Everyday Sadism: Throwing Light on the Dark Triad

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The Dark Triad. It could well be a cast of villains in an epic tale of fantasy. All three of these dark powers are callous and exploitative, but each is also malignant in its own way. One is charming but remorseless. The second is known for its cynicism and deception. The third is grandiose and entitled, the ultimate egotist. You don't want to cross this evil trio.

But you may have no choice, since the Dark Triad is not a literary phantasm at all. This threatening title comes out of formal personality theory, and refers to three traits that, taken together, capture the worst of humanity. They are the three faces of what's considered an anti-social human core, and their formal, scientific names reflect their inhumanity: psychopathy, Machiavellianism and narcissism.

The Dark Triad of personality theory has been studied for years, and is fairly well accepted in psychological science. But now a triad of scientists is challenging the Dark Triad. Erin Buckels and Delroy Paulhus of the University of British Columbia and Daniel Jones of the University of Texas at El Paso are not questioning the legitimacy of the three traits, but suggesting that the construct is incomplete. The true dark core of human personality, they say, is a Dark Tetrad. The missing villain is sadism.

Sadism is most often associated with cruel sexual fetishes, thanks to the Marquis de Sade, but this notion is both inaccurate and unfortunate, these scientists believe. A true sadistic disposition, they argue, is one that craves cruelty. Sadists find the act of hurting innocent people—including killing—pleasurable and exciting, and what's more, they seek out opportunities to satisfy this appetite for brutality.

That at least is the construct that these scientists are proposing in the journal *Psychological Science*, along with some preliminary evidence to bolster their claim. It's obviously difficult to study horrific behavior in a laboratory setting, so it took some ingenuity to illuminate this dark corner of human personality. Here's what the scientists did.

To study sadists' appetite for killing—since human murder was out of the question—the scientists used crunching bugs as a proxy. Under the pretense of studying personality and job preferences, they asked volunteers to choose among four tasks that mirrored odious real-life jobs: If they liked working in the cold, they could choose to endure pain from ice water. If sanitation work was more appealing, they could clean a dirty toilet. Or if exterminator was their job of choice, they could choose to kill bugs, or to assist in the killing of bugs.

The scientists were most interested in the aspiring exterminators, and to study them more closely, they invented a "killing machine." This machine was actually a coffee grinder, but it was modified to maximize gruesomeness by producing a distinct crunching sound. The exterminators were given three cups, each containing a pill bug with a name: Muffin, Ike and Tootsie. The cute names were intended to humanize the bugs. The job was to drop Muffin, Ike and Tootsie into the killing machine, one at a time,

and grind them up. (Don’t worry. This was also a ruse. No bugs were hurt in the experiment.)

The scientists measured how many bugs the volunteers crunched, and also their pleasure afterward. In addition—before the task—the volunteers completed standard measures of sadistic tendencies, sub-clinical Dark Triad tendencies, and their sensitivity to disgusting things. The idea was to see if those with a sadistic personality trait would actually act sadistically—choosing the cruelest job option and deriving the most pleasure from killing.

And they did, unquestionably. Those who scored high on sadism clearly preferred the visceral experience of crunching the bugs over the other tasks, and importantly, this connection was independent of any other dark personality traits—psychopathy, narcissism or Machiavellianism. Also notable, the sadists were not especially prone to disgust, which means that their cruelty cannot be explained by a high tolerance for blood and excrement and bugs.

The volunteers’ post-killing emotions were intriguing. Surprisingly, the sadists experienced less positive emotion than non-sadists, no matter what task they chose. The scientists think that the sadists who opted out of the killing opportunity regretted their choice, and indeed the sadists who crunched Muffin, Ike and Tootsie did experience more pleasure. This pattern suggests the disturbing possibility that sadistic types use cruelty to compensate for a general lack of positive emotion in their lives.

All of this suggests that sadism may be another, equal dark power—and perhaps even more sinister in a way. Psychopaths have no qualms about hurting others, but their aggression usually has a purpose. Narcissists are usually hurtful only when threatened. And Machiavellians are too calculating to risk retaliation unless there is a lot on the line. Sadists may be unique in engaging in unprovoked cruelty—cruelty that takes effort and has no discernible benefits.

To test this, the three scientists ran another experiment. They again administered the standard personality inventory to volunteers, who proceeded to play a computer game. They believed they were competing with another volunteer in another room, and whenever they won, they had the option of blasting their opponent with loud noise. They chose the loudness and duration of the penalty. Importantly, the opponents never blasted back, so there was to justification for retaliation.

Half of the volunteers also had to “work” for the opportunity to be cruel. Once they won a round, they had to complete a tedious and monotonous counting task before administering the blast of noise. The idea was to see who would make that effort to engage in unprovoked cruelty.

The sadists did, and only the sadists. All of those with dark personality traits were cruel to an innocent opponent when it was easy to exert pain. But the sadists increased the intensity of their attack when they realized the innocent person would not fight back. And what’s more, they were the only ones willing to spend time and energy for the opportunity to be cruel.

All of this suggests that sadists are motivated by an intrinsic appetite for cruelty. The act of inflicting suffering on innocent people is apparently pleasure-driven and so rewarding that sadists will pay a price for the chance. In that sense, these scientists conclude, sadism is arguably more morally upsetting and more dangerous than the other dark personalities—and deserves a place in a new Dark Tetrad.

Excerpts from Wray Herbert's blogs—"We're Only Human" and "Full Frontal Psychology"—appear regularly in *The Huffington Post* and elsewhere.