





ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Am I wrong? I'm never wrong: the relationship between Dark Triad, child-parent conflict, parental burnout, and perceived social support in a sample of Japanese parents

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BACKGROUND

The Dark Triad of personality has been related to various negative social outcomes, including challenges in interpersonal situations, such as conflicts within the family and parenting dynamics. The present study aimed to explore the relationship between dark personality traits, child-parent relationships, and parental burnout, while considering the potential moderating effect of perceived social support.

PARTICIPANTS AND PROCEDURE

A sample of 277 Japanese parents (49.5% men, 50.5% women), aged 20 to 39 years ($M = 31.13$, $SD = 4.9$), with children between 1 and 5 years old (toddlers or preschoolers), completed an online survey. Dark Triad traits were assessed using the Japanese version of the Dark Triad Dirty Dozen, perceived social support with the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support, parental burnout with the Parental Burnout Assessment, and child-parent conflict and closeness using the Child-Parent Relationship Scale.

RESULTS

The results showed that higher levels of dark personality traits were associated with greater conflict in the child-parent relationship as well as higher levels of parental burnout. Interestingly, for parents high in Dark Triad traits, greater perceived social support was associated with higher levels of child-parent conflict.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings highlight the complexity of social support in the context of dark personalities, as it may fail to mitigate the harmful effects of conflictual family relationships.

KEY WORDS

Dark Triad; Japanese; burnout; parenting; perceived social support

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BACKGROUND

Parenting can be deeply rewarding but also highly demanding, with considerable challenges, frustration, and stress (Oyarzún-Farías et al., 2021). However, when parents do not have sufficient personal, relational, or social resources to manage these demands, they may experience parental burnout (Mikolajczak et al., 2019). Parental burnout is a context-specific syndrome characterized by overwhelming exhaustion, emotional distancing from one's children, and a sense of ineffectiveness in the parental role (Roskam et al., 2018). Research indicates that the global prevalence of parental burnout ranges from 5% to 9% (Roskam et al., 2021).

According to the Balance between Risks and Resources theory (BR²), parental burnout occurs when the demands of parenting outweigh the resources available to parents (Mikolajczak & Roskam, 2018). In this framework, risk factors such as conflict-prone personality traits, ineffective parenting, weak co-parenting, or limited social networks increase parental stress, whereas resources like emotional intelligence, supportive parent-child bonds, positive co-parenting, and reliable social support help buffer it (Mikolajczak et al., 2019). Thus, the interplay between these risks and resources depends on a range of personal, relational, and contextual factors, with evidence consistently showing their association with burnout risk (Le Vigouroux & Scola, 2018; Ren et al., 2024; Zhuo et al., 2022).

Building on this framework, certain personality traits may disrupt the balance between parenting demands and resources, thereby increasing parental stress and burnout (Grover & Furnham, 2021; Lyons et al., 2019). The Dark Triad (DT) is a constellation of socially aversive personality traits that share a common core of callousness, manipulateness, and low empathy (Paulhus & Williams, 2002), and generally correlates with low levels of conscientiousness and agreeableness. Specifically, it consists of three distinct traits: Machiavellianism, involving manipulation and cynicism; psychopathy, marked by callousness and impulsivity; and narcissism, defined by vanity and self-centeredness (Jonason et al., 2015). Furthermore, these traits are often associated with conflict, poor parenting practices (Rantanen et al., 2015), detrimental parental behaviors, and low-quality care (Geher et al., 2020; Jonason et al., 2014).

In addition to individual factors, the quality of the relationship between parents and their children represents a crucial interpersonal factor that can influence parents' experience of burnout. The child-parent (CP) relationship encompasses emotional, communicative, and interactive elements (Cao & Liu, 2023) and is often considered one of the most challenging aspects of family life (Abar et al., 2014). Specifically, this relationship is conceptualized along two dimen-

sions: conflict, which involves discordant interactions and a sense of instability; and closeness, which is characterized by warmth, affection, and open communication (Driscoll & Pianta, 2011). At the contextual level, perceived social support (PSS), defined as an individual's sense of care and reliable assistance from others (Taylor, 2011), is an important resource that influences parents' risk of burnout. Higher PSS often acts as a protective factor, whereas limited support may increase parental stress and conflict (Robinson & Weiss, 2020).

CURRENT STUDY AND HYPOTHESES

Relative to conflictual CP relationships and parental burnout, limited research has explored how social support is perceived by parents with high DT traits. Studies have shown that individuals high in Dark Triad traits tend to prefer self-reliance, agentic behavior, and superficial social interactions, often viewing social support as a threat to their independence (Aldousari & Ickes, 2021; Jonason & Fletcher, 2018; Schade et al., 2021). However, these studies focus on general social contexts rather than parenting situations. Furthermore, to the best of our knowledge, no research has examined this phenomenon within the context of Japanese society. For these reasons, the current study aimed to examine the relationship between dark personality traits, CP relationships, and parental burnout, while exploring the role of PSS in parenting situations.

Accordingly, it is hypothesized that DT traits are positively related to CP conflict (H1), that CP conflict is positively related to parental burnout (H2), and that PSS is negatively related to both CP conflict and parental burnout (H3). Additionally, PSS moderates the relationship between DT traits and CP conflict (H4).

PARTICIPANTS AND PROCEDURE

PARTICIPANTS

A convenience sample of 350 Japanese parents was recruited nationwide across Japan via an online survey panel (iBridge Co., Ltd.). Out of the total respondents, 73 participants were excluded because the age of their children did not fall within the specified target range for this research. The final sample comprised 277 Japanese individuals (49.5% men, 50.5% women), ranging in age from 20 to 39 years ($M = 31.13$, $SD = 4.9$), and having toddlers or preschoolers aged between 1 and 5 years. No specific attention checks, response-time filters, or other automated data quality controls were implemented.

Because parenting demands at this stage are known burnout risks and child-parent dynamics

form in these years, this age range was chosen to ensure a more homogeneous sample and strengthen internal validity. Among the participants, 91.7% were married, 97.5% were employed, and 71.1% reported a yearly income ranging from three to eight million Japanese yen. This income range surrounds the national average annual salary for private sector employees (4.58 million yen in 2022), suggesting that the sample is broadly representative of Japan's middle-class working population in terms of income level (National Tax Agency, 2022).

Before participating, all participants received a digital written consent form detailing the study's purpose, measures to ensure anonymity and confidentiality, their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty, and assurances that participation would not result in any harm. Participants provided explicit agreement prior to their involvement in the study.

MATERIALS

Dark Triad. Dark personality traits were assessed using the Japanese version of the Dark Triad Dirty Dozen (DTDD-J; Tamura et al., 2015). This scale assesses Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and narcissism through 12 items answered on a five-point Likert scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*). Cronbach's α values were .83 for Machiavellianism, .60 for psychopathy, .73 for narcissism, and .91 for the total scale.

Perceived social support. Perceived social support was measured through the Japanese version of the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS; Iwasa et al., 2007). Twelve items were rated by participants on a seven-point Likert scale from 1 (*very strongly disagree*) to 7 (*very strongly agree*). The scale comprises three factors: Significant Others, Friends, and Family, in addition to providing an overall total score. Cronbach's α values ranged from .83 to .89 for the subscales and α was .92 for the total scale.

Parental burnout. Parental burnout was assessed using the Japanese version of the Parental Burnout Assessment (PBA-J; Furutani et al., 2020). This scale features 23 items answered on a 7-point Likert scale (0 – *never*; 6 – *daily*) to assess parental burnout through four subscales: exhaustion in one's parental role, comparison with the previous parental self, exploration of feelings of being fed up with being a parent, and evaluation of emotional distancing from one's children. In the present study, reliability coefficients varied from .88 to .95.

Child-parent relationship. The relationship between parents and their children was assessed using the Japanese version of the Child-Parent Relationship Scale (CPRS; Kibe, 2016), which examines the perceptions of parents regarding the relationships with their children. Participants responded to 15 items that assess the child-parent relationship through two

factors: closeness and conflict. Cronbach's α values were .83 and .86, respectively.

DATA ANALYSIS

All statistical analyses were performed using the open-source software RStudio (version 2022.12.0, R base version 4.2.2). Pearson correlations were employed to examine the relationships between variables, while descriptive statistics were used to provide a comprehensive overview of the data. A moderated mediation analysis was conducted with the PROCESS macro, Model 59 (Hayes, 2017). Variables were mean-centered prior to the analysis, and parent age and gender were included as covariates in all models. Variance inflation factors ranged from 1.01 to 1.67, indicating no problematic multicollinearity (Kim, 2019). Bias-corrected bootstrapping procedures with 5000 samples were used for estimating conditional indirect effects (Edwards & Lambert, 2007). First, using the DT total score as the independent variable (see Supplementary materials: Figure S1), we examined the mediating role of CP conflict in parental burnout, along with the moderated effect of PSS in all paths. The same model was then applied separately with each DT trait as the independent variable.

RESULTS

DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS AND CORRELATION ANALYSES

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics and correlation coefficients among dark personality traits, CP relationship, PSS, parental burnout, age, and gender. DT showed positive correlations with CP conflict and parental burnout, whereas no statistically significant correlation was found with PSS or CP closeness. Conflict was positively correlated with parental burnout but also showed a positive, albeit weak, correlation with closeness. PSS was positively correlated with closeness and negatively correlated with conflict and parental burnout.

MODERATED MEDIATION ANALYSIS

A moderated mediation analysis was constructed to test whether the relationships between DT traits, CP conflict, and parental burnout varied with parents' perceived social support (Tables 2 and 3). With CP conflict as the dependent variable, R^2 values ranged from .23 to .32. Significant direct effects were found for Machiavellianism ($\beta = .35$, $SE = .06$, $p < .001$), psychopathy ($\beta = .40$, $SE = .06$, $p < .001$), narcissism ($\beta = .43$, $SE = .06$, $p < .01$), and the DT total score

Table 1

Means, standard deviations, and correlations between the Dark Triad, perceived social support, parental burnout, and child-parent relationship

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Dark Triad Total	8.37	2.25							
2. Machiavellianism	2.74	0.95	.88**						
3. Psychopathy	2.83	0.76	.78**	.58**					
4. Narcissism	2.79	0.96	.85**	.62**	.46**				
5. Perceived social support	14.42	3.36	.02	.00	-.05	.08			
6. Child-parent conflict	2.76	0.87	.54**	.44**	.46**	.46**	-.12*		
7. Child-parent closeness	3.59	0.77	.01	.01	.00	.00	.45**	.13*	
8. Parental burnout	11.10	6.50	.49**	.40**	.43**	.41**	-.19**	.65**	.02

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

($\beta = .49$, $SE = .05$, $p < .001$) on CP conflict, indicating moderate positive associations whereby higher levels of DT traits corresponded to greater conflict. Furthermore, PSS showed a direct effect on CP conflict in relation to the DT total score ($\beta = -.12$, $SE = .05$, $p < .001$), Machiavellianism ($\beta = -.11$, $SE = .06$, $p < .001$), and narcissism ($\beta = -.15$, $SE = .05$, $p < .001$), although no significant effect was observed for psychopathy. Additionally, PSS moderated the relationship between the DT total score ($\beta = .10$, $SE = .05$, $p < .001$), Machiavellianism ($\beta = .11$, $SE = .05$, $p < .001$), psychopathy ($\beta = .15$, $SE = .04$, $p < .001$), narcissism ($\beta = .13$, $SE = .05$, $p < .001$), and CP conflict (see Supplementary materials: Figure S2).

Across each model, PSS consistently exhibited negative effects on CP conflict (β s = $-.12$ to $-.14$, $p < .001$), indicating a small yet significant protective effect, while CP conflict consistently showed strong positive effects on parental burnout (β s = $.53$ – $.57$, $p < .001$). Furthermore, although PSS did not moderate the effects of DT or CP conflict on parental burnout, significant direct effects were observed for the total DT score ($\beta = .22$, $SE = .06$, $p < .001$), Machiavellianism ($\beta = .15$, $SE = .05$, $p < .001$), psychopathy ($\beta = .17$, $SE = .05$, $p < .001$), and narcissism ($\beta = .17$, $SE = .05$, $p < .001$). These results point to small-to-moderate associations between DT traits and burnout, with R^2 values ranging from .46 to .47.

DISCUSSION

The present study aimed to explore the relationships between dark personality traits, child-parent interactions, and parental burnout. In particular, we focused on identifying the role of perceived social support in moderating these relationships, including its potential to influence child-parent conflict and parental burnout.

Consistent with previous research, higher DT levels are associated with greater CP conflict and burnout (Ferencz et al., 2023; Le Vigouroux & Scola, 2018; Tajmiriyahi et al., 2021). In line with Zhuo et al. (2022), CP conflict emerged as a relevant factor in parental burnout. Interestingly, conflict and closeness may coexist in CP relationships (Kibe, 2016), which may reflect an Asian parenting style that combines discipline and control with warmth and affection to foster children's independence and success (Chan, 2009; Kusumoto, 2019). Overall, the findings supported H1 and H2. In addition, H3 was supported at the main-effect level but qualified by moderation effects. In line with H4, perceived social support significantly moderated the relationship between dark personality traits and CP conflict. However, the direction of this interaction revealed a more complex dynamic than initially hypothesized.

In our moderated mediation model, DT predicted higher levels of conflict, likely due to their shared core of disagreeableness (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). As agreeableness serves as a moderator of interpersonal behavior, characterized by compassion, trust, and prioritizing others' needs (Graziano & Tobin, 2009), the absence of these qualities in individuals with high DT may therefore increase conflict. In addition, BR² theory suggests that PSS from a partner or external sources is related to lower levels of burnout (Mikolajczak & Roskam, 2018), which aligns with the direct effects found in this study, supporting the view that PSS buffers the challenges of parenting (Robinson & Weiss, 2020) by providing emotional and practical assistance to manage role demands more effectively.

We also found that individuals high in DT showed higher burnout levels. Certain personality traits can increase burnout risk; for example, low conscientiousness and agreeableness are known risk factors under the Big Five model (Le Vigouroux et al., 2017) and are common in Dark Triad traits. As a result,

Table 2

Moderated mediation models (n = 277)

Variables	Child-parent conflict				Parental burnout			
	β	SE	t	95% CI	β	SE	t	95% CI
Dark Triad total score	.49	.05	9.13	[0.39, 0.59]	.22	.06	4.00	[0.11, 0.33]
PSS	-.12	.05	-2.39	[-0.22, -0.02]	-.14	.05	-3.02	[-0.23, -0.05]
Dark Triad total score × PSS	.10	.04	2.46	[0.02, 0.19]	-.03	.04	-0.87	[-0.11, 0.04]
CPC					.53	.05	9.75	[0.42, 0.63]
CPC × PSS					.01	.04	0.26	[-0.07, 0.09]
R ²	.32				.47			
F	43.62				48.53			
Machiavellianism	.35	.06	6.86	[-0.11, 0.10]	.15	.05	2.78	[0.04, 0.25]
PSS	-.11	.05	-2.13	[-0.22, -0.01]	-.13	.05	-2.81	[-0.22, -0.04]
Machiavellianism × PSS	.11	.05	2.31	[0.02, 0.21]	-.02	.04	-0.53	[-0.11, 0.06]
CPC					.57	.05	11.01	[0.47, 0.68]
CPC × PSS					.02	.04	0.55	[-0.06, 0.10]
R ²	.23				.47			
F	26.73				45.60			
Psychopathy	.40	.06	7.29	[0.29, 0.51]	.17	.05	3.21	[0.07, 0.27]
PSS	-.08	.05	-1.44	[-0.18, 0.03]	-.12	.05	-2.59	[-0.21, -0.03]
Psychopathy × PSS	.15	.04	3.60	[0.07, 0.23]	-.02	.04	-0.50	[-0.03, 0.06]
CPC					.57	.05	10.87	[0.46, 0.67]
CPC × PSS					.00	.04	0.19	[-0.07, 0.09]
R ²	.26				.46			
F	31.45				46.51			
Narcissism	.43	.06	7.74	[0.32, 0.54]	.17	.05	3.33	[0.07, 0.28]
PSS	-.15	.05	-2.88	[-0.25, -0.05]	-.14	.05	-3.14	[-0.24, -0.05]
Narcissism × PSS	.13	.05	2.54	[0.03, 0.22]	-.03	.04	-0.76	[-0.12, 0.05]
CPC					.56	.05	10.57	[0.45, 0.66]
CPC × PSS					.03	.04	0.69	[-0.05, 0.11]
R ²	.25				.46			
F	30.83				46.79			

Note. PSS – perceived social support; CPC – child-parent conflict. Regression coefficients presented in bold are statistically significant at $p < .05$. Exact p -values are reported in the text. All regression models controlled for age and gender.

high DT parents may struggle to create a supportive environment and to respond empathically to their children’s needs. This is consistent with research showing that parental violence and neglect predict parental burnout (Swit & Breen, 2023), likely because such behaviors further disrupt the balance of risks and resources required for effective parenting. However, when examining the moderating role of PSS, we found that it only affected the relationships between

dark personality traits and CP conflict. A key insight from this study is that parents high in DT traits who reported higher PSS experienced more CP conflict. Although this may seem contrary to the buffering role of social support, it suggests that for some, PSS may add pressure and stress rather than reduce relational conflict.

For instance, parents high in DT traits may prefer a self-driven approach to parenting, as they often

Table 3

Conditional indirect effects of Dark Triad on parental burnout through child-parent conflict at levels of perceived social support (n = 277)

	Perceived social support	Effect	SE	95% CI
Dark Triad total	-1	0.201	0.103	[0.090, 0.461]
	0	0.260	0.055	[0.179, 0.391]
	1	0.321	0.057	[0.208, 0.425]
Machiavellianism	-1	0.154	0.088	[0.042, 0.373]
	0	0.226	0.049	[0.147, 0.338]
	1	0.302	0.060	[0.183, 0.421]
Psychopathy	-1	0.139	0.082	[0.036, 0.345]
	0	0.226	0.048	[0.149, 0.335]
	1	0.315	0.058	[0.195, 0.423]
Narcissism	-1	0.160	0.078	[0.055, 0.349]
	0	0.238	0.046	[0.162, 0.340]
	1	0.323	0.062	[0.200, 0.442]

Note. 5000 bootstrap samples. SE and 95% bias-corrected bootstrap confidence interval. Perceived social support values are the mean and \pm SD from the mean.

seek control and influence (Aldousari & Ickes, 2021). Because DT traits are related to agentic behavior and an independent self-view (Jonason & Fletcher, 2018; Jonason et al., 2017), support from others may conflict with this need, adding stress and conflict. They also tend to pursue hedonistic and status motives, so accepting support may feel like admitting weakness, which can increase tension (Jonason et al., 2018).

Our results showed that PSS did not moderate the effects of DT or CP conflict on parental burnout. One possible reason is that parents of younger children often experience high levels of parenting stress related to daily caregiving demands and child behavioral challenges (Kwon et al., 2022). Fatigue and disrupted sleep are common at this parenting stage and are associated with higher stress levels, which may limit parents' ability to benefit from emotional support (Cooklin et al., 2011). Additionally, they have a tendency towards other-oriented perfectionism (Stoerber, 2014) and a dichotomous thinking style (Jonason et al., 2018; Oshio, 2009), leading to unrealistic expectations of themselves as parents, as they want to be seen by others in a positive way. Together, this suggests that for parents of very young children, PSS alone may be insufficient to buffer the intense and persistent demands of parenting. When these parents fail to meet their unrealistic expectations, they may experience frustration and stress, further increasing conflict and burnout.

Another perspective is that individuals high in DT tend to form shallow relationships, prioritizing self-interest over genuine bonds. For instance, Ma-

chiavellians often deceive, manipulate, and detach emotionally, thereby viewing family life as rigid and instrumental (Láng & Birkás, 2014). In addition, they employ flexible moral tactics to achieve their goals and may influence others' values, reinforcing manipulative dynamics that heighten conflict (Jones, 2020). Psychopaths, in contrast, are impulsive and disregard others' perspectives, and because they often react aggressively when provoked (Jones & Paulhus, 2010), those around them may comply to avoid confrontation. Furthermore, their emotional impairments (Burghart & Mier, 2022) reduce their reliance on social support, as they objectify others as tools rather than partners (Lachowicz-Tabaczek et al., 2025). Lastly, narcissists are overconfident, self-centered, and dismissive of others' input (Lubit, 2002), so offers of help may be perceived as status-threatening or critical, thereby intensifying conflict. Notably, attempts to provide visible, direct support may produce negative effects on recipients (Zee & Bolger, 2019), particularly when such help is perceived as intrusive, critical, or autonomy-threatening.

The current study is not without limitations. First, while self-report measures of personality traits are often influenced by social desirability (Pedregon et al., 2012), individuals high in Dark Triad traits may further distort their responses (Walker & MacCann, 2024). In addition, the relatively low internal consistency of the psychopathy subscale may have attenuated some associations and should be considered when interpreting trait-specific effects. Second, this study was conducted only with Japanese parents, so

future research may benefit from replicating our results with different samples. Third, while our study focused on parents with toddlers or preschoolers, we did not consider the potential role of having more than one child on the parenting process. Since having multiple children may be associated with differences in parental behavior (Zhuo et al., 2022), future studies should explore how siblings affect parenting dynamics in the context of dark personalities. Additionally, we only focused on the parents' perspective of their perceived relationship and personalities. Lastly, it is important to understand how children perceive this relationship, as parental burnout and CP conflicts often co-occur, with higher levels of burnout being associated with greater conflict in the CP relationship.

In summary, our findings suggest that parents with dark personalities are more likely to experience conflictual relationships with their children, which in turn contributes to higher levels of parental burnout. However, the present study underscores the complexity of social support when dark personalities are involved, as it may not always buffer against the negative effects of parenting and, in some cases, might even increase conflict.

Supplementary materials are available on the journal's website.

DISCLOSURES

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