

## The Relationship Between Dark Triad and Quality of Family Interaction among Young Adults

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### Abstract

The importance of family in shaping an individual's personality is highly crucial. Thus, family dynamics and interactions play a vital role in the development of both positive and negative traits. This research explored the complexities of the relationship between the dark triad personality traits and the quality of family interactions among young adults. Each category of the dark triad that dealt with different elements of family dynamics was analyzed using a correlation design on data gathered from a sample of 300 young adults ages 18 to 25. The data was collected through the Short Dark Triad Scale for the assessment of dark triad traits and to measure the quality of family interactions; a modified version of the Family Assessment Device was used. For statistical analysis, Pearson product-moment correlation was applied. The inferential and descriptive data of this study revealed that higher levels of the dark triad personality traits- Machiavellianism, Psychopathy, and Narcissism- result in lower levels of family functioning and are negatively correlated with various elements of family interactions. Findings from this study can help bridge the existing literature gap and also elucidate the complex relationship between family interaction and personality development.

**Keywords:** Dark Triad, Family Interaction, Personality Traits, Young Adults

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### Introduction

Over time and across generations, people have been quite interested in knowing a person's personality. There has been a surge in interest surrounding the notion, as numerous scholars propose that the Dark Triad serves as a notable predecessor of behaviors that defy norms and boundaries (Muris et al., 2017). The interplay between personality traits and family interaction presents a multifaceted and engrossing

domain within the realm of psychology. According to the Health Resources and Services Administration, 'a family is a group of two or more people related by birth, marriage, or adoption' (Definition of Family, 2023). Simply put, a group of people associated with each other who live together can be defined as a family. Family members are elaborately connected throughout different stages of life; playing a crucial role as a fundamental source of social connection (Thomas et al., 2017). These bonds and the quality of relationships are essential in shaping individuals' overall well-being, including their psychological, behavioral, and psychosocial aspects. Similarly, stressors within families, such as conflicts and pressures, can adversely affect their overall well-being (Thoits, 2011).

Recently, research has moved beyond the conventional model of assessing personality traits, namely, the 'Big Five model' and has advanced towards the exploration of a darker side of human nature which falls under the dark triad traits (Buckels et al., 2013; Jonason et al., 2014;

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Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Moreover, this research holds the potential to enhance the understanding of the complex interplay between personality and family dynamics, offering valuable insights for both psychological research and practical interventions. The focus of the study was young adults aged between 18 to 25, as 29% of Pakistan's population falls under this age bracket. The years between 18 to 25 are crucial and significant years of development in which one's personality, perspective and characteristics are evolving and are influenced by what surrounds an individual.

According to the United Nations Human Development Reports (2018), young people from Pakistan are influential in several capacities. One such is being able to use social media platforms to innovate, raise voices, and spread awareness. In addition to this, they are actively condemning oppression and are taking part in various social movements. This provides the insight to conduct a comprehensive exploration of this age group in relation to what personality traits shape and impact their micro-environment, such as family interactions.

Various theories can explain the connection between the dark triad traits and family interactions. One such is the attachment theory proposed by Bowlby (1982), which suggests that early attachment experiences influence personality development and family dynamics. Another theory is the social learning theory by Bandura (1977), which proposed that an individual develops behaviors through observing and imitating. Family members may inadvertently reinforce Dark Triad behaviors, perpetuating dysfunctional interaction patterns (Láng & Lénárd, 2015).

Attachment theory explains how relationships with caregivers in the early years of development can shape the various tendencies in one's personality that may manifest themselves as Dark Triad traits. While social learning theory demonstrates how reinforcement through imitation and

modelling can provide an understanding of these traits, both of these frameworks together demonstrate how early attachment experiences and behaviors learned within the family context may contribute to the development and emergence of the dark triad traits, ultimately contributing to maladaptive and dysfunctional family interactions. Using this as a basis, the current study hypothesizes a negative relationship between Dark Triad traits and family interactions, such that dysfunctional family patterns or family dynamics are associated with higher levels of Dark Triad traits.

### **Hypotheses**

H1: There is a negative relationship between the Dark Triad (Machiavellianism, Narcissism, and Psychopathy) and the Quality of family interaction (Problem Solving, Communication, Roles, Affective Responsiveness, Affective Involvement, Behavior Control, and General Functioning).

H2: Machiavellianism is negatively correlated with General functioning.

H3: Psychopathy is negatively correlated with Affective Responsiveness.

H4: Narcissism is negatively correlated with Affective Involvement.

### **Method**

#### **Research Design**

This research utilized a correlational approach to investigate the relationship between the dark triad traits (*Machiavellianism, Narcissism, and Psychopathy*) and the quality of family interactions (*Problem-Solving, Communication, Roles, Affective Responsiveness, Affective Involvement, Behavior Control, and General Functioning*). This method was preferred because it did not involve manipulating variables, allowing the researcher to examine multiple variables simultaneously.

#### **Participants and Sampling**

The study recruited a convenience sample of adults aged 18 to 25 from 5 notable universities in Lahore and 2 corporate offices, with diverse backgrounds and

family structures. The target sample size was 300 participants. The largest population was from the 22- to 25-year-old age group (57%). The sample consisted of

a greater number of females (60.7%) than males (39.3%). Most participants in the study belonged to a nuclear family structure (81.7%).

**Table 1**

*Sociodemographic Characteristics of Participants (N=300)*

Baseline Characteristic	<i>n</i>	%
<b>Age</b>		
18-19	51	17.0
20-22	171	57.0
23-25	78	26.0
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	118	39.3
Female	182	60.7
<b>Family Structure</b>		
Nuclear	245	81.7
Extended	36	12.0
Single parent	18	6.0
Divorced	1	.3

## Measures

### Dark Triad

The '27-item Short Dark Triad (SD3)' was administered to assess the dark triad traits (Jones & Paulhus, 2013). All items were ranked on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = completely disagree, 5 = completely agree). The scale used in the study demonstrated good internal consistency reliability (Machiavellianism:  $\alpha = .71$ , narcissism:  $\alpha = .74$ , psychopathy:  $\alpha = .77$ ). Based on the current sample, the demonstrated reliability scores are (Machiavellianism:  $\alpha = .70$ , narcissism:  $\alpha = .69$ , psychopathy:  $\alpha = .68$ ).

### Quality of Family Interaction

The quality of family interaction was assessed using the modified version of the 'Family Assessment Device' (Epstein et al., 1983). Based on the 'McMaster Model of Family Functioning' (MMFF), the FAD measures the structural, organizational, and transactional characteristics of families. The 7 sub-scales assess the 7 dimensions of the MMFF— 'affective involvement, affective responsiveness, behavioral control, communication, problem-solving,

roles, and lastly general family functioning'. The measure comprises 53 statements related to family relations.

### Procedure

After approval from the relevant authorities, which included the Ethics Review Committee, Institutional Review Board, and Board of Studies, data collection was started. The data was collected from different private and public universities and corporate offices in Lahore after seeking permission from the relevant authorities. Participants were requested to share demographic information, such as their age, gender, family size, and family structure (e.g., nuclear family, extended family, single-parent family, and divorced families). Participants received comprehensive information regarding the study's objectives, methods, possible risks, and advantages.

The data were gathered through self-report questionnaires administered to participants. They were directed to an in-person survey to complete the questionnaires anonymously, before answering questions

related to the Dark Triad traits and family interaction, informed consent was taken from the participants, and they were provided with clear instructions about the confidentiality of their responses. To make the Dark Triad scale culturally relevant and appropriate, item no 26, which corresponds to the following statement, “I enjoy having sex with people I hardly know” was omitted from the survey forms after the IRB’s concern, as it is socially inappropriate and does not apply to the population in the cultural context of Pakistan. Hence, the scale used in this study comprised 26 items in total.

### Ethical Considerations

All participants were required to sign the consent forms after fully comprehending the study's objectives, methods, possible risks, and advantages. Participation was on a voluntary basis, and individuals could choose to exit the study at any time. The privacy and confidentiality of participants were rigorously protected through anonymous data collection methods. The study used no deception, and participants were provided with a comprehensive

debriefing process. Research materials and procedures were culturally appropriate and sensitive to ensure that ethical standards were consistently upheld throughout the research process.

### Statistical Analyses

For statistical investigation, both descriptive and inferential statistical analyses were conducted. Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, etc.) were computed for Dark Triad traits and Family Interaction variables. For inferential statistics analysis, Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients were calculated to examine the relationships between Machiavellianism, Narcissism, Psychopathy, and the dimensions of family interaction, including General Functioning, Affective Involvement, and Affective Responsiveness.

### Results

This chapter summarizes the results of the current research. The proposed statistical analyses were performed to test the hypotheses, and the results obtained are as follows.

**Table 2**

*Mean, Standard Deviation, Skewness, Kurtosis of Dark Triad and Family Assessment Device (N=300)*

Scale	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Skewness	Kurtosis
Dark Triad	77.0	12.2	.15	.28
Family Assessment Device	130.7	12.7	-.07	1.9

Table 2 indicates that the skewness and kurtosis value ranges from -.07 to .15 on both scales, falling within the range

indicating approximate normality, which is between -2 to +2 (Almquist et al., 2020).

**Table 3**

*Correlation between Dark Triad and Family Assessment Device (N = 300)*

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2
1. Dark Triad	77.0	12.4	—	
2. Family Assessment Device	130.7	12.7	-.24**	—

\*\* $p < .01$

There was a negative correlation between the Dark Triad and the Family Assessment Device [ $r = -.24$ ]. This statistical finding

demonstrates a significant negative correlation between the two variables, as

high levels of the Dark Triad are associated with lower levels of family functioning.

**Table 4**

*Correlation between Machiavellianism and General Functioning (N = 300)*

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2
1. Machiavellianism	28.3	5.6	—	
2. General Functioning	28.9	3.7	-.05	-

$p < .05$

There was a weak negative correlation between Machiavellianism and general functioning [ $r = -.05$ ], with high levels of Machiavellianism associated with lower

levels of general functioning. It can be inferred that there was no significant correlation between the two variables.

**Table 5**

*Correlation between Psychopathy and Affective Responsiveness (N = 300)*

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2
1. Psychopathy	21.2	5.2	—	
2. Affective Responsiveness	15.4	2.4	-.15**	—

\* $p < .05$

There was a weak negative correlation between psychopathy and affective responsiveness [ $r = -.15$ ], with high levels

of psychopathy associated with lower levels of affective responsiveness; the results were significant.

**Table 6**

*Correlation between Narcissism and Affective Involvement (N = 300)*

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2
1. Narcissism	26.7	5.2	—	
2. Affective Involvement	18.6	3.6	-.05	—

$p < .05$

There was a very weak negative correlation between narcissism and affective involvement [ $r = -.05$ ], with high levels of narcissism associated with lower levels of

affective involvement, and the results were not statistically significant.

## Discussion

The Dark Triad and its influence on family interactions among young adults has been a relatively understudied relationship in the study of psychology. In Asian cultures, countries with larger young adult populations can help contribute to the existing research on the relationship between dark triads and family interactions by providing insight into how patterns may differ in a collectivistic culture. One such

study that may provide insight into findings in Asian culture is the study conducted by Nayab and Farooq (2024), which aimed to understand the influence of family structure on an individual's well-being. The study showed that family structure has a significant influence on an individual's personality and well-being. The findings revealed that individuals belonging to extended families exhibited higher levels of well-being. On the contrary, individuals in

nuclear families scored the least on overall well-being. While single-parent families also demonstrated a healthy, well-being environment (Nayab & Farooq, 2024). In a collectivistic culture like Pakistan, where the concept of extended families living together is prevalent and widely practised, it is sometimes assumed that larger families have complex relationships; however, this research proves otherwise (Nayab & Farooq, 2024).

The first hypothesis in this research examined whether a relationship exists between the dark triad and the quality of family interaction. The results from the correlation analysis demonstrated a highly significant negative correlation between the dark triad traits and family interaction. This also means that individuals who scored higher in the aversive personality traits mentioned in the dark triad (*Machiavellianism, Narcissism, and Psychopathy*) have a lower or poor quality of family interactions. Another inference that can be drawn from the findings is that a lower quality of family interactions is linked with the development of dark triad personality traits among young adults. This finding coincides with the research conclusions of Jonason et al. (2014), a study that investigated the impact of parental care and attachment on the dark triad personality traits. The conclusions drawn suggested that low-quality or inconsistent parental care has a role in the development of dark personality traits. In family interactions, a parent-child relationship is of particular focus, as it shapes one's personality to a much greater extent and prepares one for secondary socialization in and out of one's family. Therefore, it is crucial to understand how the parent-child relationship within the family is a significant variable in understanding the development of dark personality traits. Tajmirriyahi et al. (2021) conducted research that explored if there is a relationship between the dark triad, attachment styles, and parental care. The study revealed that individuals who scored

higher for the dark triad traits were unable to have higher levels of parents' recalled care. Apart from parental relationships, sibling dynamics also acted as a determinant in the development of the dark triad traits. This was demonstrated by Ferencz et al. (2022), who found that Machiavellianism and psychopathy were positively correlated among adolescents coming from households where there was conflict among siblings. However, cordial sibling relationships were negatively associated with Machiavellianism (Ferencz et al., 2022).

The second hypothesis investigates whether there is any link between Machiavellianism and general functioning. The results revealed little to no significant correlation between the two variables. This finding affirms the study conducted by Láng and Birkás (2014), which explored the relationship between Machiavellianism and family dynamics amongst adolescents. Findings from the study show that there is a notable difference in perception amongst individuals with high and low Machiavellianism scores. Individuals with higher scores found their families to be detached and chaotic in comparison to those with lower scores. Additionally, Láng and Lénárd (2015) reported that psychological abuse experienced in childhood was recalled by those individuals who displayed Machiavellian traits. Supporting evidence can be found in the study by Tajmirriyahi et al (2021) that indicated that individuals with strained relationships with their parents had a higher score on Machiavellian traits.

The third hypothesis explored the relationship between psychopathy and affective responsiveness, showcasing a weak and negative correlation. The findings indicate that individuals with higher psychopathic traits tend to find it harder to build emotional connections with others. This is further affirmed in the research conducted by Masui et al. (2012), which found that individuals with higher scores in psychopathy and lower scores in family

support were more likely to exhibit aggressive behaviour. Similarly, individuals who lack affective responsiveness often struggle with understanding and dealing with the emotions of their family, which then leads to conflicts and distress. While this study supports the hypothesis of the current study, it suggests that psychopathy and lack of family support are among the factors that contribute to aggressive behaviour. Moreover, Silva & Stattin's (2015) research demonstrates that the quality of parenting can either moderate or intensify the psychopathic traits in their children by enabling an unhealthy cycle of parenting styles. Likewise, another study examined the correlation between psychopathic personality traits and parenting quality. It revealed that children with higher scores in psychopathic traits, coupled with negative parenting practices, struggle to form healthy relationships with their families (Beaver et al., 2014). A study by Kaya et al. (2023) used a Person-Centred approach to explore the relationship between emotional security, psychological symptoms, and dark triad traits (such as psychopathy) among university students. Their findings underscored the importance of individual differences in emotional security and psychological well-being within familial and social contexts. These findings also contribute to the fulfillment of the hypothesis explored in this current study to understand the nature of psychopathy and its implications for familial relationships and emotional functioning.

The fourth hypothesis investigated the relationship between narcissism and affective involvement. The findings of this study revealed a very weak negative correlation, suggesting that the two variables are not directly linked with each other. On the contrary, Horton et al. (2006) investigated the relationship between narcissism and parenting practices amongst college and high school students. The results from this study showed that parenting practices such as warmth,

monitoring, and psychological control may influence the development of narcissistic traits. Monitoring was found to be negatively associated with narcissism, which provides insight that parental oversight can reduce the expression of narcissistic traits. Whereas psychological control had a positive association with narcissism, which highlights that controlling behaviors of parents can potentially lead to the development of narcissistic tendencies. Findings by Day et al. (2019) revealed that family members of individuals who had pathological narcissism had reported higher levels of grief, disturbed mental health, and overall distress. The findings also revealed that the manifestation of narcissism largely determines the response of their family members. Those showing vulnerable narcissism may have a sympathetic response from their family, but those with grandiose narcissism may lead to emotional responses like anger, indicating that narcissism presents itself in shaping responses and interactions within a family. These findings support the hypothesis, suggesting that affective involvement is significant for interpersonal engagement within a family to foster a healthy family dynamic. However, it also offers insight that traits such as narcissism may lead to a negative perception of one's relationships, which can result in negative behaviors in engagement and ultimately hinder healthy affective involvement.

### **Implications of the Study**

It underscores the significance of family relationships in shaping an individual's personality, behaviors, and other relationships. It opens avenues for further exploration into the mechanisms underlying the relationship between Dark Triad traits and family interactions in diverse cultural contexts. The findings highlight the importance of identifying and addressing dysfunctional family dynamics at an early stage to help mitigate the risk of developing maladaptive personality traits at a young age. Early intervention programs

designed to enhance parent-child relationships and resolve sibling conflicts may contribute to healthier family interactions. Longitudinal studies could provide insights into the developmental trajectories of these personality traits and their reciprocal influences on family dynamics over time. It could also provide some insight into how people interact in diverse social circles, such as those with their immediate or extended families, i.e. siblings and cousins.

### **Limitations and Recommendations**

One of the primary challenges faced was that the literature collected for this research primarily belonged to cultures other than Pakistan's. The research was self-financed with a limited number of resources, which contributed to a minimized sample size. Due to the limited time available, it was not possible to collect data from cities across Pakistan, and the study was therefore restricted to Lahore. The study focuses only on young adults, which poses a limitation, hindering the generalization of results to other age groups. Another limitation revolves around the scale used; the Short Dark Triad (SD3) scale is not entirely relevant to the cultural context of Pakistan. The primary limitation lies in the likelihood of family interaction styles, dynamics, and even evolving personality traits. Furthermore, the questionnaires used were self-reported measures for collecting data, which increases the likelihood of producing socially desirable answers or selecting answers on a Likert scale randomly.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the study's core findings reveal a negative correlation between dark personality traits and the quality of family interaction, which was highly significant in the given population. However, in the case of understanding the correlation between separate subscales from the Dark Triad Questionnaire and the Family Assessment Device, the results were not statistically significant. For instance, the relationship between Machiavellianism and general functioning had a very weak and negative

correlation. The findings were similar when the relationship between narcissism and affective involvement was correlated. Moreover, when the subscales of psychopathy and affective responsiveness were examined in relation to each other, a weak negative correlation was observed. However, to draw conclusions that can be generalized to a greater population and to bridge the gap that exists on this specific subject, extensive future research with a greater sample and multi-method assessment, along with additional relevant variables, would serve to be of great help in understanding the development as well as the evolution of dark triad traits in relationship with family interactions.

### **Ethics Statement**

All the ethical standards of APA were met. Informed consent was taken in written form from all the respondents to participate in this study.

### **Contribution of Authors**

Quratul Ain Arshad: Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Writing – Original Draft

Uzma Ashiq: Methodology, Writing - Reviewing & Editing, Supervision

Khadija Malik: Methodology, Writing - Reviewing & Editing

### **Conflict of Interest**

There is no conflict of interest declared by the authors.

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The authors declared no source of funding.

### **Data Availability Statement**

The datasets of the current study are not available publicly due to ethical reasons but are available from the corresponding author [Q.A.] upon the reasonable request.

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