CAN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' BELIEFS MEDIATE THE LINK BETWEEN DARK TRIAD TRAITS AND ACADEMIC DISHONESTY?

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Abstract: *This article presents the mediating role of Academic Entitlement on the relationship between the Dark Triad personality traits (e.g. psychopathy, Machiavellianism and narcissism) and students' engagement in unethical academic behaviours (e.g. plagiarism, cheating). The study included 155 students enrolled in various universities across Romania. These findings indicate that externalized responsibility was the only factor which mediate the relationship between Dark Triad traits and Academic Dishonesty.*

Key words: *dark triad, academic dishonesty, entitled expectations, externalized responsibility*

1. Introduction

Over the years, myriad of studies have explored the phenomenon of academic dishonesty. Higher education institutions, in collaboration with faculties, have sought to identify the underlying reasons for such behaviours to mitigate them and motivate students to engage in learning. The chosen topic, which investigates the relationship between academic dishonesty, dark triad personality traits and unrealistic academic expectations among students, is particularly relevant in the current educational context. The selection of this topic is driven by a desire to understand the psychological and contextual factors that promote unethical behaviour in universities.

2. Academic dishonesty

Academic dishonesty is a frequent issue faced by most universities around the world, prompting researchers in psychology to observe behaviours associated with dishonesty in educational settings. Moreover, some studies focus on solutions to reduce the incidence of students resorting to such practices to achieve their desired grades.
    Student's propensity to engage in dishonest behaviours has represented a form of

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rebellion in response to challenging subjects with a high level of competitiveness, which created discomfort for them (Parnther, 2020).

Traditional methods of academic dishonesty encompass a variety of practices, such as cheating during exams, collaborating informally outside the classroom to complete assignments, and using notes prepared for tests. Additional forms include making up excuses to obtain deadline extensions, data fabrication, impersonating another student during an exam, completing individual assignments collaboratively in peer groups, and purchasing assignments or written work from others (Witherspoon et al., 2010).

In online, cheating can occur in several ways. One common method involves students forming online study groups and using virtual messaging applications such as WhatsApp, Slack, and GroupMe to share answers to assignments. Another prevalent form of cheating is the use of artificial intelligence; students may buy subscription to artificial intelligence programs to generate complex and precise responses for online exams or assignments. This practice poses challenges for teachers, as AI-generated responses can closely resemble original student work, making detection difficult (Cantiello & Geschke, 2024).

Prior research indicates that male students are more prone to academic dishonesty than woman. This disparity can be understood through the lens of gender role socialization theory, which suggests that women are generally more inclined to comply with rules and uphold ethical standards compared to men (McCabe et al., 1997).

Zhang et al. (2017) argue that moral standards represent a significant predictor of academic dishonesty, highlighting that students with lower moral principles are more prone to engaging in cheating behaviours. Moreover, they contend that the enforcement of penalties does not effectively diminish the prevalence of academic misconduct.

3. Dark Triad

The concept of the "dark triad" was introduced in 2002 by Paulhus and Williams, who identified three distinct personality traits—narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy—that, while differing in definition, empirically share a common semantic domain. These traits are studied at a subclinical level and are unified by a central characteristic: manipulation. Later, a fourth trait, sadism, was incorporated, expanding the framework into the "dark tetrad" of personality (Stănescu & Romașcanu, 2022).

In the context of the Dark Triad, various studies have been conducted to explore whether a relationship exists between Dark Triad traits and unethical academic behaviours. For instance, Esteves and collaborators (2021) investigated the association between Machiavellianism, psychopathy, narcissism, and the tendency to engage in academic fraud.

The findings of the study revealed that Machiavellianism and narcissism are positively associated with academic dishonesty, supporting the researchers' hypothesis that such personality traits may predispose individuals to commit academic fraud. Furthermore, the study determined that Machiavellianism and narcissism serve as predictors of academic dishonesty (Esteves et al., 2021).

Curtis (2023) investigated the influence of traits from both the Dark Triad and the Light Triad on academic fraud behaviours. The study revealed a positive relationship between Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and academic dishonesty. This connection was partially explained by the students' unrealistic academic expectations.

Turnipseed and Cohen (2015) research aimed to examine whether elevated levels of Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and narcissism predict a heightened sense of unjustified academic rights.

The results indicated that externalized responsibility positively correlated with gender and psychopathy, with male students and those scoring high in psychopathy displaying exaggerated expectations of university services. Additionally, narcissism was strongly associated with unjustified entitlement expectations. Moreover, it suggested that such expectations may be learned behaviours. When students demand higher grades and faculty comply, this behaviour becomes reinforced, potentially leading to its perpetuation (Turnipseed & Cohen, 2015).

4. Academic Entitlement

Academic expectations reflect the belief that students should receive positive academic outcomes despite minimal effort or low-quality work. Theoretical perspectives suggest that individuals with high scores on the academic expectations construct are more likely to attribute negative outcomes in assignments or examinations to shortcomings on the part of instructors or the institution, rather than to their own abilities (Carollo, 2020).

Externalized responsibility reflects an individual's tendency to avoid taking accountability for their outcomes, instead attributing success, or failure to external factors rather than acknowledging their contribution. This concept aligns with an external locus of control, where individuals believe their results are determined by outside influences. In the academic context, externalized responsibility is exhibited by students who blame professors or peers for their grades (Chowning & Campbell, 2009).

Entitled expectations describe an individual's predisposition to hold unrealistic expectations of success or preferential treatment that are not commensurate with the level of effort invested in their tasks. In the academic setting, this tendency is frequently reflected in students who anticipate high grades or preferential treatment without putting forth sufficient effort to meet their academic obligations (Chowning & Campbell, 2009).

Boswell and Sohr-Peterson's (2015) research revealed a strong positive correlation between academic dishonesty and students' unjustified sense of entitlement. According to the study, individuals with high scores on unrealistic academic expectations are more likely to engage in cheating or plagiarizing assignments and coursework. Additionally, students with elevated levels in this area often undervalue the learning process while overestimating the effort they put into their tasks. This can make them feel more entitled to academic rewards, such as high grades, which they use to justify their behaviour and cultivate a mindset focused solely on achieving academic success (Boswell & Sohr-Peterson, 2015).

Curtis et al. (2022) explore whether unrealistic academic expectations act as mediators in the connection between dark triad traits and academic dishonesty. Also, they found that unrealistic expectations significantly influenced the impact of dark triad traits on dishonest academic behaviours. Furthermore, externalized responsibility mediated the link between all three dark triad traits—Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and narcissism—and breaches of academic integrity. In contrast, entitled expectations did not have a similar mediating role, indicating that students who do not view learning as their personal responsibility are more prone to engage in actions such as plagiarism, cheating, and falsifying data (Curtis et al., 2022).

5. Method
5.1. Objective and hypotheses

The objective of this correlational study is to identify the mediating role among the academic dishonesty, dark triad traits and student's unrealistic academic expectations. The hypotheses are the following:
H1: Academic dishonesty may predict students' unrealistic expectations.
H2: Dark Triad traits may predict students' unrealistic expectations.
H3: Students' academic expectations mediate the relationship between Dark Triad personality traits and academic dishonesty.

5.2. Participants and procedure

The survey involved 155 students from several faculties across Romania. The age range was 19 to 41 years (M = 21.97, SD = 3.11). 44 participants identified as male, 109 as female, and two chose not to reveal their gender. According to their level of study, 80.65 % of participants enrolled in bachelor's programs, 18.71 % in master's programs, and 0.65 % in doctoral programs. Furthermore, 32.90 % were in a science-focused program, while 67.10 % were in a humanities field.

An online Google form was used to collect data. The subsequent phase entailed distributing the questionnaire online via social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram) and private messaging groups. The invitation to complete the questionnaire succinctly described the research's goal, indicating that participation was anonymous and voluntary, with the option to leave at any time without a risk.

5.3. Measures

Three questionnaires were used to measure the variables included in this study.
Students' academic dishonesty was measured with Academic Ethic Questionnaire (Ives et al., 2017). The 18 items are measured on a five-point Likert scale, from never to strongly agree and they are grouped in two scales: Current dishonesty (13 items, α = .86) and Plagiarism (5 items, α = .73).
Dark triad was measure with the Short Dark Triad (SD3) (Jones & Paulhus, 2014). It contains 27 items that are measured on a five-point Likert scale, from strongly disagree

to strongly agree and are grouped in three scales: Narcissism (9 items, α = .70), Machiavellianism (9 items, α = .83), Psychopathy (9 items, α = .62).

Students' academic entitlement was measured with Academic Entitlement Scale (Chowning & Campbell, 2009). The questionnaire includes two dimensions: Entitled expectations (5 items, α = .63) and Externalised responsibility (10 items, α = .66). Responses are rated on a 5-point Likert scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Internal consistency is good, with a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of .75.

A factual questionnaire was used to collect data about demographic aspects (gender, age, and study field), and current academic context (grades at the end of the first semester of the actual academic year).

5.4. Data Analysis

Descriptive analysis showed that all the variables are normally distributed without signs of outliers. To test the mediating relationship among the variables of academic dishonesty, the dark triad, entitled expectations and externalized responsibility, specific steps were conducted. A Pearson correlation analysis was performed to determine if there were significant relationships among the variables included in the study. Subsequently, a simple linear regression was applied to observe the relationship between the independent variables, the dependent variable, and the mediator. To verify the mediation effect, the Sobel test was used to assess whether the relationship between the independent and dependent variables is statistically significant and mediated by the students' unrealistic academic expectations.

Table 1

Descriptive statistics

Variables	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
Current dishonesty	29.88	9.61	.52	-.15
Plagiarism	8.10	3.33	1.00	.03
Narcissism	26.14	5.59	.01	-.38
Machiavellianism	27.18	7.19	.11	-.64
Psychopathy	16.51	4.91	.35	-.47
Externalized responsibility	23.77	7.69	.60	-.03
Entitled expectations	21.10	5.59	-.10	-.43
Academic dishonesty	37.98	12.12	.68	.03
Dark Triad	69.83	13.96	-.05	-.27
Academic entitlement	44.88	11.36	.21	-.06

6. Results

Table 1 shows the values of the central tendency indicators for the scales and their subscales. It indicates that data are normally distributed.

Hypotheses testing

To establish a mediating relationship, there must be a significant and positive correlation among the variables included in the study. The correlation is statistically significant, according to the results presented in Table 2.

Correlation coefficients between variables   Table 2

Variables	1	2	3
1. Academic dishonesty	-		
2. Externalized responsibility	.42**	-	
3. Entitled expectations	.19*	.44**	-
4. Dark triad	.35*	.38**	.41**

N = 155, **p < .001, *p < .05

H1: Academic dishonesty may predict students' unrealistic expectations.

The regression model is statistically significant, with 12.4% of the variance in academic dishonesty explained by variations in Dark Triad traits (F = 21.73, p < .001). This indicates that the model is effective, supporting hypothesis 1 based on the data. Regression coefficient analysis confirms that the Dark Triad variable is a significant predictor of academic dishonesty (t = 4.66, p < .001), suggesting that students with higher levels of Dark Triad traits are more likely to engage in dishonest academic behaviour. The regression equation is academic dishonesty = 16.60 + .30 * Dark Triad (Table 3).

The regression model indicates a direct relationship between the Dark Triad variable and academic dishonesty (c = .306), as shown in Figure 1.

Table 3

Prediction of academic dishonesty by dark triad

Variables		Unstandardised Coefficients		Standardised Coefficients		
		B	*SE B*	*ß*	*t*	*p*
R²	.12					
F	21.73					
Constant		16.60	4.67		3.55	<.001
Dark triad		.30	.06	.35	4.66	<.001

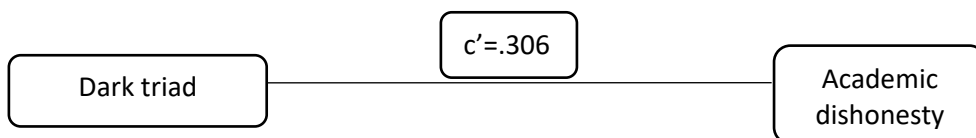Note: *Dependent variable: Academic dishonesty, **p < .01, N = 155*

Fig. 1. *The direct effect between the dark triad and academic dishonesty*

H2: Dark Triad traits may predict students' unrealistic expectations.

The regression models are statistically significant, indicating that variations in Dark Triad traits account for 15 % of the variance in externalized responsibility (F = 26.95, p < .001) and 17.3 % of the variance in academic dishonesty (F = 32.084, p < .001). These findings confirm the efficacy of the regression models and provide empirical support for hypothesis tow. The analysis of regression coefficients reveals that the Dark Triad variable is a significant predictor of both externalized responsibility (a_1 = .213, t = 5.19, p < .001) and unrealistic academic expectations (a_2 = .167, t = 5.66, p < .001). This suggests that higher levels of dark triad traits in students are associated with increased levels of externalized responsibility and unrealistic academic expectations. The corresponding regression equations for these relationships are as follows:

Externalized Responsibility = 26.951 + .21 * Dark Triad

Unrealistic Expectations = 26.03 + .16 * Dark Triad (Table 4)

Prediction of externalized responsibility by dark triad   Table 4

Variables		Unstandardised Coefficients		Standardised Coefficients		
		B	SE B	β	t	p
R^2	.15					
F	26.95**					
Constant		8.88	2.92		3.04	<.05
Dark triad		.21	.04	.38	5.19	<.001

Note: *Dependent variable: Externalized responsibility, **p < .01, N = 155*

Prediction of entitled expectations by dark triad   Table 5

Variables		Unstandardised Coefficients		Standardised Coefficients		
		B	SE B	β	t	p
R^2	.17					
F	32.04**					
Constant		9.46	2.09		4.51	<.001
Dark triad		.16	.02	.41	5.66	<.001

Note: *Dependent variable: Entitled expectations, **p < .01, N = 155*

H3: Students' academic expectations mediate the relationship between Dark Triad personality traits and academic dishonesty.

The regression model is statistically significant (F = 14.605, p < .001), indicating that the Dark Triad traits and externalized responsibility explain approximately 22.5 % of the variance in academic dishonesty among students. The effect of externalized responsibility on academic dishonesty is statistically significant, with b1 = .567, t(155) = 4.35, p < .001, and c' = .208, t(155) = 2.94, p < .05. This shows that the impact of the Dark Triad on academic dishonesty remains statistically significant even when externalized responsibility is controlled. When responsibility is viewed as external, the

chances of students participating in academically dishonest actions rise. Conversely, the impact of unrealistic expectations on academic dishonesty is not statistically significant, $b2 = -.136$, $t(155) = -.74$, $p > .05$. This can be viewed in Table 6. Thus, outsourced responsibility partially mediates the relationship between the Dark Triad and academic dishonesty. The relationship can be analysed in Figure 2

Table 6

Prediction of academic dishonesty by academic entitlement

Variables		Unstandardised Coefficients		Standardised Coefficients		
		B	SE B	β	t	p
R^2	.22					
F	14.60**					
Constant		.20	.07	.23	2.94	<.05
Dark triad		-.13	.18	-.06	-.746	>.05
Externalized responsibility		.56	.13	.36	4.35	<.001

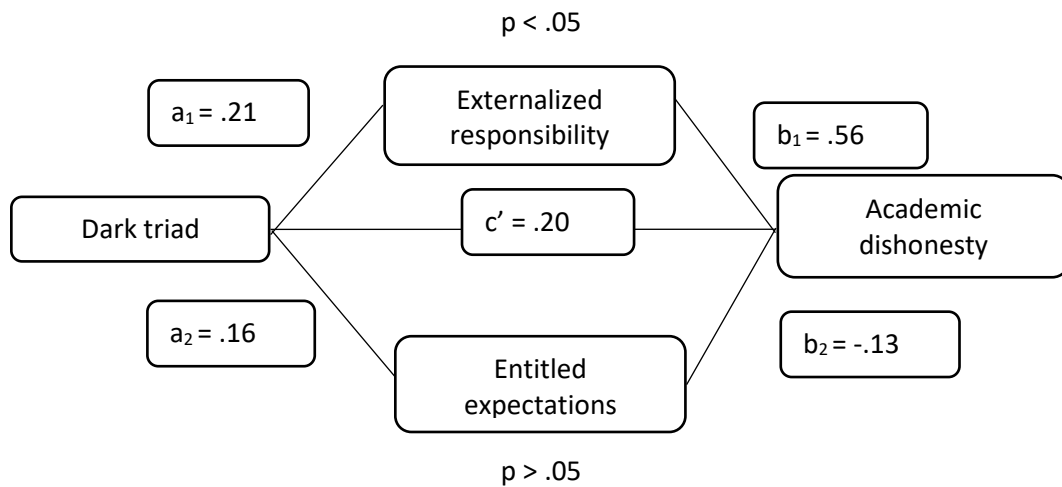Note: *Dependent variable: Academic dishonesty, **p < .01, N = 155*

Fig. 2. *The mediating effect of externalized responsibility and entitled expectations on the relationship between Dark Triad traits and academic dishonesty, presented as a statistical diagram*

7. Conclusions and Discussion

This study provides valuable insights into the relationship between personality traits, narcissism, Machiavellianism and psychopathy and students' engagement in academically dishonest behaviours, mediated by their academic expectations and belief.

The findings reveal the students exhibiting high levels of dark triad traits are more prone to cheat, particularly when they tend to externalize their responsibility for academic outcomes or hold unrealistic expectations about their educational background. This suggests that personality traits are not the only predictors of dishonesty, but their academic beliefs can enhance or mitigate this predisposition.

On the other hand, these findings underscore the importance of fostering an academic culture that encourages personal accountability, realistic expectations, and ethical behaviour. Universities have a significant role in mitigating academic cheating by implementing focused interventions that reshape students' perceptions of the learning process and reinforce the importance of personal responsibility in achieving academic success. For instance, workshops or courses emphasizing personal accountability, ethical decision-making, and realistic goal setting could help students align their academic expectations more closely with the efforts needed for authentic achievement.

Future research should build on these findings by investigating additional personality dimensions and contextual factors, such as peer influence, locus of control, and institutional policies on academic integrity.

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