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# The Dark Triad in Helping Professions – Comparison of Teachers and Pedagogy Students



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Radka Čopková<sup>1</sup>

Technical University of Košice, Department of Engineering Education,  
Košice, Slovak Republic

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## ABSTRACT

*The presented research is the part of a broader pilot study within exploration of the dark side of helping professionals; in this case we are focusing on current teachers and future teachers (pedagogy students). The aim of the current research was the exploration and comparison of the aversive personality traits that are inappropriate for performing helping professions. It is the concept called Dark Triad that includes machiavellianism, narcissism and psychopathy at their subclinical level. The Dark Triad has been explored in the sample of 172 participants (Mage=34,3 years; SD=10,7) including 72 teachers (42,9%) and 100 pedagogy students (57,1%). We have used Slovak version of the Short Dark Triad Questionnaire (SD3; Jones & Paulhus, 2014) which includes machiavellianism, narcissism and psychopathy subscales. The data were processed in SPSS 21 via analysis of variance (ANOVA). Significant differences in machiavellianism were found among current teachers and future teachers, students were scoring higher. Machiavellianism was identified as the most significant dark trait compared to narcissism and psychopathy in both samples. The results are not so surprising as teaching profession seems to provide opportunities to satisfy people's needs for power, dominant status, authority and obtaining benefits from the others. For further intervention it is necessary to find a way how to deal with machiavellian*

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<sup>1</sup> Address: Nĕmcovej 32, Košice, Slovakia, e-mail: radka.copkova@tuke.sk

*people in the educational system who could influence their student's personal and professional development.*

**KEY WORDS:** *dark triad, machiavellianism, narcissism, pedagogy students, psychopathy, teachers*

## **Introduction**

The work of a helping professional is based on the interaction of the professional and the client. The aim of this interaction is to promote growth; solve personal, physical, psychological or intellectual problems; and to improve or optimize clients' condition in many ways (Graf, Sator & Spranz-Forgasy, 2014). The helping professionals, whose main task is caring for other people, are doctors, nurses, educators, social workers, and psychologists. In general, these professions have one central core characteristic – to help others. As reported by Kopřiva and Šiklová (2000) the personality is the main tool of the worker in these kinds of professions. This fact makes it quite difficult to carry out such work on a psychological or physical level and the consequent psychological consequences. It is also well known how the personality of a helping professional should look like – empathetic, client oriented, credible, responsible, sociable, creative, tolerant, flexible.

Naturally, one expects that, only people whose personalities really meet listed traits will choose the work of helping professional. However, the practice shows the rule is not always applied. As helping professions are based on asymmetrical relationship among worker and client, there is a big opportunity for worker to misuse his or her position in this relationship. And that is the reason why even people with pathological personalities choose helping professions as their calling.

Teaching profession also offers some space for implementing even the aversive personal tendencies. A teacher has the power, is in the center of attention as an authority with dominant status who is admired by students, sets rules and the way of its following, punishes and rewards students.

According to Kasáčová (2004) there are 3 categories of personality traits required from a good teacher:

- Personal – self-esteem, creativity, self-worth, purposefulness, responsibility, emotional stability, patience, flexibility, tameness, optimism, conscientiousness, decisiveness, predictability;

- Social – communicability, sociability, tolerance, acceptance of others, empathy, respect to others, friendliness, sense of humor, justice, pro-sociability, tactfulness;
- Ethical – altruism, congruency, honesty, self-sacrifice, consistency, straightness.

The aim of the current research was the exploration and comparison of the aversive personality traits that are inappropriate for performing helping professions, teaching profession as well. The explored concept is called Dark Triad and includes machiavellianism, narcissism and psychopathy traits at their subclinical level. In presented research we have focused on those three aversive personality dimensions and their incidence in the population of teachers who currently perform their work at schools and pedagogy students as potential future teaching professionals and potential threat for school environment.

## **The Dark Triad**

Each of us has both good and bad qualities, each of them varies from the weakest to the strongest on the continuous spectrum. Research has a long-standing tradition of exploring the personality structure, for example, through the Big Five concept, which reflects the desirable aspects of personality. Many researchers have not dealt with the fact that to some extent each of us also has the darker aspects of personality. Nevertheless, it has always been a challenge to draw a line between "normal and abnormal" personality (Furnham et al., 2013). The difference between clinical and subclinical personality is that the clinical sample includes individuals who must be under clinical or forensic supervision because their personality structure affects their environment or themselves. On the other hand, the subclinical level of a personality traits points to its context in the wider population.

The concept of Paulhus and Williams from 2002 caused a great interest in studying the subpathological features of personality. The Dark Triad is a concept involving three aversive features of a personality that share a tendency to be insensitive, selfish and malevolent in interpersonal relationships - machiavellianism, narcissism and psychopathy. These three features are also conceptualized as a socially malevolent character with behavioural tendencies to promote themselves, emotional coldness, insincerity and aggressiveness. It should be emphasized that these are

subclinical features, that is, the behaviour of individuals exhibiting these features is not extreme enough to attract the attention of clinical psychologists or psychiatrists. Because of their ability to adapt and the slight degree of negative personality traits, they are part of a wider society and everyday life. It is therefore not deniable that they are our colleagues, friends or superiors.

At first glance, these are three distinct concepts, but they share many common features (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). However, each of the constructs differs in some aspect from the other two aspects and has been explored separately long before the Dark Triad emerged. The common features of the three components of the Dark Triad are their desire to lift themselves and harm others (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). The Dark Triad represents a grouping of antisocial dimensions because it contains behaviours that often do not meet acceptance in society. As Paulhus (2014) points out, their common feature is the lack of empathy, but in each of the three personalities it develops differently. The concepts of narcissism and psychopathy originate from clinical literature and still exist as a personality disorder in diagnostic systems. On the other hand, the machiavellian construct has a completely different story. Machiavellianism has no origin in personality disorders and is named after renaissance politician Niccolò Machiavelli (Furnham et al., 2013; Wilson et al., 1996).

In the case of etiological factors influencing the emergence and development of these dark personality traits, the prevailing opinion points to its connection with socio-economic conditions in early childhood. If there is no safe relationship between the mother and the child, the child develops the behavioural pattern that can affect a person's whole life. In the research by Jonason, Lyons, Bethell and Ross (2016), the influence of the mother seems to be related to the Dark Triad directly by manifestations of leadership, authoritarianism, grandiosity, exhibitions, but it also seems to be through attachment style, which is closely related to the development of machiavellianism. Even according to a study of the effect of heredity, machiavellianism as the only one in the trio shows greater environmental influence, while narcissism and psychopathy exhibit a moderate hereditary component (Vernon, Villani, Vickers & Harris, 2007). According to Morf and Rhodenwalt (2001), narcissists also appear as individuals whose own needs in childhood were unfulfilled due to lack of maternal empathy or neglect.

## **Machiavellianism**

Machiavellists appear to be cold, little emotionally based manipulators. This statement is research-based because in research by Jonason and Kraus (2013) machiavellists have been shown to have low empathy scores, linked to alexithymia, a difficulty of identifying feelings and describing them. Machiavellists have a good ability to improvise, be "chameleons" in interpersonal situations, reveal true or false information about themselves in order to create the illusion of false intimacy. They dispose with lack of self-control and high level of self-licensing (Čopková, 2016). Outwardly, they act as introverts who have a negative view of the world and their priority is to take care of their well-being. In psychology, the term machiavellianism is used to describe a personality that is characterized by emotional separation and a tendency to manipulate in order to achieve its own goal regardless of others (Al Ain et al., 2013). Machiavellists perceive others as very untrustworthy and negative. Machiavellists plan forward, build alliances, and do their utmost to maintain a positive reputation what differs them from subclinical psychopaths (Jones & Paulhus, 2014). They are very good liars, but they cannot be considered completely evil because they do not violate the rules, but they have the exceptional ability to circumvent them. The opposite is also true, those whose machiavellianism is not high cannot be considered as a social model. Even such people are lying and deceiving, but motivation is different in this case (Wilson et al., 1996).

## **Narcissism**

Subclinical narcissism reflects the affection for oneself, which fundamentally undermines individual's social life. Very often, subclinical narcissists show signs of exaggerated self-love, inflated confidence, sense of importance, superiority over others and skewed normative beliefs (Čopková & Matyiová, 2016). As described by Morf and Rhodenwalt (2001), narcissists have an extremely positive but at the same time vulnerable self-image. Outwardly they are trying to conceive their irresponsibility to others, but the basic mechanism that drives them is their constantly lusty ego, whose basic survival motive is to constantly validate one's self-worth from the environment. Their life, therefore, constantly revolves around their worth, which is unstable and dependant on the association of positive responses on the part of society. Therefore, it is not surprising that life with them is very exhausting, although narcissists may act charmingly or even

pleasantly in the short term (Spain, Harms & Lebreton, 2014). In the long term, they have difficulties in maintaining long-term friendships, trust, or they lack concern for others (Morf & Rhodenwalt, 2001).

## **Psychopathy**

Subclinical psychopathy traits feature high impulsivity, excitement search, low empathy, low anxiety (Paulhus & Williams, 2002) and insufficiently motivated antisocial behaviour. Subclinical psychopaths experience a lack of negative emotions, remorse, or regret for others, and are manifested by overall emotional coldness in affective situations (Douglas, Bore & Munro, 2012). Along with narcissists, they also have another common feature, their grandiose self-esteem. Psychopaths see themselves as dominant persons who are open to experience but do not consider themselves as caring and showing very low interest in the welfare of others (Rauthmann & Kolar, 2012). Others are most often perceived as rivals, enemies or threats (LeBreton, Binnig & Adorno, 2006). According to O'Boyl et al. (2012) psychopaths are accustomed to their lack of concern for others, lack of guilt when they hurt others and emotional shallowness.

Insufficient affective experience is manifested by the general tendencies of psychopaths not to feel anxious, to experience superficial emotions with which they can also work brilliantly - they are able to emulate a wide range of emotions as needed. On the cognitive side, psychopaths seem to be intelligent, successful, and as financially well-valued as possible, that is, they may often envy their privileges and abilities in the short term, but in the long term they provide an image of arrogance, haughtiness and ignorance.

## **The Dark Triad in Teaching Profession**

The helping professionals' personality should include abilities and skills typical for helping and working with people, such as empathy, because the quality of the emotional climate seems to be one of the most important factors determining whether or not the relationship with the practitioner is really helping. In the sense of their work, helping professions are categorized by emotional involvement in working with people. But what if the "dark" personality traits penetrate the world of these professions? Research shows that the incidence of Dark Triad in helping professions is not rare. The dark motivation for a professional practice might be the hidden selfish goals and an effort to expose own personality to the constant need for

admiration, the desire for power, or the need to help which is motivated by own selfish purpose.

For the teacher it is important to know their personality but also the personality of others. The need to understand the students' personality is an essential factor in the effectiveness of the educational process. A ruthless and impartial teacher creates a toxic environment filled with negativity and lack of performance.

A machiavellian teacher represents so-called organizational machiavellianism, which means that the use of manipulation is not only justified but is also necessary to achieve the goals set in the context of the school environment (Kessler et al. 2010). Organizational machiavellists are satisfied with the exploitation of others and do so whenever it is profitable for them. The essence of organizational machiavellianism uses manipulation and fraud when the situation requires it. These types of people are not necessarily heartless, cool and calculating because in good situations they can be prowess and tactful. In a broader sense, a teacher with features of machiavellianism is an integral part of the teaching profession, since being a teacher, more or less, means manipulating others.

After joining the school organization, the teacher's identity is consolidated by adapting to organizational ideology. The source of the teacher's expression is the attitude acquired during adaptation to the organizational culture of the educational environment and the school context. Another source of teachers' machiavellianism are survival strategies (Baňka & Orłowski, 2012), which are the basis for adapting to certain school situations and special teacher roles. The basis of many teacher activities is their own well-being. The teacher seeks to minimize stress, avoid situations that can lead to it, maximize mood, independence and autonomy. Resilience as a personal feature that allows a teacher to survive in a school environment is a socially created category (Qing & Day, 2007) and machiavellianism is an integral part of this resilience. Internal sources of effective measures, including unconscious feelings and teachers' beliefs about human nature, the essence of power, and effective action against students, can be present at the source of machiavellian behaviour. They exist in the minds of individuals regardless of their conscious and accepted beliefs and plans of students (Day 1999). In this case, machiavellianism is a function of the mental image of students as partners for interaction. Another source of teachers' machiavellianism is the ubiquitous machiavellianism of students as main partners of social interaction at school (Barry et al., 2011).

Machiavellianism is not limited by age and manifests itself at every age. The recipients of machiavellian behaviour among students are their peers (Andreou, 2004) as well as teachers. Teachers who, on the one hand, possess the characteristics of machiavellianism, can teach students this type of behaviour through social modelling, and on the other hand use these strategies as a form of defense against machiavellian students. The machiavellian students and behaviour they present are described by teachers as a risk factor in professional practice.

The last potential source of machiavellianism in the teaching profession is education reforms introduced at the national level (Kwiecinski, 1997; Day, Flores & Viana, 2007; Day & Lindsey, 2009). These factors of educational change that occur in the school environment, even if they are aimed for improving teaching and learning standards, as well as increasing student success in a growing unstable and turbulent economic and social environment, can actually be perceived as counterproductive to those who are responsible for implementing these changes. When there are several reforms and changes in education policies at national level, machiavellian tendencies seem to increase as easily as teachers' adaptation responses to new challenges, duties and responsibilities. At a time of professional threat and ambiguity, the criteria of professional competence are down to bureaucracy and machiavellianism.

## **Method**

### **Sample**

The research sample has consisted from 172 participants aged from 19 to 63 years ( $M_{age}=34,3$  years;  $SD=10,7$  years). The sample was divided into teachers – 72 (42,9%) and pedagogy students – 100 (57,1%); 39 males (23%) and 133 females (77%). The sample of current teachers aged from 19 to 63 years ( $M_{age}=37,3$  years;  $SD=12,0$  years) has consisted of 4 males (5,6%) and 68 females (94,4%); the sample of pedagogy students aged from 20 to 60 years ( $M_{age}=32,12$ ,  $SD=9,0$  years) has consisted of 35 males (35%) and 65 females (65%).

Convenience and purposive sampling methods have been used.



## **Procedure and Tool**

The Short Dark Triad Questionnaire (SD3; Jones & Paulhus, 2014). We have used the Slovak version of the questionnaire translated from the original one. The Short Dark Triad consists of 27 items saturating 3 different aversive personality traits scales – machiavellianism (item 1-9; „I like to use clever manipulation to get my way.“), narcissism (item 10-18; „I know that I am special because everyone keeps telling me so.“) and psychopathy (item 19-27; „I’ll say anything to get what I want.“) at their subclinical level. Each item is evaluated on the Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). There is a need to reverse code several items – 2, 6 and 8 in the narcissism scale and 2 and 7 in the psychopathy scale. The final score is summed separately for each scale, the minimum reached score in each scale is 9; maximum reached score is 45. Since the questionnaire has been translated, we have tested internal consistency by Cronbach’s alpha, it’s value for machiavellianism subscale was 0,736; narcissism subscale 0,586 and psychopathy subscale 0,744.

The research tool was distributed in the electronic form via application Google Docs Form and via Paper-and-Pencil method. Data were processed in SPSS 21.0 (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) via Mixed ANOVA.

There were no missing values, normality of data distribution tested by Kolmogorov-Smirnov test proved that data are normally distributed according to the criterion ( $p_{\alpha} > 0,05$ ). Mauchly’s test of sphericity showed that sphericity was not violated (according to criterion  $p_{\alpha} > 0,05$ ). The value of skewness ranged in necessary interval  $\pm 1$ . Levene’s Test of Equality of Error Variances proved that the homogeneity of variances was not violated ( $p_{\alpha} > 0,05$ ; Pallant, 2005).

## **Results**

In the terms of stated research goal mixed between-within subjects ANOVA was used as statistical technique for data analysis, because it has allowed us to explore both; variability between subjects and within-subjects variability in one step.

The results of mixed ANOVA have shown that there is a significant statistical difference in the level of dark triad traits (machiavellianism, narcissism and psychopathy) across groups and within subjects according to main effect ( $\chi^2 = 0,723$ ;  $p_{\alpha} \leq 0,0001$ ). Although we have found a statistically

significant difference, we also assessed the effect size of this result and we can conclude, it is a moderate effect size (Cohen, 1988). Of course, it was a robust result saying nothing about between and within subjects variability separately. Testing of within-subject effect has proved the existence of significant differences in dark triad within groups consisted of teachers and pedagogy students ( $\chi^2 = 0,554$ ;  $p_{\alpha} \leq 0,0001$ ), again with moderate effect size. We have got the same results from analyzing between subjects effect ( $\chi^2 = 0,962$ ;  $p_{\alpha} \leq 0,0001$ ) with large effect size as they have shown that there are significant differences in dark triad traits between group of teachers and pedagogy students. In order to obtain detailed results, we submitted post hoc analysis by Tukey's Honestly Significant Different test.

At first, we focused on between-subjects variability. That means we have tested if there are any significant differences in dark triad traits – machiavellianism, narcissism and psychopathy between teachers and pedagogy students. According to Table 1 the results have revealed that pedagogy students scored significantly higher in machiavellianism than teachers, while there were no significant differences in narcissism and psychopathy. But according to mean values, in both other cases, students scored higher than teachers, the differences were not significant.

*Table 1: Between-subjects variability in Dark Triad*

Dark trait	mean		df	t	p
	student	teacher			
machiavellianism	27,4	25,0	362	2.892	<b>0.046*</b>
narcissism	23,3	22,7	362	0.686	0.983
psychopathy	17,4	17,0	362	0.579	0.992

*Source: Author based on research results*

The next step was the exploration of within-subject differences in dark triad traits, separately for pedagogy students and teachers. The Table 2 shows significant differences between the level of machiavellian, narcissistic and psychopathic traits in the sample of pedagogy students. In detail, pedagogy students scored significantly higher in machiavellianism compared to narcissism and psychopathy; and significantly higher in narcissism compared to psychopathy.

*Table 2: Within-subject variability in Dark Triad in pedagogy students sample*

<b>Dark trait</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>Dark trait</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>df</b>	<b>t</b>	<b>P<sub>tukey</sub></b>
machiavellianism	27,4	narcissism	23,3	340	7,22	< <b>0.0001</b> **
		psychopathy	17,4	340	17,38	< <b>0.0001</b> **
narcissism	23,3	psychopathy	17,4	340	10,16	< <b>0.0001</b> **

Source: Author based on research results

The Table 3 shows significant differences between the level of machiavellian, narcissistic and psychopathic traits in the sample of teachers. The results are the same as in the sample of pedagogy students. In detail, teachers scored significantly higher in machiavellianism compared to narcissism and psychopathy; and significantly higher in narcissism compared to psychopathy.

*Table 3: Within-subject variability in Dark Triad in teachers sample*

<b>Dark trait</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>Dark trait</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>df</b>	<b>t</b>	<b>P<sub>tukey</sub></b>
machiavellianism	25,0	narcissism	22,7	340	3,36	<b>0.013</b> *
		psychopathy	17,0	340	11,85	< <b>0.0001</b> **
narcissism	22,7	psychopathy	17,0	340	8,49	< <b>0.0001</b> **

Source: Author based on research results

We can conclude that machiavellianism is dominant aversive trait from Dark Triad concept in teachers and pedagogy students.

In order to provide the complex results, the last thing we have tested was the interaction effect of dark triad and level of teaching professionalism - ( $\chi^2 = 0,005$ ;  $p = 0,048$ ). Post hoc testing showed that there are significant differences between (significantly higher level bolded): **student's machiavellianism** (27,44) and teacher's narcissism (22,70); **student's machiavellianism** (27,44) and teacher's psychopathy (16,59); **student's narcissism** (23,30) and teacher's psychopathy (16,95); student's psychopathy (17,45) and **teacher's machiavellianism** (24,9); student's psychopathy (17,45) and **teacher's narcissism** (22,70).

The Short Dark Triad Questionnaire doesn't offer the guideline for sorting participants into groups of high/low level of each aversive trait. That's why we have divided the range of potential score in each subscale to quartiles. It is important to note that only 7% of students scored in 4th

quartile (the value over 36 points) in machiavellianism and 2% in narcissism. In teachers' sample the results were similar – only 4,2% of teachers have scored in 4th quartile in machiavellianism and 1,4% in narcissism. In psychopathy subscale no one scored in 4th quartile.

## **Conclusion**

In the world of increasing interpersonal problems we have found as interesting the issue of negative personality traits incidence in the area where one would not expect it – in the field of helping professions. Since there are many kinds of helping professions – doctors, nurses, psychologists, teachers, social workers, etc., it was necessary to reduce the scope. We have focused on teachers and pedagogy students, in order to compare current professionals with future professionals.

That's the reason we were interested in the concept of Dark Triad (Paulhus & Williams, 2002) that involves aversive features of a personality that share a tendency to be insensitive, selfish and malevolent in interpersonal relationships - machiavellianism, narcissism and psychopathy. Normally, narcissism and psychopathy are the part of diagnostic systems as clinical psychiatric diagnoses, so we are emphasizing that all three concepts in the Dark Triad are conceptualized on their subclinical level.

Narcissism reflects signs of exaggerated self-love, inflated confidence, sense of importance, and superiority over others (Morf & Rhodenwalt, 2001). Machiavellianism represents the abilities of good improvisation, ability to become "a chameleon" in interpersonal situations, publishing true or false information about themselves in order to create the illusion of false intimacy (Dahling et al., 2008). Subclinical psychopathy traits are for instance high impulsivity, excitement search, low empathy, low anxiety and insufficiently motivated antisocial behavior (Douglas, Bore & Munro, 2012).

The results suggest that pedagogy students are higher in machiavellianism compared to current teachers. Actually, they scored higher in all three aversive traits what reveals the tendency of acting out of behavior expected by society. On the other hand, teachers already have some experiences with dealing with everyday problems in the school environment. It might influence them on their personality level and decrease illusions of inviolability that is expected on the level of professional preparation. Comparing the level of all aversive traits within subjects

revealed that machiavellianism was significantly dominant aversive feature in both groups, thus that is the personal orientation we should pay more attention to. As we mentioned before, teaching profession provides wide range of opportunities to implement non-desirable behavioral patterns. The option of manipulation, reaching own goals at all costs, breaking rules, disrespect to others, setting rules is very attractive for machiavellian personalities.

Personality requirements for teachers are focused on self-knowledge, student understanding, sensitivity to students' needs, charisma and organizational skills (Géringová, 2011; Kopřiva, 1997). Teachers who are high in aversive personality traits are more likely to fail in complying those requirements. The reason is that teaching profession offers a lot of opportunities that can satisfy machiavellian, narcissistic and psychopathic ways of acting. Machiavellian teacher who misuse his power and authority and manipulate students by unfair punishing and rewarding can influence the student in the way he or she would not trust teachers anymore or feel anxiety connected to school environment. On the other hand it is also possible the students would teach this negative ways of behavior and implement it in their own life. Narcissistic teacher enjoys admiration from students and being the center of their attention. By the side of this type of teacher, students might feel insufficient and develop low self-confidence. Psychopathic teachers use to be impulsive, cold and not interested in the needs of others. In this kind of environment students might not feel safe, important or being a human.

We can see the possible way how to prevent the incidence of teachers who are high in aversive personality traits in the testing of novices for teaching profession, or as part of a recruitment interview for candidates for teaching. As a part of long-life development we suggest the implementation of personality development soft skills training for teachers at all levels of educational system. It could be the way how to teach teachers the principles of self-regulation what includes standards of desirable behavior, motivation to meet standards, monitoring of situations and thoughts and willpower (Baumeister et al, 1994).

Teachers are an important part of the school education process and can influence student's behavior in long-term perspective in both positive and negative terms. They can leave a lifelong footprint in their pupils and students, influence their opinion about the personality of the teacher as such, create a good or bad relationship with the school, the subject and the

education itself. All by their behavior, influence and access to pupils. One of the important characteristics of the teacher is their fair behavior to pupils, which is significantly involved in the development of students' motivation (Rovenská, 2017). Machiavellian teacher can fail in this sphere by his or her lax approach to social norms and justice.

Our research has its limitations as well. We have not focused on whole personality, just on aversive traits. The results might be interpreted differently while considering them in the context of whole personality, for example with so called "bright traits" (Big Five, Oluf & Furnham, 2015). Also, we were not interested in the length of teaching experiences. It might be the key variable, because there are empirical evidences suggesting that the level of aversive traits decreases over the time (Bratek et al., 2015). The proportion of males and females was not equal what could influence the results, because males are likely to be higher in aversive traits than females (Jonason & Davis, 2018). In the future there is a need to examine psychometric properties of the Slovak version of Short Dark Triad Questionnaire, what will help researchers to get more representative results about this very interesting problem.

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