

Research Paper

Relationship between Dark Triad Traits, Cognitive Rigidity and Aggression among Young Adults

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ABSTRACT

People who show traits like narcissism, Machiavellianism or psychopathy often struggle in relationships and act more aggressively. Still, little is known about how their thinking styles play a role. When someone finds it hard to shift viewpoints or consider new ideas, what some call rigid thinking, it might fuel hostile reactions, especially in those with such traits. With a sample size of 200 participants, comprising 100 females and 100 males, this study looks into the relationship between Dark triad traits, cognitive rigidity, and aggression in young adults. This research looked at how these three factors connect using data from 200 young adults between 18-30 years. Dark Triad traits were measured using SDT-27. Cognitive rigidity was assessed using the Cognitive flexibility inventory (CFI-20) assuming that lower flexibility scores show higher rigidity. The Reactive-Proactive Aggression Questionnaire (RPQ) gave insight into aggressive tendencies. This study uses statistical methods, including Pearson's correlation and multiple regression methods. Strong links showed up between darker personality features, inflexible thought, and acts of aggression. Thinking in rigid ways stood out as closely tied to aggressive responses. That mental stiffness helped explain why certain personalities act more aggressively. Young adults who have rigid thinking patterns often show it in their personality which reflect harmful actions.

Keywords: *Dark Triad Traits, Cognitive Rigidity, Aggression, Reactive aggression, Proactive Aggression, Young Adults*

Young adults acting out in forceful ways worry people around them just as much as it affects their own lives. Because some folks lean toward hurtful conduct more than others, researchers often turn to character patterns for answers. Notably, a mix called the Dark Triad made up of manipulation, self-absorption, and lack of empathy keeps showing up in studies on conflict and social harm (Paulhus & Williams, 2002; Muris et al., 2017). While proof ties these features strongly to lashing out, what happens inside the mind before action takes place remains unclear.

Three dark personality traits connect in theory but still stand apart. Manipulation and cold planning mark Machiavellianism, built around self-interest. Narcissism shows up as inflated self-worth, demands special treatment, thrives on praise. Callous actions, rash choices, lack

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of feeling for others define psychopathy. Though unique, each shares a core edge of hostility and little regard for people. This common thread links them to harmful behaviors. Aggression wears different faces depending on the trait. Outbursts tied to emotion appear more with psychopathy. Harm that's planned or used as a tool lean toward Machiavellian thinking or certain sides of narcissism (Cima et al., 2013; Jonason & Webster, 2010).

Early adult years open a key chance to study these links. From teenage final stages into upper twenty ages come constant self-discovery, changing positions among people, together with stronger contact with tough school and job settings. Research shows harsher character traits might stand out more now, increasing effects on friendships, handling disagreements, also choices involving danger (Jonason et al., 2012). Still, recognizing some qualities lead to hostility fails to reveal the way those actions actually unfold when life happens.

Many scientific studies have explained the reason behind certain behaviors lies in how stiffly some minds operate resisting shifts when situations evolve. When someone sticks tightly to first impressions, adjusting views feels hard, fresh details get ignored, other ways of acting stay out of reach, especially amid disagreements. This stiffness often pairs with seeing anger where none might exist, making harsh replies more common, notably when uncertainty clouds things. Looking through a cognitive lens, lasting personal features mold routine ways of handling thoughts, steering feelings and actions alike. Those scoring high on Dark Triad qualities tend to build narrow mental frames centered on themselves, primed to spot slights or danger, shrinking the space for calm choices without force.

Previous researchers have not looked at how stubborn thinking connects with Dark Triad traits to influence various aggressive behaviors. Studies on dark personality types usually stick to linking traits straight to actions. Meanwhile, work on mental inflexibility tends to ignore the underlying character features that may shape those thought patterns. Bringing these areas together might show if fixed thinking acts as a bridge turning hostile traits into real world conduct.

Young adults' actions often stem from unseen mental routines. The present study therefore examines whether Dark Triad traits are associated with **aggression and cognitive rigidity** in young adults, and whether rigid patterns of thinking help explain variations in aggressive behavior.

In summary, looking closer at how Dark Triad traits link with rigid thinking and aggressive actions helps clarify why certain personalities react the way they do during early adult years.

METHODOLOGY

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between Dark Triad traits, cognitive rigidity, and aggression in young adults, with particular attention to potential differences between males and females. Through this investigation, the research aims to understand how personality characteristics associated with the Dark Triad may influence cognitive inflexibility and aggressive behaviors in later life.

Objectives

- To assess the correlation between Dark Triad traits, cognitive rigidity, and aggression in young adults.

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- To examine whether Dark Triad traits and cognitive rigidity significantly predict aggression among young adults using multiple regression analysis.
- To determine the relative contribution of each Dark Triad trait and cognitive rigidity in explaining variance in aggression.

Hypothesis

- **H1:** There will be a significant positive relationship between overall Dark Triad traits and aggression among young adults.
- **H2:** Machiavellianism will be significantly and positively associated with aggression among young adults.
- **H3:** Narcissism will be significantly and positively associated with aggression among young adults.
- **H4:** Psychopathy will show a significant and strong positive association with aggression among young adults.
- **H5:** Cognitive rigidity will be significantly and positively associated with aggression among young adults.
- **H6:** Psychopathy will be significantly and positively associated with cognitive rigidity among young adults.

Variables

Following variables were examined in the research,

- **Dark Triad Traits** – Dark Triad traits comprise three socially aversive personality characteristics: Machiavellianism, which involves manipulation and strategic exploitation of others, Narcissism, characterized by grandiosity, entitlement, and a need for admiration; and Psychopathy, marked by impulsivity, lack of empathy, and antisocial behavior. These traits are associated with interpersonal difficulties and antisocial tendencies in adulthood.
- **Cognitive Rigidity** – Cognitive rigidity refers to the tendency to think in a fixed, inflexible manner, showing resistance to changing one's beliefs, strategies, or perspectives even in the face of new information or circumstances. High cognitive rigidity is often linked to difficulties in problem-solving and adaptive behavior.
- **Aggression** – Aggression is the tendency to engage in behaviors intended to harm, intimidate, or dominate others, whether physically, verbally, or psychologically. Aggressive behavior can manifest as reactive or proactive aggression depending on the underlying motivation.

Sample

The study involved 200 young adults aged between 18 to 30 years, with 100 men and 100 women, who resided in India. Convenience sampling was used to select participants from Lucknow, a choice that was practical and accessible, making it easier to recruit those who were available and willing to participate in the research.

Research design

This study employed a correlational research design to examine the relationship between Dark Triad traits, cognitive rigidity, and aggression among young adults. The approach enabled the assessment of the direction and strength of associations among the variables while also evaluating their predictive value. Pearson correlation analysis was used to explore bivariate relationships, and multiple regression analysis was conducted to determine the extent to which Dark Triad traits and cognitive rigidity contributed to aggression.

Instruments

Three measures were used in this study,

1. **Short Dark Triad Scale (SD3–27):** The Short Dark Triad was developed by Delroy L. Paulhus and Daniel N. Jones to assess the three socially aversive personality traits collectively known as Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy. This standardized self-report instrument consists of 27 items, with nine items measuring each trait. Participants rate the extent to which each statement applies to them using a Likert-type scale. The SD3–27 has demonstrated good psychometric properties across diverse populations, with acceptable internal consistency, typically showing Cronbach's alpha values between 0.70 and 0.80 for the subscales. Factor analytic findings support its construct validity, while associations with antisocial tendencies, manipulation, and aggression provide evidence of criterion validity.
2. **Cognitive Flexibility Inventory (CFI):** The Cognitive Flexibility Inventory, developed by Dennis and Vander Wal, was used in the present study to assess cognitive rigidity through the inverse interpretation of flexibility. The instrument contains 20 self-report items that measure an individual's perceived ability to shift perspectives, generate alternative solutions, and view challenging situations as manageable. Responses are recorded on a Likert scale reflecting levels of agreement. The CFI has shown high internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values commonly exceeding 0.85, along with satisfactory test–retest reliability. Previous research provides strong support for its construct and convergent validity in young adult samples.
3. **Reactive–Proactive Aggression Questionnaire (RPQ):** Aggression was assessed using the Reactive Proactive Aggression Questionnaire developed by Roland and Idsoe. The RPQ is a self-report measure that distinguishes between reactive aggression, which is impulsive and emotionally driven, and proactive aggression, which is deliberate and goal oriented. Participants indicate how frequently they engage in various aggressive behaviors on a Likert-type scale. The instrument has demonstrated good internal consistency for both subscales, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients typically above 0.75. Evidence of construct validity is reflected in its ability to reliably differentiate between impulsive and instrumental forms of aggression, and it has been widely applied in research with adolescents and young adults.

Procedure

A total of 200 individuals, comprised of 100 females and 100 males, were selected using the convenience sampling method. Each participant was given a questionnaire and instructed to complete it truthfully. Before administering the questionnaire, participants were informed about the study's purpose and procedures. Demographic information, such as name, age, gender, educational qualification, occupation, and contact details, was gathered from each participant. To participate in the study, all subjects gave consent. After that, the acquired data was analysed to determine the relationships between the variables being investigated.

Ethical Considerations

The ethical guidelines that governed this research were getting participants' informed consent, protecting the privacy and confidentiality of the information gathered, limiting potential risks, honouring participants' autonomy, optimizing benefits, and upholding transparency and integrity. These principles were implemented to protect the rights, welfare, and privacy of the participants throughout the entire research process.

RESULTS

The data collected was subjected to statistical analysis, which comprised conducting correlation analyses and multiple regression to investigate the relationship between the variables.

Table No. 1 Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables

Variable	M	SD	Range	Skewness	Kurtosis
Dark Triad Traits	78.40	12.87	43–118	0.22	0.10
Machiavellianism	29.40	5.91	12–45	–0.05	0.09
Narcissism	27.00	5.06	9–40	–0.28	0.56
Psychopathy	22.00	5.71	11–38	0.48	0.11
Cognitive Flexibility	102.68	15.00	61–135	–0.24	–0.56
Aggression	11.81	9.14	0–38	1.15	0.44

Note. $N = 200$. Range represents minimum–maximum scores.

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics of the study variables. The skewness and kurtosis values were within acceptable limits, indicating that the data were approximately normally distributed and suitable for parametric analyses.

Table No. 2 Correlations Analysis of Dark Triad traits, Cognitive Rigidity and Aggression

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. Machiavellianism	—				
2. Narcissism	.412**	—			
3. Psychopathy	.390**	.386**	—		
4. Cognitive flexibility	.052	.102	–.221**	—	
5. Aggression	.386**	.230**	.615**	–.303**	—

Note. $N = 200$. Values are Pearson correlations. $p < .01$.

Table 2 shows the Pearson correlations among the variables. Aggression was positively and significantly associated with Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy. Cognitive flexibility was negatively correlated with psychopathy and aggression, indicating that lower flexibility (greater rigidity) was related to higher aggressive tendencies. The Dark Triad traits were also positively intercorrelated.

- To further examine predictors of aggression, multiple regression analyses were conducted.

Table No. 3 Multiple Regression Predicting Aggression Scores from Dark Triad Traits and Cognitive Flexibility

Variable	B	SE B	β	R ²
Model				.36
Constant	0.63	4.87		
Dark Triad traits	0.37***	0.04	.52***	
Cognitive flexibility	–0.17***	0.04	–.29***	

Note. $N = 200$. $p < .05^*$, $p < .01^{**}$, $p < .001^{***}$.

As shown in Table 3, Dark Triad traits significantly predicted aggression. Higher Dark Triad scores were associated with higher aggression. Cognitive flexibility emerged as a significant negative predictor, suggesting that lower flexibility (greater rigidity) contributed to increased aggression. The model explained 36% of the variance in aggression.

Table No. 4 Multiple Regression Predicting Aggression Scores from Dark Triad Trait Dimensions

Variable	B	SE B	β	R ²
Model				.39
Constant	-13.36***	3.23		
Machiavellianism	0.28**	0.10	.18**	
Narcissism	-0.10	0.11	-.05	
Psychopathy	0.89***	0.10	.55***	

Note. $N = 200$. $p < .05^*$, $p < .01^{**}$, $p < .001^{***}$.

Table 4 indicates that psychopathy was the strongest positive predictor of aggression, followed by Machiavellianism, whereas narcissism did not significantly predict aggression. The model accounted for 39% of the variance in aggression.

- Additional regression analyses were performed to determine whether Dark Triad traits predicted cognitive rigidity (flexibility inversed).

Table No. 5 Multiple Regression Predicting Cognitive Flexibility from Dark Triad Traits

Variable	B	SE B	β	R ²
Model				.00
Constant	105.79***	6.58		
Dark Triad traits	-0.04	0.08	-.03	

Note. $N = 200$. $p < .05^*$, $p < .01^{**}$, $p < .001^{***}$.

As presented in Table 5, Dark Triad traits did not significantly predict cognitive flexibility. The model explained negligible variance.

Table No. 6 Multiple Regression Predicting Cognitive Flexibility from Dark Triad Trait Dimensions

Variable	B	SE B	β	R ²
Model				.10
Constant	99.25***	6.46		
Machiavellianism	0.27	0.20	.11	
Narcissism	0.54*	0.23	.18*	
Psychopathy	-0.87***	0.20	-.33***	

Note. $N = 200$. $p < .05^*$, $p < .01^{**}$, $p < .001^{***}$.

However, when examining the dimensions separately (Table 6), psychopathy significantly and negatively predicted cognitive flexibility, while narcissism showed a small positive association. Machiavellianism was not a significant predictor. The model explained 10% of the variance.

DISCUSSION

The present study examined the relationships between dark triad personality traits (Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy), cognitive rigidity, and aggression among young adults. Cognitive rigidity was operationalised as the inverse of cognitive flexibility, which was measured using the Cognitive Flexibility Inventory (CFI; Dennis & Vander Wal, 2010). The findings provide important insights into how these maladaptive personality traits relate to both cognitive processing styles and aggressive behavior, with implications for understanding the psychological mechanisms underlying aggression in this population.

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The results revealed that there were a few clear patterns among which one thing stood out, the three dark personality traits tended to go together somewhat, their links falling between .39 and .41, meaning they overlap but still act like separate things. When it came to aggressive behavior, psychopathy had the tightest link ($r = .62, p < .01$), more so than Machiavellianism ($r = .39, p < .01$) or narcissism ($r = .23, p < .01$). On another note, people who scored low on cognitive flexibility (cognitive rigidity) based on the CFI scale, were more likely to show aggression ($r = -.30, p < .01$) and also leaned toward psychopathic tendencies ($r = -.22, p < .01$). Looking deeper, statistical checks showed the trio of dark traits explained 36% of why some acted aggressively, yet knowing someone's mental adaptability added extra clarity even after those traits were considered.

Dark Triad Traits Linked to Higher Aggression

A clear link shows up between dark triad traits and aggression, especially when it comes to psychopathy ($\beta = .55, p < .001$), matching what past studies have found that people with stronger psychopathic tendencies tend to act more aggressively (Jones & Paulhus, 2011; Paulhus & Williams, 2002). These outcomes add nuance by focusing on young adults, a stage where self-concept takes shape alongside growing independence.

Aggression links clearly to Machiavellianism, yet the connection isn't nearly as strong as with psychopathy ($\beta = .18, p < .01$). From a theory standpoint, that makes sense, manipulation and cold calculation define Machiavellian traits more than rash hostility (Christie & Geis, 1970).

However, narcissism did not link clearly to aggression ($\beta = -.05, p > .05$) once the other dark triad traits were accounted for, even though on its own it correlated positively ($r = .23, p < .01$). Because of this reversal, what looks like narcissism driving aggression might actually come from shared features with psychopathy and Machiavellianism. Earlier studies support these aggressive reactions in narcissists tend to flare up only after personal slights (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998), unlike the broader, steadier pattern seen in those high in psychopathy.

Cognitive Rigidity and How It Connects with Other Factors

Thinking less flexibly shows up clearly when CFI scores drop - a sign someone struggles to shift mental gears as situations change. People scoring low tend to react with more aggression, shown by the link at $r = -.30, p < .01$. Past ideas fit here that rigid thought blocks paths to smoother choices (Crick & Dodge, 1994).

Not every trait in the dark triad links to cognitive flexibility in the same way. Looking at them together, there is almost no connection and just a tiny r value that does not reach significance. But once split apart, different stories appear. Psychopathy stands out clearly, tied to lower adaptability in thinking, with a strong negative coefficient. Narcissism takes an opposite turn, showing slight alignment with more flexible thought patterns. Machiavellianism drifts off without any meaningful tie either way.

Increase in Value from Shifting Thinking

One key result stood out that is cognitive flexibility helped predict lower levels of aggression, even when considering dark triad traits ($\beta = -.29, p < .001$). Despite those personality factors already explaining a large portion of aggression ($R^2 = .36$), flexible thinking added further clarity on its own. Thinking patterns matter; being able to shift mental gears seems to influence how people act, separate from their core traits. Because of this link, working on adaptable thought processes might help reduce harmful behaviors,

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especially in tough cases where dark triad tendencies are present. Matched up, these insights fit well within models like Anderson and Bushman's from 2002, where multiple forces feed into hostile responses.

Though narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy all carry a sharp edge of hostility, their mental habits and routes to aggressive acts don't follow identical paths. Because of this twist, strategies aimed at reducing harm might work better if shaped around the distinct thought styles tied to each one.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how dark traits reveals their varied links to aggressive actions among younger people. Not every trait weighs the same when it comes to harmful acts. What stands out is psychopathy driving more hostility than others. In contrast, manipulation tactics tied to Machiavellian thinking matter less. Even though narcissistic tendencies seem linked to aggression on the surface, they fade when examined alongside the rest. Thinking patterns played a role just as much as character did. Those struggling to shift their thoughts tended to act out more often, regardless of darker personality features. What comes through clearly is that mental habits influence how inner traits show up in daily life. To grasp why young adults, turn aggressive, it helps to look beyond identity toward flexibility under pressure. Building smoother ways of adapting thought might open paths researchers have yet to fully explore.

Limitations

- The findings based on a relatively small and geographically restricted sample may not fully represent the broader population of young adults, thereby limiting generalizability.
- The use of convenience sampling may reduce the external validity of the study and increase the possibility of sampling bias.
- The cross-sectional research design prevents causal conclusions regarding the direction of relationships among Dark Triad traits, cognitive rigidity, and aggression.
- Reliance on self-report measures for Dark Triad traits, cognitive flexibility, and aggression may introduce social desirability and response biases, particularly when assessing socially undesirable traits such as psychopathy.
- Although gender distribution was equal, detailed gender-based comparative analyses were limited, which may restrict deeper understanding of gender differences in aggression and cognitive rigidity.

Directions for Future Research

- Expand and diversify sample populations across different regions and cultural contexts to enhance generalizability of findings.
- Conduct longitudinal studies to examine causal pathways between Dark Triad traits, cognitive rigidity, and aggression over time.
- Investigate potential mediating or moderating roles of cognitive rigidity in the relationship between psychopathy and aggression.
- Examine gender differences more comprehensively, particularly in relation to reactive versus proactive aggression and cognitive processing styles.
- Incorporate multi-method approaches (e.g., behavioral tasks, peer reports, or qualitative methods) to gain deeper insight into the cognitive and emotional mechanisms underlying aggressive behavior.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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