

POWER, PURPOSE AND PERSONALITY: DARK TRAITS AND MOTIVATIONAL PATHWAYS TO CAREER ASPIRATION

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Abstract

Background. Personality traits are recognized as influential factors in shaping academic and professional interests and aspirations (Schneider et al., 2017). Recent research has focused on the role of the “darker” side of personality in shaping professional goals. The Dark Tetrad traits include narcissism (entitlement), Machiavellianism (manipulation), psychopathy (callousness), and everyday sadism (cruelty; Paleczek et al., 2018), which are associated with the desire for power, status, and social dominance (Vedel & Thomsen, 2017). Further, these traits are associated with distinct motivational styles (Góis et al., 2020), which could affect career choice. *Rationale.* Our primary objective was to determine if the Dark Tetrad traits and motivational styles were significant predictors of career aspirations. *Methods.* In total, 229 participants completed an online questionnaire package that included a demographics questionnaire; the Short Dark Tetrad (SD4; Paulhus et al., 2021); the Work Extrinsic and Intrinsic Motivation Scale (WEIMS; Tremblay et al., 2009) to assess intrinsic (enjoyment), extrinsic (control), integrated (alignment), introjected (obligation), identified (value), and amotivation (disengagement) motivation styles; and the Career Aspiration Scale- Revised (CAS-R; Gregor & O’Brien) to assess career aspirations, with subscales assessing achievement, education, and leadership aspirations. *Results.* Three hierarchical multiple regressions were conducted to examine if SD-4 traits and WEIMS motivation styles predicted CAS-R subscales. Across models, age and gender were entered in Block 1 as control variables, Block 2 included SD4 traits, and WEIMS subscales were entered in Block 3. In the first regression predicting CAS-R Achievement, SD4 accounted for a significant increase in explained variance, $\Delta R^2 = .230$, $p < .01$, with Machiavellianism and narcissism contributing to the model. Further, Block 3 was statistically significant, $\Delta R^2 = .049$, $p < .01$, WEIMS extrinsic motivation contributing to the model. The second regression predicting educational aspiration, was also statistically significant; Block 2 was significant, $\Delta R^2 = .110$, $p < .01$, with narcissism contributing to the model. Block 3 was also significant, $\Delta R^2 = .055$, $p < .05$, with introjected motivation contributing to the model. Finally, the model predicting leadership aspiration was statistically significant, with Block 2 contributing to the model, $\Delta R^2 = .244$, $p < .01$; narcissism emerged as the significant predictor. Block 3 WEIMS did not contribute to this model. *Conclusion and Impact.* These results highlight the significant influence that the Dark Tetrad traits, specifically Machiavellianism and narcissism, and specific motivational pathways have on career aspirations. This research has the potential to inform career guidance, educational programming, and academic and workplace interventions to support individuals and organizations.

Keywords: *Dark Tetrad, motivational styles, career aspirations.*

1. Introduction

Motivation research suggests that individuals are more likely to become interested in, choose to pursue, and perform better in activities and occupations in which they hold strong self-efficacy beliefs and highly positive outcome expectations that are aligned with their professional and academic goals and aspirations (Lent & Brown, 2002). To better understand the “nature” of motivation, that is, the “why” of motivation, we employed theoretical frameworks from the Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which distinguishes between different types of extrinsic and intrinsic motivational styles that exist on a continuum related to the underlying reasons that an individual completes different tasks (Ryan & Deci, 2002). Amotivation involves either passive actions or a lack of intention to act. External regulation involves acting only to obtain a reward, introjected regulation involves acting to support self-worth (e.g., self-esteem, guilt), identified regulation refers to doing an activity because one identifies with its value or meaning, integrated regulation occurs when the value of an activity becomes part of the individuals sense of self, and

lastly, intrinsic regulation involves completing an activity because it is inherently interesting and/or satisfying (Trembley et al., 2009).

The Dark Tetrad. Researchers have begun to focus on the role of the “darker” side of personality in shaping professional and academic goals and aspirations. The “darker” side of personality includes personality traits that are considered socially aversive, potentially leading to harmful behaviours and interpersonal difficulties (Dhormare, 2023). Buckels et al. (2013) coined the term ‘Dark Tetrad’ to refer to the combination of four malevolent personality traits: sub-clinical narcissism, defined by high grandiosity, self-love, inflated self-views, and a preoccupation with oneself and one’s needs (Paleczek et al., 2018); Machiavellianism, characterized by manipulateness, selfishness, and a lack of empathy and morality (Boddy et al., 2010); sub-clinical psychopathy, defined by impulsive and antisocial tendencies, accompanied by low levels of fear, empathy, and remorse (Vedel & Thomsen, 2017); and everyday sadism, characterized by the tendency to derive pleasure from the physical, emotional, and psychological pain and suffering of others (Góis et al., 2020). The Dark Tetrad overlap, and primarily present as amoral and antisocial behaviours, such as emotional coldness, aggression, self-centredness, and a lack of empathy and remorse (Međedović & Petrović, 2015). Researchers have acknowledged possible gender differences, consistently indicating higher levels of Dark Tetrad traits in men compared to women (Dhormare, 2023). Therefore, when investigating the Dark Tetrad traits, it is essential to acknowledge this gender difference.

The Dark Tetrad, Motivations, and Aspirations. Motivational styles and personality traits are influential in shaping academic and professional interests and aspirations, such that personality traits significantly affect one’s motivational behaviours (Schneider et al., 2017). Furthermore, research has indicated that the Dark Tetrad traits are associated with distinctive motivational styles and aspirations (Vedel & Thomsen, 2017). For example, individuals with high expressions of narcissism and Machiavellianism traits exhibit high work-related ambition and motivation (Góis et al., 2020). Dark Tetrad traits are accompanied by a strong desire for power, status, achievement, and social dominance (Vedel & Thomsen, 2017), as well as high motivation to achieve acceptance, recognition, and control. Individuals with high levels of these traits are often found in upper-level, management, and leadership positions (Boddy et al., 2010).

The Current Study. Our primary objective of this current study is to determine if the Dark Tetrad traits and motivational styles are significant predictors of achievement, education, and leadership aspirations. Our second objective focused on gender differences in Dark Tetrad traits, motivation styles, and career aspirations.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

A total of 229 participants were recruited; 62 undergraduate students from the University of New Brunswick were recruited through SONA; an online research recruitment portal, and 167 community participants were recruited via social media postings (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Reddit).

2.2. Materials

A *demographics questionnaire* was administered to collect participants’ age, gender, nationality, relationship status, income, and level of education. **The Short Dark Tetrad (SD4;** Paulhus et al., 2021) is a brief self-report measure assessing the four Dark Tetrad traits of personality (i.e., *Machiavellianism, narcissism, psychopathy, and sadism*). The scale consists of 28 items, with four subscales including Machiavellianism, narcissism, psychopathy, and sadism. Participant rate items on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). **The Career Aspiration Scale- Revised (CAS-R;** Gregor & O’Brien, 2016) is a 24-item self-report measure that assesses participants career aspirations. Participant responses are scored on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (*not true at all for me*) to 4 (*very true of me*). Career aspirations are assessed through use of three dimensions: Achievement aspiration, leadership aspiration, and educational aspiration. **The Work Extrinsic and Intrinsic Motivation Scale (WEIMS;** Tremblay et al., 2009) is an 18-item self-report measure assessing work motivation through use of six domains: Intrinsic, extrinsic, integrated, identified, introjected, and amotivation. Responses are scored on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*does not correspond at all*) to 7 (*corresponds exactly*).

2.3. Procedure

Prior to data collection, this research was reviewed by the Research Ethics Board at the University of New Brunswick (REB 2025-225). Participants accessed the online survey via Qualtrics. Before completing the questionnaire package, all participants were presented with an informed consent form. If consent was provided, participants completed the demographics questionnaire, followed by the three questionnaires presented in random order. The survey took approximately 30 minutes to complete.

After completion a debriefing form was presented, and community participants were given the option to be entered in a draw for one of three \$20 Amazon gift cards and university students recruited through SONA were offered one bonus mark towards the final grade in one of their psychology courses.

3. Results

Overall, men reported higher achievement and leadership aspirations than women (see Table 1). Similarly, consistent with past research focused on Dark Tetrad traits, men reported higher Machiavellianism, narcissism, psychopathy, and sadism than women. Lastly, regarding motivational styles, compared to women, men reported higher integrated motivation and introjected motivation. Women reported higher amotivation than men.

Table 1. Gender differences between career aspirations, Dark Tetrad traits, and motivational styles.

	Women		Men		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
Career Aspirations							
Achievement	3.13	.649	3.49	.799	3.63	<.001	.510
Education	3.64	.937	3.74	.938	.751	.454	.106
Leadership	2.60	.958	3.14	.830	4.44*	<.001	.593
Dark Tetrad							
Machiavellianism	3.06	.746	3.61	.729	5.35	<.001	.741
Narcissism	2.77	.892	3.42	.890	5.21	<.001	.722
Psychopathy	1.62	.703	2.67	1.10	7.64*	<.001	1.24
Sadism	1.90	.845	3.10	1.14	8.19*	<.001	1.26
Motivation Styles							
Intrinsic	4.78	1.48	4.69	1.50	1.03	.151	.142
Integrated	3.94	1.08	4.37	1.21	2.85	.002	.390
Identified	3.42	1.21	4.31	1.21	5.37	<.001	.737
Introjected	4.77	1.17	5.25	1.24	2.91	.002	.400
External	4.52	1.55	4.76	1.54	1.12	.133	.153
Amotivation	3.92	1.20	2.56	1.55	1.67*	.049	.252

Note: * equal variances was not assumed.

Three hierarchical multiple regressions were conducted to examine if SD-4 traits and WEIMS motivation styles predicted CAS-R subscales. Across all models, age and gender were entered in Block 1, Block 2 included SD4 traits, and WEIMS subscales were entered in Block 3.

The first regression model predicting achievement aspiration was statistically significant. Overall, the model was statistically significant, $F(2, 217) = 14.02, p < .001$, and accounted for 43.9% of the variability (see Table 2). Block 1 was statistically significant, and both age, $t(223) = 4.966, p < .01$ and gender, $t(223) = 4.095, p < .01$ contributed significantly to the model. The addition of SD4 traits accounted for a significant increase in explained variance, $\Delta R^2 = .230, p < .01$. In this block, Machiavellianism, $t(223) = 2.066, p < .05$, and narcissism, $t(223) = 6.538, p < .01$ emerged as significant positive predictors, suggesting that higher levels of these traits were associated with higher achievement aspirations. Similarly, in Block 3, the addition of WEIMS motivational styles exhibited a further significant increase in explained variance, $\Delta R^2 = .049, p < .01$, with external regulation emerging as a significant negative predictor $t(217) = -2.310, p < .05$, indicating that, after controlling for demographic variables and SD4 traits, lower levels of extrinsic motivation were associated with higher levels of achievement aspirations.

The second regression model predicting educational aspiration was also statistically significant. Overall, the model was statistically significant, $F(2, 217) = 5.593, p < .001$, and accounted for 23.8% of the variability (see Table 2). Block 1 was statistically significant, with age, $t(223) = 4.031, p < .01$ contributing significantly to the model. The addition of SD4 traits accounted for a significant increase in explained variance, $\Delta R^2 = .110, p < .01$. In this block, narcissism emerged as a significant positive predictor $t(223) = 3.275, p < .01$, suggesting that higher levels of narcissism were associated with higher educational aspirations. Similarly, in Block 3, the addition of WEIMS motivational styles contributed to a further significant improvement in the model, $\Delta R^2 = .055, p < .05$, with introjected regulation emerging as a significant positive predictor $t(217) = 2.623, p < .01$, indicating that, after controlling for demographic variables and SD4 traits, higher levels of introjected motivation were associated with higher levels of educational aspirations.

The third regression model predicting leadership aspiration was also statistically significant. Overall, the model was statistically significant, $F(2, 217) = 12.392, p < .001$, and accounted for 40.9% of the variability (see Table 2). The addition of SD4 traits accounted for a significant increase in explained variance, $\Delta R^2 = .244, p < .01$. In this block, narcissism emerged as a significant positive predictor $t(223) = 7.551, p < .01$, suggesting that higher levels of narcissism were associated with higher leadership aspirations. Surprisingly, unlike the previous models, the addition of WEIMS motivational styles did not significantly improve the model, $\Delta R^2 = .012, p = .627$, indicating that, beyond demographics and SD4 traits, motivational styles did not explain the additional variance in leadership aspirations.

Table 2. Hierarchical regression model predicting achievement aspirations (significant predictors are **bolded**).

	ΔR^2	Achievement Aspirations		Education Aspirations		Leadership Aspirations	
		Standardized β	<i>p</i>	Standardized β	<i>p</i>	Standardized β	<i>p</i>
Step 1	.16						
Age		-.304	<.001	-.259	<.001	-.272	<.001
Gender		.401	<.001	.066	.303	.272	<.001
Step 2	.23						
Machiavellianism		.133	.040	-.009	.905	.080	.211
Narcissism		.440	<.001	.370	<.001	.505	<.001
Psychopathy		.020	.816	.003	.973	-.066	.444
Sadism		-.047	.591	-.174	.085	-.007	.940
Step 3	.049						
Intrinsic		.019	.806	-.100	.263	.033	.673
Integrated		.037	.626	.046	.610	.103	.189
Identified		.164	.066	-.084	.416	.038	.679
Introjected		.078	.349	.255	.009	-.056	.515
External		-.198	.022	.042	.673	-.034	.697
Amotivation		.151	.067	.055	.571	.025	.767

4. Discussion

The current study sought to investigate the gender differences between the Dark Tetrad traits, motivational styles, and career aspirations. Significant gender differences were observed, with men reporting significantly higher Dark Tetrad traits, as well as achievement and leadership aspirations. Furthermore, we assessed whether Dark Tetrad traits and motivational styles are significant predictors of achievement, education, and leadership aspirations. To test this, three hierarchical multiple regressions were conducted for each aspiration domain. Across models, the Dark Tetrad traits demonstrated significant influence across all three aspiration domains, with narcissism consistently emerging as a significant positive predictor and Machiavellianism significantly contributing to achievement aspirations, suggesting that higher levels of Dark Tetrad traits, specifically narcissism and Machiavellianism, were associated with higher achievement, education, and leadership aspirations. Moreover, after controlling for demographics and Dark Tetrad traits, motivational styles were shown to be significant contributors of achievement and education aspirations, but not for leadership aspirations. Furthermore, ‘external regulation’ emerged as a significant negative predictor for achievement aspirations, indicating that individuals who rely more on external rewards for motivation tend to report lower achievement aspirations. Regarding educational aspirations, ‘introjected regulation’ emerged as a significant positive predictor, suggesting that feelings of self-worth (e.g., self-esteem, guilt) significantly influence education aspirations.

5. Conclusion

Supporting previous research, these findings indicate a significant gender difference in career aspirations, motivational styles, and Dark Tetrad traits. Moreover, this study further demonstrates the significant influence that the Dark Tetrad traits, specifically narcissism and Machiavellianism, and specific motivational pathways have on achievement, education, and leadership aspirations. Thus, this research has the potential to inform career guidance, educational programming, and academic and workplace interventions to better support individuals and organizations. A limitation of this study is that it was conducted online, potentially contributing to biased or inaccurate participant responses.

Overall, this study highlights the importance for future research to acknowledge and incorporate gender, the Dark Tetrad traits, and motivational styles, when examining professional and academic aspirations.

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