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Narcissism in Romantic Relationships: An Analysis of Couples' Behavior during Disagreements

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Abstract

Many more people show classic symptoms of narcissism than merit a diagnosis of Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD). This has affected the whole of society, but potentially more importantly, it has invaded the realm of romantic interaction. This study seeks to fill gaps in the current research by exploring how narcissists interact within romantic relationships during problem solving discussions. Participants were 38 adult married or cohabiting couples who reported on their relationship's security and functioning, and who participated in two problem solving discussions. Discussions were videotaped and coded for the presence of narcissistic behaviors. Those partners who engaged in greater narcissistic behavior during the discussions reported greater insecurity and greater aggression in their relationships. Findings highlight the importance of narcissism in romantic relationships, and shed light on how narcissism may affect interpersonal interactions.

Background

Narcissism is perhaps one of the most recognizable personality traits in society today. If one were to ask, for example, if someone can name a narcissistic individual, they are likely to come up with a list of names and examples. Along with this, the idea of narcissism has been in existence almost as long as society itself. It was the ancient Greeks who first described narcissism in the form of the mythological character Narcissus.

Narcissus pursued true love throughout his life. Inevitably, however, true love was not to be in his future, at least not in the way most would imagine. After many failed attempts, Narcissus stares wonderingly into a pool of water, where he finds the only love he is to ever know; a deep and unshakeable love for himself. Eventually, Narcissus begins to waste away in front of the pool, until his death from loving himself. Even the Greeks must have known that the love of oneself has a limit.

The death of Narcissus due to his self-love is not what the current research intends to investigate. Metaphorically speaking, the current research attempts to look into the failed relationships of Narcissus to ultimately understand how his self-love prevented positive interactions in romantic relationships with others. Simply stated, the present study looks to find what behavioral strategies are put in place by those with varying levels of narcissistic qualities, and how those strategies, in turn, affect the quality of said relationships. Before doing this, however, it is important to understand exactly what narcissism is in psychological terms.

What is Narcissism?

As defined by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual's forth revision (DSM, American Psychiatric Association, 1994), Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) includes the following symptoms: 1.) exhibiting a grandiose sense of self-importance, that is to say, they overestimate their abilities and inflate their accomplishments appearing boastful and pretentious; 2.) are preoccupied with fantasies of unlimited power, success, brilliance, beauty, or ideal love; 3.)

believe that they are superior, special, or unique, and expect others to recognize them as such; 4.) require excessive admiration because their self-esteem is almost invariably fragile, thus they need constant attention and admiration and frequently "fish for compliments;" 5.) have an unreasonable expectation of favorable treatment and become upset or even furious when others do not cater to them; 6.) frequently exploit others to get what they want or need, no matter what the consequences and form friendships merely to advance their own purposes; 7.) lack empathy in regards to the feelings of others often leading them to be emotionally cold or lack reciprocal interest; 8.) are envious of others or believe others to be envious of them 9.) exhibit arrogant, haughty behaviors and have snobbish, disdainful, or patronizing attitudes. Although these criteria altogether represent NPD, not everyone with narcissistic qualities fits the diagnosis of NPD (one must exhibit at least 5 out of the 9 criteria).

Less than 1% of people with narcissistic qualities merit a diagnosis for NPD (Campbell, 2002). This in itself presents its own, and potentially more dangerous, problem. With more and more of the population exhibiting proportionately more narcissistic qualities, society has become afflicted with the ailment of "New Narcissism," which is showing an increase even in popular music (DeWall, Pond, Campbell, & Twenge, 2011), but is able to slip under the radar of current diagnostic criteria (Twenge & Campbell, 2009). While the definition of narcissism has not changed, there are more individuals with narcissistic qualities than ever before and these individuals' present symptoms are therefore vastly different from the psychological problems of the past.

Early complaints of psychological difficulties concerned themselves more with obsessive and compulsive behaviors (Batlan, 2001). In direct opposition, Batlon (2001, p.199) goes on to explain that today's patients talk about their problems in more vague and ill-defined terms "complaining of loneliness, boredom, alienation, and restlessness." Thusly, the problems have become more and more centered around the self. In light of what has become a more self-centered society, it is then important to understand how the narcissist views the self.

Narcissism and the Self

The central discussion about narcissists and their own self image is the question of self-esteem. Specifically, whether or not the narcissist likes him/her self in general is at the forefront. The answer, however, is that it depends. It seems that in agentic areas, such as intelligence and status, narcissists rate themselves more positively than they do in communal areas, such as traits like kindness and morality (Campbell, Bosson, Goheen, Lakey, & Kernis, 2007). Campbell et al. (2007, p.228) go on to state that, "narcissists do not uniformly dislike themselves deep down inside… Rather, narcissists report high explicit and implicit self-views on measures of agency, and neutral self-views on measures of communion." The argument continues into the deeper question of self-regulation in the narcissist.

Morf and Rhondewalt (2001, p.177-194) argue that narcissism is more of a personality process than some trait or difference among people. Essentially, their argument states that the narcissist perpetually battles to maintain self-esteem, but by the very process of doing so, they isolate themselves from the attention they crave. It may be best stated that the narcissistic self is in "a chronic state of self-under-construction, which they relentlessly pursue through various social-

cognitive-affective self-regulatory mechanisms in not always optimal ways" (Morf & Rhondewalt, 2001). For example, narcissists tend to think of themselves in very positive terms, which is not always accurate. When these views are challenged, narcissists present with maladaptive behaviors such as emotional coldness and lack of empathy for others.

There is much agreement about this self-regulatory process with the exception that Vazire and Funder (2006, p.154) believe that impulsivity should be added to the framework. Narcissists do seem to continually undermine themselves in their interactions with others, but this may be because they do not possess the self-control necessary to allow for positive interaction (Vazire & Funder, 2006). Narcissists are so impulsive that their actions and the consequences of those actions are rarely considered. This, along with the argument presented by Morf and Rhondewalt (2001, p.177-194) provides a bit of understanding into why the narcissist cannot maintain healthy relationships. Many, however, believe that key to the alleviation of narcissism is simply to learn to love oneself (Branden, 1994).

The idea that a narcissist "needs" to love the self more seems a bit counterproductive. In fact, as Campbell, Foster, and Finkle (2002, p.340) argue, self-love can actually come between and even destroy romantic relationships. In truth, what the narcissist is looking for is not always a healthy form of love. Many times, what the narcissist really wants with regard, to love is a romantic trophy husband or wife (Campbell, 1999) because this increases their status and allows them to have a "#1 fan." In order to attain what they want in a relationship, narcissists are also more likely to exhibit a "game-playing" relationship style (Campbell et al. 2002). For example, narcissists may seek to avoid a dependent partner and focus themselves on sexual opportunities with others while deceiving the current partner. Whatever the narcissist's self-regulation strategy, it may be a byproduct, or at the very least, exacerbated by society.

Narcissism in Social Situations

Social situations for the narcissist can be quite a roller-coaster ride. Initially, others tend to see them as charming, flattering, and even enjoyable to be around (Campbell, Foster, & Finkel, 2002). However, as social interaction becomes more and more frequent, the narcissist's pathology eventually comes to light (Campbell et al., 2002). For example, narcissists often become extremely defensive with criticism from others, have difficulty understanding and expressing emotions, and are controlling and deceptive (Atles & Them, 2008; Campbell et al., 2002; Dimmaggio et al., 2002). The narcissistic view of the self is quite different than the views of other people.

Narcissists tend to view themselves as smarter, more attractive, and all around better than others (Campbell, Foster, & Finkel, 2002). Therefore, it would appear that the narcissist lives in a world of constant social comparison. In fact, people who are high in narcissistic traits tend to experience more extreme responses to social comparison than do non-narcissists (Bogart, Benotsch, & Pavlovic, 2004). Since the narcissist tends to be highly oversensitive and is in constant need for positive attention, a negative comparison to others can be very devastating (Bogart et al., 2004). Indeed, this may lead to an overly aggressive response from the narcissistic individual (Bogart et al., 2004).

Narcissism and Aggression

Highly narcissistic individuals tend to feel more threatened by negative feedback, and thus react much more aggressively to such feedback (Stucke & Sporer, 2002). Since they hold themselves in such high regard, when someone else questions the narcissist's self-view, the narcissist tends to lash out in response (Baumeister, Bushman, & Campbell, 2000). This aggression may be physical, verbal, or both (Stucke & Spore, 2002). Indeed, interaction in general must be an extremely difficult process, but interaction within romantic relationships with a narcissistic partner becomes even more of a delicate process.

Narcissism and Romantic Relationships

Within romantic relationships, narcissism is associated with game-playing behavior, controlling behavior, and concern with the popularity and success of the partner (Kernis & Sun, 1994). Within the relationship, narcissistic "symptoms" have also been linked to physical aggression (Ryan, Weikel, & Sprechini, 2008). Interactions with a narcissistic partner are no less like interactions with a narcissistic individual, in general. Narcissists continue to search for their own self-gratification with little or no concern for the feelings of others. It is also more likely for the narcissistic partner to be less committed in their current relationships in large part due to the perception that there are other options and availabilities out there for potential relationships (Campbell & Foster, 2002). This may be why narcissists prefer relationships with little closeness and intimacy (Campbell & Foster, 2002). The gap in current research, however, does not discuss how narcissistic individuals work through problems in their current relationships.

The Current Research Project

Smolewska and Dion (2005, p.67) state that research is needed to examine how narcissists regulate emotions and behavior within romantic relationships. Such research will provide a greater understanding of how narcissism leads to functional deficits, affects others, and can be ameliorated through intervention. This will be the general focus of the current project.

The goal of this project is to determine how narcissism may be manifested through behavioral and emotional strategies, how these strategies affect the behavior and emotions of the partner, and how they are associated with overall relationship functioning. During problem solving discussions, narcissistic behaviors such as defensiveness, blame, bids for control, bringing up praise-worthy behavior, and expressions of superiority, and emotional patterns of anger in response to perceived blame, and disdain for the partner, will be identified. Overall, couples characterized by these narcissistic patterns of interaction are expected to be less satisfied with their relationship, exhibit less secure attachments with their partner, experience more frequent and severe conflicts, and maintain maladaptive patterns of discussion that force the conversation in a roundabout fashion with little or no resolution.

Methods

Participants
Participants were drawn from a larger study on families. Thirty-eight individuals participated in the study. In order to qualify for participation in the study, participants needed to be over the age of 21, in a romantic relationship with their current partner for at least two years, and have a child between the ages of 6 and 12.

Participants were recruited through old birth announcements, advertisements placed on public message boards, and referrals from those who had already participated in the study. Families were compensated with payment of $130.00 per family for their participation.

The mean age for females was M=37.2 (SD=7.2). The mean age for males was M=38.74 (SD=6.78). 91.3% of couples were married and 6.5% were cohabitating. Religion in females ranged from 21.7% Catholic, 63% Christian, 2.2% none, and 2.2% other. Religion in males ranged from 21.7% Catholic, 63% Christian, 2.2% Jewish, and 4.3% other. The distribution of race was 76.2% White, 19% African American, and 4.8% other.

Procedure
Participants were provided with questionnaires to complete. They then participated in two 10 minute problem solving discussion that were videotaped. Topics were chosen independently by the partners; each was asked to select three topics that are difficult for them to handle in their relationship, ordering them from most severe to least severe. Partners were then reunited and asked to choose one topic from each list that they were both comfortable discussing. Each topic was then discussed for 10 minutes, with the experimenter alerting the couple when to switch to the next topic. Couples were instructed to discuss the topic like they normally would at home, attempting to reach a resolution, and not pretending to have a disagreement. Video tapes were later coded for the presence of narcissistic behaviors as described below.

Measures
Romantic Attachment: Participants completed the Spousal Attachment Styles Questionnaire (SASP; Becker, Billings, Eveleth, & Gilbert, 1997), which provides measures of attachment security and fearfulness.

General Conflict Behavior: Participants also completed the Conflict Tactics Scales subscale for Psychological Aggression (CTS; Straus, 1996). The psychological aggression subscale uses higher scores indicating greater psychological aggression. Participants rated their use of psychological aggression, as well as their partners' use of psychological aggression. The CTS is the most widely used questionnaire measure of aggression in romantic relationships

Results

Pearson's correlation coefficient was used to assess associations between narcissistic behaviors during interactions and couples' attachment security and general conflict behaviors. Degrees of freedom for reported correlations vary due to missing data. Pearson correlation of .1 are considered small effects, .3 are considered medium effects, and .5 are considered large effects. Because of the small sample size, one tailed tests were examined.

During the problem solving discussion, when females were preoccupied, males were more likely to make excuses $r(30)=.38$, $p<.05$, exhibit emotionally cold behavior $r(30)=.39$, $p<.05$, and also utilize the "yes…but" strategy $r(30)=.32$, $p<.05$. However, when it was the male who was preoccupied, it was the female who was more likely to be controlling $r(32)=.34$, $p<.05$, exhibit emotionally cold behavior $r(32)=.29$, $p<.05$, and was less likely to challenge the male point of view $r(32)=-.36$, $p<.05$. The male was less likely to fanaticize about power or success $r(32)=-.41$, $p<.05$ and less likely to exhibit controlling behavior $r(32)=-.31$, $p<.05$.

When females were fearful, they were more likely to blame the male $r(30)=.39$, $p<.05$ and to challenge his point of view $r(30)=.32$, $p<.05$ and the male was more likely to fanaticize about power or success $r(30)=.33$, $p<.05$. When it was the male who was fearful, he was less likely to be in control $r(32)=-.339$, $p<.05$ and less likely to be emotionally cold $r(32)=-.33$, $p<.05$. The female was less likely to challenge the male point of view $r(32)=-.31$, $p<.05$, the male was less concerned with the female's success $r(32)=-.30$, $p<.05$, was less likely to fanaticize about power or success $r(32)=-.58$, $p<.05$ and more likely to use the "yes…but" strategy $r(32)=.29$, $p<.05$.

When the female was more secure, the male was less likely to make excuses $r(30)=-.33$, $p<.05$, less likely to fish for compliments $r(30)=-.35$, $p<.05$ and the female was less likely to blame the male $r(30)=-.36$, $p<.05$. The male was less likely to be deceptive $r(30)=-.31$, $p<.05$. However, when the male felt secure, he was more likely to be dominate $r(32)=.33$, $p<.05$.

In the questionnaires, when the female self-reported psychological aggression, the male was more likely to fish for compliments $r(30)=.31$, $p<.05$, the female was more likely to blame the male $r(30)=.38$, $p<.05$, and the male was more likely to challenge the female point of view. When the female reported psychological aggression from the partner, the male was more likely to fish for compliments $r(30)=.39$, $p<.05$, to exhibit controlling behavior $r(30)=.34$, $p<.05$, to fanaticize about power or success $r(30)=.34$, $p<.05$, and be more deceptive $r(30)=.30$, $p<.05$.

When the male self-reported using psychological aggression, he was more likely to also make excuses $r(32)=.30$, $p<.05$. However, when the male reported psychological aggression from the female, the male was more likely to make excuses $r(32)=.41$, $p<.05$ and the female was more likely to be emotionally cold.

Discussion

None of the participants in the current study exhibited the full criteria to meet a diagnosis of Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) as defined by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual fourth revision (DSM, American Psychological Association, 1994). In fact, much of what we found were random, yet significant "symptoms" of narcissism in a small percentage of the population which is consistent with the findings of Campbell, 2002; DeWall, Pond, Campbell, and Twenge, 2011; and Twenge and Campbell, 2009. These findings demonstrate that overall relationship functioning has a great deal to do with the presence of narcissistic symptoms.

Much of the pattern of relationship dysfunction followed a somewhat stimulus-response pattern exhibited in both males and females. For example, during problem solving discussions, when the female was preoccupied, the male was more likely to respond with emotional coldness, yet when the male was preoccupied, the female began to respond with emotional coldness. These findings are supported by Morf and Rhondewalt (2001) when they argue that narcissism is more of a personality process than some trait or difference among people.

Individuals high in narcissistic qualities experienced fearfulness in the same way for both males and females. When females were fearful, the male fanaticized more about power or success. On the other hand, when the male was fearful, he was less likely to fanaticize about power and success. This is consistent with the findings of Bogart, Benotsch, and Pavlovic (2004) when they explain that the narcissistic self tends to be fragile and in need of positive attention. This would also indicate that the individual high in narcissistic traits is willing to change relationship styles based upon situational factors in order to maintain a relationship that provides the attention they need.

The concept of physical aggression can be tied very closely to narcissistic individuals (Stucke & Sporer, 2002; Baumeister, Bushman, & Campbell, 2000; & Bogart, Benotsch, & Pavlovic, 2004). For example, when the female reported being physically aggressive towards their male counterpart, the male was more likely to fish for compliments and challenge the female's point of view, while the female was more likely to blame the male. When the female reported that the male was physically aggressive, the female was more likely to blame the male while the male was just as likely to fish for compliments, be controlling, but also fantasize about power or success and be deceptive in the relationship. Since males presented more physical aggression, this may once again be a defense mechanism to protect the fragile narcissistic self by all means possible (Bogart et al. 2004).

Some shortcomings in the current research are as follows: With a small sample size (38) there is the potential for a Type 1 error. To reduce this, future research should use a much larger sample size to achieve better results. This study was also demographically limited. The majority of participants were white Christians. Therefore, to be more representative, future research should look for a more diverse sample in order the see if these results are cross-cultural.

The current study was able to verify that couples' with the most narcissistic tendencies were overall less happy with their relationship. These couples also showed less commitment and were more likely to have more frequent and severe conflict. Narcissistic couples exhibited little

problem solving and discussions proceeded in a roundabout manor. The implications for areas such as couple's therapy are tremendous and future research should look into how these narcissistic dysfunctions can be alleviated through intervention.

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