

## **Ripples in the Reflecting Pool: Narcissistic Subtypes and Reactions to Past Relationship Events**

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**ABSTRACT** - The present study examined whether normal (i.e., adaptive) or pathological (i.e., maladaptive) aspects of narcissism were associated with more negative perceptions of a current romantic relationship following the written recollection of a negative relationship event. We predicted that individuals with high scores on the maladaptive facet of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (i.e., exploitation/entitlement) and those with high scores on the Pathological Narcissism Inventory would enact self-protective strategies following the recollection of a negative relationship event resulting in decreased satisfaction, commitment, and investment in the relationship, as well as increased interest in alternative relationship partners. Participants ( $N = 152$ ) completed measures of narcissism before writing about a negative or positive relationship event. Participants then completed measures pertaining to their current romantic relationship (i.e., satisfaction, commitment, investment, quality of alternatives). Results offered partial support for our hypotheses such that individuals with high levels of NPI exploitation/entitlement reported greater interest in alternative relationship partners after recalling a negative relationship event.

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Narcissism has received a considerable amount of attention from both clinical and social-personality psychology but attempts to integrate these bodies of research have had only limited success due to differences concerning the definition and measurement of narcissism (Miller & Campbell, 2008; Pincus & Lukowitsky, 2010). Clinical psychologists tend to view narcissism in a way that is largely consistent with the clinical manifestation of Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) which is associated with maladaptive features such as emotional instability and negative emotionality (e.g., arrogant or haughty behaviors, feelings of entitlement, lack of empathy, willingness to exploit others; American Psychiatric Association, 2013). In contrast, social-personality psychologists tend to focus on more adaptive aspects of narcissism that tend to be more connected to emotional resilience and extraversion than what is studied by clinical psychologists (Miller & Campbell, 2008). Thus, clinical psychologists often attend to the pathological (i.e., maladaptive) aspects of narcissism, whereas social-personality

psychologists focus more of their attention on the somewhat “normal” (i.e., adaptive) aspects of narcissism (see Miller & Campbell, 2008 or Pincus & Lukowitsky, 2010, for extended discussions). Consistent with this previous literature, we will refer to these aspects of narcissism as *pathological narcissism* and *normal narcissism*. For the present research, it is also important to note that the term 'narcissism' - whether pathological or normal - refers to nonclinical levels of narcissistic personality traits.

Both normal and pathological aspects of narcissism are generally characterized by feelings of grandiosity and inflated views of the self. One cost associated with this grandiosity is that narcissistic individuals may experience extreme reactions to experiences that challenge their self-views. Explanations concerning the reactivity of individuals with high levels of narcissism are often based on the idea that narcissistic grandiosity serves as a façade that conceals underlying feelings of inferiority and low self-esteem which stem from early experiences of inadequate or insensitive parenting (see Bosson et al., 2008, for a review). In essence, negative events undermine the grandiose façade of individuals with high levels of narcissism by increasing the salience of their negative self-views. As a result, negative events that threaten the self-esteem of these individuals may lead to the emergence of underlying negative self-views which, in turn, may trigger reactions that either reflect these negative self-views (e.g., low self-esteem, anxiety) or serve as attempts to bolster their tenuous feelings of self-worth (e.g., anger, aggressive tendencies).

The reactivity of narcissistic individuals to potentially threatening events (e.g., social rejection, achievement failure) has been clearly demonstrated among individuals with high levels of normal narcissism in various studies taking place within the confines of the laboratory (e.g., Bushman & Baumeister, 1998) or during the course of everyday life (e.g., Zeigler-Hill, Myers, & Clark, 2010). The reactivity of those with high levels of pathological narcissism to these sorts of events is complicated by the fact that pathological narcissism appears to be a heterogeneous construct consisting of both grandiose and vulnerable facets (e.g., Akhtar & Thompson, 1982; Cooper, 1998; Dickinson & Pincus, 2003; Kohut, 1971; Pincus & Lukowitsky, 2010; Wink, 1991). Pathological grandiosity is characterized by maladaptive self-enhancement strategies such as holding an overly positive self-image, exploiting others, and engaging in exhibitionistic behaviors (Pincus & Lukowitsky, 2010). In contrast, pathological vulnerability is characterized by self and emotional dysregulation including a negative self-image, self-criticism, negative affective experiences (e.g., anger, shame, dysphoria), interpersonal sensitivity, and social withdrawal (Pincus & Lukowitsky, 2010). These facets of pathological narcissism have been shown to have different associations with reactivity following negative events such that pathological grandiosity has been shown to predict heightened reactivity to threats concerning achievement failure (i.e., learning that an important promotion had been given to a coworker) whereas pathological vulnerability has been found to be associated with reactivity to threats concerning romantic betrayal (i.e., learning that one's lover had been unfaithful; Besser & Priel, 2010). In addition, pathological grandiosity has been found to be associated with heightened reactivity to threats that occur in public, whereas pathological vulnerability is associated with stronger responses to events that occur in private settings (Besser & Zeigler-Hill, 2010).

The reactivity of narcissistic individuals to events that threaten their feelings of self-worth may have important implications for their romantic relationship functioning given the extent to which narcissistic individuals rely on others to regulate their self-esteem (see Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001, for a review). More specifically, the reactivity of narcissistic individuals to negative events may provide at least a partial explanation as to why these individuals have been found to exhibit a lack of commitment to their romantic relationships and a tendency to be unfaithful (e.g., Atkins, Yi, Baucom, & Christensen, 2005; Campbell & Foster, 2002; Foster, Shira, & Campbell, 2006). Taken together, research concerning the romantic relationship functioning of narcissistic individuals suggests that these individuals appear to be more interested in using their romantic relationships to maintain and enhance their feelings of self-worth than they are in trying to build and maintain relationships that are rewarding for both themselves and their partners.

### **Overview and Predictions**

The goal of the current study was to examine the associations between normal and pathological aspects of narcissism and evaluations of romantic relationships following threat. More specifically, this study examined whether normal or pathological aspects of narcissism were associated with more negative relationship evaluations following the recollection of a negative relationship event. We predicted that individuals with high scores on the maladaptive facet of normal narcissism (i.e., exploitation/entitlement) and those with high scores for the pathological facets of narcissism would evaluate their relationships in an especially poor fashion following the recollection of a negative relationship event.

## **Method**

### ***Participants and Procedure***

Participants were 192 undergraduate students who participated in exchange for partial fulfillment of a research participation requirement. Only participants who were currently involved in a romantic relationship for a period of at least 30 days were allowed to participate. During a laboratory session, small groups of no more than 5 participants were seated at computer stations where they completed demographic items and pre-manipulation measures of narcissism.

Following the completion of the pre-manipulation measures, participants were randomly assigned to one of two writing conditions during which they were asked to recall and spend 10 minutes writing about either a negative event from their current romantic relationship (i.e., “the worst thing that your current romantic partner has ever done in your relationship”) or a positive event from their current relationship (i.e., “the best thing that your current romantic partner has ever done in your relationship”). Some examples excerpted from the negative writing condition include the following: “Honestly, my boyfriend has done many, many bad things but one of the worst things that I can recall is when he choked me and I literally almost died”; “The worst thing that my partner has ever done during our relationship is cheat on me with one of my childhood friends”; and “My current partner has always blamed me for everything that goes wrong in our relationship”. Some examples excerpted from the positive writing condition include the following: “The best thing my partner has ever done for me is take

care of me when I was sick”; “My boyfriend buys me anything I ask for”; and “The best thing that my significant other has ever done for me is take me out to a really nice expensive dinner”.

Following the writing task, participants were asked to rate the valence of their written output (i.e., “How negative or positive was the experience you just wrote about?”) using a scale that ranged from 1 (*extremely negative*) to 9 (*extremely positive*) and complete measures concerning their evaluations of their romantic relationships. The order of the post-manipulation measures was counterbalanced across participants. Participants were excluded from the analyses if they failed to follow instructions and write about the appropriate sort of event (e.g., a participant in the negative condition wrote “I don’t really have a bad thing that has ever happened with me and my boyfriend. We have been together for 10 months and it’s been the greatest 10 months of my life. We don’t argue or get into fights, so I really have nothing to talk about on this topic.”). This led us to exclude 35 participants from the negative condition and 5 participants from the positive condition. It is unclear why so many participants did not adhere to the guidelines for the writing task, especially in the negative condition. However, it is important to note that the excluded participants did not significantly differ from the remaining participants in terms of narcissism ( $t_s < 1$ , *ns*), sex ( $\chi^2[1] = .01$ , *ns*), age ( $t = 1.01$ , *ns*), relationship length ( $t < 1$ , *ns*), or racial/ethnic composition ( $\chi^2[2] = .56$ , *ns*). The final sample consisted of 152 students (118 women and 34 men) with a mean age of 20.38 years ( $SD = 2.80$ ) and a mean relationship length of 25.62 months ( $SD = 23.52$ ). The racial/ethnic composition was 49% White, 46% Black, and 5% Other.

### ***Pre-Writing Task Measures***

*Narcissistic Personality Inventory.* Normal narcissism was measured using the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Hall, 1979, 1981). The NPI was developed according to diagnostic criteria but appears to capture a somewhat emotionally resilient and extraverted aspect of narcissism with its maladaptive aspects being limited for the most part to feelings of entitlement and the tendency to exploit others (Miller & Campbell, 2008). It should be noted that the present research utilized the shortened version of the NPI that Morf and Rhodewalt (1993) adapted from Emmons’s (1987) factor analysis of the original NPI that contained 37 true-false items that load onto the following four factors: leadership/authority (9 items;  $\alpha = .78$ ), self-absorption/self-admiration (9 items;  $\alpha = .68$ ), superiority/arrogance (11 items;  $\alpha = .65$ ), and exploitation/entitlement (8 items;  $\alpha = .58$ ). Despite their low levels of internal consistency, we used the individual subscale scores rather than the overall composite score due to the fact that the exploitation/entitlement subscale often has a different pattern of correlations with related constructs (e.g., self-esteem) than is observed for the other subscales or the total NPI score (see Brown, Budzek, & Tamborski, 2009, for a review).

*Pathological Narcissism Inventory.* The Pathological Narcissism Inventory (PNI; Pincus et al., 2009) was used to assess grandiose and vulnerable facets of pathological narcissism. The PNI is a 52-item measure for which responses were made on scales ranging from 0 (*not at all like me*) to 5 (*very much like me*). This instrument captures seven dimensions of pathological narcissism including contingent self-esteem,

exploitative tendencies, self-sacrificing self-enhancement, hiding of the self, grandiose fantasy, devaluing, and entitlement rage. As outlined in recent studies (Tritt, Ryder, Ring, & Pincus, 2010; Wright, Lukowitsky, Pincus, & Conroy, 2010), these seven dimensions load onto the two higher-order factors of grandiose narcissism (exploitative tendencies, self-sacrificing self-enhancement, and grandiose fantasy;  $\alpha = .89$  ) and vulnerable narcissism (contingent self-esteem, hiding the self, entitlement rage, and devaluing;  $\alpha = .93$ ).

**Post-Writing Task Measure**

*Investment Model Scale.* The Investment Model Scale (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998) is a 22-item instrument that assesses romantic relationships on the following domains: global relationship satisfaction (5 items; e.g., “Our relationship makes me very happy”;  $\alpha = .96$ ); quality of alternatives (5 items; e.g., “The people other than my partner with whom I might become involved are very appealing”;  $\alpha = .87$ ); investment in relationship (5 items; e.g., “I have put a great deal into our relationship that I would lose if the relationship were to end”;  $\alpha = .76$ ); and commitment to relationship (7 items; e.g., “I want our relationship to last for a very long time”;  $\alpha = .87$ ). Responses were made on scales ranging from 0 (*do not agree at all*) to 7 (*agree completely*).

**Results**

Table 1 presents the intercorrelations for the measures of normal and pathological facets of narcissism, relationship satisfaction, quality of alternative partners, investment in the relationship, and commitment to the relationship.

**Table 1**  
*Intercorrelations and Descriptive Statistics*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. NPI Leadership/Authority	—	.43**	.57**	.37**	.29**	.01	-.03	.30**	.06	-.20
2. NPI Self-Absorption/Self-Admiration	.33**	—	.38**	.37**	.29**	.04	-.11	.29**	.08	-.04
3. NPI Superiority/Arrogance	.43**	.28*	—	.45**	.40**	.23*	-.04	.27*	.14	-.12
4. NPI Exploitativeness/Entitlement	.29*	.26*	.46**	—	.42**	.53**	-.25*	.21	.13	-.15
5. PNI Grandiosity	.41**	.20	.60**	.56**	—	.43**	.02	.13	.29**	.04
6. PNI Vulnerability	.16	-.15	.35**	.38**	.42**	—	-.35**	.12	.03	-.18
7. Relationship Satisfaction	-.06	-.11	.03	-.19	.06	-.15	—	-.42**	.48**	.54***
8. Quality of Alternative Partners	.17	.21	.22	.38**	.17	.01	-.43**	—	-.25*	-.24*
9. Investment in Relationship	-.02	-.15	-.01	-.09	.15	.01	.50**	-.34**	—	.50***
10. Commitment to Relationship	.03	-.02	.08	-.01	.11	.04	.67**	-.42**	.59**	—
<i>M<sub>Positive Condition</sub></i>	5.81	6.47	4.45	3.17	3.79	2.72	5.62	2.72	4.50	4.72
<i>SD<sub>Positive Condition</sub></i>	2.46	1.94	2.50	1.92	0.83	0.84	1.54	1.98	1.40	0.99
<i>M<sub>Negative Condition</sub></i>	6.19	6.42	4.36	2.99	3.94	2.92	4.73	3.14	4.42	4.46
<i>SD<sub>Negative Condition</sub></i>	2.36	1.54	2.04	1.85	0.75	0.90	2.01	1.93	1.67	1.07

*Note.* Correlations for participants in the positive writing condition are presented above the diagonal while correlations for the participants in the negative writing condition are presented below the diagonal. \*  $p < .05$  \*\*  $p < .01$  \*\*\*  $p < .001$

**Data Analytic Strategy**

Hierarchical multiple regression analyses were performed to examine whether the facets of narcissism were associated with relationship evaluations following the writing task. The results for all regression analyses in the present study are presented in Table 2. For each of these analyses, the continuous predictors were standardized for the purpose of testing interactions (Aiken & West, 1991). To examine the patterns of the interactions that emerged from these analyses, these regression analyses were followed by the simple slopes tests recommended by Aiken and West (1991).

**Table 2**  
**Analyses Regressing Relationship Satisfaction and Quality of Alternative Partners onto Sex, Relationship Length, Experimental Condition, and Subtypes of Narcissism**

	Relationship Satisfaction			Quality of Alternative Partners			Investment in Relationship			Commitment to Relationship		
	R <sup>2</sup>	ΔR <sup>2</sup>	β	R <sup>2</sup>	ΔR <sup>2</sup>	β	R <sup>2</sup>	ΔR <sup>2</sup>	β	R <sup>2</sup>	ΔR <sup>2</sup>	β
<i>Step 1</i>	.07*	.07*		.03	.03		.12**	.12**		.08*	.08*	
Sex (0 = female, 1 = male)			.06			.09			-.08			-.08
Relationship Length			.05			-.08			.33***			.25***
Writing Task (0 = negative, 1 = positive)			.26**			-.12			.08			.15
<i>Step 2</i>	.20***	.13**		.16**	.13**		.20***	.08*		.17**	.09*	
NPI Leadership/Authority			-.05			.07			-.01			-.10
NPI Self-Absorption/Admiration			-.13			.13			-.07			-.05
NPI Superiority/Arrogance			.12			.09			.05			-.02
NPI Exploitativeness/Entitlement			-.21*			.22*			-.11			-.19
PNI Grandiosity			.25**			-.05			.31**			.29**
PNI Vulnerability			-.28**			-.03			-.10			-.10
<i>Step 3</i>	.21***	.01**		.18**	.02		.23***	.03		.18**	.01	
WT x NPI Leadership/Authority			.02			.10			-.05			-.17
WT x NPI Self-Absorption/Admiration			.06			.12			.04			-.04
WT x NPI Superiority/Arrogance			-.07			-.07			.21			.00
WT x NPI Exploitativeness/Entitlement			.16			-.31*			.24			.15
WT x PNI Grandiosity			-.08			.03			-.07			.01
WT x PNI Vulnerability			-.09			.20			-.11			-.11

\*p < .05    \*\*p < .01    \*\*\*p < .001

*Global Relationship Satisfaction.* The analysis concerning global relationship satisfaction found main effects for the writing task condition ( $\beta = .26, t = 3.16, p < .01$ ), NPI exploitativeness/entitlement ( $\beta = -.21, t = -2.08, p < .05$ ), PNI grandiosity ( $\beta = .25, t = 2.64, p < .01$ ), and PNI vulnerability ( $\beta = -.28, t = -3.06, p < .01$ ) such that the highest levels of relationship satisfaction were reported by those in the positive condition, individuals with higher levels of PNI grandiosity, and those with low levels of NPI exploitativeness/entitlement and PNI vulnerability.

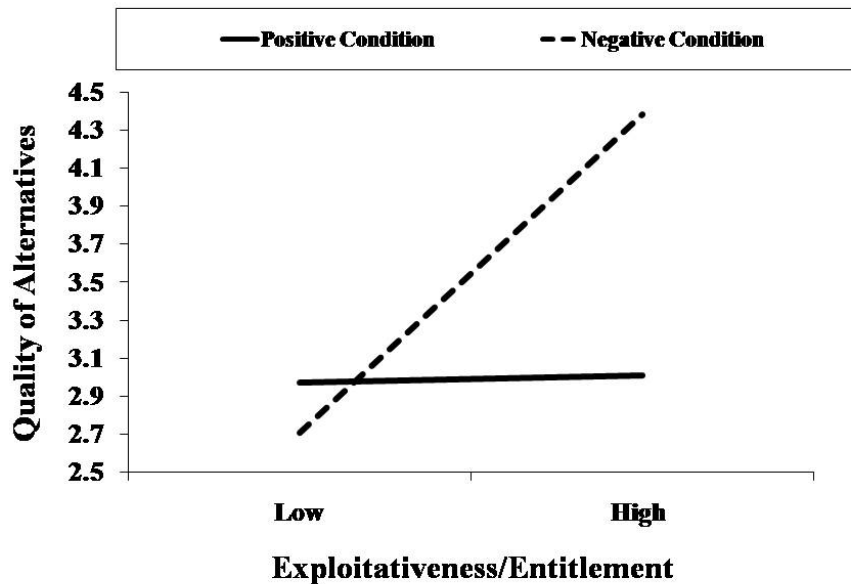
*Quality of Alternatives.* The analysis concerning the quality of alternatives found a main effect for NPI exploitativeness/entitlement ( $\beta = .22, t = 2.18, p < .05$ ) but it was qualified by its interaction with the writing task condition ( $\beta = -.31, t = -2.00, p < .05$ ). The predicted values for this interaction are presented in Figure 1. Simple slopes tests found that the slope of the line representing the association between NPI exploitativeness/entitlement and quality of alternatives was significant for those in the negative condition ( $\beta = .41, t = 2.82, p < .01$ ) but not for those in the positive condition ( $\beta = .01, t < 1, ns$ ). This pattern shows that individuals with high levels of NPI exploitativeness/entitlement who were asked to remember a negative event from their romantic relationship reported the greatest interest in alternative partners.

*Investment in Relationship.* The main effects for relationship length ( $\beta = .33, t = 4.20, p < .001$ ) and PNI grandiosity ( $\beta = .31, t = 3.28, p < .01$ ) emerged for the analysis concerning investment in relationship such that individuals involved in lengthier relationships and those with higher levels of pathological grandiosity reported higher levels of investment in their relationships.

*Commitment.* The analysis concerning relationship commitment revealed main effects for relationship length ( $\beta = .25, t = 3.07, p < .01$ ) and PNI grandiosity ( $\beta = .29, t = 2.98, p < .01$ ) such that individuals in lengthier relationships and those with higher levels of pathological grandiosity reported being more committed to their relationships.

*Figure 1*

**Predicted Values for Quality of Alternatives, Illustrating the Two-Way Interaction of Writing Task Condition and NPI Exploitativeness/Entitlement at Values that are One Standard Deviation Above and Below its Mean**



### Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to examine the associations that normal and pathological aspects of narcissism had with evaluations of relationship quality following the recollection of a negative relationship event. We expected that the more maladaptive forms of narcissism (i.e., NPI exploitativeness/entitlement; PNI grandiosity and vulnerability) would be associated with reactivity following the recollection of a negative relationship event. More specifically, we expected individuals with high levels of the pathological forms of narcissism to report less satisfaction, commitment, and investment in their relationships and more interest in alternatives to the relationship following the recall of a negative relationship event.

In partial support of our hypotheses, we found that individuals with high scores on the exploitation/entitlement subscale of the NPI reported greater interest in alternative relationship partners in the negative writing condition. In other words, ruminating about

an unpleasant relationship event may have prompted those with high levels of exploitation/entitlement to engage in self-protective processes aimed at preserving their fragile feelings of self-worth – even at the expense of their relationships. Perhaps by entertaining the possibility of other attractive relationship partners, those with high levels of exploitation/entitlement were able to buffer themselves against the threat posed by remembering an unpleasant relationship event. These results are also consistent with research suggesting that individuals with high levels of narcissism tend to be less committed and less faithful to their romantic partners (for a review, see Foster & Twenge, 2011).

In contrast to the results for individuals with high scores on the exploitation/entitlement subscale of the NPI, the expected pattern of reactivity failed to emerge for individuals with high levels of PNI grandiosity or PNI vulnerability. This absence of reactivity is somewhat surprising as at least one prior study has found PNI grandiosity and PNI vulnerability to be associated with reactivity in response to negative stimuli such as achievement failure and romantic betrayal, respectively (Besser & Priel, 2010). It should be noted, however, that Besser and Priel (2010) conducted their study using a community sample of individuals involved in serious and committed romantic relationships. This may explain, at least in part, why the present study failed to find a relationship between PNI grandiosity/vulnerability and reactivity after the recall of a negative relationship event.

The goal of the present study was to examine the relationship between different types of pathological narcissism and reactions to threat within the context of romantic relationships. We found evidence for reactivity in one form of pathological narcissism (NPI exploitativeness/entitlement) but not in others (PNI grandiosity and PNI vulnerability). On the whole, we did not observe the expected pattern of reactivity across measures and maladaptive forms of narcissism. However, this lack of reactivity may be at least partially explained by some of the limitations of the present research. For one, our sample was composed of college students involved in relatively short-term relationships. As such, it is certainly possible that some participants did not have a full range of relationship-based emotional experiences from which to draw upon. It is also possible that the writing task manipulation was too open-ended to elicit a consistent level of threat across participants. Another limitation is that our study did not include a neutral comparison condition. The positive writing condition was intended to serve as a valenced comparison condition; however, the omission of a neutral comparison condition may limit our understanding of the present findings. Finally, it should be noted that the disproportionate number of women in our sample limits our ability to apply the present findings to men.

Despite the modest level of support for our hypotheses, the present study contributes to our understanding of narcissistic reactivity in romantic relationships by showing that the recollection of a negative relationship event elicited reactivity for one specific form of pathological narcissism (i.e., NPI exploitation/entitlement) but not for others (i.e., PNI grandiosity and vulnerability). This provides initial evidence that the forms of pathological narcissism may be distinct and that individuals with high levels of pathological narcissism may differ with regard to the sorts of experiences that threaten their feelings of self-worth (e.g., Kernberg, 1986; Ronningstam, 2005). Future research

should continue to examine the conditions under which individuals with high levels of narcissism exhibit emotional reactivity in response to specific relationship events.

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