

Your Dark Side Can Motivate You to Start a Business

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Traits like Machiavellianism and psychopathy can influence a person to start a venture, above and beyond more benign factors like being extroverted or agreeable.

Which personality traits make people more likely to become entrepreneurs? Research has shown that a broad set of personality traits play a role in forming entrepreneurial intentions and outcomes. Many scholars have studied the impact of the “Big Five” model: openness, conscientiousness, extroversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism.

But this only partially explains human nature. Many humans can also have some degree of “Dark Triad” traits -- Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy – existing alongside of the Big Five, and shaping their approach to work and relationships. Research on the influence of the darker traits on people’s determination and willingness to start and manage new ventures has been inconsistent. Some studies suggest a positive impact, while others indicate a negative relationship. In our article, “[The Dark Triad’s incremental influence on entrepreneurial intentions](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00472778.2021.1883042),” (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00472778.2021.1883042>) published in the Journal of Small Business Management, we attempt to reconcile these inconsistent findings.

Our goal was to better understand how the DT traits might help explain how people develop entrepreneurial mindsets. We also considered the Theory of Planned Behavior, explained in detail below, to see how DT traits can influence an individual’s attitudes, perceived behavioral control, and understanding of what others value. A deeper understanding of all the factors that

motivate founders is important, because people with entrepreneurial mindsets can generate products and ideas that create more jobs and fuel economic growth.

Introducing the Dark Triad

DT traits are generally considered offensive but not necessarily pathological, and even nice people can have a benign dose of them. Research has explored their impact on various outcomes, indicating that they represent distinct personality traits not covered by the more commonly studied Big Five personality framework.

In our research, we predicted that each of the DT traits should predict entrepreneurial intentions beyond the personality traits in the Big Five model. Here are the characteristics of these traits.

- **Machiavellianism** involves a willingness to use unethical means for personal gains, such as status and control. Individuals who score high on Machiavellianism tend to be cunning, opportunistic, and unscrupulous. They view entrepreneurship as a way to exploit situations for personal gain, believing in the usefulness of manipulation.
- **Narcissists** exhibit grandiosity, entitlement, and possess a desire for admiration. They may engage in exploitation and exhibitionism, seeking self-enhancement. Narcissists are attracted to power, and entrepreneurship is seen as a way to demonstrate their worthiness and importance and to inflate their ego.
- **Psychopathy** at subclinical levels involves impulsivity, a lack of empathy, and a willingness to engage in antisocial behavior. Psychopaths possess a charming demeanor, are emotionally shallow, and believe that rules don’t apply to them. They are likely to pursue entrepreneurial



options to satisfy their whims without remorse.

The Entrepreneurial Mindset

The entrepreneurial mindset enables an individual to quickly perceive, take action, and mobilize resources, even in uncertain conditions. Scholars argue that individuals with a more pronounced entrepreneurial mindset often engage in entrepreneurial activities. This is important because when more people have a mindset that predisposes them to start businesses, it can lead to new jobs, technologies, products, and ideas, and overall economic growth.

Moreover, research has shown that people can have one of two mindsets: fixed and growth. Individuals with a fixed mindset see their talents and abilities as unchangeable. In contrast, those with a growth mindset believe that talents and abilities can be developed through dedication, effort, and hard work. A growth mindset is essential for entrepreneurs, who often need to adapt their thinking to recognize diverse possibilities in the world.

The entrepreneurial journey involves various qualities of the entrepreneurial mindset, including cognitive (thoughts), behavioral (actions), and emotional (feelings) aspects. Understanding these qualities helps bridge the gap between entrepreneurs' personalities, their intentions, and the creation of new ventures.

Theory of Planned Behavior

The Theory of Planned Behavior helps us understand the interplay between a person's beliefs and their personal traits. It focuses on predicting behavioral intentions, which are defined as a person's likelihood of performing a specific behavior. It can help explain how individual temperament can help shape a person's intentions, particularly when it comes to starting a business.

According to the theory, beliefs—expressed through attitudes, perceived behavioral control, and subjective norms—drive behavioral intentions and future behaviors. Individuals are likely to perform a behavior when they evaluate it positively (attitude), believe they have the ability and opportunities to act (perceived behavioral control), and believe that others will approve of the action (subjective norms).

Attitude

Individuals with selfish attitudes tend to look more

favorably on objects and actions, including future ventures and the ability to succeed. Therefore, individuals with high Dark Triad traits are likely to have a positive outlook on their capabilities, leading to more positive evaluations of their behavioral intentions related to entrepreneurship.

Perceived behavioral control

Individuals with Dark Triad traits are more confident in their ability to fulfill their desires without concern for ethics or impact on others. This confidence may lead them to perceive greater control over their behavior, resulting in more positive behavioral intentions regarding new venture creation.

Subjective norms

Individuals with Dark Triad traits are influenced by the belief that others find entrepreneurship important and valuable. This strong perceived subjective norm, coupled with social pressures and the desire for power, control, prestige, recognition, and rewards, makes those with higher DT levels more likely to have a strong interest in forming entrepreneurial intentions.

What We Studied

We collected data from employees in multiple organizations from diverse industries who had the potential to become entrepreneurs. Aware of the various limitations from previous studies, we collected data from employees and potential entrepreneurs across different industries in the United States to make our findings more widely applicable. We tasked our participants with completing web-based surveys and obtained information regarding personality traits, entrepreneurial attitude, subjective norms, perceived behavioral control, and demographics.

Two weeks later, a second survey assessed the employees' perceptions of entrepreneurial intentions. Confidentiality was maintained using secure online software, and incentives were provided to encourage participation using a random raffle for gift cards. The final sample of 345 was diverse, with 44.3% male participants, an average age of 41.39 years, and various ethnicities. We found no meaningful differences in the results based on the gender of our participants, despite other research indicating this might be an issue.

Unlike previous research that used short scales, our study employed detailed measures for the Dark Triad traits. Additionally, we accounted for the respondents'

other personality traits that affect intentions (such as openness to experience). We employed the Theory of Planned Behavior to provide a theoretical framework to explain why personality would impact intentions.

What We Found

We found that Machiavellianism and psychopathy, but not narcissism, significantly predicted entrepreneurial intentions even when accounting for variables in the Theory of Planned Behavior model and the other personality traits. This shows that certain dark personality traits are essential for understanding the entrepreneurial mindset and are influential factors in creating new ventures, above and beyond personality factors like being extroverted or agreeable.

This is noteworthy because Dark Triad traits are often associated with socially undesirable behavior, and individuals with these traits might pursue entrepreneurship for personal gain or exploitation rather than contributing positively to the economy.

Our study also highlights the positive impact of the Big Five trait “openness to experience” on entrepreneurial intentions. Therefore, we believe Big Five personality traits must be considered in models and other research examining entrepreneurial intentions.

This study diverged from previous ones in some important ways, such as using comprehensive measures, a diverse sample, and including controls for various personality traits. While we addressed discrepancies in prior studies, more research is needed, as results for narcissism were inconclusive.

The Takeaway

Practically, we concluded that individuals with high levels of Machiavellianism and psychopathy may pose risks for entrepreneurial ventures, potentially harming employees and affecting venture performance, but this is speculative. One method to avoid the possibility of this potential harm could be pre-employment testing for these traits when feasible.

However, our findings do not indicate that possessing a dark personality is a deal-breaker for successful entrepreneurship. Rather, our results imply that individuals who have greater degrees of these traits are more motivated in some ways to pursue new ventures, which might or might not lead to greater venture success. Further, while possessing a dark personality

might indicate a desire to engage in new venture creation, this does not mean that people with these traits will follow through on that desire or have what it takes to run a business. Instead, they might believe that pursuing entrepreneurship is a vehicle to express their personalities.

On the bright side, if they actually do start a business, even for selfish reasons, the outcome could be beneficial in terms of new jobs and economic growth. We believe those who teach entrepreneurship should raise awareness of the potential negative and positive consequences of dark personality traits in entrepreneurship.

Explore the Research

McLarty, B. D., Skorodziyevskiy, V., & Muldoon, J. (2023). [The Dark Triad's incremental influence on entrepreneurial intentions](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00472778.2021.1883042). *Journal of Small Business Management* (https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00472778.2021.1883042) , 61(4), 2097-2125.

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