

UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' DARK TRIAD TRAITS AND ETHICAL ATTITUDES

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Abstract: *One of the personality models which has recently become very popular is the Dark Triad theory, which draws our attention to the fact that there are some personality traits which can indeed show the negative side of our personality. The theory encompasses three socially undesirable personality traits – Machiavellianism, narcissism and psychopathy. These traits are, to a certain extent, recognisable in everyone, and are significant in a work context, too. The first part of our research aims to measure the manifestation of these traits in the students of the Faculty of Economics at the University of Debrecen. The students we questioned responded to 12 statements on the validated Dirty Dozen questionnaire, which is designed to measure the Dark Triad; following this, the points assigned to the answers were aggregated in order to establish whether the “three dark traits” were present or absent in their personalities. The other set of questions in our study concentrated on discovering the ethical attitudes of the students at the faculty. The work of Ludlum and his associates was the first to offer an analysis which included students’ evaluations of situations arising at the workplace and the extent to which they considered them unethical. Using the questionnaire prepared by these authors, we also asked our students to evaluate these situations, and in this way we were able to compare the ethical attitudes of American and Hungarian students. During the analysis we presented the results with average and standard deviation indicators, and calculated Pearson and Spearman correlational coefficients. During our work we also attempted to link the two subjects mentioned above, i.e. with those students who have a negative personality in terms of the three dark traits we were looking to establish what kind of value system they follow as regards workplace ethics. Here, too, we support our findings with correlation coefficients. According to our initial assumptions, those students who scored higher on the Dirty Dozen questionnaire, i.e. those who were strongly characterised by the Dark Triad personality traits, probably have a less ethical value system. On the basis of the responses we received, we only succeeded in establishing a weak link between these two factors. Our attempt, and also our research itself, is novel in several respects: firstly because to our knowledge no attempt has yet been made in Hungary to measure the existence of the Dark Triad of personality traits; secondly, because the presentation of the ethical attitudes of university students is also a relatively little-known and researched area, and thirdly, because thus far in Hungary there has been no work examining the relationship between these research questions.*

Keywords: *Dark Triad; Dirty Dozen; ethical attitudes.*

JEL classification: *M100.*

1. Introduction

The present study aims to explore possible correlations between personality traits of the Dark Triad and ethical values among economics students.

Today, the Dark Triad personality model – which features three socially undesirable human qualities of Machiavellianism, narcissism and psychopathy – is becoming more and more widely known in the Hungarian literature. We all have these same traits to varying degrees, and they play an important role both at work and in our private lives. In this respect our

research question was intended to discover to what extent students are characterized by these traits.

In the second part of our work we examined the ethical values of the same sample of students. Presented with 20 workplace situations, our students stated the extent to which they consider them unethical. In this context, the aim of our research is twofold: first, to assess the ethical attitudes of student respondents; secondly, to compare our results with related results from the US sample.

In our study, we tried to combine the above two areas: so we are looking for an answer to the question of what kind of value system in terms of workplace ethics is followed by those students who are considered to have a more negative personality in terms of the dark traits. In this paper we first provide a brief literature review of the above two topics, and then introduce the applied methodology and the sample used as the basis of the analysis, before presenting the results of the experiment to the reader.

2. Literature Review

The examination of Machiavellianism, narcissism and psychopathy personality traits has a long history. Paulhus and Williams (2002) referred to them as the Dark Triad because of the social aversion associated with them. Each is accompanied by a certain amount of ill will, which can directly affect behaviour between individuals.

Machiavellianism is named after Niccolo Machiavelli, who in the sixteenth century wrote about how to acquire and exert power (Robbins and Judge, 2016). Strongly Machiavellian individuals are pragmatic, keep an emotional distance and believe that the "end justifies the means." Research shows that they can easily manipulate and convince others, but they themselves are hard to convince, and often emerge from a situation as winners (Jonas et al, 2012). They easily become aggressive and can often produce other forms of undesirable behavior (Paulhus and Jones, 2009).

Narcissistic individuals are characterized by their faith in their own greatness and superiority and crave the admiration of others (Morf and Rhodewalt, 2001); they are more charismatic than others (Galvin et al, 2010), and in some situations they, too, can become aggressive (Bushman et al 2009).

Psychopathy manifests itself in indifference towards others and regulatory mechanisms. They are characterized by a lack of conscience and guilt when their actions cause harm to others. In personal relationships they can make a good impression, are talkative and charismatic, but emotionally shallow, often lead a parasitic lifestyle and even become involved in crime in order to achieve their goals (Hare and Neuman 2009).

We can often find individuals with these personality types as heads of political and economic organizations and in the media, as people who clearly benefit from their membership of the Dark Triad (Jonas et al, 2012).

We have not found statistical or research results detailing what proportion of the population are typically characterised by these personality traits. The only estimates concern psychopaths, who are believed to make up about 1% of the general population (Tweng et al 2008).

Regarding students ethical attitudes, both international and domestic research should be mentioned. Among international studies the work of McCabe is considered outstanding. Since 1960 McCabe and his colleagues have studied many aspects of the attitudes of university students towards cheating. McCabe's working group conducted research in two directions: on the one hand trying to uncover attitudes of university students relating to cheating; on the other hand, seeking to identify the factors that influence them. Trevino and McCabe (1996) showed that in 1993, compared to their counterparts in 1963, the proportion of American college students who copied from their fellow students during exams had increased by 26%, and those who worked in groups despite being asked by their teacher to work alone had increased by 38%, although among the same students the rate of plagiarism

decreased by 4%. Discussing the influencing factors in terms of gender differences, McCabe and Bowers (1996) revealed that over the 30-year period under examination the rate of cheating among women had increased by 7%, while among men it had remained constant (possibly due to the fact that more women participate in higher education today, but also to the fact that women's competition with men forces them to cheat, rather than that they themselves are so unethical). McCabe and Trevino (1993) also further showed that if peers accept cheating, or if one student witnesses another cheating, this increases the incidence of cheating, and it was also found that the power of peer behavior is twice as effective as the threat of severe penalties.

In the context of university codes of ethical conduct, McCabe et al (2001) found that at those campuses where there a formal code of ethics the students develop positive attitudes during the monitoring, reporting and management of cheating, and thus cheat less in these higher education institutions. According to researchers, it is very important to emphasize that the mere existence of a code in itself is not enough; the students and educators need to embrace it as their own, all the more so because it has been shown to produce an effect which is twice as strong as the threat of severe punishment.

Another direction of international research has been to examine which workplace situations university students consider unethical and the extent to which they do so. In this area, we build on the work of Ludlum et al (2009), who first tried to identify among Russian university students what they think of corruption and its causes. Ludlum's research was also conducted on five US campuses in the autumn of 2009, and repeated in 2015, although this time on only three campuses. In these empirical surveys students had to judge twenty workplace situations on a five-point Likert scale according to how ethical they considered them. The students assessed four of them as being particularly unethical: accusing an innocent colleague of what they themselves were being accused of; making public secret information; getting credit for others' work, and faking reports; for all these, the average value was greater than four (Ludlum et al., 2013 Ludlum et al., 2015).

International researchers also sought answers to another question, which is whether students' ethical values are likely to affect their future workplace behavior. Sims gave an affirmative answer to this in a 1993 study. However, reference should be made to the test results in that the ethical studies of the students did not influence their actions and their moral and immoral choices (Curren and Harich, 1996, Waples et al., 2009).

We have, however, so far only found two authors in the Hungarian literature who have worked on an analysis of students' cheating habits.

One is Márta Fülöp (2008), who analyses ethical behavior in relation to competitive behavior. In one study she concludes that Hungarian students cheat more than their foreign counterparts, but points out two interesting facts; firstly, that in Hungarian schools we are only confronted with the phenomenon of cheating if it is noticed by the teacher, and secondly, if a student indicates to a teacher that cheating is going on, the common reaction from the teacher is typically a "mind your own business" type response (Fülöp, 2008).

Another Hungarian author on this topic is Gábor Orosz, who, in a study published in 2011, reports that the majority of students consider copying to be admissible, and regularly copy during tests, and allow others to copy from them, even though two thirds of them are aware that such cases constitute cheating (Orosz, 2011).

We will refer back to one of our smaller-scale analyses. In this (building our questions on Ludlum's research) we tested how students at the Faculty of Economics at the University of Debrecen viewed specific workplace behaviors in terms of their ethical nature. According to the students of the Faculty, there were 9 statements which could be categorised as particularly unethical behaviour (with an average value above 4). These included: the disclosure of secret information, accusing others of what we ourselves have been accused of, stealing the company's assets, reaping the rewards of others' work, falsification of reports, sleeping during work, allowing business rules to be violated, increasing bills by more than 10% and sleeping in church (Barizsné and Kiss, 2016).

Many studies can be found in the international literature that analyze the relationship between the Dark Triad and ethical behavior. Here we present two specific examples. Gephart Kish et al (2010), in their meta-analysis of the origins of unethical decisions at work, have shown a positive relationship between Machiavellianism and unethical behavior, among others. O'Boyle Jr et al (2012) also examined the relationship between the Dark Triad and work practices, in the form of a meta-analysis. More specifically, they tried to show the relationship between Machiavellianism, narcissism and psychopathy, and job performance and undesirable workplace behavior in 245 independent samples published between 1951 and 2011. They found that the deterioration in job performance is clearly related to Machiavellianism and the intensification of psychopathy. Undesirable behavior at work is linked with the intensification of all three components of the Dark Triad.

3. Research Methodology

Our research was carried out among students at the Faculty of Economics, University of Debrecen. In February 2017, in the context of classroom teaching, we asked the students present to complete the questionnaire. 211 questionnaires were collected (inadequately completed questionnaires were excluded from the analysis). The distribution of respondents by gender was 60 men and 150 women (one respondent did not indicate gender). Respondents were between the ages of 19 and 45, most of them 20-21 years old, with a mean age of 21.57 years (SD 3.19, mode 20, median 21 years old, 5 missing data). The questionnaire is divided into several parts. In this work we analyze the Dirty Dozen 12-question personality test (Jonas and Webster, 2010), and the results of the ethical attitude test developed by Ludlum et al (2013).

Respondents had to mark the Dirty Dozen questionnaire on a seven-point Likert scale, according to how much the statements listed were characteristic of them. Of the 12 questions, 4 each measure narcissism, Machiavellianism and psychopathy. Each personality trait can be given a score between 4 and 28 points, and so the combined total points available ranges from 12 to 84. The researchers considered a score of 45 points and above to be characteristic of the Dark Three.

The questionnaire regarding ethical attitudes of respondents in work situations evaluates the ethical nature of the workplace situations developed by Ludlum and his colleagues on a five point Likert scale. (Method of evaluation: 1 = very ethical; 2 = ethical, 3 = neutral; 4 = unethical; 5 = Very unethical).

We formulated three research questions:

1. *How characteristic are Dark Triad traits in the student sample from the Faculty of Economics at the University of Debrecen?*
2. *Which forms of behaviour do students consider most, and least, ethical?*
3. *Is there a relationship between the Dark Triad and the judgement of the ethical nature of situations at the workplace?*

During the analysis, taking into account the value of the answers given on the Likert scales we calculated means and standard deviations, and examining the Pearson or Spearman correlation indicators for the entire sample we illustrate the relationship between the individual questions. The correlation coefficient values can be interpreted on the basis of Evans (1996), as follows:

- - 0.19 : very weak
- 0.20 - 0.39 : weak
- 0.40 - 0.59 : medium
- 0.60 - 0.79 : strong
- 0.80 - 1.0 : very strong relationship between the examined factors.

4. Results and Discussion

Table 1 shows the mean and standard deviation of the individual replies to the Dirty Dozen, the average of the three personality traits, the standard deviation, and the average and standard deviation for all the questionnaire answers.

Table 1: The means and standard deviation of the Dirty Dozen Dark Triad items

Statements	Average for the whole sample	Standard deviation
Machiavellianism	11.388	5.2273
I am willing to manipulate others, in order to get ahead.	2.99	1.703
I have used trickery or lies in order to get ahead.	3.03	1.751
I have used flattery in order to get ahead.	3.14	1.816
I am willing to use others in order to reach my goals.	2.23	1.536
Psychopathy	9.292	4.1308
It is not typical of me to feel problems with my conscience.	2.26	1.65
I don't usually pay attention to the moral aspects of what I do.	1.98	1.257
I am usually ruthless or without feeling.	1.82	1.335
I am usually cynical.	3.23	1.844
Narcissism	14.029	5.0268
I want other people to think I'm wonderful.	3.5	1.837
It is typical of me that I seek power and recognition.	3.64	1.762
I usually expect others to do special favours for me.	2.25	1.493
I want other people to pay attention to me.	4.64	1.535
Overall average	34.708	11.985

Source: Authors' own research

It can be seen that the statements related to narcissism scored the highest point average, reaching or passing the average of 3.5 which indicates membership of the Dark Triad in three out of the four questions. Of the three personality traits the second is Machiavellianism and the two statements which produce the lowest averages are related to psychopathy.

Analysing the students' answers individually, 50 of them (23.9%) are highly Machiavellian (i.e. the four related statements produce a total of 15 or more), divided into 25 male and 25 female respondents. A strong narcissistic personality was a feature of 94 students (45%), 32 men and 62 women, and a strongly psychopathic personality was a feature of 20 students (9.6% of the sample), 11 men and 9 women. Analysing the three traits together revealed that 35 people, or 17.1% of the sample, belonged to the Dark Triad, i.e. they scored at least 45 points in total. This result can be considered very significant. In the international literature we only found data relating to the frequency of psychopathy. In the general population this was measured at around 1% (Boddy, 2011), which is well below our finding of 9.6%. Our research results more or less confirmed the findings of other studies in terms of frequency relating to gender, in that among men all three characteristics are more common (Paulhus and Williams, 2002).

If we treat the data a little more strictly, and only include those who scored 15 points or more in all three traits as members of the Dark Triad, then there are 12 such individuals in the sample, making up 5.7% of respondents, of whom 7 are men and 5 women.

Next, we move on to analyze how students included in the survey assessed the ethical aspects of specific workplace situations. Examining the mean and standard deviation of the

total sample we can determine which behaviors our students considered the most and which the least ethical, (Table 2).

Table 2: Statements assessed

Situation assessed	The average of the whole sample	Standard deviation
Making public confidential information.	4.75	0.6
Accusing an innocent colleague of something you are accused of.	4.70	0.6
Taking credit for the work of others.	4.55	0.7
Small-scale theft of the company's tools or stock.	4.49	0.7
Falsifying information relating to time, quantity or quality on a report.	4.35	0.7
Increasing the value of an invoice by more than 10% by increasing the cost of individual items.	4.09	0.9
Allowing an employee to break the company's rules.	4.00	0.8
Falling asleep in church.	3.78	1.0
Falling asleep at work.	3.71	0.8
Snacking and visiting the snack bar at work.	3.71	0.8
Increasing the value of an invoice by less than 10% by increasing the cost of individual items.	3.64	1.0
Stretching out the time needed to finish the job.	3.50	0.9
Claiming to be ill in order to get a day off.	3.50	0.7
"Sneaking" extra free time for yourself (e.g. coming in later to work, finishing work early).	3.47	0.7
Remaining silent while others break the company's policy or rules.	3.45	0.8
Sorting out your own affairs while at work.	3.37	0.7
Accepting a gift or discount in order to get a favourable contract.	3.33	1.0
Using services paid for by the firm for your own personal purposes (e.g. telephone services).	3.24	0.7
Giving a gift or offering a discount in order to get a favourable contract.	3.15	1.0
Covering for somebody's mistakes.	3.13	0.9

Source: Authors' own research

With regard to the individual situations, when considering the averages we can say that students considered seven situations to be particularly unethical (with an average above 4): disclosing confidential information; accusing an innocent colleague of something we ourselves have been accused of; taking the credit for someone else's work; small-scale theft of company property; falsifying information relating to time, quantity or quality on a report; increasing the value of an invoice by more than 10% by increasing the cost of individual items; allowing an employee to break the company's rules. In these cases, although the value of the standard deviation was relatively high, it did not reach 1. The respondents considered 6 situations moderately unethical (with an average between 3.5 and 4). These are: falling asleep at work, falling asleep in church, eating at work, increasing the value of an invoice by less than 10% by increasing the cost of individual items, stretching out the time needed to finish the job, and claiming to be ill in order to get a day off. The remaining seven situations were considered slightly unethical (with an average between 3 and 3.5): "sneaking" extra free time for yourself, remaining silent while others break the company's policy or rules, sorting out your own affairs while at work, accepting a gift or discount in order

to get a favourable contract, using services paid for by the firm for your own personal purposes, giving a gift or offering a discount in order to get a favourable contract, and covering for somebody's mistakes.

Compared with the results obtained by Ludlum and his colleagues (2013 and 2015), we can say that beyond the four situations mentioned above Hungarian respondents considered a further three to be particularly unethical, but their ideas about which situations were unethical were completely different from those of the American students. The explanation probably lies in cultural differences; our assumptions in this direction, however, require further research.

We were also looking for correlation connections (using Pearson's correlation coefficients) between the ratings given for the situations. However, notable results were only found in two cases: the same proportion of students who considered it unethical to increase the value of an invoice by less than 10% in value also considered it unethical to increase an invoice by more than 10% ($r = 0.549$ at a 1% significance level). Giving gifts and offering discounts, and receiving them in order to secure a contract also moderately correlate with each other ($r = 0.548$ at a 1% significance level).

By examining the correlation coefficients between the individual Dark Triad traits we were searching for an answer as to whether a statistically demonstrable correlation exists between them, i.e. whether, for example, a person who has a more narcissistic personality is more likely to have Machiavellian traits, as well. Based on our analysis, moderate correlation coefficients were found in three cases:

- Machiavellian personality traits co-occur with narcissistic personality traits in the students questioned ($r=0.59$ at a 1% significance level),
- Machiavellian personality traits with psychopathic traits ($r=0.564$ at a 1% significance level),
- narcissistic personality traits co-occur with psychopathic personality traits ($r=0.449$ at a 1% significance level).

Below, we examine whether we can demonstrate with statistical methods a clear link between university students' personalities and ethical attitudes. In other words, while the analyses described above examined these two issues separately, we now attempt, with the help of Spearman's correlation coefficients, to explore the relationship between them. Based on our results we can say that a weak and opposing co-occurrence can be observed between the students' Machiavellian traits and ethical attitudes ($\rho = -0.241$ at a 1% significance level), i.e. the more Machiavellian traits featured in the students' personality traits, the less ethical would be their judgement of workplace situations. We can make a similar statement concerning the students' narcissistic traits and ethical attitudes: a weak co-occurrence in the opposite direction is observed between these two factors ($\rho = -0.244$ at a 1% significance level).

5. Conclusion

The objective of our work was to analyze university students' personality traits and ethical attitudes. This study sought to answer three research questions:

- How typical are Dark Triad traits among the sample of students from the Faculty of Economics, at the University of Debrecen?
- Which behaviors do our students consider the most and the least ethical?
- Is there a connection between the Dark Triad and the ethicality judgements of workplace situations?

First of all we established the strength of three properties which feature in the Dark Triad model, which is becoming increasingly widely known. Regarding psychopathy, we can state that there is a clearly higher proportion of these personalities in our sample than is described in the specialist literature. We found even greater proportions of individuals with the other two traits, but there is no data available for comparison.

Examining the ethical attitudes of students based on our results, we can say that the respondents recognized unethical workplace behaviors, and considered the majority of them to be particularly or moderately unethical (thirteen situations out of twenty), and only a few situations to be slightly unethical (seven situations out of twenty). Compared to the American sample, the ethical values of the Hungarian students proved to be stricter.

The analysis of the relationship between personality and ethical values among the Debrecen students can be summarized by stating that the existence of three negative human qualities and the strength of their presence co-occurs to a limited degree with unethical behavior.

The possible future directions of our research are varied: we would like to carry out similar tests on samples which are both larger and more diversified. We intend to extend the analysis to university students on courses other than Economics, as well to students from abroad.

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