



Should have known better: The impact of mating experience and the desire for marriage upon attraction to the narcissistic personality



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ABSTRACT

Narcissistic males do not make good romantic partners. Narcissistic males lack commitment, engage in manipulative game-playing and are unfaithful. Despite this, they are still desired by females. Females value different traits in short-term and long-term partners. Previous mate sampling experience is also important to facilitate mate assessment. This study aimed to determine whether amongst young adult heterosexual females; their mate sampling experience and desire for marriage influenced their attraction to narcissistic personality traits in a potential mate. British females aged 18–28 provided information on past mating experience, future desire for marriage and rated their agreement with 20 statements relating to the extent that they found narcissistic personality traits attractive in a potential mate. Females with greater mating experience and those desiring marriage were more attracted to the narcissistic male personality. The narcissistic personality, whilst having many negative qualities, possesses qualities associated with status and resource provision. These traits are desirable in short and long-term mating contexts. Despite future long-term mating desires which are unlikely to be achieved with a narcissistic male and possession of substantial mate sampling experience, females view the narcissistic male as a suitable partner: a testament to the success of the narcissistic personality in facilitating short-term mating.

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1. Introduction

The Dark Triad comprises Machiavellianism, psychopathy and narcissism (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Narcissism is a personality construct defined by an exaggerated sense of self-importance, authority, entitlement, self-sufficiency, exhibitionism, vanity and a willingness to manipulate others (Raskin & Terry, 1988). Narcissists show low scores for agreeableness and high scores for extraversion and openness on the Big Five personality domains (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). When considering the General Factor of Personality (Van der Linden, te Nijenhuis, & Bakker, 2010), narcissists can be tentatively suggested to score highly based on their high extraversion and openness. Narcissism is more prevalent in males than females (Foster, Campbell, & Twenge, 2003; Grijalva et al., 2014).

Short-term mating strategies are thought to be more evolutionarily adaptive to males than females due to males' lower parental investment and the costs to females of casual sexual encounters such as pregnancy, injury or infection (Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Carter, Campbell, & Muncer, 2014). However, there are problems

for males associated with short-term mating strategies such as the willingness to compete with one's own gender, the ability to successfully engage in this competition and the ability to repel mates shortly after intercourse (Holtzman & Strube, 2010). Narcissism has been suggested to have evolved primarily in response to these problems and narcissists tend to pursue and excel at short-term mating (Carter et al., 2014; Holtzman & Strube, 2010; Jonason, Li, Webster, & Schmitt, 2009). Narcissists are attractive to females, aware of the alternate mating opportunities available to them, begin new relationships with ease and are frequently non-monogamous (Campbell & Foster, 2002; Carter et al., 2014; Holtzman & Strube, 2010).

Whilst narcissism has clear reproductive benefits for the narcissist, the situation is largely negative for their romantic partner (Foster & Campbell, 2005). Narcissistic mates are more likely to be unfaithful (McNulty & Widman, 2014) and narcissism is associated with a lack of commitment (Campbell & Foster, 2002). This is due to their inflated self-view leading to dissatisfaction with their partner, their tendency to engage in manipulative game-playing within their relationships and their relative selfishness and lack of empathy (Campbell & Foster, 2002; Campbell, Foster, & Finkel, 2002). In addition, narcissists are attracted to potential partners of high social status that provide the opportunity for enhancement

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via association (Campbell, 1999; Tanchotsrinon, Maneesri, & Campbell, 2007). This, combined with their poor commitment, can lead to narcissistic individuals being constantly on the lookout for more attractive or higher status partners (Campbell & Foster, 2002).

Despite these disadvantages narcissistic males are still desired by females and are highly successful in short-term mating (Holtzman & Strube, 2010; Jonason et al., 2009). At least in the short-term, narcissists are frequently perceived as charming, popular, socially confident and entertaining (Back, Schmukle, & Egloff, 2010; Campbell et al., 2002; Watson & Biderman, 1994). Narcissists also frequently achieve high social status (Brunell et al., 2008; Young & Pinsky, 2006). These traits are desirable in potential mates (Bressler & Balshine, 2006; Buss, 2007; Buunk, Dijkstra, Fetchenhauer, & Kenrick, 2002; Fletcher, Simpson, Thomas, & Giles, 1999; Rauthmann & Kolar, 2013; Regan, Levin, Sprecher, Christopher, & Gate, 2000). Narcissistic males are also attractive to females due to their physical attractiveness (Holtzman & Strube, 2010), enhanced grooming and advertisement of potential resource provision (Vazire, Naumann, Rentfrow, & Gosling, 2008) as well as the personality construct itself being attractive (Carter et al., 2014).

For a multitude of reasons, narcissistic mates are therefore attractive to females. This is particularly proposed to be the case with younger females who typically exhibit a more short-term focus in their relationships (Carter et al., 2014), a mating scenario in which the narcissistic male excels (Carter et al., 2014; Holtzman & Strube, 2010; Jonason et al., 2009). However many factors can potentially influence female mate choice; such as their future relationship desires and their mating experience.

Many studies have indicated that females value different traits in potential short-term and long-term partners (e.g. Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Gangestad & Simpson, 2000; Li & Kenrick, 2006; Regan et al., 2000). Females also show higher selectivity when choosing long-term partners (Stewart, Stinnett, & Rosenfeld, 2000). Traits such as sexual desirability and attractiveness are important in potential short-term partners, whilst traits such as intelligence, honesty, dependability, kindness, resource acquisition and status are valued in potential long-term partners (Buss, 2007; Li, Bailey, Kenrick, & Linsenmeier, 2002; Li & Kenrick, 2006; Regan et al., 2000). This difference has also been demonstrated in the Dark Triad context with females preferring males low on Machiavellianism as long-term partners and males high on Machiavellianism in short-term mating contexts (Aitken, Lyons, & Jonason, 2013).

Another factor that can influence a female's choice of mates is their previous mating experience. Females with greater mating experience demonstrate more confidence in their assessment of attractive traits in potential mates than less experienced females (Waynforth, 2007). Humans typically engage in sequential mate search via dating a number of individuals successively before choosing a long-term partner. This search entails sampling a number of potential mates to provide information upon mate value. This information can then be utilised when choosing a suitable future long-term partner (Miller & Todd, 1998; Todd, 1997).

There has been little research, to our knowledge, into the effects of young females' future relationship desires and past mating experience upon attraction to narcissistic mates. In the current study the aim was thus to determine whether amongst young adult heterosexual females (ranging from ages 18 to 28); their number of previous partners and their desire for marriage influenced their attraction to the narcissistic personality in a potential mate.

We hypothesise that females with greater mate sampling experience and those with a desire for long-term relationship commitment will be less attracted to the narcissistic male personality.

This is due to experienced females being better able to assess the traits important in a potential mate (Miller & Todd, 1998; Todd, 1997; Waynforth, 2007), and due to matrimonial minded females seeking males displaying traits important in long-term relationship contexts (Aitken et al., 2013; Buss, 2007; Li et al., 2002; Regan et al., 2000). In both these situations, we would predict that narcissistic males would be found wanting due to the disadvantages associated with the narcissistic personality.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Participant recruitment

One hundred and forty-six young British females (mean age 23.6, range 18–28) participated in this study which was conducted via online questionnaire. Of these, 76% ($n = 111$) desired marriage in the future and 24% ($n = 35$) did not. Within this sample, 52.1% ($n = 76$) of the participants had 0–5 previous partners, 21.2% ($n = 31$) had 6–10, 15.8% had 11–15 ($n = 23$), 3.4% had 16–20 ($n = 5$) and 7.5% ($n = 11$) had 21+ previous partners.

The questionnaire was advertised on the social media websites Facebook™ and Twitter™. The young target population frequently utilise the internet and social media sites thus an internet based survey was easily accessible to participants. Participants were required to be over the age of 18, under the age of 28, female and heterosexual in order to complete the questionnaire. No identifying personal data were collected, and participants were reassured that all responses were voluntary, data remained anonymous, and all information collected was held securely. Participants provided informed consent. The study was approved by the Institutional Research Ethics Committee.

2.2. Questionnaire design

Participant age information was obtained and they were presented with two closed ended questions relating to the participant's desire for marriage (Yes/No) and number of previous mating partners (0–5; 6–10; 11–15; 16–20; 21+). Subsequently, participants were asked to consider 20 statements relating to the extent that they found narcissistic personality traits attractive in a potential mate. These statements were based on those utilised in the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI) (Raskin & Hall, 1979). The NPI is a viable tool for the measurement of the general construct of narcissism and is the most common measure of narcissism validated for use with nonclinical populations (John & Robins, 1994; Raskin & Terry, 1988). The NPI was adapted for this study in order to investigate female attraction to narcissistic personality traits. In developing the scale used in this study, we changed the NPI from 40 statements with a forced choice format to 20 statements with a Likert-type format. The statements assessed female attraction to narcissistic male traits such as being egotistical, arrogant, driven to succeed, confident, proud, competitive, vain, manipulative, devoid of empathy, self-important, praise and attention seeking, assertive, influential and authoritative. The statements covered the seven components of the narcissistic personality construct; authority, superiority, self-sufficiency, exhibitionism, entitlement, vanity and exploitiveness (Raskin & Terry, 1988).

Participants were asked to rate their agreement with statements such as “Confidence in a male is more alluring than modesty” on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree” (Table 1). Attraction to the narcissistic male personality was calculated by summing the scores for each statement (with values ranging from 5 for “strongly agree” to 1 for “strongly disagree”). Hence a high total score indicated that the participant found narcissistic traits to be attractive in a potential mate.

Table 1
Statements pertaining to female attraction to narcissistic male traits.

1. I am attracted to an egotistical male	11. A lack of empathy is desirable in a male
2. An arrogant manner is attractive	12. I am drawn to a male who uses manipulation to meet his needs
3. I am attracted to a male who is preoccupied with brilliance and power	13. Having a self-important character is appealing
4. I am drawn to an attention seeking male	14. A male who seeks and expects praise is attractive
5. Confidence in a male is more alluring than modesty	15. A male who can influence people is attractive to me
6. A proud male is more appealing, than a passive male	16. I am attracted to men who take pleasure in being the centre of attention
7. Competitiveness is a desirable attribute in a male mate	17. I desire males who exhibit assertiveness
8. Male vanity is an attractive attribute	18. I am drawn to a male who displays authority
9. A man who admires themselves is desirable	19. A male who is confident in displaying his body attracts me
10. I prefer a male mate to have a more confident attitude than myself	20. A man who uses manipulation to influence his success at work is attractive

2.3. Statistical analysis

The influence of desire for marriage upon attraction to the narcissist personality was analysed using the Mann Whitney *U* test, whilst the Kruskal–Wallis test was used to investigate the effect of mating experience upon attraction to the narcissistic personality. The effects of future matrimonial desires and mating experience upon attraction to the narcissistic personality were determined both for the total narcissistic personality score and for the scores for the individual narcissistic traits. For the analyses of mating experience, where significant results were found, a Post Hoc Mann Whitney *U* test was performed on all probable paired outcomes. Subsequently, a Bonferroni Correction calculation was applied to the results, creating a new Bonferroni adjusted significance level set at $p < 0.005$ to avoid spurious positive results. All analyses were carried out in SPSS (version 21.0, [SPSS Inc., 2012](#)).

3. Results

3.1. Effect of desire for marriage upon attraction to the total narcissistic personality score

There was a significant difference in attraction to the narcissistic personality depending on whether individuals desired marriage ($U = 1463.5$, $z = -2.197$, $p = 0.028$, $r = -0.182$). Individuals wishing to get married were more attracted to the narcissistic male personality (mean rank = 77.82) than those not desiring marriage (mean rank = 59.81).

3.2. Effect of desire for marriage upon attraction to the individual narcissistic traits

There was a significant difference in the responses to the statements “I am drawn to a man who displays authority” ($U = 1413.0$, $z = -2.590$, $p = 0.01$, $r = -0.214$) and “A man who uses manipulation to influence his success at work is attractive” ($U = 1252.5$, $z = -3.310$, $p = 0.001$, $r = -0.274$). Individuals desiring marriage showed higher agreement with the statement “I am drawn to a man who displays authority” (mean rank = 78.27) than those not desiring marriage (mean rank = 58.27). Individuals desiring marriage also showed higher agreement with the statement “A man who uses manipulation to influence his success at work is attractive” (mean rank = 79.72) than those not desiring marriage (mean rank = 53.79).

3.3. Effect of mating experience upon attraction to the total narcissistic personality score

There was a significant difference in attraction to the narcissistic personality depending on mating experience ($H(4) = 18.203$, $p = 0.001$). Post hoc tests showed that there was no significant difference in attraction to narcissistic males between individuals who

had 0–5 and 6–10 previous partners ($U = 1023$, $z = -1.065$, $p = 0.287$, $r = -0.103$), 0–5 and 11–15 partners ($U = 701.5$, $z = -1.430$, $p = 0.153$, $r = -0.144$) and 0–5 and 16–20 partners ($U = 125$, $z = -1.277$, $p = 0.202$, $r = -0.142$). There was also no significant difference in attraction to narcissistic males between individuals with 6–10 and 11–15 partners ($U = 322.5$, $z = -0.595$, $p = 0.552$, $r = -0.081$), 6–10 and 16–20 partners ($U = 56.5$, $z = -0.962$, $p = 0.336$, $r = -0.160$), 11–15 and 16–20 partners ($U = 41.5$, $z = -0.961$, $p = 0.337$, $r = -0.182$), 11–15 and 21+ partners ($U = 50.5$, $z = -2.799$, $p = 0.005$, $r = -0.480$) and 16–20 and 21+ partners ($U = 21$, $z = -0.737$, $p = 0.461$, $r = -0.184$).

However, individuals who had 21+ previous partners were significantly more attracted to the narcissistic male personality (mean rank = 71.82) than those individuals who had 0–5 partners (mean rank = 39.97) ($U = 112$, $z = -3.911$, $p < 0.0005$, $r = -0.419$). There was also a significant difference depending on whether individuals had 21+ previous partners or 6–10 partners ($U = 48.5$, $z = -3.494$, $p < 0.0005$, $r = -0.539$). Individuals with 21+ partners were more attracted to the narcissistic personality (mean rank = 32.59) than those with 6–10 partners (mean rank = 17.56).

3.4. Effect of mating experience upon attraction to the individual narcissistic traits

There was a significant difference in the responses to 10 of the statements depending on mating experience: “I am attracted to an egotistical male” ($H(4) = 18.128$, $p = 0.001$), “An arrogant manner is attractive” ($H(4) = 26.696$, $p < 0.0005$), “I am drawn to an attention seeking male” ($H(4) = 25.221$, $p < 0.0005$), “Confidence in a male is more alluring than modesty” ($H(4) = 15.592$, $p = 0.004$), “A proud male is more appealing than a passive male” ($H(4) = 9.970$, $p = 0.041$), “Having a self-important character is appealing” ($H(4) = 13.174$, $p = 0.010$), “A male who can influence people is attractive” ($H(4) = 13.651$, $p = 0.008$), “I am attracted to men who take pleasure in being the centre of attention” ($H(4) = 18.931$, $p = 0.001$), “I desire males who exhibit assertiveness” ($H(4) = 18.105$, $p = 0.001$), and “I am drawn to a male who displays authority” ($H(4) = 11.245$, $p = 0.024$).

Post hoc tests showed that there were no significant differences in the responses to these statements for individuals who had 0–5 and 6–10 previous partners, 0–5 and 11–15 partners or 0–5 and 16–20 partners. No significant differences were also found between individuals who had 6–10 and 11–15 partners, 6–10 and 16–20 partners, 11–15 and 16–20 partners, or 16–20 and 21+ partners.

However significant differences in the responses to all 10 of these statements were found between individuals who had 0–5 and 21+ partners, and in the responses to 7 of these statements between individuals who had 6–10 and 21+ partners. Significant differences were also found between individuals having 11–15 and 21+ partners in the responses to 2 of these statements. For all these contexts, those with 21+ partners rated higher agreement with the statements (Table 2).

Table 2
Analysis of impact of mating experience upon attraction to individual narcissistic personality traits.

Statement	Number of previous partners	Mean rank	<i>U</i>	<i>z</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>p</i>
I am attracted to an egotistical male	0–5 and 21+	0–5: 40.16 21+: 70.50	126.5	–3.851	–0.413	<0.0005
	6–10 and 21+	6–10: 17.63 21+: 32.41	50.5	–3.531	–0.545	<0.0005
An arrogant manner is attractive	0–5 and 21+	0–5: 39.62 21+: 74.27	85.0	–4.500	–0.482	<0.0005
	6–10 and 21+	6–10: 18.06 21+: 31.18	64.0	–3.127	–0.482	0.002
	11–15 and 21+	11–15: 13.89 21+: 25.05	43.5	–3.193	–0.548	0.001
I am drawn to an attention seeking male	0–5 and 21+	0–5: 39.90 21+: 72.32	106.5	–4.219	–0.452	<0.0005
	6–10 and 21+	6–10: 17.87 21+: 31.73	58.0	–3.407	–0.526	0.001
	11–15 and 21+	11–15: 14.17 21+: 24.45	50.0	–2.974	–0.510	0.003
Confidence in a male is more alluring than modesty	0–5 and 21+	0–5: 40.71 21+: 66.73	168.0	–3.355	–0.360	0.001
	6–10 and 21+	6–10: 18.40 21+: 30.23	74.5	–2.890	–0.446	0.004
A proud male is more appealing than a passive male	0–5 and 21+	0–5: 41.18 21+: 63.50	203.5	–2.881	–0.309	0.004
Having a self-important character is appealing	0–5 and 21+	0–5: 40.98 21+: 64.86	188.5	–3.067	–0.328	0.002
A male who can influence people is attractive	0–5 and 21+	0–5: 40.77 21+: 66.32	172.5	–3.142	–0.337	0.001
	6–10 and 21+	6–10: 18.48 21+: 30.00	77.0	–2.955	–0.456	0.003
I am attracted to men who take pleasure in being the centre of attention	0–5 and 21+	0–5: 40.26 21+: 69.82	134.0	–3.849	–0.413	<0.0005
	6–10 and 21+	6–10: 18.10 21+: 31.09	65.0	–3.148	–0.486	0.002
I desire males who exhibit assertiveness	0–5 and 21+	0–5: 40.72 21+: 66.68	168.5	–3.512	–0.377	<0.0005
	6–10 and 21+	6–10: 17.90 21+: 31.64	59.0	–3.421	–0.528	0.001
I am drawn to a male who displays authority	0–5 and 21+	0–5: 40.99 21+: 64.77	189.5	–3.080	–0.330	0.002

4. Discussion

Overall, individuals with greater mating experience and those that desired marriage were more attracted to the narcissistic male personality. Our hypotheses were therefore not supported; greater mating experience and a desire for marriage resulted in increased attraction to the narcissistic male personality.

4.1. Effect of desire for marriage upon attraction to the narcissistic personality

Females that desired marriage were more attracted to the narcissistic personality than their counterparts who did not desire marriage. This finding is problematic from a female perspective as the narcissistic male is primarily short-term mating goal orientated (Carter et al., 2014; Jonason et al., 2009) and does not provide a suitable long-term partner (Campbell & Foster, 2002; Campbell et al., 2002). This finding is also surprising as females will discriminate against males possessing other Dark Triad traits in long-term mating contexts (Aitken et al., 2013). However, superficially the narcissistic male personality construct does possess at least some of the traits that are desirable in a matrimonial partner. Females desiring marriage were more attracted to statements indicating that the male was authoritative and willing to use manipulation to enhance his success in a working environment. These statements indicate that the narcissistic male may be successful in acquiring status and resources; traits which are valued in a potential long-term partner (Buss, 1989, 2007; Li et al., 2002). Furthermore, many of the disadvantages of narcissistic males that render them unlikely to engage in successful long-term

partnerships are not immediately evident, both in the questionnaire and when initially meeting a narcissistic male (Back et al., 2010; Carlson, Vazire, & Oltmanns, 2011). Whilst the narcissistic male is not good marriage material, it can be seen why he may appear to be so.

4.2. Effect of mating experience upon attraction to the narcissistic personality

Females with greater mating experience should have more information available to them when assessing a suitable mate (Miller & Todd, 1998; Todd, 1997; Waynforth, 2007). We hypothesised that experienced females would be less attracted to the narcissistic male personality due to greater awareness of the qualities needed in a suitable partner. This was not found to be the case and instead females who had greater than 21 previous partners were more attracted to the narcissistic male personality than those individuals who had fewer than 10 partners.

The greater mating experience in these females may reflect their pursuit of multiple matings and a short-term mating strategy mindset (Greiling & Buss, 2000). A number of statements within the questionnaire suggest that the narcissistic male personality is attractive, an important consideration in a short-term mating context (Buss, 2007; Buunk et al., 2002; Fletcher et al., 1999; Regan et al., 2000).

Alternatively, these findings may indicate that greater mate sampling experience deems narcissistic males a valid mate choice. This is problematic as narcissistic males do not make good romantic partners (Campbell & Foster, 2002; Campbell et al., 2002). Females with the greatest mating experience rated statements indicating that the male was egotistical, arrogant, attention-seeking, confident,

influential and assertive, as more attractive than did females with fewer than 10 partners. A number of these statements suggest that the male possesses status, the ability to acquire resources, and that they are entertaining and self-assured. These traits are attractive to females in relationship contexts (Bressler & Balshine, 2006; Buss, 2007; Buunk et al., 2002). The narcissistic male thus can seem to be a suitable potential mate, a view which appears to only be reinforced by greater mate sampling experience and the ability to gauge partner quality (Miller & Todd, 1998; Todd, 1997). Some of these traits, such as egotism and arrogance are less clearly beneficial in a potential mate. However narcissistic males may not only be desired for their seemingly positive attributes. 'Bad boys' are highly popular in the literature and the media and these antiheroes frequently display narcissistic traits such as vanity, infidelity and manipulation which do not hinder their popularity (Jonason, Webster, Schmitt, Li, & Crysel, 2012). The narcissistic male does not make a good partner but even experienced females do not realise this: a testament to the narcissistic male's success in securing short-term matings.

5. Conclusions

There are several limitations of the study that should be mentioned. We did not assess narcissism in our participants, determine whether they were currently in relationships or investigate their ovulatory phase. A female's level of fertility can affect her mate choice with regards to Dark Triad traits (Aitken et al., 2013). Future studies could consider how female relationship status, fertility and personality traits interact with past experience, future desires and attraction to narcissistic males. Another limitation was that we only utilised self-report data, it would be beneficial for future work to explore attraction to dating profiles of potential mates that have narcissistic traits or investigate this in a speed dating scenario.

Nonetheless this study serves to highlight for the first time, to our knowledge, the effect of future relationship desires and past mating experience upon attraction to the narcissistic male personality. Regardless of females possessing substantial mating experience and matrimonial desires which could be suggested to render the narcissistic male unsuitable as a partner, the narcissistic male personality is still desired, highlighting the success of this personality construct in facilitating a short-term mating strategy. These results indicate the need to take into account future relationship desires and past mating experience when considering attraction to narcissistic male personality traits.

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