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Sexual attitudes help explain narcissists' relationship problems

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When Robert Browning wrote “grow old along with me, the best is yet to be,” he had no inkling of a future University of Florida study showing that narcissists are more interested in sexual pleasure than lasting intimacy.

The new study found that narcissists are more likely to philander and dump their partners than people who view closeness and commitment as the most important parts of a relationship, said Ilan Shrira, a UF visiting psychologist.

“Narcissists have a heightened sense of sexuality, but they tend to view sex very differently than other people do,” said Shrira, whose study appears in the current issue of the Journal of Social and Personal Relationships. “They see sexuality more in terms of power, influence and as something daring, in contrast to people with low narcissistic qualities who associated sex more with caring and love.”

As a result, narcissists tend to go through a string of short-term relationships that don’t last long and are usually devoid of much intimacy, he said.

“Even when they’re in a relationship, they always seem to be on the lookout for other partners and searching for a better deal,” Shrira said. “Whether that’s because of their heightened sexuality or because they think multiple partners enhance their self-image isn’t entirely clear.”

Although narcissism and sexuality have been linked since the psychoanalytic writings of Freud, researchers have paid little attention to the connection, he said.

Shrira collaborated with Joshua D. Foster, a University of South Alabama social psychologist, and W. Keith Campbell, a University of Georgia social psychologist and author of the 2005 book “When You Love a Man Who Loves Himself.” They did two studies with a total of 485 undergraduate students at the University of Georgia.

In the first study, participants who scored high on a narcissism personality inventory test, as measured by strong agreement to such statements as ‘I will be a success’ and “I find it easy to manipulate people,’ considered physical pleasure to be much more important in a sexual relationship than emotional intimacy. The highly narcissistic were 50 percent more likely than the more humble to view the primary purpose of sexual intercourse as enhancing their own physical pleasure, rather than increasing emotional intimacy with their partner, he said.

In the second study, which involved only undergraduates who were in a romantic relationship, those with high narcissism scores expressed considerably low commitment to their partner.

Typically, males are more narcissistic than females, who are known to place greater priority than men on personal relationships, Shrira said. “Narcissists tend not to value relationships unless it’s for self-serving purposes,” he said.

In a separate cross-cultural study the researchers conducted on people ages 8 to 80, they found that narcissism peaks at about 15 or 16 and then steadily declines as people get older, Shrira said. He attributed this partly to the “reality principle.”

“When you’re in high school or college, you’re at the peak of your physical condition and the world is your oyster,” he said. “But when you get out in the world you realize you’re not the best at everything and it sort of humbles you.”

Narcissists often make a good first impression because of strong social skills that make them appear charming, and sometimes even empathetic, but this is usually only a ploy to attract attention, Shrira said. “Once you get to know these people, you realize they’re very self-focused and are always bringing the conversation back to themselves,” he said.

Shrira said he believes narcissism is on the rise partly because of the prominence of the self-esteem movement over the past quarter century. When the movement began in the ‘80s, an improved self-concept was credited with helping students perform better in school and resisting the temptations of premarital sex. But now people are starting to realize that unlimited positive reinforcement may not necessarily be a good thing, he said.

“If all you get is positive feedback as a child and your success is not based on any sort of real accomplishment, you’re not going to be motivated to work hard,” he said.

Seth Rosenthal, a post-doctoral research fellow at the John F. Kennedy School of Government’s Center for Public Leadership at Harvard University, said Shrira’s study “adds to an accumulating body of evidence that narcissists often aren’t playing by the same set of interpersonal ‘rules’ that most people are.”

Source: University of Florida

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