



An exploration of the correlates of grandiose and vulnerable narcissism in romantic relationships: Homophily, partner characteristics, and dyadic adjustment



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ABSTRACT

The present study examined the characteristics of individuals ($N = 104$ undergraduate couples) who date grandiosely or vulnerably narcissistic individuals, including the experience of developmental trauma, general and pathological personality traits, and psychopathology, using multiple data sources. In addition, relationship duration was tested as a moderator of the relations between the narcissism dimensions and relationship adjustment. Actor–Partner Interdependence Models indicated that negative relationship adjustment was found when both partners had higher entitlement/exploitativeness traits and had been together for a longer period of time. Overall, there were no clear patterns of partner characteristics, although some evidence for homophily emerged for traits related to grandiose narcissism.

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1. Introduction

Narcissistic individuals possess a sense of self-importance, believe themselves to be superior or special, are preoccupied with fantasies of success and admiration, and expect preferential treatment (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Narcissism is also linked to a lack of empathy, sense of entitlement, and envy. More recent conceptualizations of narcissism emphasize the need to delineate between grandiose and vulnerable dimensions of narcissism (e.g., Miller & Campbell, 2008; Pincus & Lukowitsky, 2010), as these dimensions manifest divergent nomological networks (Miller et al., 2011). Grandiose narcissism is linked to extraversion, dominance, self-assurance, exhibitionism, and aggression; vulnerable narcissism is distinguished by introversion, defensiveness, anxiety, interpersonal coldness and hostility, as well as vulnerability to stress (Wink, 1991). Both narcissism dimensions, however, are associated with interpersonal dysfunction due, in part, to the antagonistic and intrusive behaviors associated with both. In the present research, we examine both dimensions in the context of romantic relationships.

It is unclear whether narcissistic individuals seek out a certain type of romantic partner. Given the interpersonal antagonism associated with narcissism, one hypothesis is that narcissistic

individuals might seek out meek, passive individuals who make for more pliant partners (i.e., “victims”). For example, perhaps partners with mood- or personality-related psychopathology and family histories of conflict or maltreatment might be seen by narcissistic individuals as easier to manipulate and thus appealing romantic partners. However, evidence from studies on homophily support another hypothesis, which suggests that grandiosely narcissistic individuals will seek partners who are similarly self-centered. Homophily, the idea that individuals partner with similar others, is observed throughout a wide range of human relationships (see McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001). Several studies have tested for homophily in relation to grandiose narcissism with some studies finding evidence for it (Campbell, Foster, & Finkel, 2002; Keller et al., 2014; McNulty & Widman, 2013) and others not (e.g., Ryan, Weikel, & Sprechini, 2008). To date, there has been no published work examining relational homophily as it pertains to vulnerable narcissism. Using egocentric social network analysis, Lamkin, Clifton, Campbell, and Miller (2014) found that both vulnerable and grandiose narcissistic individuals described, on average, the individuals closest to them in their social networks as self-centered, narcissistic, and disagreeable—suggesting, at the very least, that there is some perception of homophily among both grandiosely and vulnerably narcissistic individuals.

Campbell's (1999) self-orientation model of narcissism and romantic attraction posits that individuals with narcissistic tendencies employ a self-regulatory strategy in which interpersonal

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relationships serve to enhance and maintain their self-concept. Initial research provides some support for this model; for instance, even in a collectivistic culture that emphasizes communal values over self-focused goals (i.e., Thailand), narcissism predicted attraction to individuals who provided an opportunity for self-enhancement (Tanchotsrinon, Maneesri, & Campbell, 2007). Although all participants were attracted to caring individuals, grandiose participants were more attracted to partners who were described as admiring, attractive, and high status, and less attracted to other-oriented individuals who were described as caring and emotionally needy.

At this time, little is known about the manner in which vulnerable narcissism is related to romantic functioning. However, given that vulnerable narcissism shares a basic tendency towards self-absorption and entitlement with grandiose narcissism, one might hypothesize that vulnerably narcissistic individuals would also prefer romantic partners who serve as sources of self-enhancement. Actually entering relationships that provide these opportunities may be more difficult for these individuals to achieve, however, due to their more neurotic and introverted personality style (Wink, 1991). Furthermore, vulnerable narcissism has been linked to anxiety, depression, and maladaptive attachment styles, which may also impact romantic relationships (Miller et al., 2011).

Narcissism often has negative interpersonal consequences, including causing pain and suffering in romantic partners, family members, and friends (Miller, Campbell, & Pilkonis, 2007). Partners of narcissistic individuals incur long-term costs as a result of the decisions and behaviors enacted by their partners (Campbell & Campbell, 2009). Relationships with narcissistic individuals may start out positively, but then decline over time. For example, when asked to rate their relationship satisfaction at the beginning and end of their relationship, those who were dating narcissistic individuals endorsed a larger reduction in satisfaction than those who were not dating narcissistic individuals (Brunell & Campbell, 2011). This change in relationship satisfaction over time has been called the chocolate cake model (Campbell, 2005). In this model, chocolate cake serves as a metaphor for a relationship with someone who is narcissistic: initially, eating chocolate cake is enjoyable, but it comes with long-term costs (e.g., weight gain, discomfort) that lead to dissatisfaction. Of note, studies related to the chocolate cake model have typically used the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI), which tends to measure the primarily grandiose features of narcissism and NPD (e.g., Miller et al., 2014) and thus the generalizability of these findings to vulnerable narcissism is unclear.

Based on what is known about narcissism and romantic relationships, we developed two hypotheses and one research question. First, we predicted that partners of narcissistic individuals would also exhibit narcissistic characteristics. We further anticipated that grandiose and vulnerable narcissism would manifest homophily differentially through their respective personality traits (i.e., grandiosely narcissistic individuals would be more likely to date others high in extraversion; vulnerably narcissistic individuals would be more likely to date others characterized by introversion and neuroticism). Second, we explored the characteristics of those dating narcissistic individuals. Beyond homophily, there was no clear prediction to make as to whether grandiosely or vulnerably narcissistic individuals would have clear preferences for certain types of partners. We also included variables related to the “victim” hypothesis to test whether narcissistic individuals might seek out more vulnerable partners (e.g., histories of maltreatment; negative emotionality; personality difficulties). Third, consistent with the chocolate cake model, we hypothesized that partners of those with higher levels of grandiose narcissism would rate a relationship of shorter duration more positively than those

in a relationship of a longer duration. We hypothesized that this pattern would be weaker or nonexistent for individuals dating a vulnerably narcissistic individual, as these relationships may be less likely to begin with significant satisfaction. Additionally, we obtained peer reports about the relationships in order to have an alternative perspective on variables related to self-enhancement (e.g., social influence).

2. Method

2.1. Overview

We used multiple measures to answer the questions of interest. Our focus was on the narcissism scores of “Partner A” in relation to their romantic partner’s (“Partner B”) characteristics. We collected self-report data from both partners. Due to time constraints, only one member of the dyad, recruited via a research participant pool (Partner B), completed the full battery of questionnaires; their scores are used as outcomes. Their respective partners, who were recruited via email (Partner A), completed a shorter battery; their scores are used as predictors.

2.2. Participants

The sample comprised 104 undergraduate couples (50% male; 81.8% Caucasian; mean age = 19.6; SD = 1.63) consisting of participants recruited from a research pool (Partner B) and their respective romantic partners (Partner A). To participate, the dyad had to have been in their current relationship for at least 6 weeks. Of the 173 individuals who took part in the initial assessment, information on both partners was available for 104 couples. Participants who had a partner respond did not differ from participants who did not with respect to mean age, gender, ethnicity (i.e., % Caucasian vs. % non-Caucasian), dyadic adjustment, or narcissism.

2.3. Procedure

Partner B filled out a series of measures pertaining to themselves, their partners, and their relationships through a secure website for research credit. Each Partner B was also asked to provide the email address of his or her romantic partner and three peers.

Each Partner A was emailed a link to a secure online survey where they were asked questions about their relationship and personality. Partner A received ten dollars for participating in the study. Peers were emailed a link to a brief online survey where they were asked to answer questions about the couple and were entered into a \$50 drawing.

2.4. Materials

2.4.1. Demographic and relationship information

Both partners were asked to provide demographic information as well as duration of their current relationship. As there was wide variability in the length of relationships, duration was calculated as the number of weeks in the relationship. This information was reported by the participant via the question, “What is the current duration of your relationship?” Also, all partners were asked to rate their partners’ social status, influence, physical attractiveness, and popularity on a 1 (not at all) to 5 (very) scale.

2.4.2. Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS)

The DAS (Spanier, 1976) consists of 32 items that assess consensus, affectional expression, satisfaction, and cohesion. Analyses use

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