



# Don't threaten me and my dark side or even self-harm won't stop me from hurting you



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## ABSTRACT

The present study aims to investigate whether our dark side not only leads to aggressive behavior against others but also to direct deliberate self-harming behavior when the ego is threatened. One hundred and seventy two students of sports science were recruited as participants (60.7% female) with a mean age of 20.98 ( $SD = 1.95$ ). Participants filled out the German versions of the NPI, Mach IV and the SRP-III. To assess direct deliberate self-harming behavior, a white-noise-aggression to others and to self paradigm was used. Findings revealed that mainly the common core of the dark side of personality and not its facets (only narcissism to a very small extent) predicted direct deliberate self-harming behavior. These results highlight the necessity for researching this “vulnerable dark side” to obtain a better understanding of the Dark Triad members acting in situations with ego-threats (especially self-esteem threats).

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## 1. Introduction

Past studies have shown that there is a positive correlation between the Dark Triad traits of narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy with symptoms of aggression (more recently Douglas, Bore, & Munro, 2012; Muris, Meester, & Timmermans, 2013). Moreover, in an experimental study different provocations were shown to trigger aggressive behavior towards others in narcissists and psychopaths. The authors point out that this might lead to the assumption that experimentally provoking aggression based on interindividual differences in the Dark Triad is context dependent (Jones & Paulhus, 2010). However, Buckels, Jones, and Paulhus (in press) found more recently that people scoring higher on psychopathy or narcissism inventories showed aggressive behavior even against innocent persons, but only when aggression was easy (no-work condition: punishing without any tasks; Buckels et al., in press). Aside from this perpetrator perspective, there is also evidence for a dark side to victims: Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychoticism were shown to be related to subjective ratings of being a victim (Linton & Power, 2013). Thus, differences in Dark Triad traits have been shown to be related to hurting others or being hurt by others. However, until now research is lacking as to whether people having elevated scores on Dark Triad inventories would also focus their aggression on themselves under certain

circumstances and would thus also be victims of their own aggression. Consequently, within the present study an experimental design was developed and tested to explore the relationship between self-harming behavior and the Dark Triad.

### 1.1. Deliberate self-harm

Deliberate self-harm is understood as intentionally injuring oneself without suicidal intent and is either directly harmful (e.g., cutting, burning, scratching) or indirectly harmful (e.g., binge eating, substance abuse, excessive risk taking like reckless driving). It is associated with affect regulation (negative affect) and substance abuse (Moller, Tait, & Byrne, 2013). Until now research trying to induce deliberate self-harm is missing. Most existing studies are correlational and assess self-harm using single items (e.g., “Have you ever done anything on purpose to injure, hurt, or harm yourself or your body (but you weren't trying to kill yourself)?”) or the Deliberate Self-Harm Inventory (Moller et al., 2013). While this research certainly is interesting, experimental approaches are needed to explore the causal mechanisms between personality traits such as the Dark Triad and self-harming behavior.

The present study tested such an experimental approach. Self-harm was operationalized using white noise. White-noise-aggression paradigms to others were used in recent studies and also in relation to the Dark Triad (e.g., Buckels et al., in press). Buckels et al. used a white noise paradigm to show that sadism is related to unprovoked aggression and, in contrast to the Dark Triad Traits,

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to working in order to be able to hurt someone. The findings show that except for Machiavellianism all Dark Triad traits are moderately and positively related to unprovoked aggressive behavior, i.e. blasting an innocent person with white noise. Additionally, the authors also summarize prior research and state that aggressive behavior caused by psychopathy usually has an instrumental character with low investment, short term responses (Jones & Paulhus, 2010). Narcissistic tendencies in contrast cause aggression when an ego threat is involved. Finally, a relation between Machiavellianism and aggression should require sufficient benefits to outweigh retaliation or punishment. Thus, white noise paradigms have successfully been applied to demonstrate a relationship between the Dark Triad and aggression towards others.

### 1.2. An experimental design to test the relationship between the Dark Triad and self harm

To find out if interindividual Dark Triad differences also result in deliberate self-harming behavior, provocations that trigger deliberate self-harming behavior are needed. Moreover, these provocations must be related to interindividual differences in the Dark Triad. In other words, a situation is needed where differences in the Dark Triad cause behavior that is potentially self-harming. Past research has shown that the Dark Triad – mainly psychopathy – is related to cheating in academic settings (Nathanson, Paulhus, & Williams, 2006). Obviously, being caught can potentially be quite harmful. Moreover, people scoring higher on narcissism inventories experience extreme affective responses to social comparisons: increased positive affect from downward comparison and increased hostility from upward comparison (Bogart, Benotsch, & Pavlovic, 2004). Thus, an upward comparison in an academic setting might be a provocation that triggers deliberate self-harming behavior based on interindividual differences in the Dark Triad. With regard to psychopathy it is further assumed that, due to their reckless aggressive behavior, they also care little about their own physical safety (Wilson & Daly, 1985). Thus, people scoring higher on psychopathy scales might deliberately harm themselves in order to avoid failing in an academic setting. Narcissism and self-esteem are positively related, which also influences social comparison behavior (Krizan & Bushman, 2011). The relationship has been exploited to create scenarios in which people experience ego threats. Very often, self-esteem threats like upward comparisons were used as ego threats in past research (Leary, Terry, Allen, & Tate, 2009). Especially, the relationship between narcissism and risk behavior was shown to be moderated by ego threats (Crysel, Crosier, & Webster, 2013; Jones & Paulhus, 2010). Thus, ego threats might potentially also induce narcissism related self-harm.

Summing up, an academic setting which involves another person enabling a potentially ego threatening social comparison might have all the ingredients to cause self-harming behavior related to psychopathy and narcissism. The operationalization of this idea is described below.

### 1.3. Aims and scope

In sum, the present study had three aims. The first aim was to test an experimental paradigm triggering direct self-harm. Secondly, the relationship between the shown self-harming behavior and the Dark Triad should be explored. It was hypothesized that especially psychopathy and narcissism should be positively related to self-harming behavior. Due to the high self-control of Machiavellianists, their engagement in overt antisocial (e.g., aggressive) behavior is rare (Jones & Paulhus, 2009). Finally, because of the given overlap between the Dark Triad traits (Paulhus & Williams, 2002), it will also be analyzed if the common core or the specific

variance within the Dark Triad is instead responsible for deliberate self-harming behavior.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Sample

One hundred and seventy two students of sports science were recruited as participants (60.7% female). Their mean age was 20.98 ( $SD = 1.95$ ).

### 2.2. Experimental design

Aim of the experimental design was to cause self-harming behavior. To this end, students were told in a lecture for statistics that the following study will be conducted: "Current research has shown physical exhaustion reduces the ability to conceive and remember a crime scene (Hope, Lewinski, Dixon, Blocksidge, & Gabbert, 2012). With this new study it shall be analyzed how well police officers must be trained in order to reduce this effect of reduced ability to a minimum." To motivate the students to participate they were told that they will have a 50:50 chance to win €10. Prior to coming to the lab, participants first filled out questionnaires via an online link (see test materials). The general instruction given to the participants in the lab was that they would take part in a simulated crime scene investigation. To create realistic conditions, prior to seeing the crime scene, their heart rate would be increased. To this end they would have to jump back and forth within the framework of a rectangle stuck to the ground (see test materials) while wearing a pulse measuring device connected to a computer. Jumps were to be performed over the center line on each occasion. A rhythm was also provided for the participants and they were told to always jump at this rhythm or faster, but never slower. Moreover, a competitor would undergo the same experimental task at the same time. Jumping would stop once one of the participants would reach a pulse of 160. To maintain a fair competition, participants were told that their competitor would be matched based on their fitness level. When jumping participants could view a colored circle on a computer screen. Red would indicate that their own pulse is higher than their competitors and green a difference in their own favor. A white circle would signal no difference. Jumping would have to stop when signaled by the instructor who supposedly was in telephone contact with an instructor in the adjoining room. The participants were told that the stop signal would be given once one of the participant's pulse reached 160. To this end, the instructor held a device which would start a 15 s countdown as soon as the stop signal was given. Within the 15 s participants had to take up a position in front of a computer screen which would display a crime scene and put on headphones. The instruction here was to take note of as many details as possible. The crime scene was visible for another 15 s. In the end, the person who would remember the most details of the crime scene, as seen in a questionnaire (see Material) administered afterwards, would receive the €10. A task (APM, see below) had to be completed before the crime scene questionnaire could be filled out.

To ensure that each participant would experience a potentially ego threatening situation, there was no competitor and the whole interaction with the competitor was preprogrammed. The cover story was that adjoining rooms without sight contact would be used to ensure anonymity. The colored circle was programmed to show red from the beginning. Thus, the ego threat was created.

Within the instruction, participants were also given the information that a current study had shown that memory-performance is poorer the more exhausted one is, i.e. the higher the pulse had been. They were then told that should they be the participant

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