



# Beyond good and evil: Exploring the mediating role of mental toughness on the Dark Triad of personality traits



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## ABSTRACT

The Dark Triad (DT) involves three closely related personality traits: narcissism, psychopathy and Machiavellianism. Mental toughness (MT) is a multi-facet trait that entails positive psychological resources, which are important across a range of achievement contexts. Research that examined the association between MT and the DT returned mixed findings. The present study aimed at: (1) exploring the association between MT and the DT using a considerable larger sample in comparison to previous studies; (2) investigating whether MT mediates the association between narcissism with psychopathy and Machiavellianism. The mediation model revealed that narcissism exerts significant negative indirect effects on both psychopathy and Machiavellianism, through MT. The implications of these findings for reducing socially undesirable outcomes, often linked to the DT, are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

Mental Toughness (MT) is an umbrella term that entails positive psychological resources, which are important across a range of achievement contexts (Clough, Earle, & Sewell, 2002). The Dark Triad of personality (DT) includes the traits of subclinical narcissism, subclinical psychopathy and Machiavellianism (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). The current study tested directly the relationship between all four traits in a large adult sample; and a statistical model, which suggests that subclinical narcissism will exert negative—rather than positive—effects on both subclinical psychopathy and Machiavellianism, when MT is included in the model as a mediator.

### 1.1. Mental toughness

A number of traits have been identified that buffer against the negative impacts of stressful situations. These include grit (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007), buoyancy (A. J. Martin & Marsh, 2008), resilience and hardiness. Research on resilience primarily explores factors and processes that have a protective function on individuals experiencing adversity (Luthar, Sawyer, & Brown, 2006; Masten, 2004). Similarly, research has explored hardiness (Kobasa, 1979) in

relation to performance, leadership, conduct, and health (Godlewski & Kline, 2012). Individuals scoring high on hardiness typically appraise stressful situations positively and employ adaptive coping behaviours (Funk, 1992). Mental Toughness (MT) is a personality trait that allows integrating many aspects of the previous coping literature.

MT reflects an effective coping mechanism as reaction to stressors and it allows individuals to proactively seek out opportunities for personal growth (St Clair-Thompson, Bugler, Robinson, Clough, McGeown, & Perry, 2015). While MT shares some conceptual similarities with hardiness, it clearly differs in its additional emphasis on confidence in one's abilities and interpersonal relations. Individuals who score high on MT are not only able to remain committed when confronting with stress, they are also confident about successfully completing the task and are assertive in social situations. MT is also distinct from grit, described by Duckworth et al. (2007) as perseverance and passion for long-term goals. While individuals, who score high on grit, may work strenuously toward goals despite self-doubt, mentally tough individuals believe that they are truly worthwhile people and maintain the self-confidence to achieve goals. Furthermore, they are able to control their emotion effectively in the face of setbacks and challenges.

Clough et al. (2002) conceptualized MT as a global construct that can manifest in any area of life, including personal relationships, vocational endeavours, and sport. Their 4C's model is the most frequently used conceptualization of MT. Clough et al. (2002) characterised MT as a composite of four interrelated but independent components:

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(1) control (life and emotion): the tendency to feel and act as if one is influential and keep anxieties in check; (2) commitment: the tendency to be deeply involved in pursuing goals despite difficulties that arise; (3) challenge: the tendency to see potential threats as opportunities for self-development and to continue to strive in changing environments; and (4) confidence (in abilities and interpersonal): the belief that one is a truly worthwhile person in spite of setbacks, and the ability to push oneself forward in social settings.

### 1.2. The Dark Triad of personality

The Dark Triad (DT) is a personality cluster, defined at the subclinical level, and composed of three distinct, but overlapping personality traits: narcissism, psychopathy and Machiavellianism (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). The construct of subclinical or “normal” narcissism includes facets retained from the clinical syndrome namely, grandiosity, entitlement, dominance, and superiority (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). The adaptation of psychopathy to the subclinical sphere is recent (Lilienfeld & Andrews, 1996). Subclinical psychopathy is characterised by high impulsivity and thrill seeking along with low empathy and anxiety (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Machiavellianism is synonymous with manipulation; individuals scoring high on Machiavellianism employ self-serving strategies, they are master manipulators and deceivers, who care little for moral and societal norms (Kapoor, 2015).

The DT traits are conventionally perceived as socially malevolent; however, they have also been associated with success in the workforce, in short-term relationships and in various socially desirable outcomes (e.g., Jonason & Kavanagh, 2010, Jonason, Li, Webster, & Schmitt, 2009, Jonason & Webster, 2010, Onley, Veselka, Schermer, & Vernon, 2013, Young & Pinsky, 2006). For example, a study reported that individuals who scored high on Machiavellianism were socially central, peers liked them, they were socially skilled, and well adjusted (Hawley, 2003). Other studies have found that narcissism was associated with higher self-rated creativity (Furnham, Hughes & Marshall, 2013) and emotional intelligence (Petrides, Vernon, Schermer, & Veselka, 2011). Finally, a recent study reported that traits related to psychopathy (such as boldness) and narcissism predicted creative achievement, and better divergent thinking scores (Galang, Castelo, Santos, Perlas, & Angeles, 2016). These findings suggest that the DT involve three complex personality traits that have both socially desirable and toxic elements.

Furnham, Richards and Paulhus (2013) suggested that – although the DT traits sometimes show the same outcome correlates and they exhibit moderate-sized positive intercorrelations – lumping them together implies a simplistic distinction between good and bad personalities. Using mediation models could be useful for investigating, the degree to which associations between the DT traits are influenced by the presence of other traits.

### 1.3. The Dark Triad and mental toughness

Studies that explored the association between MT and the DT returned mainly mixed findings. The most recent study on this area reported positive associations between all components of MT and narcissism, psychopathy and Machiavellianism (Sabouri et al., 2016). However, a previous study reported negative correlations between MT and psychopathy and Machiavellianism; and a positive correlation between MT and narcissism (Onley et al., 2013). Onley et al. (2013) suggested that narcissism might be qualitatively unique among the DT traits because, in the same sample, it correlated positively with a prosocial and adaptive trait (MT) as well as with psychopathy and Machiavellianism. Veselka, Schermer, and Vernon (2012) explored the DT traits and the five factor model of personality and reached a similar conclusion: “With regard to the development of our understanding of the Dark Triad variables, it is evident from these findings that while Machiavellianism and psychopathy exhibited a pattern of correlations that is to be

expected with measures of social malevolence, narcissism did not follow suit.” (p. 421).

### 1.4. The current study

We tested directly the association between MT and its four components (4Cs) with narcissism, psychopathy and Machiavellianism in a considerably larger sample in comparison to previous research in this area. Using mediation analysis, we investigated whether associations between the DT traits are influenced by the presence of a prosocial trait, namely MT. Considering previous findings that showed that narcissism correlates positively with MT; and that it might be a unique trait among the DT traits; we tested a statistical model, which suggests that the relationship between narcissism with psychopathy and Machiavellianism is mediated by individuals’ level of MT.

Specifically, we hypothesized that: (1) narcissism will correlate positively with MT as well as with psychopathy and Machiavellianism; (2) narcissism would exert a significant negative indirect effect on psychopathy and Machiavellianism through mental toughness. In this model, narcissism increases MT, which decreases levels of psychopathy and Machiavellianism.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Sample

Participants ( $N = 608$ ) were recruited online through advertisements on social networks (e.g. Facebook) as well as through word of mouth. Participants’ mean age was 24.31 years ( $SD = 9.16$ , range 18–79); 56.9% of the participants were females. Participants received detailed information regarding the aims of the study and the voluntary basis of their participation and they signed informed consent forms. The participants did not receive compensation for taking part in the study.

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. Mental toughness

The Mental Toughness Questionnaire 48 (MTQ48) is the most frequently used measure of MT as conceptualized by Clough et al. (2002). It has an average completion time of 10 min and responses to its 48 items are given on a 5-point Likert scale anchored at 1 = *strongly disagree* and 5 = *strongly agree*. Twenty-two items are reverse coded; An overall MT score can be calculated by summing up individual items of the questionnaire. Example items include “I can usually adapt myself to challenges that come my way” and “I don’t usually give up under pressure”. The MTQ48 has generally shown good reliability (Crust & Swann, 2011; Perry, Clough, Crust, Earle, & Nicholls, 2013). Previous studies have verified the instrument’s construct and criterion validity, and the MTQ48 has received independent support for its factor structure through confirmatory factor analyses (Horsburgh, Schermer, Veselka, & Vernon, 2009). In the present study, an overall Cronbach’s alpha of 0.88 was obtained.

#### 2.2.2. The Dark Triad

The Short Dark Triad questionnaire (SD3; Jones & Paulhus, 2014) assesses the Dark Triad of personalities, narcissism, psychopathy and Machiavellianism, as conceptualized by Paulhus and Williams (2002). The SD3 has 27 items, 9 for each scale, and responses are given on a 5-point Likert scale, with 1 = *strongly disagree* and 5 = *strongly agree*. Example items include: “I like to use clever manipulation to get my way” (Machiavellianism), “People see me as a natural leader” (narcissism) and “It’s true that I can be mean to others” (psychopathy). The score for each subscale represents the average score of their 9 corresponding items. Studies by Jones and Paulhus (2014) have demonstrated that the SD3 has high reliability and validity, including construct validity, as well as external validity with informant ratings.

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