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**THE ROLE OF NEGATIVE PERSONALITY TRAITS IN
DECISION-MAKING UNDER CONDITIONS OF CONFLICTING
ALTERNATIVES (ON THE EXAMPLE OF ECONOMIC AND MORAL-
ETHICAL DECISIONS)**

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Abstract

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Abstract

of the dissertation submitted for the degree of candidate of psychological sciences by Nadezhda Pavlovna Yachmeneva “The role of negative personality traits in decision-making under conditions of conflicting alternatives (using the example of economic and moral-ethical decisions)”

Modern decision-making psychology has established that when individuals face a conflict of alternatives, certain choices are preferred more frequently than others. In situations of economic risk, the preferred choice is loss avoidance, explained by the phenomenon of loss aversion, empirically demonstrated and theoretically grounded within prospect theory (Kahneman, Tversky, 1979). When individuals face a conflict between profit maximization and adherence to ethical norms, the preferred decision is ethically justified maximization grounded in the fairness heuristic, which prohibits exploiting consumer vulnerability without objective grounds (Kahneman et al., 1986). In moral dilemmas requiring a choice between utilitarian benefit and harm infliction, the most preferred alternative is refusal of the utilitarian option, especially when the harm is intentional (Cushman, 2008), requires physical contact with the victim (Greene et al., 2001), or is permitted through omission (Mikhail, 2007). The acceptability of utilitarian decisions decreases as these factors intensify (Greene et al., 2004; Greene, Haidt, 2002; Hauser et al., 2007).

Negative personality traits, due to their stable association with antisocial and exploitative behavioral patterns, may be considered relevant dispositional factors that potentially shift choices toward riskier and less ethical alternatives. Empirical data demonstrate that negative traits (narcissism, Machiavellianism, psychopathy, sadism) correlate with key factors facilitating such decisions. These include tolerance of uncertainty (Furnham, Treglown, 2021), materialistic values and an orientation toward enrichment (Pilch, Górnik-Durose, 2016). A deficit of empathy is one of the most documented characteristics of negative traits: psychopathy and sadism are associated with reduced affective empathy, while narcissism is linked to difficulties in cognitive empathy (Jonason, Krause, 2013; Urbonaviciute, Hepper,

2020; Wai, Tiliopoulos, 2012). Machiavellianism and psychopathy negatively correlate with emotional-intelligence-related abilities such as emotion recognition and regulation (Nagler et al., 2014; Petrides et al., 2011). Finally, all components of the Dark Triad/Tetrad are positively associated with moral disengagement (Egan et al., 2015; Moshagen et al., 2020; Wu et al., 2020).

These numerous significant correlations raise questions regarding the unique contribution of negative traits to predicting risky and unethical decisions. If their influence is fully mediated or overshadowed by established dispositional predictors (tolerance of uncertainty, materialism, low empathy, low emotional intelligence, moral disengagement), then it remains unclear whether negative traits possess specific, unique content capable of explaining variance in deviant choices beyond these known factors. The question remains whether negative traits retain a statistically significant incremental contribution to predicting risky economic behavior after controlling for tolerance of uncertainty, to predicting approval of unethical profit maximization after controlling for materialism, and to predicting utilitarian choices in moral dilemmas after controlling for empathy, emotional intelligence, and moral disengagement.

This dissertation is aimed at identifying and analyzing the specific, independent, and differentiated contribution of negative personality traits (the Dark Triad and Dark Tetrad) to shifting preferred decisions toward riskier and less ethical alternatives in economic and moral–ethical contexts, after accounting for other relevant dispositional predictors (tolerance of uncertainty, materialism, empathy, emotional intelligence, moral disengagement). The study also attempts to overcome limitations of previous research by expanding the gradient of decision-making domains (from economic to moral–ethical), simultaneously measuring a wide range of relevant variables, and applying hierarchical regression analysis. Economic and moral decisions are not discrete categories but form a continuum in which ethical and social components gradually intensify.

Based on theoretical analysis and a series of empirical studies, the following conclusions were drawn:

1. Under conditions of conflicting alternatives, negative personality traits serve as dispositional factors shifting decision preferences toward riskier and less ethical options. Their contribution remains statistically significant after accounting for basic personality characteristics with established predictive value for economic and moral–ethical decisions.

2. A high level of the integrative Dark Triad indicator increases the likelihood of risky economic decisions at the level of real behavior, but not at the level of hypothetical (non-behaviorally enacted) risk. The key negative trait increasing this likelihood is narcissism, which provides a significant incremental contribution beyond tolerance of uncertainty as a fundamental risk-related trait. It may be assumed that other negative traits could be activated by specific situational contexts.

3. A high level of the integrative Dark Triad indicator shifts preferred economic choices toward acceptance of unethical profit-oriented decisions. The key trait enabling individuals to overcome the fairness heuristic—which prohibits exploiting consumer vulnerability without objective grounds—is Machiavellianism.

4. Materialism as a basic personal orientation influences approval of unethical profit-maximizing decisions only under conditions of low economic status (i.e., unmet material needs). The Dark Triad, however, increases the likelihood of approving ethically unjustified profit maximization regardless of income level, and its incremental contribution remains significant after controlling for materialism.

5. The acceptability of utilitarian decisions in moral dilemmas systematically decreases as moral constraints related to intentional harm and physical contact intensify. Machiavellianism is the key trait weakening moral prohibitions across dilemmas of varying complexity.

6. The combination of high Machiavellianism and high narcissism reduces resistance to utilitarian choices involving intentional harm, and to some extent weakens barriers related to physical contact during active harm or its deliberate

allowance through inaction. However, this combination does not make psychologically difficult dilemmas as easy to resolve as situations involving unintentional harm and no physical contact.

7. The combination of high Machiavellianism and high sadism fully eliminates differences in the acceptability of utilitarian decisions in “easy” versus “difficult” moral conflicts. This indicates that sadism, especially when combined with Machiavellianism, is a powerful factor suppressing deep emotional and moral prohibitions, making even the most aversive utilitarian choices psychologically accessible.

8. The contributions of Machiavellianism, narcissism, and sadism to decision-making in moral dilemmas of varying complexity remain statistically significant after controlling for low empathy, low emotional intelligence, and high moral disengagement.

9. Psychopathy is the only negative trait that does not have an independent effect on shifting preferred decisions under conditions of conflicting alternatives. The most likely explanation is that its effects are overshadowed by the stronger and more specific effects of other negative traits.

10. Based on the empirical findings, the theoretical model of the contributions of Dark Triad/Tetrad traits to risky and unethical decision-making in economic and moral–ethical domains was refined (Figure 1). The model highlights qualitatively distinct and context-specific roles of negative traits. Narcissism serves as a “catalyst” for risky decisions, supplementing and exceeding tolerance of uncertainty. Machiavellianism acts as a “universal solvent” of moral–ethical barriers—from the fairness heuristic in economic decisions to deep moral taboos in moral dilemmas of varying difficulty. Sadism functions as an “eliminator of moral distinctions,” representing the strongest factor suppressing emotional and moral prohibitions, capable—when combined with Machiavellianism—of fully eliminating psychological differences between easy and difficult moral conflicts. Psychopathy functions as a “latent trait,” lacking independent effects because its

influence is overshadowed by more specific and stronger effects of other Dark Tetrad traits.

Figure 1. Theoretical model of the specific and differentiated incremental contributions of negative personality traits to choosing risky and unethical alternatives in economic and moral–ethical decision-making

