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To cite this article: Silvia Casale, Giulia Fioravanti, Virginia Baldi, Gordon L. Flett & Paul L. Hewitt (2019): Narcissism, perfectionistic self-presentation, and relationship satisfaction from a dyadic perspective, *Self and Identity*, DOI: [10.1080/15298868.2019.1707272](https://doi.org/10.1080/15298868.2019.1707272)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15298868.2019.1707272>



Published online: 24 Dec 2019.



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ARTICLE



## Narcissism, perfectionistic self-presentation, and relationship satisfaction from a dyadic perspective

### Narcissism and Relationship Satisfaction

Silvia Casale<sup>a</sup>, Giulia Fioravanti<sup>a</sup>, Virginia Baldi<sup>a</sup>, Gordon L. Flett<sup>b</sup> and Paul L. Hewitt<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Health Sciences, Psychology and Psychiatry Unit, University of Florence, Florence, Italy;

<sup>b</sup>Department of Psychology, York University, Toronto, Ontario, Canada; <sup>c</sup>Department of Psychology, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada

#### ABSTRACT

The psychological mechanisms that potentially underlie the negative correlation between narcissism and relationship satisfaction are unknown. This study examined the potential mediating role of perfectionistic self-presentation in the association between grandiose and vulnerable narcissistic traits and relationship satisfaction. The Actor-Partner Interdependence Mediation Model was used to examine these associations in 344 nonclinical heterosexual couples. Mediated actor effects of men's grandiose narcissism (GN) on their own relationship satisfaction emerged as well as direct effects of women's vulnerable narcissism (VN) on their own satisfaction. Women's relationship satisfaction was influenced by their male partner's VN. Male partners of women high in GN reported lower relationship satisfaction. The results uniquely illustrate how narcissism focused on a need to seem perfect can undermine relationship satisfaction.

#### ARTICLE HISTORY



Received 22 May 2019

Accepted 14 December 2019

#### KEYWORDS

Narcissism; Relationship Satisfaction; Perfectionistic Self-Presentation; Actor-Partner Interdependence Mediation Model

The impact of narcissism on romantic relationships, including relationship satisfaction, has garnered considerable scientific attention. Prior research has shown that narcissists report a low need for intimacy (Carroll, 1987), are unlikely to desire relationships as a source of intimacy (Sedikides, Campbell, Reeder, Elliot, & Gregg, 2002), and are less empathetic in their relationships (Watson, Grisham, Trotter, & Biderman, 1984). Evidence of the detrimental characteristics of narcissists' romantic relationships also comes from empirical research on narcissists' partners. Brunell and Campbell (2011) found that individuals who perceive their partners as narcissists also considered them to be less committed and faithful than did non-narcissists' partners. Those reporting having dated a narcissist described him/her as self-centered, deceptive, materialistic, overly controlling (Brunell & Campbell, 2011), and manipulative (Campbell, Foster, & Finkel, 2002). Lack of emotional closeness (Foster, Shrira, & Campbell, 2003) has also been reported by people who date narcissists, especially after the excitement experienced during the early stages of a relationship begins to wane (Foster et al., 2003).

**CONTACT** Silvia Casale  [silvia.casale@unifi.it](mailto:silvia.casale@unifi.it)  Department of Health Sciences, Psychology and Psychiatry Unit, University of Florence, via di San Salvi 12, Florence, Italy

None of the authors report any financial interests or potential conflicts of interest.

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A negative association between self-reported narcissism and both self- and partner-reported relationship satisfaction has also been found (Ye, Lam, Ma, & Ng, 2016).

Still left partially unanswered is the question of *how* narcissistic traits affect relationship satisfaction, since relatively few studies have investigated the underlying mechanisms that might explain these associations. Moreover, the preponderance of the literature in this field focused on the grandiose form of narcissism, whereas we propose that the two forms of narcissism (i.e. grandiose and vulnerable) must be distinguished in order to explore the impact of narcissism in terms of romance. In accordance with the agency model, which highlight the role of the narcissistic self-regulation tactics, we propose that the perfectionistic strivings of narcissists should be taken into account as a possible psychological mechanism that might explain the negative association between grandiose and vulnerable narcissistic traits and relationship satisfaction.

### *Narcissism and romantic relationships*

The agency model (Campbell, Brunell, & Finkel, 2006; Campbell & Foster, 2007) is useful for understanding narcissism in romantic relationships. This model proposes that narcissism should be conceptualized as a self-regulating system comprising various reinforcing elements. The fundamental core of narcissism involves: 1) a focus on agentic rather communal concerns; 2) an approach orientation; 3) an inflated view of the self; and 4) a self-orientation focused on acquiring self-esteem. This narcissistic core reinforces a variety of interpersonal skills (e.g. confidence and resilience) and the use of self-regulatory strategies. Sometimes self-regulation tactics are intrapsychic, such as fantasizing about power (Raskin & Novacek, 1991) or blaming the situation rather than the self for failure (Farwell & Wohlwend-Lloyd, 1998). At other times these efforts are interpersonal, such as when narcissists put effort into looking good and defend the self against perceived threats (Campbell & Foster, 2007). Attention seeking, directing the topics of conversations to themselves, showing off, and bragging are all standard narcissistic strategies (Buss & Chiodo, 1991). Perfectionistic self-presentation (PSPS; see Hewitt et al., 2003) – i.e. the public interpersonal expression of perfectionism – has been included among the narcissistic strategic self-regulatory behaviors driven by an intense need for external validation and admiration (Pincus et al., 2009), in keeping with theoretical accounts that have traditionally considered perfectionism as a significant part of narcissistic personality functioning (Millon & Davis, 2000; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001).

This narcissistic drive to appear to others as perfect has recently begun to attract more scientific attention as an interpersonal self-regulatory tactic, which may also help to delineate the empirical profiles associated with different narcissism dimensions. It has been argued that vulnerable and grandiose narcissists (i.e. those whose grandiosity is largely marked by hypersensitivity to the opinions of others and those whose narcissism reflects traits related to **grandiosity**, aggression, and dominance, respectively) might employ different PSPS tactics depending on their degree of hypersensitivity to image threat (Hart, Adams, Burton, & Tortoriello, 2017). In fact, vulnerable narcissists have a fragile self that needs constant social feedback, while grandiose narcissists are less prone to be influenced by social information (Miller et al., 2011). Sherry, Gralnick, Hewitt, Sherry, and Flett (2014) conducted the initial study that examined perfectionistic self-presentation and narcissism. They highlighted that perfectionistic self-promotion (i.e.

actively promoting a perfect image) was positively and uniquely associated with grandiose narcissism. This is consistent with results highlighting the tendency of grandiose narcissists to brag and take credit for positive outcomes (e.g. Campbell & Sedikides, 1999). Subsequent studies (Casale, Fioravanti, Rugai, Flett, & Hewitt, 2016; Smith et al., 2016) found that both grandiose and vulnerable narcissists adopt an interpersonal style that focuses on presenting a public image of flawlessness. Both these studies showed that grandiose narcissists brashly portray themselves as perfect to others, while vulnerable narcissists seek to avoid displaying or disclosing their imperfections. It is important to underscore here, in the context of our current objectives, that Casale et al. (2016) reported evidence indicating a robust association between various facets of perfectionistic self-presentation (perfectionistic self-promotion, non-display of imperfection, and non-disclosure of imperfection) and vulnerable narcissism.

While the perfectionistic self-presentation tactics used by grandiose and vulnerable narcissists have been investigated, less studied is the impact that these strategies might have on relationship satisfaction. This research topic might deserve more scientific attention since previous studies have already shown the negative link between perfectionistic self-presentation and romantic relationship functioning (see Flett, Hewitt, Shapiro, & Rayman, 2001). Flett et al. (2001) showed that perfectionistic self-presentation was associated with low dyadic adjustment as well as self-conscious anxiety and obsessive preoccupations in romantic relationships. However, this research included only one member of the couple. Another investigation by Habke, Hewitt, and Flett (1999) examined the associations among trait perfectionism (i.e. the need *to be* perfect), perfectionistic self-presentation (i.e. the need *to appear* perfect to others), two indices of sexual satisfaction including satisfaction with partner, and marital adjustment in 74 couples with both members of the couple included in the study. This investigation found little association between perfectionistic self-presentation in husbands and relationship adjustment. However, among women, it was found that perfectionistic self-presentation predicted their self-reports of relationship and marital satisfaction. While this study is unique and points to the need for further consideration of perfectionistic self-presentation in relationship contexts, it is limited in that the main focus was on sexual satisfaction and it was based on a relatively small number of couples with no attempt made to distinguish between actor versus partner effects.

To our knowledge, the current research is the first empirical attempt to examine the association between narcissism, perfectionistic self-presentation, and relationship dissatisfaction within the context of the Actor-Partner Interdependence Mediation Model. In the following paragraph we outline the reasons why we believe that perfectionistic self-presentation deserves more scientific attention to enhance our understanding of the relationship between narcissism and relationship satisfaction.

### ***Narcissism, perfectionistic self-presentation, and relationship satisfaction***

As already mentioned, perfectionistic self-presentation is a self-regulatory tactic used by both grandiose and vulnerable narcissists to obtain validation and admiration (Pincus et al., 2009). Others are expected to maintain the *aura* of perfection, and the narcissistic individual may react with intense anger if those expectations go unmet (Rothstein, 1999), with some authors suggesting that narcissistic injury and subsequent rage may be

triggered by any experienced loss of perfection when others disappoint narcissistic perfectionists (see Nealis, Sherry, Sherry, Stewart, & Macneil, 2015). This implies that the discrepancies between the expectations of entitlement from the partner and the actual experiences may lead narcissists to feel at least somewhat dissatisfied with their own relationship. Relevant to the present study, narcissistic perfectionists have been found to engage in conflictual interactions as a result of others not meeting their expectations of entitlement (Nealis et al., 2015), and this might impact both the narcissist's and his/her partner's relationship satisfaction. Moreover, the narcissist's partner might be overwhelmed by the continuous presentation of perfection as well as by the demand of recognition and admiration. Since this need of entitlement is the core element of both grandiose and vulnerable narcissism, we expected to find a negative effect of narcissism level on partner's relationship satisfaction, regardless of the form, on narcissism.

However, the tactics used by grandiose and vulnerable narcissists to present themselves as perfect are quite different, and this implies that their tactics might have different outcomes on relationship satisfaction. Perfectionistic self-presentation in terms of avoidance of displaying or disclosing imperfections is associated with self-silencing – the tendency to conceal one's own true feelings out of a desire to maintain relationships and obtain the approval of others (Flett, Besser, Hewitt, & Davis, 2007). Since perfectionistic self-presentation involving efforts to hide parts of oneself is more typical of vulnerable narcissists (Casale et al., 2016), this might imply that this type of narcissism is characterized by not being true to oneself or to other people in most situations (see Hewitt et al., 2003). This perspective has been already supported by previous studies showing a negative association between vulnerable narcissism (but not grandiose narcissism) and self-reported authenticity (Casale, Rugai, Fioravanti, & Puccetti, 2018). Since authenticity is a key factor for relationship satisfaction (Rasco & Warner, 2017), we speculate that this tendency to hide parts of oneself in order to gain approval might negatively impact relationship satisfaction.

Overall, the current work is based on the conceptual premise that vulnerable, hypersensitive narcissists who cope with threats to the self by engaging in false self-representations in the form of perfectionistic self-presentation are either setting the stage for relationship difficulties or maintaining or exacerbating existing difficulties due to several factors and processes associated with perfectionistic self-presentation. This is in keeping with the conclusion that “The implications of such self-presentation are clear with regard to securing meaningful relationships; not only are the facades difficult to maintain, they also decrease the chance of emotional intimacy that is vital for close and satisfying relationships” (Habke & Flynn, 2002, p. 165). Factors and processes that limit emotional intimacy include characteristics described above, such as a tendency to be low in authenticity and intimate self-disclosure, aloof and avoidant tendencies, silencing the self, and a general propensity for perfectionistic self-presentation, which are associated subjectively or objectively with social disconnection.

Parenthetically, it is noteworthy that few studies have taken a dyadic approach to understanding the effects of narcissism on relationship satisfaction, as much of the literature focuses on only one member of the couples (i.e. the partner of the narcissist). This represents a limitation for both theoretical and methodological reasons. From a theoretical point of view, the narcissist's point of view regarding his/her own relationship satisfaction as well as the potential contribution of his/her narcissism to his/her own

satisfaction need to be examined in order to ease the understanding of narcissism's effect on intimate relationships. In fact, dyadic studies allow the examination of the effect of one's own narcissism on relationship satisfaction (actor effect) as well as the effect of one's partner's narcissism on the other partner's relationship satisfaction (partner effect). Moreover, dyadic studies also help to explore the potential interactive effect of high levels of narcissism and gender on relationship adjustment. In this regard, conflicting results were reported by previous studies. For example, Ye et al. (2016) found similar correlation coefficients between narcissism and both self-reported and partner-reported relationship satisfaction among men and women. Similarly, Lamkin, Campbell, vanDellen, and Miller (2015) noted negative relationship adjustment when both partners self-reported high narcissistic traits and had been together for a longer period of time. Notably, they did not find a substantial relation between vulnerable narcissism and dyadic adjustment either as a main effect or moderated by duration. In a subsequent study, Lavner, Lamkin, Miller, Campbell, & Karney, (2016) found that especially women's grandiose narcissism negatively predicted relationship satisfaction and marital problems for themselves and for their husbands. Without distinguishing between the two forms of narcissism, Gewirtz-Meydan and Finzi-Dottan (2018) confirmed that women's narcissism total score drives most of the partner-effects. The gendered nature of these results could have at least two different theoretical explanations. On the one hand, the marital research perspective has shown a predominance of women's characteristics on affecting heterosexual relationships' outcomes (e.g. Floyd & Markman, 1983). On the other hand, high levels of narcissism are generally attributed to men (Grijalva, Newman, Tay, Donnellan, & Harms, 2015), rendering men's narcissism more acceptable and less deleterious for relationship satisfaction, whereas women's narcissistic traits may be perceived as especially negative and adverse for a couple's well-being. These perspectives as well as the empirical findings about the negative effect of women's narcissism highlight the need to distinguish between male and female partners in this study area.

### The present study

The present research aims to build upon previous results on the association between the two forms of narcissism and relationship satisfaction. There are many gaps in the literature that require further research. First, empirical research in this area has been almost entirely focused on the grandiose form of narcissism. Second, almost no studies examining the associations between personality traits and well-being in the context of close relationships have investigated the underlying mechanisms that might explain these associations. While the associations between grandiose narcissism and relationship satisfaction, on the one hand, and perfectionistic self-presentation and relationship satisfaction, on the other, have been reported, the potential mediating role of narcissistic perfectionistic strategies in the association between the two narcissistic phenotypes and relationship satisfaction has never been tested. Third, a dyadic approach is needed to further clarify the potential interactive effect of gender and high levels of narcissism, on the one hand, and both the actor and partner-effect of the two forms of narcissism on relationship satisfaction, on the other hand.

Based on what is known about narcissism and romantic relationships, we predicted the following actor and partner effects:

*H1a (actor effect):* grandiose narcissism will be negatively associated with relationship satisfaction;

*H1b (actor effect):* vulnerable narcissism will be negatively associated with relationship satisfaction;

*H2a (actor effect):* one's own perfectionistic self-presentation will mediate the association between one's own grandiose narcissism and one's own relationship satisfaction;

*H2b (actor effect):* one's own perfectionistic self-presentation will mediate the association between one's own vulnerable narcissism and one's own relationship satisfaction;

*H3a (partner effect):* partners of those with high levels of grandiose narcissism will report lower relationship satisfaction;

*H3b (partner effect):* partners of those with high levels of vulnerable narcissism will report lower relationship satisfaction;

*H4 (partner effect):* perfectionistic self-presentation exhibited by the partner will affect one's own relationship satisfaction.

*H5 (partner effect):* women's grandiose narcissism in particular will negatively predict partner's relationship satisfaction

These hypotheses were tested in a large sample of couples who were recruited in various ways that are outlined below. They completed a battery of self-report questionnaires as outlined below.

## Method

### Participants

We followed Kenny and Ledermann (2010) recommendation of a sample size of at least "between 80 and 100 couples" (p. 446) to estimate the APIM through SEM. A power analysis for the APIM was conducted using the program written by Ackerman and Kenny (2016). Given earlier findings on narcissism and relationship satisfaction (Gewirtz-Meydan & Finzi-Dottan, 2018), we assumed a medium actor effect (standardized estimate = .25) and a small to medium partner effect (standardized estimates = .15). At minimum, 328 dyads are needed to detect actor and partner effects for men and women, when power is at least .80.

Participants were recruited using a range of methods, including advertisements and social media sites (e.g. Facebook), where they were provided with brief information about the study and contact details. The inclusion criterion was that couples had to be in the relationship for at least one year in order to examine couples in developed stages of their relationship.

A total of 356 nonclinical heterosexual couples agreed to participate. Prior to questionnaire completion, it was agreed that they would not find out one another's responses. Both partners completed the questionnaires simultaneously but independently, seated at two separate desks. Completing the questionnaires took 10–15 minutes. When fewer than five values were missing, the item mean was used while performing missing data imputation. After removing cases with five or more missing values (12 couples), the final sample consisted of 344 nonclinical heterosexual couples ( $N = 688$ ). Participants' age ranged from 18 to 61 years, and the average age was 26.18 ( $SD = 7.47$ ) years, with an average relationship duration of 5 years ( $M = 5.10$ ,  $SD = 6.56$ ). Twenty-five couples had at least one child, and 60 couples (17.44% of the sample) were married (mean marriage duration was  $15.05 \pm 11.41$  years). All participants were Caucasian. All couples provided full written informed consent before answering the questionnaires.

## Measures

### Grandiose narcissism

To measure grandiose narcissism, the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI-16; Ames, Rose, & Anderson, 2006) was used. This measure is a more concise, unidimensional measure of the NPI-40, which was designed to measure grandiose narcissism in non-clinical populations. It contains 16 pairs of items, each consisting of two conflicting proposals that the participants must express a preference for (e.g. "I like to be the center of the attention" vs. "I prefer to blend in with the crowd"). Higher scores on this scale indicate higher levels of grandiose narcissism. This 16-item, forced-choice personality questionnaire has an  $\alpha = .72$  and notable face, internal, discriminant, and predictive validity. The Cronbach's alphas were  $\alpha = .75$  for men and  $\alpha = .78$  for women in the current study.

### Vulnerable narcissism

To measure vulnerable narcissism, the Hypersensitive Narcissism Scale (HSNS; Hendin & Cheek, 1997) was used. The HSNS is a 10-item, one-dimensional measure of vulnerable narcissism involving statements regarding feelings of narcissistic hypersensitivity (e.g. "My feelings are easily hurt by ridicule or by the hurtful remarks of others"). The HSNS has demonstrated reliability and validity in numerous studies (Pincus et al., 2009). Participants indicated to what extent the items were characteristic of their feelings and behavior using a response scale that ranges from 1 (*very uncharacteristic or untrue*) to 5 (*very characteristic or true*). Higher scores on this scale indicate higher levels of vulnerable narcissism. In the present study, the Cronbach's alphas were  $\alpha = .74$  for men and  $\alpha = .70$  for women.

### Perfectionistic self-presentational style

To assess a perfectionistic self-presentational style, the Perfectionistic Self-Presentation Scale (PSPS; Hewitt et al., 2003) was used. This is a 27-item measure that assesses a perfectionistic self-presentational style used to promote an image of perfection to others as well as the need to avoid behavioral demonstrations and verbal disclosures of one's imperfection. The PSPS comprises three subscales (perfectionistic self-promotion,



non-display of imperfection, and non-disclosure of imperfection) and a total score obtained by the sum of the 27 items. Higher scores indicate greater perfectionistic self-presentation. In the current study, we used the total PSPS score due to the tendency of the three facets to be highly correlated and for ease of interpretation. Descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations for the three PSPS facets by gender are reported as supplemental material in Table S1. Participants responded to the items in all three subscales using a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Evidence supports both the reliability and validity of the PSPS, especially in terms of its ability to predict unique variance in key outcomes beyond trait perfectionism (see Hewitt et al., 2003). The Cronbach's alphas for the total score were  $\alpha = .77$  for men and  $\alpha = .77$  for women.

### *Relationship satisfaction*

To assess relationship satisfaction, the Satisfaction Scale (SS; Busby & Gardner, 2008) was used. The SS is a 7-item, one-dimensional measure of relationship satisfaction. This face-valid self-report measure evaluates how satisfied the participants are with the physical intimacy, the amount of love in the relationship, the way conflicts are resolved, the relationship equality, the amount of time they spend together, their communication, and the overall relationship. Respondents answered these questions on a 5-point Likert response scale ranging from "very dissatisfied" to "very satisfied." The reliability coefficients (Cronbach's alphas) for the satisfaction measures were  $\alpha = .82$  for men and  $\alpha = .78$  for women.

### *Data analyses*

Because partners influence each other, traditional statistical analyses assuming independence are not accurate in estimating statistical significance in dyadic data. To address this issue, this study applied the Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (APIM; Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006). This approach has been widely used in analyzing dyadic data to achieve a more rigorous estimation of the effects of a person's causal factors on his/her own outcome variable (actor effect) and on the outcome variable of the partner (partner effect), with the partner's own causal factors being controlled for. The partner effect from the APIM directly models the reciprocal influence that may occur between both individuals in the dyadic relationship (Campbell & Kashy, 2002). To allow for dyadic analyses, the data were organized in a pairwise structure so that each row contained the respondents' scores and the partners' scores. To examine whether the two members' perfectionistic self-presentation mediates the link between narcissism (vulnerable and grandiose) and relationship satisfaction, we used an Actor-Partner Interdependence Mediation Model (APIMeM; Ledermann, Macho, & Kenny, 2011). In this case, actor effects are the effects of each partner's narcissism on his/her own reports of perfectionistic self-presentation and of relationship satisfaction. Partner effects are the effects of men's narcissism on their female partners' reports of perfectionistic self-presentation and relationship satisfaction and the effects of women's narcissism on their male partners' perfectionistic self-presentation and relationship satisfaction. Two mediation models were tested separately for vulnerable narcissism and grandiose narcissism. Models were estimated using MPlus 6.1 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2012) structural equation modeling

package. A model is considered as having adequate fit to the observed data if the  $\chi^2$  test is not significant, the comparative fit index (CFI) and the Tucker-Lewis index (TLI) are greater than 0.95, and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) is less than 0.05. The significance of each mediation path was estimated using bias-corrected bootstrap analysis with 5.000 resampling.

## Results

### Descriptive statistics and correlations

Means, standard deviations, test statistics, and effect sizes for the differences between partners in the main study measures are shown in Table 1. Differences between partners were examined through a series of paired sample t-test analyses. The analyses indicated that men were significantly higher on grandiose narcissism and women obtained significantly higher scores on relationship satisfaction. There were no significant gender differences in vulnerable narcissism and perfectionistic self-presentation.

Relationship satisfaction was negatively correlated with narcissism and perfectionistic self-presentation among men (see Table 2). Significant negative correlations were also found between men's relationship satisfaction and women's vulnerable narcissism scores. Women's relationship satisfaction was correlated with both one's own vulnerable narcissism and the partner's vulnerable narcissism. Moreover, women's perfectionistic self-presentation was negatively correlated with women's relationship satisfaction. Parenthetically, it should be noted that a significant positive correlation between men's

**Table 1.** Gender differences in the study variables.

	Men <i>M (SD)</i>	Women <i>M (SD)</i>	<i>t</i> (1, 343)	<i>Cohen's d</i>
NPI	3.84 (2.86)	2.77 (2.26)	5.93**	−0.41
HSNS	28.12 (6.50)	28.72 (5.80)	−1.34	–
PSPS	98.58 (25.06)	98.61 (27.56)	−.019	–
SS	29.09 (4.57)	29.58 (4.23)	−1.99*	0.11

*Note.* NPI = Narcissistic Personality Inventory; HSNS = Hypersensitive Narcissism Scale; PSPS = Perfectionistic Self-Presentation Total Score; SS = Relationship Satisfaction. \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

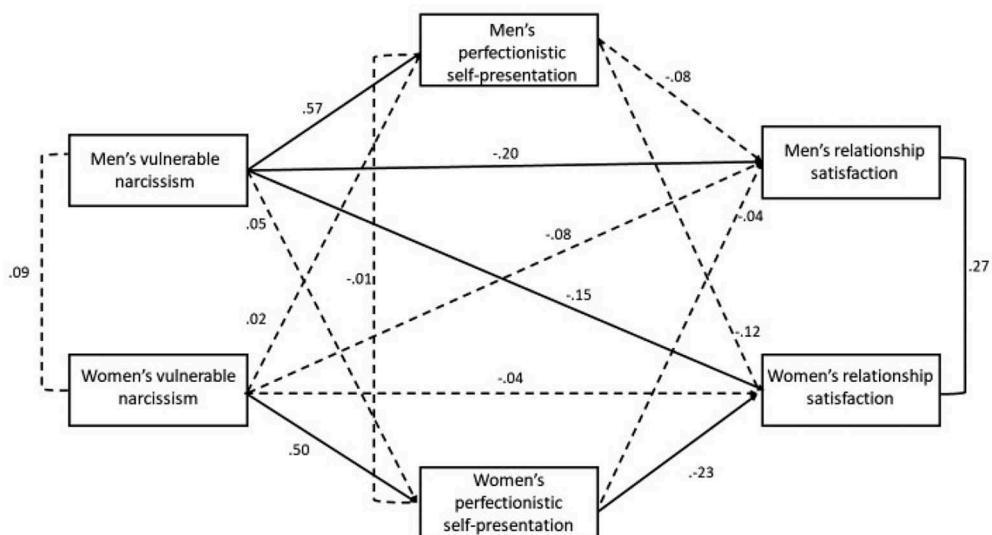
**Table 2.** Correlations between the study variables.

	Narcissism				Perfectionistic Self/ Presentation		Relationship Satisfaction	
	Grandiose Narcissism		Vulnerable Narcissism		PSPS Men	PSPS Women	SS Men	SS Women
	NPI Men	NPI Women	HSNS Men	HSNS Women				
NPI Men	1	.17**	.12*	.07	.12*	−.02	−.18**	−.02
NPI Women	.17**	1	−.04	.09	−.07	.14**	.01	.03
HSNS Men	.12*	−.04	1	.09	.58**	.00	−.26**	−.16**
HSNS Women	.07	.09	.09	1	.04	.51**	−.13*	−.25**
PSPS Men	.12*	−.07	.58**	.04	1	−.01	−.19**	−.05
PSPS Women	−.03	.14**	.00	.51**	−.01	1	−.07	−.21**
SS Men	−.18**	.01	−.26**	−.13*	−.19**	−.07	1	.47**
SS Women	−.02	.03	−.15**	−.25**	−.05	−.21**	.47**	1

*Note.* NPI = Narcissistic Personality Inventory; HSNS = Hypersensitive Narcissism Scale; PSPS = Perfectionistic Self – Presentation Total Score; SS = Relationship Satisfaction. \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$

We also examined the association between the relationship length and the study variables. The associations between the two forms of narcissism and relationship length were weak in magnitude among women ( $r = -.07, p = .17$ ;  $r = -.13, p = .02$ , respectively for grandiose narcissism and vulnerable narcissism) and men ( $r = -.15, p = .01$ ;  $r = .00, p = .99$ , respectively for grandiose narcissism and vulnerable narcissism). No significant correlations were found between relationship length and relationship satisfaction among women ( $r = -.10, p = .06$ ) or men ( $r = -.04, p = .48$ ). Similarly, no significant correlations were evident between relationship length and perfectionistic self-presentation among women ( $r = -.04, p = .48$ ) or men ( $r = .02, p = .74$ ). Therefore, relationship length was not included as a moderator in the hypotheses testing.

The APIMeM showed good fit to the observed data:  $\chi^2(2) = 1.26$   $p = .53$ ; CFI = 1.00; TLI = 1.02; RMSEA [90%CI] = .00 [.00-.09]; SRMR = .01]. As shown in Figure 1, two actor effects and one partner effect were statistically significant. Men's relationship satisfaction was negatively predicted only by their own level of vulnerable narcissism ( $H1b$  was supported among men,  $H5$  was not supported). This effect was not mediated by perfectionistic self-presentation ( $H2b$  was not supported among men). Women's relationship



**Figure 1.** Actor-partner effect (standardized coefficients) of vulnerable narcissism on relationship satisfaction, mediated by perfectionistic self-presentation. Significant paths are presented in bold lines, and non-significant paths are presented in broken lines.

**Table 3.** Total effects, total indirect effects, simple indirect effects, and direct effects of vulnerable narcissism on relationship satisfaction (unstandardized coefficients).

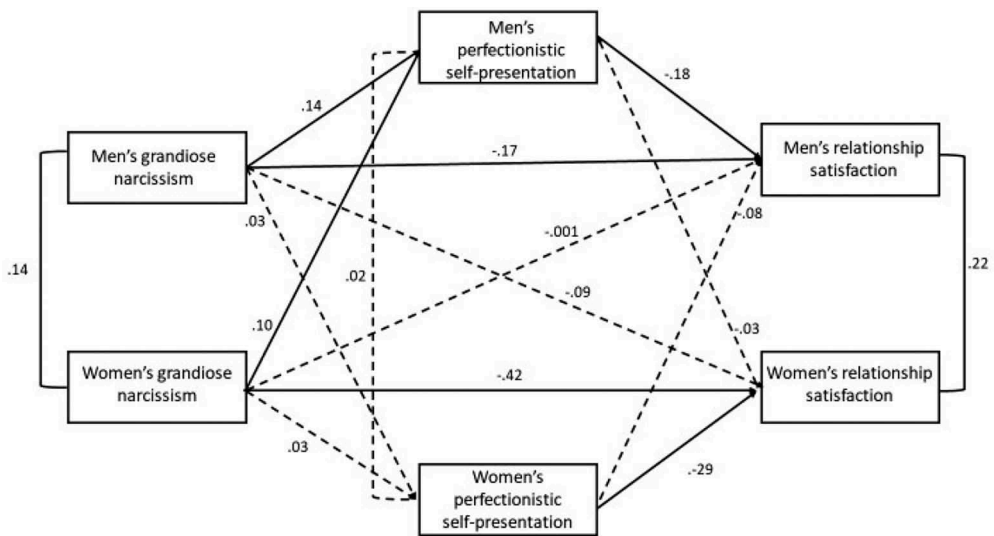
Effect	Estimate	95% CI	Proportion of the Total Effect
<i>Men Actor effect</i>			
<b>Total Effect</b>	<b>-.17</b>	<b>-.35, -.13</b>	
Total IE	-.03	-.11, .02	17.8
Actor-Actor IE	-.03	-.12, .02	
Partner-Partner IE	-.001	-.003, .02	
<b>Direct Effect</b>	<b>-.14</b>	<b>-.32, -.07</b>	82.2
<i>Women Actor Effect</i>			
<b>Total Effect</b>	<b>-.21</b>	<b>-.28, -.04</b>	
<b>Total IE</b>	<b>-.16</b>	<b>-.21, -.03</b>	74.4
<b>Actor-Actor IE</b>	<b>-.16</b>	<b>-.20, -.03</b>	
Partner-Partner IE	-.003	-.02, .006	
Direct Effect	-.05	-.04, .22	25.6
<i>Men Partner Effect</i>			
<b>Total Effect</b>	<b>-.28</b>	<b>-.33, -.02</b>	
Total IE	-.10	-.02, .17	36.7
Actor-Partner IE	-.08	-.20, -.03	
Partner-Actor IE	-.02	-.02, .006	
<b>Direct Effect</b>	<b>-.18</b>	<b>-.21, -.04</b>	64.3
<i>Women Partner Effect</i>			
Total Effect	-.08	-.21, .007	
Total IE	-.01	-.08, .04	18.5
Partner-Actor IE	-.001	-.005, .02	
Actor-Partner IE	-.02	-.07, .04	
Direct Effect	-.07	-.21, .05	81.5

Note. IE = Indirect Effect. Significant paths are in bold.

satisfaction was negatively predicted by men's vulnerable narcissism directly and by their own level of vulnerable narcissism indirectly through their own perfectionistic self-presentation (*H3b* and *H2b* were both supported among women). The total effects, total indirect effects, simple indirect effects, and direct effects are presented in Table 3. Among men, it was evident that the partner effects were stronger than the actor effects (–.28 and –.17 respectively), whereas among women the actor effects were stronger than the partner effects (–.21 and –.08 respectively). Total direct effects accounted for the largest amount of explained variance for all the effects. The effect of women's narcissism on their own relationship satisfaction was predominantly accounted for by the mediation of their own perfectionistic self-presentation. Inspection of the bootstrapped confidence intervals revealed that only one of the simple indirect effects was statistically significant, that is the actor-actor indirect effect of women's vulnerable narcissism on their own relationship satisfaction through their own perfectionistic self-presentation ( $b = -.11$ ). However, men's vulnerable narcissism had a stronger direct effect on women's relationship satisfaction ( $b = -.15$ ) compared to the effect of women's vulnerable narcissism through their own perfectionistic self-presentation.

### *Grandiose narcissism and relationship satisfaction*

A different pattern of results emerged regarding grandiose narcissism [model fit:  $\chi^2(4) = 3.38$   $p = .49$ ; CFI = 1.00; TLI = 1.01; RMSEA[90%CI] = .00 [.00-.08]; SRMR = .02]. As shown in Figure 2, three actor effects and one partner effect were statistically significant. Men's relationship satisfaction was negatively predicted by their own levels of grandiose narcissism both directly and through their own perfectionistic self-presentation (*H1a* and



**Figure 2.** Actor-partner effect (standardized coefficients) of grandiose narcissism on relationship satisfaction, mediated by perfectionistic self-presentation. Significant paths are presented in bold lines, and non-significant paths are presented in broken lines.

*H2a* were both supported among men). Moreover, an indirect unexpected effect of women's grandiose narcissism on men's relationship satisfaction was found (*H5* was supported). Indeed, women's grandiose narcissism positively predicted men's perfectionistic self-presentation, that in turn negatively predicted men's relationship satisfaction. Women's relationship satisfaction was negatively predicted only by their own level of grandiose narcissism (*H1a* was supported among women). This effect was not mediated by perfectionistic self-presentation (*H2a* was not supported among women). The total effects, total indirect effects, simple indirect effects, and direct effects are presented in [Table 4](#). It is evident that the actor effects were stronger than the partner effects, especially among women (men:  $-.30$  and  $-.23$  respectively; women:  $-.97$  and  $-.03$  respectively). In particular, women's relationship satisfaction was mostly explained by their own level of grandiose narcissism; men's narcissism did not predict women's relationship satisfaction (neither directly nor by perfectionistic self-presentation). Total direct effects accounted for a larger amount of explained variance for all the effects, with the exception of women partner effects. The effect of women's narcissism on men's satisfaction was predominantly accountable for the mediation effect of men's perfectionistic self-presentation. Inspection of the bootstrapped confidence intervals revealed that only two of the simple indirect effects were statistically significant: 1) the partner-actor indirect effect of women's grandiose narcissism on men's relationship satisfaction by men's perfectionistic self-presentation ( $b = -.03 [-.002, -.04]$ ), and 2) the actor-actor indirect effect of men's grandiose narcissism on relationship satisfaction by their own perfectionistic self-presentation ( $b = -.04 [-.06, -.005]$ ).

Finally, *H4* was not supported neither among men nor among women in that the partner's perfectionistic self-presentation was not found to predict relationship satisfaction.

**Table 4.** Total effects, total indirect effects, simple indirect effects, and direct effects of grandiose narcissism on relationship satisfaction (unstandardized coefficients).

Effect	Estimate	95% CI	Proportion of the Total Effect
<i>Men Actor effect</i>			
<b>Total Effect</b>	<b>-.30</b>	<b>-.29, -.07</b>	
Total IE	-.04	-.06, .001	13.3
<b>Actor-Actor IE</b>	<b>-.04</b>	<b>-.06, -.005</b>	
Partner-Partner IE	-.003	-.005, .02	
<b>Direct Effect</b>	<b>-.26</b>	<b>-.27, -.05</b>	86.7
<i>Women Actor Effect</i>			
<b>Total Effect</b>	<b>-.97</b>	<b>-.99, -.71</b>	
Total IE	-.03	-.05, .06	3.1
Actor-Actor IE	-.007	-.004, .02	
Partner-Partner IE	-.02	-.05, .05	
<b>Direct Effect</b>	<b>-.94</b>	<b>-.96, -.65</b>	96.9
<i>Men Partner Effect</i>			
Total Effect	-.23	-.28, .03	
Total IE	-.03	-.04, .03	13
Actor-Partner IE	-.009	-.02, -.006	
Partner-Actor IE	-.02	-.03, .04	
Direct Effect	-.20	-.21, .02	87
<i>Women Partner Effect</i>			
Total Effect	-.035	-.09, .13	
Total IE	-.034	-.01, .05	97.1
<b>Partner-Actor IE</b>	<b>-.03</b>	<b>-.002, -.04</b>	
Actor-Partner IE	-.004	-.03, .01	
Direct Effect	-.001	-.12, .12	2.9

Note. IE = Indirect Effect. Significant paths are in bold.

## Discussion

The current study examined actor and partner effects of grandiose and vulnerable narcissism on relationship satisfaction while also investigating the potential mediating role of perfectionistic self-presentation. An overarching goal of this research was to promote greater consideration of the role of extreme forms of self-presentation in relationship dissatisfaction within the context of other personality vulnerabilities that can contribute to relationship difficulties. Several unique findings emerged from this investigation: first, H1 was supported in that one's own narcissistic traits, be they grandiose or vulnerable, negatively impact one's own relationship satisfaction, be this effect direct or mediated. In particular, we found mediated actor effects (i.e. through perfectionistic self-presentation) of men's grandiose narcissism and of women's vulnerable narcissism on their own relationship satisfaction; second, women's relationship satisfaction was influenced by men's vulnerable narcissism but not by their partners' grandiose narcissism; third, male partners of women high in grandiose narcissism reported lower relationship satisfaction, which was seemingly due to the negative effect that women's narcissism had on their partner's need to appear perfect.

Below we will begin by discussing the results concerning the actor effects (H1a, H1b, H2a, and H2b). Subsequently, we will review results related to the partner effects (H3a, H3b, H4).

### *Effects of one's own narcissism on relationship satisfaction (actor effects)*

H1a predicted that grandiose narcissism would negatively impact relationship satisfaction, and this hypothesis was supported among both men and women. Similarly, H1b was

supported in that vulnerable narcissism was found to be negatively associated with relationship satisfaction among both genders (even if this effect was mediated among women). Results about the direct actor-effects of both grandiose and vulnerable narcissism on relationship satisfaction are not surprising in that previous literature has consistently shown a medium-to-large effect of one's own personality traits on one's own relationship satisfaction (see Malouff, Thorsteinsson, Schutte, Bhullar, & Rooke, 2010). However, the present study builds upon previous studies in some key respects. First, the preponderance of previous research has mainly focused on the big five personality traits, and thus little is known about the actor and partner-effects of narcissistic traits on relationship satisfaction. Second, as noted earlier, the few studies that investigated the effects of narcissism on relationship satisfaction focused on the grandiose form and the partner's point of view. In other words, there has been a paucity of research on the vulnerable form as well as the narcissist's relationship satisfaction. Therefore, the current findings represent one of the first empirical demonstrations of the apparent negative effects that one's own vulnerable narcissism might have on one's own relationship satisfaction. One possible interpretation concerns the unrealistic expectations of entitlement that grandiose and vulnerable narcissists share. The discrepancy that individuals with high levels of narcissism may experience between their highly optimistic expectations of entitlement from their partner and their actual experiences may lead them to feel at least somewhat dissatisfied with their own relationship.

*H2a* and *H2B* predicted a mediating role of one's own perfectionistic self-presentation in the association between relationship satisfaction and grandiose and vulnerable narcissism, respectively. These hypotheses were partially supported in that results about the indirect actor-effects revealed a mediating role of perfectionistic self-presentation in one's own relationship satisfaction only among vulnerable women and grandiose men. Women with high levels of grandiose narcissism reported relationship dissatisfaction independently from their level of perfectionistic self-presentation. This result suggests that for grandiose women, other factors (e.g. anticipated infidelity, see Buss & Shackelford, 1997) or other narcissistic needs (e.g. need for power) may better explain negative relational satisfaction. The absence of a mediational role of the need to seem perfect in the relationship between vulnerable narcissism and relationship satisfaction among men could be explained by the observation that vulnerable narcissism (but not grandiose narcissism) has been linked to anxiety, depression, and maladaptive attachment styles (Miller et al., 2011), which might have a greater impact on relationship satisfaction than perfectionistic self-presentational strategies. Taken together, these results may indicate a gendered pattern of associations between this form of narcissism, perfectionistic self-presentation, and one's own relationship satisfaction. Indeed, the interpersonal expression of perfectionism seems particularly relevant for relationship satisfaction among grandiose men and vulnerable women. Although there is a lack of a systematic focus on gender differences in perfectionistic self-presentation, presentation of self, image construction, and appearance, these factors are seemingly more relevant for females (see Pliner, Chaikin, & Flett, 1990); this could be particularly true for vulnerable women (and not for grandiose women), since they are characterized by an insecure sense of grandiosity, low self-esteem, and hypersensitivity to the evaluation of others (Pincus & Roche, 2011). Concurrently, perfectionistic self-promotion seems mainly relevant for grandiose men. A possible explanation relates to the observation that there are clear

differences in self-presentational norms for females and males (see Leary, 1996). Displaying an ideal public self that conveys an image of being flawless could be a primary need, especially for men with high levels of exhibitionism, self-esteem, grandiosity, and arrogance.

Our study qualifies the results of earlier research by showing that men high in grandiose narcissism and women high in vulnerable narcissism invest in seeming perfect and this, in turn, predicts lower relationship satisfaction. Again, one possible interpretation concerns the disappointment caused by the unsatisfied entitlement desire despite one's own efforts to appear perfect. Moreover, perfectionistic self-presentation involves efforts to hide certain aspects of one's self, and previous studies found that these efforts are correlated with low authenticity (Casale et al., 2018), a key factor in determining relationship satisfaction (Rasco & Warner, 2017).

### *Effects of partner's narcissism on relationship satisfaction (partner effects)*

It is arguably the case that the most interesting results of the present study concern the partner effects. In fact, men's relationship satisfaction was impacted by women's grandiose narcissism (but not by women's vulnerable narcissism) in a manner that is in keeping with previous findings reported by Lavner et al. (2016). In contrast, men's vulnerable narcissism (but not men's grandiose narcissism) was negatively associated with women's relationship satisfaction. Our results did not support previous findings suggesting an absence of association between men's vulnerable narcissism and their female partners' relationship satisfaction (Gewirtz-Meydan & Finzi-Dottan, 2018). Notably, the partner-effect was larger than the actor-effect, and this is particularly intriguing because meta-analytic studies found that actor effects of personality traits on relationship satisfaction are typically larger than partner effects, often about twice as large (see Malouff et al., 2010). However, this previous research examined this association only at a bivariate level.

Social role theory provides a useful framework for understanding the results of the current study. Social role theory proposes that individuals are penalized for deviating from gender role expectations. Rudman, Moss-Racusin, Phelan, and Nauts (2012) asked 832 participants to rate 64 gender-stereotypical traits for how desirable-undesirable each was for men versus women. Traits viewed as more desirable for men included career-oriented, leadership ability, aggressive, assertive, and independent (which are well-known correlates of grandiose narcissism). The most undesirable traits for men included emotional, naïve, weak, insecure, and gullible (which are well-known correlates of vulnerable narcissism). In contrast, the most undesirable (proscriptive) traits for women were reflected by the adjectives aggressive, intimidating, dominating, arrogant, and rebellious. As Grijalva et al. (2015) commented in their meta-analytic review on gender differences in narcissism, "... essentially, these results suggest men should be agentic and they should not be 'weak,' whereas, women should be communal and they should not be dominant – dominance is reserved for men" (p. 264). This might explain why men's vulnerable narcissism but not men's grandiose narcissism was found to be negatively related to women's relationship satisfaction as well as why women's grandiose narcissism negatively impacted men's relationship satisfaction. Essentially, our results seem to support Lavner et al.'s proposition (2016) regarding grandiose narcissism that "... there may be something normative about men having higher levels of narcissistic features, making



narcissisms less deleterious for their romantic functioning, whereas narcissistic features among women may be seen as especially negative” (p. 14). Another potential explanation for the absence of an association between men’s grandiose narcissism and their partners’ relationship satisfaction is that this research did not address pathological narcissism and, instead, focused exclusively on persons with relatively high degrees of narcissism (i.e. normal grandiose narcissism, see Paulhus, 2001).

It is also noteworthy in the present study that women’s grandiose narcissism was negatively associated with their partners’ relationship satisfaction due to the negative effect that women’s narcissism had on their partners’ need to appear perfect. These results are consistent with previous findings showing that expectations of perfection perceived as coming from the wives as well as wives’ partner-prescribed perfectionism are negatively correlated with marital happiness (Haring, Hewitt, & Flett, 2003). However, the current results also build upon these previous results in that they highlighted one of the intra-individual psychological mechanisms (i.e. the efforts made to appear perfect) that might explain the association between the partner’s prescription and one’s own relationship satisfaction.

The present study has some limitations that should be noted. First, much of the research in this field used the NPI-40 to assess grandiose narcissism. The inconsistencies found regarding results concerning the effects of men’s grandiose narcissism on their partners’ satisfaction might be due, at least in part, to the fact that we used a shorter version of the NPI. Another limitation is that we assessed constructs using one single method (i.e. self-report). This implies that the actor effect is based on information from one source (i.e. self-reports on narcissism, perfectionistic self-presentation, and relationship satisfaction by one individual), whereas the partner effect is based on information from different sources (i.e. self-reports on narcissism by one partner and relationship satisfaction reported by the other partner). Consequently, the actor effect is based on measures that have more method variance in common than the measures on which the partner effect is based (see Orth, 2013). Multimethod assessment should be used in future studies because it allows controlling for the effect of shared method variance and may provide more valid estimates of actor and partner effects. Future studies should also follow couples longitudinally to examine how narcissism impacts relationship satisfaction over time. Further, the effect of one’s own narcissism and partner’s narcissism should be investigated by also considering the interactive effect with broader personality traits. Previous research found that higher levels of one’s own conscientiousness, agreeableness, and extraversion were each associated with higher levels of one’s own relationship satisfaction, and higher levels of neuroticism were associated with lower relationship satisfaction. Broad personality traits also affect the partner’s relationship satisfaction; having a partner high in conscientiousness and agreeableness were each associated with higher levels of relationship satisfaction, whereas having a partner with higher levels of neuroticism and extraversion were each associated with lower relationship satisfaction (Chopik & Lucas, 2019). It would be interesting to study if narcissism maintains its effect on relationship satisfaction while controlling for broader personality traits as well as to investigate the potential interactive effect between these personality traits. Emotional stability should be considered when investigating the effect of vulnerable narcissism on relationship satisfaction, since this form of narcissism has been repeatedly found to be associated with high levels of neuroticism; some authors (Miller et al., 2018) suggested that it is mostly a disorder of neuroticism.

Despite these limitations, the current study builds upon previous results in several respects. First, it confirmed the negative association between women's grandiose narcissism and their partners' relationship satisfaction, and it showed uniquely that being in a romantic relationship with a man with vulnerable narcissistic traits might be worse than being in a relationship with a grandiose narcissist. Finally, the current research yielded initial evidence of the negative role of perfectionistic self-presentation in the association between narcissistic traits and relationship satisfaction. These findings add to previous evidence attesting to the negative outcomes that tend to accompany elevated levels of an interpersonal style dominated by an excessive need to seem perfect to others.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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