

Research Paper

## Guilt-Shame Proneness in Dark Triad: Assessing Young Adults

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### ABSTRACT

Dark Triad forms of Psychopathy, Machiavelliansim and Narcissism as a cluster of malevolent personality traits. Although individuals assessments of Guilt-shame with the three traits is available but not the cluster as a whole. This study undertakes the task to assess the relation between Dark Triad and Guilt-Shame in young adult population. 168 University students were assessed on the measures of Dark Triad and Guilt-Shame. Pearson correlation and regression analysis were performed to assess their association ship and variability. A low significant correlation and variance between the two constructs was found. Results are discussed.

**Keywords:** Dark Triad, Guilt-Shame, Negative Affectivity, Young Adults, Late Adolescents

In memory of S Amrik Singh Bhopal and S Ranjit Singh Bhopal

*“Never attempt to win by force what can be won by deception”*

*-Niccolo Machiavelli*

The Dark Triad comprises of Psychopathy, Narcissism and Machiavellianism. To varying degrees all three entail socially malevolent characters with behavior tendencies towards self-promotion, self-promotion, emotional coldness, duplicity and aggressiveness (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Dark Triad has been a particular variable of interest since Paulhus and colleagues came up with the construct comprising three overlapping personality traits. These traits which are sub-clinical and pathological in nature have not been covered in personality theories. But ever since Dark Triad has come into open interest has grown over the years since it pertains specifically to the so called “Dark Side” of the human personality.

The general view is that Narcissism, Machiavellianism, and Psychopathy represent the malevolent side of human nature and thus are inherently maladaptive and are alongside associated with negative psychosocial outcomes (Muris et al., 2017)

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Before beginning a discussion on Dark Triad, it would be fruitful to define the individual traits in brief.

Psychopathy is a personality trait marked by deceit/manipulation lack of remorse, absence of empathy. According to Lynam and Miller (2019) the traits of antagonism such as callousness, lack of guilt, ruthlessness, exploitation, arrogance, manipulation are the primary features. Affectively, individuals with psychopathy lack empathy, guilt, or remorse, are callous, and have shallow and deficient affect, whereas interpersonally they are grandiose, arrogant, deceitful, and manipulative (De Brito et al., 2021).

Machiavellianism, named after Italian Political thinker Niccolo Machiavelli, is a personality derivative of his works. The label was chosen to capture a duplicitous interpersonal style assumed to emerge from a broader network of cynical beliefs and pragmatic morality. (Jones & Paulhus, 2009). Machiavellianism is a strategy of social conduct that involves manipulating others for personal gain, often against the other's self-interest (Wilson et al., 1996). Furthermore, Machiavellian individuals have decreased motivation for empathy and affective attunement with other people (Paal & Bereczkei, 2007).

Narcissism is a relatively stable individual difference consisting of grandiosity, self-love and inflated self-views. It is characterized by uniqueness, vanity, sense of entitlement, contains low empathy levels and are manipulative and exploitative. They seek opportunities for attention and admiration (Campbell et al., 2011). All in all, Narcissism can be understood as excessive self-love and egocentrism (APA, n.d.)

According to Pilch (2020), the Dark Triad is a set of dispositions fostering the use of exploitative resource acquisition strategies (Furnham et al., 2013), which enables the expropriation of other people's resources using deception, manipulation, intimidation or coercion (Buss & Duntley, 2008). The three personality constructs namely, Psychopathy, Narcissism and Machiavellianism correlate with each another singularly and in combination (Hare et al., 1991; Skinner, 1988; Smith & Griffith, 1978; McHoskey, 1995; Jakobwitz & Egan, 2006) and thus have been regarded an important cluster of antagonistic personalities in psychology (Jones & Figueredo, 2013). Three different theories suggest that Callousness, Dishonesty and disagreeableness respectively are the three contenders that are supposed where the Dark Triad traits overlap (Jones & Figueredo, 2013). Some researches have proposed that the DT traits increase fitness by reinforcing an exploitative and fast life strategy i.e., providing a survival function whereas others have pointed out its undesirable consequences such as but not limited to mate defection, unstable interpersonal relationships, lower subjective well-being etc (Pilch, 2020). All three traits can be viewed as lower- order traits that load onto one super trait of malevolence (Muris et al., 2017)

Guilt is a self-conscious emotion characterized by a painful appraisal of having done/thought something that is wrong and often by a readiness to take action designed to undo/ mitigate this wrong. Shame involves emotions arising from the sense of there being something dishonorable, immodest/indecorous in one's conduct. Many features of Guilt and Shame are intertwined and thus have been studied as a single variable. (APA., n.d.)

Shame and Guilt are often used interchangeably by laymen and scientists alike as it refers to that "moral emotions" that inhibits socially undesirable behavior and foster moral conduct (Damon, 1988; Eisenberg & Shell, 1986; Harris & Lipian, 1989; Schulman & Mekler, 1985). Shame and Guilt are assumed to serve adaptive functions at the societal level,

clinicians have long identified these emotions as potentially problematic for the individual (Tangney, 1995). Both these emotions therefore, produce a negative affectivity inside an individual. Guilt and Shame can further be understood in a public and private dialectic. Shame is a more “public” emotion than guilt, arising from a public exposure and disapproval whereas guilt represents to a more “private” experience arising from self-generated pangs of conscience. (Tangney, 1995; Ausubel, 1955; Benedict, 1946; Gehm & Scherer, 1988).

### *Present Study*

All the three traits share malignant character traits such as callousness, manipulation, deception, etc it points to that fact that their emotional and behavioral regulation and the ability to experience Negative Affect, of which guilt and shame form an essential part, are low.

Therefore, to test this Hypothesis empirically we undertook the present study. The aim of the present study is to study relationship between Guilt-Shame and Dark Triad traits on the young adult population.

## **METHODS**

### *Participants*

The sample consisted of 168 Indian University students (58 males and 110 females) between the ages of 18-21.

### *Measures*

- **The Short Dark Triad:** The Short Dark Triad (SD3) (Jones and Paulhus, 2013) is a self-report measure of Dark Triad traits. It consists of 27 items, 9 each for Psychopathy, Narcissism and Machiavellianism. Participants were asked to rate their agreement to a number of self-reflective statements on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5= strongly agree). Examples include: “Make sure your plans benefit yourself, not others” (Machiavellianism), “I have been compared to famous people” (Narcissism) and “It’s true that I can be mean to others.” (Psychopathy). Cronbach’s alphas ranged from .68 to .74.
- **Guilt-Shame Proneness Scale:** The Guilt-Shame Proneness Scale (GASP) (Cohen et al., 2011) is a self-report measure consisting of 16 items to be responded on a 7-point Likert scale (1= Very Unlikely, 7= Very Likely). Moreover, the scale is an apt tool as it measures Guilt-Shame proneness using both self-behavior and public-private distinctions: the two schools of thought regarding the difference between Guilt and Shame. Furthermore, as a predictive element, the GASP uses an emotional trait approach (i.e., Guilt proneness and Shame proneness) rather than an emotional state one (i.e., Guilt or Shame feeling in the moment). Therefore, this allows us to actually understand and predict as to “how much” an individual is “about to” experience emotions of Guilt-Shame in a Dark Triad context.

### *Procedure*

Authors shared a link consisting of the questionnaires to University Students via WhatsApp. The online form consisted of instructions and a consent form on the first page followed by questionnaires. The participants filled the form which had additional measures not relevant to the current study. The results kept collecting on the online portal which were later analyzed.

**RESULTS*****Zero Order Correlation***

The correlation results between Dark Triad and Guilt-Shame variables are given in Table No 1. As moving with the educated expectation, Dark Triad showed high negative significant relation with Guilt Shame. The only subscale of Dark Triad which showed a significant relation with Guilt-Shame was Psychopathy with a negative correlation. The subscales of Guilt-shame which showed significant (negative) relation with Dark Triad as a whole were Guilt Negative Behavior and Negative Self Evaluation. Interestingly Psychopathy showed negative significant correlation with all subscales of Guilt-Shame as is evident from Table No 1. Other than this the only significant correlation was displayed between Machiavellianism and Guilt Negative Behavior. The important thing to note here is that all significant correlations have been on a lower end between the range of  $-.187$  to  $-.345$

***Linear Regression Analysis***

Linear Regression was used to assess how much of variance of Dark Triad behaviors can be ascertained to Negative affect, here Guilt-Shame.

***Table No 1: Correlation table DT and Guilt-Shame***

	<b>Guilt Shame</b>	<b>Guilt Negative Behaviour Evaluation</b>	<b>Guilt Repair</b>	<b>Shame Withdrawal</b>	<b>Shame Negative Self Evaluation</b>
Dark triad	-.254**	-.275**	-.149	-.031	-.274**
Psychopathy	-.289**	-.313**	-.282**	-.189*	-.345**
Machiavellianism	-.136	-.187*	-.087	-.021	-.069
Narcissism	-.070	-.039	.079	-.111	-.111

\*\* $p < .02$  \* $p < .05$

***Table No. 2: Linear Regression Analysis ( $R^2$ )***

	<b>Dark Triad</b>	<b>Psychopathy</b>	<b>Machiavellianism</b>	<b>Narcissism</b>
Guilt Shame	<b>.064**</b>	<b>.084**</b>	<b>.018</b>	<b>.005</b>
Guilt Negative Behaviour Evaluation	.076**	.098	.035*	.002
Guilt Repair	.022**	.080**	.008	.006
Shame Negative Self Evaluation	.075**	.119	.005	.012
Shame Withdrawal	.001	.036*	.000	.012

\*\* $p < .02$  \* $p < .05$

**DISCUSSION**

The correlation analysis revealed how little an association exists between Dark Triad and Guilt-Shame ( $-.25$ ). From the Dark Triad traits only Psychopathy seemed to exhibit a similar lower level of correlation. Both Narcissism (as opposed to previous studies such as Monetebarocci (2004), Harder & Lewis (1987) where it yielded a significant one) and Machiavellianism did not tend to have a significant relationship with Guilt-Shame. Given the nature of the three malignant traits where deception, exploitation and manipulation run rampant it is but humble to guess that negative affect would play a dim role in their

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emotional and behavioural regulatory processes. That Psychopaths lack in Shame and remorse as a central characteristic has been shown by Cleckley (1964) and De Brito and his Colleagues (2021). Furthermore, in a study by Lyons (2014) Primary Psychopathy, was associated with lower Guilt proneness after a private transgression and lower negative self-evaluations after a public transgression. A Machiavellian lack for affective attunement has also been noted by Paal & Bereczkei (2006). Similar findings present themselves for Narcissism in the work of Montebanarocci and colleagues (2004) where the lack of Guilt-Shame has been understood as a defense against inadequacy and inferiority. All in all, our data backs the fact that Dark Triad behaviour lack emotions of Guilt and Shame. Furthermore, they present a negative association to each other simply meaning that as Dark Triad traits go up Guilt-Shame simultaneously reduces. This presents a straight fact that all the three traits are associated with Emotional Dysregulation as has been previously established (Lau and Marsee, 2012; Akram & Stevenson, 2021; Gomez-Leal et al., 2019).

After applying Regression Analysis, a 6.4% of variance in Dark Triad personality traits is accounted to Guilt-Shame with much of it being ascertained to Psychopathy with 8.4% of variance. This points to a diminished role that Guilt-Shame as an Emotional Dysregulation process play in the acting out of Dark Triad traits.

The Guilt Negative Behavior Evaluation subscale which describes feeling bad about how one acted was significantly negatively associated with Dark Triad and its two traits namely, Psychopathy and Machiavellianism on a lower end. In terms regression analysis it only amounted to a significant 7.6% of variance in Dark Triad with only Machiavellianism amounting to a significant 3.5% of variance. Thus, pointing to a low variance in terms of placing a guilt behavioral evaluation in a Dark Triad context.

Next comes the Guilt Repair which points to the action tendencies focused on compensating for a transgression. On this subscale, the only significant relation was shown with Psychopathy which was a low negative. In terms of regression, however a significant relation was established with both Psychopathy and Dark Triad with Psychopathy amounting to most its variance of 8% and Dark Triad only a little 2.2%. Overall, for Dark Triad, Guilt Repair which is a behavioral tendency to look out for one's actions, amounts to a highly low count.

Then is the Shame Negative Self Evaluation which describes feeling bad about oneself. The negative significant association to this was with Dark Triad and Psychopathy. For Regression Analysis only 7.5% variance was observed for Dark Triad. The three traits remained insignificant.

And lastly the Shame Withdraw explains the action tendencies focused on hiding or withdrawing from public where only Psychopathy showed a little negative significant association and a similar 3.6% accounted variance for the same.

According to the authors of the GASP scale, it can more accurately detect individuals' propensity to experience guilt and shame in their everyday lives (Cohen et al., 2011). Thus, the data has helped us to locate the role that Guilt-shame plays in a Dark Triad led context which to our expectations was low i.e., Guilt-Shame as Negative Affect play little role in the play out of Dark Triad traits.

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The American writer Natalie Babbitt in “The Eyes of the Amaryllis” writes, “A guilty conscience can be very troublesome, I’ve heard”. Perhaps it can and to keep in check one’s behaviour it must but not so for the Dark traits as we have shown above.

### ***Implications***

Since this study has proposed that guilt shame as emotional regulators play little role in Dark Triad led behaviours, the results of this study therefore may have implications in the construction and usage of interventions in the delinquent youth and to approach anti-social behaviour overall. According to Lau & Marsee (2012) & Pardini et al (2003), for youth characterized by callous traits which forms the core of Dark Triad, interventions aimed at their reward-dominant cognitive style, self-interests/motivations, lack of regard for punishment and consequences, and behavioural impulsivity may be warranted. Behavioural reinforcements could increase the desired responses and the behavioural repertoire of social problem-solving techniques (Kazdin, 2010). Since a lot of Dark Triad traits occur in an interpersonal setting, the interpersonal therapy techniques could adopt measures to improve interpersonal exchange taking into account the role of Guilt-Shame as regulatory emotions. More advancement in Adaptive strategies could be brought so to regulate Dark Triad based behaviour and reduce its negative outcome. This study has also added to the humungous Developmental Psychology corpus by providing novel insights into emotional processes of Young Adults stage which can further be assessed in a comparative fashion by taking into account other age groups. In conclusion, the present study promises primary implications for Clinical and Psychiatric settings.

### ***Limitations and Future Research***

Although we found significant variance, the variance accounted in the entire study was modest ranging from around 2% to 8%. Second because of the cross-sectional nature of this study the directionality and the causality of the observations could not be inferred. Furthermore, since this study was only focused on young adults future research should be longitudinal to look at the stability of these personality and affective patterns over time.

Self-report measure presents another issue as it’s the student who report about their response tendencies which could pose certain limitations such as in form of social desirability. Future researches could look into alternative measures to assess this relation such as informant report measures or behavioural observations or perhaps triangulating multiple methods for more nuanced understanding.

The sample is limited to North Indian University Students therefore young adults with different background and socio-demographic factors should also be studied. Along with that the sample is a community sample and thus doesn’t create a picture for forensic, at risk and clinical population. Future research could look and compare these samples as well.

Mediation Analysis of certain mediating variables could be studied to better understand the relationship between Guilt-Shame and Dark Triad traits and what other factors mediate the two.

Since most significant correlations have been established with Psychopathy it would be fruitful to assess the role of Psychopathy alone in Negative Affectivity and Emotional (Dys) regulation more broadly and to answer the contribution of Psychopathy to this Emotional and Personality specter.

Further research could see to relative change in Dark Triad traits if the propensity to experience Guilt-Shame is increased experimentally i.e., to check the manipulation in Guilt-Shame levels to assess dark trait response. This would provide to its relative association to each other and might help develop a causal pathway.

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