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Narcissism, vanity, personality and mating effort

Vincent Egan ^{*}, Cara McCorkindale

*Department of Psychology, Glasgow Caledonian University, Cowcaddens Road, Glasgow G4 0BA,
Scotland, United Kingdom*

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Abstract

The current study examined the relationship between narcissism and vanity, and the degree these are predicted by the ‘Big Five’ personality traits and mating effort (ME) using a sample of 103 females recruited from a large beauty salon. Narcissism correlated with vanity at 0.72 ($P < 0.001$), and was associated positively with extraversion (E), ME and the subscales of vanity; narcissism was associated negatively with neuroticism (N) and agreeableness (A). Vanity correlated positively with E, conscientiousness, both subscales of narcissism, and ME, and negatively with N and A. A composite narcissism–vanity score was produced using principal components analysis, and used along with scores from the NEO-FFI-R to predict mating effort. The narcissism–vanity composite, low A and E significantly and independently predicted mating effort (adjusted $R^2 = 0.28$, $F(9.96) = 7.74$, $P < 0.001$). These results show that mating effort is additionally predicted by narcissism as well as self-reported personality.

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1. Introduction

Although narcissism forms one third of the ‘dark triad’ of personality and is associated with low agreeableness (A) and other unpleasant aspects of character (Jakobwitz & Egan, 2006),

^{*} Corresponding author. Present address: School of Psychology, Forensic Section, 106 New Walk, Leicester LE1 7EA, United Kingdom. Tel.: +44 (0) 116 252 3658.

E-mail address: vincent.egan@le.ac.uk (V. Egan).

narcissism also promotes and protects self-interest, enhancing positive aspects of the self, and so is probably evolutionarily adaptive (Campbell, 2001). The role of vanity in this process is less well specified, but it seems plausible that enhancing one's own physical attractiveness could assist mate choice. Persons higher in narcissism prefer to look at themselves in the mirror (Robins & John, 1997), but this behaviour could be construed as vanity, as it places greater emphasis on physical self-presentation. The present study examines whether vanity is a “jangle” variant on narcissistic traits, and whether it adds to an understanding of how personality relates to mating effort.

The narcissistic personality inventory (NPI; Raskin & Hall, 1979; Raskin & Terry, 1988) correlates positively with Eysenck's extraversion (E) and psychoticism (P) dimensions (Raskin & Hall, 1981). These findings support the lay view that a narcissist is exhibitionist, assertive, controlling and critically evaluative. While Eysenck's dimensions of E and neuroticism (N) are satisfactory, the P dimension is problematic (Caruso, Witkiewitz, Belcourt-Dittloff, & Gottlieb, 2001). Costa and McCrae's ‘Big Five’ model of personality uses the dimensions of A and conscientiousness (C) to predict P-like qualities without confusing diagnostic labels and behavioural description; moreover, A and C are reliable to measure. Using a short-form measure of the ‘Big Five’, Kubarych, Deary, and Austin (2004) found persons higher on narcissism and NPI “power” and “exhibitionism” subscales higher in E and O, and lower in A and N. These findings suggest narcissism is a higher-order product of normal general personality traits.

Narcissism can hinder relationships; persons higher in narcissism are less likely to commit to a partner, more inclined to play emotional ‘games’ with them, and more likely to consider possible other lovers (Campbell & Foster, 2002; Campbell, Foster, & Finkel, 2002). It is unclear whether the narcissist's behaviour in relationships reflects the effects of personality, attitudes to sexuality, or both (Foster, Shrira, & Campbell, 2006). However, it would be surprising if narcissism was unrelated to mating effort. Mating effort is the “energy expenditure allocated to locating, courting and sexually interacting with individuals of the preferred sex and age” (Lalumière & Quinsey, 1996, pp. 34), is readily measured using a brief scale (Rowe, Vazsonyi, & Figueredo, 1997), and is related to self reported delinquency (Charles & Egan, 2005), self reported psychopathy (Egan & Angus, 2004), and general anti-social tendencies (Lalumière & Quinsey, 1996). This study examines whether narcissism correlates with mating effort.

Compared to narcissism and personality, vanity has been largely unexplored. The difference between these constructs is that narcissism can involve self-perception, whereas vanity is primarily about appearance. LeBel (2003) found a pilot vanity scale broke down into two components – physical appearance and confidence in one's own abilities – which correlated positively with E and O, and negatively with NEO-FFI N, A, and C. While vanity can be seen negatively (and its correlations with low A and low C support this view), self-presentational motives involving a concern for one's personal appearance and the desire to enhance individual attractiveness help persons to form relationships with one another, and appearing pleasant is likely to help this process. Rhodes (2006) finds concepts of attractiveness consistent across cultures and gender, challenging the view that such preferences are arbitrary and socially constructed, universal criteria for biological attractiveness being the averageness of facial features, bilateral symmetry, and sexual dimorphism. Such attractiveness is an adaptation to mate choice and signals mate quality, in particular, health (Grammer, Fink, Møller, & Thornhill, 2003). Not all persons are as attractive as they would like, so enhancing one's appearance can be seen as rational, and vanity's preoccupation with self-presentation potentially one expression of this concern.

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