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## Soldiers of misfortune: An examination of the Dark Triad and the experience of schadenfreude



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### ABSTRACT

This study was the first to investigate the relation between Dark Triad personality traits and the experience of schadenfreude. Participants ( $N = 120$ ) were assigned to one of three priming conditions: empathy, schadenfreude, or neutral. After reading a vignette priming one of the three emotional states, each participant was exposed to a photographic image showing an unfortunate event experienced by the individual described in the vignette. All participants were shown the same four images and completed an evaluation form about their subjective emotional reactions to each image. Further, their facial expression reactions to each image were video-recorded and coded for smile presence and intensity. Results indicated positive relationships between Dark Triad traits and both self-reported schadenfreude and objective smile intensity. Higher Dark Triad scores also were associated with self-reported increased schadenfreude in daily life and a propensity to seek out related stimuli.

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### 1. Introduction

The popularity of television shows such as American Idol and YouTube videos depicting “fails” indicates that there is a widespread interest in laughing at others’ misfortunes. This common affective experience, in which an observer derives pleasure from another’s misfortune, is schadenfreude (Takahashi et al., 2009). Unlike sadism, which involves deriving pleasure from directly causing the misfortune or pain in another person, schadenfreude is associated with pleasure from a physical and psychological distance. However, both involve a failure to experience empathy (e.g., Cikara, Bruneau, & Saxe, 2011) suggesting that they may not be discrete entities but rather exist on a continuum (Buckels, 2012). Factors that promote schadenfreude include a personal gain of some sort (e.g., watching a fellow employee get demoted), envy (e.g., hearing about a wealthy celebrity’s downfall), and the deservingness of the target (e.g., observing a student who is caught cheating; Feather, Boeckmann, & McKee, 2001; Smith, Powell, Combs, & Schurtz, 2009). Of the three factors, the perception of target deservingness appears to be the most robust factor to elicit schadenfreude (Feather et al., 2001). An example of where the role of deservingness in schadenfreude may feature prominently is in the courtroom, in which the public (and thus, jury members)

derive pleasure from observing a (perceived) deserving offender experience harsh sentencing for his/her wrongdoing.

Little research has addressed the observation that some people seem to experience more frequent and intense schadenfreude than others. However, some work has examined individual differences in sadistic interests. For example, psychopathy consistently has been related to sadism (e.g., Porter, Woodworth, Earle, Drugge, & Boer, 2003; Woodworth et al., 2013). Given the profound trait empathy deficit associated with psychopathy and required for the state of schadenfreude, it is possible that they also may be linked. Further, psychopathy has been linked to laughing at others for the purpose of harming them (Proyer, Flisch, Tschupp, Platt, & Ruch, 2012). Related work indicates that psychopaths exhibit negative (e.g., maladaptive, aggressive) humour styles (Veselka, Schermer, Martin, & Vernon, 2010).

Research also has established a link between schadenfreude and the other two Dark Triad traits, Machiavellianism and narcissism. For example, there is a relationship between each of psychopathy and Machiavellianism with positive emotions elicited by sad images (Ali, Amorim, & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2009), consistent with the concepts of sadism and schadenfreude. Further, Krizan and Johar (2012) found that vulnerable narcissism (e.g., having a heightened sensitivity to critique and disapproval) was related to schadenfreude and envy. Recently, Buckels (2012) proposed that “everyday sadism” should be included with the Dark Triad constructs to form the “Dark Tetrad”. Everyday sadism can be conceptualized as a nonclinical form of sadism, differing from clinical sadism in that the individual does not harm others out of the need for cruelty but rather for the pleasure derived from the act

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(Buckels, 2012), making it more closely related to the concept of *schadenfreude*. While Buckels specifically highlighted the importance of examining individual differences, particularly dark personality traits, in the expression of *schadenfreude*, surprisingly no research has directly examined this relationship.

The current study sought to examine the experiences of *schadenfreude* and empathy in relation to the Dark Triad. *Schadenfreude* was assessed through self-report measures coupled with objective coding of smile intensity of observers who viewed an image depicting a primed target experiencing an unfortunate event. It was hypothesized that Dark Triad features, particularly psychopathy, would be related to increased *schadenfreude*. Further, given the role of deservingness in *schadenfreude* it was hypothesized that a greater intensity of *schadenfreude* would be present in response to targets who had engaged in criminal behavior (i.e., legal stimuli; Feather et al., 2001) than those who experienced a non-legal misfortune (i.e., non-legal stimuli). It also was predicted that emotional facial expressions of happiness, as inferred from smile intensity, would indicate that participants experienced more *schadenfreude* than they self-reported, and that the difference between high Dark Triad scorers' self-reported and objective *schadenfreude* would be greater than for lower scorers (given their propensity to use deception and self-enhancement).

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Participants

Participants ("observers") were 120 undergraduate students at a Canadian university, with a mean age of 20.55 years ( $SD = 3.90$ ). Of these, 87 were female and 33 male. Participants were granted course credit to compensate for their time.

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. Dark Triad measures

The Dark Triad subcomponents psychopathy, Machiavellianism, and narcissism were measured using well-validated tools including the Self-Report Psychopathy Scale-4 (SRP-4; Paulhus, Neumann, & Hare, in press), the MACH-IV (Christie & Geis, 1970), and the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Hall, 1979), respectively.

#### 2.2.2. Schadenfreude and Empathy Evaluation Form

This measure was created for the current study by expanding on a questionnaire used in a similar study by van Dijk, Goslinga, and Ouwerkerk (2008). Three items were adopted from this measure to evaluate *schadenfreude*: (a) I enjoy what happened to [the target]; (b) I could not resist a little smile; and (c) I actually had to laugh a bit, and three items were adopted to assess sympathy and empathy: (a) I commiserate with [the target] about what happened; (though "commiserate" was substituted with "empathize", to better fit the current study); (b) I feel sorry for what happened to [the target]; and (c) I sympathize with [the target]. Additional original items included ratings of the degree of pleasure and pain experienced; how funny he/she found the situation; and how bad he/she felt for the target. All of the items were measured using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

#### 2.2.3. Smile coding

Smiles were coded for intensity using a procedure based on elements of the Facial Action Coding System (FACS; Ekman, Friesen, & Hagar, 2002). The present study made use of a recent adaptation of this approach by Kraus and Chen (2013) who used Action Unit 12,

the zygomatic major (ZM) muscle, which upturns the corners of the lips, as the primary indicator of a smile. The intensity coding consisted of rating a smile on the following scale: 0 = neutral or no smile, 1 = smile with moderate contraction of the ZM with closed lips, 2 = smile with major contraction of the ZM with parted lips, teeth visible, and 3 = smile with audible laughter. One undergraduate student conducted the smile coding with a second trained graduate student coding 19 (15%) of the 120 videos. Raters' scores were correlated between .78 and .88 ( $p < .05$ ) for each of the four intensity levels and no mean difference was found between raters.

### 2.3. Procedure

Observers were randomly assigned to one of three priming conditions: empathy, *schadenfreude*, or neutral (no emotional prime). The condition determined the type of vignettes presented to the observer. Each vignette consisted of a description of a person's current lifestyle characteristics. For example, a vignette in the empathy condition depicted a man who has been diagnosed with cancer, recently lost his job, and lacked a social life. Alternatively, in the vignette intended to elicit *schadenfreude*, the same man was described as spending a great deal of money and time on his appearance, having a well-paying job, and being a "ladies man". In both scenarios, the man is on his way to meet a date when he is splashed by a car driving through a muddy puddle. In the neutral condition, the man is described as "average", and most of the information given surrounds the negative event itself, rather than personal information.

Observers read the vignette from a desktop computer and subsequently were exposed to an image portraying the target described in the vignette experiencing a misfortune. Each image was displayed for 5-s, and observers' faces were video-recorded during this time. Although the vignettes differed across conditions, all observers were shown the same four images. Two images were of a misfortune in a legal context (i.e., an arrest; a court sentence hearing), and two images were misfortunes of a non-legal context (i.e., a man spilling coffee on himself; a man splashed by a car driving through a puddle). Following the presentation of the vignette and corresponding image, observers completed the *Schadenfreude* and Empathy Evaluation Form. After the observers viewed and rated all four images, they completed the three self-report questionnaires assessing Dark Triad traits (SRP-4, MACH-IV, and NPI). Finally, observers completed a demographics questionnaire, which included an item (item 7) relating to the participant's frequency of seeking out videos of others getting hurt (i.e., "how often do you watch videos on YouTube of people accidentally getting hurt?").

### 2.4. Data preparation

The three Dark Triad measures (SRP-4, MACH-IV, and NPI) were scored individually according to their respective scoring requirements before being standardized using z scores and then averaged to create a Dark Triad composite score (Jonason, Li, Webster, & Schmitt, 2009).

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Dark Triad measures

The mean score on the SRP-4 for the total sample was 139.65 ( $SD = 22.47$ ), with total scores ranging from 100 to 212. The mean score on the MACH-IV for the total sample was 86.59 ( $SD = 10.8$ ), with total scores ranging from 64 to 118. The mean score on the NPI for the total sample was 13.45 ( $SD = 6.7$ ), with total scores ranging from 1 to 31. The mean score on the Dark Triad composite

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