https://doi.org/10.62663/pjpprp.v16i1.206

# Dark Triads and Ethical Attitudes in Undergraduate University Students

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This study explored the association between Dark Triad personality traits—Narcissism, Psychopathy, and Machiavellianism—and ethical attitudes, specifically Idealism and Relativism, in undergraduate university students. It was hypothesized that higher levels of narcissism would be associated with more unethical attitudes (i.e., lower idealism and higher relativism). Additionally, it was predicted that psychopathy and Machiavellianism would show distinct patterns of association with ethical orientations. The study further hypothesized that gender would significantly influence the expression of Dark Triad traits, with men expected to score higher than women. A correlational research design was employed, involving 202 students (101 men, 101 women; age range = 17–24 years; M = 21.27, SD = 1.98). Participants completed the Short Dark Triad-3 (Jones & Paulhus, 2014) and the Ethics Position Questionnaire (Schlenker & Forsyth, 1980). Pearson bivariate correlation revealed that narcissism and psychopathy showed a negative correlation with idealism, however Machiavellianism showed a positively correlation with relativism. Independent samples t-tests indicated that men scored significantly higher than women on all three Dark Triad traits. These findings suggest that each Dark Triad trait differentially relates to ethical attitudes, and that men tend to exhibit more pronounced dark personality characteristics compared to women.

*Keywords:* dark triads; psychopathy; narcissism; machiavellianism; ethics; ethical attitudes; relativism; idealism

The Dark Triad is a psychological construct founded on the trilogy of three malevolent personality traits which are established as destructive and offensive in their disposition, however, they are regulated at a sub-clinical level. These traits are identified as Machiavellianism, Psychopathy and Narcissism (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). The term ‘dark’ is associated with these traits as a consequence of their malevolent disposition. The three components of the Dark Triad are exhibited as distinct traits with their own expression of characteristics and extrinsic behaviors. Nevertheless, the three traits are interlinked through their callous and manipulative interpersonal style of interactions (Jones & Paulhus, 2010).

Narcissism is marked by grandiosity, pride, egocentrism, and a notable lack of empathy (Heinz, 1977). Patients with high narcissism symptoms are usually characterised by grandiosity, entitlement, dominance, and a feeling of superiority that runs through them (Corry et al., 2008). The results of the research indicate that preferences of individuals exhibiting high rates of narcissism are inclined to such traits like extraversion, which denotes sociability, as well as assertiveness and excitement display. Additionally, narcissists tend to express openness, which consists of creativity, the feeling of curiosity, and the readiness to feel something new. On the other hand, narcissism also has a reverse correlation, which means that the score is lower as regards to altruism, trust, and cooperation (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Studies have also explored the overlap between narcissism and psychopathy, revealing shared tendencies toward emotional coldness and manipulation (Vernon et al., 2008).

Machiavellianism is characterized by manipulative behavior, emotional detachment, and a strategic orientation toward personal gain (Jakobwitz et al., 2006). The distinctive

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https://doi.org/10.62663/pjpprp.v16i1.206

people who tend to exhibit strong issues of Machiavellianism are accompanied by a set of many-faceted features which are deeply ingrained in a self-serving nature and maneuvering wiles. They are also defined by their interpersonal behavior being cold and calculating, and are frequently known to be manipulative in their motives to advance their own agendas at the expense of strict ethical bearing or their take on the welfare of others. They often use charm and deception as tools to influence others and exploit social dynamics (VadenBos, 2015). These are also characteristic traits which are complemented by a significant lack of empathy and moral conscience. Instead of giving a detailed exposure of the historical origins, the details of psychological studies usually underline the pessimistic attitude toward the universe, lack of moral restraints, and calculating manipulation that constitutes Machiavellianism in the contemporary scenario (Christie & Geis, 1970; Jones & Paulhus, 2010). Further differences between Machiavellianism and psychopathy have been drawn by making appeals to the focus on strategy and reputation by Machiavellianism in contrast to the impulsive actions and social rule violation by psychopaths (Hare & Neumann, 2008).

Psychopathy is often understood as a spectrum of behaviours and traits characterized by antisocial tendencies, impulsivity, self-centeredness, callousness, and emotional detachment (Cleckley, 1976). Individuals high on the psychopathy spectrum may exhibit a lack of empathy or remorse for their actions, along with a propensity for thrill-seeking and risk-taking behaviours (Jones & Paulhus, 2011a). These traits affect interpersonal and societal functioning by reducing emotional responsiveness and increasing socially disruptive behaviors (Frick et al., 2008; Skeem et al., 2011). Psychopathy has been established as the most malevolent of the dark triads (Rauthmann, 2012). In terms of the Big Five personality factors, psychopathy has been observed to have negative correlations with agreeableness and conscientiousness (Hare, 1985). A distinguishing factor between psychopathy and Machiavellianism lies in impulsivity, which is more central to secondary psychopathy (Hicks et al., 2007).

Elevated scores in these dimensions have been empirically linked to heightened propensities for criminal behavior, societal disruption, and organizational challenges, particularly when individuals holding such traits occupy leadership roles (Ernest et al., 2012). Additionally, individuals scoring high in these traits typically exhibit diminished levels of compassion, agreeableness, empathy, and life satisfaction. An attitude represents a nuanced evaluative stance or opinion that an individual holds towards a person, object, or event (Robbins & Judge, 2013). These evaluations serve as concise summaries of one's perceptions and sentiments and are believed to stem from a combination of beliefs, emotions, and past experiences (VadenBos, 2015). According to Daniel Katz (2013), attitudes can fulfill instrumental, ego-defensive, value-expressive, and knowledge functions—serving to guide behavior and decision-making.

The transition from personality traits to ethical attitudes becomes significant when examining how individual differences influence moral reasoning and conduct. An ethical attitude involves evaluating behavior based on principles of right and wrong, fairness, justice, and integrity (Rodzalan & Saat, 2016). Moosavi et al. (2016) emphasize that ethical attitudes extend beyond adherence to formal codes and include a broader personal commitment to moral behavior. Education received at various higher educational institutions can positively impact students' perceptions of ethics (Özeltürkay et al., 2018). Therefore, ethical education must also align with students' cognitive development to foster internalized moral reasoning (Berkovich & Eyal, 2018).

Academic environments, however, can also normalize unethical conduct when peer influence encourages it. Research by McCabe (1996) revealed rising trends in academic dishonesty and emphasized the role of peer influence in facilitating unethical decisions.

https://doi.org/10.62663/pjpprp.v16i1.206

Király et al. (2018) found that crowded exam settings and peer presence may intensify students' willingness to cheat. Similarly, Csillag et al. (2017) showed how cheating undermines faculty motivation and disrupts the academic environment. Rodzalan and Saat (2016) reported that fear of social exclusion often leads students to conform to unethical behaviors. Philosophical ethics often contrast deontological (rule-based) frameworks with teleological (outcome-based) perspectives. Psychological research mirrors this distinction by examining rule-based and outcome-based moral reasoning (Gray & Schein, 2016; Conway & Gawronski, 2013; Gilligan, 1982).

The Ethical Position Theory posits that moral judgments arise from two orientations: idealism, which emphasizes harm avoidance, and relativism, which challenges universal moral standards (Forsyth, 1980). This EPQ framework provides insight into moral diversity by measuring commitment to harm avoidance (idealism) and skepticism toward universal moral rules (relativism). Four ethical types emerge including Exceptionists (High idealism, low relativism); Subjectivists (High relativism, low idealism); Absolutists (High idealism, low relativism); Situationists: High in both idealism and relativism (Forsyth et al., 1988)

When traits associated with the Dark Triad are considered in this ethical framework, a consistent pattern emerges: individuals high in these traits often rely on manipulative, self-serving strategies—commonly termed "cheater strategies"—to achieve their goals (Fox & Rooney, 2015). Such tendencies often translate into ethical dysfunction in both academic and social environments (Jonason et al., 2015). Studies by Furnham et al. (2013) and Roeser et al. (2016) found that individuals with high Dark Triad traits were more prone to academic dishonesty, including cheating, plagiarism, and deceptive negotiation for grades.

## Method

This research was established on a correlational research design. Where correlational design is projected as a non-experimental design that serves to examine the association between two variables without manipulating the said variables. The variables of interest of the scope of this study were retained as the Dark Triads and Ethical Attitudes in Undergraduate University Students.

The sampling method applied for this research was determined as purposive or judgmental sampling which was clarified by the existence of inclusion and exclusion criteria of the people approached to partake in the research. Extending on the notion, the fact established was that the sample population showed a high degree of invalid responses and errors, therefore, the researcher's judgement was utilized to ensure that the individuals capable of giving the complete and valid responses for the study be preferred over the others. Judgmental sampling can also be referred to as purposive sampling or authoritative sampling and this type of approach to sampling is based on non-probability since sample selection depends entirely on the researcher who has made the selection based on his or her expertise and judgment. By leveraging the researcher's insights, this technique aimed to assemble a sample that precisely meets the research objectives. Consequently, outcomes derived from this approach are often characterized by high accuracy and minimal margin of error due to the careful consideration of sample members (Fleetwood, 2023).

The sample size for the study was established as 202 individuals with an age range of 17 to 24 years, comprising of 101 females (50%) and 101 males (50%). The sample size was established upon relevance to literature, availability of the participants, and the period sanctioned for the data collection for the said research. Participants were taken from government and private sector universities of Lahore.

### Assessment Measures

#### *The Short Dark Triad (SD3)*

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It was given by Jones and Paulhus (2014) consisting of 27 item based self-reporting scale which confines the responses to a five-point Likert type scale where the points range from "strongly disagree" going through "Neither agree nor disagree" to the extreme of "Strongly Agree." The scale is intended to study the trinity of interrelated dimensions of personality which project connotations of malevolence in personality of an individual. The dimensions can be enumerated as Machiavellianism that is characterized by the manipulative and strategic demeanor that tends to show logical and long-term exhibition of destructive tendencies towards others. Extending on the notion, Narcissism depicts the presence of a sense of grandiosity, with an inflated sense of self – appreciation and self-regard while Psychopathy is marked by an alarming decline in empathy and emotional detachment towards both individuals and objects. SD3 tends to establish the measure for these three inter-related dimensions by distributing 9 items for each dimension which are focused on establishing the presence or absence of that particular dimension. The concurrent reliability for SD3 sub-scales with Self-Report Psychopathy Scale (SRP – III), MACH – IV and Narcissistic Personality Inventory is given as .82 – .92 showing consistent and clear correspondence with the criterion counterparts (Jones et al., 2014), while the concurrent validity for the scales of Machiavellianism, Psychopathy and Narcissism is given as .82, .92 and .87 respectively.

***The Ethics Position Questionnaire (EPQ)***

It was given by Schlenker and Forsyth (1980) consisting of 20 item based self-reporting scale that confines the responses to a nine-point Likert type scale where the points range from "Completely Disagree" going through "Neither agree nor disagree" to the extreme of "Completely Agree." EPQ was based on two major sources of ethical reasoning and disposition of morality. The two domains are given as idealism and relativism. Idealism is based on the concept that harm must be avoided in all circumstances, while relativism takes a realistic approach to morality and professes that at times, for the greater good, harm is unavoidable. Realistic individuals are skeptical of universal standards and morals which refuse any modification. EPQ defines that ethical attitudes are obtained in response to the gradient of harm or benefit resulting from the action and the contemplation of the said action in light of morals and standards considered acceptable by the society. These instances are encompassed in the deontological and teleological models of morality and ethics. The subscales of idealism and relativism show test-retest reliabilities of .67 and .66 respectively (Forsyth et al., 1988). Further, the relativism subscale exhibits a -.31 correlation with

***Demographic Questionnaire***

The demographic variables denoted comprised of age, gender, religion, family system, family income, information related to siblings etc.

**Procedure**

The researcher followed the ethical guidelines of consulting the respective institutes authorities about the permission to conduct the research at the respective institutes where recruiting of the participants was to be done. The research aims as well as its procedures were adequately communicated to the participants prior to their involvement and consent through signing of an informed consent was received.

Proceeding with the recruitment of the participants, a pilot study was initiated prior to the conduction of the main study. For this purpose, 10 undergraduate students were approached as the participants of the pilot study, to assess the clarity, comprehensibility, cultural appropriateness and the time allocated to the participants for the questionnaire.

The pilot study aimed to find out whether the items of questionnaire were interpreted as meant by the researchers, and the identification of potential problems in the linguistic or

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conceptual understanding of the items with the consideration of the administration of the questionnaire as a whole. Once the pilot study was completed, the main study was commenced. The questionnaires were administered to participants recruited from various universities in Lahore. Confidentiality and privacy of the participants was given first priority and was ensured. The researcher ensured that all data collected shall be treated with necessary precaution to preserve the confidentiality of the data through the research process.

## Results

The Pearson Bivariate Correlation Analysis was done to study the association between Dark Triads and Ethical attitudes, by inquiring the relation between the sub scales of SD3 (Machiavellianism, Narcissism, Psychopathy) and EPQ (Idealism, Relativism). A significant negative correlation was observed between Idealism and Narcissism ($r = -.218$, $p < 0.01$), and between Idealism and Psychopathy ($r = -2.81$, $p < 0.01$). A significant positive correlation is exhibited between Relativism and Machiavellianism ($r = .161$, $p < 0.05$).

**Table 1**

*Correlation of Dark Triads, Idealism and Relativism*

| Variables | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Machiavellianism | | | | | |
| 2. Narcissism | 0.301** | | | | |
| 3. Psychopathy | 0.338** | 0.360** | | | |
| 4. Relativism | 0.161* | -0.010 | 0.099 | | |
| 5. Idealism | -0.033 | -0.218** | -0.281** | 0.265** | - |

*Note.* $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$

Extending on these results, the proposed hypotheses are reinforced. Psychopathy shows a relation with the ethical attitudes and as prompted by the correlation, it shows a negative disposition towards the ethical attitudes especially the idealistic morals and ethical attitudes of the society, this is also consistent with Narcissism, which in turn establishes that higher instances of Psychopathy and Narcissism are related with higher instances of unethical attitudes. Further, Machiavellianism shows a negative relation with idealism however, it's not significant nevertheless, a positive relation is observed between Machiavellianism and Relativism which shows that there exists a relation between higher instances of Machiavellianism and some display of ethical attitudes based on realistic expectations.

Reflecting upon the results of the Independent Samples T-Test, men exhibited an average of $M = 3.4041$ in terms of score of Machiavellianism, with $SD = 0.54009$ showing a higher average score than women. Statistical analysis indicates that the Machiavellianism score was significantly greater than the score of females, $t(200) = 3.372$, $p < .05$, $r^2 = 0.474$

Men also exhibited an average of $M = 3.0406$ in terms of score of Narcissism, with $SD = 0.53491$ showing a higher average score than women. Statistical analysis indicates that the Narcissism score was not significantly greater than the score of women, $t(200) = 1.516$, $p = .131$, $r^2 = 0.213$

Men also exhibited an average of $M = 2.9463$ in terms of score of Psychopathy, with $SD = 0.46770$ showing a higher average score than women. Statistical analysis indicates that the Psychopathy score was significantly greater than the score of women, $t(200) = 4.436$, $p < .05$, $r^2 = 0.624$

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**Table 2**
*Gender Differences in Dark Triads*

| Variable | Men | | Women | | t | df | p | Cohen's d |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | M | SD | M | SD | | | | |
| Machiavellianism | 3.4041 | .54009 | 3.1523 | .52113 | 3.372 | 200 | <.001 | .474 |
| Narcissism | 3.0406 | .53491 | 2.9300 | .50119 | 1.516 | 200 | .131 | .213 |
| Psychopathy | 2.9463 | .46770 | 2.6050 | .61588 | 4.436 | 200 | <.000 | .624 |

*Note.* A confidence interval of 95% is utilized for the analysis. (alpha = .05)

## Discussion

Considering the findings, this study affirmed the hypothesized associations between Dark Triad traits and ethical attitudes among university students. Specifically, Machiavellianism demonstrated a positive correlation with relativism, aligning with Hypothesis 2. This suggests that those who exhibit high propensity for Machiavellian traits tend to perceive ethical norms as situational and flexible rather than absolute. Relativism, as defined by Forsyth (1980), reflects a judgment style where moral decisions are made without strict adherence to universal principles. Schlenker (1977) extended this by emphasizing that relativism is not simply the absence of moral codes but a cognitive process shaped by perceived benefit, context, and personal gain. This aligns with Jones and Paulhus's (2009) assertion that Machiavellians possess firm motives—such as power, competition, and status—which they pursue through strategic and, at times, deceptive means.

Leary et al. (1986) further noted that Machiavellians view moral rules as tools, not constraints, favoring a pragmatic approach to morality. They often find themselves in conflict with idealists, who believe ethical outcomes can be universally positive and that moral values should be upheld under all circumstances. From a Machiavellian standpoint, morality is fluid; actions are justified based on their effectiveness, not their ethical merit (McIlwain, 2012). Pitkin (1984) highlighted this strategic mindset, observing that Machiavellians rarely act unless the situation promises personal gain. Even emotional expressions, as McIlwain (2003) described, are often instrumental—used to extract useful information or manipulate others before being discarded as no longer necessary.

Psychopathy also aligned with the expected pattern, showing a negative correlation with idealism, consistent with Hypothesis 2. Forsyth (1980) conceptualized idealism as a strong concern for others' welfare, rooted in the belief that harm should never be inflicted regardless of the situation. In contrast, individuals high in psychopathy exhibit traits such as emotional detachment, impulsivity, and lack of remorse (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Hare (1999) distinguished between two key elements of psychopathy: callous-unemotional traits and a propensity for manipulative behavior. Such individuals lack both the emotional responsiveness and the moral reasoning capacity necessary to engage in idealistic decision-making.

Blair (1999) argued that while psychopaths can cognitively recognize another's perspective, they lack the emotional capacity to vicariously experience those emotions—making moral resonance virtually absent. Levenston et al. (2000) supported this by identifying a void in both hot (emotional) and cold (cognitive) empathy. This emotional detachment explains why psychopathic individuals may engage in morally questionable behavior without internal conflict, aligning with the present study's findings.

Narcissism, similarly, showed a negative relationship with idealism, reinforcing Hypothesis 1. Defined by grandiosity, entitlement, and a preoccupation with self-importance (Paulhus & Williams, 2002), narcissism reflects a personality style that devalues the needs of others. This egocentric orientation results in a diminished concern for moral absolutes or the well-being of others (Linehan, 1993). Narcissists often regard their own values as superior

https://doi.org/10.62663/pjpprp.v16i1.206

and may dismiss others as unworthy of protection or empathy. McIlwain et al. (2012) illustrated this with interpersonal scenarios where narcissistic individuals expressed unwillingness to assist loved ones in danger, citing their own safety and priorities as paramount.

Such findings were echoed by McCroskey and Richmond (1996), who found that individuals with high narcissistic traits scored lower on ethical idealism, indicating a tendency to justify unethical decisions when personal interests are at stake. This supports the conclusion that narcissism undermines moral consistency, particularly in situations that challenge self-image or autonomy.

The study also revealed significant gender differences in the expression of Dark Triad traits, where the males scored higher across all three dimensions. Machiavellianism and psychopathy showed substantial gender-based variance, while narcissism revealed a non-significant difference. This is consistent with literature suggesting that biological and sociocultural factors contribute to the heightened expression of these traits in men (Melanie, 2023). Higher levels of testosterone, social reinforcement of dominance, and masculine ideals that reward emotional suppression may all foster the development of these characteristics.

In many cultures, particularly in patriarchal or collectivist societies, assertiveness and emotional detachment are normalized—if not praised—in men, especially in competitive environments such as academics and business. Consequently, Machiavellian strategies may be viewed as effective rather than unethical, and psychopathy may be misinterpreted as rational decision-making.

Given that this study was conducted in a Pakistani context—a collectivist society shaped by Islamic values—it is important to consider the sociocultural backdrop. Islamic teachings emphasize moral absolutism, empathy, humility, and accountability (Haque, 2004). Idealism, therefore, is often perceived as both a religious virtue and a marker of social maturity. Ethical values are reinforced early in life through family and education, particularly for women, who are traditionally socialized to be emotionally aware, morally upright, and relationship-oriented (Kausar & Khalid, 2016). Men, in contrast, may be granted more behavioral autonomy and social approval for assertiveness and individual achievement (Riaz et al., 2022).

This dual moral framework can lead to impression management behaviors, as proposed by Goffman (1959), where individuals adjust their public conduct to align with societal expectations rather than personal convictions. In such contexts, survey responses may be influenced by social desirability, especially when discussing traits associated with manipulation, emotional detachment, or self-centeredness.

This cultural complexity needs to be brought out in future research works. Our knowledge about justification or hiding of the Dark Triad traits under the influence of religious beliefs, the importance of family roles or social pressures could gain color through the use of qualitative methodologies. Furthermore, the discussion of at least one moderating variable in the form of religious identity can assist in unraveling the way people are trying to resolve unethical propensities and internalized moral rules.

The conclusions in this research have relevant implications to the college environments. High narcissists or high psychopaths may have difficulties in moral judgment although they may perform well in performance-driven cultures or even seem to be functional. This is a challenge that can be faced by educators and administrators because such characteristics might not even be noticed or even rewarded. It is critical to note that detachment of emotions and tactical choices can lead an individual to certain benefit when faced with morally ambiguous cases and at the same time destroy empathy and social responsibility.

To promote the feelings of empathy and moral sensitivity, universities should think about introducing the careful, constructed framework of ethical reasoning, with dilemma-based discussion and self-reflection sessions, among others. A combination of employing ethics in academics and the extracurricular activities helps to temper the outpouring of the socially disruptive traits. Besides, it is possible to introduce some short ethical orientation/personality screenings by offering counseling services which would help the institution adjust assistance in this or that way.

As an example, people high on Machiavellianism might want to work on projects in groups where other people hold them accountable, whereas people high up on narcissism might want to participate in peer-affirmation activities where they are asked to recognize strengths in others. The important thing is early intervention considering the fact that the study focuses on undergraduate students who can at some point assume leadership roles.

Even though it has contributed, this research has various limitations. Firstly there was a small sample size owing to time and resource limitation. Second, a change of data collection to online could have come along with sampling bias. Third, the research in terms of cross-cultural literature on expression of Dark Triad traits in South Asian conditions is scarce, which restricts the generalizability of the results.

Lastly, the cross-sectional design does not allow keeping track of the evolution of these traits or their effect on the ethical behavior over time. Future studies are expected to be based on longitudinal design in assessing ethical orientations throughout adulthood. It is also possible that research done through qualitative inquiry is used to provide an insight as to what moral reasoning strategies are being used by individuals that possess high Dark Triad traits, especially in those cultures found to be collectivistic and those that permeate religion. This sort of study can be of use to turn ethical liabilities into growth areas by being able to identify it early and use character-based mentorship to change the influence on the individual.

In sum, this study reaffirms that Machiavellianism is positively associated with relativism, while narcissism and psychopathy negatively relate to idealism. Gender differences further underscore the nuanced ways in which these traits manifest across cultural lines, reinforcing the need for contextualized ethical education and intervention strategies.

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Recived 19 May 2025
Revision Recived 10 July 2025
Published 25 July 2025