



The Dark Triad and break-up distress

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ABSTRACT

The Dark Triad traits of narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism have previously been associated with short-term relationship styles and low relationship commitment. Relationship commitment, in turn, has been identified as a reliable predictor of distress following romantic relationship dissolution. It was thus hypothesized that high levels of Dark Triad traits would predict lower break-up distress. Results showed, however, that Machiavellianism and psychopathy showed positive zero-order correlations with break-up distress, and narcissism showed no association with break-up distress. A subsequent pre-registered replication supported these unexpected findings. Implications for future research on the Dark Triad and relationship dissolution are discussed.

1. Introduction

In the context of romantic relationships, individuals' personality characteristics predict the type of relationships they prefer and how they conduct themselves both during the relationship and after it ends (e.g. Jones & Paulhus, 2010). One subset of personality traits that has been particularly useful in differentially predicting relationship behaviour is the Dark Triad (Jonason & Kavanagh, 2010; Jonason, Luevano, & Adams, 2012; Jones & Paulhus, 2010). The Dark Triad of personality is a set of three, subclinical, anti-social personality traits that are thought to fall beyond the traditional Five-Factor Model (Jones & Paulhus, 2014; Veselka, Schermer, & Vernon, 2012). These traits include psychopathy, characterized by individuals who are impersonal, cold, and lacking in empathy; narcissism, referring to an inflated sense of self-importance; and Machiavellianism, characterized by individuals who are controlling, manipulative, and self-serving (Jones & Paulhus, 2014; Paulhus & Williams, 2002).

The Dark Triad traits have previously been linked with relationship variables such as commitment (e.g. Jonason et al., 2012) and the use of pragmatic or game-playing love styles (Jonason & Kavanagh, 2010). However, no research to date has examined how the Dark Triad might predict reactions following the dissolution of a romantic relationship. Given that previous research has found that individuals scoring higher on the Dark Triad traits report lower levels of commitment, and that lower levels of commitment are associated with less distress following a relationship break-up (Sprecher, Felmlee, Metts, Fehr, & Vanni, 1998), it may be hypothesized that individuals who score highly on Dark Triad traits will also experience less break-up distress. However, the results of

the current study are not consistent with this expectation and may call our understanding of the Dark Triad and relationships into question. Relevant literature is considered prior to discussing the current studies in detail.

1.1. The Dark Triad, the Investment Model, and break-up distress

The Investment Model employs interdependence constructs to predict the tendency to persist in a relationship (Kelley, 1979; Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). One key feature of this model is commitment, which reflects an individual's intent to remain in his or her current relationship, a long-term orientation toward the relationship, and an emotional bond to the relationship and his or her partner (Agnew, van Lange, Rusbult, & Langston, 1998; Le & Agnew, 2003; Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998). The model posits that relationship commitment is influenced by the indices of relationship satisfaction, level of investment in the relationship, and quality of available alternatives. Commitment, in turn, has been shown to be one of the strongest predictors of relationship duration (Drigotas & Rusbult, 1992).

Moreover, commitment has been identified as the strongest single predictor of distress following the dissolution of a romantic relationship (Sprecher et al., 1998). This experience, termed break-up distress, encompasses feelings of stress, guilt, anxiety, anger, sorrow, depression, and any other negative emotional responses to the end of a relationship (Field, Diego, Pelaez, Deeds, & Delgado, 2009; Sprecher et al., 1998). Those who are highly committed to their relationship partners tend to feel higher levels of break-up distress.

In addition, investment has also been shown to be an important

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predictor of distress following romantic relationship dissolution (Le, Dove, Agnew, Korn, & Mutso, 2010). For example, greater investment has been found to be associated with higher levels of break-up distress, including perceiving a greater likelihood of reuniting with their estranged partner and being less likely to be dating a new partner in the months following the break-up (Goodfriend & Agnew, 2008).

As noted below, associations between all three Dark Triad traits and commitment have been reported by various research studies. However, very little research has examined the Dark Triad in relation to break-up distress. One recent study found that Machiavellianism was not predictive of distress following relationship dissolution in women (Brewer & Abell, 2017). However, this relationship was not assessed for men, and neither psychopathy nor narcissism has been examined in relation to break-up distress in the past.

1.2. Relationships and the Dark Triad

Some previous research has treated the Dark Triad traits as a single composite score for data analyses, while other studies have assessed the three traits separately. Although we consider the traits separately in our study, it is worth reviewing the connections that have been uncovered between the Dark Triad composite and relationship styles and mating strategies. Jonason, Li, Webster, and Schmitt (2009) noted that their composite Dark Triad variable was correlated with short-term mating strategies, but not long-term mating strategies. They argued that those with higher scores on the Dark Triad, especially men, espouse an aggressive, opportunistic social style that facilitates exploitative short-term mating strategies. Recent work also suggests that the Dark Triad is associated with indiscriminate selection of short-term mates, which would certainly be beneficial to a short-term mating strategy (Jonason, Valentine, Li, & Harbeson, 2011). The Dark Triad has been associated with pragmatic and game-playing love styles, which may facilitate a short-term mating strategy as well (Jonason & Kavanagh, 2010).

1.2.1. Narcissism

Narcissism appears to be correlated with both sociosexual orientation and relationship commitment; that is, narcissists tend to feel less committed to their partner when in a relationship, and to engage in sexual activities when less committed to partners (Brewer, Hunt, James, & Abell, 2015; Foster, Shrira, & Campbell, 2006). Campbell and Foster (2002) also found this lack of commitment among narcissists, and suggested that it may occur primarily due to an increased perception of their quality of alternatives. Campbell, Foster, and Finkel (2002) similarly noted decreased commitment and increased perceived quality of alternatives among highly narcissistic individuals, as well as a game-playing love style. Narcissism is also correlated negatively with relationship satisfaction and investment, and moderates the relationships described in the Investment Model, such that decreases in these variables result in greater decreases in commitment than they would for non-narcissistic individuals (Foster, 2008). Overall, the negative association between narcissism and commitment seems to be well-established.

1.2.2. Machiavellianism

Ali and Chamorro-Premuzic (2010) reported a positive association between Machiavellianism and promiscuity, again denoting a short-term mating strategy. They also found that Machiavellianism positively predicted sociosexual orientation and negatively predicted relationship variables such as commitment, passion, and intimacy. Recent work has linked Machiavellianism to higher levels of sexual deception and a greater intention to engage in infidelity (Brewer & Abell, 2015; Brewer et al., 2015); further, individuals scoring high on Machiavellianism are more likely to use deceptive mating strategies (Dussault, Hojjat, & Boone, 2013). High Machiavellians report less trust in their romantic partners and more uncertainty about their feelings for their partner (Ináncsi, Láng, & Bereczkei, 2015). Machiavellianism has also been

shown to predict an increased preference for one-night stands and a decreased preference for serious romantic relationships, although it was not predictive of a preference for “booty-call” relationships or “friends-with-benefits” relationships (Jonason et al., 2012). Similarly, Machiavellianism has been negatively correlated with amount of experience in “booty-call”, “friends-with-benefits”, or serious romantic relationships (Adams, Luevano, & Jonason, 2014). In sum, most work seems to indicate that high Machiavellians espouse short-term mating strategies, with an emphasis on low commitment and intimacy.

1.2.3. Psychopathy

Recent work has noted a correlation between psychopathy and intention to engage in infidelity (Brewer et al., 2015). Interestingly, the same study noted a positive relationship between psychopathy and a composite relationship quality variable comprised of commitment, passion, and intimacy. The authors suggested that perhaps highly psychopathic individuals desire closeness and passion so that they can manipulate their partners more effectively. However, when examined in isolation, the relationship between psychopathy and commitment, passion, or intimacy were all negative or approaching zero. Similarly, recent work has linked psychopathy with significant decreases in commitment, satisfaction, romance, and trust for men, and commitment and trust for women (Love & Holder, 2016; Savard, Sabourin, & Lussier, 2011). Overall, this would seem to suggest that the findings of Ali and Chamorro-Premuzic (2010) may be specific to the sample or the method of analysis, as in general, psychopathy is negatively related to variables that speak to the quality of a relationship (Love & Holder, 2016; Savard et al., 2011; Smith et al., 2014).

1.3. The present studies

In the present studies, we predicted that the Dark Triad traits may act as a buffer in recovering from failed romantic relationships.

Hypothesis 1. Those who score highly on narcissism (1a), psychopathy (1b), and Machiavellianism (1c) will experience less distress following the dissolution of a romantic partnership.

Hypothesis 2. Commitment will mediate the respective relationship between each of narcissism (2a), psychopathy (2b), Machiavellianism (2c), and break-up distress. Measures assessing relationship satisfaction, perceived quality of alternatives, and relationship investment were included in the study to further test for indirect effects.

2. Study 1

2.1. Methods

2.1.1. Preregistration

These hypotheses were pre-registered in September 2014 on the Open Science Framework. Hypotheses, rationale, measures, and the data analytic plan may be found at <https://osf.io/uj8r2/>. Notably, this preregistration (and the preregistration for Study 2) includes some data that are beyond the scope of this particular paper; as such, only the pertinent materials and analyses are discussed here.

2.1.2. Participants

This study was conducted using undergraduate students from a large Canadian university. Participants completed the study online, and received research credit for their participation. In order to qualify for this study, participants must have experienced a break-up no more than six months prior to the time they completed the questionnaire. Initially, 384 participants signed up to complete the study. However, based on suggestions by Meade and Craig (2012), participants who were identified as careless responders were subsequently removed from the sample. Specifically, these participants completed the study too quickly

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