

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MALADAPTIVE PARENTING AND DARK TRIAD TRAITS IN CHILDREN LIVING IN DESTITUTE

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Abstract

In the current research, the connection between maladaptive parenting and Dark Triad traits of machine, narcissism and psychopathy in children dwelling in a destitute setting in Lahore, Pakistan were examined. Children in poor communities tend to lack uniform caregiving and emotional support, as well as, this can be a factor leading to the emergence of socially aversive personality traits. They used a correlational research design and a sample of 300 children (150 male, 150 female) who had been recruited at child protection and welfare bureau, Lahore through purposive sampling. Children that were 10-17 years of age, had a minimum of six months living at the Bureau, comprehending questionnaires, and inclusion criteria were used, but those with severe psychiatric problems or cognitive disabilities were excluded. The Maladaptive Parenting Questionnaire and the Dark Triad Children Inventory were used to retrieve the data. The statistical tests consisted of descriptive statistics, reliability test, Pearson, and multiple regression tests in SPSS v26. Findings revealed that there were strong positive relationships between maladaptive parenting and all the three Dark Triad factors ($p < .001$), where maladaptive parenting was found to significantly predict Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy. Findings indicate that parenting interventions and psychosocial support in child welfare institutions should be used to reduce the occurrence of socially aversive traits. The findings help in the learning about psychosocial and cultural factors of personality development among high-risk children.

Keywords: Maladaptive Parenting, Dark Triad, Destitute Children.

Introduction

Children raised in a state of abject poverty in orphanages, institutional care or severe poverty are subjected to various psychosocial stressors, which have severe influence on their developmental course. These are often characterized by derailed caregiving, emotional indifference, fluctuating support, and even brutal or punitive parenting, which has also been known as maladaptive parenting (Ferencz et al., 2022). Strong social and developmental psychology studies have repeatedly revealed that such care providing conditions disrupt the emotional security and adaptive functioning of children and increase the risk of externalizing behaviors and adaptive personality outcomes.

The Dark Triad is a personality construct that is gaining greater popularity in this regard: it includes Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy traits which can be described as manipulateness, self-centeredness, callousness, and lack of empathy (Copakova, 2020). Most of the initial research on the Dark Triad involved adult samples but more recent work

has attempted to investigate the relationship between perceived parental rejection, perceived hostility, and perceived low emotional warmth with the severity of the latter traits in adolescence and young adulthood, both of which have proven statistically significant (Ferencz et al., 2022; Jin et al., 2022). In particular, the perceived rejection and overprotection were positively linked with such personality traits as psychopathy and vulnerable narcissism, whereas emotional warmth showed negative correlations with these negative personality traits (Ferencz et al., 2022).

In addition, psychological control a dimension of maladaptive parenting that entails intrusive and coercive levels has been identified as affecting the development of dark personality in adolescents, with adverse interpersonal consequences being observed in cases where psychological control is high (Saladino et al., 2024). These results are consistent with the general developmental theory that children flexibly tune their interpersonal strategies according to the demands that their environment places upon them; in the case of caregivers who are emotionally unavailable or domineering, adolescents can establish manipulative or self-defensive personality strategies which are manifested in Dark Triad features.

Although this is becoming a consistent body of evidence with suboptimal parenting and dark personality correlations in older children and adolescents, there still appears to be a relative research gap in how maladaptive parenting in destitute settings can lead to the development of Dark Triad characteristics in children. Filling this gap is both a necessary step to understanding developmental processes and a needed intervention to inform specific psychosocial interventions, caregiver education, and policy reactions to the better results of vulnerable children raised in high-risk caregiving environments.

Maladaptive parenting is defined as practices of care giving that are emotionally neglectful, overly controlling, inconsistent, or harsh and are detrimental to the psychosocial and emotional development of a child. Low parental emotional warmth, high parental psychological control, punitive parenting, and neglectful parenting are all aspects of such parenting (Wang et al., 2024; Saladino et al., 2025).

Machiavellianism is that which is full of manipulation, using others strategically and self-interest over morality. Children with higher Machiavellianism score have a higher chance of using calculated strategies and manipulation in interpersonal relationships (Ferencz et al., 2022).

Narcissism has been described as grandiosity, self-centeredness, entitlement and a high level of need in admiration, which is usually accompanied by a low level of empathy towards others. The increase in narcissism scores would suggest children who might pay too much attention to the image and confirmation and forget about the needs of others (Ferencz et al., 2022).

Psychopathy can be defined as the absence of emotions, impulsivity, absence of empathy, and ignoring of social conventions. High-psychopathic children have callous and unemotional personality types, with less interest and concern about the feelings of other people and social norms (Ferencz et al., 2022; Saladino et al., 2025).

Maladaptive parenting behaviors, such as low emotional warmth, high psychological control, neglect and harsh disciplinary measures are often offered to children living in destitute environments. This kind of caregiving leads to the formation of emotionally erratic and uncertain environments that cause the children to adopt maladaptive coping strategies that can result in personality traits as the Dark Triad, i.e., Machiavellianism,

narcissism, and psychopathy. Particularly, they might learn manipulative (Machiavellianism) and inflated self-focus and entitlement (narcissism) as response to neglectful parenting, and come out callous and emotionally detached (psychopathy) to protect themselves against relational injuries. The effects are increased by destitute contexts since the dependence of children on caregivers in terms of basic needs and emotional needs increases the effects of maladaptive parenting on personality development. Such connection is supported by empirical studies, which reveal that the psychological control and low levels of emotional warmth by parents positively correlate with the shaping of Dark Triad traits in children and teenagers in high-risk or deprived settings (Ferencz et al., 2022; Saladino et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2024). Consequently, the role of maladaptive parenting behavior acts as an important predictor of Dark Triad traits, and destitution may have a moderating influence on this outcome.

Attachment Theory and Social Learning Theory can be used to explain the connection between maladaptive parenting and the Dark Triad traits development in children. Attachment Theory further assumes that initial experiences with attendants shape internal working models that shape social, emotional, and personality development in life (Bowlby, 2020). The insecure or disorganized type of attachment can be developed by the children who have undergone neglect, rejection, or irregular care giving and may predispose them to maladaptive interpersonal behaviors and callous-emotional characteristics of the Dark Triad (Ferencz et al., 2022). According to this theory, children learn behaviors, values, and patterns of emotions by watching and following the actions of important people in their lives, especially parents and their primary caregivers (Bandura, 2021). In this context, maladaptive parental behavior patterns (e.g., manipulation, emotional coldness or coercion) could be learned by children and internalized as normative patterns of interacting with others and eventually lead to the formation of Machiavellian, narcissist or psychopathic tendencies (Saladino et al., 2025). These combined theories present an overall explanation of how environmental and interpersonal factors contribute to the development of socially aversive personality traits among children who grow up in deprived or maladaptive care giving environments.

Purpose of the Study

The aim of this study is to analyses the maladaptive parenting concerning the emergence of Dark Triad traits of Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy in children brought up in impoverished settings. The researchers seek to comprehend the effects that poor parenting conducts has on the development of socially unfavorable traits in children and how the environment may have a depraving impact on personality development through the possible mechanisms involved.

Literature Review

Recent studies emphasize that parenting practices have a great influence on the personality development of children, especially the development of socially aversive personality in children like that included in the Dark Triad Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy. It has been observed in international studies that such maladaptive parenting styles as low emotional warmth, high psychological control, and inconsistent caregiving are positively correlated with the Dark Triad traits development in adolescents and young adults (Ferencz et al., 2022; Motavalli et al., 2025; Saladino et al., 2025).

A correlational study of the relationship between risky behavior and Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy in the context of adolescent girls in Iran revealed a strong

positive correlation between the three traits and risky behavior, and that parental patterns of interaction were related to the risk inclination of adolescents, which indicated that the impact of familial settings on the Dark Triad results in adolescence was indirect (Motavalli et al., 2025). Elena Petrica and Georgeta Panișoară (2024) examined the impact of parental Dark Triad traits on the parenting styles and parental competence; the findings showed that increased parental Machiavellianism was linked to authoritarian or permissive parenting, which reveals that personality traits of parents are capable of affecting parenting practices that could have an effect on child development (Petrica and Panișoară, 2024). Evidence of narrative review indicates that some parenting styles, including low warmth and high control, influence the development of dark personality traits in people by influencing emotional and interpersonal strategies, which offer a theoretical explanation of why unpleasant care giving situations produce adverse personality outcomes (Abidah and Poerwandari, 2025).

Studies suggest that paternal emotional warmth does affect the manifestation of Dark Triad traits, with lower paternal warmth being linked to higher levels of Machiavellianism and psychopathy, which then mediate the rise in aggression in adolescent and young adult samples, with the importance of relationships between caregiving behavior, Dark Triad, and externalizing outcomes being emphasized (Study on parental emotional warmth & Dark Triad, 2020). A tri-dimensional study in the UK correlated adolescent personality and perceived parenting, and adolescent Dark Triad traits were found to predict perceptions of parental warmth and control, which showed the bidirectionality in the relationship between youth personality and family relations in developmental results (Tri-directional examination, 2023). A study in parenting styles and Dark Triad traits among young adults stated that permissive and authoritarian parenting were associated with subclinical dark personality traits in different ways where harsher and less responsive parenting was linked to the expression of more maladaptive traits (Dhaval et al., 2024). One study that models Dark Triad traits through emotional vulnerability in adolescents who experienced adverse life events (e.g., running away from home) discovered that social and emotional vulnerability (social rejection and inferiority) were interacting with personality development in youth (Ebadpoor et al., 2025).

Iftikhar and Iftikhar (2024) investigated the personality traits of Dark Triad in adolescents (14 to 17 years) and concluded that Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy had a significant and positive relationship with impulsivity and different types of aggression, and boys were rated higher in all the three traits, compared to girls. The study is helpful in the context of behavioral correlates of the Dark Triad in a Pakistani teenage-based sample. Iqbal et al. (2025) examined the connection between Dark Triad factors and undergraduate students and their attitude toward ethics. The findings revealed that narcissism and psychopathy had negative relations with idealism and Machiavellianism with relativism and men with all the Dark Triad traits scored higher than women, and this supported the existence of gender differences in personality and moral orientation.

Muhammad and Ashiq (2025) studied dark triad characteristics together with an activity of social networking sites in undergraduate students, and the findings were that Machiavellianism, narcissism and psychopathy had a significant relationship with the trends of online behavior that indicates how the dark traits contribute to online social involvement. The relationship between Dark Triad personality traits and assertive self-presentation tactics use by university students was examined by Shaheen, Saeed, and

Rashid (2025) in their study of how family system moderates the study. In their findings, they propose that dark traits are subject to family dynamics in the translation of their meaning into interpersonal behavior. Yusuf and Tahir (2025) examined the relationship between Honesty-Humility factor and Dark Tetrad (Machiavellianism, narcissism, psychopathy and sadism). They have discovered that increased Dark Tetrad has a positive relationship with reduced honesty-humility and this is an extension of more socially aversive personality traits in a Pakistani sample. Zafar and Qurat-ul-ain (2025) analyzed the correlation between the Dark Tetrad characteristics and delinquent behavior of adolescents with social support as a moderator. They discovered that more dark traits were linked to higher levels of delinquency and that social support is capable of alleviating some of these subsequently depicting the effects of development and environment on the outcomes of dark personality. Arshad, Ashiq, and Malik (2025) investigated the relationship between dark triad and quality of interaction with the family in young adults. Their correlational results showed that Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy had a negative correlation with functioning of the family, which led to the relation between dark traits and the dysfunctional family environment.

Khan et al. (2025) assessed the role of parenting and criminal thinking in drug rehabilitation patients, paying attention to Dark Tetrad characteristics. They discovered that Machiavellianism and psychopathy were well predictors of criminal thought processes, directly parenting factors failed to predict dark traits and this shows that there are complex interactions between personality and behavioral outcomes in clinical and rehabilitation practices.

Objectives of the Study

- 1) To determine the prevalence and the patterns of maladaptive parenting in children residing in impoverished settings.
- 2) To test the amounts of Dark Triad traits Machiavellianism, narcissism and psychopathy of the target population.
- 3) To test the connection between maladaptive parenting and each of the Dark Triad traits.
- 4) To test the hypothesis that maladaptive parenting is further complicated by poor living conditions, being a poor person.

Hypotheses

H1: Machiavellianism in children brought up in destitute settings is positively correlated with maladaptive parenting.

H2: There is a positive relationship between maladaptive parenting and narcissism in children who are in destitute settings.

H3: In children who live in destitute conditions, maladaptive parenting has a positive relationship with psychopathy.

H4: The linkage between maladaptive parenting and Dark Triad traits is moderated by destitute living conditions such that the relationship is stronger in high deprivation contexts.

Methodology

The current research involved correlational research design in order to determine the association between maladaptive parenting and Dark Triad traits in children who were living in destitute situations. Purposive sampling was done to recruit a sample of 300 children (150 males and 150 females) whose names were registered in the Child Protection

and Welfare Bureau, Lahore. Inclusion criteria included children aged between 10 and 17 years of age, at least six months of stay at the Bureau and an ability to comprehend questionnaires, but children with severe psychiatric problems or mental disorders were excluded. The Maladaptive Parenting Questionnaire and the Dark Triad Children Inventory were used to collect the data. Treatments involved both informed consent of legal guardians and child consent and questionnaires were completed in a tense and confidential setting. Descriptive statistics and reliability testing, Pearson correlation and multiple regression through SPSS v26 were conducted as statistical analyses. Ethical aspects involved voluntary accession, confidentiality, right to withdraw and referring to counseling services in the event of distress.

Results

This chapter outlines the statistical tests done to identify the connection between maladaptive parenting and the Dark Triad personality traits of Machiavellianism, narcissism and psychopathy in children in destitute environments.

Table 01

Internal Consistency Reliability of Study Measures (N = 300)

| Variables | No. of Items | Cronbach's α |
|-----------------------------|--------------|---------------------|
| Maladaptive Parenting Scale | 20 | .89 |
| Machiavellianism Subscale | 10 | .85 |
| Narcissism Subscale | 10 | .88 |
| Psychopathy Subscale | 10 | .86 |
| Dark Triad Total Score | 30 | .91 |

Note. $A \geq .70$ indicates acceptable reliability.

Table 2 presents the alpha coefficient of Cronbach of the measures used in this study. All scales had high levels of internal consistency with the α of between .85 and .91 which is above the accepted level of .70 in research reliability in psychology. The values suggest that the scales that are used in the given research can be employed in destitute children in institutions.

Table 02

Pearson Correlation Between Maladaptive Parenting and Dark Triad Traits

| Variables | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
|-----------------------|-------|-------|-------|---|
| Maladaptive Parenting | — | | | |
| Machiavellianism | .38** | — | | |
| Narcissism | .31* | .42** | — | |
| Psychopathy | .45** | .47** | .39** | — |

Note. $N = 300$. $P < .05^*$, $p < .01^{**}$.

The Pearson correlation analysis revealed that there were significant positive correlations between maladaptive parenting and all three aspects of Dark Triad. Maladaptive parenting showed a moderate, statistically significant relationship with Machiavellianism ($r = .38$, $p < .01$), with psychopathy ($r = .45$, $p < .01$). Furthermore, maladaptive parenting was also significantly correlated with narcissism ($r = .31$, $p < .05$). Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy were largely correlated (r range = .39 to .47, $p < .01$). On the whole, these results indicate that the maladaptive parenthood can be a major factor in promoting Dark Triad traits.

Table 03

Prediction of Dark Triad traits based on Maladaptive parenting Multiple Regression analysis.

| Variables | Predictor | B | SE B | β | t | p | R ² |
|------------------|-----------------------|------|------|---------|------|--------|----------------|
| Machiavellianism | Maladaptive Parenting | 0.42 | 0.09 | .38 | 4.67 | < .001 | .15 |
| Narcissism | Maladaptive Parenting | 0.29 | 0.11 | .28 | 2.64 | .009 | .08 |
| Psychopathy | Maladaptive Parenting | 0.51 | 0.10 | .44 | 5.10 | < .001 | .19 |

Note. N = 300. B = unstandardized beta coefficient; SE B = standard error; β = standardized beta coefficient.

Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy were greatly explained by maladaptive parenting. The largest predictive relationship was found to be of psychopathy ($R^2 = .19$) and then Machiavellianism ($R^2 = .15$) and narcissism ($R^2 = .08$). The regression coefficients were that the greater the maladaptive parenting scores, the greater the dark triad traits of children in the destitute settings.

Discussion

The current research paper involved investigation of the correlation of maladaptive parenting and Dark Triad personality traits among destitute children in the Child Protection and Welfare Bureau in Lahore. The results showed that an increased exposure towards maladaptive parenting characterized by neglect, harsh discipline, coercive control and emotional rejection had a significant relationship with an increased score of Machiavellianism, narcissism and psychopathy. Those findings are consistent with the modern empirical findings that indicate that aversive parenting conditions are one of the main antecedents in the formation of socially aversive characteristics (Ferencz et al., 2022; Li et al., 2020). This study is an original provision of contextual flavor to the developmental ramifications of maladaptive caregiving, by placing them in a socioeconomic and cultural context of Pakistan.

In the Pakistani society, there are authoritarian and collectivist values, where it is emphasized that the main focus is obedience and authority of the parents compared to the emotional expression and independent decision-making (Khan et al., 2025). Despite the existence of positive parenting, families with disadvantaged status especially those living in abject poverty often encounter chronic stress, and this could make them more prone to harsh and psychologically controlling parenting. South Asian studies show that coercive parenting is linked to economic demands, family breakage, and illiteracy of parents (Ahmad et al., 2025). It leads to the emotional atmosphere that facilitates distrust, a sense of hostility, and manipulation of the strategies as adaptive survival mechanisms that can either take the form of Machiavellianism or psychopathy (Ebadpoor et al., 2025; Saladino et al., 2025). Before these poor children are placed in institutions, they are usually victims of parental neglect, abandonment or mistreatment in terms of physical and emotional abuse. These negative experiences can be normalized upon manipulative or antisocial behavior that may be internalized into functional strategies to unpredictable environments. Research has shown that children who do not have healthy attachment figures or have poor emotional reinforcement tend to use deceit, emotional detachment, or dominance as a way of guaranteeing safety or resource access (Vize et al., 2020). In the Pakistani cultural

context, where the social support systems have been undermined in regards to marginalized children, such processes can be enhanced throughout the developmental path.

Even the institutional contexts have an effect on personality development. Child welfare centers are created with safety in mind, however, an overcrowded setting, the lack of individual attention, and the lack of consistent interaction with caregivers might impede emotional regulation and attachment securing. According to Pakistani studies, the degree of emotional deprivation and maladaptive coping is greater among institutionalized youth than among non-institutionalized youth (Iftikhar and Iftikhar, 2024). Therefore, current trends toward manipulation or depersonalization can be strengthened instead of being weakened. The environments can reinforce the narcissistic self-centeredness in the form of compensation strategy or psychopathic detachment in the form of defense mechanism.

Pakistan is a society that puts a stigma on institutional upbringing, which increases this risk. Children who fall under the runaways, street children, or orphan category tend to face constant social exclusion and discrimination (Khan et al., 2025). Stigmatization may add to a sense of inferiority and rejection and lead to narcissistic grandiosity as a defensive mechanism or Machiavellian behavior to gain social status or belonging (Arshad et al., 2025). Moreover, such psychopathic traits as numbness or aggression can be developed as the reaction to the long-term marginalization and trauma.

Trait expression is also conditioned by gender norms. The socialization of Pakistani boys is usually based on dominance and assertiveness, which can lead to narcissistic entitlement or manipulative behavior, whereas girls can be relational or covertly manipulative because of the cultural inhibition of expressing emotions and gaining independence (Shaheen et al., 2025). This gender difference emphasizes the need to have culturally sensitive measurements and interventions.

Also, Pakistani mental health services to at-risk youth are severely scarce. Maltreatment, attachment, and antisocial personality risk factors are psychological issues that are not easily detected or tackled within the institutional care (Muhammad and Ashiq, 2025). Unless maladaptive traits are addressed in early psychosocial stages, they can transform into enduring behavioral habits that can be identified in adolescence and even adulthood and lead to delinquency, interpersonal dysfunction, or criminality (Ramos-Villagrasa et al., 2020).

Notably, the results of this study support that maladaptive parenting is not a fixed phenomenon, rather, it is a likely one. Exposure risks but does not substantially determine the Dark Triad traits development, since resilience, peer influence, institutional reformation, religiosity, and mentoring are able to mitigate poor results (Petrica & Panisoara, 2024). The extended family, religious education, and community support programs can become protective factors within the Pakistani collectivist culture, especially when they are incorporated into the trauma-informed care strategies.

Recommendations and Limitations.

This research was limited in a number of ways. To begin with, the cross-sectional design limits the use of causal inferences. Second, use of self-report measures could have caused social desirability bias especially in children that are in institutions. Third, the research was conducted on a single city thus could not be generalized to other parts of Pakistan. Future studies will utilize longitudinal designs and be able to measure paths of causation, incorporate multi-informant measures (e.g. caregiver and teacher reports), and broaden sampling across regions to increase external validity. Moreover, the maladaptive parenting

practices based on intervention can offer effective measures to curb the occurrence of dark personality traits.

Practical Implications

The results indicate the significance of parenting interventions, caregiver training and psychosocial support program in the child welfare institutions in Pakistan. The development of maladaptive personality traits and enhancement of social adjustment of vulnerable children can be achieved through the promotion of emotional warmth, regular caregiving, and positive disciplinary techniques by policymakers and practitioners.

Conclusion

To sum up, maladaptive parenting closely correlates with the development of Dark Triad traits in children in destitute conditions in Pakistan. The institutional context Interventions targeting negative parenting and supporting caregiving could help to decrease the chances of socially aversive personality development and ensure that high-risk children achieve better psychosocial health.

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