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Narcissism, relationship satisfaction, and emotional intelligence among female college students

Chelsea D. Link and William C. Bailey†*

ABSTRACT

Emotional intelligence and narcissism have an influence on the overall relationship satisfaction people have with their significant others. Researchers have reported that as emotional intelligence increases, so does relationship satisfaction. However, researchers have also reported that as narcissism increases, relationship satisfaction decreases. No previous study has examined all three concepts together, which is the purpose of this study. Female college students ($N = 169$) were given a questionnaire comprised of measures to assess emotional intelligence, narcissism, and relationship satisfaction. Correlation analysis determined there was a weak relationship between emotional intelligence and narcissism ($r = 0.28$). Regression analysis found no relationship between emotional intelligence, narcissism, and relationship satisfaction with the student's significant others.

* Chelsea Link received a B.S. degree in May 2010 with a major in Human Development, Family Sciences, and Rural Sociology. This paper is based on her undergraduate honors research project for which she received funding through a Student Undergraduate Research Fellowship from the Arkansas Department of Education.

† William Bailey is a professor in Human Development, Family Sciences, and Rural Sociology.

MEET THE STUDENT-AUTHOR



Chelsea Link

I am from Shawnee, Kansas, and a graduate of Shawnee Mission Northwest High School. I graduated from the University of Arkansas with a Bachelor of Science in Human Environmental Sciences. My major was Human Development, Family Sciences, and Rural Sociology with a concentration in Lifespan. This fall I will be attending graduate school at Kansas State University where I will obtain a master's degree in Marriage and Family Therapy.

During my four year career at the University of Arkansas, I was involved in several campus organizations. I was a member of Gamma Beta Phi for three years. During those three years, I was treasurer for one year and president for another year. I also was a member of Phi Upsilon Omicron and was treasurer for this organization for one year. During the summer semester of 2008, I studied in Paderno del Grappa, Italy.

This project was inspired by my desire to learn more about relationships. Since I plan on pursuing my goal of becoming a Marriage and Family Therapist, I was interested in discovering more about the dynamics of a relationship.

I would like to thank my committee, Dr. Jean Turner and Dr. Duane Wolf, for their support. I would also like to send a special thank you to my thesis mentor, Dr. William Bailey.

INTRODUCTION

Many individuals strive to achieve high levels of relationship satisfaction in their important relationships, especially within one that is romantic. Those who study relationships have determined emotional intelligence (Keaten and Kelly, 2008) and narcissism (Twenge and Campbell, 2009) are two of many attributes that have a role in the satisfaction a person experiences in a relationship. Emotional intelligence and narcissism seem to have completely different influences on the levels of relationship satisfaction a person experiences. Keaten and Kelly (2008) found that high relationship satisfaction was related to high levels of emotional intelligence. Simultaneously, with the discovery of the role of emotional intelligence, Twenge and Campbell (2009) determined that people involved in relationships with narcissistic individuals have a low level of relationship satisfaction. Despite previous research findings that emotional intelligence has a positive influence and that narcissism has a negative impact on relationship satisfaction, no research has been done linking all three factors.

Research has shown that various factors influence relationships and the satisfaction people obtain from them. This research focused on female college students' satisfaction with their significant-other relationship. The research goal was to determine the role of the respondent's level of emotional intelligence and narcissism (Twenge and Campbell, 2009; Keaten and Kelly, 2008) in regard to her

satisfaction with her partner. This project examined the relationship between emotional intelligence, narcissism, and relationship satisfaction (Fig. 1).

Emotional Intelligence. One factor expected to influence relationship satisfaction is emotional intelligence. In this study, emotional intelligence is defined as a skill. The foundation for emotional intelligence is the concept of being able to understand one's own individual emotions (Schutte et al., 1998). Only a few studies have examined emotional intelligence and relationship satisfaction together. Keaten and Kelly (2008) found that relationship satisfaction is higher when a person has high emotional intelligence. Positive social interactions and better interpersonal factors like healthier relationships are more likely when someone has high levels of emotional intelligence (Mayer et al., 2004).

Narcissism. Another factor being examined in this study is narcissism. Narcissism is a "complex of personality traits and processes" (Ames et al., 2006). In a study that looked at the various aspects of narcissism across cultures, Munro et al. (2005) defined narcissism in a general way as "being unpleasant to others in the pursuit of one's own goals." Research has shown that narcissistic tendencies do influence overall relationship satisfaction. Twenge and Campbell (2009) found that relationships that involve a narcissistic individual are generally less satisfying. Boldt (2007) found that people in relationships with narcissistic individuals tend to have a less satisfying life overall. Recent research has also found that the rate of narcissism is increasing in

the population, especially among college students (Twenge et al., 2008). Twenge and Campbell (2009) predict that this generation of college students will have more problems with relationships than any previous groups of college students.

Relationship Satisfaction. The dependent variable in this study is relationship satisfaction. Vaughn and Baier (1999) claimed that relationship satisfaction is very subjective, making it difficult to have a definitive definition. The researchers stated that someone has achieved high relationship satisfaction if he or she evaluates the relationship as meeting or exceeding certain standards. Furthermore, Furman and Buhrmester (1985) stated that relationship satisfaction has to do with how happy a person is with the way things are in their relationship with another person.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

A questionnaire was compiled using items from three existing, reliable and valid questionnaires. The Emotional Intelligence Scale, or the EIS (Schutte et al., 1998), was used to evaluate emotional intelligence. The scale was developed from Salovey and Mayer's model of emotional intelligence that included questions about appraisal, regulation, and utilization of emotions. Schutte et al. (1998) suggested that the EIS be used when exploring emotional intelligence and when examining the effects of emotional intelligence on other factors.

The 16-item Narcissistic Personality Inventory, or NPI-16 (Ames et al., 2006), was used to evaluate narcissism in the respondents. The NPI-16 is a valid alternative to the longer NPI-40, to be used when the longer inventory is not appropriate. The NPI-16 comprises several different measures in a shorter inventory to accurately measure various components of narcissism. Ames et al. (2006) report good reliability and high levels of validity on both the NPI-16 and the NPI-40.

The Network of Relationships Inventory, also called the NRI (Furman and Buhrmester, 1985), was used to evaluate relationship satisfaction. The NRI examines various characteristics of relationships as well as various types of relationships. Furman and Buhrmester (1985) have established the NRI's validity and reliability for accurately measuring relationship satisfaction. Demographic questions, such as age and relationship satisfaction, were also included at the end of the questionnaire.

The study used a convenience sample of 169 female students attending a large southeastern, public university. The data were collected using students who were enrolled in a variety of classes at the University of Arkansas. The survey was placed online and an email with a hyperlink to the location of the survey was sent to the students enrolled in the classes. In some of the classes, the students were given extra points for participating in the survey while oth-

ers were not, depending on the class. The survey remained open for two weeks in order to allow the respondents time to complete the survey. The data collected by the survey were downloaded and SPSS (SPSS Inc, Chicago) was used for correlation and regression analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Respondents ranged in age from 19 to 25 ($M = 20.64$) (Table 1). More than half of the respondents reported being in a committed relationship, which included being in a serious dating relationship or marriage (64.5%, $n = 109$). Out of the 169 respondents, 35.5% reported they were casually dating ($n = 60$).

In order to make conclusions about the relationship between emotional intelligence, narcissism, and relationship satisfaction, the three variables were examined separately. The sample reported a mean score of 125.03 for EIS with a standard deviation of 10.122 (Fig. 2). On the NPI-16, the respondents had a mean of 4.85 and a standard deviation of 3.388. For relationship satisfaction, the sample had a mean score of 12.13 with a standard deviation of 3.296. The number of respondents in this inventory was 158 instead of 169 due to missing data from 11 respondents.

In order to determine any relationship between emotional intelligence, narcissism, and relationship satisfaction, a correlation was performed using the scores from the questionnaires. The results from the correlation analysis revealed that there were little or no relationships between the variables (Table 2). There was no statistically significant relationship between emotional intelligence and relationship satisfaction. In a similar manner, the relationship between narcissism and relationship satisfaction was nonexistent. However, the correlation revealed a weak relationship between emotional intelligence and narcissism ($r = 0.28$, $p < 0.001$).

A regression analysis was conducted. The regression used the Emotional Intelligence Scale scores as well as the Narcissistic Personality Inventory scores as the independent variables. The dependent variable was the score of each respondent on the Network of Relationships Inventory Relationship Satisfaction score. The results of the analysis were not significant (Table 3). It was determined that emotional intelligence and narcissism did not predict the relationship satisfaction for these respondents. Further research is needed to determine the predictors of relationship satisfaction.

Although previous research (Twenge and Campbell, 2009) suggests that narcissism does have an influence on relationship satisfaction, this study did not find one. However, the study did find that the level of emotional intelligence a woman has is slightly related to her narcissistic tendencies. This was an unexpected finding. More research

is needed to determine if this relationship between emotional intelligence and narcissism is an unusual finding or is more prevalent than would seem based on previous research. Based on this study, for which a very low percentage of variance could be accounted, it can be concluded that there are other factors besides emotional intelligence and narcissism that have a large impact on overall relationship satisfaction for college-aged women.

Future research should examine the same research question, but with a different sample. A limitation to this study was the lack of a diverse sample. A more diverse sample in all aspects, from gender to geographical location, could lead to different findings. It is logical to assume that emotional intelligence and narcissism are both impacted by development throughout adulthood. Therefore, varying the age range of the participants will provide an opportunity to explore the three characteristics from a developmental dimension. Also, exploration of additional personality characteristics and their relationship to narcissism and emotional intelligence should be examined in order to gain a better understanding of how narcissism and emotional intelligence function relative to relationship satisfaction. Increasing exploration of factors such as these can hopefully lead to the development of effective interventions leading to higher relationship satisfaction.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. William Bailey for all of his support, advice, and motivation throughout my thesis project. I would also like to extend a thank you to Drs. Jean Turner and Duane Wolf for their support and assistance. Financial assistance was provided by SURF.

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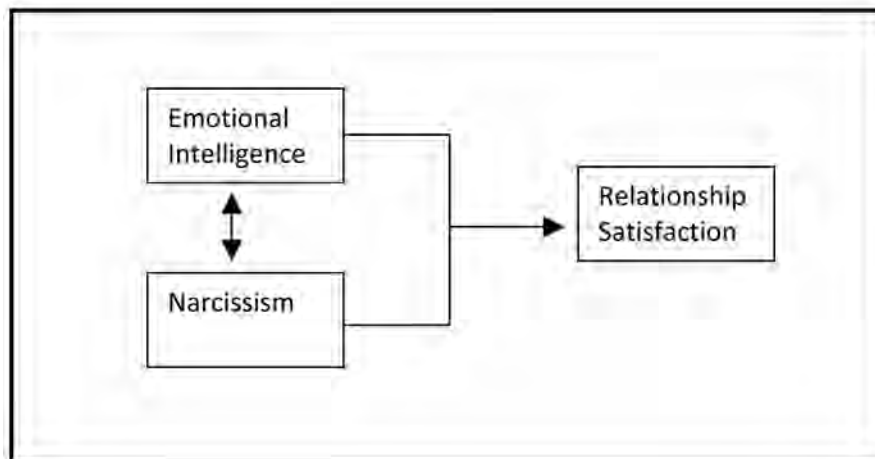


Fig. 1. Theoretical model of the association of emotional intelligence and narcissism to relationship satisfaction.

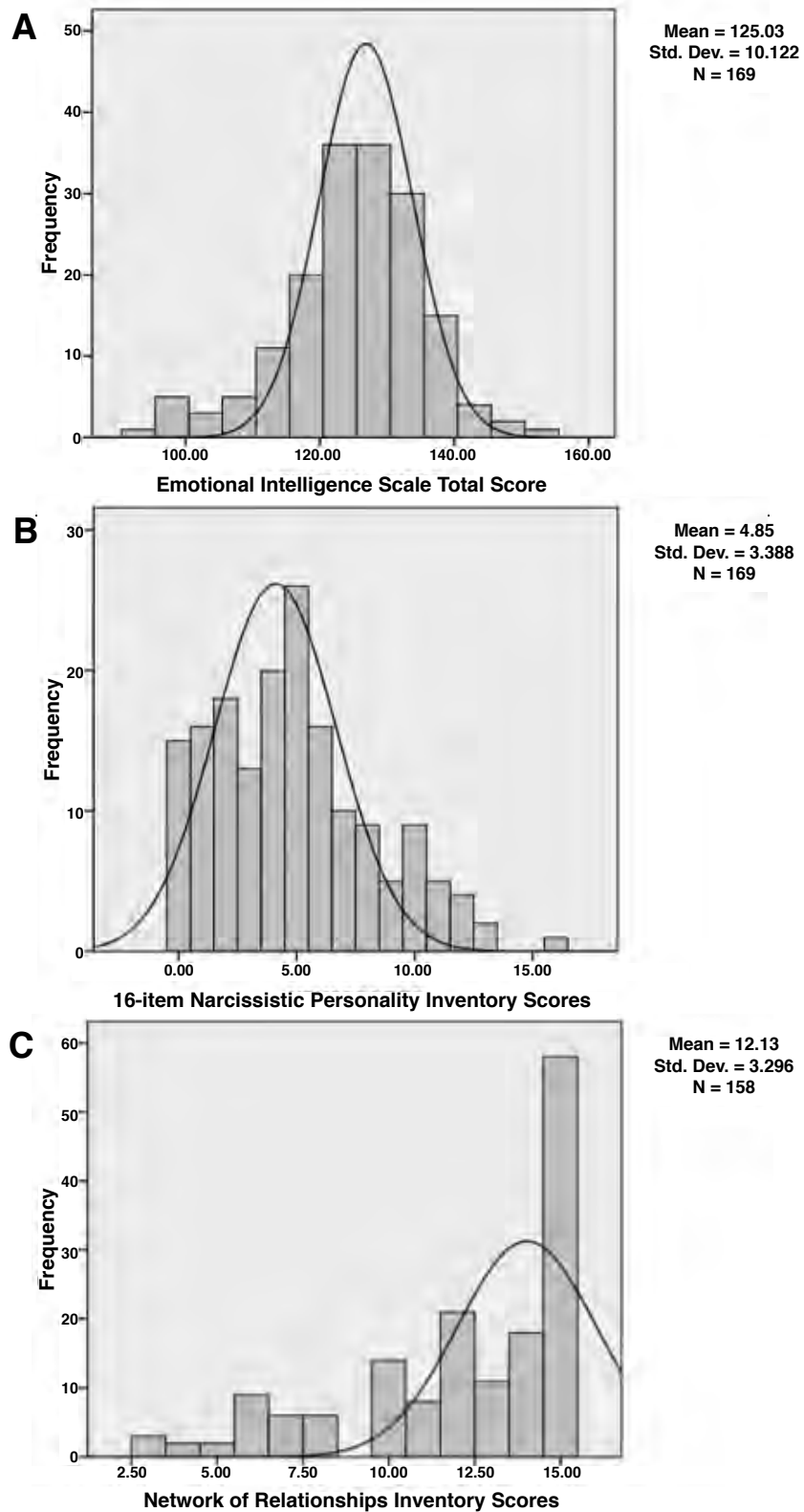


Fig. 2. Charts and statistics of (A) emotional intelligence, (B) narcissism, and (C) relationship satisfaction of respondents.

Table 1. Demographic frequencies of female college students surveyed to explore relationship satisfaction, emotional intelligence and narcissism

Age	Frequency	Percent
19	37	21.9
20	56	33.1
21	38	22.5
22	20	11.8
23	7	4.1
24	8	4.7
25	3	1.8
Total	169	100.0

Table 2. Correlation coefficients and sample size between emotional intelligence, narcissism, and relationship satisfaction

Concept	Emotional Intelligence	Narcissism	Relationship Satisfaction
Emotional Intelligence	1	0.28, N = 169	0.07, N = 158
Narcissism		1	-0.08, N = 158
Relationship Satisfaction			1

Table 3. Regression of Emotional Intelligence, Narcissism, and Relationship Satisfaction from Emotional Intelligence Scale and Narcissistic Personality Inventory

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Coefficients		
	B	Standard Error	Beta	t	Significance
Constant	8.421	3.337		2.523	0.013
Emotional Intelligence	0.033	0.027	0.102	1.228	0.221
Narcissism Score	-0.100	0.079	-0.105	-1.262	0.209