

Examining the Mediating Role of Interpersonal Distrust between Dark Tetrad Personalities and Counterproductive Behavior in the Field of Academia

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Abstract

This study focuses on the mediating role of interpersonal distrust between the Dark Tetrad personalities and counterproductive behavior (CB) in academic institutions. Using a survey-based cross-sectional design, data were collected from 385 full-time faculty members at six public universities in Bangladesh. The hypothesized relationships were tested using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling. This study is based on the Social Exchange Theory (SET) and focuses on how dark personality traits interfere with the establishment of trust, which is associated with the development of CBs that hinder collaboration and productivity in an academic environment. According to this study, the participants who were high in Dark Tetrad characteristics reported significantly higher interpersonal distrust, and as a result, interpersonal distrust mediated the relationship between these characteristics and CB perpetration. The findings indicate that narcissism, Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and sadism are associated with a suspicious and hostile environment and with such actions as knowledge concealment, sabotage, and aggression. This research is an important contribution to the theoretical understanding of the connection between SET and Dark Tetrad Theory and the importance of interpersonal distrust as a crucial mediator in academic settings. In terms of practical implications, it is suggested that academic institutions take measures to promote trust, reduce interpersonal distrust, and address the effects of dark personalities, including through leadership development programs and ethical training.

Categories: Strategic Human Resource Management, Organisational Behavior

Keywords: dark tetrad personalities, counterproductive behavior, interpersonal distrust, social exchange theory, higher education

Introduction

In recent years, the role of personality in the development of workplace behaviors has seen a great deal of interest, particularly in the area of organizational psychology, where personality has been identified as one of the major factors that influence both employee performance and well-being (Chang, 2024). The manner in which people think, feel, and act influences their interactions at work and is predictive of a number of consequences, such as job satisfaction, engagement, and counterproductive behavior (CB) (Szostek et al., 2024). Recent research has shown that personality traits account for a substantial 25% of the variance in behavior and performance of employees (Duradoni et al., 2023). Academic institutions, which require a distinctive combination of cooperation, competition, and relative autonomy, are a perfect environment for testing the influence of personality on work outcomes, especially since they are largely reliant on

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trust, cooperation, and knowledge sharing (Mutahar et al., 2022). Universities are a particularly consequential setting for this question because collegial governance, peer-based evaluation, and long-tenured employment relationships limit the conventional managerial accountability mechanisms that might otherwise constrain dark-trait behavior in corporate settings. This dynamic environment creates opportunities and challenges in terms of understanding the role of certain personality variables, particularly those related to destructive behaviors, in determining outcomes in academic environments. Among the personality constructs, the Dark Tetrad, made up of narcissism, Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and everyday sadism, has been extensively researched for its association with adverse organizational behavior (Gómez-Leal et al., 2024). These traits involve self-serving behaviors, lack of empathy, manipulative tendencies, and sadistic impulses that compromise organizational goals and interfere with interpersonal relationships (Moreira et al., 2024). Recent meta-analytic reviews have found that these traits are positively related to CBs, such as theft, sabotage, and unethical behavior, especially in environments in which power dynamics and competition are elevated (Cai et al., 2024). Studies have also found that people who are high in these traits are more likely to take part in behaviors that are harmful to organizational goals, damage professional relationships, and contribute to toxic work environments (Gajda et al., 2022). Dark Tetrad traits are predictors of more deviance in the workplace through mechanisms such as unethical decision-making and interpersonal conflict (Ortet-Walker et al., 2024).

Despite the growing body of evidence of an association between the Dark Tetrad and counterproductive behaviors, there is limited research on the impact of the Dark Tetrad in academic environments. Academia, as a high-performing and relationally complex environment, offers a unique context in which dark traits can be expressed in the form of knowledge hiding, undermining colleagues, hoarding resources, and lateral aggression, all behaviors that can be especially harmful in environments that rely on open communication, trust, and collaborative work (Li et al., 2020). Although studies have been conducted on the Dark Triad (as a subset of the Dark Tetrad, excluding sadism) in connection with unethical behavior and workplace conflict in other industries, there is an obvious void in understanding the impact of the full spectrum of dark traits in the context of academic settings (Roeser et al., 2015). This represents a clear research gap, since no prior study has tested how all four Dark Tetrad traits operate together, through a common relational mechanism, within the specifically collegial, peer-governed, and knowledge-sharing-dependent environment of higher education. Moreover, existing research tends to emphasize single traits rather than their interaction in shaping harmful academic behaviors (Dargis et al., 2018), (Grapsas et al., 2019), and (Zhong et al., 2024). A particularly important mediating mechanism through which dark personality traits may give rise to CBs is interpersonal distrust (ID), which is defined as a reduced belief in the integrity, reliability, and good intentions of other people (Junça-Silva and Silva, 2022). According to Social Exchange Theory (SET) which proposes that individuals form reciprocal relationships in which trust plays a major role, distrust brings about an imbalance in these exchanges, resulting in a decrease in cooperation and an increase in conflict (Blau, 1964). Research has demonstrated that ID is central to people's responses to organizational challenges, which often leads to lower levels of cooperation, more conflict, and unwillingness to engage in collaborative tasks (Van Prooijen et al., 2021). Research implies that ID can explain 24% of variance in workplace ostracism that has a significant impact on the well-being and performance of individuals (Karim et al., 2021). Individuals who are distrustful are more likely to stockpile resources, avoid cooperating with others, and retaliate against colleagues (Imran et al., 2021). Recent studies have also proposed that ID mediates the relationship between organizational politics and workplace deviance, showing that it is essential in facilitating CBs (Karim et al., 2021). In academic settings where the ability to work together and trust one another are important prerequisites for productivity and creativity, the existence of ID exacerbates the negative influence of dark traits on the behaviors of faculty members (Ying and Cohen, 2018). Thus, ID may play an important mediating role through which dark personality characteristics, including narcissism, Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and sadism, contribute to CB in academia. This study aims to fill this void by examining the relationship between Dark Tetrad personality traits and CBs in the academic environment, more specifically to examine the mediating role played by ID. This research has the following main research question: To what extent does ID mediate the relationship between Dark Tetrad personalities and CB among faculty members? To answer this question, this study integrates the research on dark personality, relational dynamics, and organizational behavior in academic institutions that can be valuable in understanding how to cope with the harmful behaviors occurring in higher education institutions.

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Literature review

Dark Tetrad Personalities

Personality traits are one of the most significant aspects that contribute to psychology and determine the behavior and relations of people in work-related areas. One of the most alarming types of personality constructs is socially aversive traits, which have been developed from the perspective of the Dark Triad (Paulhus and Williams, 2002). The model includes three different qualities that are interrelated but independent of each other: narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy, all of which are self-interested, manipulative, and indifferent to others. Such qualities are constantly associated with selfish and aggressive actions, making them especially applicable to research on dysfunctional organizational performance, such as CB (O'Boyle et al., 2012). Based on this model, more recent studies have expanded this model to include sadism, which has been described as the need to obtain pleasure or satisfaction by causing physical, emotional, or psychological pain in others (Buckels et al., 2013).

Narcissism

One of the elements of the dark triad is narcissism, which is described as grandiosity, entitlement, and lack of empathy. Narcissistic people are prone to thinking that they are better than others and require excessive admiration and validation (Braun, 2017). Studies have reported that narcissists tend to indulge in self-promotion and may react to threats to their highly inflated self-image with hostility and aggression (Acuña and Male, 2022). Although narcissists have been acknowledged as charismatic leaders because of their self-confidence and dominance, they do not function well in team-based setups, where their need for admiration and control may be interpersonal and discourage team spirit (Jonason and Webster, 2010). Interestingly, some studies propose that narcissists often exhibit cognitive empathy, the ability to perceive the feelings of other people, but lack affective empathy, the capacity for genuine emotional resonance with others (Wai and Tiliopoulos, 2012). The adverse effects of narcissism in the workplace are not new to the literature, as narcissistic individuals tend to exhibit workplace bullying, aggression, and knowledge withholding behaviors (O'Boyle et al., 2012).

Machiavellianism

Another basic element of the Dark Triad is Machiavellianism, which is the manipulative and opportunistic nature of the pursuit of personal goals. Machiavellian people are tactical, calculating, and tend to look at others as a means to be used (Christie and Geis, 1970). Machiavellians are social manipulators and power players who cheat their way to influence and resources at the expense of others in an organization (Paulhus and Williams, 2002). It has been established that individuals with high levels of Machiavellianism participate in unhealthy organizational politics, indulging in deceptive and exploitative behaviors to accomplish their individual objectives (Cai et al., 2024). These may manifest as sabotaging other employees, gossiping at the workplace, or favoritism, which can be disastrous to both trust and group cooperation (Belschak et al., 2016). Machiavellian traits have been associated with unethical decision-making, and their organizational implications can be detrimental to the organization, including work aggression and cognitive bias (LeBreton et al., 2018).

Psychopathy

The third and the most alarming attribute of the dark triad is psychopathy, which is characterized as impulsive and heartless, and the most troubling attribute of the syndrome is the lack of remorse over the actions that one engages in (Cleckley, 1988). Psychopathy is also related to various types of CBs in the work context, such as bullying at work, sabotage, and crime (O'Boyle et al., 2012). Research suggests that psychopathic individuals tend to exhibit greater levels of overt aggression and antisocial conduct compared to narcissistic or Machiavellian individuals, largely due to their reduced impulse control and absence of remorse (O'Boyle et al., 2012). In academic settings where professional integrity, honesty, and teamwork are of utmost importance, individuals with high levels of psychopathy may greatly interfere with teamwork, sabotage it, and create a negative working atmosphere. They are particularly hazardous to the integrity of an organization because of their lack of remorse and tendency to exploit others to gain individual benefits (Babiak and Hare, 2006).

Sadism

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The fourth dimension incorporated in the dark triad and introduced as the dark tetrad is sadism, which defines a disposition toward seeking pleasure or psychological gratification by causing pain, humiliation, or misery in others (Buckels et al., 2013). Contrary to psychopathy, when people are antisocial, the motivation for sadism is intrinsic, as it seeks pleasure rather than receiving external benefits. Sadists are those who are fascinated by aggression, seek to control or hurt others, and tend to rationalize their actions by moral disengagement or superiority (Buckels et al., 2013). As recent studies have shown, everyday or prosocially disguised sadism is becoming increasingly common in the organizational and online world, and in this case, such individuals are able to use the structural hierarchies or anonymity of the Internet to harm others without being socially penalized (Forsyth et al., 2021). Sadistic tendencies are associated with workplace bullying and emotional abuse, which foster an unhealthy organizational atmosphere in the workplace and academia (Jonason et al., 2013). Academics or employees with high sadism can strategically cause personal discomfort, sabotage their colleagues, or take pleasure in their failures, damaging their psychological comfort and collegiality (Sassenrath et al., 2024). In addition, cyber-aggression and trolling are linked to sadism and suggest that this quality leads not only to physical harm but also to cruelty online (Kiziloglu et al., 2021). These results support the idea that sadism can be taken as a unique and powerful indicator of CBs and add explanatory depth to the dark tetrad paradigm by describing the voluntary and affectively rewarding aspects of destructive behavior.

Interpersonal Distrust

ID refers to a low level of confidence in the intentions, honesty, or faithfulness of other people or organizations and is a key element in the relationship between people and organizations (Gurtman, 1992). Although trust has long been described as an enabler of positive organizational performance in terms of cooperation, knowledge sharing, and innovation, distrust is quickly evolving into an equally distinct construct that can directly suppress collaborative performance and foster deviance at work (Kundi et al., 2022). Theorists have defined ID as more than a lack of trust, pointing out that it is both a feeling of doubt about the intentions of others and an emotional reaction that can be characterized by suspicion or fear (Wang et al., 2020). In addition, the distrust dimensions of affective distrust (emotional reactions) and cognitive distrust (rational suspicion) were found to be significant underminers of cooperation, with affective distrust alone explaining approximately 27% of the variance in turnover intentions in high-stress contexts (Ho, 2024). This affective-cognitive conceptualization is distinct from swift trust, which describes the provisional, role-based confidence that forms rapidly among individuals with little prior interaction history, such as newly formed committees or project teams (Meyerson et al., 1996). The present study focuses specifically on the cognitive-affective form of ID accumulated through repeated workplace exposure, rather than swift trust, because faculty relationships in established departments are long-term and recurring rather than transient, making this enduring, exposure-based form of distrust the more theoretically relevant mechanism for the academic context examined here. Empirical findings also show ID to be associated with negative organizational performance; the current literature suggests that it can account for up to 30% of the variation in CBs, such as sabotage and knowledge hiding (Karim et al., 2021). Furthermore, some individuals with dark personality traits, such as narcissism, Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and sadism, are more likely to promote ID, making them more likely to engage in unethical or deviant behavior (Roeser et al., 2015). In academic settings, where trust, mutual respect, and open knowledge exchange are foundational, ID is particularly destructive to the academic environment (Khan et al., 2022). Recent evidence indicates that distrust accounts for approximately 25% of the variance in academic staff turnover and 21% in student dissatisfaction (Dlamini and Dlamini, 2024). Given this evidence, ID appears to be an important variable in understanding how a breakdown in relationships is translated into dysfunctional behavior in organizations and in academia.

Narcissism and Interpersonal Distrust

Narcissistic people consider relationships in terms of self-interest, and in most cases, they use others to enhance their self-image (Marchlewska et al., 2018). Such vanity is likely to lead to a lack of trust because narcissists do not see others as colleagues but as competitors (Grapsas et al., 2019). It has been proposed that interpersonal distrust is closely associated with narcissism, as narcissists are more likely to distrust individuals who fail to confirm their superiority (Dăderman and Kajonius, 2024). Mistrust is further enhanced by the tensions and conflicts those narcissists tend to develop within relationships, undermining the assumption of trust at both personal and professional levels (Krizan and Herlache, 2017).

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Moreover, the fact that narcissists are prone to manipulating other people also leads to even greater mistrust, since they regard others as a means of personal benefit (Marchlewska et al., 2018). Accordingly, narcissism contributes to the rise of interpersonal distrust as it produces a negative, self-interested perception of the motives of others, which interferes with relationships (Back et al., 2010). While this link may appear intuitive, no prior study has tested narcissism's independent contribution to interpersonal distrust alongside the other three Dark Tetrad traits within a single model, leaving open whether narcissism retains a distinct effect once its shared variance with Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and sadism is accounted for, particularly within an academic setting.

H1: Narcissism has a significant relationship with Interpersonal Distrust.

Machiavellianism and Interpersonal Distrust

Machiavellians view people as a means of self-enrichment and presuppose an exploitative mentality (Al A'in et al., 2013). This is what makes one have doubt and suspicion, creating a cynical attitude toward others (Brewer and Abell, 2017). It has been discovered that the propensity to manipulate and deceive results in Machiavellians expecting the same behavior in others, which further causes distrust (Hutter et al., 2015). Their self-interest-motivated actions frequently hurt the collaboration process and increase interpersonal conflict (Liyangam et al., 2022). The manipulative aspect of Machiavellianism and lack of concern for the integrity of others deepens interpersonal mistrust in the role of a mediator between Machiavellianism and CB in organizations (Serenko and Choo, 2020). Although the manipulative-traits-breed-distrust link is well rehearsed in the literature, its incremental contribution once narcissism, psychopathy, and sadism are modeled simultaneously has not been established, which is the gap H2 addresses.

H2: Machiavellianism has a significant relationship with Interpersonal Distrust.

Psychopathy and Interpersonal Distrust

Psychopaths are usually manipulative and violent, which interferes with social harmony, and these same exploitative tendencies lead them to expect comparably self-interested conduct from others, undermining their own capacity to trust colleagues (Duradoni et al., 2023). It has been demonstrated that the level of ID is closely connected to psychopathy, since psychopathic characteristics such as deceitfulness and the disparagement of emotions do not allow the building of meaningful and trust-based relationships (Dargis et al., 2018). Psychopathic individuals' own exploitative and manipulative orientation predisposes them to interpret colleagues' actions through a similarly suspicious lens, producing a lack of trust in others (Reidy et al., 2011). Consequently, psychopathy increases distrust between people, interferes with relationships, and contributes to poor organizational behavior (Khan et al., 2020). Testing this trait alongside the other three traits is nonetheless necessary, since prior work has rarely modeled psychopathy's effect net of the substantial variance it shares with Machiavellianism and narcissism.

H3: Psychopathy has a significant relationship with Interpersonal Distrust.

Sadism and Interpersonal Distrust

Sadistic people get pleasure when they inflict harm, and this same hostile orientation predisposes them to project similarly malicious intent onto colleagues, fostering their own suspicion and distrust of others (Pfattheicher et al., 2021). Their own hostile and manipulative tendencies lead them to interpret the surrounding environment as similarly threatening, doubting the motives and intentions of those around them. It is also emphasized that such sadistic tendencies contribute to toxic relational dynamics, since individuals high in sadism act in a hostile and aggressive manner that reflects, and reinforces, their own diminished trust in the reliability and integrity of others (Kowalski et al., 2019). ID is aggravated by sadistic behaviors, which are disruptive and self-serving and this has a significant effect on the nature of relationships both in workplaces and academia (Richmond et al., 2023). Sadism is included as a distinct fourth hypothesis, rather than folded into psychopathy, because its motivational basis, the intrinsic pleasure of causing harm, is conceptually separate from psychopathy's remorselessness, and whether this affectively driven trait predicts distrust independently, net of the other three traits, has not previously been tested.

H4: Sadism has a significant relationship with Interpersonal Distrust.

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Counterproductive Behavior

CB has emerged as an important area of study in organizational management, especially in relation to productivity, employee morale, and organizational performance. CB consists of those actions that specifically violate the interests of an organization, including theft, sabotage, interpersonal aggression, and waste (Spector and Fox, 2005). CB imposes substantial financial costs on organizations, amounting to billions of dollars annually (Robinson and Bennett, 1995). These can also be done in different forms including lateness, defamation, social isolation, and aggression which prevent cooperation, confidence, and overall performance in an organization (Fatima et al., 2013). Some manifestations of CB like absenteeism, forged medical leaves, and slander of the institution in the open, among others, not only affect the day-to-day functioning of an institution but also ruin the reputation of this institution and the academic culture (Spector et al., 2006). In addition, faculty members who experience the feeling of high organizational politics are especially prone to CB-based coping skills, resulting in procrastination, disengagement, and interpersonal breakdowns (Karim, 2021). According to the Counterproductive Work Behavior Checklist (CWB-C) proposed by Spector et al. (Spector et al., 2010), CB is classified under 10 core constructs such as resource misuse, trivial complaints, and derision of peers which reflect more general organizational stressors and unmet psychological contracts (Spector et al., 2010). These behaviors affect the working environment, reduce employee commitment, and slow down institutional performance (Kelloway and Day, 2005). To minimize these adverse effects, organizations, such as universities, should focus on developing a conducive environment, improving communication, and adopting clear policies to reduce CB (Smith and Fredricks-Lowman, 2019).

Interpersonal Distrust and Counterproductive Behavior

ID is defined as a lack of confidence in the motives, integrity, or reliability of other people and is an important factor that leads to CB in organizations (Kessler et al., 2013). When people fail to trust their coworkers or bosses, collaboration decreases and conflict increases, leading to behaviors such as knowledge hiding, sabotage, and aggression at work (Karim, 2021). In addition, distrust leads to the climate of feeling threatened or exploited, hence employees withhold resources and conceal information, thereby undermining organizational efficiency and eroding teamwork (Knoll et al., 2020). Moreover, ID is linked to ostracism and social exclusion at work where workers can react by committing deviant behaviors such as sabotaging their coworkers or shirking work (Abas et al., 2024). ID is a central factor in the interaction between dark personality factors and CB, which leads to exacerbation of the toxic work environment and perpetuation of the negative behavior cycle (O'Boyle et al., 2012). Therefore, ID is a critical component in cultivating CB as it disrupts trust-based relationships and fosters behaviors that have a negative impact on organizational goals and human interactions (Ahmed et al., 2024).

H5: Interpersonal Distrust has a significant relationship with Counterproductive Behavior.

Mediating Role of Interpersonal Distrust between Dark Tetrad Personalities and Counterproductive Behavior

Dark Tetrad people are noted to be manipulative, self-serving and aggressive, traits which, as established above, predispose them to project these same motives onto colleagues and destroys any form of trust in an environment of suspicion and confrontation (O'Boyle et al., 2012). For example, the feeling of entitlement in narcissists and the manipulative nature of Machiavellians lead to distrust between people, which in turn leads them to behave in a way such as hiding knowledge, sabotaging and unethical behaviors (Jones and Paulhus, 2012). Similarly, psychopathic and sadistic traits, such as impulsivity and lack of compassion and pleasure in the destruction of other people, respectively, only lead to distrust and interpersonal failures leading to deviance in the workplace (Međedović, 2016). Research indicates that ID is a very important mediator between dark traits and CB since it heightens undesirable organizational behaviors, such as resource hoarding, lessening cooperation, and committing aggressive actions (Karim et al., 2021). Nevertheless, the number of studies that investigate ID as a mediator between Dark Tetrad personalities and CB is limited, especially in academic settings. ID is particularly counterproductive in the academic context, where trust and cooperation are crucial, causing unhealthy environments in which academic success cannot be achieved (Datu and Bernardo, 2020). Thus, ID is a very important mediator, and the interplay of dark personality traits in detrimental behaviors is explained by its role.

H6: Interpersonal Distrust mediates the relationship between Narcissism and Counterproductive Behavior.

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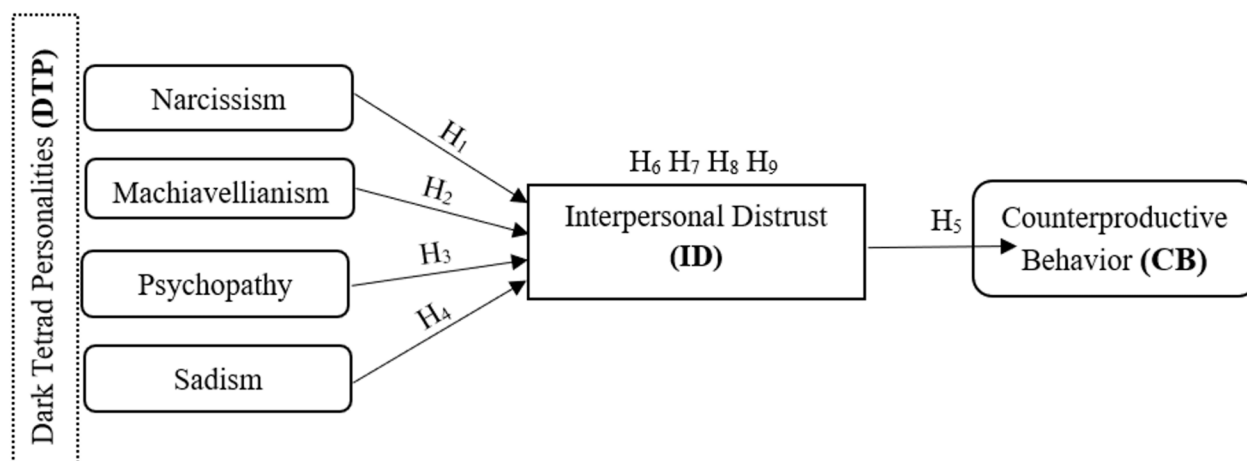
H7: Interpersonal Distrust mediates the relationship between Machiavellianism and Counterproductive Behavior.

H8: Interpersonal Distrust mediates the relationship between Psychopathy and Counterproductive Behavior.

H9: Interpersonal Distrust mediates the relationship between Sadism and Counterproductive Behavior.

Theoretical Framework

According to researchers, the SET is built on the principle of reciprocity, which emphasizes the process of exchanging benefits and costs between people involved in an interaction (Blau, 1964) (Mahmoodi et al., 2018). The principle of reciprocity states that people expect equal returns for positive or negative actions from the parties with whom they have contacts (Tantucci et al., 2022). This theory applies in academic contexts, whereby once people trust each other, they tend to be more cooperative, whereas ID, which is a lack of confidence in others and their intentions or reliability, does not allow them to engage in such interactions, leading to adverse consequences, such as CBs. Dark Tetrad Personalities (DTP) - narcissism, Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and sadism - do not seem to promote trust; however, they lead to ID, which preconditions deviance in the environment (Jonason et al., 2013). Through the reciprocity mechanism central to SET, individuals high in these traits, who themselves behave exploitatively toward others, come to expect equivalent treatment in return, generating their own distrust of colleagues rather than simply being distrusted by them; this self-generated distrust then disrupts the reciprocal exchange of cooperative behavior that SET identifies as the basis of functional workplace relationships. Thus, SET supports the hypothesis that interpersonal distrust is the mediating variable between Dark Tetrad traits and CB, which shows that dark personality traits contribute to the development of CB in academic settings. The theoretical framework of this study is shown in Figure 1.



Note: DTP = Dark Tetrad Personality; ID = Interpersonal Distrust; CB = Counterproductive Behavior

FIGURE 1: Theoretical framework

Source: Author

Research Method

Sample and data collection

The sample consisted of full-time faculty members from six public universities in Bangladesh. Faculty, rather than students, were sampled because the constructs central to this study, interpersonal distrust accumulated through recurring professional exchange and CB enacted within an employment relationship, presuppose organizational membership and reciprocal workplace obligations of the kind specified under Social Exchange Theory; students are not party to this employment-based exchange relationship and would not be meaningfully positioned to report on it. Data

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were collected using a self-reported structured questionnaire. Of the 790 questionnaires distributed, 385 were returned and found usable, yielding a response rate of 48.7%, which is considered satisfactory for online survey-based research in social sciences (Baruch and Holtom, 2008). All participants provided informed consent prior to completing the questionnaire. Participation was voluntary, and the anonymity and confidentiality of all respondents were guaranteed. Convenience sampling was employed due to the accessibility of faculty members through institutional directories. Convenience sampling may have introduced self-selection bias; therefore, the sample cannot be considered representative of all university faculty members in Bangladesh, and the findings have been discussed with caution.

The achieved sample size of 385 is considered sufficient for Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) analysis, which generally requires a minimum of 10 times the largest number of paths directed at any construct in the model (Hair et al., 2017). In this model, the maximum number of paths to a single construct is five (four dark tetrad traits + interpersonal distrust leading to CB), requiring a minimum of 50 observations well below the obtained sample. Additionally, using G*Power analysis for multiple regression with $\alpha = 0.05$, power = 0.80, and a medium effect size ($f^2 = 0.15$), the minimum required sample size is approximately 138, further confirming the adequacy of the sample. The respondents were quite balanced in terms of gender, with 56.6% males and 43.4% females (Table 7). Regarding marital status, 67.3% were married and 32.7% were single. Marital status, alongside the other demographic variables reported below, was collected primarily for sample-profiling purposes. Regarding academic rank, the vast majority of respondents were assistant professors (35.1%), followed by lecturers (27.0%), associate professors (24.2%), and full professors (13.7%). Regarding academic qualifications, 42.3% of the respondents had PhDs, 41.0% had master's degrees, 7.3% had bachelor's degrees, and 9.4% had other qualifications. Regarding age group, 36.4% of the respondents were aged 35-44 years, 27.0% were aged 25-34 years, 20.5% were aged 45-54 years, 8.8% were aged 55 years and above, and 7.3% were aged below 25 years. Regarding academic experience, 39.7% of the faculty had 11-20 years of experience, 27.5% had 5-10 years of experience, 21.3% had over 20 years of experience, and 11.4% had less than 5 years of experience. All constructs in the questionnaire were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

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Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Age	Below 25 years	28	7.3
	25–34 years	104	27.0
	35–44 years	140	36.4
	45–54 years	79	20.5
	55 years and above	34	8.8
	Total	385	100.0
Gender	Male	218	56.6
	Female	167	43.4
	Total	385	100.0
Academic Rank / Position	Lecturer	104	27.0
	Assistant Professor	135	35.1
	Associate Professor	93	24.2
	Professor	53	13.7
	Total	385	100.0
Academic Qualification	Bachelor's Degree	28	7.3
	Master's Degree	158	41.0
	PhD	163	42.3
	Other (Specify)	36	9.4
	Total	385	100.0
Years of Academic Experience	Less than 5 years	44	11.4
	5–10 years	106	27.5
	11–20 years	153	39.7
	More than 20 years	82	21.3
	Total	385	100.0

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Marital Status	Single	126	32.7
	Married	259	67.3
	Total	385	100.0

TABLE 1: Demographic information of the respondents

Source: Author's own data collection

Measurement

The psychometric measures of all constructs were well tested by the researchers. Dark Tetrad Personality (DTP) is used here as a collective label for four conceptually related but empirically distinct traits, narcissism, Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and sadism, each modeled in this study as a separate first-order exogenous construct rather than as sub-dimensions of a single combined higher-order factor. Narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy were measured using the Dirty Dozen Scale (DDS), developed by Jonason and Webster (Jonason and Webster, 2010), which consists of 12 items rated on a five-point Likert scale. The DDS has been found to be internally consistent ($\alpha = 0.89$) and valid in personality-related studies. After item-level screening ("The Measurement model" section), Machiavellianism and Psychopathy were each retained with only three items, a sparse level of per-trait coverage that should be read as a measurement limitation rather than a confirmation of the full breadth of the original twelve-item DDS. The sadism measure was the Short Sadistic Impulse Scale (SSIS) of 10 items by O'Meara et al. (O'Meara et al., 2011), which concerns the pleasure derived from the misery of others, and its reliability was ($\alpha = 0.87$). Item-level screening subsequently removed six of these ten items, including the two items most directly capturing sadism's defining affective core (enjoyment from others' suffering; interest in hurting or humiliating others); the four retained items instead converge on dominance- and aggression-oriented content. The retained construct is therefore better characterized as a narrower dominance-oriented sadistic tendency than as the full clinical sadism construct, a distinction discussed further as a construct-validity limitation in "Limitations and directions for future research" section. Each of the four Dark Tetrad traits was retained and analyzed as a distinct construct rather than aggregated into a single composite DTP score, consistent with the structural model reported in Table 5. Three items based on Chen et al. (Chen et al., 2018) which measure the absence of confidence in the reliability and motives of others were modified to measure interpersonal distrust ($\alpha = 0.711$, $\rho_a = 0.700$, consistent with Table 3). Finally, CB was measured using the CWB-C (Spector et al., 2010). All items for the DDS, SSIS, ID scale, and CWB-C were rated on a five-point Likert scale anchored at 1 = Strongly Disagree and 5 = Strongly Agree.

Data analysis plan

Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations were computed using SPSS (v24.0). The hypothesized structural relationships were tested using PLS-SEM via SmartPLS (v4.1.1.6). PLS-SEM was selected because it accommodates complex models with multiple mediators and is appropriate for relatively small samples (Hair et al., 2017). A two-stage analytical approach was adopted: (1) a measurement model assessment to evaluate indicator reliability, internal consistency (Cronbach's α , ρ_a , ρ_c), convergent validity ($AVE > 0.50$), and discriminant validity ($HTMT < 0.85$); and (2) a structural model assessment of path coefficients (β), R^2 , f^2 , Q^2 , and mediation effects using bootstrapping (10,000 resamples) with 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals.

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Results And Discussion

Results

The analysis of descriptive statistics and inter-construct correlations were carried out with the help of the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) (Version 24.0) and PLS-SEM with SmartPLS (Version 4.1.1.6) to justify the measurement tools and prove the hypothesized relationships in the research model. PLS-SEM is a powerful multivariate technique used for the study of complex models, particularly when the sample size is relatively small (Hair et al., 2017). A two-step PLS-SEM analysis was conducted, which consisted of a measurement model to address the validity and reliability of the construct, and a structural model analysis to address the hypotheses formulated between the two variables (Ali et al., 2018). Stated in plain terms before the statistics are presented, the model being tested has four exogenous predictors, narcissism, Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and sadism, each hypothesized to predict the single endogenous mediator, interpersonal distrust, which in turn is hypothesized to predict the final endogenous outcome, CB, as depicted in Figure 1. Figure 2 shows the structural model and path coefficients, which show the hypothetical relationship between the constructs used in this study.

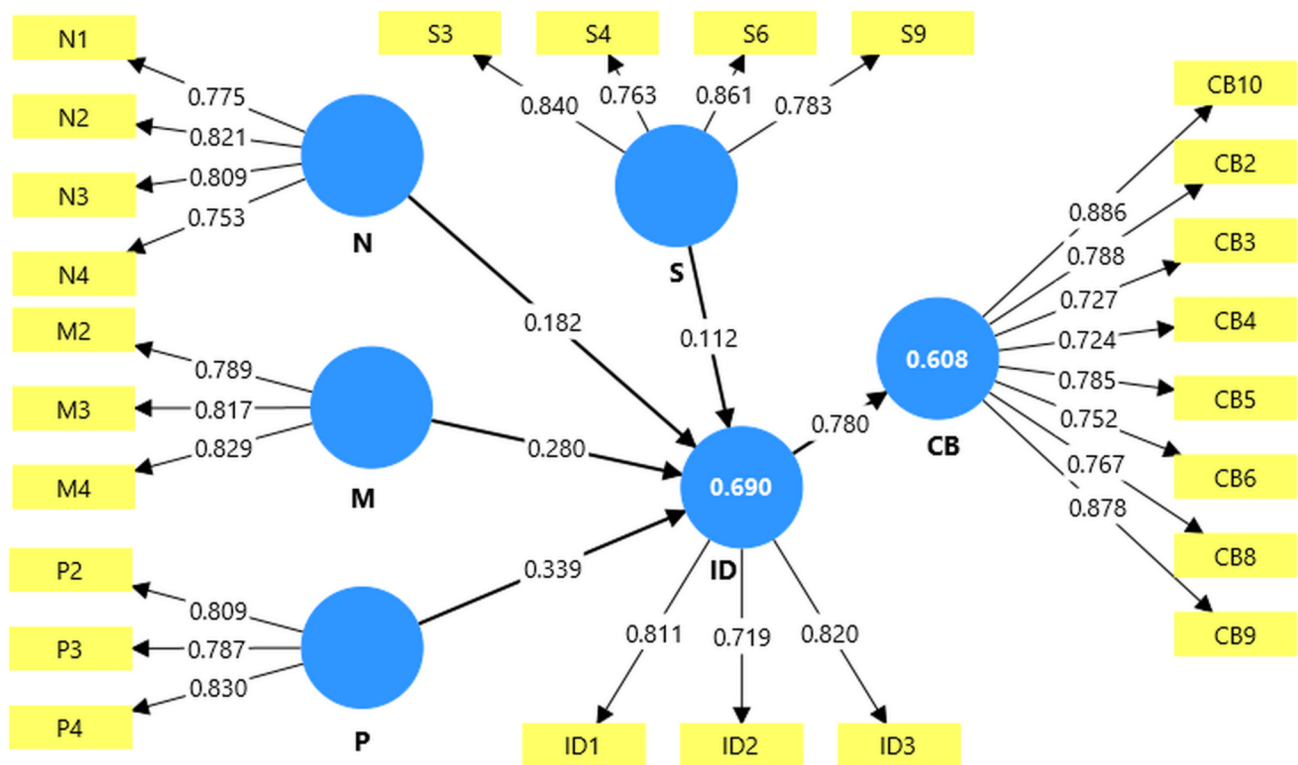


FIGURE 2: Structural model - path coefficient

Source: Author's own SmartPLS output

Bivariate correlations between latent constructs

The results of the bivariate correlations between the constructs are reported in Table 2. Narcissism (N) is positively and significantly related to ID ($r = 0.760$, $p < 0.01$). Similarly, Machiavellianism (M) ($r = 0.765$, $p < 0.01$), Psychopathy (P) ($r = 0.780$, $p < 0.01$), and Sadism (S) ($r = 0.745$, $p < 0.01$) were also positively and significantly correlated with ID. Furthermore, ID was positively and significantly associated with CB ($r = 0.791$, $p < 0.01$). These results suggest that higher levels of dark personality traits are highly correlated with higher levels of ID, which in turn is correlated with higher levels of CBs. This implies that people who display dark characteristics are more likely to create an atmosphere of distrust and consequently act more deviant in the workplace or academic settings.

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Construct Pair	Pearson r	Bootstrap SE	t statistic	p value
N ↔ ID	0.76	0.034	21.816	p < 0.001
M ↔ ID	0.765	0.034	22.087	p < 0.001
P ↔ ID	0.78	0.032	23.992	p < 0.001
S ↔ ID	0.745	0.036	20.426	p < 0.001
ID ↔ CB	0.791	0.032	24.423	p < 0.001

TABLE 2: Bivariate correlations between latent constructs

Note. N = narcissism; M = Machiavellianism; P = psychopathy; S = sadism; ID = interpersonal distrust; CB = counterproductive behavior. ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). Source: Author's own calculations using SmartPLS v4.1.1.6.

Measurement model

A measurement model was used to test the reliability and validity of the latent constructs. As presented in Table 3, the factor loadings of some items, namely, M1, P1, S1, S2, S5, S7, S8, S10, CB1, and CB7, were below the acceptable threshold of 0.60. Consequently, these items were excluded from the analyses. Once these items were dropped, the remaining indicators had satisfactory loading values, indicating reasonable reliability. The Cronbach's alpha, rho_a, and composite reliability of all constructs were above the recommended threshold of 0.70, indicating adequate internal consistency. The Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values of all constructs were between 0.615 and 0.661, which is higher than the minimum acceptable threshold of 0.50; hence, the convergent validity of the constructs was ensured. Therefore, the measurement model showed a high level of indicator reliability, internal consistency, and convergent validity for all constructs.

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Construct	Items	Loadings	Cronbach's α	ρ_a	ρ_c	AVE
Narcissism	N1	0.775	0.799	0.804	0.869	0.624
	N2	0.821				
	N3	0.809				
	N4	0.753				
Machiavellianism	M2	0.789	0.743	0.748	0.853	0.659
	M3	0.817				
	M4	0.829				
Psychopathy	P2	0.809	0.737	0.741	0.850	0.655
	P3	0.787				
	P4	0.830				
Sadism	S3	0.840	0.828	0.830	0.886	0.661
	S4	0.763				
	S6	0.861				
	S9	0.783				
Interpersonal Distrust	ID1	0.811	0.711	0.700	0.827	0.615
	ID2	0.719				
	ID3	0.820				
Counterproductive Behavior	CB2	0.788	0.913	0.919	0.930	0.625
	CB3	0.727				
	CB4	0.724				
	CB5	0.785				
	CB6	0.752				
	CB8	0.767				

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Examining the Mediating Role of Interpersonal Distrust between Dark Tetrad Personalities and Counterproductive Behavior in the Field of Academia

	CB9	0.878				
	CB10	0.886				

TABLE 3: Outcomes of measurement model

Source: Author's own calculations using SmartPLS v4.1.1.6. AVE = Average Variance Extracted

Finally, this study evaluated discriminant validity using the Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio (HTMT), which is considered better than traditional tools such as the Fornell-Larcker criterion and cross-loadings in assessing discriminant validity (Ringle et al., 2020). As shown in Table 4, the HTMT values were all less than the conservative level of 0.85, with a range of 0.68-0.79, indicating satisfactory discriminant validity. Furthermore, the values of Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) were computed to ensure the absence of any problem of multicollinearity. The VIFs ranged from 1.374 to 5.440. Evaluated against the more stringent benchmarks recommended in current PLS-SEM guidance, an ideal VIF below 3.3 and a tolerable ceiling of 5 (Hair et al., 2017), the upper end of this range (5.440) exceeds even the tolerable threshold, indicating a degree of multicollinearity among the Dark Tetrad predictors that the older VIF > 10 rule of thumb would have masked. Combined with the HTMT values of 0.68-0.79 among the four traits, this indicates meaningful, though not severe, cross-construct overlap; the implications of this overlap for the stability of the individual trait path coefficients, and for the relative ranking of the four predictors, are addressed in "corresponding titled" subsection.

	CB	ID	M	N	P	S
CB						
ID	0.72					
M	0.68	0.79				
N	0.74	0.75	0.76			
P	0.77	0.74	0.7	0.71		
S	0.71	0.73	0.72	0.77	0.72	

TABLE 4: Discriminant validity by HTMT

Note. CB = counterproductive behavior; ID = interpersonal distrust; M = Machiavellianism; N = narcissism; P = psychopathy; S = sadism.; HTMT = Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio. Values represent HTMT ratios; all values < 0.85 indicate satisfactory discriminant validity.

Structural model

Table 5 summarizes the path coefficients, effect sizes, and mediation results, all of which confirm support for H1 through H9. Significant paths were found between the Dark Tetrad traits of Narcissism (N), Machiavellianism (M), Psychopathy (P), and Sadism (S) and Interpersonal Distrust (ID), as well as between Interpersonal Distrust (ID) and Counterproductive Behavior (CB). Specifically, Narcissism (N) significantly influenced ID ($\beta = 0.182$, $t = 3.693$, $p < 0.001$), indicating a strong

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positive relationship. Similarly, Machiavellianism (M) had a significant effect on ID ($\beta = 0.280$, $t = 4.950$, $p < 0.001$), and Psychopathy (P) also had a significant effect ($\beta = 0.339$, $t = 5.177$, $p < 0.001$). Sadism (S), although with a weaker effect, was also a significant predictor of ID ($\beta = 0.112$, $t = 2.444$, $p = 0.007$). Additionally, ID was significantly associated with CB ($\beta = 0.780$, $t = 24.423$, $p < 0.001$), implying that distrust is a major factor in promoting deviant behaviors.

In addition, the mediation hypotheses were supported. Narcissism (N) had an indirect effect on CB via ID ($\beta = 0.142$, $t = 3.402$, $p < 0.001$), as did Machiavellianism (M) ($\beta = 0.218$, $t = 4.832$, $p < 0.001$), Psychopathy (P) ($\beta = 0.264$, $t = 5.218$, $p < 0.001$), and Sadism (S) ($\beta = 0.087$, $t = 2.315$, $p = 0.010$). These results indicate that ID mediates the relationship between the Dark Tetrad traits and CB. The R^2 values of 0.690 for ID and 0.608 for CB suggest that the model explains a large portion of the variance in both constructs. The f^2 values, which varied from 0.029 to 1.549, imply medium to large effect sizes, with ID showing a particularly strong effect on CB.

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Hs	Paths	β	STDEV	t statistic	f ²	p value	Decision	LL	UL
H1	N → ID	0.182	0.049	3.693***	0.029	0	Supported	0.104	0.263
H2	M → ID	0.28	0.056	4.950***	0.083	0	Supported	0.196	0.381
H3	P → ID	0.339	0.066	5.177***	0.115	0	Supported	0.242	0.461
H4	S → ID	0.112	0.046	2.444**	0.011	0.007	Supported	0.039	0.189
H5	ID → CB	0.78	0.032	24.423***	1.549	0	Supported	0.704	0.818
H6	N → ID → CB	0.142	0.042	3.402***	—	0	Supported	0.076	0.21
H7	M → ID → CB	0.218	0.045	4.832***	—	0	Supported	0.149	0.293
H8	P → ID → CB	0.264	0.051	5.218***	—	0	Supported	0.186	0.352
H9	S → ID → CB	0.087	0.038	2.315*	—	0.01	Supported	0.028	0.15
Construct-level fit		R ²		Q ²					
ID (endogenous)		0.69		0.664					
CB (endogenous)		0.608		0.743					

TABLE 5: Outcomes of the structural model

Note. **t ≥ 2.327 at p < 0.01; ***t ≥ 3.092 at p < 0.001; *t ≥ 1.645 at p < 0.05 (one-tailed, 10,000 bootstraps). H = hypothesis, N = narcissism, M = Machiavellianism, P = psychopathy, S = sadism, ID = interpersonal distrust, CB = counterproductive behavior, BC = bias-corrected, LL = lower limit, UL = upper limit. R² and Q² are construct-level statistics reported for the two endogenous variables (ID and CB). Source: Author's own calculations using SmartPLS v4.1.1.6.

Discussion

This study examined the mediating role of ID between Dark Tetrad personalities and CB among 385 full-time faculty members at public universities in Bangladesh. The empirical findings, derived from PLS-SEM analysis, supported all nine hypotheses. All four Dark Tetrad traits significantly predicted ID, which in turn exerted a strong effect on CB. The following

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subsections interpret these findings in relation to existing literature, highlighting convergence and divergence, before outlining theoretical and practical contributions, limitations, and future research directions.

Dark tetrad traits and interpersonal distrust

Hypotheses H1 through H4 proposed that each Dark Tetrad trait would significantly predict interpersonal distrust. All four were supported. Psychopathy emerged as the strongest predictor ($\beta = 0.339$, $t = 5.177$, $p < 0.001$), followed by Machiavellianism ($\beta = 0.280$, $t = 4.950$, $p < 0.001$), narcissism ($\beta = 0.182$, $t = 3.693$, $p < 0.001$), and sadism ($\beta = 0.112$, $t = 2.444$, $p = 0.007$).

Narcissism and interpersonal distrust (H1). The finding that narcissism positively and significantly predicts ID (H1) is consistent with existing evidence. Narcissistic individuals tend to regard colleagues as competitors rather than collaborators, adopting a self-serving relational orientation that systematically undermines mutual confidence (Marchlewska et al., 2018). This is aligned with Back et al. (Back et al., 2010), who demonstrated that narcissistic self-enhancement strategies, while initially projecting a charming facade, ultimately corrode relational trust by signaling competitive and exploitative motives. Krizan and Herlache (Krizan and Herlache, 2017) similarly established that narcissistic entitlement generates sustained interpersonal conflict, progressively dismantling the foundations of trust in professional relationships. In academic settings, where collegiality and collaborative inquiry are institutionally valued, the distrust generated by narcissistic faculty members is particularly consequential for knowledge sharing and joint research productivity.

Machiavellianism and interpersonal distrust (H2). The significant positive effect of Machiavellianism on interpersonal distrust is well-supported in the organizational literature. Machiavellian individuals operate with a fundamentally instrumentalist worldview, treating others as means to personal ends and projecting their own duplicitous tendencies onto colleagues in the form of suspicion and cynicism (Al Ain et al., 2013) (Brewer and Abell, 2017). This finding aligns closely with Hutter et al. (Hutter et al., 2015), who documented that Machiavellian actors in collaborative environments engender distrust through deceptive communication and opportunistic defection. In the academic context, Machiavellian faculty may engage in political maneuvering for resources and promotions, withhold strategically valuable information, and undermine trust in institutional governance processes, all of which cultivate and sustain an atmosphere of interpersonal distrust (Serenko and Choo, 2020).

Psychopathy and interpersonal distrust (H3). Psychopathy was the strongest individual predictor of ID in the present model. This result is consistent with Dargis et al. (Dargis et al., 2018), who linked psychopathic traits, particularly emotional callousness and deficit in empathic processing, to a fundamental incapacity for trust-based relationship formation. Psychopathic individuals generate environments characterized by fear, vigilance, and social withdrawal among colleagues, as their exploitative and remorseless conduct creates pervasive interpersonal insecurity (Reidy et al., 2011). The stronger effect of psychopathy relative to the other traits may reflect its more overt behavioral expression, which is less amenable to strategic concealment within formal professional interactions. This interpretation converges with O'Boyle et al. (O'Boyle et al., 2012) meta-analytic evidence that psychopathy is the most potent Dark Triad predictor of CWB, with interpersonal antagonism and distrust as central mediating processes.

Sadism and interpersonal distrust (H4). Sadism, while the weakest predictor, nonetheless exerted a significant positive effect on ID. This finding is consistent with Pfattheicher et al. (Pfattheicher et al., 2021), who demonstrated that sadistic individuals derive intrinsic gratification from inflicting psychological harm on others, which inherently destabilizes the relational safety necessary for the development of trust. Kowalski et al. (Kowalski et al., 2019) corroborated this by showing that sadistic personality was associated with a predilection for activities that demean and harm others, creating hostile and fear-laden organizational climates. The relatively weaker effect observed here may partly diverge from Buckels et al. (Buckels et al., 2013), who positioned sadism as a powerful and largely unrestrained aggression predictor. However, this discrepancy is likely explained by the institutional constraints of academic environments, which impose normative and professional pressures that moderate the overt expression of sadistic tendencies. In such settings, sadistic behaviors may be displaced into subtler forms of cruelty, including deliberate public criticism, strategic withholding of mentorship, and covert sabotage, which, while less visible, nonetheless generate ID over time (Forsyth et al., 2021).

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Interpersonal distrust and counterproductive behavior

Hypothesis H5 proposed a significant positive relationship between ID and CB. This hypothesis was strongly supported, with ID emerging as a very strong predictor of CB ($\beta = 0.780$, $t = 24.423$, $p < 0.001$). The full structural model explained 60.8% of the variance in CB ($R^2 = 0.608$), reflecting the combined predictive power of the dark tetrad traits operating through ID. This represents the largest path coefficient in the structural model. The finding is highly consistent with Kessler et al. (Kessler et al., 2013), who established distrust as a central stressor triggering counterproductive behavioral responses including aggression, knowledge withholding, and sabotage. It also converges with Karim et al. (Karim et al., 2021), who showed ID to be a significant predictor of workplace deviance, and with Knoll et al. (Knoll et al., 2020), who linked distrust-related organizational silence to a range of counterproductive responses. In academic institutions where scholarly productivity depends on collaborative trust, the consequences of distrust are amplified: distrustful faculty members withdraw from cooperation, hoard intellectual resources, and engage in behaviors that directly obstruct institutional functioning (Van Prooijen et al., 2021).

Mediating Role of Interpersonal Distrust (H6-H9)

Hypotheses H6 through H9 proposed that ID mediates the relationship between each Dark Tetrad trait and CB. All four mediation hypotheses were supported, with indirect effects ranging from $b = 0.087$ for sadism ($t = 2.315$, $p = 0.010$) to $\beta = 0.264$ for psychopathy ($t = 5.218$, $p < 0.001$). These results provide robust empirical support for SET, which holds that trust is the foundational mechanism of positive reciprocal exchanges and that its disruption, particularly through distrust, precipitates retaliatory and self-protective deviance (Blau, 1964).

The mediation of narcissism through distrust (H6: $\beta = 0.142$, $t = 3.402$, $p < 0.001$) is consistent with Grapsas et al. (Grapsas et al., 2019), who showed that narcissistic status-seeking behaviors generate adversarial relational dynamics that erode institutional trust and stimulate defensive deviance among colleagues. For Machiavellianism (H7: $\beta = 0.218$, $t = 4.832$, $p < 0.001$), the indirect effect aligns with Serenko and Choo (Serenko and Choo, 2020), who demonstrated that Machiavellian individuals create organizational atmospheres in which distrust catalyzes knowledge sabotage and political maneuvering. The mediated effect for psychopathy (H8: $\beta = 0.264$) was the strongest, corroborating O'Boyle et al. (O'Boyle et al., 2012) meta-analytic conclusion that psychopathy exerts its most damaging organizational effects precisely through its capacity to dismantle interpersonal trust. Finally, sadism's mediated effect (H9: $\beta = 0.087$), while significant and consistent with the theoretical model, was the weakest, reflecting the institutional modulation of sadistic expression discussed previously.

Collectively, these findings extend prior work by Jones and Paulhus (Jones and Paulhus, 2012), who argued that Dark Tetrad individuals share a common interpersonal strategy of exploiting social relationships. The present study operationalizes and quantifies the role of interpersonal distrust as the specific relational mechanism through which these exploitative orientations generate counterproductive outcomes in the institutional setting of Bangladeshi public academia. The model's R^2 values of 0.690 for ID and 0.608 for CB, combined with a large effect size for the ID $\rightarrow$ CB path ($f^2 = 1.549$), confirm that this is not merely a statistically significant but a substantively powerful explanatory model.

Theoretical and practical contributions

Theoretical Contributions

This study makes four key theoretical contributions. First, it extends SET to the Dark Tetrad domain, empirically demonstrating that ID functions as the pivotal relational pathway through which dark personality traits engender CB in academic institutions. While SET has previously been applied to explain trust-based cooperative exchanges (Blau, 1964), the present study is among the first to integrate it systematically with Dark Tetrad Theory in a higher education context, thereby enriching both theoretical frameworks. Second, by demonstrating that sadism, despite being the weakest predictor, constitutes a statistically significant and theoretically distinct contributor to distrust and CB, this study adds explanatory depth to the full Dark Tetrad construct beyond the more commonly studied Dark Triad. Prior studies have predominantly examined narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy in isolation or as a triad (Roesser et al., 2015) (Duradoni et al., 2023), and the present findings underscore the value of including sadism as an independent dimension,

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particularly for understanding the volitional and affectively gratifying aspects of organizational deviance. Third, by situating the analysis within public universities in Bangladesh, this study expands the predominantly Western empirical base of Dark Tetrad research. The findings challenge the implicit cultural universality assumed in much prior work and establish a foundation for cross-cultural comparative research on dark personality dynamics in organizational settings across South and Southeast Asia. Fourth, the methodological application of PLS-SEM with bias-corrected bootstrapping (10,000 resamples) for mediation testing, combined with HTMT-based discriminant validity assessment, advances the psychometric standards of Dark Tetrad research in organizational contexts. The full reporting of f^2 effect sizes and Q^2 predictive relevance values provides a model of comprehensive structural model assessment that future studies in this domain may build upon (Hair et al., 2017).

Practical Contributions

The findings carry substantial practical implications for the leadership and governance of higher education institutions. Given that ID mediates the relationship between dark personality traits and CB, interventions that directly target the organizational antecedents and consequences of distrust represent the highest-leverage strategy for reducing the harmful effects of dark personalities in academia. First, universities should incorporate personality-based screening instruments, such as the DDS (Jonason and Webster, 2010) or the Short Dark Tetrad, into faculty recruitment and promotion processes. Such assessments, implemented with appropriate ethical oversight and transparency, can help identify candidates with pronounced dark profiles, particularly high-psychopathy and high-Machiavellian individuals, who were shown to be the most potent generators of institutional distrust and CB. Implementing this recommendation responsibly requires navigating two competing risks: self-report personality measures are susceptible to socially desirable faking under selection conditions, while candidates may reasonably perceive personality-based screening as discriminatory if used as a pass/fail filter. Institutions can mitigate both risks by using personality data only as one input within a holistic, multi-method assessment, alongside structured interviews and work-sample exercises rather than self-report alone, by disclosing to candidates what is being assessed and why, and by subjecting the screening process to adverse-impact and legal review before adoption. Second, leadership development programs should prioritize emotional intelligence, ethical decision-making, and conflict resolution competencies. Concretely, such programs should target self-awareness (recognizing one's own emotional triggers and biases), social awareness (accurately reading colleagues' perspectives and distress signals), relationship management (giving and receiving difficult feedback constructively), and structured de-escalation skills for mediating disputes before they harden into entrenched distrust. Academic leaders who model trust-building behaviors and respond swiftly and fairly to interpersonal misconduct can substantially reduce the organizational conditions under which dark personality traits flourish. Drawing on frameworks of authentic leadership and ethical leadership, such programs should be embedded in institutional induction processes for department heads, deans, and committee chairs. Third, transparent and merit-based systems for resource allocation, promotion, and research assignment should be established to reduce the political space in which dark traits operate most effectively. Opacity in institutional decision-making creates conditions in which Machiavellian manipulation and narcissistic entitlement go unchecked, amplifying distrust across the institution. Clear accountability mechanisms can structurally inhibit these dynamics. Finally, institutions should develop structured, confidential reporting mechanisms for interpersonal misconduct and provide restorative conflict management resources. A culture of psychological safety, inclusion, and relational accountability is the ultimate organizational antidote to the toxic interpersonal dynamics engendered by dark personality traits.

Limitations and directions for future research

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that warrant consideration. First, the cross-sectional design precludes causal inference. All data were collected at a single time point, making it impossible to establish temporal precedence between Dark Tetrad traits, ID, and CB. Future studies should employ longitudinal or time-lagged designs to trace the developmental trajectory of these relationships and confirm the causal order of the mediation pathway. Second, the sample was restricted to full-time faculty members at six public universities in Bangladesh, limiting the generalizability of the findings. The hierarchical, resource-constrained, and culturally specific nature of Bangladeshi public academia may moderate the Dark Tetrad-distrust-CB relationships in ways that do not generalize to private

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institutions, other national contexts, or non-academic organizational settings. Cross-national comparative studies would considerably strengthen the external validity of these findings. Third, all constructs were measured via self-reported questionnaires, which raises concerns about common method bias and social desirability, particularly regarding self-reports of dark personality traits and CB. Future studies should adopt multi-source data collection strategies, including peer ratings, supervisor assessments, or behavioral records, to triangulate findings and reduce reliance on single-source self-report data. Fourth, the ID scale used in this study comprised only three items ($\alpha = 0.711$), which clears the conventional 0.70 threshold but only narrowly, reflecting the brevity of the three-item adaptation. While this level may be acceptable for an adapted, exploratory measure, future studies should develop or validate a more comprehensive and psychometrically robust measure of ID in academic contexts, ideally capturing both its cognitive and affective dimensions (Wang et al., 2020). Relatedly, item-level screening left Machiavellianism and Psychopathy with only three retained items each and narrowed the sadism measure to its dominance-oriented items, sparse per-trait coverage that should be read as a further psychometric limitation of the Dirty Dozen and SSIS instruments in this sample. Fifth, this study did not examine contextual moderators that may attenuate or amplify the Dark Tetrad-distrust-CB relationship, such as ethical leadership, perceived organizational justice, psychological safety, and institutional trust climate. Including such boundary conditions in future models would advance a more nuanced and practically actionable understanding of when and for whom dark personality effects are most pronounced. Finally, qualitative and mixed-method research designs would usefully complement the present quantitative findings. In-depth interviews and narrative analyses could illuminate the subtle, institutionally embedded manifestations of dark-personality-driven distrust and CB that survey instruments may fail to capture, providing richer insights for both theory and practice.

Conclusions

This study examined the mediating role of ID in the relationship between Dark Tetrad personalities and CB among faculty members in Bangladeshi public universities. All nine hypotheses were supported. Narcissism, Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and sadism each significantly predicted ID, which in turn exerted a substantial effect on CB. Psychopathy emerged as the strongest predictor of distrust and the most potent driver of the mediated effect on CB, followed by Machiavellianism and narcissism, with sadism contributing a weaker but still significant effect, though this relative ordering should be treated as provisional given the collinearity among the four predictors. These findings confirm the theoretical premise of SET that the erosion of trust, particularly through the relational toxicity of dark personalities, creates conditions conducive to organizational deviance. The study extends this framework to the academically underexplored context of Bangladeshi public universities, contributing to a growing body of evidence on how dark personality dynamics shape institutional culture and performance in non-Western higher education settings. For university leaders and policymakers, the findings underscore the importance of addressing dark personality dynamics proactively through personality-informed recruitment, ethical leadership development, transparent governance, and trust-building organizational practices. Creating academic environments that are resilient to the disruptive influence of dark personality traits is not only an institutional imperative but a prerequisite for sustaining the collegial, trust-based culture on which scholarly productivity and academic integrity ultimately depend.

Appendices

The research questionnaire used in this study is presented in Table 6.

RESEARCH QUESTIONNAIRE, Examining the Mediating Role of Interpersonal Distrust between Dark Tetrad Personalities and Counterproductive Behavior in the Field of Academia

Dear Respondent, This survey is conducted for academic research purposes. It examines the relationship between personality traits, interpersonal distrust, and counterproductive workplace behavior in academic settings. Your participation is entirely voluntary and all responses will remain strictly confidential. There are no right or wrong answers, please respond based on your own honest experience and perceptions. Likert Scale Key: 1 = Strongly Disagree | 2 = Disagree | 3 = Neutral | 4 = Agree | 5 = Strongly Agree

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SECTION A: Demographic Information

1	Age	Under 25 years	☐
		25–34 years	☐
		35–44 years	☐
		45–54 years	☐
		55 years and above	☐
2	Gender	Male	☐
		Female	☐
3	Academic Rank	Lecturer	☐
		Assistant Professor	☐
		Associate Professor	☐
		Professor	☐
4	Academic Qualification	Bachelor's Degree	☐
		Master's Degree	☐
		PhD	☐
		Other	☐
5	Years of Experience	Less than 5 years	☐
		5–10 years	☐
		11–20 years	☐
		More than 20 years	☐
6	Marital Status	Single	☐
		Married	☐

SECTION B: Dark Tetrad Personality Traits

Please indicate the extent to which each statement applies to you. 1 = Strongly Disagree 2 = Disagree 3 = Neutral 4 = Agree 5 = Strongly Agree

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No.	Variable	Code	Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Part B1: Narcissism (N)								
7	Narcissism (N)	N1	I like receiving admiration from others.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
8		N2	I enjoy being the center of attention.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
9		N3	I seek recognition and prestige.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
10		N4	I believe I deserve special treatment.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Part B2: Machiavellianism (M)								
11	Machiavellianism (M)	M1	I tend to manipulate people to achieve my goals.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
12		M2	I am willing to use others for personal benefit.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
13		M3	I may employ deceptive tactics when advantageous.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
14		M4	I use charm or flattery strategically.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

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			y to get what I want.					
Part B3: Psychopathy (P)								
15	Psychopath y (P)	P1	I rarely feel remorse for actions that hurt others.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
16		P2	I can be emotionall y insensitive toward others.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
17		P3	Moral concerns do not strongly influence my decisions.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
18		P4	I tend to have a cynical view of people.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Part B4: Sadism (S)								
19	Sadism (S)	S1	I experience enjoyment when seeing others suffer.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
20		S2	I have an interest in hurting or humiliating others.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
21		S3	I derive pleasure from	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

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			having dominance over others.					
22		S4	I enjoy cruel jokes or pranks at others' expense.	○	○	○	○	○
23		S5	I show little concern about others' distress.	○	○	○	○	○
24		S6	I am attracted to aggressive or violent acts.	○	○	○	○	○
25		S7	I feel satisfaction from making others uncomfortable.	○	○	○	○	○
26		S8	I have an interest in witnessing physical or emotional pain.	○	○	○	○	○
27		S9	I enjoy the power that comes through intimidating others.	○	○	○	○	○
28		S10	I feel uncomfortable at the idea of harming others.	○	○	○	○	○

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SECTION C: Interpersonal Distrust (ID)								
Please indicate the extent to which each statement reflects your workplace experience. 1 = Strongly Disagree 2 = Disagree 3 = Neutral 4 = Agree 5 = Strongly Agree								
No.	Variable	Code	Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
29	Interpersonal Distrust (ID)	ID1	I suspect that colleagues may have hidden motives behind their actions.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
30		ID2	I doubt the honesty or sincerity of my coworkers.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
31		ID3	I feel reluctant to rely on or be vulnerable to colleagues because they may act against my interests.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
SECTION D: Counterproductive Work Behavior (CWB-C)								
Please indicate how frequently you have engaged in each behavior in your current academic position. 1 = Strongly Disagree 2 = Disagree 3 = Neutral 4 = Agree 5 = Strongly Agree								
No.	Variable	Code	Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
32	Counterproductive Work Behavior (CWB-C)	CB1	I have purposely wasted my employer's	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

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			materials or supplies.					
33		CB2	I have complained about insignificant things at work.	○	○	○	○	○
34		CB3	I have told people outside the institution what a poor workplace it is.	○	○	○	○	○
35		CB4	I have come to work late without prior permission.	○	○	○	○	○
36		CB5	I have stayed home from work and claimed to be sick when I was not.	○	○	○	○	○
37		CB6	I have insulted someone about their job performance.	○	○	○	○	○
38		CB7	I have made fun of someone's personal life at work.	○	○	○	○	○

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39		CB8	I have deliberately ignored someone at work.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
40		CB9	I have started an argument with someone at work.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
41		CB10	I have insulted or ridiculed someone at work.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

TABLE 6: Research questionnaire

Thank You for Your Participation Your responses are highly valued. All information will be kept strictly confidential and used solely for research purposes.

Additional Information

Author Contributions

All authors have reviewed the final version to be published and agreed to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

Concept and design: Md. Anamul Haque

Drafting of the manuscript: Md. Anamul Haque, Dewan Niamul Karim, Sabrina Sharmin Nishat

Acquisition, analysis, or interpretation of data: Dewan Niamul Karim, Sabrina Sharmin Nishat

Critical review of the manuscript for important intellectual content: Dewan Niamul Karim, Sabrina Sharmin Nishat

Disclosures

Human subjects: Consent was obtained or waived by all participants in this study. Research Ethics Committee of Bangladesh University of Professionals (BUP) issued approval 23.01.902.858.07.786.24/68. This study was conducted in adherence to the ethical standards outlined by the Research Ethics Committee of Bangladesh University of Professionals (BUP). All participants provided informed consent before completing the questionnaire, and participation was entirely voluntary. The anonymity and confidentiality of all respondents were guaranteed throughout. **Animal subjects:** All authors have confirmed that this study did not involve animal subjects or tissue. **Conflicts of interest:** In compliance with the ICMJE uniform disclosure form, all authors declare the following: **Payment/services info:** All authors have declared that no financial support was received from any organization for the submitted work. **Financial relationships:** All authors have declared that they have no financial relationships at present or within the previous three years with any organizations that might have an interest in the submitted work. **Other relationships:** All authors have declared that there are no other relationships or activities that could appear to have influenced the submitted work.

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Data Availability Statements

The datasets (and/or code) supporting this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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