

# In Defense of Self-Love: An Observational Study on Narcissists' Negative Behavior During Romantic Relationship Conflict

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Research suggests narcissists respond negatively to ego-threats stemming from both negative evaluative feedback (Bushman, B. J., & Baumeister, R. F. (1998). Threatened egotism, narcissism, self-esteem, and direct and displaced aggression: Does self-love or self-hate lead to violence? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 75, 219–229) and negative social feedback (Twenge, J. M., & Campbell, W. K. (2003). "Isn't it fun to get the respect that we're going to deserve?" Narcissism, social rejection, and aggression. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 29, 261–272). In the current study, we used an observational methodology to examine whether narcissists also respond negatively to romantic relationship conflict. Multi-level analyses revealed that people high (vs. low) in narcissism were observed by independent coders as engaging in significantly more negative behaviors (i.e., criticizing, name-calling, insulting) during a conflict with their romantic partner. Post-conflict, narcissists reported feeling less committed to their relationships, while reporting that their partners felt more committed to their relationships. Together, these results suggest that narcissists self-protectively derogate relationship partners both during and after conflict as a way to defend against relationship-threats.

**Keywords:** Narcissism; Romantic relationships; Threat; Self-enhancement.

The research on narcissism and romantic relationships has revealed a complex picture. On the one hand, narcissists successfully resist doubts about both a current romantic partner's love (Foster & Campbell, 2005) and a potential dating partner's interest (Rhodewalt & Eddings, 2002). On the other hand, narcissists' romantic relationships are characterized by less commitment, less accommodation (Campbell & Foster, 2002), and less forgiveness following a partner transgression (Exline, Baumeister, Bushman, Campbell, & Finkel, 2004). While such research highlights the complexities inherent to narcissists' love lives, compared to research on narcissism and ego-threat, there has been relatively little research investigating how narcissists respond to difficulties in their current romantic relationships. In fact, much of the research on narcissists' reactions to relationship-threat has focused on threats occurring outside of their ongoing romantic relationships (e.g., Konrath, Bushman, & Campbell, 2006; Nicholls & Stukas, 2011;

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Rhodewalt & Eddings, 2002; Twenge & Campbell, 2003; cf. Exline et al., 2004; Foster & Campbell, 2005), and we know of no research to date that has used an observational methodology to study the responses of narcissists in threatening relationship interactions. To that end, the goal of the current observational research is to explore how narcissists navigate conflict in their ongoing romantic relationships.

## **Narcissism and Threat**

Research on narcissism and ego-threat has revealed that narcissists are highly sensitive to criticism. For example, narcissists respond to failure feedback with more anger (Stucke, 2003) and aggression (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998) than their non-narcissistic counterparts. Moreover, narcissists are willing to derogate both high and low status evaluators who deliver unfavorable interpersonal judgments (Horton & Sedikides, 2009), rate evaluators as less competent following negative interpersonal feedback (Kernis & Sun, 1994), and derogate similar others who perform better than them on a social sensitivity task (Morf & Rhodewalt, 1993). Research looking specifically at social rejection has revealed that narcissists are both angry and aggressive when excluded by a group (Twenge & Campbell, 2003). Perhaps not surprisingly, when relationship partners become the source of a self-esteem threat, narcissists appear willing to jeopardize these interpersonal bonds in the pursuit of self-enhancement. Nicholls and Stukas (2011) found that after being outperformed by a friend, narcissists actively decrease closeness with that friend. As a result of such self-regulatory strategies, narcissists' interpersonal lives appear riddled with feelings of hostility and interpersonal conflict. Longitudinal research suggests that narcissistic entitlement is related to chronic conflict over a 10-week period—and this relationship is completely mediated by self-image goals, suggesting that the motivation to maintain an inflated sense of self lies at the heart of narcissists' poor relationship functioning (Moeller, Crocker, & Bushman, 2009).

## **Narcissism, Romantic Relationships, and Threat**

The literature on narcissism and romantic relationships suggests that narcissists navigate their relationships in ways that help maintain positive self-views (Campbell, 1999; Campbell, Brunell, & Finkel, 2006; Campbell, Foster, & Finkel, 2002; Campbell, Rudich, & Sedikides, 2002). For example, narcissists prefer partners who are both perfect and admiring, in part because narcissists believe these partners will enhance their self-esteem (Campbell, 1999). Narcissists' self-enhancement bias may also help them resist romantic rejection. For example, narcissistic men recall their past dating histories as being more successful than initial reports of these histories after learning that a potential dating partner had rejected them (Rhodewalt & Eddings, 2002). Similarly, when asked to list 10 reasons why their partners may not be committed to them, narcissists report more difficulty generating this list and subsequently report less relationship dysfunction (Foster & Campbell, 2005). Such findings seem to suggest that narcissists may enhance relationship dynamics as a way to maintain feelings of self-worth in response to romantic rejection.

While such findings point to narcissists' potential for romantic-resilience in the face of threat, it remains to be seen whether this type of resilience is evident in response to relationship conflict. Because narcissists are less concerned for the well-being of their partners (see Sedikides, Campbell, Reeder, Elliot, & Gregg, 2002), more concerned about maintaining power and autonomy in their relationships (Campbell, Foster, et al., 2002), and willing to derogate romantic partners in order to maintain positive self-views

(Campbell, Rudich, et al., 2002), conflict may provide a scenario in which narcissists rely on relationship-damaging tactics to enhance feelings of self-worth. Consistent with this reasoning, longitudinal research suggests that narcissists hold grudges against romantic partners who hurt them (Exline et al., 2004). Moreover, self-report research investigating how narcissists cope with romantic conflict has revealed that narcissists (as compared to their non-narcissistic counterparts) report being less likely to respond to conflict by discussing the conflict, remaining loyal to their partner, or refraining from negative responses (Campbell & Foster, 2002). These latter findings seem to suggest that narcissists will respond to conflict within a romantic relationship with the same negativity they exhibit in other threatening interpersonal interactions (e.g., Moeller et al., 2009; Smalley & Stake, 1996; Twenge & Campbell, 2003).

## **Present Research**

The goal of the current research was to explore how narcissists respond to conflict in their ongoing romantic relationships. We used an observational methodology to investigate the relation between narcissism and observer-rated negative behaviors (e.g., criticizing, complaining, name-calling, insulting) during a videotaped conflict discussion task. In addition, we also included pre- and post-conflict measures of commitment to determine if conflict influences how narcissists regulate closeness in their relationships. Because research on narcissism and relationship-threat has revealed inconsistent results, we tested two competing predictions. On the one hand, it is possible that narcissists will defend against relationship threats by enhancing their relationships and drawing closer to their partners. Such findings would be consistent with research suggesting that narcissists may be buffered from the negative effects of relationship doubts by exhibiting less relationship dysfunction (e.g., Foster & Campbell, 2005; Rhodewalt & Eddings, 2002) and with research suggesting that people with more positive self-perceptions affirm their relationships in the face of threat (e.g., Murray, Bellavia, Rose, & Griffin, 2003; Murray, Rose, Bellavia, Holmes, & Kusche, 2002). Therefore, the relationship-enhancement hypothesis predicts that narcissists will be observed engaging in less negative behavior during conflict and will enhance their own commitment to the relationship post-conflict.

On the other hand, it is also possible that narcissists will enhance the self at the expense of their relationship. Research suggests that narcissism is associated with a willingness to weaken bonds with close others in order to maintain inflated self-views (e.g., Nicholls & Stukas, 2011; see also Sedikides et al., 2002). Moreover, some researchers have suggested that narcissists' positive self-evaluations mask underlying (and potentially implicit) insecurities about self-worth—suggesting narcissists may protect the self from potential romantic rejection by devaluing partners (see DeHart, Longua, & Smith, 2011; Morf, Horvath, & Torchetti, 2011). Therefore, the self-enhancement hypothesis predicts that narcissists will be observed as engaging in significantly more negative behavior during conflict and will report significantly less commitment to their partners post-conflict as a way to enhance the self.

Lastly, we asked participants to report on perceptions of their partners' commitment to the relationship both pre- and post-conflict. Predicting narcissists' post-conflict perceptions of their partners' commitment also allowed for two competing predictions. At first blush, it appears that narcissists' penchant for admiration should prompt them to maintain (if not exaggerate) their partner's level of commitment after the conflict interaction (see Campbell et al., 2006; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001; Sedikides et al., 2002). Because increases in perceived partner commitment enhance relationship- and self-

evaluations, such a prediction would be consistent with both the relationship-enhancement and the self-enhancement hypotheses. However, previous research has revealed that narcissists believe that close others view them as less positive, less agreeable, and more concerned with power (Carlson, Vazire, & Oltmanns, 2011), suggesting narcissists are aware of how others perceive them. Therefore, in the current study, it is possible that narcissists who behave poorly during conflict (i.e., self-enhancement hypothesis) have insight into the potentially negative relational consequences of this bad behavior—and as a result may perceive their partners as reducing commitment to them post-conflict.

## Method

### *Participants*

A total of 204 undergraduate college students (102 couples) currently involved in a monogamous romantic relationship of at least 2 months took part in a study on “Romantic Relationship Interactions.” Potential participants did not know that they would be asked to discuss a conflict in their relationship during recruitment. Instead, potential participants were told that their participation “includes taking part in a videotaped discussion with your romantic partner and filling out a series of questionnaires about yourself and your relationship.” The students’ mean age was 20.73 years old ( $SD = 1.52$ ) and the average relationship length was 19.95 months ( $SD = 16.53$ ). Of the 204 couples, 200 couples were heterosexual and 4 couples were same-sex.<sup>1</sup> Participants received either monetary payment or course credit for participating in the study.

### *Overview of Procedure*

Couples participating in the study arrived at the lab and independently completed a series of questionnaires, including demographic information and measures of narcissism, pre-conflict own commitment, and pre-conflict perceived partner commitment. The last item of the questionnaire packet asked each member of the couple to independently identify an issue that was a recent source of major disagreement in their relationship. Partners were then brought back together and the researcher randomly selected one of the topics for the conflict discussion by flipping a coin (Powers, Pietromanaco, Gunlicks, & Sayer, 2006).

After the issue was chosen for discussion, participants were told to think about the last major argument they had about this topic and then try to resolve it (adapted from Simpson, Rholes, & Philips, 1996). Couples were told that though no one would be in the room while their interaction took place, it would be videotaped and coded later. Following the 7-min discussion session, participants completed a measure of post-conflict mood and interpersonal vulnerability. In addition, we reassessed participants’ own commitment and perceived partner commitment, which allowed us to explore changes in feelings of commitment from pre- to post-conflict assessments. Finally, a positive conversation task was introduced to help couples recover from any negative affect left over from the conflict discussion. In this 3-min discussion, participants were asked to tell one another what it is they really enjoy about each other and their relationship. At the completion of the positive conversation, task participants were compensated and fully debriefed about the nature of the study. All participants were asked to sign a video release form if they agreed to have their conflict discussion included in the study.<sup>2</sup>

## *Measures*

### ***Narcissism***

Narcissism was assessed with the 40-item narcissistic personality inventory (Raskin & Terry, 1988). Participants indicated whether a series of statements were true or false (e.g., “If I ruled the world, it would be a much better place,” “I am going to be a great person,” “I am more capable than other people”). The scale is coded so that higher scores indicate higher levels of narcissistic personality ( $\alpha = .82$ ).

### ***Own Commitment***

One item was used to assess participants’ own commitment to the relationship. Participants indicated how committed they were to their current romantic relationship on a scale from 1 (not at all committed) to 7 (very committed). Participants responded to this item both before and after the conflict interaction.

### ***Perceived Partner Commitment***

One item was used to assess participants’ perceptions of their partners’ commitment to the relationship. Participants indicated how committed they believed their partner was to their current romantic relationship on a scale from 1 (not at all committed) to 7 (very committed). Participants responded to this item both before and after the conflict interaction.

### ***Interpersonal Vulnerability***

To determine whether narcissists felt as hurt by the conflict as their non-narcissistic counterparts, a seven-item measure was used to assess feelings of interpersonal vulnerability and rejection following the conflict interaction (adapted from Murray, Derrick, Leder, & Holmes, 2008). Participants indicated how they felt directly following the interaction (happy, angry, hurt, betrayed, included, rejected, disappointed) on a seven-point scale (1, not at all; 7, very). Positive items were reverse scored such that higher scores reflected greater feelings of interpersonal angst or vulnerability ( $\alpha = .93$ ).

### ***Affect***

The positive and negative affectivity schedule (PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988) was used to tap participants’ mood following the conflict interaction. The PANAS consists of 10 negative (e.g., irritable, jittery) and 10 positive (e.g., excited, strong) emotions. Participants rated the extent that they felt each emotion at that moment on a five-point scale (1, very slightly or not at all; 5, extremely). An index of positive affect was created by aggregating the positive emotions ( $\alpha = .87$ ) and an index of negative affect was created by aggregating the negative emotions ( $\alpha = .87$ ).

### ***Coding Interactions***

Videotapes were coded by trained observers. Before observers made any ratings, they were given detailed definitions, instructions and training on the behaviors. Three independent observers coded male behavior and three coded female behavior.<sup>3</sup> In addition, because ratings of conflict behaviors were continuous, interrater reliability was established by calculating intraclass correlations (ICCs). Two ICCs, one for males and one for females, were computed for each behavior item being coded. The current study used a two way mixed model, where raters are seen as a fixed effect and behaviors are seen as a random effect (Shrout & Fleiss, 1979). A consistency computation was used to determine

if raters' scores are correlated (as opposed to identical). Ratings by the three independent observers were averaged to create a single rating for each behavior being coded. An ICC score of .70 or higher was considered acceptable interrater reliability.

### ***Negative Behaviors***

Six items were adapted from the rapid marital interaction coding system (RMICS; Heyman & Vivian, 2000) and used to assess negative behavior (e.g. criticized partner, complained about partner's personality or character, insulted or name called, snapped or yelled, responded sarcastically). On a scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (nearly all the time), independent observers rated the degree to which participants engaged in each of the negative behaviors. ICCs ranged from .71 to .90. Negative behaviors were then combined such that higher scores indicated greater observed negative behavior ( $\alpha = .85$ ).

### ***Positive Behaviors***

Five items were adapted from the RMICS (Heyman & Vivian, 2000) and were used to tap positive behaviors (e.g., expressed understanding or agreement, expressed caring or concern, rephrased partner's words, reassured love). On a scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (nearly all the time), independent observers rated the degree to which participants engaged in each of the positive behaviors. ICCs ranged from .72 to .86. The positive behavior ratings were then combined such that higher scores indicated greater observed positive behavior ( $\alpha = .66$ ).

## **Results**

### ***Descriptive Statistics***

Table 1 shows the means, standard deviations and correlations among key variables. Gender was positively related to observer-rated positive behavior, suggesting that females engaged in more positive behavior during the conflict. Narcissism was positively related to observer-rated negative behavior and negative affect. Negative affect was negatively related to both post-conflict own commitment and post-conflict partner commitment, but positively related to interpersonal vulnerability. Observer-rated negative behavior was inversely related to observer-rated positive behavior, suggesting that participants who engaged in more negative behavior also engaged in fewer positive behaviors. Observer-rated negative behavior was also negatively related to post-conflict perceived partner commitment and positively related to interpersonal vulnerability. These later findings suggest that participants who engaged in more negative behavior during the conflict reported both more negative perceptions of their partner's commitment and more interpersonal pain post-conflict. Finally, post-conflict own commitment was positively related to post-conflict perceived partner commitment and negatively related to interpersonal vulnerability.

### ***Multilevel Regression Analyses***

Because the data contain two levels of analysis with individuals (Level 1) nested within couple (Level 2), SAS PROC MIXED in SAS v9.2 was used to conduct multilevel regression analyses (Kenny, Kashy, & Bolger, 1998; Nezlek, 2001). This approach allows for the simultaneous estimation of regression equations for partners from the same dyad, while controlling for the interdependence between observations. In the current study, all mixed predictor variables (i.e., those predictors that have variation both within and

**TABLE 1** Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Variable name	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Gender			—							
2. Narcissism	20.89	6.32	-.07	—						
3. Negative affect	1.70	.72	.08	.12 <sup>†</sup>	—					
4. Observer-rated negative behavior	4.22	.61	.09	.28**	.12 <sup>†</sup>	—				
5. Observer-rated positive behavior	3.87	.52	.22**	-.11	-.07	-.44**	—			
6. Post-conflict commitment	6.48	1.07	.09	-.09	-.39***	-.11	.21**	—		
7. Post-conflict perceived partner commitment	6.35	1.12	-.02	.04	-.45***	-.22**	.20**	.57**	—	
8. Interpersonal vulnerability	1.90	1.02	.08	.11	.74***	.31**	-.26**	-.50**	-.62**	—

<sup>†</sup>  $p < .10$ , \*\* $p < .01$ .



between dyads, such as narcissism) were modeled as Level-1 variables (Campbell & Kashy, 2002).<sup>4</sup>

### *Narcissism and Conflict Behavior*

To determine if narcissists respond to conflict in ways consistent with the relationship-enhancement or self-enhancement hypotheses, multilevel regression analyses were used to examine the main effect of narcissism on negative behavior during the conflict interaction. Gender (1, females; -1, males) was significantly related to conflict behavior and controlled for in all analyses.<sup>5</sup> We also controlled for negative affect in order to ensure that effects were due to levels of narcissism and not due to mood. Finally, we controlled for the effect of observer-rated positive behavior on ratings of negative behavior (and vice versa). Including these covariates in the model does not change the pattern of results presented. As shown in the left panel of Table 2, multilevel analyses revealed a significant effect of gender and positive behavior. Consistent with the self-enhancement hypothesis, there was also a significant and positive main effect of narcissism, suggesting that narcissists were observed engaging in more criticism and partner-derogation during the conflict interaction when compared to their non-narcissistic counterparts. Finally, to explore whether narcissism also predicted positive conflict behaviors, we predicted positive behavior from the same predictors as above. Narcissism was unrelated to observer-rated positive behaviors during the conflict interaction (see the right panel of Table 2).

### *Narcissism and Post-Conflict Measures*

Two multilevel regression analyses were run predicting the post-conflict measures of own commitment and perceived partner commitment from the effects of gender, negative affect, and narcissism. These analyses also controlled for the relevant pre-conflict relationship perception. For example, analyses predicting participants' post-conflict reports of own commitment controlled for pre-conflict reports of own commitment. The multilevel regression analysis predicting post-conflict own commitment revealed significant effects for negative affect and pre-conflict commitment. Consistent with the self-enhancement hypothesis, there was also a marginally significant negative effect of narcissism (see left panel of Table 3), suggesting that narcissists not only behaved more negatively toward their partners, but actively reduced closeness with their partner post-conflict by becoming less committed than they had been pre-conflict.

Conversely, the analysis predicting post-conflict perceived partner commitment revealed that narcissism was significantly and positively related to perceptions of a

**TABLE 2** Multilevel Regression Analyses for Narcissism Predicting Conflict Behavior

	Negative behaviors (DV)		Positive behaviors (DV)	
	<i>b</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>t</i>
Intercept	1.63**	33.22	2.04**	53.26
Gender	.12**	4.57	.14**	5.03
Negative affect	-.01	-.29	-.01	-.24
Positive behavior	-.43**	-6.00	-	-
Negative behavior	-	-	-.38**	-6.51
Narcissism	.01*	2.10 ( <i>r</i> = .17)	.001	.13 ( <i>r</i> = .01)

\**p* < .05, \*\**p* < .01.



**TABLE 3** Multilevel Regression Analyses for Narcissism Predicting Post-Conflict Commitment

	Post-conflict own commitment (DV)		Post-conflict perceived partner commitment (DV)	
	<i>b</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>t</i>
Intercept	6.51**	133.74	6.35**	91.02
Gender	-.05	-.90	-.004	-.08
Negative affect	-.40**	-5.66	-.49**	-5.16
Pre-conflict own commitment	-.86**	12.64	-	-
Pre-conflict perceived partner commitment	-	-	.59**	7.15
Narcissism	-.01 <sup>†</sup>	-1.74 ( <i>r</i> = .13)	.02*	1.96 ( <i>r</i> = .14)

<sup>†</sup>  $p < .10$ , \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ .

partner's commitment (see right panel of Table 3), suggesting that while participants high in narcissism reduced their own commitment following the conflict interaction, they reported that their partner had actually increased her or his commitment to the relationship. Finally, multilevel regression analyses predicting post-conflict interpersonal vulnerability revealed a significant effect of negative affect ( $b = .94$ ,  $t(187) = 13.83$ ,  $p < .001$ ), but a non-significant main effect of both gender ( $b = .03$ ,  $t(87) = 13.83$ ,  $p = .37$ ) and narcissism ( $b = -.001$ ,  $t(175) = 13.83$ ,  $p = .93$ ). These results suggest that narcissists reported feeling no more hurt by the conflict interaction than their non-narcissistic counterparts.

#### Post-Hoc Analyses

Participants in the current study engaged in a positive conversation task after completing the post-conflict measures. While this task was originally introduced to reduce the negative effects of conflict, it allowed us to code participant behavior and run an additional post hoc analysis to determine if the pattern of results observed for narcissists in the conflict interaction was significantly different than the pattern observed in the positive interaction. To do this, we created a difference score by subtracting negative behavior in the conflict interaction from negative behavior in the positive interaction. Because a positive difference score would indicate more negative behavior in the positive interaction, we expected that narcissism would be negatively related to this difference score. That is, we predicted that, as narcissism scores increased, the difference score would become more negative, indicating that narcissism was associated with significantly more negative behavior in the conflict interaction.

A multilevel regression analysis was run predicting the difference score from the main effects of gender (1, females; -1, males), negative affect, and narcissism. This analysis revealed a non-significant effect of negative affect ( $b = -.01$ ,  $t(165) = .26$ ,  $p = .79$ ) and a significant main effect of gender ( $b = -.06$ ,  $t(88.1) = -2.37$ ,  $p = .02$ ). As predicted, narcissism was significantly and negatively related to the difference score ( $b = -.01$ ,  $t(141) = -2.22$ ,  $p = .03$ ,  $r = .18$ ). This effect remains significant when covariates are excluded from the model. The results suggest that narcissism is a significantly better predictor of negative behavior following a negative interaction than a positive one, supporting our argument that narcissists (vs. non-narcissists) engage in more partner derogation during conflict. It should be noted, however, that an obvious limitation to this post hoc analysis is the lack of counterbalancing of interactions. That is, the conflict interaction always preceded the positive interaction. Nevertheless, this analysis confirms

that narcissists behave more negatively during the conflict interaction than they do during the positive discussion task—even when this positive discussion follows conflict.

## General Discussion

To our knowledge, the current research is the first to use an observational methodology to explore how narcissists respond to conflict in their ongoing romantic relationships. Consistent with previous research suggesting that narcissists behave badly in response to negative evaluative feedback (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998) and negative social feedback (Twenge & Campbell, 2003), the current study revealed that narcissists also behave badly in response to romantic conflict. Results indicated that participants higher (vs. lower) in narcissism were observed engaging in significantly more negative behavior, such as criticizing, complaining, insulting, and name-calling, during the conflict and reported becoming less committed to their partners after the conflict. Given narcissists lack of communal concerns (Sedikides et al., 2002; cf. Gebauer, Sedikides, Verplanken, & Maio, 2012) and willingness to derogate close others in the pursuit of self-enhancement (Campbell, Rudich, et al., 2002; Nicholls & Stukas, 2011), the current results both support the self-enhancement hypothesis and fit well with the literature's conceptualization of narcissists as poor relationship partners (see also Campbell et al., 2006).

Despite this bad behavior, narcissists perceive their partners as becoming more devoted to them over the course of the study. Narcissists' simultaneous reporting of decreased own commitment and increased perceived partner commitment may be one way narcissists psychologically distance themselves from threatening partners (e.g., Morf & Rhodewalt, 1993) while maintaining perceptions of power and grandiosity (e.g., Campbell, Foster, et al., 2002). In perceiving greater commitment from a partner (whom they just derogated), narcissists may also be engaging in some amount of self-deception. Research by Paulhus (1998) suggests that narcissists may actually believe their own overly inflated self-evaluations. Moreover, while narcissists are aware that close others perceive them less favorably than they perceive themselves, they still incorrectly assume that close others perceive them in very positive ways (Carlson et al., 2011). In relation to the current study, it is possible that participants high in narcissism, accustomed to self-deception, may truly believe their partners have increased commitment to them post-conflict, thus solidifying feelings of superiority. Although the current study did not assess whether this process occurs automatically, it seems possible that decreases in own commitment and increases in perceived partner commitment might be a nonconscious or unintentional way for narcissists protect the self from relationship threats.

While such self-protective responses might prove successful in maintaining positive self-views, these responses likely harm the relationship over the long term. For example, research suggests that people who derogate or reduce closeness with partners in response to perceived relationship threats may eventually elicit actual rejection from their partners (e.g., Downey & Feldman, 1996; Downey, Freitas, Michaelis, & Khouri, 1998; Murray et al., 2002). Moreover, research on romantic conflict has revealed that couples most destined for relationship loss seem to be those who, during conflict, criticize and express contempt for each other, respond defensively, and withdraw from one another (Gottman, 1994), suggesting narcissists' self-regulatory style may ultimately lead to relationship dissatisfaction or dissolution.

The results of the current study appear consistent with much of the literature on narcissism and interpersonal functioning; however, there are a few issues to be considered. First, the findings appear at odds with the relationship-enhancement hypothesis and with research highlighting the possible benefits of narcissism for relationship functioning (e.g., Foster & Campbell, 2005). Why, in the current study, do narcissists display greater

dysfunction? One likely explanation is the nature of the threat. While Foster and Campbell (2005) elicit relationship doubts by asking participants to list reasons why partners may not be committed, the current study elicits relationship-threat by having participants discuss an issue of major disagreement in the relationship. It is possible that threat-resistance involving the type of relationship-enhancement evident in Foster and Campbell's work (i.e., perceiving more difficulty generating reasons a partner may not be committed) is not possible during a conflict interaction, where threat occurs as part of a current social interaction. In line with this possibility, self-report research suggests that narcissists indeed perceive themselves as less likely to make efforts to positively cope with conflict (see Campbell & Foster, 2002). While the current study did not assess participants' perceptions of their own behavior during the conflict, future research should explore whether narcissists acknowledge their negative behavior, or whether they reinterpret their negative responses in a positive light.

Second, despite the strengths of multilevel modeling to explore how narcissists navigate threat in their romantic relationships, the analyses are correlational in nature and do not allow us to make causal inferences. For example, we cannot know whether narcissism caused people to behave more negatively during conflict. It is possible that other relationship variables or events influenced both participant's reports of narcissism and their conflict behaviors. However, because the findings are supported by theory and previous research on narcissism and interpersonal self-regulation (see Campbell et al., 2006; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001; Sedikides et al., 2002), it is likely our results reflect the differential reactivity of people high and low in narcissism to threatening relationship interactions.

Third, because the majority of participants were involved in dating relationships, it may be fruitful to consider whether narcissists in more committed relationships, such as marriages, engage in similar relationship-regulation strategies. For example, the married narcissist may become more communal over time (see Campbell et al., 2006), potentially reducing the need to engage in conflict strategies that enhance the self, while derogating the partner. Moreover, there may be moderators of the effect of narcissism on responses to threat. Research has shown that when spouses elicit communal qualities in their narcissistic husband or wife, narcissists report more commitment to their relationship (Finkel, Campbell, Buffardi, Kumashiro, & Rusbult, 2009). In addition, narcissistic aggression disappears when the target of aggression is seen as similar to the self (Konrath et al., 2006), suggesting narcissists may respond less negatively toward romantic partners who they perceive to be similar to the self. Finally, it should be noted that the current study used a one-item scale to measure relationship commitment. While this scale has good face validity, future research that investigates more committed adult relationships (i.e., marriages) may consider using a multi-item measure of commitment.

### *Concluding Thoughts*

Conflict is a natural part of any close relationship—but how people regulate the self in these potentially rejecting interpersonal contexts has important implications for both happiness and stability in romantic relationships (see Gottman, 1998 for a review). Unfortunately, the results of the current study suggest that narcissists' are not only hostile in response to relationship conflict, but also likely to manipulate relationship perceptions in ways that maintain feelings of power and perpetuate a game-playing style of love. While previous research has highlighted the value of defending against relationship doubts (e.g., Murray et al., 2003; Murray, Holmes, Griffin, Bellavia, & Rose, 2001), and provided evidence that this may be a potential benefit of narcissism (Foster & Campbell, 2005), the

current study suggests that, for narcissists, resisting doubts elicited by conflict is truly a defense of self-love rather than romantic love. Over time, narcissist's love-lives will surely suffer from such a dynamic.

## Notes

1. Dropping same-sex couples from the analyses did not change the pattern of findings.
2. Data from this study were also reported in Peterson and DeHart (2013), study 2. Findings regarding narcissism and negative verbal behavior were not reported in that research.
3. If members of a couple were of the same sex, independent observers only coded one partner, never both.
4. Analyses were also run to explore whether partner narcissism interacted with participants own levels of narcissism to predict behavior and commitment (Actor-Partner Interdependence Model; Kenny & Kashy, 2000). None of the interactions between participant narcissism and partner narcissism were significant ( $b$ 's  $\leq .001$ ,  $p \geq .46$ ) and therefore they were not included in the final model.
5. We also explored whether gender moderated the effect of narcissism on observer-rated behaviors and self-reported relationship perceptions. Gender did not moderate any of the effects reported in the paper ( $b$ 's  $\leq .009$ ,  $p \geq .24$ ).

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