



The ultimate femme fatale? Narcissism predicts serious and aggressive sexually coercive behaviour in females

Victoria Blinkhorn*, Minna Lyons, Louise Almond

The University of Liverpool, UK



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ABSTRACT

Narcissism has been associated with persistent sexual persuasion, coercion, aggression, and rape conducive beliefs. However, the majority of research has concentrated on male samples. The present study ($N = 329$) investigated narcissism and sexually coercive tactics, varying in severity, in both males and females. Males scored significantly higher on total narcissism and sexual coercion. However, when narcissism was investigated in relation to sexually coercive tactics, it was found that narcissistic females were just as likely to engage in serious and aggressive sexually coercive behaviour. In addition, sexual coercion in males related to more socially desirable aspects of narcissism (adaptive narcissism), whereas in females, sexual coercion was associated with socially toxic components of the construct (maladaptive narcissism). Our results demonstrate that gender differences in narcissism can differ significantly when investigating the impact narcissism has on a specific type of behaviour such as sexual coercion. These new findings contribute to the very little we already know about narcissism in females, suggesting that both sexes should be included in future research on narcissism.

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1. Introduction

Previous research has suggested that personality plays an important role in sexually coercive tactics (DeGue & DiLillo, 2005; Kosson, Kelly, & White, 1997; Muñoz, Khan, & Cordwell, 2011; Voller & Long, 2010). Narcissism is a potentially relevant personality construct, likely to be responsible for increased sexual coercion due to being characterised by self-serving cognitive distortions, and the excessive need for admiration (Baumeister, Catanese, & Wallace, 2002). Indeed, studies have found a relationship between narcissism and persistent sexual persuasion (Jones & Olderbak, 2014), coercion and aggression (Mouilso & Calhoun, 2012; Widman & McNulty, 2010; Ryan, Weikel, & Sprechini, 2008), rape conducive beliefs (Bushman, Bonacci, Baumeister, & van Dijk, 2003) and domestic violence (Simmons, Lehmann, Cobb, & Fowler, 2005). However, despite most studies using sub-clinical populations, they mainly concentrated on male samples (Jones & Olderbak, 2014; Bushman et al., 2003; Widman & McNulty, 2010; Mouilso & Calhoun, 2012), and when females were included, they were studied alongside their partners as young dating couples (Ryan et al., 2008), or within an offending sample (Simmons et al., 2005). This study investigated narcissism and sexually coercive tactics in both males and females in a sub-clinical non-offending population.

Research has found that both sexes appear to engage in similar types of sexually coercive behaviour at similar rates (Schatzel-Murphy, Harris,

Knight, & Milburn, 2009). Females, as well as males, employ a number of sexually coercive tactics including the seduction of unwilling partners, manipulation, use of alcohol and/or drugs, and physical force (e.g., Struckman-Johnson, 1988; Anderson & Aymami, 1993; Fiebert & Tucci, 1998). Interestingly, Struckman-Johnson, Struckman-Johnson, and Anderson (2003) found that females employed more seductive tactics such as taking their clothes off (41.1%), and manipulative tactics such as threatening blackmail (3.6%) and to harm themselves (5.5%). Males lied to their partners more (42.4%), and also employed more physically coercive tactics such as restraining (22.4%), persistently kissing and touching (70.8%), and taking advantage of their partners when intoxicated (42.1%). Due to these differences, it is clear that any research into sexually coercive tactics should include sex differences, as well as the full range of coercive strategies from minor to severe.

A prominent theory concerning narcissism and sexual coercion is 'the narcissistic reactance theory of rape and sexual coercion' (Baumeister et al., 2002). This theory proposes that sexual coercion may stem from a combination of narcissistic tendencies and reactance. The general notion is that narcissism constitutes a personality that may cultivate tendencies towards sexual coercion. However, more specifically, when a narcissistic individual's sexual desires are rejected, they may exhibit reactance. This reactance can increase their sexual desire, motivation to attempt to take what has been rejected, and aggression against the individual who denied them. According to Baumeister et al. (2002), together, these responses may contribute to sexually coercive behaviour. Bushman et al. (2003) empirically tested and validated this theory over three individual studies. However, this theory, and subsequent empirical tests, focussed on male samples. The present study

* Corresponding author at: School of Psychology, The University of Liverpool, Bedford Street South, Liverpool L69 7ZA, UK.

E-mail address: Victoria.Blinkhorn@liverpool.ac.uk (V. Blinkhorn).

aimed to find similar relationships between narcissism, sexual coercion, and reactance, in both males and females.

It is possible that the lack of research on narcissism and sexual coercion in females is due to consistent findings of higher levels of narcissism (e.g., Grijalva et al., 2015; Paulhus & Williams, 2002; Tschanz, Morf, & Turner, 1998) and inter-personal violence (Conradi & Geffner, 2012) in males. There is a notable lack of research investigating female sexual coercion against males (Schatzel-Murphy et al., 2009), despite over 200 studies finding gender symmetry (Straus, 2012). Schatzel-Murphy et al. (2009) found that both sexes engaged in similar sexually coercive behaviour, however, the attitudes and desire behind that behaviour varied significantly. Male sexual coercion was predicted by deriving sexual pleasure from dominating someone in a sexual situation (sexual dominance) and a willingness to engage in uncommitted sexual relations or casual sex (sociosexuality). In contrast, female sexual coercion was predicted by a difficulty in controlling sexual urges (sexual compulsivity). In addition, prior sexual abuse directly predicted sexual coercion in females (Schatzel-Murphy et al., 2009). In order to contribute to the very little we know so far, the present study investigated narcissism and sexually coercive tactics varying in severity in both males and females.

In addition to focussing on both sexes, this study also used a measure of sexual coercion that might be more relevant to narcissism. Previous studies that utilised a self-report measure for sexual coercion focussed on the tactics an individual uses to gain sexual access to another (Ryan et al., 2008; Widman & McNulty, 2010; Mouilso & Calhoun, 2012). However, narcissists are more likely to react to disappointment with shame and rage, which can ultimately lead to aggression and a desire for revenge (Kohut, 1978), or what Baumeister et al. (2002) termed 'reactance'. Therefore, this study investigated narcissism and 'Postrefusal Sexual Persistence' (PSP), the act of pursuing sexual contact with a person after he or she has refused the initial advance (Struckman-Johnson et al., 2003). The PSP scale was used which assessed sexually coercive tactics on four levels increasing in severity from emotional manipulation to physical force (Struckman-Johnson et al., 2003). Due to previous research finding differences between the types of sexually coercive tactics males and females use (Struckman-Johnson et al., 2003); a measure incorporating a range of tactics varying in severity is crucial for studying narcissism and sexual coercion.

Not only may sexually coercive strategies depend on overall narcissism in both sexes, but it also may depend on the sub-facet of narcissism. According to Ackerman et al. (2011), the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI) consists of maladaptive, socially toxic components (i.e., Entitlement/Exploitativeness) and adaptive components (Leadership/Authority). They also identified a third component, Grandiose/Exhibitionism, which was not particularly maladaptive or adaptive in nature. For the present study, we considered the Entitlement/Exploitativeness subscale to be maladaptive and the Leadership/Authority and Grandiose/Exhibitionism subscales relatively adaptive.

The expression of narcissism can vary with gender (Philipson, 1985; Richman & Flaherty, 1990). Males may be more likely to express overt/grandiose narcissism whereas females may use more indirect and discreet ways to fulfil their narcissistic goals (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). In terms of which gender expresses maladaptive traits (Entitlement/Exploitativeness) the most, findings are conflicting. Richman and Flaherty (1990) found that males scored higher on narcissistic traits reflecting Entitlement/Exploitativeness and a lack of empathy. Further, Tschanz et al. (1998) found that Entitlement/Exploitativeness traits were less correlated with other narcissistic traits in females more than males, thus suggesting these maladaptive traits are less central to narcissism in females. However, a couple of studies have proven that when these maladaptive traits are investigated with gender and other types of behaviours, specifically sexual coercion and domestic violence, the findings differ. Ryan et al. (2008) found that in young dating couples, females with higher levels of Entitlement/Exploitativeness

were more sexually coercive towards their current partner than males. In addition, Simmons et al. (2005) investigated the personalities of males and females who had been arrested for domestic violence and found higher rates of clinically elevated narcissistic personality traits in females. These findings demonstrate that much more research is required to investigate the relationship between sub-facets of narcissism and sexually coercive behaviour, particularly with distinct male and female samples from a sub-clinical population.

To date, no studies have investigated the relationship between narcissism and PSP with a male or female sample and therefore, we present this brief report. We predict that sexually coercive behaviour will be present amongst both sexes, and the higher the narcissism, the higher the number of sexually coercive tactics an individual will report to have used. In addition, we predict our results will provide additional empirical support for 'The Narcissistic Reactance Theory of Rape and Sexual Coercion' (Baumeister et al., 2002), and demonstrate that the theory can also be applied to narcissistic females rather than just males. In relation to the subscales of the NPI, we predict that Leadership/Authority and Grandiose/Exhibitionism will not be related to severe sexual tactics, whereas the more maladaptive traits, Entitlement/Exploitativeness, will. Based on previous research, we can predict that females who score more highly on Entitlement/Exploitativeness will have carried out more severe sexual tactics.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The sample consisted of 329 participants ($M = 26.61$, $SD = 12.43$, 70 (21.28%) males), predominantly British (225) and American (78). An online survey was advertised at a University in North-West England to undergraduate students who could participate in exchange for course credit. In addition, the survey was advertised to the wider community via the authors' social networks, and also on psychology research participation websites.

2.2. Materials

Narcissism was measured using the 40-item forced-choice Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Terry, 1988). Participants chose between two statements, one of which indicated high narcissism (e.g., I have a natural talent for influencing people) and one indicated low narcissism (e.g., I am not good at influencing people). A score of 1 was given for each high narcissism choice (0 for a low narcissism choice) and these points were totalled to create an overall narcissism score (range = 1–36) (Cronbach's $\alpha = .89$). In the present paper we use the three-factor structure (Ackerman et al., 2011) where the NPI is split into Leadership/Authority ($\alpha = .80$), Grandiose Exhibitionism ($\alpha = .78$), and Entitlement/Exploitativeness ($\alpha = .55$). The low level of internal consistency for Entitlement/Exploitativeness is not unusual for this particular subscale (Ackerman et al., 2011) and is consistent with other research (e.g. Jones & Figueredo, 2013; Vonk, Zeigler-Hill, Mayhew, & Mercer, 2013; Cater, Zeigler-Hill, & Vonk, 2011).

Sexually coercive tactics were measured by the Postrefusal Sexual Persistence scale (PSP; Struckman-Johnson et al., 2003), a 19-item self-report questionnaire. The PSP is separated into subcategories that assess coercive tactics in increasing severity: 1) sexual arousal (e.g., persistently kissing and touching), 2) emotional manipulation and deception (e.g., questioning their sexuality), 3) exploitation of the intoxicated (e.g., purposefully getting the target drunk), and 4) physical force, threats, and harm (e.g., using physical harm). Participants were asked to indicate "yes" or "no" as to whether they had used each tactic after their partner had indicated 'no' to their sexual advance. A score of 1 was given for each answer indicating "yes" (0 for an answer indicating "no") and these points were totalled to create an overall score (range = 0–15) ($\alpha = .92$) and four individual subscale scores; sexual

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