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Perceptions of female narcissism in intimate partner violence: A thematic analysis

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This study sought to explicitly investigate manifestations of female narcissism and their attempts at self-regulation in the context of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV). This novel phenomenon was explored through the lens of ex-partners' perceptions of female narcissists. A qualitative approach using individual interviews was adopted to gain an in-depth insight of the subtleties and nuances of gender differences in narcissistic personality. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with ten male participants who reported having experienced an abusive relationship with a female narcissist. These interviews were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis. Three overarching themes emerged from the data analysis: (1) Dualistic personas of narcissism; (2) The mask of femininity; (3) The hidden paradox of gender roles. Findings illustrated that perceived expressions of female narcissists depicted presentations of narcissistic vulnerability. Analysis also demonstrated that gender-related norms further shaped motives and self-regulatory strategies for females to obtain positions of power and control. These were established through adopting a 'victim status', playing the 'mother card' and using legal and societal benefits to their advantage. Female narcissists were perceived to employ strategic attempts at self-construction in sinister and abusive ways governed by what society allows them to express. It is concluded that narcissism describes a phenomenon in females that moves beyond the overt grandiose stereotype. Limitations and suggestions for future research are discussed.

Keywords: Narcissism, gender, female narcissism, intimate partner violence, perceptions, victims

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1. Introduction

Traditional concepts of narcissism including a grandiose self-image, entitlement, exhibitionism and an authoritarian character appear to predominantly entail male qualities in society (Corry, Merritt, Mrug & Pamp, 2008). Despite this, widespread conceptualisations of narcissism - as a pathological disorder and normative personality trait - embody a personality construct that is often presented in gender-neutral terms. This universally claimed gender neutrality is brought into question as a result of the disproportionate representation of males in both clinical prevalence rates (up to 75% of those diagnosed with narcissistic personality disorder are males; American Psychiatric Association, 2013), and empirical research indicating marked gender differences on the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI) where males consistently obtain significantly higher scores compared to females (Blinkhorn, Lyons & Almond, 2015; 2016; 2018; Corry et al., 2008; Grijalva et al., 2014; Miller & Campbell, 2008; Zeigler-Hill et al., 2008; Zerach, 2016). The observed gender bias across the theoretical, clinical and empirical literature indicates that narcissism may in fact describe a different phenomenon in females (Grijalva et al., 2014).

Research suggests that gender differences in narcissism may adhere to gender-related norms associated with masculinity and femininity (Corry et al., 2008; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). A recent study by Jonason and Davis (2018) found that narcissism (NPI) was associated with high masculinity and low femininity. Unsurprisingly, males scored significantly higher on narcissism compared to females, and females obtained higher scores on feminine traits. These results suggest that gender differences in narcissism exist, and this appears to be driven by sex differences in gender roles. The findings from this study led to the conclusion that males and masculinity may orient towards narcissistic behaviours reflective of leadership and status-seeking behaviours, obsession with power, assertiveness and exploitative behaviours. In contrast, females and a feminine disposition may inhibit and directly interfere with the display of maladaptive exploitative self-concern of conspecifics by encouraging, for instance, nurturance and compassion.

It has also been theorised that narcissism in males and females may instead align along the lines of grandiose and vulnerable narcissism, respectively. As opposed to grandiose narcissists, the vulnerable narcissist is thought to present themselves with shyness, hypersensitivity and low self-esteem that obscures feelings of inadequacy, negative affect and incompetence. Underlying this outward presentation, however, are elements of grandiose fantasies and entitled expectations (Pincus & Lukowitsky, 2010). Interpersonally, vulnerable narcissists often rely upon the validation they receive from others to modulate self-esteem, and experience greater interpersonal distress to cues of rejection and abandonment given the tenuous nature of their self-esteem (Green & Charles, 2019). For them, having their entitled expectations unmet and experiencing disappointments are thought to often result in hostile and angry responses followed by conscious feelings of shame and depression (Besser & Priel, 2010).

Gender differences on vulnerable narcissism have found to be either gender neutral (Besser & Priel, 2009; Grijalva et al., 2014; Miller, Dir, Gentile, Wilson, Pryor & Campbell, 2010), or with some research finding a higher female preponderance (Onofrei, 2009; Pincus et al., 2009; Rohmann, Neumann, Herner & Bierhoff, 2012; Wright, Lukowitsky, Pincus & Conroy, 2010; Wolven, 2015). Onofrei (2009) conducted a systematic search and found a significant overlap between grandiose/masculine and vulnerable/feminine expressions of narcissism in the literature. As opposed to grandiose/masculine expressions, 'femininity' as it relates to (vulnerable) narcissism was associated with a greater inhibition of overt grandiosity, exploitativeness and leadership, and increased tendencies to experience shame when these behaviours were present. Another study conducted by Smolewska and Dion (2005) investigated the relationship between narcissistic subtypes and attachment domains of anxiety and avoidance, in an all-female sample. The findings of this study demonstrated that nearly a quarter of the variance (i.e., overlap) was shared between vulnerable narcissism and both attachment dimensions, but, consistent with previous research, with a stronger association to anxiety attachment (Dickinson & Pincus, 2003). Smolewska and Dion (2005) concluded that female narcissists with high levels of vulnerability display a fearful attachment style in intimate relationships, preoccupied by fears of rejection and abandonment.

Although internal and underlying psychological phenomenology (e.g., fragmented sense of self, interpersonal impairment and self-esteem dysregulation) are most likely experienced by both males and females, it is likely outward expressions of narcissism would differ by gender. In this context, Campbell and Miller (2012) argued that gender-related norms and broader socio-cultural contexts shape different motives and self-regulatory strategies among female and male narcissists in attaining their narcissistic goals. In a similar vein, Morf and Rhodewalt (2001) argued that, while stereotypical narcissistic behaviours are more pragmatic and socially acceptable for males in pursuing their narcissistic needs, females are seemingly forced to obtain their self-worth through more indirect, subtle and affiliative means that conform with culturally held expectations of their feminine identity. Therefore, strategic attempts at self-construction may be markedly different, and gendered.

With regard to the Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) literature, much research points to the conclusion that narcissism is associated with a propensity toward IPV; broadly defined as psychological, physical and verbal abuse (for a review, see Green & Charles, 2019). Due to their interpersonal exploitation and lack of empathy towards others, narcissists behave in an intrusive, malevolent and antagonistic manner in intimate relationships, causing significant distress and harm to close others (Miller, Campbell & Pilkonis, 2007). Notably, however, existing literature on narcissism and IPV arguably overlooks much behaviour displayed by female narcissists due to its focus on the behaviour of male narcissists. On the one hand, some studies in the IPV literature exclude female participants entirely on the grounds that 'males are more aggressive and narcissistic than females' (e.g., Meier, 2004; Rinker, 2009; Talbot, Babineau, & Bergheul, 2015). On the other hand, the studies

that include males and females in their IPV literature display an overreliance on grandiose features as the main assessment of narcissism (NPI), which may not accurately capture narcissistic traits in females. Such studies have linked narcissism to the perpetration of psychological abuse (Gormley & Lopez, 2010), verbal abuse (Caiozzo, Houston & Grych, 2016), and sexual and physical abuse (Blinkhorn et al., 2015; Ryan, Weikel & Sprechini, 2008; Southard, 2010).

Further adding to these limitations, other dyadic research has not distinguished the gender of the perpetrator versus the victim (Carton & Egan, 2017; Fields, 2012; Peterson & Dehart, 2014), which is particularly problematic given the fact that males are overrepresented as IPV perpetrators in general, and in narcissism research in particular (Gormley & Lopez, 2010; Meier, 2004; Rinker, 2009; Talbot et al., 2015). While mainstream depictions regarding IPV commonly involve a male perpetrator and a female victim, the prevalence rate of IPV has shown that one in six men are victims during their lifetime (Home Office, 2015). It is argued here, therefore, that the failure to comprehend narcissism in females as perpetrators of IPV is concerning in light of these figures.

Despite these issues, through initial observations in the existing literature on narcissism and IPV it can be tentatively suggested that male violence is characterised as more overt and grandiose in nature, the result of responding to perceived threats to an inflated self-esteem (Ryan et al., 2008; Southard, 2010). Female violence, on the other hand, has been typified as indirect and subtle in nature (Ryan et al., 2008; Southard, 2010), and linked to a low self-esteem in response to aggressive behaviour (Barnett & Powell, 2016). These diverging outcomes in intimate violence may be a consequence of differential self-regulatory strategies among females and males in attaining their narcissistic goals, where males are more likely to express overt/grandiose narcissism, and females may use more discreet and indirect ways to obtain their self-worth (Campbell & Miller, 2012; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). In light of the above limitations within the literature, a more comprehensive understanding of the ways in which gender impacts narcissistic manifestations in IPV certainly seems warranted.

The Present Study

The primary aim of this study is to investigate manifestations of female narcissism and female attempts at self-regulation in the context of IPV. Given the lack of theoretical knowledge and understanding, this study explores this phenomenon in a novel way through in-depth qualitative interviews with ex-partners' perceptions of female narcissists, in the normal population. A qualitative research design was chosen as, in order to enhance theoretical understanding and to more thoroughly comprehend the essence of narcissistic presentation as it relates to the complexity of gender, it was considered necessary to go beyond the traditional quantitative measures dominant in the narcissism literature.

2. Method

2.1 Research Design

Qualitative methods are championed for their ability to produce detailed and contextualised data with regard to the meanings, motivations and dynamics of violent relationships (Feder, Hutson, Ramsay & Taket, 2006; Liebschutz, Battaglia, Finley & Averbuch, 2008). The qualitative design adopted in this study therefore complimented existing research into narcissism and IPV, allowing for rich interpretation regarding underlying motives and intent for abusive behaviour spanning the full spectrum of IPV. Semi-structured interviews were considered to be most suitable for the current study as they allowed for elaboration, flexibility and direction of content by the participant (Silverman, 2010).

2.2 Participant Recruitment

Ten male participants took part in the current study (see Table 1 for descriptive information). In terms of the approach to sampling, a purposive sampling strategy was adopted and the study was advertised through social media and the use of open support groups on Facebook. The aims and details of the study were shared as a post in the respective groups, allowing members of the group to directly contact the researcher should they wish to take part.

Table 1.
Male participants' demographics and details of previous relationship

Participants (Pseudonyms)	Age (years) at Interview	Relationship Nature	Number of Children	Relationship Duration
George	48	Married	1	11 years
Simon	52	Dating	0	3 years
Erik	31	Married	0	8 years
Adam	47	Dating	0	10 months
Jonathan	37	Cohabiting	0	1 year
Nick	48	Married	3	14 years
Christopher	Unknown	Cohabiting	0	3 years
Matthew	31	Married	2	12 years
Fredrick	53	Dating	0	9 months
Tom	59	Married	2	16 years

The inclusion criteria required individuals (of either sex) to be over 18 years old and to have believed themselves to have been in a past abusive relationship with a female narcissistic partner. The term 'abusive' was adopted in preference to 'IPV' as it was considered that participants may have a better understanding of what 'abusive' entails and may use this term compared to 'IPV' to describe such experiences. In this context, 'abusive' was used as a proxy for IPV in the recruitment phase. Participants' responses to interview questions pertaining to their experience

of IPV aspects (e.g., verbal abuse, coercive control, manipulation) were used as a screening tool to ensure participants had, in fact, been in an ‘abusive’ relationship (see appendix 1 for full interview schedule).

Selection criteria for screening other-informants on their assessment of narcissism have often been utilised using the Multisource Assessment of Personality Pathology (MAPP; Carlson et al., 2011; 2013; Cooper, Balsis & Oltmanns, 2012; Oltmanns, Rodrigues, Weinstein & Gleason, 2014). The items of this questionnaire are, however, designed to specifically assess the DSM-IV criteria of narcissism. For the purposes of the present study, given that it was considered that the DSM-IV criteria may be somewhat gender-biased (see Lindsay, Sankis & Widiger, 2000; Pulay, Goldstein & Grant, 2012 for reviews), it was not used to select participants. Instead, participants were selected on the basis that they were able to describe essential features of narcissism in response to an initial interview question (i.e., “In general, how would you describe a narcissist?”). The essential narcissistic features were defined to be present if evidence was found of expression of both grandiose and vulnerable narcissism in participants’ answers.

Although some participants may not have listed every single narcissistic trait they observed in their partners in response to the initial screening question, the interview proceeded if a sufficient number of traits were mentioned at the start. This gave participants more time and flexibility to elaborate further on narcissistic traits in their IPV relationships as the interview went on. The follow-up interview questions, which pertained to participants’ experience of narcissism in relation to their intimate partners within the context of IPV, did give rise to more key features of narcissism. Table 2 illustrates how participants’ responses were carefully compared to key features of narcissism derived from the literature to ensure they had indeed been with a partner with narcissistic traits. Individuals who did not meet these criteria were therefore not interviewed, and this included those who identified close others as narcissists (e.g., narcissistic mother, narcissistic female friend etc.).

Table 2.

Key features of narcissism identified by participants

Elements of grandiose and vulnerable narcissism in participants' accounts	Participants' supporting accounts ($n = 10$)	Source
Superior/power/control (G, V)	10/10	e.g., Cain et al., 2008
Manipulative (G, V)	10/10	e.g., Pincus et al., 2009
Exploitative (G, V)	10/10	e.g., Dickinson & Pincus, 2003
Lack of empathy (G, V)	10/10	e.g., American Psychiatric Association, 2013
Easily threatened (G, V)	10/10	e.g., American Psychiatric Association, 2013
No accountability for own actions (G, V)	10/10	e.g., Pincus & Lukowitsky, 2010
Entitlement (G, V)	10/10	e.g., Dickinson & Pincus, 2003
Insecure/vulnerable (V)	6/10	e.g., Pincus et al., 2009
Self-centered (G, V)	5/10	e.g., Gore & Widiger, 2016
Fear of abandonment (V)	5/10	e.g., Green & Charles, 2019
Grandiose (G)	4/10	e.g., Campbell & Miller, 2012
Low self-esteem (V)	4/10	e.g., Pincus et al., 2009
Hypersensitive (V)	4/10	e.g., Pincus & Lukowitsky, 2010
Prone to episodes of depression (V)	3/10	e.g., Ronningstam, 2005
Shy (V)	3/10	e.g., Ronningstam, 2005
Selfish (G, V)	3/10	e.g., Campbell & Miller, 2012

2.3 Procedure

Geographical distance meant that all ten interviews were conducted online via Skype at a time of convenience for each participant. Prior to the interviews, participants were emailed the information sheet and the consent form, and asked to email back their consent either in writing or via electronic signature. At the time of the interview, participants were again verbally informed about the aims of the study and asked if they had any questions before starting. They were also informed that the interview would be recorded in its entirety on a digital device and reminded that they had the right to withdraw at any point without having to give a reason. Interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes, ranging from 34 minutes to 80 minutes. At the end of each interview a full debrief was given to each participant and any questions or enquires were addressed. All interviews were transcribed verbatim. All participants were assigned a pseudonym and any information that revealed identification of participants such as names, events and locations were removed from the written transcripts.

2.4 Thematic analysis

Thematic analysis is an effective approach when exploring novel or under-researched areas as it both lends itself to the identification and analysis of recurrent patterns and themes within the whole data set, and also provides rich and detailed thematic description of such data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this analysis, thematic analysis was performed using the six-phase step guided by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and producing the results. description of data. Interpretations of patterns and themes within the data were identified using a deductive approach, as such an approach is more analyst-driven given its close link to the researcher's theoretical interest and research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006). However, the analysis also allowed for alternative themes to emerge from the data set, which may not have necessarily fit within the theoretical interest of the researcher, but were nevertheless worthwhile to discuss.

Code and theme development were analysed at a latent level of interpretation, as this type of analysis goes beyond surface level interpretations and identifies underlying patterns and meanings which are theorised as underpinning what is truly articulated in the data set. Finally, in order to limit personal bias and preconceived notions on part of the researcher, the process of 'bracketing' was used (Clift, Hatchard, & Gore, 2018). This was done through appraising the researcher's analytical and theoretical standpoint prior to collecting and analysing data, allowing for the commencement of the interviews with limited preconceived notions of what the data may show. However, throughout the research process, a conscious effort was continually made to avoid falling back on any idiosyncrasies and personal bias (by taking notes of any biases that arose during the research process), thereby consistently interpreting what is truly articulated in the data set in order to most accurately reflect participants' subjective accounts. Themes were discussed with the research team before final representation of themes to further limit interpretation bias. A thematic map was produced to aid visualisation of key themes generated from the analytic framework.

2.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was granted by the authors' institution. It is important to emphasise here that the advertising for, and recruiting of, participants took place through online groups whereby those who wished to take part were advised to email the researcher. This gave participants full choice regarding whether they wished to take part, meaning that there was minimal pressure on them to become involved in the study. As the main aim of this study was to gather experiences of IPV and perceptions of female narcissism in past intimate relationships, the researcher chose not to interview individuals who during initial contact appeared hostile or aggressive in their tone towards their partner (e.g., through derogatory reference such as 'slut', 'bitch', or more extreme terms). This decision was made as it was considered that if these accounts were as aggressive throughout they may not be as reflective or balanced. From an ethics perspective, it was considered that such individuals were still very much connected to the previous relationship and it might still be very raw in their

minds. Thus, it was considered that interviewing them may well be asking them to convey experiences which were still very uncomfortable or sensitive to them.

Moreover, extreme care and consideration was taken into account prior to the commencement of the interviews. This involved asking participants if they were comfortable and ready to begin, and reassured them from the very beginning that they did not have to answer any questions if they did not want to and that they were free to withdraw from the study at any point without any requirement to give a reason. All participants were informed prior to the interview that if they became distressed at any stage during the process, the interview would be immediately paused and the participants would be asked if they wished to continue, if they required anything and if they needed a short break. At the end of the interview, all participants were provided with a list of contact details for agencies providing emotional support in case they decided they needed such support after partaking in the current study.

3. Results

3.1 Thematic analysis

Through the data analysis three overarching themes emerged concerning participants' intimate experiences and perceptions of female narcissists within IPV. These themes were: (1) Dualistic personas of narcissism, (2) The mask of femininity, and (3) The hidden paradox of gender roles. Each theme is constituted by two sub-themes as illustrated in the thematic map below (Figure 1). The remainder of this section presents each theme with the support of data extracts in the form of participant quotes, followed by analysis of the quotes in terms of their significance for narcissism and gender with respect to IPV.

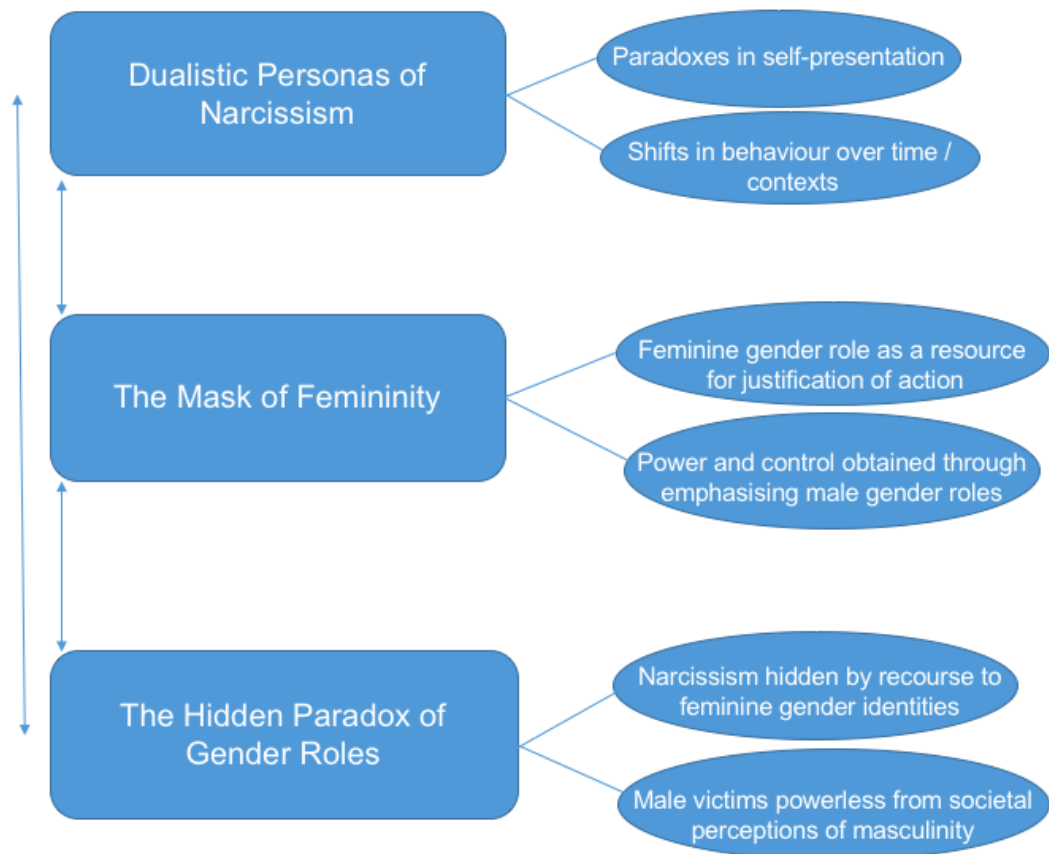


Figure 1. Thematic map of overarching themes and sub-themes within them.

3.1.1 Dualistic personas of narcissism

3.1.1.1 Shifts in behaviour over time/contexts

This sub-theme encapsulates the perceived shift in outward expressions of female narcissists during the course of the relationship. All participants portrayed their narcissistic partners as wearing several ‘masks’, in public and in private:

“She was always that like perfect angel in public, happy you know, but the second she left public view, she always talked about being depressed and always the victim about something.” (Erik)

Similarly as described by another participant:

“She was quiet and almost like demure, very kind of playing the kind of soft spoken woman in some way but there was always an underlying kind of energy of anger when she spoke to people.” (Jonathan)

Essentially, these narratives revealed initial overt presentation of female narcissism to align with vulnerable manifestations, in which narcissists were initially perceived as shy, timid, hypersensitive, insecure, fearful of abandonment, depressed and feminine.

3.1.1.2 Paradoxes in self-presentation

The results further indicated that the presentation of narcissism was perceived to serve the function of masking an underlying state of covert grandiosity, entitlement and exploitation. As powerfully demonstrated in the excerpt below:

“When I first met her she came across as sexy, fun-loving but also very sensitive and emotional and very feminine and soft. And you know the sort of lady that would cry about a movie about a dog getting lost. And would be very gentle and loving. You know, delicate and make me want to protect her. I found that very attractive, it’s the sort of woman that I like and as I got to know her this aggressive personality started to coming out, controlling and aggressive, and very, very different to that loving woman that she portrayed to me.” (Fredrick)

This perceived dual presentation - or dramatically differently perceived self-presentation - showed a degree of congruence in the participants’ accounts. More importantly, these participants’ depictions of their narcissistic partners is consistent with much of the theory and research on vulnerable narcissism (Grijalva et al., 2014; Pincus et al., 2009; Wright et al., 2010).

3.1.2 The mask of femininity

3.1.2.1 Feminine gender role as a resource for justification of action

This sub-theme captures the self-regulatory strategies and manifestations of IPV as portrayed by female narcissists. The participants voiced sentiments that the abuse they were subjected to was often gendered and chauvinistic, in which their partners were perceived to use their female gender as a means to assume a ‘victim status’, playing the ‘mother card’, withholding intimacy and affection, making false accusations of abuse and using legal and societal benefits to their advantage.

“... every single thing in that house was decided by whether or not she would threatened to take our daughter away to where I could never see them again. So her manipulation was both quiet and final if I disagreed with the decision or I wanted to do things differently I couldn't, because at the end of the day every single argument ended with that - so she used my daughter, access to my daughter, for seven years almost in a terroristic manner, and she would just throw it out there all the time you know like just make little threats to keep me in line...” (George)

Another participant, Erik, similarly remarked:

“... because she’s mom, doesn’t matter if I’ve been dad for 8 years or even if they were biologically mine, she made that clear once too. That even if they were biologically mine, she is mom and that gives her the right to control what happens. That gives her the right to decide what happens.” (Erik)

The data here suggest that the self-regulatory strategies employed by female narcissists appear to be employed in more subtle and indirect ways, through social norms and legal rights. Possibly, and this is considered in the third theme below (section 3.1.3), female narcissists may assert their femininity and receive affirmation from society to attain their goals, and at the same time deflect accountability and externalise blame.

3.1.2.2 Power and control obtained through emphasising male gender roles

Further analysis revealed that the majority of participants felt that their partners sought to achieve and maintain positions of power and control, and did so in ways that systematically violated traditional feminine assumptions:

“... I would try and leave the house after arguments just to kind of get away and get some fresh air and she had called the police and physically blocked the door from not letting me leave. [...]... I think she just would tell them [police] that we got into an argument and that I had been abusive because when the police talked to me they were pretty pissed off even though I was the one covered in scratches and bruises.” (Jonathan)

Many of the men expressed that their reluctance to retaliate to the abuse subjected to them was significant in their victimisation, in that female narcissists were perceived to attack their masculinity and inertia as a means to maintain power and control. In fact, throughout their relationships, participants reported that they experienced sustained and prolonged abuse from their narcissistic partners, including psychological, verbal, and physical violence. Although the physical violence reported was severe (at times so severe that it warranted medical attention), the majority of participants considered that the psychological abuse was more damaging, whereby a combination of experiencing violent threats, cruel reprimands intended to invalidate their reality, and coercive control all resulted in what was perceived as a cynically engineered and slow erosion of their sense of self. These accounts highlight, evidenced by the data extracts above, the significance of femininity and the violation of stereotypical gender norms in the exertion of power for female narcissism.

3.1.3 The hidden paradox of gender roles

3.1.3.1 Narcissism hidden by resource to feminine gender identities

The analytic process generated an alternative theme that somewhat diverged from the research aims and theoretical interests of the current study, but was nevertheless considered worthwhile to discuss given the strong pattern of perceived gender-role violations underpinning the participants' narratives in their experience of IPV as perpetrated by female narcissists. This sub-theme captures how culturally prescribed norms of gender stereotypes and the endorsement of 'male dominance' and 'female submissiveness' appear to be reinforced and manipulated in favour by female narcissists in their prerogative for power and exploitation:

“... no one sees women narcissists coming. No one expects them to be this devious, to enjoy this much chaos, to basically torturing someone, but they are out there.[....] I would say women have the potential to be far more damaging as narcissists because of the entitlement they have to being given you know the benefit of the doubt in all situations.” (George)

As also acknowledged by Nick:

“... narcissism has typically been associated with the male gender and when it is there in a female, I think it tends, it tends to get overlooked. Because I think a lot of people say ‘oh she’s a woman there is no way she could be a narcissist’. Because women are typically thought to be very loving and caring and nurturing, and it’s, it’s quite the opposite. I think that women can be narcissist, can be controlling.” (Nick)

These themes were echoed by the majority of participants’ accounts in the interview, and show that participants perceived the harm enacted to them by their partners as overlooked by society as a result of deeply ingrained gendered scripts surrounding IPV perpetration linked to masculine traits, and victimisation associated with feminine traits.

3.1.3.2 Male victims powerless from societal perceptions of masculinity

The reinforcement of gendered stereotypes conveyed feelings of distress and frustration on the part of the participants, as they felt their partners, presumed to embody these ‘feminine’ characteristics, were given the ‘benefit of the doubt’ and were able to deny that they were perpetrators.

Notably, the participants’ narratives of victimisation were not only trivialised and challenged by society, but acted as a barrier to seek help as a result of stereotypical perceptions of masculinity and internalised patriarchal values. The quote below presents insights into the significant implications of social norms and traditional gender discourses for male victims of IPV:

“...I wanted to get a violent restraining order against her when I left because she kept harassing me and threatening my family, my mother and myself. And the lawyer I went to see basically said that ‘you, more than likely you won’t get a restraining order against her, the judge would probably laugh you out of the court. You’re a six foot four bloke, you’re fairly well built you know, he’ll take one look at you and won’t believe a word you say’.”(Jonathan)

4. Discussion

Participants' initial perceptions of their partners portrayed a shy, unobtrusive and soft-spoken narcissist which, significantly, diverges from the prominent image of grandiose narcissism commonly conceptualised in theory, research and vernacular language (Corry et al., 2008). Participants further viewed their partners' narcissistic tendencies as initially being more hidden and subtle, and were unable to comprehend the destructive nature of the narcissist until years into the relationship, or only after the relationship had ended. The data arguably highlights the fact that there is a significant oversight with an over-emphasis in existing theory and research on grandiose features of narcissism at the expense of vulnerable manifestations, along with the failure of such literature to capture the gendered differences in the expressions of narcissism. The above results illustrating a great tendency toward manifestations of vulnerable narcissism in females are consistent with previous research demonstrating higher female preponderance on vulnerable components of narcissism (Pincus et al., 2009; Wright et al., 2010). The results also resonate with previous speculations and suggested theorisations regarding the influence of gender-related norms and gendered socialisation in the expression of narcissism in each gender (Grijalva et al., 2014; Jonason & Davis, 2018; Onofrei, 2009). In other words, the initial expressions of narcissism in females as perceived by the participants may therefore resemble stereotypical characteristics of female qualities (nurturing, caring and tenderness), and therefore align more with vulnerable features of narcissism than grandiosity.

The findings here also provide support for previous research which has theorised that the outward expressions of narcissism would differ by gender (Campbell & Miller, 2012; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). Yet, despite marked differences in the *presentation* of narcissism by gender, it is argued here that the underlying *core* of narcissism is not gender-specific (Campbell & Miller, 2012). The analysis of the data revealed a recurrent pattern suggesting that female narcissists presented an extreme contradiction, or duality, in self-presentation, manifested in alternate self-states of vulnerability and grandiosity. Indications of this dual presentation were further present in the participants' accounts. Indeed, narratives across the interviews showed that female narcissists appeared to exhibit omnipotent fantasies, extreme self-centredness, lack of empathy, need for power, and to also display exploitative interpersonal tendencies driven by expectations of entitlement. According to the participants, the demanding state of entitled expectations and exploitative motives on the part of their narcissistic partners frequently alternated with a fragile self-confidence and interpersonal fearfulness in response to separation and abandonment. These accounts strongly resonate with depictions of theoretical and empirical research regarding the interpersonal nature of vulnerable narcissism (Besser & Priel, 2010; Dickinson & Pincus, 2003; Smolewska & Dion, 2005).

In this sample, the significant distress and harm reported by the participants following their relationships with narcissistic partners add further credence to the role of narcissism in IPV (Blinkhorn et al., 2015; Caiozzo et al., 2016; Gormley & Lopez,

2010; Miller et al., 2007; Ryan et al., 2008; Southard, 2010; Green & Charles, 2019). The above data shed light on the cold, vindictive and domineering characteristics of female narcissists as they were perceived by the male participants, characteristics which are nevertheless masked by a disarmingly modest and 'feminine' persona. Depictions of female narcissists suggested that they were in a state of continuous self-conflict, and would react with intensified and overt anger as well as scheming and subtle passive-aggressive rage when their narcissistically perceived reality had been threatened. Such findings contradict previous research that has argued that female narcissists abuse in indirect and subtle ways (contra. Barnett & Powell, 2016).

The data analysis also appears to show the presence of a difference between the exploitative strategies of female narcissism as it is manifested here compared to the strategies associated with male narcissism in the IPV literature (cf. Ryan et al., 2008; Southard, 2010). The findings here showed that female narcissists were perceived to use their socially and culturally determined 'femininity' to their advantage as a means to attain their grandiose self-goals. In other words, female narcissists were considered to employ strategic attempts at self-regulation in sinister and abusive ways governed by what society allows them to express. These accounts on the part of the participants resonate with previous research, in that the female narcissists shape their motives and self-regulatory strategies according to gender-related and societal norms (cf. Campbell & Miller, 2012). Results also suggest that female narcissists do not necessarily obtain their ideal selves through more subtle and affiliate means in conformity with their gender role (cf. Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). Rather, traits expressed as overt and excessive entitlement and exploitation are merely adjusted to their changing environment.

The narratives across the interviews depicted traditional gender discourses within IPV where females are portrayed as being innately nonviolent, passive and nurturing, and men are believed to be assertive, dominant and capable of self-defense (Dutton, Nicholls, & Spidel, 2005). When conveying their experiences, the participants felt that their narcissistic partners strategically manipulated these traditional discourses in gender roles to their advantage in sinister ways as a means to achieve their self-goals. In other words, the violation of gender conformity in this case resulted in reduced power and status for the male participants, being victims of IPV, given the discredit to their 'masculine' identity. In contrast, female narcissists, who were perceived to hide behind a 'victim-like' status and passivity, instead gained power and dominance.

Taken together, the results suggest that strategic attempts at self-construction are expressed in markedly different, and gendered, ways. Since gender constructs continually change, and socially accepted gender roles differ greatly across cultures, so do the manifestations of narcissism (e.g., Campbell & Miller., 2012). Thus, narcissism is as much a cultural phenomenon as it is a phenomenon of personality. This further highlights the complex and historically entrenched gender roles in the expressions of narcissism within IPV, along with the gendered self-construction processes and dynamics that underlie them.

4.1 Limitations and future directions

The limitations of this study relate to the perceptions of female narcissism in IPV being understood entirely from a male sample. The current findings illustrated a paradox arising in the exertion of power and control as a result of predetermined cultural stereotypes, where female narcissists were able to harness any potential loss of power (mask of femininity) as an actual means to gain power over their male partners (threat to masculinity). It is possible, although this is only a speculation, that manifestations of female narcissism and the self-regulatory strategies employed to obtain positions of power and control may differ in same-sex relationships. Furthermore, in terms of the method employed, thematic analysis has often been criticised for the 'anything goes' technique compared to other qualitative methods (Braun & Clarke, 2006), given the lack of clear and concise guidelines in performing this type of analysis. For this reason, it could be argued that thematic analysis has a limited interpretative power and is unable to examine the complex and subtle ways in which language is used.

The findings of this study also raise implications regarding the aetiology of narcissism. As illustrated in the above data, initial manifestations of narcissism and the exploitative strategies employed in pursuit to compensate for a deficient sense of self appear to differ in males and females, a finding which may indicate that the condition of narcissism is developed and experienced differently in each gender due to the process through which they are socialised (e.g. Carroll, 1989; Philipson, 1985). Future research could address such speculations in hope to further illuminate the origins of grandiose and vulnerable narcissism in general, and how these subtleties manifest themselves in each gender in particular. Lastly, it is suggested future research could explore narcissism in IPV in dyadic relationships, obtained in a larger sample to reveal a more complete picture of the complexities and alternative explanations that may exist in the context of gender dichotomy and narcissistic typologies.

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