

THE ROLE OF NARCISSISTIC PERSONALITY FEATURES IN SEXUAL AGGRESSION

VIRGIL ZEIGLER-HILL, BRIAN ENJAIAN, AND LAUREN ESSA
Oakland University

Narcissism has been identified as a potential risk factor for sexual aggression among men. The purpose of the present study was to examine whether specific facets of narcissism differed in terms of their association with sexual aggression. This was accomplished by examining the associations that the normal and pathological forms of narcissism had with sexual aggression. The results showed that only certain facets of narcissism were associated with sexual aggression. Facets of narcissism that concerned feelings of entitlement and a willingness to exploit others were positively associated with sexual aggression whereas pathological forms of narcissistic grandiosity were negatively associated with sexual aggression. Discussion focuses on the implications of these results for understanding the connection between narcissistic personality features and sexually aggressive behavior.

It is unfortunately common for individuals to either feel pressured or be forced to engage in sexual activities against their will. These unwanted sexual experiences are often separated into those involving the use of physical force (i.e., sexual aggression) and those that do not involve physical force (i.e., sexual coercion). Sexual aggression is generally considered to be the more severe and harmful of these behaviors and it is accompanied by clear legal consequences for perpetrators. This type of behavior includes events such as forcible rape, drug-facilitated rape, and incapacitated rape (Kilpatrick, Resnick, Ruggiero, Conoscenti, & McCauley, 2007). A great deal of

Address correspondence to Virgil Zeigler-Hill, Ph.D., Department of Psychology, Oakland University, 212A Pryale Hall, Rochester, MI 48309; E-mail: zeiglerh@oakland.edu.

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research concerning unwanted sexual experiences has focused on sexual aggression which has highlighted the prevalence of these behaviors, identified risk factors for perpetrators, and clarified the consequences for victims (e.g., Koss, 2005). Sexual coercion, in contrast, has received less empirical attention than sexual aggression. Sexually coercive behavior involves an array of tactics to gain sexual access to an unwilling partner such as frequent arguments, verbal pressure, threats to end the relationship, lying, and emotional manipulation (DeGue & DiLillo, 2005; Shackelford & Goetz, 2004).

Although members of either sex may be a perpetrator or victim in these encounters, the most common form of these experiences is for men to pressure or force women to perform unwanted sexual acts. More than 30% of men admit to having either physically forced (e.g., unwanted sexual touching) or verbally coerced (e.g., use of threats or intimidation) women into engaging in sexual behavior with nearly 15% of men acknowledging past behaviors that meet the legal definition of rape or attempted rape (e.g., DeGue & DiLillo, 2004). It has also been shown that approximately 30% of men indicate at least some willingness to force sexual activity on a woman in the future if they could be assured they would not be caught (e.g., Briere & Malamuth, 1983). It is important for researchers to gain a better understanding of these behaviors because approximately 30% of women report having been coerced at some point in the past (Gross, Winslett, Roberts, & Gohm, 2006) with more than 20% reporting that they were the victims of either rape or attempted rape during their lives (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). The risk of experiencing an actual or attempted rape is especially high among certain populations. For example, more than 8% of college-age women have experienced either an actual or attempted rape during the last six months (Koss, Gidycz, & Wisniewski, 1987). Experiences of sexual coercion or rape often have a tremendous impact on the lives of women including a host of negative outcomes such as physical injuries, post-traumatic stress disorder, low self-esteem, depression, anxiety, and sleep disturbances (e.g., Zweig, Barber, & Eccles, 1997).

The most influential theories for understanding sexual aggression tend to be derived from either the feminist perspective or evolutionary theory. Feminist explanations of unwanted sexual experiences argue that these behaviors are a way for men to exploit and dominate women rather than being motivated by sexual desire (e.g., Brownmiller, 1975). According to the feminist view of sexu-

al aggression, the sexual pleasure that men derive from these acts is less important than the desire of men to dominate women. In contrast, explanations derived from evolutionary theory argue that sexual desire and its underlying biology may play vital roles in the sexually aggressive behaviors exhibited by men (e.g., Thornhill & Palmer, 2000). Neither feminist nor evolutionary explanations have been able to account for all acts of sexual aggression and sexual coercion. The limited utility of these explanations is not surprising given that unwanted sexual experiences appear to have multiple causes, involve a variety of motivations, and differ across cultures with regard to their expression and acceptance (e.g., Crowell & Burgess, 1996).

One approach to understanding sexual aggression has been to examine individual differences that are shared by those who have either engaged in these behaviors in the past or demonstrate a willingness to consider engaging in these behaviors in the future. This avenue of research is important because it may help identify risk factors that increase the likelihood that men will engage in these behaviors which may, in turn, lead to particular intervention strategies. For example, individuals who report high levels of psychopathic personality features have been found to be more likely to report pressuring or forcing others to participate in unwanted sexual experiences (e.g., Malamuth, 2003). Recent studies have suggested that narcissism may also be a particularly important dispositional risk factor for engaging in sexual coercion and sexual aggression (e.g., Blackburn & Coid, 1999; Bushman, Bonacci, van Dijk, & Baumeister, 2003; Kosson, Kelly, & White, 1997; Mouilso & Calhoun, 2012; Widman & McNulty, 2010). The idea that men with narcissistic personality features may be more likely to engage in sexual aggression is not surprising given that narcissists (1) have inflated views of themselves and their abilities (Gabriel, Critelli, & Ee, 1994) which may lead them to believe they are more sexually desirable than they actually are; (2) possess a strong need for positive regard and admiration (e.g., Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001) which may lead them to want to be viewed as a desirable sexual partner; (3) tend to be very responsive to negative experiences (e.g., Zeigler-Hill, Myers, & Clark, 2010) which may extend to them being very upset by sexual rejection; and (4) possess low levels of empathy, high levels of entitlement, high levels of hostility, and high levels of exploitativeness which may lead them to pressure or force women to sub-

mit to their sexual advances even if they are aware that doing so may cause these women harm (see Widman & McNulty, 2010 for a review).

Baumeister, Catanese, and Wallace (2002) suggest that narcissistic men may generally prefer consensual sexual activities but they may be more likely than others to resort to sexual aggression when they are denied sexual access to women they desire. The proposed reason that narcissistic men may engage in sexual aggression is psychological reactance. Reactance theory (Brehm, 1966) proposes that individuals who are not allowed to act on their desires may come to desire the forbidden activity even more strongly. The impact of sexual denial—and the resulting psychological reactance—may be especially upsetting to narcissistic men because of their feelings of entitlement and underlying feelings of insecurity. Narcissistic men may be especially likely to engage in sexual coercion or sexual aggression when their proposed heightened reactivity to sexual rejection is combined with their low levels of empathy and willingness to exploit others.

Previous research concerning the link between narcissism and forcing others to engage in unwanted sexual experiences has often focused on the form of narcissism that is captured by the total score of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Hall, 1979). The frequent use of the NPI in this area is potentially important because this instrument captures a form of narcissism that is characterized by extraversion and emotional resilience (Miller & Campbell, 2008). The form of narcissism captured by the NPI is often referred to as normal narcissism and it has received considerable attention from social-personality psychologists in recent years (see Miller & Campbell, 2008 or Pincus & Lukowitsky, 2010 for extended discussions). Clinical psychologists, in contrast, tend to conceptualize narcissism as a personality disorder that is characterized by arrogant or haughty behaviors, feelings of entitlement, a lack of empathy, and a willingness to exploit other individuals (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). The form of narcissism studied by clinical psychologists is often associated with emotional instability and the tendency to experience negative emotions. These differences lead clinical psychologists to emphasize elements of narcissism that are more pathological than what is generally studied by social-personality psychologists (e.g., Miller & Campbell, 2008; Pincus & Lukowitsky, 2010). This interest in the pathological elements of narcissism that

are not adequately captured by the NPI has led to the development of other assessment instruments such as the Pathological Narcissism Inventory (PNI; Pincus et al., 2009).

OVERVIEW AND PREDICTIONS

Narcissistic personality features have been found to be associated with self-reported levels of past sexually coercive and sexually aggressive behavior (Blackburn & Coid, 1999; Kosson et al., 1997; Mouilso & Calhoun, 2012) as well as attitudes that may contribute to these behaviors (e.g., greater acceptance of rape myths, less empathy for rape victims, greater enjoyment while watching a film depicting rape; Bushman, Bonacci, van Dijk, & Baumeister, 2003). Our goal for the present study was to extend what is known about the connection between narcissistic personality features and sexual aggression by assessing the specific facets of both normal and pathological forms of narcissism. Our prediction was that narcissistic personality features concerning feelings of entitlement and a willingness to exploit others would be the most closely associated with the use of sexual aggression because these appear to be the interpersonally toxic components of narcissism.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS AND PROCEDURE

Participants were 170 male undergraduates at a university in the southern region of the United States who were enrolled in psychology courses and participated in return for partial fulfillment of a research participation requirement. Participants completed measures of normal narcissism, pathological narcissism, and sexual aggression via the internet. The mean age of the participants was 21.19 years ($SD = 4.60$) and their racial/ethnic composition was 55% White, 34% Black, 5% Hispanic, 2% Asian, and 4% Other.

MEASURES

Normal Narcissism. Normal narcissism was measured using the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Hall, 1979). The

version of the NPI used in the present study consisted of 40 items and used a forced-choice format such that participants were asked to decide between a narcissistic alternative and a non-narcissistic alternative for each item (e.g., I really like to be the center of attention vs. It makes me uncomfortable to be the center of attention). There has been considerable debate about the factor structure of the 40-item NPI but Ackerman and colleagues (2010) recently suggested the following three factors: Leadership/ Authority (11 items; e.g., If I ruled the world it would be a much better place; $a = .75$), Grandiose Exhibitionism (10 items; e.g., I know that I am good because everybody keeps telling me so; $a = .72$), and Entitlement/Exploitativeness (4 items; e.g., I find it easy to manipulate people; $a = .52$).

Pathological Narcissism. The Pathological Narcissism Inventory (PNI; Pincus et al., 2009) was used to assess grandiose and vulnerable aspects of pathological narcissism. Grandiose narcissism is the most easily recognized form of pathological narcissism because of its similarity to NPD with one common characteristic being the use of maladaptive self-enhancement strategies (e.g., holding an overly positive self-image). Vulnerable narcissism, in contrast, is characterized by dysregulation across various areas including mental representations of the self (e.g., negative self-image), emotionality (e.g., negative affective experiences including anger, shame, and dysphoria), and interpersonal relationship functioning (e.g., interpersonal sensitivity; Pincus & Lukowitsky, 2010). The PNI is a 52-item measure for which responses are made on scales ranging from 0 (not at all like me) to 5 (very much like me). The PNI items load onto the factors of grandiose narcissism (18 items; e.g., I often fantasize about being recognized for my accomplishments; $a = .85$) and vulnerable narcissism (34 items; e.g., I typically get very angry when I'm unable to get what I want from others; $a = .94$). Initial information concerning the reliability and validity of the PNI has shown that it is correlated in the expected direction with other measures of narcissism (e.g., NPI) as well as with related constructs such as self-esteem level, interpersonal style, clinical outcomes, and contingent self-esteem (Pincus et al., 2009; Zeigler-Hill, Clark, & Pickard, 2008).

Sexual Aggression. Sexually aggressive behavior was measured using the Sexual Experiences Survey (Koss & Oros, 1982). This instrument consists of 12 yes-or-no items concerning specific sexually aggressive acts that have been committed by the respondent since age

14. These items identified four levels of sexually aggressive behavior: consensual sexual contact (2 items; e.g., Had sexual intercourse with a woman when you both wanted to?), sexual coercion (5 items; e.g., Had sexual intercourse with a woman even though she didn't really want to because she felt pressured by your continual arguments?), attempted rape (2 items; e.g., Been in a situation where you used some degree of physical force, twisting her arm, holding her down, etc. to try to get a woman to have sexual intercourse with you when she didn't want to, but for various reasons sexual intercourse did not occur?), and rape (3 items; e.g., Had sexual intercourse with a woman when she didn't want to because you used some degree of physical force, twisting her arm, holding her down, etc.). The score for the Sexual Experiences Survey reflects the most severe level of sexually coercive behavior that was reported by the respondent (0 = did not report any behaviors beyond consensual sexual contact, 1 = reported sexually coercive behaviors but not attempted rape or rape, 2 = reported attempted rape but not rape, and 3 = reported rape).

RESULTS

Of the 170 participants, 112 participants (66%) denied any behaviors that went beyond consensual sexual contact, 41 participants (24%) acknowledged engaging in sexually coercive behavior but denied ever raping or attempting to rape a woman, three participants (2%) admitted that they have attempted to rape a woman in the past but denied completing the act, and 14 participants (8%) admitted to having raped a woman. These rates of behavior are similar to those reported in previous studies (e.g., DeGue & DiLillo, 2004).

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations for the measures in the present study. The associations observed for the various facets of narcissism are similar to what has been observed in previous studies (e.g., Malkin, Zeigler-Hill, Barry, & Southard, in press). That is, NPI Leadership/ Authority was associated with NPI Grandiose Exhibitionism ($r = .44, p < .001$) but not NPI Entitlement/Exploitativeness ($r = .11, ns$). NPI Grandiose Exhibitionism was associated with NPI Entitlement/Exploitativeness ($r = .30, p < .001$). Further, all three of the NPI subscales were correlated with NPI Grandiosity ($r_s > .17, p_s < .05$) but only NPI Entitlement/

TABLE 1. Intercorrelations and Descriptive Statistics for the Facets of Narcissism and Sexual Aggression

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. NPI Leadership/Authority	—					
2. NPI Grandiose Exhibitionism	.44***	—				
3. NPI Entitlement/Exploitativeness	.11	.30***	—			
4. PNI Grandiosity	.17*	.26***	.20**	—		
5. PNI Vulnerability	.07	.14	.33***	.65***	—	
6. Sexual Aggression	.16*	.18*	.32***	.04	.25***	—
M	6.44	3.98	1.20	3.57	3.01	0.52
SD	2.59	2.48	1.14	0.89	0.95	0.89

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Exploitativeness was associated with PNI Vulnerability ($r = .33, p < .001$). Finally, the association between PNI Grandiosity and PNI Vulnerability was significant ($r = .65, p < .001$).

We began our examination of the associations between the facets of narcissism and sexually aggressive behavior by inspecting their zero-order correlations. These correlations revealed that four of the facets of narcissism were significantly associated with sexually aggressive behavior: NPI Leadership/Authority ($r = .16, p < .05$), NPI Grandiose Exhibitionism ($r = .18, p < .05$), NPI Entitlement/Exploitativeness ($r = .32, p < .001$), and PNI Vulnerability ($r = .25, p < .001$). The only facet of narcissism that was not associated with sexually coercive behavior was PNI Grandiosity ($r = .04, ns$). Taken together, these results suggest that individuals who acknowledge possessing narcissistic tendencies—except for those captured by PNI Grandiosity—were more likely to report engaging in more severe forms of sexual aggression.

A simultaneous multiple regression analysis was used to gain a clearer understanding of the associations between the facets of narcissism and sexually aggressive behavior. More specifically, this analysis allowed us to determine the unique association between each facet of narcissism and sexual aggression that was not due to a common narcissistic core. In this analysis, sexual aggression was regressed onto the facets of narcissism. The results of this analysis are presented in Table 2. Three facets of narcissism were associated with sexual aggression: NPI Entitlement/Exploitativeness ($b = .27, t = 2.84, p < .01, d = .44$), PNI Grandiosity ($b = -.25, t = -2.58, p < .05, d$

TABLE 2. Regression of Sexual Aggression onto the Facets of Narcissism

	Sexual Aggression		
	<i>R</i> ²	β	<i>d</i>
Total Model	.17***		
NPI Leadership/Authority		.12	
NPI Grandiose Exhibitionism		.08	
NPI Entitlement/Exploitativeness		.27**	.44
PNI Grandiosity		-.25**	-.40
PNI Vulnerability		.32***	.50

** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

= -.40), and PNI Vulnerability ($b = .32$, $t = 3.21$, $p < .01$, $d = .50$). That is, individuals who reported higher levels of NPI Entitlement/Exploitativeness, higher levels of PNI Vulnerability, and lower levels of PNI Grandiosity also tended to report having engaged in more severe levels of sexual aggression. NPI Leadership/Authority and NPI Grandiose Exhibitionism failed to emerge as significant predictors of sexually aggressive behavior in this analysis.

DISCUSSION

The results of the present study provide additional support for the connection between narcissistic personality features and sexual aggression. The pattern of results suggests that men with certain facets of narcissism are more likely to engage in extreme forms of sexual aggression including rape. More specifically, the facets of narcissism that capture some of the maladaptive or pathological elements of the construct (e.g., feelings of entitlement and a willingness to exploit others) were associated with heightened sexual aggression. This explanation is consistent with the fact that NPI Entitlement/Exploitativeness and PNI Vulnerability were positively associated with sexual aggression. NPI Entitlement/Exploitativeness captures feelings of entitlement and a willingness to exploit others. This is the facet of normal narcissism that is often associated with maladaptive outcomes such as actual-ideal self-discrepancies and poor psychological adjustment (see Brown, Budzek, & Tamborski, 2009 for a review). PNI Vulnerability captures a form of narcissistic entitlement rage (e.g., high levels of endorsement for items such as "I

typically get very angry when I'm unable to get what I want from others" and "I will never be satisfied until I get all that I deserve") as well as feelings of uncertainty (e.g., contingent self-esteem). This entitlement rage may take the shape of sexual aggression if the individual is denied sexual access to a partner to which he believes he is entitled. In contrast to the pattern of results that emerged for NPI Entitlement/Exploitativeness and PNI Vulnerability, PNI Grandiosity was negatively associated with sexual aggression. This pattern may be explained by certain elements of PNI Grandiosity (e.g., self-sacrificing self-enhancement) overriding other aspects of this construct (e.g., a willingness to exploit others). Taken together, these results suggest that specific facets of narcissism have unique associations with sexual aggression. These results extend what was previously known about the connection between narcissism and sexual aggression.

Given the delicate nature of the issues examined in the present research, it is important for us to be absolutely clear about our interpretation of these results. These results show that certain narcissistic personality features are associated with self-reported levels of sexually aggressive behavior. We do not believe that all narcissistic individuals are potential sexual predators but it does appear that certain aspects of narcissism (e.g., those concerning feelings of entitlement and a willingness to exploit others) may increase the risk that individuals will engage in sexual aggression under certain conditions. It is also important to note that the purpose of our research was not to find an excuse for male sexual aggression. We firmly believe that sexual aggression is unconscionable regardless of the personality features possessed by the perpetrator. Our goal was to simply shed additional light on the personality features that may allow us to predict which men will be more likely to pressure or force women to engage in sexual activity against their will. Further research is clearly needed to gain a better understanding of the underlying causal mechanisms that link narcissistic personality features with sexual aggression.

The present study had a number of strengths (e.g., its use of various facets of narcissism rather than relying on overall composite scores) but it also had various limitations. The first limitation is the correlational nature of the study which precludes an understanding of the causal nature of the relationship between narcissism and

sexual aggression. Although the assumption underlying the present study was that certain facets of narcissism would lead individuals to engage in sexual aggression, this cannot be established using the present data. For example, it is possible—but unlikely—that the use of sexually aggressive behavior may cause men to develop narcissistic personality features. It is also possible that both narcissism and sexually aggressive behavior are due to some third variable that was not assessed in the present study (e.g., poor ability to empathize with the experiences of others). It may be helpful for future researchers who are interested in the link between narcissism and sexual aggression to collect additional information concerning other personality features (e.g., self-esteem) or emotional states (e.g., negative affect) that may clarify this connection. The second limitation of the present research is that all of the data collected were from self-report measures. This limitation may be important because participants may have distorted their responses in a socially desirable manner (e.g., denied that they had engaged in sexually aggressive behavior). This may have led to fewer reports of sexual aggressive behavior than were actually committed by our participants. Although this is an important issue, it is likely that this sort of response distortion would have weakened the observed association between narcissism and sexual aggression. This suggests the possibility that the reported results may be an underestimate of the actual association between narcissistic personality features and sexual aggression. The third limitation is that this study was conducted using undergraduates at a university in the southern region of the United States which may limit the extent to which these results can be generalized. The extent to which the present results would replicate in other regions of the country or with other age groups is an open empirical question that should be addressed given the importance of gaining a better understanding of which men are likely to engage in sexual aggression.

CONCLUSION

The present study found connections between specific facets of narcissism and sexual aggression. More specifically, men who possessed narcissistic qualities reflecting feelings of entitlement, a willingness to exploit others, and pathological vulnerability reported

higher levels of sexually aggressive behavior, whereas those who possessed pathological grandiosity actually reported lower levels of sexually aggressive behavior. These findings suggest the intriguing possibility that specific facets of narcissism may have very different associations with sexual aggression. These results extend our understanding of the link between narcissistic personality features and the perpetration of sexual aggression.

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