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Narcissism and Response to Agentic and Communal Threats from Romantic Partners

Jordan Zuber

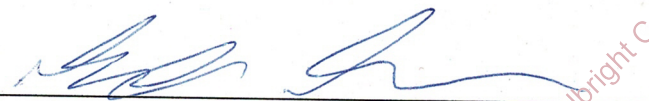
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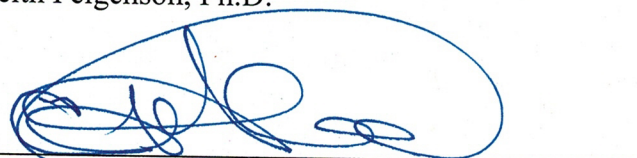
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Abstract

Narcissism as a personality trait can be studied in terms of its role in romantic relationships. Due to the nature of narcissism, caring for others is of less importance than maintaining one's own positive self-image. Agentic qualities, like being successful and intelligent, are more important to narcissists and as a result they are not as concerned with communal traits, such as being kind and intimate. Narcissists tend to think highly of only themselves, and for this reason they do not take well to criticism, even if the feedback they are receiving is from a loved one. The current study aims to test whether narcissists are more likely to react unfavorably to an agentic threat, rather than a communal threat, coming from their romantic partner. Couples (N=16) were recruited from Albright college to participate in a survey in the lab. The series of questionnaires led one partner to believe that his or her significant other was listing negative traits, of either agentic or communal nature, that they exhibit. The partner perceiving the threat was then tested on relationship closeness, perceptions of partner, and state self-esteem. Although results were not significant, there is area for growth in terms of future research.

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Narcissism and Relationship Threat

Narcissism is a distinctive personality trait that when displayed, can change the dynamics of relationships. Narcissists are characterized by an extreme sense of self-love and a need to be viewed as competent and successful. Thus, they often react negatively to criticism (e.g., Campbell, Rudich, & Sedikides, 2002), and are plagued by difficulties in their romantic relationships. The current research examines how a narcissist might react towards a romantic partner when he/she perceives a threat to an area of personal importance.

Narcissism

Narcissism is characterized by needing the admiration of others, and being overly concerned with self-image (Campbell et al., 2002). People are often referred to as narcissists when they display qualities that are linked with narcissistic personality disorder, such as presenting themselves in a selfish manner or obsessing over their own positive characteristics, whether those characteristics exist or not (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). They truly believe that they are better than the people around them. Narcissism, which was originally hypothesized to be a psychological disorder, has also been examined as a measureable personality trait that each person can possess (Lamkin, Lavner, & Shaffer, 2017). These traits can be found in the average populations to varying degrees, without reaching a clinical level (Raskin & Hall, 1979). According to research, everyone lies on a continuum when assessing narcissistic qualities (Raskin & Hall, 1979).

Narcissists' unrealistic view of themselves can often be the source of problems in their interpersonal relationships. Those with narcissism rate themselves much more favorably than others rate them and more favorably than they rate other people, and as a result expect others to

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serve them (Sedikides, Campbell, Reeder, Elliot & Gregg, 2002). These are not the individuals who accommodate others or even show much commitment in terms of personal relationships (Campbell & Campbell, 2009). These qualities make relationships with others difficult, as narcissists are mainly involved in interpersonal relationships for their own benefit. Since their overly positive self-views do not align with the reality that others see, tension can arise when others do not agree with a narcissist's qualifications (Grijalva & Zhang, 2016).

In order to balance this gap in interpersonal perception and the reality that surrounds them, narcissists engage in self-enhancing behaviors (Campbell, Brunell & Finkel, 2006). Their actions are carried out in a way that promotes their success. Self-enhancement becomes a tool that aids in closing the gap in perceived attractiveness and reality. When narcissists feel their fabricated reality being challenged, they do not react favorably. Twenge and Campbell (2003) studied social rejection in a controlled environment and found that narcissists responded much more irritably and aggressively compared to non-narcissists when under the impression that they were being labeled as undesirable work partners. When experiencing social rejection, narcissists will become aggressive in retaliation. They are less likely to experience internalized negative feelings of sadness nor shame when facing rejection; instead they experience externalized negative emotions and become angry and violent. When examining their reactions to competition, narcissists resort to belittling their opponent, even when the opponent is a close other (Sedikides et al., 2002). This is consistent with their overly confident views of themselves. Since narcissists view themselves so highly, they feel as if they should not be rejected or made to feel inferior. Engaging in negative behaviors as a reaction to forms of failure becomes part of preserving their interpersonal perceptions. When it comes to accepting judgment, narcissists give higher validity and legitimacy to positive feedback and perceive those expressing the feedback as

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more competent (Sedikides et al., 2002). They do not see the logic in negative feedback and therefore question the soundness of whoever is delivering criticism. Overall narcissists do not respond well to being judged, outperformed, or corrected by others. They believe their reality is intact and do their best to prove that to others.

Narcissists' inflated views do not affect how they see themselves in all domains. One area in which narcissists seem to judge themselves more accurately is communal traits. In a meta-analysis by Grijalv and Zhang (2016), it was shown that narcissists tend to exaggerate their agentic abilities, like being successful and desirable, yet they do not seem to inflate their abilities when it comes to communal traits, such as being kind and committed. When testing implicit processes, narcissists show tendencies to correlate their characteristics with those that deal with power (success, intelligence, dominance) rather than those involving intimacy (kind, committed) (Campbell, Bosson, Goheen, Lakey, & Kernis, 2007; Grijalv, & Zhang, 2016). This suggests that a narcissist might not find it insulting when being referred to as inconsiderate, but would take a large amount of offence to being called weak or unsuccessful. Since they are less likely to misjudge themselves on communal traits, there is no gap between their perception and reality as it is. Wurst, Gerlach, Dufner, Rauthmann, Grosz, Küfner, and Back (2017) describe how those with high trait narcissism are very sensitive when criticized, and as a result will mistreat their partner. Their view of themselves is highly regarded, and when threatened narcissists typically react in socially insensitive ways (Wurst et al., 2017). Research on narcissists' strongly negative reactions to judgement suggests that they will only react forcefully when they sense of threat to one of their agentic qualities.

The Agency Model

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One way to examine narcissism is through the Agency Model. Campbell, Brunell, and Finkel (2006) and Brunell and Campbell (2011) describe relationships with others as useful to a narcissist. Forming relationships can be used for many self-enhancing reasons. Relationships can become a source of reinforcement for a narcissist. Being chosen and adored by another serves as a very convincing ego boost. If a narcissist can say they have a partner, then they can support the fact that they are exceptional. Being in a relationship is almost like having a trophy to prove one's desirability. This further closes the gap between their self-view and reality. They also can use their partner as a constant source of endearment. The love they receive from another is not essential to their being, but it conclusively promotes their own egocentric views. Lastly, narcissists can use a relationship as a source of blame. If a narcissist is being associated with failure in any way, he/she can disperse blame onto a current partner. Narcissists' thought process leads them to evaluate relationships as a source of entertainment as well as control. The Agency Model depicts how interpersonal relationships are used as a way to serve narcissists in achieving their ultimate goal, success and admiration.

When dealing with narcissism, the importance of agentic versus communal traits can be explained using The Agency Model. Since narcissists hold so much importance on their own self-esteem, they use relationships as a reinforcement system. The Agency Model identifies the ways in which relationships serve narcissists. Through romantic relationships, narcissists are able to obtain the admiration of another. They can use their charming skills to prove their attractiveness. Since agentic traits are extremely important to narcissists, relationships serve as a way to associate with qualities like being attractive, successful, and intelligent (Brunell & Campbell, 2011; Campbell et al., 2006).

Relationship Threat

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Despite all of the qualities that narcissists lack that are favorable for romantic relationships, they still desire and carry out relationships with other people. As the agency model describes, their desire for a relationship is purely out of self-benefit, but they still choose to share their lives with another individual. Relationships involve disagreements and compromise, so it is important to note how narcissists react to such discrepancies and how their reaction varies from non narcissists in relationships. People may respond differently to relationship threats, especially in the case of their partner having doubts about them. When it comes to a person's self-esteem, a relationship threat activates self-protection in those with lower self-esteem (Murray, Rose, Bellavia, Holmes, & Kusche, 2002; Murray, Bellavia, Rose & Griffin, 2003). When those with overall low self-esteem perceive that their partner is dissatisfied, they respond by rating themselves even lower than before. As a result of facing rejection, their positive views of themselves decreased. They also tend to respond by distancing themselves from their partners, by viewing their partners more negatively and feeling less close to their partners. In terms of those with high trait narcissism, they can be expected to react unfavorably to rejection but only in terms of agentic traits as they focus on admiration and self-success (Twenge & Campbell, 2003). A threat to their communal abilities should not hold such power over them.

As previously stated, narcissists can become aggressive and even belittle the individual providing criticism. This should be especially true when that negative feedback is referring to an area of agentic qualities, rather than those of communal nature. In response to criticism, a narcissist is likely to channel their anger towards the individual providing the feedback (Sedikides et al., 2002), which in this case is their romantic partner. Narcissists also find the giver of the feedback to be incompetent, but only when that feedback is negative (Sedikides et al., 2002). To a narcissist, negative feedback is unfounded (Kernis and Sun, 1994). This could

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also be a driving force that leads someone with narcissistic qualities to attack their partner and the relationship rather than to accept the feedback. Overall, receiving negative feedback from a partner should elicit a stronger negative response and decrease closeness and engender more negative evaluations of one's partner when the threat is geared towards agentic traits as compared to communal ones.

The usefulness that comes from a relationship is diminished when a narcissist receives negative feedback from a partner. The agency model states that a relationship serves the narcissist as a way of associating with positive qualities, receiving admiration, and preserving an inflated ego. Upon receiving negative feedback on an agentic trait, a narcissist is no longer feeding off of the core components of their relationship. They might feel a lack of admiration from their partner now. They also no longer see their partner as a credible source, so there is no need to be associated with that person. All of the key elements of a relationship that serve narcissists disappear when their partner judges them negatively on their success and intelligence. Since narcissists are less likely to inflate their positive communal qualities, they should not feel as threatened by their partner judging them as "not nice." This reaction to agentic versus communal threats should differ for the general population as compared to narcissists. The threat a narcissist feels should cause a strong reaction, such as a decrease in partner closeness and positive perceptions of the partner, but only when that threat is based on the characteristics a narcissist is known to inflate.

The current research suggests that a threat to an agentic trait should trigger a more powerful response from individuals who show higher signs of trait narcissism due to the idea that their goal is to have a relationship that serves them with regard to agency.

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We hypothesized that those scoring higher on trait narcissism will respond more negatively to agentic, rather than communal, threats. Upon believing that one's partner does not regard them highly on some agentic trait (successful, intelligent, attractive), it is predicted narcissists will show a more negative response in perceptions of their partner, and relationship closeness than when a communal threat is presented, whereas non-narcissists will have a less negative reaction to either threat. We do not believe that narcissists' will differ in the extent to which these two types of threats impact their state self-esteem because they will ignore negative feedback that does not fit their self-views.

Methods

Participants

Participants were recruited at Albright College via classroom visits, flyers, and emails and received extra credit for their participation if applicable. The emails included a flyer stating that if those in a relationship can come to participate in the study, with their partner, then they will be placed in a drawing to win a \$100 gift card. The sample consisted of 16 heterosexual couples. Females made up 50% of the participants who were assigned to the manipulation. Of those assigned to a condition, 9 were placed in the communal threat condition while 7 were placed in the agentic threat condition. The mean age for participants assigned to the manipulation was 20.88 ($SD = 1.26$) and the mean age of their partners was 20.44 ($SD = 1.41$). Participants marked the status of their relationship with one "casually dating," 12 "exclusive but not living together," and three "living together." Relationship length was reported with a mean of 1.60 years ($SD = 1.55$) and a range of 2 months to 6 years and 4 months.

Procedure

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Participants were recruited and brought to the lab to undergo an experiment involving the completion of a questionnaire packet. One partner was randomly assigned to either a communal threat or an agentic threat condition. These two conditions were compared, with no control group due to anticipation of a small sample size. The remaining partner was not under any threat condition. The conditions were assigned prior to participants entering the lab, so the experimenter was blind to all conditions. The Relationship Assessment Scale and The Narcissistic Personality Inventory were measured before, and then partner enhancement, closeness, and state self-esteem are measured post-manipulation as dependent variables (Hendrick, Dicke, & Hendrick, 1998; Raskin & Hall, 1979). In a procedure adapted from Murray and colleagues (2003), the two participants were instructed to sit directly across from each other at a conference table. Participants were led to believe they were filling out an identical questionnaire packet, going at the same pace. They were instructed to fill out each page and wait until both partners were done to continue to the next page. The questionnaire packet was designed to look the same on the surface, no matter the condition (agentic, communal, or no threat). It included a series of personality measures followed by a demographics form before the independent variable was introduced. The current study implemented a similar technique used by Murray, Holmes, and Griffin (1996) in which romantic partners were seated across from each other and led to believe they were filling out the same questionnaire. In reality, one participant received a question that led them to believe their partner was giving them negative feedback on either an agentic or communal trait. Those in the no threat condition received a question stating “On this page, please list everything you can think of that is in your dorm room/bedroom at home (list at least 20 items),” while those in the agentic threat condition’s read “On this page, please list traits your partner has that indicate that s/he is not a competent and capable person. If

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you can think of any or only 1 or 2 traits, that's fine," and those in the communal threat condition read "On this page, please list traits your partner has that indicate that s/he is not a warm and caring person. If you can think of any or only 1 or 2 traits, that's fine." One partner was taking the time to generate a long list of items, while the other thought they were being criticized by their partner on either agentic or communal traits. The threat was followed by questionnaires to measure the dependent variables (perceptions of partner, relationship closeness, and state self-esteem). At the end of the packet there was a feedback form in order to assess participants' suspicion of the manipulation. Before starting, the participants were told not to speak throughout the packet as their answers should not influence each other. They were then offered extra credit if they were enrolled in a psychology course and had their names entered in a drawing to win a \$100 gift card.

Measures

Before introducing the independent variable, the subjects took the Relationship Assessment Scale (Hendrick et al., 1998) which measures relationship satisfaction using seven questions that are answered with a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (low satisfaction) to 5 (high satisfaction). Some of the questions included "How well does your partner meet your needs?" and "How much do you love your partner?". The Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Hall, 1979) was completed in order to measure each participant on their trait narcissism. The NPI is a 40 question test that, for each question, prompts the participant to choose which best describes them out of two statements. Some sample pairs include "Modesty doesn't become me" versus "I am essentially a modest person," "I think I am a special person" versus "I am no better or worse than most people," and "I like to be complimented." versus "Compliments embarrass me." They also completed other measures not of interest in the current

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analysis. Before moving on to the manipulation, participants completed a demographics questionnaire.

The dependent variables were measured using the Relationship Intimacy Scale, the Perceptions of Partner Scale and the State Self Esteem Scale. The Relationship Intimacy Scale consists of three questions that are rated using a 5-point system from 1 (not at all) to 5 (extremely). The questions consisted of “how intimate is your relationship,” “How close is your relationship,” and “How connected are you to your partner” (Letcher, Simpson, & Thomas, 2000). The Perceptions of Partner Scale was used to measure how the participant currently felt about their partner and consisted of 21 traits that were rated based on 1 (not at all characteristic of my partner) to 7 (very characteristic of my partner). The traits included traits known to be important characteristics that people seek in romantic partners, including “kind and affectionate,” “lazy,” distant, and self-assured (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996). Heatherton and Polivy’s (1991) State Self-Esteem scale was used to assess the individual’s self-esteem at the current moment. It is made up of 20 items that are measured using a 5 point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (extremely). Some sample questions are “I feel confident about my abilities” and “I feel frustrated or rattled about my performance.”

Results

In order to test if those with higher levels of trait narcissism would respond more negatively to an agentic rather than communal threat from their partner, the NPI was first scored by taking the mean of all 40 items for each participant. This made each participant’s score range anywhere from 0 to 1, where a score of 1 represents choosing the narcissistic answer for every forced-choice item and a score of 0 represents choosing the non-narcissistic answer for every

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item. Then, a multiple regression model was run for each dependent variable (closeness, perceptions of partner, state self-esteem) using a mean-centered version of the NPI score, condition, and the interaction between the NPI score and the condition as predictors. Inconsistent with the predictions, the results as shown in Table 1 indicate no significant findings for any of the regression coefficients. Table 2 displays the mean scores and standard deviations for each dependent variable and is divided by high and low narcissism (median split) and condition (agentic or communal). This analysis elaborates on the differences in partner perceptions, closeness, and state self-esteem of those scoring high versus low on the NPI.

In order to determine the sample size needed to see varying effect sizes, a power calculator for multiple regression was used (Soper, 2017). Three predictors were used with either a small (.02), medium (.15), or large (.35) effect size in order to define the minimum sample size. In order to detect small effects we would have needed 543 participants, with only 76 participants required for a moderate effect. In order to get a large effect a sample of 36 would be needed.

Discussion

Narcissism causes unrealistic self-views, and as a result leads individuals scoring high on trait narcissism to act aggressively in the face of criticism. This type of criticism can come from many sources, including loved ones. Due to the nature of narcissists' self-enhancements, they are more likely to disagree with someone who criticizes their agentic qualities, or ability to be smart and successful, rather than their communal qualities. In order to test this, couples were assessed through a series of questionnaires that measured their levels of narcissism. The initial prediction that those scoring higher on trait narcissism would react unfavorably when being criticized by

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their partner on agentic, but not communal, qualities was not supported by the results. One of the biggest limitations of this study was the small sample size. A small sample size may have been what caused the results to be insignificant, as our study was very underpowered. Even to detect large effects in our regression model, we would have needed 36 participants to achieve 80% power and 76 participants if the effects were moderate in size. In future research, the hypothesis that narcissists will respond more negatively to an agentic threat as compared to a communal threat must be tested using a much larger sample of couples. There is still importance in the question presented in the current research, and it should be further explored in greater detail in future experiments.

One way in which a greater sample of participants may be reached would be by changing the design of the study. The same question can be examined using a less effortful approach on the participant's part by not requiring both participants to be present in the laboratory at the same time. For example, a threat that came via a text message from one's partner could be implemented even if the partner was at a distance. This eliminates the need to have both partners come to the lab. This study could also be attempted with prospective romantic partners. In this case, single participants could interact with an attractive confederate and complete a similar manipulation and dependent measures. The use of false feedback from a confederate can be seen in a study done by Kernis and Sun (1994), where narcissists rated positive feedback as more legitimate than negative feedback. In addition, a large literature on social rejection has employed a variety of methods to instill a false sense of rejection by seen or unseen strangers (Twenge & Campbell, 2003; Buckley, Winkel, & Leary, 2004; Sedikides et al., 2002). These methods can be useful in future research, as it is easier to obtain a sample of single participants rather than pairs of romantic partners.

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There were also several limitations with the method of the present study. The manipulation required participants to stay completely silent, allowing their answers to remain independent of each other. There were times when participants did not obey these instructions. On the threat condition page of the survey, some participants stated things like “I can’t think of enough items,” or “Am I that bad?” These responses could have raised suspicions and, as a result, dulled the effect of the perceived threat. If the partner in the threat condition realized, from the remarks of their partner, that the tests were different, then the manipulation would not have worked properly. One participant had even stated that they already knew what study the current experiment was replicating. Of the sample recruited, 50% of the 32 participants were currently enrolled in a psychology class. The familiarity with the use of deception in studies is more common among groups that study psychology; therefore the chosen sample might have been more difficult to mislead. A second limitation was that participants’ narcissism scores were close to the midpoint of the scale, with the highest scoring only .63 on a scale ranging from 0 to 1. The norms used for the NPI were derived from Raskin and Hall (1979), using the normal scoring method, from 0 to 40, with a mean of 15.55 ($SD=6.66$). The scores from 8.89 to 22.21 (.22 to .56 when rescaled from 0 to 1) were within one SD of the mean. Most of the participants obtained in this sample fell into the normal range. None of the participants scored low ($<.22$) on the NPI and only 3 participants scored high ($>.56$). In order to test narcissism, some participants must be especially high on this trait and others especially low, and the present sample failed to show sufficient variability in narcissism scores.

There are also more naturalistic ways of measuring how narcissists react to agentic and communal threats within their relationship. One method for future research could be using daily self-reports of feelings of relationship threat and attitudes toward oneself and one’s partner.

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Daily diaries are very informative when dissecting reactions as they occur in real situations, as opposed to lab settings (Bolger, Davis, & Rafaeli, 2003). A diary also offers the chance for individuals to report on events as they occur in their everyday life, which is more realistic. A main barrier in this study was the effectiveness of the perceived threat. The fabricated threat that was implemented in this study may not be similar enough to the real agentic and communal threats experienced between partners. It might be more realistic to not mimic a threat, but to instead study ones that occur on a daily basis.

Narcissism is complex in its presentation and can be seen in the general public to varying degrees. Studying how narcissists respond to threats from a romantic partner is important, as it is an unexplored area of research. It is difficult to maintain a relationship with a narcissist, because they are so focused on loving themselves that they do not hold value loving others (Sedikides et al., 2002). Understanding how narcissists respond to difficult, yet normal, stressors in a relationship can lead to narcissists and their partners having higher quality relationships. The support that narcissism causes inflated views, but only for agentic traits, and leads to aggressive responses to criticism supports the question at hand. In order to understand the interplay of narcissism and romantic relationships fully, this focus should be undertaken by future researchers.

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Table 1

Regression Weights and Standard Errors

Predictors	Criterion Variables		
	Partner Perceptions	Closeness	State Self-Esteem
Narcissism	-.63 (4.12)	2.13 (3.28)	.00 (2.42)
Condition	.64 (.49)	-.039 (.39)	-.03 (.29)
Narcissism X Condition	-6.49 (7.31)	-5.76 (5.82)	-4.18 (4.30)
R^2	.211	.077	.104
$M (SD)$	5.08 (.97)	4.31 (.71)	3.55 (.54)

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Table 2

Mean and Standard Deviations of the Dependent Variables by Narcissism Level and Condition

Level of Narcissism	Threat Condition					
	Partner Perceptions		Closeness		State Self-Esteem	
	Agentic	Communal	Agentic	Communal	Agentic	Communal
High ($N = 6$)	4.18 (.83)	4.91 (.58)	4.33 (.88)	3.89 (.84)	3.30 (.41)	3.42 (.19)
Low ($N = 10$)	5.12 (.99)	5.60 (1.00)	4.33 (.72)	4.50 (.69)	3.76 (.74)	3.61 (.60)

Note. High narcissism indicates scoring a .51 or higher on the NPI where low narcissism indicates a score of .48 or lower.