The Influence of the Dark Triad Traits on the Motivation to Succeed Among Students Under Martial Law in Ukraine

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Original Article

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Abstract:

In recent decades, researchers around the world have been actively studying the impact of personality traits on management, career, leadership, and interpersonal relationships. Of particular interest is the role of the so-called "dark" traits, which are traditionally associated with manipulation and unethical behavior, but can also contribute to the achievement of ambitious goals. And in today's world, where competition for resources, career opportunities, and social influence is constantly intensifying, the motivation to succeed often involves the use of strategies typical of people with high Dark Triad

scores. In this regard, our study investigates the influence of the Dark Triad trait construct on the motivation to succeed among students of higher education institutions under martial law in Ukraine.

Methods: To test the hypotheses, we used Pearson correlations and the hierarchical regression method with statistical significance testing. This is a universal statistical test that is widely used to identify predictors.

Results: After analyzing the results, we found a systematic, positive, and statistically significant effect of one of the Dark Triad traits (narcissism) on success motivation. However, we did not find a statistically significant effect of the other two Dark Triad traits on success motivation.

Conclusion: The hypothesis about the significant influence of the Dark Triad traits on success motivation was partially confirmed in the case of subclinical narcissism. This allows us to conclude that self-esteem, the need for recognition, demonstrativeness, and belief in personal uniqueness, inherent in the narcissistic type, play a leading role in shaping success orientation. The results obtained are of both theoretical value for further study of motivational mechanisms and practical importance, in particular, in the areas of management, pedagogical counseling, professional selection, and psychoprophylaxis.

Introduction

Modern society views success as one of the key values that determines professional fulfillment, social status and personal well-being. It is conventionally posited that success results from a combination of perseverance, innate ability, sustained effort, and a high level of emotional intelligence.. Without diminishing the importance of these really important traits, in this study we would like to draw attention to the impact on success motivation of certain personality traits that have been attracting more and more attention from experts around the world in recent decades. We will talk about the personality construct of the Dark Triad, which combines three such "dark" traits as subclinical psychopathy, subclinical narcissism, and Machiavellianism (14) and the impact of this construct on the motivation to succeed.

Narcissism is defined as a combination of a grandiose but at the same time vulnerable self-image, excessive focus on achieving success, a need for admiration from others, a desire for self-actualization, and difficulties in building and maintaining interpersonal relationships due to a lack of trust and empathy (1).

Psychopathy, in turn, is characterized by impulsivity, reduced empathy and anxiety, lack of guilt, emotional coldness, conviction of one's own superiority, and a parasitic lifestyle, often accompanied by deviant or criminal behavior.

Machiavellianism is characterized by a proclivity to manipulate and exploit others as a means of attaining personal objectives. People with a high level of this trait usually hold three key attitudes: a belief in the effectiveness of manipulative strategies in social interactions, a cynical outlook on human nature, and a belief that expediency is of higher value than moral norms (22).

Combined together, these traits form a special type of psyche that primarily manifests itself as self-interest, aggression, and ruthlessness.

Most previous studies have focused on the negative effects of the Dark Triad (7; 25). However, there are cases where a high level of Dark Triad traits in combination with other factors (intelligence, physical attractiveness) can help

a person gain leadership positions. For example, a study (26) shows that individuals with high Dark Triad scores are quite successful in managing their self-image, which ultimately allows them to build a successful career. In some situations, people with high Dark Triad traits can demonstrate strategic advantages, especially in highly competitive environments or where circumstances require quick decision-making (16).

Given that success encompasses more than just career advancement and represents a broader, multifaceted construct, it is pertinent to reference research examining the perceived attractiveness of men exhibiting Dark Triad traits from the perspective of female evaluators. (5). The study revealed that male individuals exhibiting elevated levels of Dark Triad traits were evaluated as significantly more attractive by the participants. Even when the study participants consciously recognized that they were looking at people with high levels of the Dark Triad traits, they still rated them as more attractive. In addition, some studies have examined the relationship of individual components of the Dark Triad to career growth and success (i.e., salary, status, and job satisfaction (26).

However, to our knowledge, no studies have analyzed whether and to what extent the Dark Triad traits influence success when conceptualized as a broad and generalized concept. Consequently, success as a socio-psychological phenomenon may reflect not only the negative but also the potentially adaptive aspects of the Dark Triad.

Against the background of the above, the present study aimed to extend research on personality and success by, first, investigating whether narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism exert differential (i.e., both negative and positive) effects on an individual's motivation for success. Second, we assessed which components of the Dark Triad exert a more substantial and reliable influence on success motivation. This approach allowed us to determine the relative predictive validity of each Dark Triad trait in this context.

It is important to note that the majority of the studies referenced are predominantly based on Western samples. Given the cultural differences between Western contexts and Ukraine, it remains unclear whether the findings from these studies can be directly applied to Ukrainian populations. Therefore, one of the additional questions posed in the current study was whether statistically significant conclusions could be drawn using Ukrainian research samples, taking into account the unique cultural characteristics of the region. Another important issue of this study is to determine the levels of expression of the components of the Dark Triad of Personality (SD3) among students under martial law in Ukraine in comparison with the corresponding indicators in samples of students from Germany and the United States, which allows us to identify culturally and situationally determined features of social and psychological adaptation.

Given that such studies are hardly ever conducted in Ukraine, this issue is of great interest to us, as we are also considering the possibility of further studying and testing it in the Ukrainian context.

Success as a socio-psychological phenomenon

Success is a multifaceted socio-psychological construct that reflects both personal aspirations and social expectations. In psychology, it is seen not only as the achievement of an externally recognized goal, but also as a subjective experience of self-realization, satisfaction, and social recognition (6). From the point of view of social psychology, notions of success are shaped by cultural norms, social stereotypes, and reference groups that define standards of "successful" behavior. Individual perceptions of success are closely related to self-esteem, achievement motivation (19), ambition level, and social context, including expectations of family, professional environment, and the broader cultural milieu. Success also has a normative function, setting benchmarks for social comparison and identification in the social hierarchy. Thus, success is a dynamic socio-psychological phenomenon in which personal values, social evaluations, and cultural models interact. Its achievement or lack thereof has a significant impact on emotional well-being, social status, and overall life satisfaction (6).

Narcissism and success

We hypothesize that narcissism is positively related to success through motivational tendencies to get ahead and succeed, as well as through a higher desire to prove one's worth. For example, Elliot & Thrash (10) concluded that at least some components of narcissism are positively related to achievement orientation. Moreover, in situations related to success, narcissists demonstrate strong emotional reactions and use them as an additional source of self-improvement (e.g., subjective sense of success) (3; 23).

In addition, research has shown that narcissists are highly effective in creating a positive impression, especially in selection situations (4; 26), which can help them get a more prestigious job. This can also be explained by beliefs in the high self-efficacy of narcissists (20). Ultimately, since narcissists are assumed to have higher levels of self-efficacy beliefs, a higher drive to prove their worth, and can present themselves more effectively, they are more focused on achieving success.

Hypothesis 1: Narcissism is positively elated to success motivation

Psychopathy and success

Psychopathic personality traits, such as impulsivity, emotional superficiality, and lack of guilt, are associated with a reduced level of corporate responsibility, which in turn can negatively affect individual performance in the professional environment (9). Among the personality characteristics of the Dark Triad, psychopathy is the most significant negative predictor of professional performance (22).

Despite the predominantly negative impact of psychopathic traits on professional performance, some studies have suggested potential mechanisms through which psychopathy may be associated with higher rates of career success. In particular, some individuals with severe psychopathy may demonstrate outward attractiveness, extroverted charisma, and confidence, which contributes to their perception as effective leaders or managers. In this context, researchers have found a positive relationship between antisocial tendencies, which partially overlap with psychopathic traits, and achievement of higher positions and financial results (2; 27).

However, despite such arguments, most empirical studies provide convincing evidence that psychopathy is usually associated with lower objective (e.g., income, job status) and subjective (e.g., career satisfaction) success. Impulsivity, negative affectivity, and social coexistence disorders are the main factors that determine this relationship.

Hypothesis 2. Psychopathy is negatively related to success

Machiavellianism and the motivation to succeed

Machiavellianism has a long tradition of research in the context of success and leadership. This is because the key traits of individuals with a pronounced Machiavellian type of behavior (a tendency to manipulate, use other people, and think strategically) can be effectively implemented in positions and roles that involve authority. Despite the fact that the presence of Machiavellian tendencies is associated with lower loyalty to the organization, reduced commitment to the team and leadership (28), and negative perceptions from subordinates (24), these personality characteristics can contribute to achieving leadership positions.

It is also noted that individuals with high levels of Machiavellianism are often inclined to career-oriented professions, particularly in the fields of law and management, where they can exercise control and influence, as well as due to their own initiative and confidence. They seek power and have a strong motivation to achieve status (17). It has also been found that, unlike individuals with high levels of psychopathy, individuals with pronounced Machiavellianism are more likely to use socially acceptable soft power strategies: demonstrating charm, attractive appearance, humor, compromise, mutually beneficial exchange, building alliances, and using compliments (12). These approaches are less confrontational, which reduces the risk of negative consequences in the medium and long term, thereby contributing to objective career success.

With regard to career success, the evidence

remains less conclusive. Despite their potential effectiveness in achieving professional goals, individuals with high levels of Machiavellianism tend to report lower levels of job satisfaction. This may be due to increased expectations of reward, control, and influence that are not always realized to the desired degree. However, it is worth noting that individuals with high levels of Machiavellianism, even when seeking greater influence and control, may subjectively perceive themselves as successful in their career due to achieving a prestigious or influential position.

Hypothesis 3: Machiavellianism is positively correlated with success motivation

Materials and method

The study was conducted online. This was due to the restrictions caused by martial law, as well as the peculiarities of organizing the educational process, which took into account the safety of the participants (lack of heating and, in some places, electricity, air raids, etc.).

The sample consisted of 175 students and teachers of educational and professional programs in Psychology, Management, Mathematics, Information Technology, and Economics from higher educational institutions of Ukraine. The chosen areas of study have a common feature - a professional orientation to human interaction, which can manifest the features of the Dark Triad. It should be noted that the main idea was also to form a sample in which the bulk of respondents would be approximately the same age (18-25), since the characteristics of the Dark Triad construct can change both under the influence of personal and professional growth (including the influence of the surrounding professional environment) and under the influence of age-related changes. Nevertheless, these changes themselves aroused some research interest, so no age restrictions were included in the study design.

Measurement

Motivation to achieve success

As an instrument for studying the motivation to succeed, the Ehlers' questionnaire (8) was chosen, which is a well-known tool for assessing the level of motivation of individuals to succeed in various fields of activity, which has become popular in psychological research due to its simplicity and effectiveness.

The methodology consists of 41 questions or statements to which the respondent must answer "yes" or "no," which allows us to assess the level of success motivation. It is a self-assessment, meaning that respondents independently evaluate their own reactions and behavior in various life situations. A high level of motivation to succeed is often associated with ambition, activity, desire to achieve high results, and the ability to overcome difficulties. The answers to the questions are compiled to form the success motivation (ELRS).

The Dark Triad

To examine the Dark Triad as a holistic construct, the present study employed the Short Dark Triad (SD3) assessment methodology. (14). According to the authors of the methodology, the features of the Dark Triad are similar in their manifestations (and therefore correlate), but at the same time, each of them contributes to socially unacceptable behavior (and therefore, these are three relatively independent features). Its peculiarity is that it allows simultaneously identifying the presence and degree of certainty of all three components of the Dark Triad: Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and narcissism in a normal (non-clinical) population. The questionnaire consists of 27 questions, 9 questions for each component. The respondent is asked to answer these questions on a 5-point Likert scale (answers range from "1. Strongly disagree" to "5. Strongly agree"). The final result is presented for each of the three scales separately, so the Dark Triad is represented in our study: Machiavellianism (SD3_M), Narcissism (SD3_N), Psychopathy (SD3_P).

The NPI Narcissism Inventory

The NPI-16 (*Narcissistic Personality Inventory-16*) is a shortened version of the larger NPI-40, designed to assess the level of grandiose narcissism in the general population (1). It consists of 16 pairs of statements, where the respon-

dent chooses the one that best matches his or her views or behavior. This questionnaire also allows to analyze the structure of this component in more detail: leadership/authority (NPI_LA), superiority/arrogance (NPI_SA), and self-absorption/self-satisfaction (NPI_SS).

Analytical approach

All variables were standardized before the analysis to ensure comparability of beta coefficients across all regression models. Two main analytical strategies were used:

1. Pearson correlations: Bivariate correlations were calculated to examine the relationships between all measured variables (N = 175).
2. Hierarchical regression:

- Model 1: SD3 traits (Machiavellianism, narcissism, psychopathy) as predictors of the ELRS
- Model 2: NPI-16 subscales (Leadership/Authority, Superiority/Arrogance, Self-Absorption/Self-Capture) as predictors of ELRS

Results obtained

Correlation analysis

Pearson's bivariate correlations revealed systematic patterns of relationship between Dark Triad traits, narcissism components, and achievement motivation (Table 1), and its "temperature" version is shown in Figure 1. The correlation matrix revealed differentiated relationships between specific narcissistic traits and achievement motivation.

Correlation with motivation to success (ELRS)

- ELRS ↔ NPI_LA ($r = 0.409$, $p < .001$): Leadership-oriented narcissism is positively correlated with achievement motivation, supporting theories of "adaptive" narcissism.
- ELRS ↔ SD3_N ($r = 0.344$, $p < .001$): Narcissism from SD3 correlated with motivation to succeed, although the relationship was somewhat weaker than that of NPI_LA.

Hierarchical regression analysis

Model 1 The predictive role of Dark Triad (SD3) traits

The first hierarchical regression model examined the predictive power of the Dark Triad traits in terms of influencing the motivation to succeed (ELRS). The regression equation was statistically significant: $F(3, 171) = 8.50$, $p < .001$ (Table 2).

Key findings from Model

The only significant predictor was SD3_N (narcissism): $\beta = 0.33$, $SE = 0.076$, $t(171) = 4.34$, $p < .001$, which shows a positive and statistically significant effect on the ELRS, indicating that individuals with more pronounced narcissistic traits have higher levels of motivation to

Table 1 Correlation matrix of the Dark Triad traits, narcissism subscales, and motivation to succeed

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1.NPI_LA	---						
2.NPI_SA	---	---					
3.NPI_SS	.456***	.447***	---				
4.SD3_M	-.015	---	---	---			
5. SD3_N	.551***	---	.672***	.273**	---		
6.SD3_P	---	---	---	.511***	---	---	
7. ELRS	.409***	---	.288***	---	.344***	.110	---

Notes. N = 175. Only significant and theoretically relevant correlations are shown. NPI_LA = Leadership/Authority; NPI_SA = Superiority/Arrogance; NPI_SS = Self-Absorption/Self-Satisfaction; SD3_M = Machiavellianism; SD3_N = Narcissism; SD3_P = Psychopathy; ELRS = Effort-Leadership-Results Scale (motivation to succeed).

**p < .01. ***p < .001.

succeed. The other predictors were either insignificant or not significant.

Notes: In the ANOVA (Type I SS), SD3_M (Machiavellianism) showed little significance ($p = .011$) when entered first, but its effect was absorbed by SD3_N (narcissism).

Model 2 The predictive role of the NPI-16 narcissism subscales

The second hierarchical regression model examined the three factor components of the NPI-16: Leadership/Authority (NPI_LA), Superiority/Arrogance (NPI_SA), and Self-Absorption/Self-Satisfaction (NPI_SS). This model provided a more detailed assessment of how specific narcissistic tendencies are related to success motivation. The regression equation was statistically significant: $F(3, 171) = 13.08$, $p < .001$ (Table 3).

Key findings from Model 2

The only significant predictor was NPI_LA ($\beta = 0.37$, $SE = 0.079$, $t(171) = 4.66$, $p < .001$), while other predictors were either insignificant or not significant. Thus, it is Leadership/Authority that has a statistically significant and strong impact on ELRS and accounts for 89.7% of the explained variance in the model.

Comparison of severity levels by components of the Dark Triad

The data obtained in our study, as well as data from studies in Germany (18) and the United States (13; 11; 15) are presented in Table 4.

Figure 1 „Temperature" correlation matrix



Table 2 Hierarchical regression analysis: Dark Triad traits as predictors of motivation to succeed

Predictor	β	SE	T	p	95% CI	SS	% of variance
SD3_N	0.330	0.076	4.34	<.001	[0.18, 0.48]	16.24	73%
SD3_M	0.125	0.084	1.50	.136	[-0.04, 0.29]	5.88	26%
SD3_P	-0.062	0.085	-0.72	.471	[-0.23, 0.11]	0.46	1%

Notes. N = 175. Dependent variable: Standardized ELRS (motivation to succeed). All predictors are standardized. SD3_N = Narcissism; SD3_M = Machiavellianism; SD3_P = Psychopathy; SS = Sum of Squares. Model results: $F(3, 171) = 8.50$, $p < .001$; Adjusted $R^2 = .115$; Residual standard error = 0.941.

Discussion

Theoretical and empirical implications

This study analyzes the relationship of Dark Triad personality traits with success motivation among mostly young people studying at different universities in Ukraine. An important contribution of the study is the simultaneous examination of all three Dark Triad traits in relation to this relationship. Narcissism turned out to be the only Dark Triad trait that has **a systematic, statistically significant, and positive effect on success motivation**. This may be due to the narcissistic personality's characteristic tendency to self-enhancement, demonstrativeness, and need for recognition, which stimulates the desire to achieve high results. However, a more detailed analysis of the narcissism dimensions revealed that this relationship is mostly driven by the Leadership/Authority component (NPI_LA, $\beta = 0.37$), which supports the concept of "adaptive narcissism" in achievement contexts. Psychopathy and Machiavellianism did not show a significant relationship with achievement motivation, which may indicate that the underlying destructive traits are not determinants of socially adaptive achievement motivation

We also proved that in the context of studying the Dark Triad traits, the existing cultural differences between Ukraine and Western countries do not affect the effectiveness and statistical significance of the sample when applying the correct models. In general, the study extends previous work on the impact of the Dark Triad traits on certain areas of human life not only in the geographical and cultural sense, adding Ukrainian samples to Western ones, but also in the sense of analyzing this impact on success as a broader socio-psychological phenomenon. Thus, our study makes a significant contribution both to the field of management and business and to the field of holistic personality research.

A comparative analysis of the average values of the Dark Triad components among students in Ukraine, which is in martial law, with those in peaceful countries turned out to be quite interesting. For example, the levels of psychopathy and narcissism were even lower than other indicators, but the level of Machiavellianism was the highest.

Despite the results, their interpretation requires some caution. In particular, it was unexpected that Machiavellianism did not demonstrate a statistically significant positive relationship with success motivation. One possible explanation for these results may be that the sample under study mostly did not have a suffi-

Table 3 Hierarchical regression analysis: NPI-16 subscales as predictors of success motivation

Predictor	β	SE	T	p	95% CI	SS	% of variance
NPI_LA	0.367	0.079	4.66	<.001	[0.21, 0.52]	29.14	89.7%
NPI_SS	0.161	0.083	1.94	.053	[-0.002, 0.32]	3.13	9.6%
NPI_SA	-0.090	0.078	-1.15	.252	[-0.24, 0.06]	0.21	0.7%

Notes. N = 175. Dependent variable: Standardized ELRS (motivation to succeed). All predictors are standardized. NPI_LA = Leadership/Authority; NPI_SS = Self-absorption/Self-satisfaction; NPI_SA = Superiority/Arrogance; SS = Sum of Squares. Model results: $F(3, 171) = 13.08$, $p < .001$; Adjusted $R^2 = .172$; Residual standard error = 0.910

Table 4 Comparison of the levels of expression of the Dark Triad traits among students

Component	Germany(18)	USA(13)	USA(11)	USA(15)	This study
SD3_M	3.12	2.99	2.36	2.90	3.65
SD3_N	3.45	3.38	3.29	2.91	3.08
SD3_P	2.89	2.16	2.12	2.16	2.10

cient level of professional experience necessary for the full manifestation of the predicted individual psychological tendencies in the context of career trajectory.

Conclusion

The results of the study

The theoretical significance of this study is manifested primarily in three key areas.

First, our findings offer a new perspective on the relationship between Dark Triad traits and success motivation in the context of Ukrainian culture and the current martial law. Against the backdrop of previous empirical evidence that Dark Triad traits influence emotional and social aspects of behavior, our study extends the understanding of these relationships in the context of the impact on the motivational domain of the individual. We confirmed the results of existing studies that the Dark Triad has a positive predictive effect on career achievement (12), extending them to motivation to succeed in general. However, the only statistically significant positive predictor of this effect was narcissism (or rather, its leadership/authority component), which differs from previous studies in which Machiavellianism was also a predictor. Summarizing, the results of this study reveal certain discrepancies with the findings of Western elections. This allows us to take a fresh look at the existing research and opens up new directions for further empirical research in this area.

Second, this study is the first in the Ukrainian scientific context to offer a differentiated analysis of the relationship between individual Dark Triad traits and success motivation. It complements and extends previous research that has predominantly focused on the relationship between success and more general constructs of dark personality based on a combination of traits from the Big Five model, rather than focusing on the specific components of the Dark Triad - narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism.

Third, the increased level of Machiavellianism compared to peaceful countries may be a reaction to the threat and uncertainty inherent in martial law. In crisis situations, the value of strategic thinking, pragmatism, and interpersonal manipulativeness increases as a means of self-preservation or adaptation to instability. The lowest level of psychopathy may seem paradoxical, but in times of war, social cohesion and moral responsibility can suppress manifestations of ruthlessness or impulsivity. This may also be the result of increased mobilization of pro-social attitudes and collective ethics aimed at survival. Therefore, in our opinion, these patterns may indicate **adaptation to stressful conditions through strategic behavior, but without cruelty**, which is consistent with high social solidarity and moral mobilization in Ukrainian society.

Implications for practice

The findings regarding the impact of Dark Triad traits on achievement motivation hold substantial practical significance across multiple domains, including management, human resource practices, and educational settings.

First, the positive impact of narcissism on the motivation to succeed has been found to allow a new interpretation of the role of this trait in management processes. In particular, in a highly competitive environment, individuals with a moderate level of narcissism can be effective drivers of result-oriented change. Managers can take this into account when assigning roles in teams, creating motivational strategies, or developing leadership development programs. At the same time, it is important to control excessive manifestations of narcissism that can lead to conflicts, authoritarian management style, or neglect of team interaction.

Secondly, the results obtained can be used in the processes of recruiting personnel, assessing the potential of candidates and forming a personnel reserve. In particular, knowledge of the relationship between narcissism and the motivation to succeed can be useful in assessing leadership potential or career development. On the other hand, the absence of a significant influence of Machiavellianism and psychopathy on achievement motivation gives grounds for a cautious attitude towards individuals with high scores on these traits, especially in the context of teamwork, corporate ethics, and long-term organizational effectiveness. In HR practice, this can be realized through the use of appropriate

psychodiagnostics techniques (in particular, SD3) in the formation of a psychological profile of employees.

Thirdly, in the education system, the results of the study can be useful for career guidance, psychological support for students, and the development of their motivational sphere. The knowledge that only narcissism correlates with the motivation to succeed can help in individualizing approaches to stimulating achievement, as well as in identifying potential leaders among students and pupils. It is also advisable to include the topic of psychological characteristics of achievement motivation in training programs and courses on personal development.

In general, the results of the study can serve as a basis for building evidence-based practices of human resource management, leadership development, and improving the effectiveness of educational programs.

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