

EVERYDAY SADISM AS A DARK PERSONALITY TRAIT

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KEY POINTS

QUESTIONS

To what extent is subclinical sadism a trait of the dark personality differentiated from the rest of the Dark Triad traits?

FINDINGS

In this cross-sectional study with a total of 405 participants from the general population, sadism is shown to be significantly associated with normal personality: $r = -.23^{***}$ with conscientiousness; $r = -.41^{***}$ with agreeableness. Moreover, at the level of factor structure, it is satisfactorily differentiated from the rest of the dark traits, forming a factor distinct from, although related to, subclinical psychopathy, subclinical narcissism, and Machiavellianism. Finally, it significantly predicts certain dissocial behaviors beyond the rest of the dark triad: $\beta = .17^*$ for antisocial behaviors; $\beta = .19^{**}$ for animal abuse; $\beta = .33^{***}$ for bullying; $\beta = .27^{***}$ for cyber-bullying.

MEANING

Sadism is strongly associated with the normal personality, is structurally distinct from the rest of the dark tetrad traits, and has the capacity to predict behaviors that are harmful to society, thus justifying its place in the dark personality tetrad.

Abstract 350 words

In recent decades there has been a growing interest in the "dark" aspects of personality. Initially three particularly socially harmful aspects were proposed, subclinical psychopathy, subclinical narcissism and Machiavellianism, the so-called "dark triad" (Paulhus and Williams, 2002). More recently, a possible fourth dark aspect, everyday sadism, has been included, forming the so-called "dark tetrad" (Buckels, et al., 2013). Such aspect has been related to aversive behaviors such as obtaining pleasure through suffering and/or dominance before others. This study aims to examine whether sadism differs structurally from the rest of the traits of the Dark tetrad, its pattern of associations with normal personality, and the ability to predict certain behaviors harmful to society, beyond the traits that make up the Dark triad. For this purpose, a survey was administered through a link to the google forms platform, in which participants voluntarily completed different questionnaires of the Dark tetrad SD4 (Ortet-Walker et al., 2022) and different scales that assess harmful behaviors such as antisocial behavior, animal abuse, bullying and cyberbullying. The exploratory factor analysis showed a four-factor structure, with most sadism items saturating in a single factor differentiated from Machiavellianism, narcissism and psychopathy factors. Likewise, the daily sadism scale showed a moderate-high relationship with low agreeableness, and a low-medium relationship with low

responsibility. Finally, multiple regression analyses showed that the most relevant variables in the prediction of these dissocial behaviors such as animal abuse and antisocial behavior were male sex, psychopathy and sadism. In reference to bullying and cyberbullying, the variables age (conversely) and machiavellianism were also found to be significant predictors. In short, our results suggest that everyday sadism explains a significant part of the variability of behaviors such as bullying and cyberbullying, antisocial behavior and animal abuse, beyond the other dark traits, suggesting that this new dark trait is relevant to explain behaviors that are harmful to society and, therefore, would justify the relevance of the so-called "Dark Tetrad".

KEY WORDS: Dark Tetrad, sadism, antisocial behaviors, personality.

1) Introduction/ Background-Significance

In recent decades, there has been an exponential research interest in the study of the "darkest" or most harmful aspects of personality for society. Thus, it has gone from a publication frequency of a couple of studies per year in the first decade of the 2000s, passing through a few tens per year between 2010 to 2015, until reaching in 2018 150 publications on the topic (Dinić & Jevremov, 2019). The concept of dark traits, or Dark Triad, was initially introduced by Paulhus and Williams in 2002. The aim of this was to highlight that negative personality traits existed in the general population, that these traits resembled less severe versions of their corresponding clinical pictures, and that this constellation of traits were related to each other, so it was advisable to study them as a whole. Three constructs or variables were proposed: subclinical narcissism, Machiavellianism, and subclinical psychopathy. Subclinical narcissism refers to aspects such as a constant search for attention along with an exaggerated perception or importance of self. They feel superior to others, with more rights and have excessive selfishness. Machiavellianism consists of behaviors that involve manipulation in a strategic and cold way, being those who "pull the strings" and act behind the backs of others, without having direct confrontation with those they consider useful in the future. Finally, subclinical psychopathy can be defined as an impulsive thrill-seeking tendency, but also includes aspects of emotional coldness and malice.

More recently, the inclusion of a new dark trait, so-called everyday sadism, has been suggested (Buckels, et al., 2013; Paulhus, 2014), forming the "Dark Tetrad" of personality. Traditionally, sadism has been understood from its most extreme forms, such as sexual sadism or sadomasochism, torture for pleasure or serial killers with dozens of victims. This fact has focused the investigation of sadism almost exclusively in forensic settings, such as sexual crimes, or crimes related to violence. Recently, however, it has been posited that there is a form of "everyday sadistic behavior" observed in community populations (Paulhus, & Dutton, 2016). Thus, everyday sadism has been associated with antisocial behaviors, online trolling,

vandalism, stalking and cyberstalking, or cyberstalking, that is, the repeated and malicious harassment and/or surveillance of someone, usually an intimate partner or ex-partner (Buckels, Trapnell, & Paulhus, 2014; van Geel et al., 2017). These everyday sadistic behaviors have been attributed to obtaining pleasure and/or to show some dominance or superiority to others (O'Meara et al., 2011; Plouffe, Saklofske, & Smith, 2017). These "dark" traits have been studied subclinically, that is, they refer to negative traits that occur in general population, and with a lower level of severity than similar clinical pictures found in criminal subjects, with pathologies or under clinical supervision. Thus, dark traits can be understood as combinations of extreme scores of normal personality dimensions (Vize et al., 2021; Paulhus and Williams, 2002; Paulhus, 2020).

There is ample evidence that would support the idea of a continuum from normal personality to combinations of high levels of these dimensions that would give rise to, for example, subclinical psychopathy, and at more extreme levels to more severe clinical pictures, such as psychopathy. Thus, a recent meta-analysis has shown how subclinical psychopathy is characterized by a combination of normal personality traits such as low agreeableness or antagonism and low conscientiousness or disinhibition (Schreiber & Marcus, 2021). This pattern of relationships is identical to that found when studying the normal personality traits that characterize clinical psychopathy (see meta-analysis by Decuyper et al., 2009), suggesting that subclinical psychopathy and clinical psychopathy can be understood as more or less extreme manifestations on the same continuum of normal personality.

Another line of evidence comes from studies exploring the relationships between normal personality models and the dark factor or D-factor, i.e., the common factor latent to dark traits. Thus, different studies have shown a latent correlation between the D factor and antagonism (i.e. low agreeableness) very close to 1, which would clearly indicate that the D factor is the polar opposite of agreeableness, and not a different construct (Vize et al., 2020; 2021).

Finally, the most convincing evidence comes from the few quantitative genetic studies. Thus, in the only existing work in this regard Vernon et al. (2008), have documented a genetic correlation between subclinical psychopathy and agreeableness of $-.70$, and of $-.50$ with conscientiousness, indicating that the relationship between dark traits and normal personality is fundamentally attributable to the same genes. Along these lines, Mann et al. (2015) investigated the genetic overlap between normal personality traits and one of the core components of psychopathy, emotional harshness, in a sample of adolescent twins, finding that the genes at the basis of harshness were the same as the genes involved in low agreeableness and low conscientiousness. In addition, this study also found evidence for continuity between normal personality traits and emotional harshness. Both studies, one on dark traits, and one on traits underlying clinical pictures, support a continuum view from normal personality through the dark traits of the dark tetrad to clinical pictures such as psychopathy.

Although there is ample evidence for the relationship of normal personality to Dark Triad traits, there are hardly any studies exploring the relationship between subclinical sadism and the Five Factor personality model.... Thus, Greitemeyer (2015) conducted 2 studies on dark and normal personality traits in relation to the use of violent video games, finding correlations of between $-.18$ and $-.25$ with agreeableness, and between $-.12$ and $-.25$ with conscientiousness. In the same vein, van Geel et al (2017) examined the relationship between dark tetrad, personality, bullying and cyberbullying, reporting higher correlations between sadism with agreeableness ($-.43^{***}$) and with conscientiousness ($-.26^{***}$). In a recent study in our country by Fernandez del Rio et al. (2021) on dark personality, the five factors and bullying at work, they found a similar pattern of correlations, with magnitudes of $-.31$ and $-.25$ with agreeableness and conscientiousness, respectively.

2) Objectives and hypotheses.

The main objective of this study is to examine in general population samples, and from a continuum view between normal personality and subclinical and clinical dark traits, the relationship of everyday sadism with the dimensions of the Five Factor personality model.

The main hypotheses in this regard are:

Subclinical sadism will be significantly associated with personality, especially low agreeableness and, to a lesser extent, low conscientiousness.

Likewise, the distinctive role of everyday sadism with respect to the rest of the constructs of the Dark Tetrad will be studied. For this purpose, the factor structure of the SD4 questionnaire, a questionnaire recently developed to assess dark tetrad (Paulhus et al, 2020), will be examined. In addition, the role of sadism beyond narcissism, Machiavellianism and psychopathy, in behaviors harmful to society, such as bullying, cyberbullying or cruelty to animals, will be studied,

The main hypotheses in this regard are:

SD4 will show a structure of four interrelated factors representing the dark traits of psychopathy, narcissism, Machiavellianism, and sadism.

- sadism will show incremental validity beyond the rest of the dark traits, in the behaviors of bullying, cyberbullying, antisocial behavior, and animal abuse.

-the rest of the dark constructs, especially psychopathy, would also explain part of the harmful behaviors, but to a lesser extent.

3) Experimental design and data analyses

This is a cross-sectional correlational study in a convenience sample of the general population. From the data obtained, descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation...) will be calculated using the SPSS program; differences according to

biological sex will be calculated using the SPSS program; differences according to biological sex by means of a Student's t-test; Pearson's bivariate correlations between personality variables and the dark tetrad; an Exploratory Factor Analysis of principal axes with oblique rotation and extraction of 4 factors; and multiple regression analysis to predict antisocial behavior, bullying and cyberbullying behaviors, and animal abuse from the dark traits evaluated.

4) Methodology/Methods.

Sample: The sample consists of a total of 405 people, of which 311 were born female (77%) and 94 were born male (23%)

. Regarding the age range of the sample, it ranges from 14 to 82 years of age, although the highest percentage of participation is between 18 and 27 years of age. ([Graphic 1. Age range.](#))

Instruments used:

The psychometric tests used are:

- NEO FFI (Costa and McCrae, 2008).
- SD4: Short dark tetrad (Ortet-Walker et al., 2022).
- SRP antisocial behavior scale (Self-Report Psychopathy scale; Paulhus et al., 2016).
- Animal abuse (Own elaboration)
- B&CB: Bullying & cyber-bullying (Own elaboration).

Procedure: The data will be collected using a Google Forms form. The dissemination of the link to the form will be carried out through social networks (whatsapp, Instagram, twitter and Facebook) in the general population and on a voluntary basis. To encourage the population and thus obtain a greater number of sample, they will be given a report interpreting their responses on one of the constructs mentioned in the experiment. These reports will be delivered once all the study procedures have been completed.

5) Results/Results:

Regarding descriptive statistics, all means are moderately higher in males than in females. Student's t-test shows that the differences between sexes are quite significant ([TABLE 1. Descriptive statistics](#)).

Correlations between normal personality and Dark Tetrad traits show that subclinical sadism has a high mean correlation with low agreeableness of $r = -.407^{**}$, and of $r = -.234^{**}$ with low conscientiousness. The rest of the data can be found below ([Table 2. Correlations between normal and dark personality.](#))

In the pattern matrix of the factor analysis it is observed that all the items of the dark triad show satisfactory saturations in their corresponding factor. In the case of the new construct of everyday sadism, all items of this scale show adequate saturations, except item 22 "I find fist fights exciting" which also saturates in the psychopathy factor, and item 27 "I have said offensive things on social networks just for fun", which saturates more in the psychopathy factor than in the sadism factor. ([Table 3. Pattern matrix.](#)).

The multiple regression analysis showed that the most relevant variables in the prediction of these dissocial behaviors such as animal abuse and antisocial behavior were male sex ($\beta = -.42^{***}$ and $\beta = -.10^*$), psychopathy ($\beta = .14^{***}$ and $\beta = .28^{***}$) and sadism ($\beta = .19^{**}$ and $\beta = .17^*$). In reference to bullying and cyberbullying, the variables reverse age ($\beta = -.21^{***}$ and $\beta = -.12^*$) and Machiavellianism ($\beta = .11^{**}$ bullying) were also found to be significant predictors, in addition to the remaining dark dimensions and male sex.

Regarding the amount of variance explained by these dark dimensions, it is observed in bullying with .31; cyber-bullying with .19; antisocial behavior with .15 and animal abuse with .24. ([Table 4. Multiple regression analysis](#)).

6) Discussion and Conclusions

The present study provides evidence regarding the continuity between normal personality traits and dark traits of the Dark Tetrad, as well as regarding the validity of subclinical sadism as a relevant and differentiated dark trait of the Dark Triad. Thus, we found that subclinical sadism was significantly and importantly related to low agreeableness and, to a lesser extent, low conscientiousness, in line with few previous studies (Fernández-del-Río, E., et al., 2021; van Geel, M., et al 2017; Foulkes, L. 2019; Vize et al., 2021). This would reinforce the idea that subclinical sadism could be understood as a combination of extremely low levels of agreeableness and conscientiousness and that, therefore, dark traits and normal personality are part of the same continuum.

Furthermore, we found that sadism constituted a latent factor distinct from psychopathy, narcissism, or Machiavellianism. This finding is consistent with previous factorial studies, such as Plouffe et al. (2017), or Paulhus et al. (2020). Finally, we found how sadism contributed to the prediction of socially harmful behaviors, such as animal abuse, antisocial behavior, bullying and cyber-bullying, beyond the role of psychopathy, Machiavellianism and narcissism, in line with previous work (Buckels et al., 2013; 2014; van Geel et al. (2017); Fernández del Rio et al. (2021).

In short, our study shows that subclinical sadism is significantly associated with normal personality, so it could be understood as a result of the combination of dimensions such as low agreeableness and low conscientiousness. Moreover, it

shows a factor structure differentiated from the rest of the Dark Triad constructs. Finally, everyday sadism explains a significant part of the variability of behaviors such as bullying and cyberbullying, antisocial behavior and animal abuse, beyond the other traits of the dark triad. All this suggests that this new dark trait is relevant to explain behaviors harmful to society and, therefore, would justify the relevance of the so-called "Dark Tetrad".

7) Limitations

The main limitation of this study is the sample, since the majority (77%) are women. In addition, it would be necessary to broaden the age range to be able to apply the conclusions not only to those aged 18 to 27 years.

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9) ANNEX: GRAPHIC/TABLE

Graphic 1. Age range.

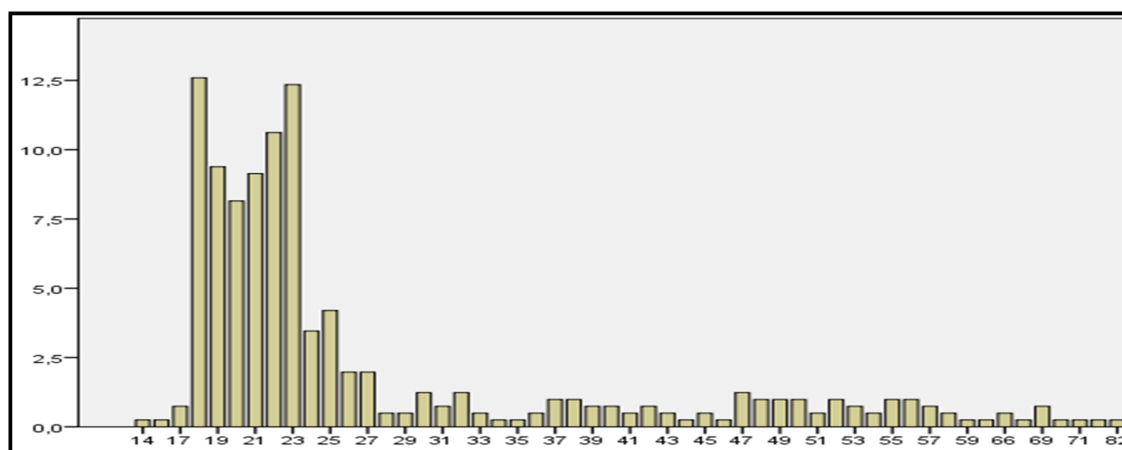


TABLE 1. Descriptive statistics

	Please indicate your sex at birth	Average	Standard deviation	Mean standard error	T estudent (difference between sexes)
ANTISOCIAL	hombre	3,6277	2,31398	0,23867	t=2,03; P<0,05
	mujer	3,0097	2,66037	0,1511	
ACS	hombre	4,9574	3,66593	0,37811	t=9,3; P<0,001
	mujer	2,2258	2,01467	0,11443	
BULLYING	hombre	3,3298	3,94965	0,40738	t=6,62; P<0,001
	mujer	1,2613	2,10857	0,11976	
CYBER_BULLYING	hombre	1,883	2,75469	0,28412	t=2,9; P<0,01
	mujer	1,1452	1,99876	0,11352	
MACH	hombre	14,766	5,7144	0,58939	t=4,8; P<0,001
	mujer	11,4452	5,86762	0,33326	
NAR	hombre	11,0319	6,02941	0,62189	t=3,3; P=0,001
	mujer	8,7581	5,74959	0,32655	
PSY	hombre	4,2979	5,26671	0,54322	t=3,5; P=0,001
	mujer	2,6161	3,68207	0,20913	
SAD	hombre	10,1915	6,6012	0,68086	t=9,6; P<0,001
	mujer	4,1516	4,8996	0,27828	

Note: ^aPresents the descriptive data of the sample, as well as the differences in means according to biological sex.

Table 2. Correlations between normal and dark personality.

SD4	E	N	O	C	A
PSY	.09	.00	-.06	-.24**	-.42**
SAD	-.05	.03	.10	.23**	-.40**
NAR	.31**	-.14**	.26**	.00	-.40**
MAQ	-.09	.13**	.17**	.02	-.41**

Note:

Abbreviations: E-Extraversion, N-neuroticism, O-openness, C-conscientiousness, A-agreeableness.

^a Shows correlations between normal personality dimensions and Dark Tetrad traits. Specifically, subclinical sadism shows a high mean correlation with low agreeableness of $r = -.41^{**}$, and of $r = -.23^{**}$ with low conscientiousness.

Table 3. Pattern matrix.

	NAR	SAD	MAQ	PSY
[8 La gente me ve como un líder natural]	.699	.014	-.043	.018
[12 Tengo algunas cualidades excepcionales]	.693	-.094	-.054	-.106
[9 Tengo un talento único para convencer a la gente]	.674	-.060	.094	-.015
[11 Sé que soy especial porque todo el mundo me lo dice una y otra vez]	.671	.091	.084	.082
[10 Muchas actividades en grupo tienden a ser aburridas sin mí]	.548	.018	.132	.106
[13 Es probable que en el futuro me convierta en una estrella en algún ámbito]	.512	-.063	.017	.151
[14 Me gusta presumir de vez en cuando]	.253	-.022	.044	.236
[23 Me encantan las películas y los videojuegos violentos]	.104	-.817	.040	.002
[25 Disfruto viendo deportes violentos]	.069	-.785	-.062	.114
[24 Es gracioso cuando un idiota cae y se estampa la cara contra el suelo]	-.009	-.613	.186	.097
[26 Hay algunas personas que merecen sufrir]	.053	-.386	.317	.068
[28 Sé cómo hacer daño a la gente usando sólo las palabras]	.228	-.372	.273	.031
[4 Si quieres salirte con la tuya, es mejor pasar desapercibido]	-.100	-.075	.720	.024

(CONTINUATION TABLE)	NAR	SAD	MAQ	PSY
[6 Usar halagos es una buena forma de conseguir que la gente esté de tu lado]	,095	-,081	,589	-,005
[3 Evito el conflicto directo con otros porque me pueden ser de utilidad en el futuro]	-,027	,136	,582	,126
[5 Tiendo a planificar previamente para manejar las situaciones como yo quiero.]	,249	,047	,554	,018
[2 Cueste lo que cueste, debes tener a la gente importante de tu lado.]	,099	,052	,494	,019
[7 Me encanta cuando me funciona un plan astuto]	,310	-,112	,470	-,039
[1 No es prudente contar tus secretos.]	-,054	-,130	,392	-,078
[16 Me gusta vengarme de las figuras de autoridad]	-,013	,054	,128	,700
[20 A veces me meto en situaciones peligrosas]	-,046	-,144	-,032	,700
[15 La gente dice a menudo que estoy fuera de control]	,125	,201	,129	,637
[17 He estado en más peleas que mucha gente de mi edad y género]	,042	-,029	-,049	,623
[19 He tenido problemas con la ley]	-,059	-,210	-,046	,570
[18 Tiendo a lanzarme primero y preguntar después]	,239	,077	-,058	,457
[21 La gente que se mete conmigo siempre lo lamenta]	,119	-,170	,147	,448
[22 Las peleas a puñetazo limpio me resultan excitantes]	-,029	-,422	-,038	,437
[27 He dicho cosas ofensivas en redes sociales solo para divertirme]	-,055	-,262	,069	,400

Note: Abbreviations: nar-narcissism; sad-sadism; maq-machiavellianism; psy-psychopathy

^aAs can be seen, the last 2 red-items, typical of sadism, also saturate in psychopathy.

Table 4. Multiple regression analysis

	Animal mistreatment			Antisocial behavior			Bullying			Cyberbullying		
	R ²	Δ R ²	B	R ²	Δ R ²	B	R ²	Δ R ²	β	R ²	Δ R ²	β
Step 1	.18	----		.01	----		.14	----		.034	----	
SEX			-.42***			-.10*			-.31***			-.14**
AGE			.04			-.05			-.21***			-.12*
Step 2	.24	.06		.15	.14		.31	.17		.19	.16	
PSY			.14***			.271***			.11**			.15**
NAR			.01			.00			-.03***			.07
MAQ			-.05			.01			.11**			.04
SAD			.19***			.168*			.33***			.27***

Note: ^a Table 4 shows the multiple regression analyses, which include the multiple correlation (R²) of sex, age and dark tetrad with the aversive behaviors of animal abuse, antisocial behavior, bullying and cyber-bullying, as well as the increments in the multiple correlation (Δ R²) to test how much each aspect contributes to the variance of variance the detrimental behaviors; and finally the β with its respective significance has been calculated.