



## Stress and affective experiences: The importance of dark personality features



Amy E. Noser<sup>a</sup>, Virgil Zeigler-Hill<sup>b,\*</sup>, Avi Besser<sup>c,\*</sup>

<sup>a</sup>University of Kansas, United States

<sup>b</sup>Oakland University, United States

<sup>c</sup>Sapir Academic College, Israel

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Available online 20 October 2014

#### Keywords:

Dark Triad  
Stress  
Negative affect

### ABSTRACT

Personality has been shown to play an important role in the negative outcomes associated with stress. The purpose of the present study was to examine whether Dark Triad personality features (i.e., psychopathy, narcissism, and Machiavellianism) moderated the associations between stress and affective experiences. This was accomplished using a sample of 193 Israeli community participants who completed measures concerning dark personality features and affective expectations for their vacation prior to checking-into exclusive hotels in a resort city in southern Israel. Follow-up assessments concerning affective experiences and stress during vacation were completed by participants before checking-out. Results showed that psychopathy moderated the associations between stress and affective experiences such that individuals with high levels of psychopathy were more reactive to stress.

© 2014 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

### 1. Introduction

It has become increasingly apparent that stress – both chronic and acute – adversely impacts psychological and physical well-being (e.g., Eckenrode, 1984; Keller et al., 2012; Lantz, House, Mero, & Williams, 2005). A particular area of importance has concerned the stress-response process. More specifically, researchers have argued that understanding the stress-response process may be essential for explaining the detrimental effects that stress has on mental and physical health (Bolger & Schilling, 1991; Bolger & Zuckerman, 1995; Keller et al., 2012). Support for this argument has been found in studies showing that the extent to which individuals experience stress coupled with how they react – both emotionally and physically – to stressful events leads to negative outcomes (e.g., depression, anger, negative affective experiences; Bolger & Zuckerman, 1995; Braveman, Egerter, & Williams, 2011; Lantz et al., 2005; Marco & Suls, 1993; Smith & Anderson, 1986; Smith & Rhodewalt, 1986).

Although research has clearly documented that some individuals are more likely to experience stress and respond more negatively to stressful situations, the reasons these individuals

are at greater risk for the negative consequences associated with stress remain somewhat unclear. One possible explanation that has been given considerable empirical attention is the importance of personality features (e.g., Bolger & Schilling, 1991; Bolger & Zuckerman, 1995; Korotkov, 2008; Marco & Suls, 1993; Mroczek & Almeida, 2004). Previous research has examined the importance of personality features in the stress process with the results of these studies providing consistent evidence that personality features influence how individuals perceive and respond to stressful situations (e.g., Besser, Zeigler-Hill, Pincus, & Neria, 2013; Bolger & Schilling, 1991; Bolger & Zuckerman, 1995; Smith & Anderson, 1986; Smith & Rhodewalt, 1986). For example, studies have found that increased exposure to stressful situations coupled with greater reactivity to those situations may explain, at least in part, why Type A personality leads to coronary heart disease (Smith & Anderson, 1986; Smith & Rhodewalt, 1986) and why neurotic individuals generally perceive situations to be more stressful and are more likely to respond to stress with anger and depression (Bolger & Schilling, 1991). However, it is important to note that reactivity to stress has been found to be much more important than actual exposure to stress (e.g., Bolger & Schilling, 1991; Bolger & Zuckerman, 1995). That is, individuals who are highly reactive to stress are at a greater risk for experiencing the negative consequences associated with stress. The goal of the present study is to examine whether the Dark Triad of personality (i.e., psychopathy, narcissism, and Machiavellianism; Paulhus & Williams, 2002) are associated with affective responses to stress.

\* Corresponding authors at: Department of Psychology, Oakland University, 212A Pryale Hall, Rochester, MI 48309, United States (V. Zeigler-Hill). Center for Research in Personality, Life Transitions, and Stressful Life Events, Sapir Academic College, D.N. Hof Ashkelon 79165, Israel (A. Besser).

E-mail addresses: [zeiglerh@oakland.edu](mailto:zeiglerh@oakland.edu) (V. Zeigler-Hill), [besser@mail.sapir.ac.il](mailto:besser@mail.sapir.ac.il) (A. Besser).

Empirical research that has examined the associations between personality features and stress has focused a great deal of attention on the Big Five dimensions of personality (e.g., John & Srivastava, 1999). Studies that have used this model to explore the stress process have found that neuroticism is strongly associated with both stress and negative affect (e.g., David, Green, Martin, & Suls, 1997; Gross, Sutton, & Ketelaar, 1998; Korotkov, 2008; Suls, Green, & Hillis, 1998). In contrast, extraversion, agreeableness, and conscientiousness have been shown to be associated with lower levels of perceived stress and fewer disruptions to life events due to stress (e.g., Ebstrup, Eplow, Pisinger, & Jørgensen, 2011; see Vollrath, 2001, for a review). Taken together, these findings suggest that certain personality features (e.g., neuroticism) seem to exacerbate the stress process, whereas others (e.g., agreeableness) appear to buffer against stress and distress.

Although a great deal is known about the roles that the Big Five dimensions of personality play in the stress process, relatively little is known about the role that other personality features such as the Dark Triad of personality may play in responses to stress. The Dark Triad share a common lack of agreeableness (Paulhus & Williams, 2002) which is a personality feature shown to protect against the experience of stress (Vollrath, 2001). Further, each component of the Dark Triad is characterized by antagonistic behavioral tendencies such as being deceptive, manipulative, and aggressive (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). This suggests the intriguing possibility that Dark Triad personality features may impact how individuals perceive and respond to stress because they lack important features that buffer against stress (i.e., agreeableness) and engage in behaviors that are associated with heightened levels of stress reactions.

### 1.1. Psychopathy

The first component of the Dark Triad is psychopathy. In addition to being disagreeable, individuals with high levels of psychopathy are characterized by a disregard for social norms and values, irresponsibility, dishonesty, and emotional shallowness which puts them at an increased risk to engage in both instrumental (i.e., goal-directed) and reactive (i.e., impulsive, emotion-driven) forms of aggression (Cornell et al., 1996; Frick, Cornell, Barry, Bodin, & Dane, 2003). The idea that psychopathic individuals engage in instrumental aggression is consistent with research showing that psychopathy is associated with deficits in particular forms of emotional reactivity – especially with respect to fear (Fowles, 1988; Lykken, 1995; Patrick, Cuthbert, & Lang, 1994) – due to reduced amygdala function (Blair, 2007). The reason for the link between psychopathy and reactive aggression is less clear but Blair (2010) has recently suggested that this connection may be due to individuals with high levels of psychopathy being highly susceptible to frustration. Frustration refers to an emotional state that occurs when an individual performs an action with the expectation of a particular reward but does not receive the anticipated reward (Berkowitz, 1993). The association between psychopathy and frustration may be explained by two impairments that include disruptions in stimulus-reinforcement learning and reversal learning (e.g., Blair, 2010; Finger et al., 2008). Both learning deficits are known consequences of impairment in the ventromedial prefrontal cortex which is a principle region of concern in psychopathy (Blair, 2010). Taken together, these findings suggest that individuals with high levels of psychopathy may be especially reactive to stressful events that have the potential to provoke frustration.

### 1.2. Narcissism

The second component of the Dark Triad is narcissism. Previous studies have shown that narcissistic individuals are highly reactive

to mundane negative events that have the ability to threaten their grandiose self-views (e.g., failure to achieve a particular goal; Besser & Zeigler-Hill, 2010, 2011; Zeigler-Hill & Besser, 2013; Zeigler-Hill, Myers, & Clark, 2010). In addition, narcissistic individuals are highly sensitive to feeling antagonized by others (Hopwood et al., 2011), more likely to perceive themselves as victims of daily interpersonal transgressions (McCullough, Emmons, Kilpatrick, & Mooney, 2003), and report more acute anxiety symptoms following potentially life-threatening events (e.g., civilians exposed to missile fire; Besser et al., 2013). The heightened reactivity of individuals with narcissistic personality features to stressful events is thought to be due to their self-concepts being grandiose yet vulnerable to threat (Kealy & Rasmussen, 2012; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001; Pincus & Roche, 2011; Zeigler-Hill & Jordan, 2011). It has been suggested that the heightened reactivity of individuals with narcissistic personality features may extend to other negative events including those that are stressful (e.g., Zeigler-Hill et al., 2010). Narcissistic individuals may be especially reactive to stressful events that have the potential to undermine their sense of control and challenge their beliefs concerning their ability to effectively manage that sort of negative experience.

### 1.3. Machiavellianism

Machiavellianism is the final member of the Dark Triad. Machiavellianism is a personality trait that reflects cynical, manipulative, and amoral behavior (Christie & Geis, 1970). Although Machiavellianism is similar to psychopathy and narcissism in some respects (e.g., disagreeable and antagonistic), Machiavellianism has been shown to differ from the other aspects of the Dark Triad in important ways (e.g., less impulsive; Jones & Paulhus, 2011a) which makes its association with the stress process less clear. For example, individuals with psychopathic and narcissistic personality features tend to be highly reactive to particular types of threat (physical threat and ego-threat, respectively; Jones & Paulhus, 2010, 2011b), whereas Machiavellian individuals tend to be more cautious and deliberate in their behavior (Williams, Nathanson, & Paulhus, 2010). This suggests that although Machiavellian individuals may be just as socially aversive as individuals with high levels of psychopathy and narcissism, the tendency to engage in calculated and cautious behavior may reduce the reactivity of Machiavellian individuals to stressful situations (Jones & Paulhus, 2010).

### 1.4. Overview and predictions

The purpose of the present study was to examine the importance of Dark Triad personality features in the associations between stress and negative outcomes. More specifically, the present study examined whether Dark Triad personality features moderated the association between perceived stress and affect during a relatively positive experience (i.e., going on vacation). This was accomplished using a short-term pre–post study design. In the initial session, participants completed measures concerning their dark personality features and expectations for their vacation. Follow-up assessments took place on the last day of the participant's vacation. These assessments asked participants to report their affective experiences and perceived level of stress during vacation. We expected that individuals with psychopathic and narcissistic personality features would be especially responsive to stress in this context such that they would report fewer positive affective experiences while vacationing when they felt stressed. The rationale for this prediction was that psychopathy and narcissism would exacerbate the stress process leading these individuals to be especially reactive to stress during a generally positive experience. We believed that individuals with psychopathic and narcissistic personality features would exhibit heightened reactivity in this

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/7326945>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/7326945>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)