



# Narcissism and observed communication in couples

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 8 August 2016

Received in revised form 23 September 2016

Accepted 26 September 2016

Available online 5 October 2016

### Keywords:

Narcissism  
Communication  
Observational  
Couples  
Dyadic

## ABSTRACT

Narcissism is associated with dysfunction in interpersonal relationships. Empirically, limited information is available about how narcissism affects observed interactions in romantic relationships. In this study, we employed dyadic data analyses to investigate the effects of narcissism on relationship functioning. Young adult couples ( $N = 54$  couples) participated in a neutral discussion task, and their communication behaviors (hostility, anger, and positive affect) were coded by observers. We also assessed self-reported relationship satisfaction and narcissism. Results of multilevel models revealed that women with higher levels of narcissism demonstrated significantly higher levels of hostility, as did their male partners. Men also displayed more anger if their female partner had higher levels of narcissism. Narcissism was not associated with observed positive affect in any of the analyses. Results are consistent with previous research on couples in highlighting that women's narcissism is associated with more difficulties in romantic relationships for women and their male partners. Findings are discussed with attention to better understanding the behaviors that lead to dissatisfaction and dysfunction in romantic relationships where narcissism is present.

Published by Elsevier Ltd.

## 1. Introduction

Narcissism, which can be conceptualized both as a personality trait and personality disorder, is characterized by antagonism, preoccupation with the self, and lack of empathy. It is associated with dysfunction in interpersonal relationships, including causing pain and suffering in close others (Miller, Campbell, & Piskonis, 2007). In the context of romantic relationships, narcissism has been consistently associated with negative consequences for romantic partners when measured at a trait-based level (Campbell & Campbell, 2009; Lavner, Lamkin, Miller, Campbell, & Karney, 2016). For example, individuals who previously dated a narcissistic individual reported experiencing steeper declines in relationship satisfaction over time compared to those who dated non-narcissistic partners (Brunell & Campbell, 2011). Gender differences may be pertinent as well. In general, men have higher overall narcissism scores than do women (Grijalva et al., 2015). However, in a longitudinal study of heterosexual newlyweds, it was wives' narcissism that predicted declines in marital satisfaction and increases in marital problems over the first four years of marriage (Lavner et al., 2016). These studies provide some insight into the self-reported relationship impairment associated with narcissism. The current study seeks to build on this work by examining how narcissism affects observed couples' communication,

providing a more objective measure of interpersonal dysfunction in the context of romantic relationships.

Early investigations of narcissism revealed that narcissism is associated with self-reported problems with anger, especially when coupled with high self-esteem (Papps & O'Carroll, 1998). These patterns have generally been supported in observational studies as well. For example, Rhodewalt and Morf (1998) found that individuals with higher narcissism scores responded with stronger changes in anger, anxiety, and self-esteem when informed that they had failed a task after previously succeeding in one. Many laboratory tasks used to assess narcissistic behavior similarly emphasize eliciting negative affect (especially aggression) from narcissistic participants and give less opportunity for other types of responses (Nevecka, Baas, & Ten Velden, 2015). Given this emphasis, there is a substantial body of literature that has established that narcissistic individuals respond more negatively to criticism, rejection, and failure than people with lower narcissism scores (Horton & Sedikides, 2009; Smalley & Stake, 1996; Twenge & Campbell, 2003).

This same pattern holds true for studies that apply narcissism-focused behavioral paradigms to romantic couples. Thus far, the few studies that assess narcissistic traits in relation to behavior in an observed task between romantic partners are conflict-oriented. Peterson and DeHart (2014) demonstrated that narcissistic individuals were more likely to engage in hostility (e.g., criticism, insults) when discussing a conflict with their partner. In another study, Keller et al. (2014) rated the behavior of couples playing a competitive game. In general, individuals with higher narcissism scores were more likely to exhibit angry/aggressive behavior toward their partner during the task. Although conflict-oriented tasks such as these provide interesting information about narcissistic behavior, tasks that were intentionally designed to

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evoke hostility or aggression make it difficult to see the general presentation of narcissistic behavior when an individual is not necessarily threatened or challenged. A more neutral task would provide the opportunity to observe couples in a context that may better reflect their day-to-day interactions. Moreover, these tasks have not tested whether narcissistic individuals also exhibit attenuated positive communication behaviors in addition to greater negative behaviors.

In the present study, we sought to investigate whether self-reported narcissism was linked to aspects of observed communication (hostility, anger, and positive affect) in a neutral discussion task (i.e., planning a vacation together) among a sample of heterosexual couples. We paid particular attention to gender effects and analyzed the effects of men's and women's narcissism on their own and their partner's outcomes simultaneously using multilevel models (Atkins, 2005; Raudenbush, Brennan, & Barnett, 1995). We also examined the association between narcissism and self-reported relationship satisfaction. We hypothesized that higher narcissism would be associated with higher levels of hostility and anger, and associated with lower levels of positive affect and relationship satisfaction.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

Participants were drawn from a sample of 60 young adult dyads in heterosexual romantic relationships; all participants were undergraduate students. Of this sample, six couples were dropped because the partners failed to complete the discussion task, so there were no observational data available for these dyads. Final sample size was 54 dyads. Couples' relationship length ranged from 1 to 66 months, with most couples in relationships for over a year ( $M = 18.15$ ,  $SD = 15.90$ ). A majority (89.3%) of the couples described themselves as dating, one couple was engaged, and four were married. The average participant age was 19.43 years ( $SD = 1.39$ ). The ethnic composition of the sample was 69.6% Caucasian, 14.3% Asian, 8.9% Latino, and 7.1% mixed race.

### 2.2. Procedure

Study participants were recruited from fliers posted throughout campus as well as through the University Psychology Research Pool, and completed an online survey as part of a broader study. Participants who endorsed being part of an exclusive romantic relationship were invited to participate in the lab-based portion of the study. All participants had to be at least 18 years of age; participants and their partners consented individually for the study. Couples participated in observational communication tasks (described below), which were video-recorded by research assistants. Following these interactions, participants and their partners completed self-report questionnaires in separate rooms. Participants received course credit for research participation, or \$20; partners received \$20. All study procedures were approved by the University's Institutional Review Board.

### 2.3. Measures

#### 2.3.1. Narcissism

The Narcissism Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Terry, 1988) is a 40-item, forced-choice measure of trait grandiose narcissism. We used the NPI total score, which demonstrated adequate reliability for men and women (men's  $\alpha = 0.84$ , women's  $\alpha = 0.81$ ). Men's and women's narcissism scores were not significantly correlated:  $r(53) = 0.04$ ,  $p > 0.10$ .

#### 2.3.2. Behavioral observations of couples' communication

Ratings of positive affect, anger, and hostility were derived from observations in the lab during a task in which each dyad was asked to

engage in a 10-min discussion to plan a hypothetical five-day vacation, with a \$3000 budget and two activities per day. Each person was rated separately by trained observers (described below). All scales were scored on 1–7 (low to high) Likert scales using detailed coding schemes drawn from the *Minnesota Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children* (2003). In this macrocoding system, each participant is given a single score for each code at the end of the task. Inter-rater reliabilities were calculated for each scale for 30% of the sample and found to be adequate (ICCs = 0.79 for positive affect, 0.81 for anger, and 0.81 for hostility). Anger and hostility were coded separately in order to distinguish different aspects of behavior as described below; the correlation between them was  $r = 0.62$ ,  $p < 0.01$ .

*Positive affect* captures the participant's expressed pleasure and enjoyment in the task and/or in being with the partner. Positive affect as defined here is more than simply interest. High levels of positive affect were characterized by frequent smiling, laughter, and enjoyment. Low levels of positive affect were indicated by limited signs of genuine enjoyment, where affect was either negative or restricted. Observed ratings for positive affect ranged from 1 to 7 ( $mean = 4.16$ ,  $SD = 1.37$ ).

*Anger* is observed primarily through direct and active behavioral signs, including signs of fighting (blazing eyes, raised voices, confrontative style), voice tone (irritation, impatience, frustration), and/or snarls (quick cut with provocation). Anger also can be manifested in more passive ways such as pouting, turning away, and not offering or rejecting an opinion. High levels on this scale indicate behaviors throughout the interaction characterized by anger as well as inadequate or inconsistent ability to modulate one's own anger. Low levels on this scale are characterized by a lack of intensity with few, if any, signs of anger. Observed ratings for anger ranged from 1 to 5 ( $mean = 1.30$ ,  $SD = 0.72$ ).

*Hostility* is distinct from the anger scale because hostility is defined as behaviors that are not intended to engage or elicit a response from the partner. There is no expectation on the part of the individual that a satisfactory resolution will ensue through the use of hostility. Hostility was rated as high if the participants made cold and rejecting comments or easily expressed hurtful comments that conveyed hopelessness at conflict resolution. Low hostility was characterized by few, if any, mild putdowns that also conveyed hope at resolving any conflict. Observed ratings for hostility ranged from 1 to 7 ( $mean = 1.33$ ,  $SD = 0.86$ ).

#### 2.3.3. Relationship satisfaction

Participants rated their current level of relationship satisfaction using the Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS; Hendrick, 1988). The RAS assesses global relationship satisfaction using 7 items on a 5-point Likert-type scale, with higher scores indicating greater relationship satisfaction. This scale is appropriate for married, dating, or co-habiting couples. Internal consistency for this scale in the current study was 0.82 for both male and female participants.

## 3. Results

We first used correlations to examine how self- and partner- narcissism were associated with observed communication (hostility, anger, and positive affect) and with self-reported relationship satisfaction (Table 1). No significant effects were found for men's narcissism, but results for women's narcissism were more robust. Specifically, women's narcissism was positively associated with their own observed hostility and their male partner's observed hostility and anger (all  $p < 0.05$ ), reflecting communication that was more negative when women reported higher levels of narcissism. No significant associations were found between women's narcissism and positive affect or relationship satisfaction for themselves or for their male partners.

To examine the independent influence of men's and women's narcissism on their own and their partner's relationship functioning, we used a series of multilevel, multivariate models and the HLM 7.0 computer program (Raudenbush, Bryk, & Congdon, 2010). We used the

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