



# The ultimate femme fatale? Narcissism predicts serious and aggressive sexually coercive behaviour in females



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## ABSTRACT

Narcissism has been associated with persistent sexual persuasion, coercion, aggression, and rape conducive beliefs. However, the majority of research has concentrated on male samples. The present study ( $N = 329$ ) investigated narcissism and sexually coercive tactics, varying in severity, in both males and females. Males scored significantly higher on total narcissism and sexual coercion. However, when narcissism was investigated in relation to sexually coercive tactics, it was found that narcissistic females were just as likely to engage in serious and aggressive sexually coercive behaviour. In addition, sexual coercion in males related to more socially desirable aspects of narcissism (adaptive narcissism), whereas in females, sexual coercion was associated with socially toxic components of the construct (maladaptive narcissism). Our results demonstrate that gender differences in narcissism can differ significantly when investigating the impact narcissism has on a specific type of behaviour such as sexual coercion. These new findings contribute to the very little we already know about narcissism in females, suggesting that both sexes should be included in future research on narcissism.

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## 1. Introduction

Previous research has suggested that personality plays an important role in sexually coercive tactics (DeGue & DiLillo, 2005; Kosson, Kelly, & White, 1997; Muñoz, Khan, & Cordwell, 2011; Voller & Long, 2010). Narcissism is a potentially relevant personality construct, likely to be responsible for increased sexual coercion due to being characterised by self-serving cognitive distortions, and the excessive need for admiration (Baumeister, Catanese, & Wallace, 2002). Indeed, studies have found a relationship between narcissism and persistent sexual persuasion (Jones & Olderbak, 2014), coercion and aggression (Mouilso & Calhoun, 2012; Widman & McNulty, 2010; Ryan, Weikel, & Sprechini, 2008), rape conducive beliefs (Bushman, Bonacci, Baumeister, & van Dijk, 2003) and domestic violence (Simmons, Lehmann, Cobb, & Fowler, 2005). However, despite most studies using sub-clinical populations, they mainly concentrated on male samples (Jones & Olderbak, 2014; Bushman et al., 2003; Widman & McNulty, 2010; Mouilso & Calhoun, 2012), and when females were included, they were studied alongside their partners as young dating couples (Ryan et al., 2008), or within an offending sample (Simmons et al., 2005). This study investigated narcissism and sexually coercive tactics in both males and females in a sub-clinical non-offending population.

Research has found that both sexes appear to engage in similar types of sexually coercive behaviour at similar rates (Schatzel-Murphy, Harris,

Knight, & Milburn, 2009). Females, as well as males, employ a number of sexually coercive tactics including the seduction of unwilling partners, manipulation, use of alcohol and/or drugs, and physical force (e.g., Struckman-Johnson, 1988; Anderson & Aymami, 1993; Fiebert & Tucci, 1998). Interestingly, Struckman-Johnson, Struckman-Johnson, and Anderson (2003) found that females employed more seductive tactics such as taking their clothes off (41.1%), and manipulative tactics such as threatening blackmail (3.6%) and to harm themselves (5.5%). Males lied to their partners more (42.4%), and also employed more physically coercive tactics such as restraining (22.4%), persistently kissing and touching (70.8%), and taking advantage of their partners when intoxicated (42.1%). Due to these differences, it is clear that any research into sexually coercive tactics should include sex differences, as well as the full range of coercive strategies from minor to severe.

A prominent theory concerning narcissism and sexual coercion is 'the narcissistic reactance theory of rape and sexual coercion' (Baumeister et al., 2002). This theory proposes that sexual coercion may stem from a combination of narcissistic tendencies and reactance. The general notion is that narcissism constitutes a personality that may cultivate tendencies towards sexual coercion. However, more specifically, when a narcissistic individual's sexual desires are rejected, they may exhibit reactance. This reactance can increase their sexual desire, motivation to attempt to take what has been rejected, and aggression against the individual who denied them. According to Baumeister et al. (2002), together, these responses may contribute to sexually coercive behaviour. Bushman et al. (2003) empirically tested and validated this theory over three individual studies. However, this theory, and subsequent empirical tests, focussed on male samples. The present study

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aimed to find similar relationships between narcissism, sexual coercion, and reactance, in both males and females.

It is possible that the lack of research on narcissism and sexual coercion in females is due to consistent findings of higher levels of narcissism (e.g., Grijalva et al., 2015; Paulhus & Williams, 2002; Tschanz, Morf, & Turner, 1998) and inter-personal violence (Conradi & Geffner, 2012) in males. There is a notable lack of research investigating female sexual coercion against males (Schatzel-Murphy et al., 2009), despite over 200 studies finding gender symmetry (Straus, 2012). Schatzel-Murphy et al. (2009) found that both sexes engaged in similar sexually coercive behaviour, however, the attitudes and desire behind that behaviour varied significantly. Male sexual coercion was predicted by deriving sexual pleasure from dominating someone in a sexual situation (sexual dominance) and a willingness to engage in uncommitted sexual relations or casual sex (sociosexuality). In contrast, female sexual coercion was predicted by a difficulty in controlling sexual urges (sexual compulsivity). In addition, prior sexual abuse directly predicted sexual coercion in females (Schatzel-Murphy et al., 2009). In order to contribute to the very little we know so far, the present study investigated narcissism and sexually coercive tactics varying in severity in both males and females.

In addition to focussing on both sexes, this study also used a measure of sexual coercion that might be more relevant to narcissism. Previous studies that utilised a self-report measure for sexual coercion focussed on the tactics an individual uses to gain sexual access to another (Ryan et al., 2008; Widman & McNulty, 2010; Mouilso & Calhoun, 2012). However, narcissists are more likely to react to disappointment with shame and rage, which can ultimately lead to aggression and a desire for revenge (Kohut, 1978), or what Baumeister et al. (2002) termed 'reactance'. Therefore, this study investigated narcissism and 'Postrefusal Sexual Persistence' (PSP), the act of pursuing sexual contact with a person after he or she has refused the initial advance (Struckman-Johnson et al., 2003). The PSP scale was used which assessed sexually coercive tactics on four levels increasing in severity from emotional manipulation to physical force (Struckman-Johnson et al., 2003). Due to previous research finding differences between the types of sexually coercive tactics males and females use (Struckman-Johnson et al., 2003); a measure incorporating a range of tactics varying in severity is crucial for studying narcissism and sexual coercion.

Not only may sexually coercive strategies depend on overall narcissism in both sexes, but it also may depend on the sub-facet of narcissism. According to Ackerman et al. (2011), the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI) consists of maladaptive, socially toxic components (i.e., Entitlement/Exploitativeness) and adaptive components (Leadership/Authority). They also identified a third component, Grandiose/Exhibitionism, which was not particularly maladaptive or adaptive in nature. For the present study, we considered the Entitlement/Exploitativeness subscale to be maladaptive and the Leadership/Authority and Grandiose/Exhibitionism subscales relatively adaptive.

The expression of narcissism can vary with gender (Philipson, 1985; Richman & Flaherty, 1990). Males may be more likely to express overt/grandiose narcissism whereas females may use more indirect and discreet ways to fulfil their narcissistic goals (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). In terms of which gender expresses maladaptive traits (Entitlement/Exploitativeness) the most, findings are conflicting. Richman and Flaherty (1990) found that males scored higher on narcissistic traits reflecting Entitlement/Exploitativeness and a lack of empathy. Further, Tschanz et al. (1998) found that Entitlement/Exploitativeness traits were less correlated with other narcissistic traits in females more than males, thus suggesting these maladaptive traits are less central to narcissism in females. However, a couple of studies have proven that when these maladaptive traits are investigated with gender and other types of behaviours, specifically sexual coercion and domestic violence, the findings differ. Ryan et al. (2008) found that in young dating couples, females with higher levels of Entitlement/Exploitativeness

were more sexually coercive towards their current partner than males. In addition, Simmons et al. (2005) investigated the personalities of males and females who had been arrested for domestic violence and found higher rates of clinically elevated narcissistic personality traits in females. These findings demonstrate that much more research is required to investigate the relationship between sub-facets of narcissism and sexually coercive behaviour, particularly with distinct male and female samples from a sub-clinical population.

To date, no studies have investigated the relationship between narcissism and PSP with a male or female sample and therefore, we present this brief report. We predict that sexually coercive behaviour will be present amongst both sexes, and the higher the narcissism, the higher the number of sexually coercive tactics an individual will report to have used. In addition, we predict our results will provide additional empirical support for 'The Narcissistic Reactance Theory of Rape and Sexual Coercion' (Baumeister et al., 2002), and demonstrate that the theory can also be applied to narcissistic females rather than just males. In relation to the subscales of the NPI, we predict that Leadership/Authority and Grandiose/Exhibitionism will not be related to severe sexual tactics, whereas the more maladaptive traits, Entitlement/Exploitativeness, will. Based on previous research, we can predict that females who score more highly on Entitlement/Exploitativeness will have carried out more severe sexual tactics.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

The sample consisted of 329 participants ( $M = 26.61$ ,  $SD = 12.43$ , 70 (21.28%) males), predominantly British (225) and American (78). An online survey was advertised at a University in North-West England to undergraduate students who could participate in exchange for course credit. In addition, the survey was advertised to the wider community via the authors' social networks, and also on psychology research participation websites.

### 2.2. Materials

Narcissism was measured using the 40-item forced-choice Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Terry, 1988). Participants chose between two statements, one of which indicated high narcissism (e.g., I have a natural talent for influencing people) and one indicated low narcissism (e.g., I am not good at influencing people). A score of 1 was given for each high narcissism choice (0 for a low narcissism choice) and these points were totalled to create an overall narcissism score (range = 1–36) (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .89$ ). In the present paper we use the three-factor structure (Ackerman et al., 2011) where the NPI is split into Leadership/Authority ( $\alpha = .80$ ), Grandiose Exhibitionism ( $\alpha = .78$ ), and Entitlement/Exploitativeness ( $\alpha = .55$ ). The low level of internal consistency for Entitlement/Exploitativeness is not unusual for this particular subscale (Ackerman et al., 2011) and is consistent with other research (e.g. Jones & Figueredo, 2013; Vonk, Zeigler-Hill, Mayhew, & Mercer, 2013; Cater, Zeigler-Hill, & Vonk, 2011).

Sexually coercive tactics were measured by the Postrefusal Sexual Persistence scale (PSP; Struckman-Johnson et al., 2003), a 19-item self-report questionnaire. The PSP is separated into subcategories that assess coercive tactics in increasing severity: 1) sexual arousal (e.g., persistently kissing and touching), 2) emotional manipulation and deception (e.g., questioning their sexuality), 3) exploitation of the intoxicated (e.g., purposefully getting the target drunk), and 4) physical force, threats, and harm (e.g., using physical harm). Participants were asked to indicate "yes" or "no" as to whether they had used each tactic after their partner had indicated 'no' to their sexual advance. A score of 1 was given for each answer indicating "yes" (0 for an answer indicating "no") and these points were totalled to create an overall score (range = 0–15) ( $\alpha = .92$ ) and four individual subscale scores; sexual

**Table 1**  
Descriptive statistics and sex differences for all measures.

	Mean (SD)			t
	Overall n = 329	Males n = 70	Females n = 259	
Total NPI	11.71 (7.56)	15.56 (9.20)	10.67 (6.70)	4.15***
Leadership/authority	3.79 (2.91)	5.20 (3.10)	3.41 (2.75)	4.39***
Grandiose exhibitionism	2.43 (2.43)	3.14 (2.56)	2.25 (2.36)	2.77**
Entitlement/exploitativeness	0.76 (1.02)	1.18 (1.16)	0.64 (0.95)	3.62***
Total PSP	0.55 (1.99)	1.76 (3.59)	0.23 (1.07)	3.53**
Sexual arousal	0.18 (0.59)	0.49 (0.93)	0.10 (0.42)	3.38**
Emotional manipulation	0.23 (0.85)	0.74 (1.49)	0.10 (0.48)	3.58**
Exploiting intoxicated	0.05 (0.29)	0.21 (0.59)	0.01 (0.09)	2.94**
Physical force, threats, harm	0.09 (0.59)	0.31 (1.10)	0.02 (0.32)	2.12*

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

arousal ( $\alpha = .76$ ), emotional manipulation and deception ( $\alpha = .79$ ), exploitation of the intoxicated ( $\alpha = .82$ ), and physical force, threats, and harm ( $\alpha = .91$ ).

### 2.3. Procedure

The first page of the on-line survey contained the participant information sheet and other relevant ethical information. Participants completed a selection of demographic questions and then continued to complete the NPI, PSP, and other questionnaires not reported in this paper. After completing the survey, participants were thanked, and presented with a full debrief.

### 3. Results

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics and sex differences for all measures. Males scored significantly higher than females on total narcissism, total PSP, and all subscales.

In Table 2, we report the associations between the NPI and PSP subscales. In males, Leadership/Authority and Grandiose Exhibitionism was positively associated with each of the four PSP subscales and Entitlement/Exploitativeness was positively associated with Emotional Manipulation. In females, Leadership/Authority was positively associated with Emotional Manipulation and Exploitation of the Intoxicated, Grandiose Exhibitionism was positively associated with Exploitation of the Intoxicated, and Entitlement/Exploitativeness was positively associated with all four PSP subscales.

When shared variance between the narcissism subscales was controlled in multiple regressions, in males, the Leadership/Authority facet of the NPI predicted Emotional Manipulation and Exploitation of the Intoxicated; and Grandiose Exhibitionism predicted Sexual Arousal. In females, the Entitlement/Exploitativeness facet of the NPI predicted

all four subscales of the PSP; Sexual Arousal, Emotional Manipulation, Exploitation of the Intoxicated, and Physical Force, Threats, and Harm.

The Fisher  $r$ - $z$  transformation was used in order to test the significance of the sex differences within Table 2. We found that three of the correlations were significantly different in males and females. The correlations between Leadership/Authority and Emotional Manipulation ( $z = 2.86, p < .01$ ), Grandiose Exhibitionism and Sexual Arousal ( $z = 2.36, p < .05$ ), and Grandiose Exhibitionism and Emotional Manipulation ( $z = 2.49, p < .05$ ) were significantly stronger in males than in females. No other correlations were significantly different.

### 4. Discussion

In the present study we investigated narcissism and sexually coercive tactics varying in severity in both males and females. Males scored higher than females on total narcissism, total PSP, and all subscales. In males, the Leadership/Authority facet of the NPI predicted Emotional Manipulation and Exploitation of the Intoxicated; and Grandiose Exhibitionism predicted Sexual Arousal. In females, the Entitlement/Exploitativeness facet of the NPI predicted all four subscales of the PSP. In addition, the correlations between Leadership/Authority and Emotional Manipulation, Grandiose Exhibitionism and Sexual Arousal, and Grandiose Exhibitionism and Emotional Manipulation were significantly stronger in males than in females. No other correlations were significantly different.

Our results are congruent with Grijalva et al.'s (2015) meta-analytic review in that males scored significantly higher on total narcissism and each of the subscales. However, as with the work of Ryan et al. (2008) and Simmons et al. (2005), when narcissism was investigated in relation to another behaviour, particularly sexually coercive tactics, maladaptive narcissism was a stronger predictor in females. All types of sexually coercive behaviours were localised to the Entitlement/Exploitativeness subscale in females, whereas in males, the Leadership/Authority subscale related to Emotional Manipulation and Exploitation of the Intoxicated, and Grandiose/Exhibitionism linked to the Sexual Arousal subscale. In addition, when empirically testing these sex variances, no significant differences were found in relation to the Entitlement/Exploitativeness subscale and all types of sexually coercive behaviours. This suggests that despite males scoring higher than females on total narcissism, total PSP, and all subscales, the relationship between maladaptive narcissism and sexually coercive behaviour in females is just as strong as it is for males.

The results indicate that sexual coercion in males relates to more socially desirable aspects of narcissism, whereas in females, these strategies are associated with socially toxic components of the construct. In evolutionary terms, males can enhance their reproductive success by promiscuous mating, something that is characteristic of males high in narcissism (Jonason, Li, Webster, & Schmitt, 2009). The Leadership/Authority aspect of narcissism is related to low empathy, for instance

**Table 2**  
Zero-order correlations and standardised regression coefficients for NPI and PSP subscales.

	Leadership/authority $r(\beta)$	Grandiose exhibitionism $r(\beta)$	Entitlement/exploitativeness $r(\beta)$	Total NPI $r$
<i>Men (n = 70)</i>				
1. Sexual arousal	.27* (.04)	.40** (.36*)	.20 (.05)	.39**
2. Emotional manipulation	.48*** (.35*)	.39** (.19)	.31* (.03)	.55**
3. Exploitation of intoxicated	.39** (.31*)	.36** (.20)	.20 (-.06)	.47**
4. Physical force, threats, harm	.34** (.27)	.26* (.10)	.23 (.04)	.40**
<i>Women (n = 259)</i>				
1. Sexual arousal	.10 (.00)	.10 (.03)	.27*** (.26***)	.16**
2. Emotional manipulation	.13* (.07)	.07 (-.03)	.25*** (.23***)	.18**
3. Exploitation of intoxicated	.16** (.04)	.16* (.06)	.31*** (.28***)	.25**
4. Physical force, threats, harm	.09 (.03)	.05 (-.03)	.22*** (.22***)	.13*

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

(Jonason, Lyons, Bethell, & Ross, 2013), which could be part of a package facilitating a promiscuous mating strategy in males (see also Holtzman & Strube, 2011). According to Morf and Rhodewalt (2001), males may be more likely to express overt/grandiose narcissism whereas females may use more indirect and discreet ways to fulfil their narcissistic goals. Our results compliment this view as the aspects of narcissism which relate to male sexual coercion (Leadership/Authority and Grandiose/Exhibitionism) are clearly more overt/grandiose in nature. In contrast, the aspect of narcissism that relates to female sexual coercion (Entitlement/Exploitativeness) involves more manipulative traits and is associated with higher levels of Machiavellianism (Ackerman et al., 2011).

As expected, our results both compliment and provide additional empirical support for 'the narcissistic reactance theory of rape and sexual coercion' (Baumeister et al., 2002), which proposes that sexual coercion in males may stem from a combination of narcissistic tendencies and reactance. We found that, when rejected from a sexual advance, narcissistic females are just as likely to react with PSP tactics as males are. Therefore, this extends Baumeister et al.'s (2002) theory by proving its relevance for both sexes.

The present study is not without its limitations. First, even though our sample was composed of university students and community members, a clear strength of the study, we had an imbalanced ratio of males to females. However, as the focus of the study was on females, this became an advantage. Second, as with all self-report methods, it is never a guarantee that participants are fully honest in their answers. However, due to the complete anonymity of the survey guaranteed by the on-line environment, our results may actually be less susceptible to socially desirable responding (e.g., Link & Mokdad, 2005; Kreuter, Presser, & Tourangeau, 2008).

Narcissism has been conceptualised in many distinct ways throughout existing literature and this diversity can cause confusion as to which characteristics should be included in scales designed to measure narcissism (Ackerman et al., 2011). Pincus and Lukowitsky (2010) believe there are two distinct forms of narcissism; normal and pathological, and that the NPI (Raskin & Terry, 1988) only measures normal narcissism. They identified two ways in which pathological narcissism can be expressed; grandiosity and vulnerability, and created the Pathological Narcissism Inventory (PNI; Pincus et al., 2009) as a way to measure both facets. However, as mentioned above, Ackerman et al.'s (2011) three-factor structure of the NPI contains both adaptive/normal and maladaptive/pathological elements, and therefore, it is considered a robust, multidimensional, approach to measure narcissism. Nevertheless, future research should investigate whether pathological narcissism, using the PNI (Pincus et al., 2009), is related to sexually coercive behaviour and specific PSP tactics, in both males and females. If the NPI (Raskin & Terry, 1988) is indeed an inferior measure for pathological narcissism, then one would expect to find stronger and more significant results using the PNI (Pincus et al., 2009), particularly in females.

Future research should also investigate PSP using a more domain specific measure of narcissism such as the Sexual Narcissism Scale (SNS; Widman & McNulty, 2010). The SNS captures the extent to which four components of narcissism (entitlement, exploitation, low empathy, inflated sense of skill) are activated in sexual domains. According to some, sexual narcissism more precisely predicts which components of narcissism are activated in the sexual domain (Widman & McNulty, 2010). It would be interesting to see whether similar results are found when investigating PSP using this alternative measure. In addition, conducting interviews with individuals who score highly on narcissism and PSP would potentially uncover underlying motivations of sexual coercion and the reasons why some behave this way when refused from a sexual advance. Finally, due to the novel nature of this research, it is recommended that follow up studies be undertaken to ensure that these findings are replicable.

In summary, our findings complement those of previous research: that narcissism is related to persistent sexual persuasion (Jones &

Olderbak, 2014), coercion and aggression (Mouilso & Calhoun, 2012; Widman & McNulty, 2010) in males. However, narcissistic females are just as likely to engage in serious and aggressive sexually coercive behaviour, thus suggesting that both sexes should always be included in any future research conducted on narcissism. These new findings contribute to the little literature on narcissism and sexual coercion in women, suggesting that narcissism may capture the idea of the ultimate femme fatale, dangerous when being refused what she feels entitled to.

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