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Impulsivity, Dark Triad and Moral Disengagement among Clinical Psychologists

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Abstract

This research paper investigated the influence of impulsivity, Dark Triad personality attributes (narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy), and moral disengagement in Pakistan among 120 licensed clinical psychologists (60 male, 60 female) of age 25 to 55 years. Based on the standardized instruments Barratt Impulsiveness Scale, Dirty Dozen Dark Triad Scale and Bandura Moral Disengagement Scale the study was able to use Pearson correlation and hierarchical regression as an analysis. The results indicated that impulsivity and moral disengagement were significantly and positively related as were Dark Triad traits and moral disengagement. The strongest predictor included psychopathy, narcissism and impulsivity. The research made another important note in that the high levels of the element of impulsivity, as well as the traits included in the Dark Triad, were found to be contributing to the moral disengagement particularly in ethically stressful situations. The outcomes highlight the role of emotion management, ethical conduct and personality evaluation in training and professional growth of clinical psychologists as the means of maintaining ethical principles and enhancing therapeutic alliance.

Keyword: Clinical Psychologists, Impulsivity, Dark Triad, Moral Disengagement, Personality Traits.

Introduction

The profession of clinical psychology needs a lot of ethics, emotional maturity and professional responsibility. The professional clinical psychologists are placed in a situation of doing so in good faith and under great moral implication since they are working in complex areas of human interpersonal apartment and



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emotionally intense therapeutic situations. However, despite the assumed logical and ethical work, a clinician is a person after all and he/she is capable of psychological pathologies, as other individuals, do. In some recent research, they just cited that even some maladaptive personalities such as impulsiveness and Dark trio can change the undesired behavior in the professional domain even on such occasions as therapeutic situations (Erbacher, T. A., & Poland, (2023). It is this enhanced awareness that poses a question of concern in terms of the need to carry out empirical research on the domains through which these attributes may perhaps transpire among the clinicians as well as determine their ethical operations.

Moral disengagement, according to Bandura, goes in the form of a mental construct that people use to justify the immoral behaviours and practices by dissociating morality. This might be an issue of quality of care and trust towards the clients of clinical settings. It was discovered that such personality traits as impulsivity and Dark Triad can be found significant factors of moral disengagement. As identified by researcher Singh and Daniels (2023), the tendency of ethically unprotected therapeutic practice is to apply unethical conducts to professionals who are in need of either stress relief or having manipulative tendencies.

Impulsiveness is more widely stated as the character in which one can do something because of the impulses. It is done in a manner not considering consequences of the action (Bort & Hunt 2024). The aspect of impulsivity is also emerging as a second risk factor in clinical psychology due to its role in the control of emotions and moral behavior. Clinical psychologists must be ready to face the powerful emotions and respond to them in an adult manner, but when the level of impulsivity is high they may not remain professional and disrupt the process of communication or their behaviour may have ethical deficiencies. As Garcia et al., (2025) mentioned, self-regulation in the therapy process is essential as the practitioners must carefully reserve their steps in the sensitive and emotionally involving cases.

The Dark Triad audiences Narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy are all risk factors to ethical and interpersonal functioning in clinical psychology (Cameron & Lee, 2024; Hill-Artamonova, 2022). Maladaptive narcissism possesses the ability to ruin empathy and transfer the focus to self-image undermining therapeutic alliance (Aliyu, 2023; Khan & Khan, 2023). This philosophy of Machiavellianism promotes application of calculative power and selfish interest and this will make clinicians to have personal or organizational interest in addressing that need as opposed to meeting the need of the client. The fact that psychopathy is an emotionless and guilt-free person that may result in callousness and inappropriate professional attitude.

In combination, they create some sort of a psychological portrait where it is highly likely to commit immoral deeds and evade inner ethical standings (Kumar et al, 2025). The understanding of the interaction of different personality traits that identify moral thinking is crucial even in high-stakes job professions such as clinical psychology (Landers & Behrend, 2023). Both impulsivity and Dark Triad traits were established independently to predict unethical behavior but evidence is mounting that these two variables in fact work synergistically in predicting the moral disengagement behaviors. To use an example, an individual who is narcissistic and who is impulsive may have better opportunities to do



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something unethically and justify the action by stating that it was necessary or that he or she deserved it.

Literature Review

Singular trait-constructs of impulsivity, Dark Triad traits (narcissism, Machiavellianism, psychopath) and moral disengagement have drawn a lot of attention of the research community in fields of personality and social psychology. However, there is a lack of study about how the constructs are applied to the level of the clinical psychologists. The study will further contribute to the current literature because it will be conducted within the framework of the interaction of these variables in clinical psychologists a group of individuals that carry the burden of the great ethical responsibility in such emotionally dense environments. The relationship of impulsivity, dark triad and moral disengagement has been examined using various studies by international researchers in several occupational fields and clinical endeavors.

Making improvements in the multidimensional view of impulsivity, Whiteside and Lynam (2020) also focused on how the phenomena fall short of ethically healthy health care professionals. Due to the adverse effects that impulsivity has on coping with emotions and consequent burnout, Malik and Chen (2021) drew a conclusion that impulsivity negatively influences ethical judgment. Grajek et al., (2023) that the more impulsive therapists were, the sooner they compromised ethics in the emotionally demanding conditions when the pressure was tough.

In their study, De Zavala & A. G. (2023) established that there was a correlation whereby the psychopathic tendencies were correlated to fewer empathic behaviors and to higher 16 levels of moral disengagement amid those receiving care professionals in specific care. Cameron and Lee (2024) found out that dark triads traits to unethical conduct, in general, mediated through the process of moral disengagement, where Machiavelli sent had followed the course of diffusion of responsibility and where narcissists had visited moral justification. Parrett (2025) studied the overall impact of impulsivity and Dark Triad characteristics and suggested that the results of high impulsivity and Dark Triad traits were astonishing because all eight measures of moral disengagement mechanisms were demonstrated at a higher level by the participants. Hill-Artamonova & E. (2022) who did such a study on therapists of Asian and Latin America, discovered that the use of dark triad characteristics was applied after the irrational and unethical actions were already done using impulsive actions. The viable predictor of the unethical behavior in mental health environment that is often increased by personality traits shown by Roberts et al. 2023 is the process of moral disengagement. In the comparative study, Gomez and Li (2024) discovered that there was a joint association between impulsivity and psychopath and high rates of exposure to moral disengagement among the European psychologists and narcissism was more influential on the cultures to be individualistic.

With consideration to a psychopathic inclination among professional workers, Wood & W.D (2023) focused on ethical fading. In addition, Abdollahi & hashemi (2021) claim that the social disengagement was worse where moral prediction of clinicians was caused by Machiavellianism as compared to psychopath or narcissism in Iran. The same effects were also identified by Aliyu



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et al., in Chinese therapists. They related narcissism to arrogance and encroachment of boundaries. They, in turn, paid attention to Canadian psychologists and stated that exposure to burnout intensified the effects of Dark Triad traits (Aliyu & A. 2023). Khan and Zunaira (2023) directly focused on moral disengagement as an independent personality characteristic and declared it to mediate links between personality characteristics and unethical behavior.

Besides, Tabares et al., (2024) emphasized the combination of stress in the workplace and impulsivity led to incompetent ethical judgment. And, finally Ogunfowora (2022) discovered an even higher level of moral disengagement among psychological professionals in a more informal situation with the absence of the systematic supervision; it all depends on personalities and working conditions.

Objectives

1. To Study the link between moral disengagement and impulsivity in clinical psychologists
2. To determine the predictive validity of Dark Triad traits (narcissism, Machiavellianism and psychopathy) with regard to moral disengagement
3. To investigate the interaction between impulsivity and Dark Triad characters on the moral disengagement.

Hypotheses

1. Moral disengagement is positively related to impulsivity and the latter is considered to be a significant predictor.
2. Moral disengagement is developed positively with the traits of the Dark Triad.
3. The combination of Dark Triad traits and impulsivity is allotted to foretold increased levels of moral disengagement.

Methodology

Research Design

Correlational design was applied in the proposed research to means of addressing the relationship among variables.

Sample and Population

Clinical psychologists of Pakistan are the targeted population, working in the both government and private sectors. Purposive sampling was used with 120 participants.

Instruments

Barratt Impulsiveness Scale-11 (BIS-11): It is a 30 item questionnaire that measures impulsivity in different subdomains. Dirty Dozen Dark Triad Scale: A 12 item measure of narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy. Moral Disengagement Scale: A scale by Bandura (1996) used to gauge the cognitive reasons of acts of unethical conduct.

Procedure

After acquiring the authorization of the institutional ethical review sections and clinic management, information gathering started. The informed consent form



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will be given to participants, and it will include the purpose of the study, thinking and allowing all participants rights. The questionnaires in both paper and electronic forms will be administered and the session should last 15 to 20 minutes depending on how the participants prefer to take the questionnaires. Anonymizing all data will help to guarantee confidentiality.

Results

This chapter shows the results of the main study. The aim of this study was to investigate the relationship among impulsivity, dark triad and moral disengagement among a clinical psychologist.

Table 1: Inter-correlations among Impulsivity, Dark Triad and Moral Disengagement (N = 120)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1 Age		-.42***	.35***	.16	.00	-	.07	.07	-.15
2 Gender			-.23*	-.00	.16	.27**	-.17	.07	-.10
3 Marital status				.16	-.07	-.28**	.07	-.12	-.03
4 Impulsivity					.40***	.18	.29**	.37***	.31**
5 Mac						.61***	.46***	.86***	.43***
6 Psychopathy							.26**	.76***	.53***
7 Narcissism								.76***	.37***
8 Dark triad									.55***
9 Moral D									

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

A bivariate correlation analysis revealed several significant relationships among the study variables. Impulsivity was positively correlated with both the Dark Triad ($r = .37$, $p < .01$) and moral disengagement ($r = .31$, $p < .01$), indicating that higher levels of impulsivity are associated with more Dark Triad traits and moral disengagement. The Dark Triad also showed a strong positive relationship with moral disengagement ($r = .55$, $p < .001$), and each subscale of the Dark Triad Machiavellianism ($r = .43$, $p < .001$), psychopathy ($r = .53$, $p < .001$), and narcissism ($r = .37$, $p < .001$)—was positively correlated with moral disengagement. Regarding demographics, age had a negative correlation with psychopathy ($r = -.27$, $p < .01$), while gender had a positive correlation with psychopathy ($r = .22$, $p < .05$). Marital status was also negatively correlated with psychopathy ($r = -.28$, $p < .01$).

Table 2: Hierarchical Regression Analysis of Predictors for Moral Disengagement of Psychologists

Variables	B	95% CI		SE	B	R ²	ΔR^2
		LL	UL				
Step 1						.14	.12**
Constant	37.24*	8.38	66.10	14.57			
Age	-6.75*	-	-.26	3.28	-.20		
		13.24					
Gender	.67	-6.45	7.79	3.59	-.02		
Impulsivity	-.77***	.38	1.15	.19	.35***		



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Step 2

Constant	41.22**	13.93	68.51	13.78		.24	.22***
Age	-6.85	-	12.97	-			
		-	-	-			
Gender	-1.57	-8.38	5.23	3.44	-.04		
Impulsivity	.46*	.06	.85	.20	.21*		
Machiavellianism	2.32***	1.15	3.49	.59	.36***		
STEP III							
Constant	25.80	-.86	52.46	13.46		.34	.31***
Age	-3.22	-9.23	2.79	3.03	-.10		
Gender	-1.83	-8.21	4.56	3.22	-.05		
Impulsivity	.48*	.11	.85	.19	-.22*		
Machiavellianism	.64	-.72	2.01	.69	.10		
Psychopathy	2.73***	1.41	4.06	.67	.42***		
STEP IV							
Constant	16.69	-	43.89	13.73		.37	.34*
		10.51					
Age	-2.73	-8.63	3.17	2.98	-.08		
Gender	.34	-6.18	6.85	3.29	.01		
Impulsivity	.42	.06	.79	.19	.19*		
Machiavellianism	.00	-1.44	1.44	.73	-.00		
Psychopathy	2.73	1.44	4.03	.66	.42***		
Narcissism	1.15*	.20	2.11	.48*	.21*		

Note, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Table shows that impact of impulsivity, and dark triad (Machiavellianism, psychopathy, narcissism) on moral disengagement. In step 1, the R^2 value of .14 revealed that the impulsivity explained 14% variance on the moral disengagement with $[F(3,116) = 6.27, p < .001]$. In step 2 the R^2 value .24 revealed that impulsivity and Machiavellianism explained 24% variance on the moral disengagement of psychologists with $[F(4,115) = 9.16, p < .001]$. In the step 3 the R^2 value .34 revealed that impulsivity, Machiavellianism and psychopathy explained 34% variance on the moral disengagement of psychologists with $[F(5,114) = 11.68, p < .001]$. In the step 4 the R^2 value .37 revealed that impulsivity, Machiavellianism, psychopathy and narcissism explained 37% variance on the moral disengagement of psychologists with $[F(6,113) = 11.08, p < .001]$. The finding revealed that impulsivity ($B = .35^{***}$) positively predict moral disengagement and Machiavellianism ($.36^{***}$), psychopathy ($.42^{***}$) and narcissism ($.21^*$) positively predict the moral disengagement in clinical psychologists.

Discussion

The proposed study set out to investigate the association among impulsivity, Dark Triad of personality (Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy), and moral disengagement in licensed clinical psychologists in Pakistan. The hypothesis of the study was that (a) moral disengagement is associated positively with impulsivity and impulsivity is a strong predictor of moral disengagement, (b) moral disengagement is influenced positively by Dark Triad trait, (c) impulsivity and Dark Triad in a combination form results in notably higher moral disengagement.



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A correlational research design was applied to collect the information of a purposive sample of 120 clinical psychologists employed in both government and private sectors and with at least one year of experience background. It used the standardized self-report measures such as the Barratt Impulsiveness Scale-11, the Dirty Dozen Dark Triad Scale, and the Moral Disengagement Scale provided by Bandura. The results showed that there was a strong positive correlation between impulsivity and moral disengagement meaning that psychologists have a bigger tendency to rationalize bad behaviors by having high impulsivity scores. This was validated since the paper established a positive and significant correlation between impulsivity and moral disengagement. It turned out that psychologists whose impulsivity level is higher had higher risks to behave morally disengaged. This observation is consistent with the earlier study conducted by Rasaci & Mansouri (2020), which stated that the combination of impulsivity and dark triad traits has a positive effect on the moral disengagement level.

Moral disengagement was also positively correlated with Dark Triad styles (Machiavellianism, narcissism and psychopathy). Psychologists with higher traits of Dark Triad had stronger associations with justification of unethical actions (Cameron & Lee, 2024; Khan & Khan, 2023). This observation is valid as previous research has indicated that those who possess these characteristics tend to con people or choose to lie without much concern thus bringing in the unethical aspects within a business environment. The ethical standards of the profession are questionable due to the existence of such characteristics in clinical psychologists (Roberts et al., 2023; Singh & Daniels, 2023).

To illustrate, in the studies by Hill-Artamonova & E (2022) and Roberts (2023), it was discovered that most people high in Dark Triad characteristics tend to be rather unethical and justify their evil deeds through some of the moral disengagement processes. Narcissists, specifically, have a tendency to over-estimate their value which also leads to an unethical course of action and psychopaths generally do not have empathy which is an even greater influence of moral disengagement.

Under the third hypothesis, it was stated that impulsivity coupled with Dark Triad would contribute to increased moral disengagement. The research established that morally disengaging psychologists were impulsive and expressions of extents of Dark Triad traits (Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy) were more associated with psychologists. This observation proves that impulsivity and the characteristics of the Dark Triad interact to contribute to unethical conduct. The examples of cognitive methods that psychologists (with these traits) resort to justify their inappropriate acts include victim-blaming, moral rationalization, and displacement of responsibility.

In this research, it was concluded that Dark Triad and impulsivity were strong predictors of moral disengagement in clinical psychologists. Equally impulsive and Dark Triad psychologists possess an increased proneness to moral disengagement in order to rationalize unethical conduct. The results support earlier studies referring to the higher likelihood of people with these characteristics to perform unethical actions and exercise the moral disengagement mechanisms as a means of rationalizing their activities. The findings emphasize the relevance of training and treating impulsivity, Dark Triad traits, in ethical training and therapy among clinical psychologists in a bid to



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uphold the issue of ethics in the profession.

Although the study made valid observations, it had a number of shortcomings. The small size of the sample (N=120) can restrict the generalization of the results to the whole range of psychologists in Pakistan. Moreover, the cross-sectional design does not allow one to make conclusions regarding the causality between the researched variables.

The proposed future research ought to overcome these limitations by using more diverse and larger samples and using longitudinal research strategies. Demography factors concerning the socioeconomic background and geographic location was also proposed to be looked onto in future studies to show whether the trends observed occur in other settings.

These findings have a great implication towards the mental health profession, which has practical implications. Clinical psychologists who tend to be more impulsive and Dark Triad-related might be ethically dangerous, and they may harm their customers and damage their integrity as professionals. In the truest sense, the research lobbies the use of specific ethical training programs, which are aimed at improving self-awareness, control of impulses, and reasoning about morality. In addition to that, a therapeutic program that focuses on emotional control and personality features, i.e., cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) can also decrease the possibility of the development of moral disengagement.

Conclusion

The research is part of an increasingly large but recently emerging body of studies into psychological variables that affect moral disengagement among clinical professionals. It highlights that there is increased necessity of awareness of the role of personality aspects such as impulsivity and Dark Triad to determine ethical behavior. Through interventions and training, one can preferably reduce the risk of moral disengagement and guarantee that the clinical psychologists maintain high standards of clinical practice in terms of ethics. The research can also open avenues of further research on the effect of various personality traits on ethical behavior in other occupations and those who may be expected to do better ethically and professionally in many fields.

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