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COMMENTARY

"Dark," but Useful: Why the Term Still Matters—Commentary on Chester et al. (2025)

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Chester et al. (2025) raised objections to the use of the term "dark" for describing antagonistic traits, such as narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy. Their central claim is that "dark" is stigmatizing, sensationalistic, imprecise, and potentially problematic. While their concerns merit careful consideration, it is notable that the authors provide no scientific evidence to substantiate them. Here, we defend the continued use of this terminology while providing bibliometric evidence demonstrating that the term "dark" has facilitated interdisciplinary scientific progress and helped consolidate a rapidly growing field of research.

Scientific Progress and Conceptual Integration

Since its introduction by Paulhus and Williams (2002), the "Dark Triad" has catalyzed a burgeoning literature that connects narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy under a common conceptual structure. The rapid expansion of this field—later extended to the "Dark Tetrad" with sadism (Buckels et al., 2013)—demonstrates the heuristic value of the terminology. Far from being merely sensational, the "dark" label has functioned as a useful shorthand that has brought together diverse strands of research under a recognizable umbrella. This integration has promoted cumulative knowledge-building and inspired theoretical refinements, such as the proposal of a unified "exploitative"

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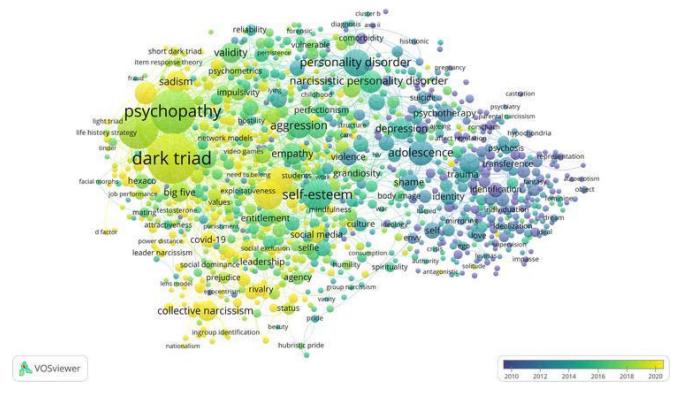
social style" or "dark core" of personality (Jonason et al., 2009; Moshagen et al., 2018). Without such a unifying term, research on these traits might have remained fragmented across subfields, hindering theoretical coherence and limiting cumulative progress.

Bibliometric analyses further demonstrate that the term "dark" itself has been central to the advancement of personality psychology. As shown in Figure 1, the term "dark triad" emerges as a prominent hub directly connected to psychometric tools, evolutionary perspectives, clinical insights, and applied domains such as leadership, social dominance, and job performance (Dinić et al., 2025). Its sustained prominence in recent years (2015–2020) indicates that the term continues to unify diverse research traditions and stimulate cumulative scientific knowledge (see also Dinić & Jevremov, 2021).

This integrative role is reinforced by longitudinal frequency analyses (see Figure 2), which show that the cumulative use of the term has increased steeply since 2010, surpassing not only individual traits (i.e., narcissism, Machiavellianism, psychopathy) but also alternative frameworks such as the HEXACO or the Big Five (Pawar et al., 2024). The trajectory of this growth illustrates that the scientific community has actively adopted the label, using it as a shared framework that organizes research across disciplines such as clinical psychology, evolutionary theory, and social science (e.g., Borráz-León et al., 2025; Dinić et al., 2025; Jonason et al., 2010, 2020).

Taken together, these bibliometric findings provide empirical support for our claim that it is not merely the construct, but the terminology itself, that has catalyzed theoretical integration, methodological innovation, and applied insights. We acknowledge that, despite the rise in work under this title, it remains possible that these effects are partly due to the way the constructs have been organized rather than the label alone. Nevertheless, the consistent adoption of the term "dark" across diverse subfields suggests that its heuristic value extends beyond mere organization, fostering a shared conceptual framework that has unified research efforts and driven cumulative progress (Dinić et al., 2025; Pawar et al., 2024). This unifying role is particularly evident when addressing concerns about the term's precision. While Chester et al. (2025) highlight the term "dark" as imprecise because of its multiple meanings, its consistent use within personality research, as shown in bibliometric networks (Dinić & Jevremov, 2021; Dinić et al., 2025), suggests a shared

Figure 1
Temporal Co-Occurrence Networks Map Showing That the "Dark Triad" Node Appears Large, Highly Connected, and Colored in Yellow-Green (the Central-To-Left Part of the Map), Indicating a Term With High Frequency and Sustained Relevance in Personality Psychology



Note. From "Perspective Chapter: Trends in Research of Narcissism—A Bibliometric Analysis," in A. Wertag and B. M. Dinić (Eds.), Psychology of Narcissism—Theory, Research Trends, Interpersonal Relations and Digital Impact, 2025, IntechOpen (https://doi.org/10.5772/intechopen.1011491). CC BY 4.0. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

scientific understanding that mitigates ambiguity when applied with conceptual consistency. Abandoning this label would risk fragmenting a field that has achieved rapid and cumulative progress under its unifying influence.

From Sensationalism to Scientific Utility

Chester et al. (2025) caution that "dark" is sensationalistic and risks delegitimizing the study of antagonistic traits. We acknowledge that the term carries rhetorical power, but this feature can be seen as a strength rather than a flaw. Its accessibility has helped consolidate research on antagonistic traits and fostered interdisciplinary dialogue within psychology (see Figure 1). Terms that resonate widely often catalyze scientific discourse; the challenge is not to discard them, but to apply them responsibly.

For "dark," this means avoiding moralizing or trivializing connotations and instead using it as descriptive shorthand for socially aversive traits. Concerns about potential misinterpretations, including morally or culturally sensitive associations, are valid, but these risks can be mitigated through careful contextualization. Concerns about "dark" fostering problematic associations, such as racial stereotypes, are noted by Chester et al. (2025); however, cross-cultural studies (e.g., Aluja et al., 2022; Jonason et al., 2020) demonstrate its neutral adoption, reducing such risks when contextualized

appropriately. What matters is ensuring that its scientific meaning remains distinct from everyday moral or cultural uses.

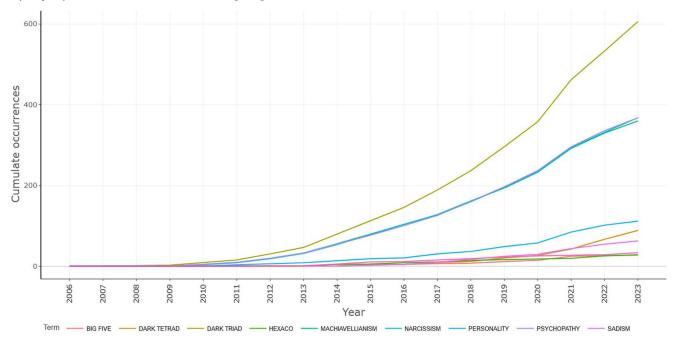
Psychology has long relied on metaphorical constructs that gained wide acceptance not because of their literal accuracy, but because of their heuristic value. For example, the "Big Five" does not imply a literal taxonomy of five fixed entities, let alone ones that are large in size, yet these terms have shaped theory, guided measurement, and fostered progress in psychology research. In the same way, the value of "dark" lies in its capacity to integrate diverse research topics under a common framework. With consistent and thoughtful application, its benefits can be preserved while minimizing the risks of misinterpretation.

Conclusion

Language matters. Researchers should remain attentive to the implications of the words they choose, striving for precision, neutrality, and integrity. However, the wholesale abandonment of the term "dark" risks discarding a unifying and generative framework that has spurred major advances in personality psychology and related fields. Rather than abandoning the term, we advocate for its responsible use, avoiding moralistic connotations and employing it consistently as a scientific descriptor of socially aversive traits. In doing so, we not only preserve but amplify the heuristic

Figure 2

Annual Growth in Publications Using Term "Dark Triad" in Comparison to Individual Traits (i.e., Narcissism, Machiavellianism, and Psychopathy) and Other Related Constructs (e.g., Big Five and HEXACO)



Note. From "Bibliometric Dataset (2002–2024) on Dark Triad, Dark Tetrad and Dark Personalities," by V. Pawar, P. Chavan, M. Paliwal, A. Vhatkar, and P. Petare, 2024, Mendeley Data, VI (https://doi.org/10.17632/zc5j2zhtk9.1). CC BY 4.0. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

power and integrative potential that have cemented "dark" as an indispensable cornerstone of personality science, propelling ongoing discoveries that illuminate our collective understanding of antagonistic traits.

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