

Narcissists: The Game Player In Relationship

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Abstract

Narcissism has a long and varied past as a personality construct. In the clinical tradition, narcissism is currently viewed as a personality disorder. The aim of this study is to find out the connection between love relationships and the narcissists. This study employed a qualitative research design. To fulfil this purpose, 100 university staffs were selected from a university in Selangor, Malaysia. These participants were then divided into two groups, A and B. A narrative session were conducted with both groups where questions related to narcissism were asked. After the session, all of the responses were made on 7-point scales. Scale anchors were generally variations on 1 (not at all) and 7 (very), and the data were presented in a table form. Results revealed converging evidence for narcissists' game playing in their dating relationships. Few recommendations are presented based on the research findings.

Keywords: Narcissists, love, relationship

INTRODUCTION

It is prevalently believed that self-love is an essential condition for loving others. As epitomized by the first quote above, this belief infuses the jurisdiction of self-help literature (Branden, 1994). At a societal equal, this belief may be linked to the self-esteem movement (itself an offshoot of the human potential movement), which has promoted positive self-views as a panacea for a range of social ills from unemployment to violence and teenage pregnancy (Mecca, Smelser, & Vasconcellos, 1989). There are numerous explanations for why self-love should promote love for others. Conceivably, individuals who do not love themselves do not trust that others can love them and thus avoid healthy love relationships. Or perhaps if individuals do not love themselves, they select bad relationships as part of an overall self-destructive strategy. Of course, the presumed link between self-love and love for others may also reproduce a misunderstanding of interconnection. When people love others, they breed in love for themselves—at least if the love is returned. The key concentration is on the individual-differences variable of narcissism. It is also examined that self-esteem and love in an effort to confirm past research and distinguish

the effects of narcissism from those of self-esteem. The study begin by defining narcissism and revising past research on narcissism and interpersonal relationships. Subsequently, the conceptualization of love used is also described in this research. After that, the experience of love of narrative accounts of those who have dated narcissists and non narcissists in the past to gain additional views of the link between narcissism and love.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Over the years, number of studies have been conducted to establish relationships between personality with various behavioural outcomes (Azianura Hani et al., 2019; Mohammad Rahim et al., 2014; 2017; 2021; Yeong et al., 2021, Sabramani et al., 2021). Narcissism has a long and varied past as a personality construct. Narcissism is extreme self-involvement to the degree that it makes a person ignore the needs of those around them. In the clinical tradition, narcissism is currently viewed as a personality disorder (i.e., narcissistic personality disorder; NPD). According to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (4th ed.; *DSM-IV*; American Psychiatric Association, 1994), narcissists share several defining characteristics. Narcissists consider themselves

to be different or unique as well as superior to or better than others. They maintain this grandiose self-concept both internally, by fantasizing about fame, power or love, and externally, by defending the self against criticism, associating with high-status others, and seeking admiration and attention. Indeed, narcissists display a predilection for showing off and may be quite charming in the pursuit of praise. Their inflated self-views are thought to have other important consequences for interpersonal behavior. For example, narcissists are said to be exploitative, lacking in empathy, and envious of others' achievements and abilities (American Psychiatric Association, 1994).

Building on the clinical tradition, researchers in social and personality psychology have conceptualized narcissism as a continuous variable (Raskin & Hall, 1979). This view of narcissism was developed by the extension of the characteristics of NPD to the normal population. Narcissistic personality approximates its clinical cousin in quality although not necessarily in degree. That is, an individual with an elevated score on a personality measure of narcissism is not likely to have NPD, the prevalence of which is estimated at 1% in the general population (American Psychiatric Association, 1994). Such an individual, however, shares many characteristics with those with NPD, albeit to a lesser degree. Throughout the article, the term *narcissists* refers to individuals toward the upper end of the continuum of narcissism. We use the term *nonnarcissists* to refer to individuals toward the lower end of the continuum of narcissism.

Self and Other

Narcissists' tactic to relationships is absorbed by two aspects of their personality structure: (a) Narcissists think very highly of themselves, and (b) narcissists are less apt than nonnarcissists to be concerned with relational intimacy. Empirical findings relevant to this conclusion mentioned that; narcissists trust that they are unique (Emmons, 1984) and smarter and more attractive than others (e.g., Gabriel, Critelli, & Ee, 1994). However, they could not simply be labelled as having inflated self-opinions. They do have highly positive self-views, but these exist only in certain domains of the self-concept. In particular, narcissists display what may be termed a strong

egoistic bias and an absent or negative moralistic bias (Paulhus & John, 1998). For example, narcissists report being much healthier than others on agentic traits (e.g., intelligence, social extraversion) and no better than others on communal traits (e.g., morality, caring). Likewise, they do not deem the latter traits to be as important as the former (W. K. Campbell, Rudich, & Sedikides, 2002). It is important to note that this research found a different pattern for individuals with high self-esteem. High self-esteem individuals see themselves as more agentic (although not to the degree that the narcissists do) and more communal than others see themselves. Several additional findings highlight narcissists' lack of interest in intimacy: Narcissists display self-focus rather than other focus (Emmons, 1987; Raskin & Shaw, 1988). They also report diminished empathy (Watson, Grisham, Trotter, & Biderman, 1984). Finally, they report a lesser need for intimacy than do nonnarcissists (Carroll, 1987).

Self-Regulation Strategies

What makes narcissism an especially fascinating construct for social and personality psychologists is that narcissists use interpersonal relationships in the service of self-regulation. In particular, narcissists are attentive in self-enhancing or maintaining esteem (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001; Raskin, Novacek, & Hogan, 1991b). They frequently accomplish this by seeking and expressing superiority to or dominance over others (Bradlee & Emmons, 1992; Carroll, 1987; Emmons, 1984; Raskin, Novacek, & Hogan, 1991a, 1991b; Raskin & Terry, 1988). They augment their sense of superiority to others by drawing attention to themselves (Rudich, 2001) or by performing exhibitionistic acts (Buss & Chiodo, 1991). When narcissists are thwarted in their drive for superiority, they may simply take credit for others' success and blame others for failure. This self-serving bias has been observed in dyadic (W. K. Campbell, Reeder, Sedikides, & Elliot, 2000; Farwell & Wohlwend-Lloyd, 1998) and group tasks (e.g., Gosling, John, Craik, & Robins, 1998; John & Robins, 1994). Narcissists may also express anger and aggression when stymied in their quest for superiority (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Rhodewalt & Morf, 1998).

Narcissists do adore status and dominance as a way to warrant their esteem, but they are not always heavy handed in their relationships with others. Often, narcissists' goals are best met by the use of a soft touch. Narcissists like to be surrounded by successful or popular people (e.g., the in crowd). To get this contact, they can be charming, flattering, or simply enjoyable to be around. For example, narcissists are considered entertaining and not boring (Paulhus, 1998, Study 2), energetic (Raskin & Terry, 1988), and socially confident (Watson & Biderman, 1994). Indeed, narcissists' anger and hostility may rarely emerge if things are going their way.

Narcissists' romantic relationships are in many ways a manifestation of their overarching views of self and other and their associated self-regulatory strategies. In romantic relationships, narcissists seek status and self-esteem rather than intimacy or caring. They are engrossed to individuals who meet these needs. These needed, trophy romantic partners possess positive qualities (e.g., success, popularity) and admire the narcissist (W. K. Campbell, 1999). Although narcissists seek perfection in potential romantic partners, they do not have an inflated opinion of their actual romantic partners. In fact, they maintain self-esteem and dominance by rating themselves as superior to their romantic partners on a range of positive characteristics and do not rate their partners as better than others (W. K. Campbell et al., 2002). Narcissists also report less commitment in their dating relationships than do nonnarcissists. This is primarily the result of the perception of elevated alternatives to the relationship. Narcissists report having multiple alternatives to their dating relationships and also report attending to those alternatives by, for example, flirting with individuals other than their partner (W. K. Campbell & Foster, in press). This courtesy to others includes sexual desire. Narcissists report elevated levels of socio sexuality (Foster, Shrira, & Campbell, 2002). For example, they report desiring multiple sexual partners and are less likely than are nonnarcissists to link sex with intimacy.

In sum, numerous things about narcissists' approach to relationships. They have highly positive self-views in agentic domains, and they

report diminished caring for others. However, narcissists want people in their lives to give them the things that they want (e.g., status, power, esteem, sex). Narcissists' self-regulatory blueprint involves bringing people in and extracting esteem from them. If that entails being, in turn, charming, exciting, deceptive, controlling, or nasty, so be it. We predict that narcissists' experience of love will reflect these self-views and self-regulatory styles.

Narcissism and Love

Before we make clear our model of narcissists' love relationships, it is important to examine the construct of love. One effective strategy for examining love is to use Lee's (1973) love styles (C. Hendrick & Hendrick, 1986, 1990; S. S. Hendrick & Hendrick, 1992). This work has partitioned the experience of love into six distinct types, or styles. These love styles are generally described using their Greek names. *Eros* is characterized by physical passion and a desire for rapidly escalating romantic involvement. *Ludus* is characterized by game playing, an aversion to partner dependence, attention to extra dyadic others, and deception. *Storage* is characterized by an emphasis on companionship and trust in relationships. *Pragma* is characterized by a pragmatic or practical approach to romantic relationships. *Mania* is characterized by an often painful obsession with the love object and alternating experiences of joy and sorrow in the relationship. Finally, *agape* is characterized by a selfless regard for the well-being of the romantic partner.

A Model of Narcissists' Approach to Love

The analysis part of narcissism and love is begin with a straightforward assumption: Love is a reflection of the lover—his or her beliefs, goals, and strategies. Consequently, to comprehend narcissists' love relationships, we need to consider their beliefs, goals, and strategies, as described previously. Narcissists come to romantic relationships armed with certain beliefs. First, they see themselves as smarter, more attractive, and more socially extraverted than others. Second, they are less likely to desire intimate or caring relationships with others. Narcissists also have several related goals in their interactions with others: (a) esteem, (b) status/power, and (c) sex. Finally, narcissists

have several skills and strategies that are effective in their nonromantic relationships and may also be useful in their romantic relationships. These include self-confidence, extraversion, charm, and manipulation skills.

What do narcissists do in the context of dating relationships? Relationships are good for narcissists because they can provide positive attention and sexual satisfaction, but they are bad in that they demand emotional intimacy and restrict attention and sexual satisfaction from other partners. The ideal solution for narcissists is to find a way to receive the benefits of a relationship without having to endure the costs—to have their cake and eat it, too, so to speak. It is convenient that the feelings of the partner do not need to figure prominently in narcissists' solution.

We suspect that the ideal solution for narcissists is to begin and maintain a relationship with a partner using charm, extraversion, and confidence. This gives narcissists access to positive attention, esteem, and sexual resources. They would be careful to keep this relationship from becoming too intimate or emotionally close lest they lose control. Finally, narcissists would covertly seek out other potential romantic partners. This strategy would allow narcissists to maintain power and freedom in the existing relationship. Likewise, it would allow narcissists to garner esteem and sexual access from additional partners. Finally, it would offer narcissists an easy transition to another relationship if their current relationship ends.

This strategy clearly corresponds to a specific love style: ludus, or game playing. We therefore predict that the defining feature of narcissists' experience of love will be ludus, or game-playing love. By adopting a game-playing approach to love, narcissists get what they want from a relationship while avoiding the things that they do not want. Narcissists should be adept at this approach because of the social attributes (e.g., extraversion, charm, confidence) that they bring to the relationship.

Assumed Predictions

First, there is little reason to predict a relationship between eros and narcissism. Some

of the clinical literature does report rapidly escalating involvement during initial relationship stages, which is consistent with elevated eros, but this is likely to be fleeting. Second, narcissists will report less storage. They are not likely to see relationships as growing out of friendship. However, there are other groups that do not see love as growing out of friendship—such a belief, for example, may be anathema to self-described romantics. Therefore, the negative relationship between narcissism and storage may not be large. Third, narcissists will report more pragma, or a pragmatic love style. They will be more willing than nonnarcissists to view relationships as a source of benefits for themselves. This is consistent with clinical reports of narcissists' willingness to exploit others in relationships as well as with research suggesting that narcissists use relationships to self-enhance. Fourth, we do not predict a link between narcissism and mania. Some clinical accounts do suggest that narcissists may show some mania early in relationships, but the research literature does not lead to any such conclusion. Fifth, narcissists will report less agape, or selfless love. They will be less willing than nonnarcissists to put their romantic partners' needs in front of their own. This is consistent with research reports of narcissists' elevated level of self-focus, high need for uniqueness, and low need for intimacy.

Self-Esteem and Love

Unlike research on narcissism and love, the association between self-esteem and love has received a moderate degree of empirical attention. The primary finding is that individuals with high self-esteem are less likely to experience mania. Manic love, or lovesickness, appears to be more symptomatic of low self-esteem individuals (C. Hendrick & Hendrick, 1986). Likewise, (Dion and Dion 1975) found that low self-esteem individuals experienced love more intensely and were more likely to report unrequited love. The link between lovesickness and low self-esteem has also been noted in clinical accounts (e.g., Moss, 1995). The direction of causation is unclear at this point, and one could argue that causation occurs in both directions. It is possible that self-esteem confers a resistance to these extreme and destabilizing

love experiences. Likewise, the experience of manic love may lead the individual to feel less positively about himself or herself.

Researchers have also reported a positive association between self-esteem and eros, or erotic love (C. Hendrick & Hendrick, 1986). High self-esteem individuals experience love more passionately than do individuals with low self-esteem. Similarly, individuals with high but nondefensively self-esteem report a greater frequency of love events (Dion & Dion, 1975). We expect to replicate these associations between self-esteem and love in the present research.

METHODOLOGY

In the current study, the predictions is tested by probing the relation between narcissism and self-reported love styles. Self-esteem is also assessed both to imitate past research on self-esteem and love and to resistor for the potentially confounding role self-esteem plays in the narcissism–love styles association (e.g., Morf & Rhodewalt, 1993; Rhodewalt & Morf, 1995).

In this study, narrative accounts from those who reported dating narcissists and nonnarcissists in the past were compared. Up to this point we have only obtained self-report evidence of game playing. There is no any validation of these reports, nor we alternative measures of game playing. Hence, this study used a narrative method to obtain converging evidence for narcissists' game playing. This study comprises two samples. Participants in both samples described their past relationships with two individuals, one who fit the description of a narcissist, and one who fit the description of a nonnarcissist. In Sample A, a limited number of specific questions about the relationship were asked. We also oblique the narratives themselves along scopes related to game playing. In Sample B, specific questions about the participants' experiences in the relationships we asked.

A total of 100 participants participated in this research. Sample A participants were 50 university staffs (40 women, 10 men) Sample B participants were 50 university staffs (31 women, 11 men). In both Sample A and Sample B, the experimenter asked participants to describe a past dating relationship with two

individuals, a narcissistic individual and a nonnarcissistic individual. Each participant thus wrote two narratives. In Sample A, a full narrative account of the relationship was given; in Sample B, only a brief (one-paragraph) account was given. Below are stories that have been asked to be narrated by the participants.

- Please tell a real story from your life in which you dated or became involved passionately with a highly narcissistic or self-centered [not at all narcissistic or self-centered] person. The relationship that you write about should have occurred in the past; *please do not write about a current dating partner*
- Who is a narcissistic or self-centered person? This person would have had numerous characteristics. He/she would have had a very great opinion of him or herself and have acted in an arrogant or vain manner. He/she may have thought or talked about fame or success. He/she may have also thought that he/she was “special” and was only willing to associate with other special persons or groups. He/she may have needed admiration and felt entitled to special treatment, perhaps taking advantage of other people. He/she may have been envious of other persons, or thought that others were envious of him/her. He/she may have lacked empathy or caring.
- Who is not a narcissistic or self-centered person? This person would have lacked several characteristics. He/she would *not* have had a very extraordinary opinion of him or herself or have acted in an arrogant or conceited manner. He/she may *not* have thought or talked about fame or success. He/she may also *not* have thought that he/she was “special” and was *not* only willing to associate with other special persons or groups. He/she would *not* have needed admiration and felt entitled to special treatment, and would *not* have taken advantage of other people. He/she may *not* have been envious of other persons, or thought that others were envious of him/her. He/she would have been empathetic and caring.]

- Please be as thorough as possible in your story. Why did you first become involved with this person? Did he or she do anything that made you attracted to him or her? What were the best and worst parts of the relationship? Finally, why did the relationship end?

After writing the stories, participants answered to several questions. All of these responses were made on 7-point scales. Scale anchors were generally variations on 1 (*not at all*) and 7 (*very*). The excerpts of the specific items were presented in a table form (**Table 1**).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis used two basic procedures. In Sample A, all the narratives responses were analyzed using chi-square statistics. In both samples, the variances between responses on the 7-point questions were compared with *t* tests. As noted in Table 1, there were only two gender interactions, and these were not consistent across samples.

All results are reported in Table 1 (coded items are italicized, and scaled items are in regular font). The pattern is very clear in both of these samples. Narcissists were described by their past dating partners as game players (e.g., “He was a player” or “It was just a game to him”). Narcissists were also described as being unfaithful in their relationships. Indeed, infidelity was reported in 24% of the narratives about narcissists and only 4% of the narratives about nonnarcissists. Narcissists were described as substantially more flirtatious with others (on a 7-point scale) than were nonnarcissists. Narcissists were also described as being more dishonest and deceptive than were nonnarcissists.

Those who dated narcissists also described them as over controlling and manipulative. Finally, narcissists were described in other ways that seemed consistent with a game-playing approach to relationships. Specifically, it took those who dated narcissists lengthier to gain insight into the narcissists’ personality, and this impression changed over the course of the relationship. Although it is not evidence of game playing per

se, this suggests that narcissists used deceptive self-presentation in the relationship.

Sample and items	Nonnarcissist	² / _t	Narcissist
Sample A			
<i>Partner played games</i>	0	5	5.29*
<i>Partner infidelity</i>	2	11	7.28**
<i>Partner lied to participant</i>	1	5	2.86†
Partner was faithful	6.66	4.20	6.13**
<i>Partner was overcontrolling</i>	2	14	10.95**
<i>Partner was manipulative</i>	0	7	7.59**
It took time before participant knew partner's personality ^a	3.00	4.58	4.72**
Participant's impression of partner changed over course of relationship	3.84	5.33	3.80**
Sample B			
Partner "played head games" in relationship	2.22	4.39	7.42**
Partner lied to participant	1.66	4.01	8.31**
Partner was faithful ^a	6.52	4.68	6.23**
Partner was unfaithful	1.68	3.27	4.65*
Partner flirted with others	2.36	5.04	9.71**
Partner was overcontrolling	2.38	4.51	6.41**
Partner was manipulative	1.92	4.65	9.37**
It took time before participant knew partner's personality	2.55	4.09	5.68**
Participant's impression of partner changed over course of relationship	3.96	5.80	6.40**

Table 1
Partner Narrative Accounts of Past Relationships With Nonnarcissists and Narcissists

As is often the case in the social sciences, the answer is much more complex than popularly thought. Indeed, there is a scrap of truth in both of these views. The answer depends on the chosen definitions of self-love and of love for others. The key focus of this research is on narcissism. Dependable with our initial predictions, it is vibrant that narcissism is linked significantly with ludus; narcissists reported maintaining a game-playing approach to love. Also consistent with our predictions, narcissists reported a more pragmatic approach to love and also a more selfish approach to relationships. The predicted link between narcissism and companionate love was small and only of marginal reliability.

This study obtained narrative accounts from individuals who reported having dated narcissistic and nonnarcissistic individuals in the

past. Across two samples, these individuals reported that the narcissists were more game playing (as well as over controlling and personally deceptive) than were nonnarcissists. Additionally, this study also found that narcissistic individuals reported being game playing and that their partners concurrently perceived them to be game playing.

The reason narcissists adopt a game-playing stance toward love because they feel that game playing is an ideal strategy for an individual who has an inflated view of himself or herself, is less interested in his or her partner's needs, strives to maintain his or her own esteem, status, and opportunities for extra dyadic sexual contact while avoiding excessive emotional intimacy, and has a confident, outgoing, and extraverted personality. Additionally, game playing allows the narcissist to stay in a relationship with the

concomitant benefits such as sex, attention, and status. Consequently, they would still have the freedom and power to initiate another relationship or garner attention from other potential dating partners.

To recapitulate, narcissists keep their love interests off balance and are constantly searching for other partners. Self-love as conceptualized by narcissism is not a boon for loving others. Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind that the narcissists' approach to love was not completely or totally pure. Narcissists do have some positive feelings for their romantic partners. However, they are more likely than nonnarcissists to be game playing and less likely than nonnarcissists to perceive love as selfless.

CONCLUSION

Does loving oneself lead to loving others? The answer is not the simple "yes" often noted in popular discourse. In fact, the opposite is often

the case. Self-love as operationalized as narcissism is linked to game playing and selfishness in romantic relationships. Narcissists look to relationships as a source of power or control, not as an arena for experiencing and expressing commitment. Narcissism does not lead to loving others in any interpersonally positive sense of the phrase.

In contrast, the implications of self-esteem for loving others are generally positive but are still mixed. High self-esteem individuals may be resistant to negative experiences of lovesickness. However, they may also miss the highs associated with manic love. These individuals also report greater passionate love. In sum, the ego can be as much of a hindrance to romantic relationships as it can be a help. Individuals looking to experience love may be best served by turning out toward the other rather than turning in toward the self.

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