



Brief report

Narcissism and resistance to doubts about romantic partners

Joshua D. Foster *, W. Keith Campbell

Psychology Department, University of Georgia, Athens, GA 30602, USA

Available online 8 March 2005

Abstract

It was hypothesized that narcissism would be associated with resistance to doubts concerning the commitment of romantic partners. Furthermore, this resistance might buffer against relationship dysfunction that sometimes follows such doubts. In support of our predictions, narcissism was associated with greater reported difficulty completing a task that involved listing reasons why current romantic partners might be less committed. Following the task, narcissism was associated with less relationship dysfunction, defined as lack of commitment, desire to accept an extra-partner dating invitation, and the desire to adopt a more game-playing (ludus) love style. The opposite pattern emerged in a second condition where participants were asked to list reasons why their current romantic partners might be more committed (i.e., narcissism associated with less difficulty and higher relationship dysfunction). Though narcissism is generally associated with lower relationship functioning, the present results illuminate a situation where narcissism may be beneficial particularly in the short-term.

© 2005 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Narcissism; Commitment; Relationship; Doubt; Infidelity; Game-playing

1. Introduction

In the domain of interpersonal relationships, narcissism is almost exclusively a negative for the partner, collaborator, or competitor (e.g., Bushman & Baumeister,

* Corresponding author. Fax: +1 706 542 3275.

E-mail address: jfoster@uga.edu (J.D. Foster).

1998; Campbell, Foster, & Finkel, 2002; Campbell, Sedikides, Reeder, & Elliott, 2000). This is especially true with regard to romantic relationships, where narcissism is associated with infidelity, game-playing, and low commitment (e.g., Buss & Shackelford, 1997; Campbell & Foster, 2002; Campbell, Rudich, & Sedikides, 2002). Narcissism, however, does appear to be a “mixed blessing” (Paulhus, 1998) for the narcissist. In the short-term at least, narcissists have an ability to maintain positive self-beliefs in the face of unexpectedly low performance (Robins & Beer, 2001). This ability to resist negative feedback can result in aggression, externalization, and other cognitive distortions (e.g., Rhodewalt & Morf, 1998; Stucke & Sporer, 2002; Twenge & Campbell, 2003), but nevertheless it is effective. For example, narcissists are resistant to repeated failures on intellectual tasks (Campbell, Goodie, & Foster, 2004) as well as to social rejection (Rhodewalt & Eddings, 2002). In the present manuscript, we predicted that this same type of resilience may be evident in the context of narcissists’ ongoing romantic relationships. Specifically, when asked to recall evidence that their romantic partners might not be committed to them, narcissists would (a) have more difficulty than others recalling such evidence, and (b) be shielded from making poor relational decisions (e.g., infidelity) after the recall task. This finding would be evidence of a potential short-term benefit of narcissism for maintaining romantic relationships.

1.1. Narcissism and relationships

Perhaps in no other domain have narcissists received more negative attention than that of interpersonal relationships. This is, of course, understandable considering the general nature of narcissism. Several lines of research on dating relationships now suggest that narcissism is linked to lower relationship commitment (e.g., Campbell & Foster, 2002). Campbell’s (1999) self-orientation model suggests that narcissists enter and maintain romantic relationships to enhance their own egos. They are less attracted to people who desire emotional intimacy, instead preferring partners who in some way can attract positive attention to themselves—commonly referred to as “trophy partners.” Narcissists also report paying more attention to alternative romantic partners and have been described as “game players” within their romantic relationships (Campbell, Rudich, et al., 2002).

In this research, participants are typically brought into the lab and asked to report on their ongoing or hypothetical relationships. However, little if any research has investigated how narcissists respond to laboratory induced relationship threat in the context of ongoing romantic relationships. (Two studies have looked at induced relational threat outside the context of an ongoing romantic relationship: Rhodewalt & Eddings, 2002; Twenge & Campbell, 2003.) In the present research, we focus on doubts concerning a romantic partner’s perception about the relationship. This is important because during the course of most romantic relationships there are times when we may doubt the feelings of our partners. Do they really love me? Are they really committed to the relationship? Do they really want to be with me? Research by Murray, Bellavia, and Rose (2003) suggests that these

cognitions can have negative implications for relationships. We argue that narcissists in particular will be resistant to such doubts concerning the feelings of their romantic partners. This resistance is part of narcissists' larger self-enhancement bias.

1.2. Narcissism, self-enhancement, and overconfidence

One reason that narcissism is so interesting to psychologists is that it is associated with the use of self-regulatory tactics that preserve feelings of superiority and esteem (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). These tactics are especially useful to narcissists when they are confronted with negative information or feedback and range from aggressing against those providing negative feedback (e.g., Bushman & Baumeister, 1998), to simply distorting feedback (e.g., Campbell et al., 2000). In a particularly clever demonstration, Rhodewalt and Eddings (2002) exposed narcissists to negative feedback from a potential dating partner and then asked them to recall their romantic histories. As expected, narcissists self-aggrandized more to the extent that they were given negative feedback. Additionally, narcissists are overconfident in their self and interpersonal abilities. For example, in a study by Campbell et al. (2004), narcissists reported that they would perform well in a future task, even after they were informed that they had performed poorly on 100 previous trials—of the same task. The authors suggested that narcissists make judgments about the self based on preexisting positive self-schemas rather than on objective observation. Likewise, Ames and Kammrath (2004) demonstrated that narcissism predicts inflated performance estimates following an interpersonal task. In this instance, narcissists reported that they were more skilled than others at knowing what others are thinking. These findings, taken as a whole, suggest that narcissists should be resistant to doubts about their partners' perceptions of their relationship. Even if things are not going well, narcissists are likely to positively bias how they think their partners view the relationship. Furthermore, narcissists are likely to distort their own impression of the relationship in reaction to threats stemming from doubts about their partner's perception.

1.3. The present research

We predict that narcissists will be resistant to negative information regarding how their romantic partners view their relationships. Specifically, narcissists should be resistant to evidence that their romantic partners may not be committed to them and their relationship. This resistance may be associated with enhanced relationship functioning by narcissists in the short-term. Consequently, one might expect that after attempts are made to make people aware of the doubts of their romantic partners, narcissists, compared to non-narcissists, will report higher relationship functioning. These two hypotheses were tested on a sample of romantically attached female participants who completed one of two tasks designed to make them aware of evidence that their partners were either less or more committed to them.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

One hundred and fifty-four romantically involved female participants (M age = 19.5) were recruited from the University of Georgia research participant pool. A sample of female participants was used because we have not uncovered significant interactions involving narcissism and gender in prior relationships research. Additionally, at the time of the study the vast majority of the research participant pool was female and thus gender comparisons were not viable. Most of the participants were either White (88%) or African American (9%), and nearly all of the relationships were characterized as dating (95%) and exclusive (91%).

2.2. Materials and procedure

Participants first completed a packet of questionnaires including the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Terry, 1988). Higher scores on the NPI indicate more narcissistic personality (range = 2–33, $M = 17.7$).

Participants were then asked at random to list (a) 10 reasons why their romantic partners were highly committed to them (positive commitment task) or (b) 10 reasons why their romantic partners were *not* very committed to them (negative commitment task). After this, participants reported how difficult it was to complete the task (higher scores indicate *less* difficulty). Not surprisingly, participants on average reported more difficulty completing the negative commitment task ($M = 2.5$, $SD = 1.8$) than the positive commitment task ($M = 5.3$, $SD = 1.6$), $t(153) = 9.7$, $p < .001$.

Participants next completed (a) an author-developed assessment of the extent to which they would *desire to accept a dating invitation* from an attractive person other than their romantic partner (higher scores indicate greater desire; range = 1–9, $M = 3.8$), (b) Hendrick and Hendrick's (1986) assessment of the extent to which they desired to behave in a manner consistent with the ludus (i.e., game-playing) love style (higher scores indicate greater desire; range = 7–43, $M = 21.0$), and (c) Rusbult, Martz, and Agnew's (1998) assessment of how *committed* they were to their current romantic partners (higher scores indicate greater commitment; range 0–56, $M = 43.9$). These measures were then z -transformed and summed to form the *Relationship Dysfunction Index* (commitment was reverse scored; higher scores indicate greater dysfunction; range = -1.3 to 2.2, $M = 0.0$).

3. Results

We predicted that narcissism would be associated with greater difficulty conjuring reasons why romantic partners were less committed to them, and less relationship dysfunction following this task. Consistent with this, a significant Narcissism \times Condition interaction emerged, $t(153) = 2.1$, $p < .05$. Simple slopes tests (see Aiken & West, 1991) revealed that narcissists (i.e., participants with NPI scores 1 SD above the mean)

reported the negative commitment task to be significantly more difficult than did non-narcissists (i.e., participants with NPI scores 1 *SD* below the mean); conversely, narcissists reported descriptively more ease (though not statistically significant) completing the positive commitment task than did non-narcissists.

We next submitted the Relationship Dysfunction Index to a regression analysis with Narcissism, Condition, and the Narcissism \times Condition interaction term as predictors. As expected, a significant interaction emerged, $t(153) = 2.8$, $p < .01$. Simple slopes tests revealed that narcissists reported less dysfunction than did non-narcissists following the negative commitment task condition, but more dysfunction following the positive commitment task condition (see Fig. 1). Similar interactions were found with each of the variables that formed our Relationship Dysfunction variable (all $ts > 1.9$, $ps < .057$).

3.1. Ancillary analysis

We did not explicitly predict a mediational model whereby task difficulty accounts for the relationship between narcissism and relationship dysfunction. Nevertheless, we tested whether such a model is statistically supported or whether a direct link between narcissism and dysfunction exists even after task difficulty is controlled (i.e., partial mediation). We tested this by comparing two nested structural equation models (see Fig. 2). The full model suggests that the Narcissism \times Condition interaction leads both (a) directly to Relationship Dysfunction and (b) indirectly to Relationship Dysfunction via the Task Condition \times Difficulty interaction. (We also included the variables that were used to create each interaction in our analyses, but do not include them in our description to enhance readability.) This model suggests that the difficulty in completing the two tasks partially mediates the link between narcissism and relationship dysfunction. In the nested model, the direct link between the

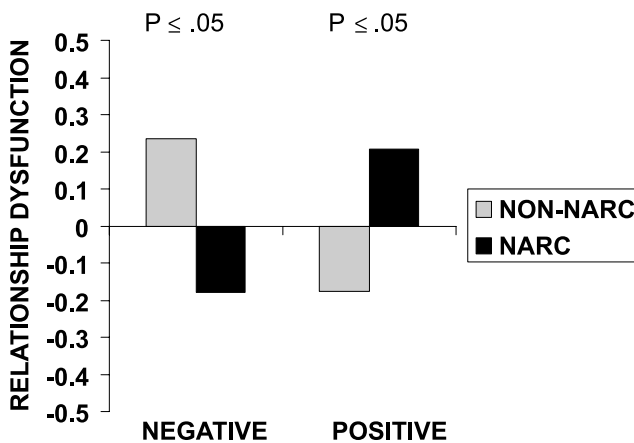


Fig. 1. Simple slopes decompositions of the Narcissism \times Condition interaction predicting Relationship Dysfunction. All p values less than .05 indicate statistically significant differences between participants 1 *SD* above the mean of the NPI (i.e., narcissists) and 1 *SD* below the mean of the NPI (i.e., non-narcissists).

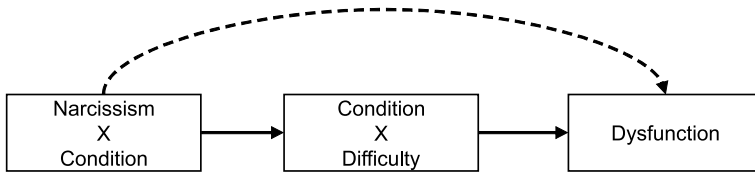


Fig. 2. Model depicting the comparison models (i.e., full versus nested). The full model contains the dashed path (indicating partial mediation), whereas the nested model does not (indicating complete mediation).

Narcissism \times Condition interaction and Relationship Dysfunction is removed, suggesting complete mediation. If the full model does not provide a significantly better fit than the nested model then we have evidence of complete mediation (support is given to the more parsimonious model). However, if model fit is significantly better for the full model then we have evidence of partial mediation.

Goodness of fit statistics suggest acceptable model fit for the full model ($\chi^2 = 11.6$, *ns*; comparative fit index [CFI; Bentler, 1990] = .94, root mean square error of approximation [RMSEA; Steiger, 1990] = .06, standardized root mean square error residual [SRMR; Joreskog & Sorbom, 1996] = .05). They were also comparable, though slightly less convincing for the nested model ($\chi^2 = 20.9$, $p < .05$; CFI = .87, RMSEA = .07, SRMR = .07). The two models were compared by examining whether the difference in χ^2 values was significant (see Steiger, Shapiro, & Browne, 1985). The difference was significant ($\chi^2 = 8.3$, $p < .05$), suggesting that the full model produced a better fit compared to the nested model. In summary, our data suggests that task difficulty provides a partial explanation for the link between narcissism and relationship dysfunction as they were related in the present study. There is also a direct link between narcissism and dysfunction that is not accounted for by differences in perceived task difficulty.

4. Discussion

To our knowledge, there are no published studies on the benefits of narcissism in terms of romantic relationship functioning. We suggest that narcissism may be advantageous to relationships, particularly when circumstances encourage doubts about the commitment of one's romantic partner. In the present study, narcissists, relative to non-narcissists, reported *less* relationship dysfunction following a task in which they contemplated reasons why their romantic partners might be less committed to them (i.e., negative commitment task). The difference in relationship dysfunction between narcissists and non-narcissists may have resulted from narcissists perceiving greater difficulty in completing the negative commitment task. That is, narcissists may have reported less dysfunction because they had more trouble thinking of reasons why their partners might be less committed to them. The mediational analysis was partially supportive of this interpretation. Narcissism was associated with less relationship dysfunction following the negative commitment task in part because of the association between narcissism and greater reported difficulty completing the negative commitment task. However, because this mediation was partial,

it is probable that other factors played a role in this process as well. For example, we suspect that the lower relationship dysfunction scores reported by participants higher in narcissism following the negative task condition may have partially been a direct self-enhancing response to the threat. Future research may target this and other potential causal factors to determine exactly why narcissism is associated with less relationship dysfunction following tasks designed to make salient relationship doubts.

Interestingly, the more typical nature of narcissism was evident in the condition where participants contemplated reasons why their partners might be *more* committed to them. In this condition, narcissists reported that the task was easier to complete, but also reported more relationship dysfunction following the task. Thus, in situations when there is less reason to doubt the commitment of one's romantic partner, which may be more typical than situations that promote doubt, narcissists function more poorly. This may account for the general finding of narcissism being associated with poor relationship functioning.

4.1. Conclusion

Narcissists may be buffered to some degree from negative information regarding their romantic relationships; specifically, the perceptions of their romantic partners' actions and thoughts regarding the relationship. This may provide a short-term benefit to relationships involving narcissists. Of course, there is a mountain of evidence suggesting that relationships with narcissists frequently suffer. However, it is hoped that the present study spurs research on scenarios in which personality constructs that are typically at odds with high relationship functioning may offer advantages under the right circumstances.

References

- Aiken, L. S., & West, S. G. (1991). *Multiple regression: Testing and interpreting interactions*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Ames, D. R., & Kamrath, L. K. (2004). Mind-reading and metacognition: Narcissism, not actual competence, predicts self-estimated ability. *Journal of Nonverbal Behavior*, 24, 187–209.
- Bentler, P. M. (1990). Comparative fit indexes in structural models. *Psychological Bulletin*, 107, 238–246.
- Bushman, B. J., & Baumeister, R. F. (1998). Threatened egotism, narcissism, self-esteem, and direct and displaced aggression: Does self-love or self-hate lead to violence. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 75, 219–229.
- Buss, D. M., & Shackelford, T. K. (1997). Susceptibility to infidelity in the first year of marriage. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 31, 193–221.
- Campbell, W. K. (1999). Narcissism and romantic attraction. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 77, 1254–1270.
- Campbell, W. K., & Foster, C. A. (2002). Narcissism and commitment in romantic relationships: An investment model analysis. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 28, 484–495.
- Campbell, W. K., Foster, C. A., & Finkel, E. J. (2002). Does self-love lead to love for others? A story of narcissistic game playing. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 83, 340–354.
- Campbell, W. K., Goodie, A. S., & Foster, J. D. (2004). Narcissism, confidence, and risk attitude. *Journal of Behavioral Decision Making*, 17, 297–311.

- Campbell, W. K., Sedikides, C., Reeder, G. D., & Elliott, A. J. (2000). Among friends. An examination of friendship and the self-serving bias. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 39, 229–239.
- Campbell, W. K., Rudich, E., & Sedikides, C. (2002). Narcissism, self-esteem, and the positivity of self-views: Two portraits of self-love. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 28, 358–368.
- Hendrick, C., & Hendrick, S. (1986). A theory and method of love. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 50, 392–402.
- Joreskog, K., & Sorbom, D. (1996). *LISREL 8: Users reference guide*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Morf, C. C., & Rhodewalt, F. (2001). Unraveling the paradoxes of Narcissism: A dynamic self-regulatory processing model. *Psychological Inquiry*, 12, 177–196.
- Murray, S. L., Bellavia, G. M., & Rose, P. (2003). Once hurt, twice hurtful: How perceived regard regulates daily marital interactions. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 84, 126–147.
- Paulhus, D. L. (1998). Interpersonal adaptiveness of trait self-enhancement: A mixed blessing?. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 74, 1197–1208.
- Raskin, R. N., & Terry, H. (1988). A principle components analysis of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory and further evidence of its construct validity. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 54, 890–902.
- Rhodewalt, F., & Eddings, S. K. (2002). Narcissus reflects: Memory distortion in response to ego-relevant feedback among high- and low-narcissistic men. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 36, 97–116.
- Rhodewalt, F., & Morf, C. C. (1998). On self-aggrandizement and anger: Temporal analysis of narcissism and affective reactions to success and failure. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 74, 672–685.
- Robins, R. W., & Beer, J. S. (2001). Positive illusions about the self: Short-term benefits and long-term costs. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 80, 340–352.
- Rusbult, C. E., Martz, J. M., & Agnew, C. R. (1998). The Investment Model Scale: Measuring commitment level, satisfaction level, quality of alternatives, and investment size. *Personal Relationships*, 5, 357–391.
- Steiger, J. H. (1990). Structural model evaluation and modification: An interval estimation approach. *Multivariate Behavioral Research*, 25, 173–180.
- Steiger, J. H., Shapiro, A., & Browne, M. W. (1985). On the multivariate asymptotic distribution of sequential chi-square statistics. *Psychometrika*, 50, 253–264.
- Stucke, T. S., & Sporer, S. (2002). When a grandiose self-image is threatened: Narcissism and self-concept clarity as predictors of negative emotions and aggression following ego-threat. *Journal of Personality*, 70, 509–532.
- Twenge, J., & Campbell, W. K. (2003). “Isn’t it fun to get the respect that we’re going to deserve?” Narcissism, social rejection, and aggression. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 29, 261–272.