

DARK PERSONALITY FEATURES AND EMOTION DYSREGULATION

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Previous reports have painted a complex picture of the associations between dark personality features and emotion dysregulation. To provide a more comprehensive picture, 532 college students completed measures of dark personality features—the Dark Triad (i.e., narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism), sadism, and spitefulness—and emotion dysregulation. We found that the grandiose and leadership facets of narcissism were negatively associated with various aspects of emotion dysregulation. In contrast, spitefulness, the callous aspect of psychopathy, and Machiavellianism were positively associated with some aspects of emotion dysregulation. Sadism was not associated with emotion dysregulation. The implications of these results for the understanding of dark personality features are discussed.

Keywords: Dark Triad, Narcissism, Psychopathy, Machiavellianism, Sadism, Spite, Emotion Regulation

The darker aspects of personality have received considerable attention during the past decade (see Zeigler-Hill & Marcus, in press, for a review). This empirical interest has been driven, at least in part, by advancements in the conceptualization and measurement of these features. The most often studied dark personality features are narcissism (characterized by entitlement, superiority, and dominance), psychopathy (characterized by callousness, impulsivity, and interpersonal antagonism), and Machiavellianism (characterized by charm and manipulativeness; Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Paulhus

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and Williams (2002) argued that these *Dark Triad* traits are distinct constructs and that their core darkness stems from shared characteristics such as disagreeableness, callousness, deceitfulness, egocentrism, a tendency to manipulate others, and a lack of empathy. The Dark Triad traits have been found to predict a wide array of behaviors and interpersonal tendencies (e.g., resource-control strategies, pursuit of short-term mating opportunities; see Furnham, Richards, & Paulhus, 2013).

We were interested in examining the associations that the Dark Triad traits had with emotion dysregulation to clarify the conflicting results of previous studies. Emotion dysregulation reflects various problematic ways in which individuals experience and respond to emotional states (Werner & Gross, 2010) and may involve a lack of acceptance of one's own emotional experiences, difficulties performing tasks or controlling impulses when upset, a lack of awareness or understanding of one's own emotions, or limited strategies for regulating emotions (Gratz & Roemer, 2004). Managing the emotions of others has been found to be positively associated with the Dark Triad personality traits (e.g., Austin, Saklofske, Smith, & Tohver, 2014) which suggests that individuals with high levels of Dark Triad traits should not experience difficulty with emotion dysregulation. However, the Dark Triad traits—especially narcissism and psychopathy—have been linked with difficulties in regulating emotional experiences following negative events (e.g., Harenski & Kiehl, 2010; Rhodewalt & Morf, 1998) and with deficits in the emotional—but not the cognitive—aspects of empathy (Wai & Tiliopoulos, 2012) suggesting that individuals with dark personality features are able to identify the emotional experiences of others even though they do not experience emotional discomfort when exposed to the suffering of others. Wai and Tiliopoulos (2012) argue that this lack of emotional responsivity may allow individuals with high levels of the Dark Triad traits to manipulate and exploit others with relatively little concern for the consequences of their behaviors.

Despite the considerable attention that has been directed toward the Dark Triad in recent years, it is extremely unlikely that there are only three dark personality features (Zeigler-Hill & Marcus, in press). For example, Buckels, Jones, and Paulhus (2013) have recently argued that the Dark Triad should be expanded to include sadism (characterized by enjoying the suffering of others) as part of the newly-christened Dark Tetrad. Although individual differences in sadistic tendencies have been largely ignored (except for those

aspects of sadism that are directly tied to sexual fetishes or criminal behavior), a body of research is quickly accumulating that demonstrates that sadism is connected with effortful aggression (Buckels et al., 2013), interpersonal style (Southard, Noser, Pollock, Mercer, & Zeigler-Hill, 2015), and internet trolling (i.e., engaging in deceptive, destructive, or disruptive behaviors in online forums without any direct benefit; Buckels, Trapnell, & Paulhus, 2014).

Another dark personality feature that has received attention in recent years is spitefulness, which refers to the willingness of an individual to incur a cost in order to inflict harm on another person. Spitefulness has been found to be associated with the Dark Triad (Marcus, Zeigler-Hill, Mercer, & Norris, 2014) as well as aggression (Marcus et al., 2014), a hostile interpersonal style (Southard et al., 2015), low levels of guilt (Marcus et al., 2014), and a lack of concern for the well-being and rights of others (Zeigler-Hill, Noser, Roof, Vonk, & Marcus, 2015).

OVERVIEW AND PREDICTIONS

We focused on the three most frequently examined dark personality features (i.e., narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism) along with sadism and spitefulness because they have the potential to make important contributions to our understanding of emotion dysregulation. Unlike many studies concerning the Dark Triad, we acknowledged the multifaceted nature of narcissism and psychopathy by examining the specific facets of those constructs. We predicted that the relatively beneficial aspects of narcissism (e.g., those concerning a desire for leadership and authority) would be negatively associated with emotion dysregulation which is consistent with previous research showing that the grandiose aspects of narcissism are positively associated with emotional stability and positive affect (Egan, Chan, & Shorter, 2014) as well as emotional intelligence (Vonk, Zeigler-Hill, Mayhew, & Mercer, 2013). In contrast, we expected the aspects of narcissism that reflect feelings of entitlement and a willingness to exploit others to be positively associated with emotion dysregulation which is consistent with the finding that narcissism is a significant predictor of negative emotions and aggression after experiencing failure (Stucke & Sporer, 2002).

We expected the callousness facet of psychopathy to be positively associated with a lack of emotional awareness. This prediction is con-

sistent with previous results showing that Factor 1 psychopathy—which captures callousness—is positively associated with emotion dysregulation (Miller et al., 2010), as well as a large body of research demonstrating that individuals with high levels of Factor 1 psychopathy often have difficulty processing certain emotional experiences such as fear (see Marsh, 2013, for a review). Additionally, psychopathy is characterized by high levels of aggression in response to frustration (Harenski & Kiehl, 2010). Psychopathy has also been found to be associated with atypical responding in the fronto-temporo-limbic system (an area of the brain responsible for emotion processing and cognitive regulation; Blair, 2008; Calzada-Reyes, Avarez-Amador, Galan-Garcia, & Valdes-Sosa, 2013) and the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex (a brain region that is critical for the regulatory control of impulses and emotion; Hoppenbrouwers et al., 2013).

Machiavellianism concerns behaviors that are deliberate and strategic so we did not anticipate that it would be associated with the impulsive aspects of emotion dysregulation. However, individuals with high levels of Machiavellianism are often willing to use whatever means are necessary to achieve their goals, which suggests the possibility that these individuals may have limited access to their own emotional states. That is, lack of awareness of their own emotional states may allow individuals with high levels of Machiavellianism to exploit and manipulate others (Wai & Tiliopoulos, 2012).

Finally, we expected sadism and spitefulness to have positive associations with various aspects of emotion dysregulation because some individuals may behave sadistically or spitefully due to difficulty controlling their emotional responses. We expected both sadism and spitefulness to be positively associated with impulse control difficulties consistent with the finding that spiteful behavior often emerges in response to a perceived provocation (e.g., a spiteful individual may hit his brakes when driving because he believes the car behind him is tailgating him).

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS AND PROCEDURE

Participants were 532 undergraduates (118 men, 414 women) at a university in the Midwestern United States who were enrolled in psychology courses and participated in return for research credits.

Participants completed measures of dark personality features and emotion dysregulation—along with other measures that are not relevant to the present study (e.g., self-esteem level)—via a secure website. The mean age of the participants was 20.18 years ($SD = 3.94$) and their racial/ethnic composition was 78% White, 7% Black, 5% Asian, 4% Hispanic, and 6% other.

MEASURES

Narcissism. We used the 40-item version of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Hall, 1979). Items on the NPI are presented in a forced-choice format such that participants must choose between a narcissistic and a nonnarcissistic statement for each item (e.g., “I like having authority over other people” or “I don’t mind following orders”). We separated responses into the three facets suggested by Ackerman et al. (2011): leadership/authority (11 items; e.g., I am a born leader; $\alpha = .79$), grandiose exhibitionism (10 items; e.g., I really like to be the center of attention; $\alpha = .76$), and exploitation/entitlement (4 items; e.g., I will never be satisfied until I get all that I deserve; $\alpha = .47$). The poor internal consistency for the exploitation/entitlement facet of the NPI is not unusual for this particular subscale (Ackerman et al., 2011) and may be due, at least in part, to the relatively small number of items comprising this subscale.

Psychopathy. Psychopathy was measured via the Self-Report Psychopathy Scale (SRP-III; Mahmut, Menictas, Stevenson, & Homewood, 2011; Paulhus, Hemphill, & Hare, 2012). The SRP-III is intended to serve as a measure of psychopathy in noncriminal samples. This version of the SRP-III consists of 34 items and contains four subscales including callous affect (8 items; e.g., I am often rude to people; $\alpha = .74$), erratic behavior (8 items; e.g., I’m a rebellious person; $\alpha = .78$), interpersonal manipulation (8 items; e.g., I find it easy to manipulate people; $\alpha = .70$), and criminal tendencies (10 items; e.g., Been arrested; $\alpha = .82$). Participants indicated their level of agreement with each statement using scales ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).

Machiavellianism. Machiavellianism was assessed via the Mach-IV (Christie & Geis, 1970). The Mach-IV consists of 20 items ($\alpha = .73$) and was developed to measure manipulative and deceitful tendencies as well as cynical and immoral beliefs. Participants rated their level of agreement with each item (e.g., Anyone who completely

trusts anyone else is asking for trouble) using scales ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).

Sadism. Sadism was assessed via the Short Sadistic Impulse Scale (SSIS; O'Meara, Davis, & Hammond, 2011), which consists of 10 items ($\alpha = .70$) intended to measure the tendency to enjoy hurting others (e.g., I have hurt people for my own enjoyment). Participants responded to each item by selecting either Unlike me or Like me.

Spitefulness. Spitefulness was assessed with the Spitefulness Scale (Marcus et al., 2014), which is a 17-item instrument designed to measure the willingness of a participant to engage in behaviors that would harm another at some cost to oneself (e.g., I would be willing to take a punch if it meant that someone I did not like would receive two punches). Participants were asked to rate their level of agreement with the items using scales that ranged from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). The Spitefulness Scale has been shown to possess adequate psychometric properties (e.g., Marcus et al., 2014) and the internal consistency for this instrument was .90 in the present study.

Emotion Dysregulation. Emotion dysregulation was measured using the Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale (DERS; Gratz & Roemer, 2004). The DERS consists of 36 items and contains six subscales including nonacceptance of emotional responses (6 items; e.g., When I'm upset, I become embarrassed for feeling that way; $\alpha = .90$), difficulties engaging in goal-directed behavior (5 items; e.g., When I'm upset, I have difficulty focusing on other things; $\alpha = .86$), impulse control difficulties (6 items; e.g., When I'm upset, I have difficulty controlling my behaviors; $\alpha = .87$), lack of emotional awareness (6 items; e.g., I pay attention to how I feel; $\alpha = .82$), limited access to emotion regulation strategies (8 items; e.g., When I'm upset, I believe that I will remain that way for a long time; $\alpha = .90$), and lack of emotional clarity (5 items; e.g., I have no idea how I am feeling; $\alpha = .79$). Participants indicated their level of agreement with each statement using scales ranging from 1 (Almost Never) to 5 (Almost Always).

RESULTS

We used path analysis to examine the unique associations that dark personality features had with aspects of emotion dysregulation.

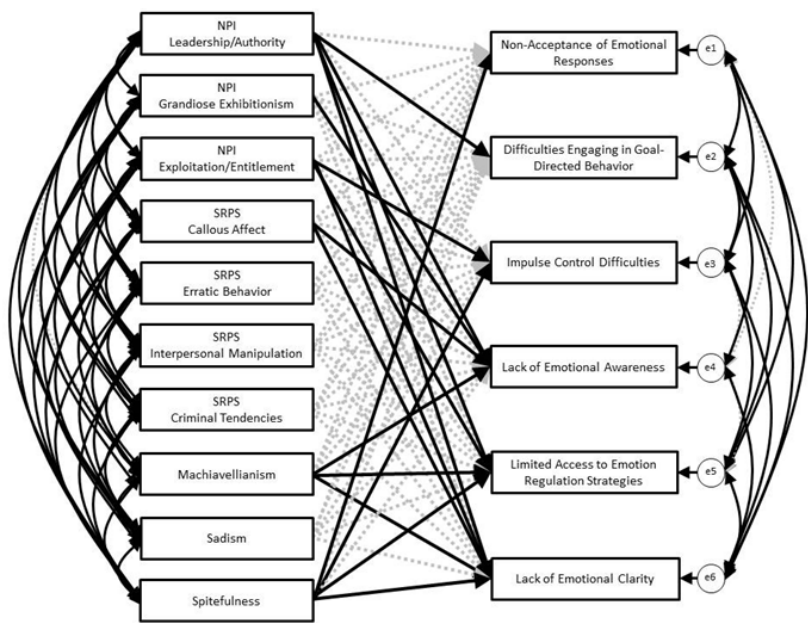


FIGURE 1. Path model of the associations that dark personality features had with emotion dysregulation. Note. Rectangles indicate measured variables and circles indicate disturbance terms. The significant associations are indicated by solid black arrows and nonsignificant associations are indicated by dashed grey arrows. The significant correlations among the predictor variables (i.e., dark personality features) and outcome variables (i.e., dimensions of emotion dysregulation) are indicated by solid curved bidirectional arrows and nonsignificant correlations are represented by dashed curved bidirectional arrows.

The model is displayed in Figure 1 and the standardized path coefficients are presented in Table 1. NPI leadership/authority was negatively associated with non-acceptance of emotional responses ($\beta = -.11, p = .02$), difficulties engaging in goal-directed behavior ($\beta = -.23, p < .001$), limited access to emotion regulation strategies ($\beta = -.16, p < .001$), and a lack of emotional clarity ($\beta = -.22, p < .001$). The associations that NPI leadership/authority had with difficulties engaging in goal-directed behavior and lack of emotional clarity were stronger than its associations with nonacceptance of emotional responses and limited access to emotion regulation strategies (z s $> 1.76, p$ s $< .04$). NPI grandiose exhibitionism was negatively associated with a lack of emotional awareness ($\beta = -.12, p = .01$). NPI exploitation/entitlement was positively associated with impulse control

TABLE 1. Standardized Path Coefficients

	Non-Acceptance of Emotional Responses	Difficulties Engaging in Goal-Directed Behavior	Impulse Control Difficulties	Lack of Emotional Awareness	Limited Access to Emotion Regulation Strategies	Lack of Emotional Clarity
NPI Leadership/Authority	-.11*	-.23***	-.04	-.10	-.16***	-.22***
NPI Grandiose Exhibitionism	-.08	.06	.00	-.12**	-.06	-.09
NPI Exploitation/Entitlement	.09	.08	.13**	.00	.18***	.09
SRPS Callous Affect	-.07	-.05	.09	.26***	.00	.12*
SRPS Erratic Behavior	.04	-.03	-.10	-.10	-.01	.02
SRPS Interpersonal Manipulation	.03	-.06	.01	.05	-.02	.03
SRPS Criminal Tendencies	.07	.10	.10	-.07	.10	.06
Machiavellianism	.05	.10	.07	.18***	.11*	.13**
Sadism	.01	.01	.08	-.07	.03	.00
Spitefulness	.24***	.04	.25***	.09	.22***	.12*

Note. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

difficulties ($\beta = .13, p < .01$) and limited access to emotion regulation strategies ($\beta = .18, p < .001$). The association that NPI exploitation/entitlement had with limited access to emotion regulation strategies was not significantly stronger than its association with impulse control difficulties ($z = 1.25, p = .11$). SRPS callous affect was positively associated with a lack of emotional awareness ($\beta = .26, p < .001$) and a lack of emotional clarity ($\beta = .12, p = .05$). The association that SRPS callous affect had with lack of emotional awareness was significantly stronger than its association with lack of emotional clarity ($z = 2.82, p = .002$). Machiavellianism was positively associated with a lack of emotional awareness ($\beta = .18, p < .001$), limited access to emotion regulation strategies ($\beta = .11, p = .02$), and a lack of emotional clarity ($\beta = .13, p = .01$). The association that Machiavellianism had with emotional awareness was not significantly different than its associations with limited access to emotion regulation strategies ($z = 1.16, p = .12$) or lack of emotional clarity ($z = 1.00, p = .16$). Spitefulness was positively associated with the non-acceptance of emotional responses ($\beta = .24, p < .001$), impulse control difficulties ($\beta = .25, p < .001$), limited access to emotion regulation strategies ($\beta = .22, p < .001$), and a lack of emotional clarity ($\beta = .12, p = .03$). The associations that spitefulness had with non-acceptance of emotional responses, impulse control difficulties, and limited access to emotion regulation strategies were stronger than its association with lack of emotional clarity ($zs > 2.11, ps < .02$).

DISCUSSION

Dark personality features had a range of associations with specific emotion regulation deficits. For example, NPI exploitation/entitlement was positively associated with impulse control difficulties and limited access to emotion regulation strategies. In contrast, other aspects of narcissism (i.e., NPI leadership/authority and NPI grandiose exhibitionism) had negative associations with various facets of emotion dysregulation. The facets of narcissism that reflect an interest in gaining positions of leadership or authority may be characterized by the ability to regulate emotional experiences, whereas the facet of narcissism concerning exploitation and entitlement is characterized by emotion dysregulation. This pattern of results provides additional support for the multifaceted nature of narcissism

suggesting that it is important for researchers to consider using the facets of the NPI rather than relying on an overall composite score.

Callous affect was the only facet of psychopathy to have unique associations with emotion dysregulation being positively associated with a lack of emotional awareness and clarity. These results are consistent with previous work linking callousness to diminished reactivity to negative emotionally-laden words (Loney, Frick, Clements, Ellis, & Kerlin, 2003). Similarly, Marsh and colleagues (2008) found that individuals with callous-unemotional traits evidenced less amygdala activation when processing fearful facial expressions. The lack of associations between other aspects of psychopathy and emotion dysregulation is consistent with the finding that a lack of impulse control—which is another key component of psychopathy—may not be closely linked with reactivity to emotional stimuli (Loney et al., 2003). As with the results for narcissism, our results for psychopathy suggest that it is important to account for its multifaceted nature rather than using an overall composite score for this complex construct.

Machiavellianism was associated with a lack of emotional awareness, a lack of emotional clarity, and limited access to emotion regulation strategies. Individuals with high levels of Machiavellianism may make decisions based on practical outcomes without much regard for emotional factors. This view is consistent with the idea that Machiavellianism reflects a willingness to do whatever is necessary to achieve one's goals without a great deal of concern for the emotional consequences of their behaviors.

Sadism was not associated with any aspects of emotion dysregulation, which may suggest that gaining pleasure from harm being inflicted on others is not the result of an inability to access or manage one's emotions. However, it is possible that the instrument we selected to measure sadism (i.e., Short Sadistic Impulse Scale) may have captured only certain aspects of the sadism construct that may not be connected with emotion dysregulation (i.e., it may have limited bandwidth). Future researchers may want to consider including measures of sadism that capture multiple facets of sadism such as the Comprehensive Assessment of Sadistic Tendencies (Buckels & Paulhus, 2013).

Spitefulness was found to be linked with various aspects of emotion dysregulation (e.g., nonacceptance of emotional responses, limited access to emotion regulation strategies, lack of emotional

clarity) which suggests the intriguing possibility that spiteful behavior may emerge as a result of being out of touch with one's own emotions. Difficulties monitoring, managing, and understanding emotional states may be important to our understanding of spiteful individuals. It is possible that spitefulness is due, at least in part, to individuals lacking the ability to manage and monitor their own emotional reactions coupled with difficulties in accurately assessing the emotional states of others.

Although the present study had a number of strengths (e.g., large sample, various dark personality features were included), it relied exclusively on self-report measures of personality features and emotion dysregulation, which leaves open the possibility that our findings may have been influenced by socially desirable responding. For example, some individuals may have been reluctant to admit that they are sadistic or acknowledge their difficulties with regulating their emotions. It would be helpful if future research captured emotion dysregulation using observer reports from close others (e.g., friends or family members). The present study also focused exclusively on data that was collected from a single college sample in the United States so these results may not generalize to other samples who experience more extreme manifestations of these traits (e.g., clinical or forensic samples) or possess very different demographic features (e.g., individuals in middle adulthood). Despite these limitations, the results of the present study expand our current understanding of the links between dark personality features and emotion dysregulation.

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