



Narcissism and gift giving: Not every gift is for others



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ABSTRACT

Although previous studies have suggested that narcissism and self-esteem carry different interpersonal implications, few have examined their differences in specific motivations behind relationship behaviors. This article detailed an exploratory study to identify romantic gift-giving motivations and examined their relations to the two personality constructs. Young adults in a romantic relationship completed measures of narcissism and self-esteem, and responded to questions about gift-giving motivations both in an actual past occasion and in a hypothetical future occasion. A factor analysis found three motivations for romantic gift giving: intrinsic, maintenance, and power motivation. When self-esteem, age, and sex were controlled, narcissism was positively related to maintenance motivation in the past, and maintenance and power motivation in the future. Self-esteem was negatively related to power motivation in the past and maintenance motivation in the future, controlling for narcissism, age, and sex. Our results suggest that narcissistic individuals critically differ from those with high self-esteem in their tendency to consider gift giving an instrumental act.

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It's not how much we give but how much love we put into giving.
— Mother Teresa

Not every gift is filled and given with love—or at least not with love solely towards the recipient. In contrast to the common belief that gifts are altruistic in nature, many researchers have noted the self-interested motivations behind gift giving (e.g., Sherry, 1983; Wolfenbarger, 1990). Inasmuch as some gifts are signs of love and intimacy intended to please the recipient, they may be self-serving expressions fulfilling the giver's own satisfaction (Minowa & Gould, 1999). This also holds true in romantic relationships. Past studies have revealed different reasons that couples exchange gifts (Huang & Yu, 2000; Schiffman & Cohn, 2009). Yet, relatively little attention has been paid to the individual differences in such motivations. This is surprising given that many interpersonal behaviors have been studied in relation to dispositional factors (e.g., Campbell, Foster, & Finkel, 2002). In the present study, we examined how narcissism and self-esteem are related to different motivations for romantic gift giving. Despite the similarity in their conceptualization of self-love (Campbell, Rudich, & Sedikides, 2002; Tracy, Cheng, Robins, & Trzesniewski, 2009), these two personality constructs are known to carry different interpersonal implications. However, their differences in specific behaviors or motivations in the context of relationship maintenance have been largely ignored.

1. Gift-giving motivations in romantic relationships

Researchers across various fields have taken different approaches to understanding why people give gifts. Sherry (1983) suggested that motivations for gift giving normally fall between the poles of altruism and egoism on a continuum. While altruistic motives indicate an intention to please the recipient, egoistic motives imply a primary concern with the giver's personal satisfaction. Goodwin, Smith, and Spiggle (1990) suggested a more fundamental distinction between voluntary and obligatory gift giving. In their motivational dichotomy, any gift giving is predominantly given with or without a sense of obligation.

However, gift-giving motivations of individuals involved in relationships characterized by intimacy, such as couples, may need to be differently approached. In romantic relationships, there is often an overlap between the self and the other (Aron, Lewandowski, Mashek, & Aron, 2013). When the other is included in the self, the other's resources and outcomes are to some extent experienced as one's own. In support of this, when researchers examined romantic gifts exchanged on Valentine's Day (Rugimbana, Donahay, Neal, & Polonsky, 2003), self-interest, obligatory, and altruistic motivations were found to be intricately intertwined. That is, participants' seemingly altruistic motivation to give a gift to their partner was accompanied by a latent self-interest motivation to maintain the relationship.

In fact, this finding also helps explain inconsistent assertions in previous research on romantic gift-giving motivations. Whereas Wolfenbarger (1990) argued that couples are mostly motivated by their own benefits, Belk and Coon (1993) argued that the exchange paradigm, in which gift giving is an instrumental act that assumes an

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egoistic motivation, is insufficient to explain the romantic gift giving. Instead, Belk and Coon brought forward the agapic love paradigm in which a gift carries purely expressive value.

Thus, the cognitive overlap among couples renders the romantic relationship as an interesting and adequate context to examine the comparative role of the different motivations, and more importantly, individual differences in the relative weight of these motivations. In short, are people more driven by a motivation to delight the receiver than to benefit themselves when it comes to gift giving in romantic relationships? And are there individual differences in this tendency?

2. Individual differences in gift giving

Previous studies have often identified sex as a variable that influences gift-giving behaviors (Cheal, 1987; Minowa & Gould, 1999). In general, women are found to be more active in the gift-giving process (Caplow, 1982; McGrath, 1995), presumably because they are more concerned with showing love and caring for others (Cheal, 1987). In support of this, when asked about gift-giving norms, women were more likely than men to provide responses related to the recipients' needs (e.g., "Giving gifts makes others happy when they are not"; Goodwin et al., 1990).

Other researchers (Fischer & Arnold, 1990; Webster & Nottingham, 2000) have noted the importance of gender identity or gender-role attitudes, rather than biological sex, in studying gift-giving behaviors. For example, Webster and Nottingham (2000) found that identification with feminine traits was positively related to experiential/positive motivations (e.g., "Choosing gifts brings out my creative side") while identification with masculine traits led to obligated (e.g., "I often feel obliged to give gifts") and practical motivations (e.g., "I think it is important to give gifts that last a long time").

Setting aside sex or gender, one variable that may also influence gift giving is how the giver views the self. In one study that examined sex hormones in men, although high prenatal testosterone exposure was related to giving an erotic gift to one's partner, denoting a clear sexual motivation, this relationship was found only among men with high mating confidence (Nepomuceno, Saad, Stenstrom, Mendenhall, & Iglesias, 2016). Apparently, only those holding positive self-views, in terms of one's own mating success, were brave enough to act on the bold motivations. This is in line with Schwartz's (1967) view that gift giving is self-defining, as givers confirm who they are by what they give. In fact, the giver's current and ideal self-concepts are found to largely influence the gift selection process (Belk, 1977). Thus, how one thinks of the self is likely to be differently related to motivations for and messages conveyed through giving a gift.

3. Two portraits of self-love: Narcissism and self-esteem

Both narcissism and self-esteem conceptualize a positive self-view. Although studies have consistently shown that they are positively related (Rosenthal, Montoya, Ridings, Rieck, & Hooley, 2011), statistically removing their shared variance yielded two distinct forms of self-love (Campbell, Rudich et al., 2002; Park & Colvin, 2015; Tracy et al., 2009). Indeed, narcissistic and high self-esteem individuals show difference in how they perceive themselves and how they behave in interpersonal relationships (Campbell, Foster et al., 2002; Park & Colvin, 2015).

More importantly, narcissism and self-esteem are also related to different outcomes in romantic relationships. In contrast to the positive relations between self-esteem and relationship satisfaction (Hendrick, Hendrick, & Adler, 1988), narcissism was found to predict low commitment, satisfaction, and investment (Foster, 2008). Nonetheless, there are few, if any, studies that probed their differences in daily relationship functioning. Insofar as the two traits make for different romantic relationship outcomes, they should display differences in specific relationship maintenance behaviors.

In the present study, we predict a divergence in how the two types of self-love are related to different romantic gift-giving motivations. For narcissistic individuals, romantic relationships are means to acquire admiration, power, and sexual resources (Campbell, 1999). They adopt a game-playing approach to love, are attracted to individuals who enhance their sense of self-worth, and have relationships that lack in commitment and caring (Campbell & Foster, 2002; Campbell, Foster et al., 2002). Thus, it is likely that their gifts reflect motivations that do not stem from altruistic concerns. For example, narcissistic people may consider the apparent presentation of a fancy, expensive gift itself an opportunity to display their superiority or power to their partner. At the same time, they may regard their partners as a part of public presentation of themselves and give them gifts for the purpose of positive self-presentation.

High self-esteem individuals may differ from those who are narcissistic in that they also place importance on interpersonal caring (Campbell, Rudich et al., 2002). As Rosenberg (1965) noted, self-esteem is a matter of "whether the individual considers himself adequate—a person of worth—not whether he considers himself superior to others" (p. 62). In romantic relationships, high self-esteem individuals adopt a passionate love style and hold positive views on their partners (Campbell, Foster et al., 2002; Campbell, Rudich et al., 2002). Therefore, their romantic gift giving is less likely to be an instrumental act or to accompany some ulterior motives. In other words, unlike narcissistic individuals, they are less likely to give gifts out of obligation, expectation for reciprocity, or desire to show their power. Indirect evidence for this was obtained in Nguyen and Munch's (2011) study where self-esteem mediated the link between attachment anxiety and gift-giving obligation. Anxious individuals who had lower self-esteem felt more obliged to give gifts to their partners.

4. The present study

The present study aimed to explore the relation between two types of self-love and specific motivations behind gift giving in romantic relationship. Although there was an existing scale that measured motivations for gift giving in general (Wolfenbarger & Yale, 1993; but see Babin, Gonzalez, & Watts, 2007), its factors and items (e.g., "Carefully selecting a gift is important to me" for experiential/positive motivations; "It's important to choose gifts that everybody needs, but don't yet own" for practical motivations) came across as inappropriate to be used in our study, especially for the purpose of uncovering the influence of individual differences on romantic gift-giving motivations. Therefore, we created an ad hoc scale to assess gift-giving motivations in the romantic relationship context.

Participants completed measures of narcissism and self-esteem and responded to the gift-giving motivation scale we developed. Participants reported their motivations pertaining to past gift-giving experiences as well as a hypothetical gift-giving situation. We assumed that responses to the latter in which participants were not financially constrained might better reflect participants' gift-giving motivations and show more clearly how they are related to the two forms of self-love.

5. Method

5.1. Participants and procedure

One hundred five young Korean couples living in Korea who were involved in a non-marital, heterosexual romantic relationship were recruited. The mean age was 22.10 years ($SD = 2.23$; range = 18 to 32), and they had been romantically involved for an average of 14.37 months ($SD = 11.28$; range = 1 to 56). Participants came to the laboratory and completed a booklet of questionnaires in privacy. The booklet included questions pertaining to their gift-giving experiences and measures of narcissism and self-esteem. They were then thanked, debriefed and rewarded for their participation. Fourteen participants did not respond

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