



# The Assessment of Sadistic Personality: Preliminary psychometric evidence for a new measure

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## ABSTRACT

Recent research suggests that subclinical sadism should be included in the Dark Triad. However, research on the assessment of sadism as a trait is lacking. To address this, we developed a new self-report measure, the Assessment of Sadistic Personality (ASP). In Study 1, 199 university students completed a preliminary 20-item version of the ASP, measures of the Dark Triad, agreeableness, honesty-humility, emotional intelligence, and sadistic tendencies. Internal consistency was acceptable and convergent validity was supported. After reducing the ASP to nine items, 202 university students completed a replication of Study 1. Internal consistency and convergent validity were again supported. When ASP items were combined with Dark Triad items, exploratory factor analysis supported the anticipated four-factor structure. These results provide preliminary evidence for the reliability and validity of the ASP as a new measure of subclinical sadism appropriate for use in conjunction with existing measures of the Dark Triad.

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## 1. Introduction

The Dark Triad (Paulhus & Williams, 2002) is composed of three socially malevolent personality traits: psychopathy, narcissism, and Machiavellianism. Psychopathy is characterized by impulsive thrill-seeking, erratic behaviour, charm, and a lack of anxiety and empathy (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Narcissists are characterized as attention-seekers, fantasize of unlimited success or power, and possess a grandiose sense of importance and entitlement (Emmons, 1987). Machiavellians tend to be deceptive, manipulative, and commonly use deceit or flattery in order to serve their own interests (Jakobwitz & Egan, 2006). Psychopathy, narcissism, and Machiavellianism have garnered considerable attention over the past decade as a constellation of unique traits sharing a common core of emotional coldness, self-promotion, and social deviance (Paulhus, 2014; Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Past findings have been robust in demonstrating that high scores on the Dark Triad traits are consistently associated with low scores on agreeableness, empathy, and honesty-humility, as well as high scores on seductiveness and manipulateness (Lee & Ashton, 2005; Paulhus & Williams, 2002; Veselka, Schermer, & Vernon, 2011).

### 1.1. Sadism and the 'Dark Tetrad'

Extensive evidence supports the inclusion of a fourth trait, termed subclinical sadism, into the Dark Triad to form a 'Dark Tetrad' of personality (Buckels, Jones, & Paulhus, 2013; Buckels, Trapnell, & Paulhus, 2014; Chabrol, Van Leeuwen, Rodgers, & Séjourné, 2009; Chabrol, Melioli, Van Leeuwen, Rodgers, & Goutaudier, 2015; Međedović & Petrović, 2015). Subclinical sadism refers to the dispositional tendency to engage in cruel, demeaning, or aggressive behaviours for pleasure or dominance (Myers, Burket, & Husted, 2006; O'Meara, Davies, & Hammond, 2011). Sadism is positively associated with the Dark Triad traits, with correlations ranging from 0.27 to 0.37 (Chabrol et al., 2009). Although sadism displays commonalities with psychopathy, narcissism, and Machiavellianism such as low empathy and emotional callousness (e.g., Kirsch & Becker, 2007; Međedović & Petrović, 2015; Paulhus, 2014), research supports the incremental validity of sadism in the prediction of a series of maladaptive behaviours, including "trolling" online, adolescent delinquency, and unprovoked aggression (Buckels et al., 2013; Buckels et al., 2014; Chabrol et al., 2009; Reidy, Zeichner, & Seibert, 2011). Thus, sadism is a unique construct that is related to psychopathy, narcissism, and Machiavellianism (Buckels et al., 2013; Međedović & Petrović, 2015).

Nonetheless, measures designed to assess sadism as a subclinical trait are lacking. The Short Sadistic Impulse Scale (SSIS) is a 10-item self-report scale developed to assess sadism along a continuum from slight sadistic attitudes to pathological sadism (O'Meara et al., 2011). However, a limitation of the SSIS is that its 10 items mainly focus on

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the “hurting” nature of the sadist, leading to a largely homogenous item pool at the expense of content coverage (Zeigler-Hill & Vonk, 2015). The 18-item Comprehensive Assessment of Sadistic Tendencies (CAST; Buckels & Paulhus, 2014) and the 16-item Varieties of Sadistic Tendencies (VAST; Paulhus & Jones, 2015) assess verbal, physical, and vicarious components of sadism. While undoubtedly useful, a shortcoming of the CAST and VAST concerns their potentially limiting description of sadism (e.g., Pfattheicher & Schindler, 2015; Trémolière & Djeriouat, 2016). For instance, there is need for the development of items reflecting the subjugating nature of the sadist, which can be described as “behaving in an overbearing manner toward others and showing absolute disregard for the other’s need” (O’Meara et al., 2011, p. 530).

To address the need for a measure of subclinical sadism with adequate content coverage, we developed a brief 9-item self-report Assessment of Sadistic Personality (ASP) designed to augment the Short Dark Triad (SD3; Jones & Paulhus, 2014). In constructing the ASP, we adhered to three fundamental principles for test construction: (a) an emphasis on psychological theory and item content, (b) maintaining item homogeneity within scales, and (c) fostering convergent validity at the item writing stage (Holden, Fekken, & Jackson, 1985; Jackson, 1970). Thus, items were developed based on an extensive review of the literature, and reflect the sadist’s tendency toward subjugation, tendency to seek pleasure through humiliation, and low empathy. Items also reflect common behaviours manifested by the sadist: intimidation, aggression, antagonism, and humiliation (Buckels et al., 2013; O’Meara et al., 2011).

## 1.2. Objectives

The objective of Study 1 was to investigate the psychometric properties of the preliminary 20-item ASP, and to subsequently reduce the item pool to a more parsimonious set of items. The objective of Study 2 was to investigate the convergent validity, reliability, and factor structure of the final 9-item ASP. We anticipated scores on the ASP would be positively correlated with the CAST and the three Short Dark Triad factors (psychopathy, narcissism, and Machiavellianism; Jones & Paulhus, 2014). We also expected that sadism would be negatively correlated with trait emotional intelligence, honesty-humility, and agreeableness (Greitemeyer, 2015; Jonason & McCain, 2012; Kirsch & Becker, 2007; Lee & Ashton, 2005; Lee et al., 2013; Međedović & Petrović, 2015). Finally, we predicted that sex differences would emerge on the ASP, with males scoring higher than females on sadism (Furnham & Trickey, 2011; Jonason, Koenig, & Tost, 2010; Paulhus & Williams, 2002).

## 2. Study 1

### 2.1. Method

#### 2.1.1. Participants and procedure

A sample of 199 undergraduate students (111 men, 88 women) from a large university in central Canada completed a series of questionnaires online. Students’ ages ranged from 17 to 36 years ( $M = 18.74$ ,  $SD = 1.76$ ).

#### 2.1.2. Measures

**2.1.2.1. Subclinical sadism.** Subclinical sadism was measured using the preliminary 20-item Assessment of Sadistic Personality (ASP; see Table 1). Following an extensive review of the literature, items were written based upon the operational definition of sadism: a tendency to engage in or think about engaging in cruel, demeaning, or aggressive behaviours for pleasure or subjugation (e.g., O’Meara et al., 2011). Participants responded to items on a 5-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*).

**2.1.2.2. Sadistic tendencies.** The 18-item Comprehensive Assessment of Sadistic Tendencies (CAST; Buckels & Paulhus, 2014) consists of three

**Table 1**

The Assessment of Sadistic Personality original 20-item set with theoretical origins.

| Items  |                    |
|--|--------------------|
| 1. I have made fun of people so that they know I am in control.    | (Subjugation)      |
| 2. People do what I want them to because they are afraid of me.    | (Subjugation)      |
| 3. When I tell people what to do, they know to do it.              | (Subjugation)      |
| 4. I never get tired of pushing people around.                     | (Subjugation)      |
| 5. I would hurt somebody if it meant that I would be in control.   | (Subjugation)      |
| 6. I control my friends through intimidation.                      | (Subjugation)      |
| 7. When I mock someone, it is funny to see them get upset.         | (Pleasure-seeking) |
| 8. Being mean to others can be exciting.                           | (Pleasure-seeking) |
| 9. When I get annoyed, tormenting people makes me feel better.     | (Pleasure-seeking) |
| 10. I have hurt people close to me for enjoyment.                  | (Pleasure-seeking) |
| 11. I enjoy humiliating others.                                    | (Pleasure-seeking) |
| 12. I get pleasure from mocking people in front of their friends.  | (Pleasure-seeking) |
| 13. I think about harassing others for enjoyment                   | (Pleasure-seeking) |
| 14. I have cheated others because I enjoy it.                      | (Pleasure-seeking) |
| 15. I think about hurting people who irritate me.                  | (Unempathic)       |
| 16. I’d lie to someone to make them upset.                         | (Unempathic)       |
| 17. I have stolen from others without regard for the consequences. | (Unempathic)       |
| 18. Making people feel bad about themselves makes me feel good.    | (Unempathic)       |
| 19. I am quick to humiliate others.                                | (Unempathic)       |
| 20. I have tormented others without feeling remorse.               | (Unempathic)       |

subscales encompassing verbal, physical, and vicarious sadism. Participants responded to items on a 5-point scale (1 = *completely disagree*, 5 = *completely agree*). Prior research supports the reliability and validity of the CAST (e.g., Buckels & Paulhus, 2014).

**2.1.2.3. The Dark Triad.** Psychopathy, narcissism, and Machiavellianism were measured using the 27-item Short Dark Triad (SD3; Jones & Paulhus, 2014). Participants responded to items on a 5-point scale (1 = *completely disagree*, 5 = *completely agree*). Reliability coefficients for the SD3’s subscales are generally acceptable (Jones & Paulhus, 2014).

**2.1.2.4. Trait emotional intelligence.** Emotional intelligence was measured using the 30-item Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire – Short Form (TEIQue-SF; Petrides & Furnham, 2006). Participants responded to items on a 7-point scale (1 = *completely disagree*, 7 = *completely agree*). Evidence supports the reliability and validity of the TEIQue-SF (Cooper & Petrides, 2010).

**2.1.2.5. Honesty-humility and agreeableness.** Honesty-humility and agreeableness were measured using subscales from the HEXACO Personality Inventory-Revised (HEXACO PI-R; Lee & Ashton, 2004). Participants responded to items on a 5-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). Prior research supports the reliability and validity of the HEXACO (Lee & Ashton, 2004).

### 2.2. Results

#### 2.2.1. Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations

Means, standard deviations, internal consistencies, and bivariate correlations for all scales are shown in Table 2. Bivariate correlations between the tetrad traits, agreeableness, honesty-humility, and trait emotional intelligence were consistent with those reported in previous literature (Buckels & Paulhus, 2014; Cooper & Petrides, 2010; Jones & Paulhus, 2014). Cronbach’s alphas ranged from 0.73 to 0.96. The internal consistency of the ASP was very high ( $\alpha = 0.96$ ), indicating that item content was largely homogeneous, and some items were redundant. Consistent with predictions, the ASP had small-to-large positive correlations with psychopathy, narcissism, and Machiavellianism. In addition, the ASP had small-to-moderate negative associations with trait emotional intelligence, honesty-humility, and agreeableness. Moreover, the ASP showed large positive correlations with the CAST (Buckels & Paulhus, 2014).

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