

## *The Dark Triad in Relation to Teachers' Interaction Styles*

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### **Abstract**

The dark triad is a set of three personality traits, namely narcissism, machiavellianism, and psychopathy, which are associated with manipulative and exploitative behaviors in interpersonal relationships. This paper examines the relationship between the dark triad and teachers' interaction styles. Specifically, it explores how teachers with high levels of dark triad traits may interact with students in ways that are detrimental to the students' academic and social development.

Keywords: The Dark Triad, Narcissism, Machiavellianism, Psychopathy, Teacher, Interactional Styles, Leadership, Helpful, Understanding, Student-Teacher Responsibility, Uncertain, Dissatisfied, Objecting, Strict

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## Introduction

The dark triad is a term used in psychology aimed at describing personality traits that include a combination of three factors: Narcissism, machiavellism and subclinical psychopathic behaviour. Persons with a high level of these traits are often perceived as manipulative and unemotional. In the context of helping professions, such as teachers, doctors, psychologists and social workers, the presence of the dark triad can be dangerous, mainly in relation to target groups of pupils, patients and clients. The collective of authors Jensen-Campbell et al. (2019) describes the individual elements of the dark triad in relation to the teacher profession as follows: Narcissism manifests as exaggerated confidence and a need to be admired. Teachers with a high level of narcissism can be overly confident and unable to accept criticism. This can lead to inappropriate decisions and behaviour towards the pupils. For example, a teacher with a high level of narcissism can be overly excited about a new teaching method and thus ignore the specific needs of a pupil. Machiavellism is characterised as manipulative behaviour and an empathy insufficiency. A teacher with a high level of machiavellism can use manipulative tactics to achieve their goals and ignore the consequences impacting pupils or colleagues. They can also be able to abuse the trust of a pupil or their parent or create conflict among colleagues in order to achieve their goals. The subclinical psychopathic trait manifests as an empathy and responsibility insufficiency. Teachers with a high level of a subclinical psychopathic trait can ignore the emotions and needs of pupils and colleagues and concentrate solely on their own interests and goals. The presence of the dark triad in helping professions is a high risk from the viewpoint of damage to the client, in the physical, emotional and social sense. Typical examples from practice are incorrect diagnosis, inadequate therapy, client trust abuse or discrimination. Several research works point this out. They target the identification of the presence of the dark triad in helping professions. Muris et al. (2017), Okruszek et al., (2018) have found that psychologists with a high level of the dark triad have a tendency to be less satisfied with their work and less engaged with their clients. They also tended to have a less positive therapeutical relationship and a lower level of the ability to handle conflicts. They are also less empathic and less able to identify and solve emotional problems in their clients. Research carried out by Furnham & Cheng, (2017) targeted the presence of the dark triad in healthcare workers and its influence on patient satisfaction. The results showed that healthcare professionals with a high level of the dark triad provided their patients with care of a lower quality and therefore had less satisfied patients. The presence of the dark triad in the case of teachers manifests in the decreased quality of their relationships to students. Research results by the author collective Jensen-Campbell et al., (2019) show that teachers with a high level of the dark triad had a tendency to have less positive relationships to their pupils and less successful results in teaching. The concept of the dark triad influences the interaction styles of teachers and has a significant effect on the relationships with students. Narcissistic teachers have a tendency to fulfill and prefer their own needs and desires. This mostly manifests by trying to direct attention to themselves and their successes, often to the detriment of the needs of pupils. Andreou (2004) and Márton (2023) bring attention to the notion that narcissistic teachers can be more susceptible to preferring students who admire them and give them positive feedback. On the other hand, less zealous pupils can be neglected. This can have a negative influence on the educational results of these pupils. Jonason et al. (2011) point out that teachers with machiavellistic traits can engage in manipulative behaviour in their relationship to pupils. They can be very tactical in reaching their goals. The work of Čopková (2022) hints that teachers with a higher score of machiavellism can lean towards the use of dishonorable tactics to reach their goals. This behaviour can cause mistrust and negative relationships between the pedagogue and students. Psychopathic traits cause an absence of conscience,

empathy and understanding of the needs and feelings of their pupils. Johnson and Murray (2018) state that psychopathic teachers are not able to perceive the emotional needs of students and can manifest a strict stance and rash behaviour which can cause the traumatising of students. Jonason et al., 2013). The interaction style of a teacher is a relatively permanent characteristic of their personality showing in behaviour, actions in and reactions to specific situations – in communication and relationships with pupils, other pedagogic and specialist employees, the management of the school and parents or legal guardians, in the choice of didactic activities and the way of examining, directing and controlling work. It stems from mutual interactions, wherein it should be considered that interaction is always bilateral or multilateral. It shows more markedly while exposed to stress and it is a typical characteristic of a teacher. To minimise the consequences of the presence of the dark triad in helping professions, it is important to have processes to control and evaluate professional behaviour. It is also important that helping professionals are trained to identify and control these risks. In relation to the above results, within this research we were interested in whether there are mutual relationships between the dimensions of the dark triad – Machiavellism, Psychopathy and Narcissism - and the individual interaction styles of teachers in our research sample - Leadership, Helpful, Understanding, Student-teacher responsibility, Uncertain, Dissatisfied, Objecting, Strict - and the polarity of these relationships.

## **Research Problem**

The research problem could then be formulated as follows: Is there a negative relationship between the dimensions of the dark triad (Machiavellism, Psychopathy, Narcissism) and the individual interaction styles of a teacher (Leadership, Helpful, Understanding, Student-teacher responsibility, Uncertain, Dissatisfied, Objecting, Strict).

The research goals stemming from the above could then be formulated as follows:

- To identify the relationship between the dimension of the dark triad Machiavellism and the individual interaction styles of a teacher (Leadership, Helpful, Understanding, Student-teacher responsibility, Uncertain, Dissatisfied, Objecting, Strict)
- To identify the relationship between the dimension of the dark triad Psychopathy and the individual interaction styles of a teacher (Leadership, Helpful, Understanding, Student-teacher responsibility, Uncertain, Dissatisfied, Objecting, Strict)
- To identify the relationship between the dimension of the dark triad Narcissism and the individual interaction styles of a teacher (Leadership, Helpful, Understanding, Student-teacher responsibility, Uncertain, Dissatisfied, Objecting, Strict)

## **Research Hypotheses**

Within the study at hand we verified the following hypotheses:

H1: We suppose that between the dimension of the dark triad Machiavellism and the interaction style of the teacher

H1.1 Leadership

H1.2 Helpful

H1.3 Understanding

H1.4 Student-teacher responsibility there is a negative relationship and the interaction style of the teacher

H1.5 Uncertain

- H1.6 Dissatisfied
- H1.7 Objecting
- H1.8 Strict there is a positive relationship

H2: We suppose that between the dimension of the dark triad Psychopathy and the interaction style of the teacher

- H2.1 Leadership
- H2.2 Helpful
- H2.3 Understanding
- H2.4 Student-teacher responsibility there is a negative relationship and the interaction style of the teacher
- H2.5 Uncertain
- H2.6 Dissatisfied
- H2.7 Objecting
- H2.8 Strict there is a positive relationship

H3: We suppose that between the dimension of the dark triad Narcissism and the interaction style of the teacher

- H3.1 Leadership
- H3.2 Helpful
- H3.3 Understanding
- H3.4 Student-teacher responsibility there is a negative relationship and the interaction style of the teacher
- H3.5 Uncertain
- H3.6 Dissatisfied
- H3.7 Objecting
- H3.8 Strict there is a positive relationship

## Research Sample

The research sample consisted of pedagogical employees of schools, mainly teachers, part of the sample was made up of teaching assistants. Data were obtained from 591 respondents using the questionnaire method. The age ranged from 20 to 72 years old ( $M=43.56$ ,  $SD=10.92$ ). The structure of the research sample as regards gender and profession is stated in Table 1.

Table 1: Structure of research sample

Research sample	N	%
Men	66	10.7
Women	525	89.3
Teaching assistant	30	5.1
Preschool/Primary teacher	92	15.6
Grades 1 through 4 Primary teacher	80	13.5
Lower secondary education teacher	167	28.3
Higher secondary education teacher	167	28.3
Principal	55	9.3

Legend: N – count

The battery of questionnaires used contained demographic questions at the start, concerning age and gender, teaching profession (preschool/primary teacher, lower or higher secondary teacher, teaching assistant, school principal). The preferred interaction styles of teachers were measured via the Questionnaire of teacher interaction style – self-evaluation, which leans of the teacher interaction behaviour model according to Wubbels and coll. (1987) stemming from Leary’s personality model (Leary, 1957) and it measures eight sectors of teacher behaviour: Leadership, helpful, understanding, student-teacher responsibility, uncertain, dissatisfied, objecting, strict. The amended version of the Questionnaire of teacher interaction style consists of 40 elements through which participants evaluated their behaviour on a five point scale ( 1 = Do not agree at all, 5 = Agree completely). For each interaction style sector there was an average score calculated – a higher score meant a stronger preference of a given style. More detailed information on the Questionnaire of teacher interaction style are at hand in the publication of Ballová Mikušková (2022). To measure the presence of the so-called dark triad in the personality of the participants we used the Dark Triad Dirty Dozen questionnaire (Jonason, Webster, 2010). The authors created a questionnaire consisting of 12 elements. As an element example, there is I have a tendency to manipulate others to reach my goals. The questionnaire is tridimensional, the individual dimensions measure machiavellism, psychopathy and narcissism. We translated the questionnaire into Slovak. Our version instructed the participants as follows: To which level do you agree with the following statements? The participants answered the individual questions of the questionnaire on a five point scale, where 1 meant do not agree at all and 5 meant agree completely. To process the data obtained, statistical procedures were used – descriptive statistic (arithmetic mean, standard deviation, minimum, maximum) and inferential statistics (Pearson’s correlation coefficient) to discover the relationships among variables.

## Conclusions

In the following text and tables we state the descriptive data of chosen professional competences first (interaction style), and the dark triad, of the participants of our research sample (Table 2), which were obtained using the Questionnaire of teacher interaction style – self evaluation and the Dark Triad Dirty Dozen questionnaire. The results are stated as average gross score, minimum, maximum and standard deviation of measured variables, as in, the individual interaction styles Leadership, Helpful, Understanding, Student-teacher responsibility, Uncertain, Dissatisfied, Objecting, Strict) and the dimensions of the dark triad (Machiavellism, Psychopathy and Narcissism) of participants.

Table 2: Descriptive data on interaction competences and dark triad in participants

		N	AM	SD	Min	Max
Interactional Styles	Leadership	590	4.27	.56	1.00	5.00
	Helpful	590	4.49	.57	1.00	5.00
	Understanding	590	4.27	.56	1.20	5.00
	Student-teacher responsibility	590	4.4	.56	1.00	5.00
	Uncertain	590	1.94	.69	1.00	4.60
	Dissatisfied	590	2.14	.60	1.00	4.60
	Objecting	590	1.72	.60	1.00	4.20
	Strict	590	3.9	.65	1.00	4.80
Dark Triad	Machiavellianism	590	1.43	.63	1.00	5.00
	Psychopathy	590	1.64	.66	1.00	4.50
	Narcissism	590	1.86	.86	1.00	5.00

Legenda: N - count; AM – arithmetic mean, SD – standard deviation, Min – minimum value, Max – maximum value.

The participants of our research reached an average gross score of 4.27 points in the Leadership interaction style, the minimum was 1 and the maximum was 5. In the Helpful style, they scored 4.49 on average, with a minimum of 1 and maximum of 5 points. The average gross score in the Understanding style was 4.27 points, with a minimum of 1.2 and maximum of 5 points. Within the Student-teacher responsibility interaction style, the average score was 4.4 with a minimum of 1 and maximum of 5 points. The interaction style Uncertain had an average gross score value of 1.94 points, with a minimum of 1 and a maximum of 4.6 points. The Dissatisfied interaction style exhibited an average gross score value of 2.14, minimum 1 and maximum 4.6 points. In the Objecting style, the participants reached an average score of 1.72 points, with a minimum of 1 and a maximum of 4.2 points. In the Strict interaction style, they reached an average score of 3.9 points, with a minimum of 1 and maximum of 4.8 points.

In the Machiavellism dimension of the dark triad the participants of our research sample reached an average gross score of 1.43 points, the minimum value reached was 1 and maximum 5 points. As far as the dark triad dimension Psychopathy goes, the participants reached an average gross score of 1.64 points, where the minimum reached was 1 and the maximum 4.5 points. In the Narcissism dimension of the dark triad, they reached an average gross score of 1.86 points, the minimum was 1 and the maximum 5 points. In our research, we looked at the mutual relationship (the strength and polarity) of the individual interaction styles of teachers and the dimensions of the dark triad. The results of the correlation analysis are listed in Table 3.

Table 3: Results of correlation analysis of interaction competence levels and dark triad in research sample participants

Interactional Styles	Dark Triad			
		Machiavellianism	Psychopathy	Narcissism
Leadership	r	-.205**	-.214**	-.139**
	p	<.001	<.001	<.001
	N	589	589	589
Helpful	r	-.202**	-.174**	-.124**
	p	<.001	<.001	.003
	N	589	589	589
Understanding	r	-.186**	-.187**	-.145**
	p	<.001	<.001	<.001
	N	589	589	589
Student-teacher responsibility	r	-.170**	-.167**	-.115**
	p	<.001	<.001	.005
	N	589	589	589
Uncertain	r	.231**	.199**	.229**
	p	<.001	<.001	<.001
	N	589	589	589
Dissatisfied	r	.260**	.209**	.174**
	p	<.001	<.001	<.001
	N	589	589	589

Objecting	r	.269**	.224**	.223**
	p	<.001	<.001	<.001
	N	589	589	589
Strict	r	.091*	.040	-.006
	p	.026	.334	.882
	N	589	589	589

Legenda: r – Pearson’s correlation coefficient, p – significance, N – count,  
 \*\* correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed), \* correlation is significant  
 at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

We found that all three dimensions of the dark triad – Machiavellism, Psychopathy and Narcissism show a medium strength negative relationship to the interaction styles Leadership, Helpful, Understanding and Student-teacher responsibility. Thus, hypotheses H1.1 – H1.4, H2.1 – H2.4, H3.1 – H3.4 were confirmed. We further found that all the dimensions of the dark triad – Machiavellism, Psychopathy and Narcissism had a medium strength positive relationship with the interaction styles Uncertain, Dissatisfied, Objecting. Thus, hypotheses H1.5 – H1.7, H2.5 – H2.7, H3.5 – H3.7 were confirmed. We also found a weak positive relationship between the dark triad dimension Machiavellism and the interaction style Strict. Thus, we confirmed hypothesis H1.8. Between the dark triad dimensions Psychopathy and Narcissism and the interaction style Strict, no relationship was found. Hypotheses H2.8 and H3.8 are thus unconfirmed. Research (e.g. Furnham et al. 2013, Furnham et al., 2014) hints that ways of behaving and experience of teachers with tendencies to the dark triad can influence the performance of students. Preference for some students, manipulation and unempathic behaviour can have a negative influence on motivation, engagement and results in students. In relation to this, researchers emphasise the importance of prevention and interventions aimed mainly at the development of emotional intelligence, communicational skills and the creation of positive relationships. This can help minimise the negative influence of the dark triad on teacher interactions and relationships to students. Questions of candidate choice for the teaching profession are also of importance.

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