



Why do narcissistic individuals engage in sex? Exploring sexual motives as a mediator for sexual satisfaction and function



Ateret Gewirtz-Meydan *

Bar Ilan University, School of Social Work, Ramat Gan 5290002, Israel
Sex and Couples Therapy Unit, Meir Medical Center, Kfar-Saba 49100, Israel

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the relationship between narcissism, sexual motives, and sexual satisfaction from a dyadic perspective. One hundred twenty-eight heterosexual couples ($N = 256$) completed questionnaires regarding their narcissism, sexual motives, and sexual satisfaction and functioning. Actor-Partner Interdependence Model analyses revealed two actor-effects on men's sexual satisfaction, intimacy during intercourse and orgasmic responsivity and one partner-effect on men's sexual satisfaction and intimacy during intercourse. Self-affirmation was identified as the main motive for engaging in sex for narcissistic individuals. Recommendations for further research and additional clinical implications are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Sexual satisfaction and functioning (SSF) are valued as an important component of one's sexual health and well-being (Davison, Bell, LaChina, Holden, & Davis, 2009). SSF is strongly related to aspects of romantic relationships, such as marital and relationship satisfaction (Byers, 2005; Fisher et al., 2014; Yeh, Lorenz, Wickrama, Conger, & Elder, 2006), communication (Litzinger & Gordon, 2005; Yoo, Bartle-Haring, Day, & Gangamma, 2014), non-sexual physical intimacy (Haning et al., 2007; Heiman et al., 2011), and emotional intimacy (Rubin & Campbell, 2011).

One way to understand the factors that contribute to sexual outcomes is to examine the role of personality traits in predicting sexual satisfaction. The research regarding narcissism and SSF is limited. Yet, the nature of narcissism which is expressed through interpersonally exploitative acts, lack of empathy, intense envy, aggression, and exhibitionism among grandiose narcissistic individuals (Pincus, Cain, & Wright, 2014; Pincus et al., 2009; Wink, 1991) and in feelings such as anger, envy, aggression, helplessness, emptiness, low self-esteem, shame and social avoidance among vulnerable narcissistic individuals (Pincus et al., 2014), may provide reasons to expect own and partner narcissism to be associated with lower SSF.

Research regarding narcissism and sexuality emphasized the pathological aspects of sexuality, linking narcissism to unrestricted socio-sexuality (Foster, Shrira, & Campbell, 2006), infidelity (Campbell & Foster, 2002; McNulty & Widman, 2014), transmission and acquisition of sexually transmitted diseases (Bjekić, Lecic-Tosevski, Vlainjac, & Marinković, 2002), extensive consumption of pornography (Kasper et al., 2015), sexual aggression (Widman & McNulty, 2010; Zeigler-Hill, Enjaian, & Essa, 2013), and misperception of partner's sexual intent (Wegner & Abbey, 2016). Narcissistic individuals tend to devalue communal rewards of sexual intercourse (e.g., emotional intimacy) and place greater value upon agentic rewards (e.g., physical pleasure), which helps to explain why they tend to be less committed to their romantic partners (Foster et al., 2006; Smith et al., 2014). McNulty and Widman (2013) were the first to examine components of sexual narcissism such as exploitation, entitlement, empathy, and sense of sexual skills in relation to satisfaction. According to their study, one's own sexual exploitation was associated with lower levels of initial sexual satisfaction that persisted over time; own and partner's low sexual empathy were associated with lower levels of initial sexual satisfaction that persisted over time; and own and partner's sexual entitlement were associated with steeper declines in sexual satisfaction over time. However, own and partner's sense of sexual skill were associated with higher levels of satisfaction that persisted over time (McNulty & Widman, 2013).

In order to identify mechanisms that mediate the association between narcissism and SSF, this study examined the possible role of sexual motivations as a mediator. Sexual motivations are defined as reasons to engage in sex or any other sexual behaviour (Browning, 2004). Motives were classified as social approval vs. self-focused (Cooper, Shapiro, & Powers, 1998), as approach vs. avoidance, and as self vs.

Abbreviations: APIM, Actor-Partner Interdependence Model; BC, bias-corrected; CI, confidence interval; ISS, Index of Sexual Satisfaction; PNI, Pathological Narcissism Index; SSF, sexual satisfaction and functioning.

* MSW, School of Social Work, Faculty of Social Sciences, Bar Ilan University, Ramat Gan 5290002, Israel.

E-mail address: ateret.meydan@gmail.com.

social focus (Cooper et al., 1998; Impett, Peplau, & Gable, 2005). According to Cooper et al. (1998) self-focused goals are primarily motivated by agentic, identity, or autonomy-competence needs and include using sex to affirm one's sense of identity or attractiveness or to manage one's internal emotional experience. This study sought to understand why narcissistic individuals engage in sex and how specific sexual motives help regulate or satisfy narcissistic needs.

1.1. The present study

Previous studies often tied narcissism to pathological aspects of sexuality, such as aggressive, sexually-coercive behaviour (Blinkhorn, Lyons, & Almond, 2015; Widman & McNulty, 2010), and transmission and acquisition of sexually transmitted diseases (Bjekic et al., 2002). Narcissism was often examined among individuals in dating relationships (Foster et al., 2006) or newlyweds (McNulty & Widman, 2013). This study was conducted from a dyadic perspective among a sample of co-parenting couples in steady, long-term relationships. It aimed to understand what motivates narcissistic individuals to engage in sex with their partners and the outcomes in terms of SSF. The central thesis is that SSF of narcissistic individuals and their partners depends at least in part on the motives that underlie sexual activity. It is hypothesized that narcissistic individuals will be motivated by their desire to reassure their own value and worth rather than a desire for intimacy, which eventually will negatively affect their own and their partner's SSF.

2. Material and methods

2.1. Sample and procedure

The sample consisted of 128 non-clinical heterosexual couples ($N = 256$). Participants were recruited using various methods, including advertisements, snowballing, and social media sites (e.g. Facebook). They were provided with brief information about the study and contact details. Inclusion criteria were that couples had to be in a married or common-law relationship for at least three years and co-parenting at least one child. These criteria were set based on studies that document sexual desire (Liu, 2000; Sprecher, Regan, & Angeles, 1998) and sexual frequency (Liu, 2000; Stafford, Kline, & Rankin, 2004), often decline over time due to preoccupation with nonsexual matters concerning day-to-day family issues. Parenting can negatively affect the quality (Liu & Ph, 2003) and frequency (Barden-O'Fallon, Tsui, Adewuyi, & In, 2003; Call, Sprecher, & Schwartz, 1995) of marital sex.

Participants' average age was 34.4 ($SD = 8.9$) years, with an average relationship duration of 11 years ($M = 11.2$, $SD = 8.6$). Couples averaged 2.7 ($SD = 1.6$) children and had an average of 15.7 ($SD = 2.4$) years of education. Most participants were native citizens (87%); the

rest were immigrants. Most participants worked full-time (64%) or part-time (24%), while others were in professional training or academic studies, unemployed or retired (12%). Economic status varied from 'very good' (17%), 'good' (49%), average (30%) to 'very bad' (4%).

The study was approved by the ethics committee of the researchers' university. All participants provided informed consent. To promote honest responding, each participant was given a personal link to the study and asked to complete it separately from his/her partner. Questionnaires were identified by code numbers only. Data were collected online from April 2015 to October 2015 using Qualtrics software, which ensures the respondents' anonymity.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Pathological narcissism

The Pathological Narcissism Index (PNI; Pincus et al., 2009) was used to assess pathological narcissistic traits (e.g., I often fantasize about being admired and respected, It irritates me when people don't notice how good a person I am). The PNI is a 52-item measure. Response scales range from 0 (not at all like me) to 5 (very much like me). This instrument captures seven basic dimensions of pathological narcissism which were loaded onto two higher order factors referred to as Narcissistic Grandiosity ($\alpha = 0.89$) and Narcissistic Vulnerability ($\alpha = 0.96$).

2.2.2. Sexual motives

The Sex Motives Scale (SMS; Cooper et al., 1998) has 29-items designed to identify human sexual motives. Four motives relevant to long-term relationships were used: Intimacy (5 items, e.g. How often do you have sex to feel emotionally close to your partner?), hedonistic (5 items e.g., How often do you have sex because it feels good?), self-affirmation (5 items e.g., How often do you have sex to reassure yourself that you are sexually desirable?) and coping (5 items, e.g., How often do you have sex to cheer yourself up?). Respondents use a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (almost never/never) to 5 (almost always/always) to indicate the frequency they have sex for this reason. The reliability coefficients for these motives were coping = 0.87, hedonism = 0.82, intimacy = 0.81, and self-affirmation = 0.90.

2.2.3. Sexual satisfaction

The Index of Sexual Satisfaction (ISS; Hudson et al., 1981) is a 25-item scale designed to measure sexual satisfaction within a relationship. Participants were asked to indicate the extent to which each statement (e.g., My sex life is very exciting) describes their current sexual relations with their partner, reversed on a scale 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (None of the time) to 7 (All of the time). The internal consistency coefficient was 0.87.

Table 1
Correlation between predictors (narcissism, sexual motivations) and outcome measures (SSF).

	Sexual satisfaction M	Sexual satisfaction W	Sexual desire M	Sexual desire W	Orgasmic responsivity M	Orgasmic responsivity W	Sexual intimacy M	Sexual intimacy W
Grandiose narcissism M	−0.25**	−0.13	0.14	0.15	−0.06	0.02	−0.13	−0.07
Grandiose narcissism W	−0.16	−0.20*	0.10	0.10	−0.07	−0.14	−0.17	−0.18*
Vulnerable narcissism M	−0.26**	−0.09	0.13	0.12	−0.16	0.03	−0.11	−0.09
Vulnerable narcissism W	−0.13	−0.17	0.18*	0.14	−0.08	−0.10	−0.16	−0.20*
Affirmation M	−0.24*	−0.06	0.12	0.22*	−0.28**	0.12	−0.06	0.04
Affirmation W	−0.11	−0.03	0.14	0.18*	−0.08	0.06	−0.03	0.10
Intimacy M	0.25**	0.12	0.09	0.09	0.08	0.13	0.28**	0.05
Intimacy W	0.13	0.35***	0.21*	0.14	0.16	0.29**	0.18*	0.46***
Hedonism M	0.11	0.12	0.10	0.07	0.21*	0.33***	0.18*	0.13
Hedonism W	0.18*	0.34***	0.14	0.27**	0.07	0.41***	0.25**	0.35***
Coping M	−0.22*	−0.03	0.13	0.18*	−0.11	0.10	0.03	0.10
Coping W	−0.04	0.02	0.12	0.21*	−0.03	0.11	−0.02	0.11

M = men, W = women.

* $p < 0.05$.

** $p < 0.01$.

*** $p < 0.001$.

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