taxometric studies suggest the Dark Triad traits are dimensional (i.e., quantitative), but investigations on the facet level are lacking and sex differences in dark personality traits have not been considered. Utilizing widely-used scales, this study investigated the Dark Triad traits, sadism, as well as the Dark Core of personality, with taxometric methods on both the aggregate and facet level and separately among men and women (total  $N = 2463$ , 56% women, mean age: 41.4 years). Dark personality traits mostly were dimensional, on both the aggregate and the facet level, and for both sexes. The Dark Core appeared to be taxonic among men, but dimensional among women. Taxon members were characterized by uniformly elevated dark personality traits and younger age. Future studies might profitably investigate the incremental predictive validity of this identified taxon and focus on further sex differences in dark personality traits.

### 1. Introduction

The Dark Triad of Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy is a concept aiming to define, measure, and describe antagonistic and malevolent personality traits in a unified model. Since its introduction (Paulhus & Williams, 2002), research into the Dark Triad has produced numerous results, suggesting that the Dark Triad traits are widely important for interpersonal behavior, ranging from jealousy in romantic relationships (Barelds, Dijkstra, Groothof, & Pastoor, 2017) to workplace behavior (O’Boyle, Forsyth, Banks, & McDaniel, 2012).

The Dark Triad traits are strongly positively interrelated and large amounts of their variance may be explained by the Five-Factor model of personality and the HEXACO factor of honesty-humility (Muris, Merckelbach, Otgaar, & Meijer, 2017; O’Boyle, Forsyth, Banks, Story, & White, 2015; Vize, Lynam, Collison, & Miller, 2016). Newer models therefore propose a single common factor (the Dark Core) to underlie Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy (Jakobwitz & Egan, 2006; Jonason, Li, & Teicher, 2010) which may have its roots in

manipulation-callousness (Jones & Figueredo, 2013) or low honesty-humility (Book, Visser, & Volk, 2015). Further, there is correlational (Book et al., 2016) and psychometric evidence (Bertl, Pietschnig, Tran, Stieger, & Voracek, 2017) that a Dark Core of personality may also accommodate, and account for, further related constructs, such as trait sadism (i.e., forming a Dark Tetrad; Chabrol, Van Leeuwen, Rodgers, & Séjourné, 2009). Trait sadism is an independent construct, showing incremental validity over and above the Dark Triad in predicting maladaptive behaviors (Plouffe, Smith, & Saklofske, 2018).

Naturally, studies in this field of research are interested in individual differences in the Dark Triad traits. However, in this context, it is important to note that not all differences are alike: in a way, there are differences in differences, or different differences (of degree, vs. of kind), as poetically alluded to in the Earl of Kent’s dictum “I’ll teach you differences” in Shakespeare’s *King Lear* (Act 1, Scene 4). Correlational and variable-centered research treats the Dark Triad traits as dimensional/quantitative constructs. Person-centered research treats them as categorical/qualitative constructs, applying median-splits or cut-offs to

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delineate groups of qualitatively different individuals (for examples, see Beller & Bosse, 2017). These different approaches beg the question which might be the more valid and therefore should be adopted more generally in future research.

Taxometric analysis (Meehl & Yonce, 1994; Waller & Meehl, 1998) is one widely-used means to investigate the nature of individual differences in latent traits. Utilizing taxometric procedures, Beller and Bosse (2017) recently provided evidence that Machiavellianism might be a dimensional trait; i.e., although individuals differ in the degree they manipulate, control, and exploit others to further their own goals, there is no identifiable threshold that reliably delineates ‘Machs’ (the taxon) from ‘non-Machs’ (this taxon’s complement). Similar evidence is available for narcissism (Foster & Campbell, 2007) and psychopathy (e.g., Walters, 2014).

However, none of these preceding taxometric studies has considered and examined the known sex differences in dark personality traits (Walters, 2014, examined an all-male sample): men exceed women in all Dark Triad traits (meta-analysis: Muris et al., 2017) and trait sadism (Jonason, Zeigler-Hill, & Okan, 2017). Although not much investigated, the dark personality traits and their correlates may manifest differently among men and women (Muris et al., 2017). Taxometric analysis compares individuals from different score regions and searches for cut-points that delineate groups of qualitatively different individuals (see Method section). Merging groups with known mean differences (i.e., men and women) in a single taxometric analysis might therefore lead to biased or erroneous results (Grove, 1991). This may hide, or indicate, a cut-point in the merged distribution that might be detectable, or might not exist, in the individual distributions. Also, studies so far have examined the Dark Triad traits exclusively on the aggregate level (scales), not on the facet level (subscales). All Dark Triad traits exhibit such an internal, lower-level, structure (e.g., narcissism comprises adaptive vs. maladaptive components; Ackerman et al., 2011). In addition, so far there has been no taxometric examination of the latent status of the Dark Core itself.

Addressing these research gaps identified above, the present study examined the latent status of the Dark Triad traits, trait sadism, and the Dark Core of personality itself with taxometric methods. We utilized widely-used scales and provide total-sample results, as well as results for men and women separately. Further, the dark personality traits were examined on both the aggregate and the facet level. Our results provide a deeper insight into the latent status of the Dark Triad traits and the Dark Core among men and women and may therefore inform both theory and the development of adequate measurement methods in this field of research.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants and procedure

Data of 2463 German-speaking volunteers (56% women, 40% men, 4% no information; ages ranging from 14 to 93 years,  $M = 41.4$ ,  $SD = 17.2$  years) were used for this study. Data of this community-based (general population) sample have been used in Bertl et al. (2017) for structural analyses of the Dark Core of personality. The sampling frame followed an age-stratified approach. Study participation was voluntary, and participants provided written informed consent. For participants younger than 18 years of age, informed parental consent was obtained. Scales were administered in the following order: NPI-15, MACH-IV, SRP-III, and SSIS.

### 2.2. Materials

German translations of the MACH-IV, SRP-III, and SSIS (see below) were created with the parallel blind technique (Behling & Law, 2000). Sample reliabilities (see Analysis section) for all scales and subscales are reported in Table 1. For all scales, higher scores indicate higher trait

expression.

#### 2.2.1. Machiavellianism Inventory-Version IV (MACH-IV; Christie & Geis, 1970)

Machiavellianism was assessed with the MACH-IV, consisting of 20 items on 6-point scales (1: strongly disagree; 6: strongly agree). Its subscales manipulative tactics and cynical worldviews consist of 9 items each. The remaining 2 items nominally form a third subscale (‘abstract morality’). However, they are psychometrically not very informative and the psychometric evidence for such a third subscale is mixed (Rauthmann, 2013). Therefore, these 2 items were used only in total score calculations.

#### 2.2.2. Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI-15; Schütz, Marcus, & Sellin, 2004)

The NPI-15 is a 15-item short version of the NPI-40 (Raskin & Hall, 1979). Its item composition covers part of the leadership (adaptive narcissism; 8 items) and exhibitionism (maladaptive narcissism; 3 items) subscales that have been devised by Ackerman et al. (2011) for the NPI-40. The remaining 4 items are not part of these subscales and were used only in total score calculations. In the present study, 6-point scales (1: strongly disagree; 6: strongly agree) were used instead of forced-choice categories, following prior recommendations (Kubarych, Deary, & Austin, 2004).

#### 2.2.3. The Self-Report Psychopathy Scale-III (SRP-III; Paulhus, Neumann, & Hare, 2016)

Psychopathy was assessed with the SRP-III, which consists of 31 items on 5-point scales (1: strongly disagree; 5: strongly agree). Its subscales manipulation, callousness, erratic lifestyle, and antisocial behavior consist of 7, 5, 9, and 10 items, respectively.

#### 2.2.4. The Short Sadistic Impulse Scale (SSIS; O’Meara, Davies, & Hammond, 2011)

Sadistic tendencies were assessed with the SSIS, which consists of 10 items on 6-point scales (1: strongly disagree; 6: strongly agree).

## 2.3. Analysis

### 2.3.1. Taxometric analysis

The taxometric procedures MAMBAC, MAXEIG, and L-Mode (Meehl & Yonce, 1994; Waller & Meehl, 1998; see also Ruscio, Carney, Dever, Pliskin, & Wang, 2017) were applied as in Beller and Bosse (2017), using software devised by Ruscio (2014) in R.

MAMBAC (Mean Above Minus Below A Cut) and MAXEIG (MAXimum EIGenvalue) each use the indicators as input and output variables in a round-robin fashion. MAMBAC plots for all pairs of input and output variables the mean difference in each output variable for 50 evenly-spaced sliding cuts on each input variable. MAXEIG assigns one indicator as input variable and uses the other indicators as output variables. It then plots the first eigenvalue of the variance-covariance matrix (with the diagonal set to zero) of the output variables for 25 overlapping windows on the ordered values of the input variable. The existence of qualitatively different groups of individuals is indicated by large indicator mean differences between these groups in MAMBAC, and a lessening of the strength of inter-relations of indicators within groups as compared to between groups in MAXEIG. Evidence of a prototypical categorical trait is thus provided by a peak in the averaged MAMBAC and MAXEIG curves, whose location indicates the score optimally separating the taxon from its complement. Prototypically dimensional traits exhibit a concave (MAMBAC) or much flatter (MAXEIG) averaged curve.

L-Mode (Latent-Mode) performs a principal-axis factor analysis on all indicators, extracting factor scores for the first factor according to Bartlett’s (1937) method. L-Mode plots the density of the distribution of these factor scores. Prototypically categorical traits exhibit a bimodal

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