Narcissism and gift giving: Not every gift is for others

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ABSTRACT

Although previous studies have suggested that narcissism and self-esteem carry different interpersonal implications, few have examined their differences in specific motivations behind relationship behaviors. This article detailed an exploratory study to identify romantic gift-giving motivations and examined their relations to the two personality constructs. Young adults in a romantic relationship completed measures of narcissism and self-esteem, and responded to questions about gift-giving motivations both in an actual past occasion and in a hypothetical future occasion. A factor analysis found three motivations for romantic gift giving: intrinsic, maintenance, and power motivation. When self-esteem, age, and sex were controlled, narcissism was positively related to maintenance motivation in the past, and maintenance and power motivation in the future. Self-esteem was negatively related to power motivation in the past and maintenance motivation in the future, controlling for narcissism, age, and sex. Our results suggest that narcissistic individuals critically differ from those with high self-esteem in their tendency to consider gift giving an instrumental act.

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It's not how much we give but how much love we put into giving.
— Mother Teresa

Not every gift is filled and given with love—or at least not with love solely towards the recipient. In contrast to the common belief that gifts are altruistic in nature, many researchers have noted the self-interested motivations behind gift giving (e.g., Sherry, 1983; Wolfinbarger, 1990). Inasmuch as some gifts are signs of love and intimacy intended to please the recipient, they may be self-serving expressions fulfilling the giver's own satisfaction (Minowa & Gould, 1999). This also holds true in romantic relationships. Past studies have revealed different reasons that couples exchange gifts (Huang & Yu, 2000; Schiffman & Cohn, 2009). Yet, relatively little attention has been paid to the individual differences in such motivations. This is surprising given that many interpersonal behaviors have been studied in relation to dispositional factors (e.g., Campbell, Foster, & Finkel, 2002). In the present study, we examined how narcissism and self-esteem are related to different motivations for romantic gift giving. Despite the similarity in their conceptualization of self-love (Campbell, Rudich, & Sedikides, 2002; Tracy, Cheng, Robins, & Trzesniewski, 2009), these two personality constructs are known to carry different interpersonal implications. However, their differences in specific behaviors or motivations in the context of relationship maintenance have been largely ignored.

1. Gift-giving motivations in romantic relationships

Researchers across various fields have taken different approaches to understanding why people give gifts. Sherry (1983) suggested that motivations for gift giving normally fall between the poles of altruism and egoism on a continuum. While altruistic motives indicate an intention to please the recipient, egoistic motives imply a primary concern with the giver's personal satisfaction. Goodwin, Smith, and Spiggle (1990) suggested a more fundamental distinction between voluntary and obligatory gift giving. In their motivational dichotomy, any gift giving is predominantly given with or without a sense of obligation.

However, gift-giving motivations of individuals involved in relationships characterized by intimacy, such as couples, may need to be differently approached. In romantic relationships, there is often an overlap between the self and the other (Aron, Lewandowski, Mashek, & Aron, 2013). When the other is included in the self, the other's resources and outcomes are to some extent experienced as one's own. In support of this, when researchers examined romantic gifts exchanged on Valentine's Day (Rugimbana, Donahay, Neal, & Polonsky, 2003), self-interest, obligatory, and altruistic motivations were found to be intricately intertwined. That is, participants' seemingly altruistic motivation to give a gift to their partner was accompanied by a latent self-interest motivation to maintain the relationship.

In fact, this finding also helps explain inconsistent assertions in previous research on romantic gift-giving motivations. Whereas Wolfinbarger (1990) argued that couples are mostly motivated by their own benefits, Belk and Coon (1993) argued that the exchange paradigm, in which gift giving is an instrumental act that assumes an

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egoistic motivation, is insufficient to explain the romantic gift giving. Instead, Belk and Coon brought forward the agapic love paradigm in which a gift carries purely expressive value.

Thus, the cognitive overlap among couples renders the romantic relationship as an interesting and adequate context to examine the comparative role of the different motivations, and more importantly, individual differences in the relative weight of these motivations. In short, are people more driven by a motivation to delight the receiver than to benefit themselves when it comes to gift giving in romantic relationships? And are there individual differences in this tendency?

2. Individual differences in gift giving

Previous studies have often identified sex as a variable that influences gift-giving behaviors (Cheal, 1987; Minowa & Gould, 1999). In general, women are found to be more active in the gift-giving process (Caplow, 1982; McGrath, 1995), presumably because they are more concerned with showing love and caring for others (Cheal, 1987). In support of this, when asked about gift-giving norms, women were more likely than men to provide responses related to the recipients' needs (e.g., "Giving gifts makes others happy when they are not"; Goodwin et al., 1990).

Other researchers (Fischer & Arnold, 1990; Webster & Nottingham, 2000) have noted the importance of gender identity or gender-role attitudes, rather than biological sex, in studying gift-giving behaviors. For example, Webster and Nottingham (2000) found that identification with feminine traits was positively related to experiential/positive motivations (e.g., "Choosing gifts brings out my creative side") while identification with masculine traits led to obligated (e.g., "I often feel obliged to give gifts") and practical motivations (e.g., "I think it is important to give gifts that last a long time").

Setting aside sex or gender, one variable that may also influence gift giving is how the giver views the self. In one study that examined sex hormones in men, although high prenatal testosterone exposure was related to giving an erotic gift to one's partner, denoting a clear sexual motivation, this relationship was found only among men with high mating confidence (Nepomuceno, Saad, Stenstrom, Mendenhall, & Iglesias, 2016). Apparently, only those holding positive self-views, in terms of one's own mating success, were brave enough to act on the bold motivations. This is in line with Schwartz's (1967) view that gift giving is self-defining, as givers confirm who they are by what they give. In fact, the giver's current and ideal self-concepts are found to largely influence the gift selection process (Belk, 1977). Thus, how one thinks of the self is likely to be differently related to motivations for and messages conveyed through giving a gift.

3. Two portraits of self-love: Narcissism and self-esteem

Both narcissism and self-esteem conceptualize a positive self-view. Although studies have consistently shown that they are positively related (Rosenthal, Montoya, Ridings, Rieck, & Hooley, 2011), statistically removing their shared variance yielded two distinct forms of self-love (Campbell, Rudich et al., 2002; Park & Colvin, 2015; Tracy et al., 2009). Indeed, narcissistic and high self-esteem individuals show difference in how they perceive themselves and how they behave in interpersonal relationships (Campbell, Foster et al., 2002; Park & Colvin, 2015).

More importantly, narcissism and self-esteem are also related to different outcomes in romantic relationships. In contrast to the positive relations between self-esteem and relationship satisfaction (Hendrick, Hendrick, & Adler, 1988), narcissism was found to predict low commitment, satisfaction, and investment (Foster, 2008). Nonetheless, there are few, if any, studies that probed their differences in daily relationship functioning. Insofar as the two traits make for different romantic relationship outcomes, they should display differences in specific relationship maintenance behaviors.

In the present study, we predict a divergence in how the two types of self-love are related to different romantic gift-giving motivations. For narcissistic individuals, romantic relationships are means to acquire admiration, power, and sexual resources (Campbell, 1999). They adopt a game-playing approach to love, are attracted to individuals who enhance their sense of self-worth, and have relationships that lack in commitment and caring (Campbell & Foster, 2002; Campbell, Foster et al., 2002). Thus, it is likely that their gifts reflect motivations that do not stem from altruistic concerns. For example, narcissistic people may consider the apparent presentation of a fancy, expensive gift itself an opportunity to display their superiority or power to their partner. At the same time, they may regard their partners as a part of public presentation of themselves and give them gifts for the purpose of positive self-presentation.

High self-esteem individuals may differ from those who are narcissistic in that they also place importance on interpersonal caring (Campbell, Rudich et al., 2002). As Rosenberg (1965) noted, self-esteem is a matter of "whether the individual considers himself adequate—a person of worth—not whether he considers himself superior to others" (p. 62). In romantic relationships, high self-esteem individuals adopt a passionate love style and hold positive views on their partners (Campbell, Foster et al., 2002; Campbell, Rudich et al., 2002). Therefore, their romantic gift giving is less likely to be an instrumental act or to accompany some ulterior motives. In other words, unlike narcissistic individuals, they are less likely to give gifts out of obligation, expectation for reciprocity, or desire to show their power. Indirect evidence for this was obtained in Nguyen and Munch's (2011) study where self-esteem mediated the link between attachment anxiety and gift-giving obligation. Anxious individuals who had lower self-esteem felt more obliged to give gifts to their partners.

4. The present study

The present study aimed to explore the relation between two types of self-love and specific motivations behind gift giving in romantic relationship. Although there was an existing scale that measured motivations for gift giving in general (Wolfinbarger & Yale, 1993; but see Babin, Gonzalez, & Watts, 2007), its factors and items (e.g., "Carefully selecting a gift is important to me" for experiential/positive motivations; "It's important to choose gifts that everybody needs, but don't yet own" for practical motivations) came across as inappropriate to be used in our study, especially for the purpose of uncovering the influence of individual differences on romantic gift-giving motivations. Therefore, we created an ad hoc scale to assess gift-giving motivations in the romantic relationship context.

Participants completed measures of narcissism and self-esteem and responded to the gift-giving motivation scale we developed. Participants reported their motivations pertaining to past gift-giving experiences as well as a hypothetical gift-giving situation. We assumed that responses to the latter in which participants were not financially constrained might better reflect participants' gift-giving motivations and show more clearly how they are related to the two forms of self-love.

5. Method

5.1. Participants and procedure

One hundred five young Korean couples living in Korea who were involved in a non-marital, heterosexual romantic relationship were recruited. The mean age was 22.10 years ($SD = 2.23$; range = 18 to 32), and they had been romantically involved for an average of 14.37 months ($SD = 11.28$; range = 1 to 56). Participants came to the laboratory and completed a booklet of questionnaires in privacy. The booklet included questions pertaining to their gift-giving experiences and measures of narcissism and self-esteem. They were then thanked, debriefed and rewarded for their participation. Fourteen participants did not respond

to questions about past motivations, presumably because they did not have a chance to give gifts yet, so *N* varied from 196 to 210 in the analyses below.

5.2. Measures

5.2.1. Narcissism

Participants completed the 40-item Narcissistic Personality Inventory on a 7-point scale (Raskin & Terry, 1988; α = .91). The Likert response format in the present study has been previously used in place of the original forced-choice version (e.g., Jordan, Spencer, Zanna, Hoshino-Browne, & Correll, 2003; Park & Colvin, 2014).

5.2.2. Self-esteem

Self-esteem was measured with the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Inventory (Rosenberg, 1965; α = .84), which consists of 10 items assessing global self-esteem.

5.2.3. Gift-giving behavior

Participants responded to questions related to gift giving in their current relationships. They first wrote down the type of occasion, described the gift they had given to their partner, its price, and completed the gift-giving motivation scale. They were then asked to imagine receiving a monthly paycheck of 4,000,000 KRW (approximately 3460 USD) and were presented with the same questions. They described a gift they would give to their partner, its price, and rated the extent to which they would be driven by each motivation.

5.2.4. Gift-giving motivations

We employed an inductive approach (Hinkin, 1998) to develop a scale by first generating items based on responses of 15 graduate students majoring in psychology and consumer behavior. Specifically, we asked them what motivations they have, and what motivations the general population would have in giving gifts to romantic partners. We then identified and grouped together items that described the same motivation. In this process, we also referred to past literature on romantic gift giving (e.g., Rugimbana et al., 2003). As a result, items were summarized into 11 motivations. Participants rated the extent to which they empathized with each motivation. All the responses were made on a 7-point scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

6. Results

6.1. Exploratory factor analysis

Participants' responses to the initial pool of 11 items were first subjected to an exploratory factor analysis using principal axis factoring with promax rotation. This analysis extracted three congruent factors with eigenvalues greater than 1 from both past and future items. One item ("because I have received a gift from my partner") that failed to

meet minimum criteria of having a strong primary factor loading (above .35) was eliminated. Repeating the analysis with the remaining 10 items (see Table 1 for items) yielded the same three factors, and subsequent parallel analysis (O'connor, 2000) supported the three-factor solution. The first factor included 3 items that reflected the degree of the giver's intrinsic motivation, and was labeled *intrinsic*. The second factor, *maintenance*, entailed 4 items that represented the giver's efforts to continue the relationship. The third, *power*, factor comprised 3 items that reflected the giver's social concerns and desire to exhibit power. Composite scores were created for each factor. The alpha reliabilities were .78, .74, and .64 for the past and .78, .72, and .68 for the future intrinsic, maintenance, and power motivations, respectively.

6.2. Main analyses

Descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations are shown in Table 2. The degrees of the three motivations participants had differed from one another both in the past, *t*s > 15.28, *p*s < .001, and in the future situations, *t*s > 10.05, *p*s < .001. Intrinsic motivation was higher than maintenance motivation, which was higher than power motivation in both situations.

As mentioned earlier, narcissism and self-esteem controlled for each other had more distinct relations with interpersonal behaviors (Campbell, Rudich et al., 2002; Park & Colvin, 2015; Tracy et al., 2009). Based on these results, we expected that controlling for the overlap between the two would clarify their associations with gift-giving motivations. To this end, we regressed each motivation on narcissism and self-esteem with sex and age entered as control variables in the first step. Squared semi-partial correlation coefficients (sr^2) were reported to indicate unique contribution of each predictor (Table 3).

For past motivations, we found a positive relation between narcissism and maintenance motivation. Participants' sex also had an effect on the maintenance motivation, such that men tended to report more. Self-esteem was negatively related to power motivation. For future motivations, both self-esteem and narcissism were related to maintenance motivation, but in an opposite direction. That is, highly narcissistic individuals reported more, but individuals with high self-esteem reported less maintenance motivations. Similar pattern was observed for power motivation, which was positively related to narcissism, but tended to show a negative relation with self-esteem although nonsignificant.

7. Discussion

We conducted an exploratory study on romantic gift-giving motivations and examined how people high in narcissism and self-esteem differ as gift-givers. We first developed a scale, identifying three types of motivations that corresponded to the giver's intrinsic desire, efforts to maintain the relationship, and self-presentational concerns. We then assessed participants' personality and their motivations for giving a gift to their partners both in past experiences and in a hypothetical

Table 1
Factor loadings of gift-giving motivations.

Item	Past			Future		
	Intrinsic	Maintenance	Power	Intrinsic	Maintenance	Power
Simply because I want to	**.80**	.03	−.05	**.87**	.08	−.11
Because I want to please my partner	**.71**	.16	−.01	**.59**	.27	.05
Because I love my partner	**.70**	.04	−.04	**.78**	−.06	−.10
Because I want to maintain a good relationship with my partner	.22	**.82**	.07	.35	**.73**	.24
Because I want my partner to treat me well	−.03	**.67**	.22	.03	**.69**	.42
Because I want to win my partner's heart	.18	**.64**	.15	.16	**.73**	.17
Because couples exchange gifts on a special occasion	−.26	**.51**	.21	−.12	**.44**	.24
Because I want to impress others	−.16	.21	**.79**	−.10	.28	**.79**
Because I want my partner to impress others	.08	.06	**.65**	−.00	.18	**.58**
Because I want to show off what I can afford	.03	.28	**.41**	−.01	.38	**.59**

Note. Strongest factor loading for each item indicated in bold.

Table 2
Descriptive statistics and correlations between variables.

Variable	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	M (SD)
1. Narcissism	.43***	.12	.18**	.06	.17*	.20**	.15*	−.04	.09	4.29 (0.65)
2. Self-esteem	–	.16*	−.02	−.12	.13	−.05	−.07	−.18**	.16*	5.47 (0.80)
3. Intrinsic (past)		–	−.04	.05	.80***	.04	.03	.04	−.01	6.38 (0.62)
4. Maintenance (past)			–	.26***	.07	.84***	.24***	−.22**	−.05	4.39 (1.15)
5. Power (past)				–	−.06	.28***	.71***	.09	−.10	2.74 (1.31)
6. Intrinsic (future)					–	.12	−.02	.08	−.00	6.41 (0.65)
7. Maintenance (future)						–	.33***	−.12	−.06	4.32 (1.14)
8. Power (future)							–	.13	−.14*	3.28 (1.43)
9. Sex[a]								–	−.27**	–
10. Age									–	22.10 (2.23)

[a] Male = 1; Female = 2.
* p ≤ .05.
** p ≤ .01.
*** p ≤ .001.

situation. The findings from a series of regression analyses below revealed two distinct portraits of self-love.

Narcissistic individuals reported high maintenance motivations for gift giving in the past. They also tended to think that they would be driven by maintenance and power motivation when asked about a hypothetical situation in the future. On the other hand, those high in self-esteem were less likely to report power motivation in the past and maintenance motivation in the future. Together, these results generally indicate that narcissistic individuals, but not those with high self-esteem, would consider gift giving to be a tool for relationship maintenance or impression management. Put differently, the two types of self-love critically differ in the tendency to regard gift giving as an instrumental act.

It is noteworthy that both in the past and in the future, participants were mostly driven by intrinsic motivations in romantic gift giving. Despite the cynicism that all gifts are ultimately self-serving or indebting in nature (Schwartz, 1967), our results revealed that gift giving in the romantic context, at least, is mostly intended to serve others. This may also explain why neither narcissism nor self-esteem was significantly related to intrinsic motivation. Couples generally have high intrinsic motivations for giving a gift to their partner. In addition, there was no sex difference in intrinsic motivation in the past or in the future, which contradicts previous findings that women use gifts as expressions of love more frequently than men do (Cheal, 1987). This suggests that in terms of romantic gift giving, men are not less likely than women to be driven by intrinsic motivations.

A potential limitation of our study concerns the way we asked the participants to describe their gift-giving experiences. Our questions about the type of occasion and price of the gift could have made some participants hesitant to write about a gift that was not for a special occasion or a gift that was not bought (e.g., drawings, handmade accessories). This methodological flaw may be responsible for the relatively weak effect sizes observed in the present study. Future research that

takes into account such possible connotations of the questions should be able to find stronger relations.

We also note that, as our study was conducted in a homogenous culture, concerns may arise regarding the cultural effects. We do acknowledge the significance and influence of cultural differences. When it comes to the manifestation of narcissistic personality, however, past studies have revealed that there is not much difference between cultures. For example, narcissism assessed in Eastern and Western samples was related to the self-enhancement bias and romantic attraction in a very similar manner (Park, Tignor, Joo, & Heo, 2015; Tanchotsrinon, Maneesri, & Campbell, 2007). Thus, we believe that there are more reasons to suppose than question the panculturality of the way narcissism influences gift-giving motivations.

For future research, we find it meaningful to take into account the perspective of the recipient as well as the giver. With gift giving being symbolic communication, how the recipient decodes the motivation behind the gift is just as important as what message the giver actually intended (Belk, 1977). In one study (Saad & Gill, 2003), women were more accurate than men in decoding their partner's tactical motivations behind their gifts. In contrast, men tended to think that women used gifts as a means of displaying long-term interest more than they did. Similarly, it is possible that recipients' personality may influence how the gift giving is understood and responded.

These results also carry implications for predicting relationship outcomes. One study found that love-expressive gifts from partners expedite the timing of relationship dissolution for males (Huang & Yu, 2000). When men perceived the motivation for the gift as an expression of commitment, they were likely to feel burdened and pressured. At the same time, expressive gifts may also remove the ambiguity and tension that are sometimes beneficial in romantic relationships. Therefore, it would be a meaningful avenue for future research to examine gift-giving motivations together with the receiver's response in the context of romantic relationships.

Table 3
Gift-giving motivations regressed on self-esteem and narcissism.

Variable	Past						Future					
	Intrinsic		Maintenance		Power		Intrinsic		Maintenance		Power	
	β	sr²	β	sr²	β	sr²	β	sr²	β	sr²	β	sr²
Step 1												
Sex[a]	.04	.00	−.25***	.06	.07	.00	.09	.01	−.15*	.02	.10	.01
Age	−.00	.00	−.12	.01	−.09	.01	.02	.00	−.10	.01	−.12	.01
Step 2												
Narcissism	.06	.00	.23**	.04	.14	.02	.13	.01	.29***	.07	.22**	.04
Self-esteem	.15	.02	−.10	.01	−.16*	.02	.09	.01	−.19**	.03	−.14	.01

[a] Male = 1; Female = 2.
* p ≤ .05.
** p ≤ .01.
*** p ≤ .001.

Lastly, our investigation coincides with an emerging wave of interest in the consumer behavior research involving consumers' narcissism (for a review, see Cisek et al., 2014). Narcissistic consumers are attracted to products that may enhance their distinctiveness, and are inclined to purchase products that serve to fulfill this self-presentational goal (Lee, Gregg, & Park, 2013). Our findings extend the past literature by showing that narcissists have similar motivations even in purchasing a gift for their partners. For example, narcissistic man may buy his girl-friend a fancy dress not because she needs it, but because he wants her to look nice next to him at a party. Considering the role of personality in the purchase of a romantic gift would contribute to the under-standing of attitudes and decision-making of the target populations and help to develop effective marketing plans (e.g., in promoting gender-specific products to the opposite sex) or advertising strategies (e.g., in creating personalized advertisements).

In conclusion, the current research took an exploratory step to ex-amine gift-giving motivations in romantic relationships and studied them in conjunction with two types of self-love. We provided empirical evidence that narcissistic individuals, but not those with high self-esteem, tend to give gifts to their partner in order to maintain the relationship or as an impression management. For those who are highly narcissistic, gifts they get for their partner may not be gifts for their partner after all.

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