

Narcissism and Conflicts in Teen Romantic Relationships

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Abstract. The conflict resolution strategy of teenagers in romantic relationships plays an important role in psychological topic because it affects emotional development and the stability and satisfaction of intimate relationships. However, discussions about narcissism, conflict styles, and relationship satisfaction are usually presented separately in most current research. There is no systematic integration of them into a unified framework. Based on this academic inefficiency, this review synthesizes the findings of empirical sampling and cross-sectional survey methods and explores how different types of narcissism affect the conflict response of adolescents, and how conflict styles affect relationship satisfaction. It focuses on narcissistic characteristics of maladjustment. It looks at how these characteristics are triggered in specific situations and examines how they lead to destructive conflict styles. Meanwhile, it explores constructive communication tendencies in intimate interactions that are based on appreciation-based narcissism, which is a more adaptive dimension. The results show that maladaptive narcissistic subtypes often trigger destructive conflict responses via situational mechanisms. These responses lower the satisfaction and stability of romantic relationships. In contrast, narcissism based on worship cannot predict these negative results stably. Additionally, the immature emotional regulation ability and highly sensitive self-esteem system of adolescents further strengthen the connection between adaptive narcissism and destructive conflict patterns. In short, this paper proposes an integrated analytical framework that links narcissistic subtypes, conflict patterns and relationship satisfaction. The framework aims to address the problems of fragmentation of existing studies and the scarcity of adolescent samples and provides a new theoretical perspective for understanding the development mechanism of adolescent intimate relationships.

Keywords: Narcissim, conflict styles, romantic relationship satisfactions, young teenagers

1. Introduction

During the process of individuals' socialization, romantic relationships play a vital role in shaping it. While developing self-identification and learning emotional regulation skills, teenagers begin to explore intimate relationships, trust and ways to interact with others. The research of many scholars shows that intimate relationship experiences in adolescence not only affect their emotional development, mental health and social functions, but also are closely related to their relationship

patterns in adulthood. Thus, understanding how teenagers will deal with conflicts in relationships is important to prevent the breakdown of relationships and promote healthy relationships.

Current studies shows that personality has a key impact on love relationships. According to the multi-dimensional narcissism model, narcissism includes several different dimensions, such as boasting, vulnerable, competitive and worshiping, each dimension with significant differences in self-esteem stability, threat sensitivity and interpersonal motivation [1]. Subsequent empirical studies further demonstrate that these differences affect conflict styles through various situational trigger mechanisms. Large narcissists tend to show coercion and domination in the face of their partner's warmth or compromise; while vulnerable narcissists tend to retreat, emotional outbreak or show hostility when they feel criticism or rejection [2,3]. Meanwhile, rivalrous narcissism has been found to be closely associated with persistent hostile communication and controlling behaviors, whereas admiration-based narcissism does not consistently predict negative interactions [4].

At the same time, it is inevitable to deem conflicts as an important part of the composition of romantic relationships. The influence of conflicts comes from the process of finding ways to solve them. Constructive strategies such as cooperation and negotiation tend to be associated with higher satisfaction, while destructive strategies, including hostility, aggression, blame, and avoidance, may undermine relationship quality and stability [5,6]. Thus, during the immaturity process of emotional regulation systems and the high sensitivity of self-identity, which leads young teenagers to reflect overreactions when having conflicts, different dimensions of narcissism are likely to directly influence relationship stability through distinct conflict styles.

However, there are still some existing limitations of current studies. Though recent research has gradually focused on the relationship between narcissism and conflict styles, most of them are still limited to adult samples, which lack attention to young teenagers' development. Furthermore, some studies use overly coarse binary classifications, like constructive vs. destructive or grandiose vs. vulnerable. This ignores the subtle differences between narcissistic subtypes and conflict strategies, thus limiting the accuracy of the theory.

Thus, this review is highly valuable because it systematically integrates cross-situational and cross-cultural empirical evidences. It also sorts out the behavioral characteristics of four narcissism subtypes, such as grandiose, vulnerable, competitive, and admiration-based, when adolescents face romantic conflicts, and clarifies how these characteristics impact relationship quality. In addition, this study aims to construct an integrated framework. It will review methods like experience sampling, structured surveys, and observational studies to reveal how different narcissistic dimensions predict destructive or constructive conflict styles, and how these styles then impact relationship satisfaction and stability. More importantly, this study focuses on addressing the fragmentation limitation of existing literature. It also aims to clarify the mechanism pathway between maladaptive narcissistic subtypes and negative relationship outcomes. In this way, this study can provide a more systematic and clear foundation for understanding the dynamic development of adolescents' romantic relationships. Moreover, this study identifies the potential protective effects of admiration-based narcissism, self-esteem stability, and constructive conflict styles, act as a buffer, offering targeted theoretical references for fostering healthy intimate relationships among adolescents.

2. Narcissism characteristics and conflict styles

2.1. Narcissism characteristics

Narcissism is a pathological personality system composed of multiple interrelated yet distinguishable components, which is not a unidimensional "egocentric" trait [1]. The subtypes of narcissism can be separated into two categories: grandiose narcissism and vulnerable narcissism. The characteristics of the former are overt feelings of superiority, a desire for dominance, a sense of entitlement, and a persistent need for admiration, and tend to involve active self-expansion and status maintenance. The characteristics of the latter are shown in extremely unstable self-esteem, high sensitivity to rejection and criticism, a tendency to experience shame and feelings of inadequacy, and often involves protecting a fragile self-concept through withdrawal, defensiveness, and internalizing distress. Therefore, viewing narcissism as a multidimensional structure rather than a unidimensional continuum of high or low is the theoretical prerequisite for understanding its different manifestations in interpersonal conflicts.

2.2. Narcissistic characteristics as predictors of conflict style differences

This section summarizes the findings regarding how narcissism as a multidimensional personality construct predicts different conflict styles, especially in young people's behaviors. Given the differences in situational triggers, motivational basis and emotional regulation methods in different dimensions of narcissism, they may have a completely different impact on destructive and constructive conflicts.

Roche et al. provided crucial empirical evidence for the relation between narcissism subtypes and interpersonal conflicts [2]. The study utilized a sample of 184 American emerging adults. Pathological Narcissism Inventory (PNI) was used to distinguish between grandiose and vulnerable narcissism. The daily interactions were assessed by a seven-day experience sampling method combined with Specific Behavioral Indicators (SBI). A key contribution of this study is to reveal that the influence of narcissism is not stable or fixed but shows a typical "if-then" situation-personality interaction mode. It has been shown by research that when others are perceived as friendly or enthusiastic, enthusiasm is often not reciprocated by individuals with high narcissistic tendencies; on the contrary, a stronger desire to dominate and control will be exhibited by them, which is defined as active non-reciprocal behavior. This response pattern - with "a friendly response to others as a dominant enhancement" - is completely consistent with the conceptualized coercive and destructive conflict [6]. This finding suggests that in intimate relationships, individuals with grandiose narcissism are more likely to interpret their partners' compromises as opportunities to compete for dominance rather than to repair the relationship.

In contrast, vulnerable narcissists exhibit a markedly different response pattern. The data of Roche et al. clearly show that fragile narcissism itself cannot reliably predict destructive behavior [2]. On the contrary, it will only be activated under certain conditions. One of the conditions is that it appears at the same time as high-level narcissism. Another condition is that the individual thinks that the object of interaction is "indifferent, picky or unsupportive" [2]. Under such threatening conditions, vulnerable narcissists tend to display withdrawal, emotional outbursts, or passive aggression. This "threat trigger" model is highly consistent with the forms of destructive conflict such as retreat and hostility described above. This coincidence further reveals that the interpersonal difficulties of fragile narcissists in intimate relationships stem from their high sensitivity, pointing to rejection, criticism and insecurity in relationships [6].

Cheng further validated this context-dependent mechanism in a sample of Chinese college students [3]. For this experiment, college students from two universities in Changchun and Mudanjiang were selected as participants. A total of 900 questionnaires were distributed, with 795 valid ones recovered (valid response rate: 88.33%). The participants were aged 18-23 (average age: 20.70 years), including 201 male students. 100 participants were randomly chosen for a retest, and 95 valid questionnaires were recovered (30 male students). The study found that narcissism can predict active attack and passive attack behavior. When individuals experience threats, these two conflict reactions are particularly obvious, especially among those with fragile narcissism, their aggression will increase significantly under the threat of relationships [3]. Furthermore, an extremely critical moderating variable, trait self-esteem, was identified by the research [3]. When an individual has low characteristic self-esteem, the connection between narcissism and aggressive behavior will be strengthened; and when an individual has high self-esteem, this connection will be weakened [3]. This finding supports the multidimensional understanding of narcissism. In addition, it also illustrates why vulnerable narcissists are more likely to show destructive responses when they have romantic conflicts. This tendency does not stem from narcissism itself. It actually stems from their unstable sense of self-worth. Self-esteem can be stable. When it is stable, certain narcissistic traits may even cease to aggression. On the contrary, these traits tend to adopt more adaptive strategies.

From a dimensional-structure perspective, rivalrous narcissism refers a higher risk for conflict than other subtypes. Gauglitz et al. used the NARQ to distinguish two types of narcissism: admiration-based and rivalrous. Only rivalrous narcissism consistently predicted negative workplace behaviors like abusive supervision, hostile communication, and punitive interactions. Admiration - based narcissism was largely unrelated to these negative interpersonal acts [4]. This suggests that in intimate relationships, persistent hostility, blame, and controlling behaviors are not caused by "narcissism" as a whole [4]. Instead, they are driven by the rivalrous dimension of narcissism. This dimension is antagonistic and sensitive to threats [4]. These findings can be extended to the love relationship of teenagers, and It can be inferred that people with highly competitive narcissistic tendencies may take the initiative to adopt aggressive strategies. They may even try to dominate, belittle or control their partners even if there is no clear threat. They can protect their psychological state through this way.

After interpreting the findings of Roche, Cheng, and Gauglitz, a thorough understanding of the relationship between narcissism and conflict styles can be developed from a multidimensional perspective [2-4]. First, narcissism does not unilaterally predict destructive conflict. On the contrary, it affects individuals' understanding and response to intimate interaction through its unique sub-dimensionality. To be more specific, grandiose narcissism is more likely to display destructive behavior when others are friendly. For vulnerable narcissists, they may react with withdrawal or hostility when faced with relationship threats. For people with rivalry-based narcissism, they are characterized by a stable aggressive tendency which tends to form continuous negative interaction patterns. Second, narcissism generally lacks a positive correlation with constructive conflict styles. Roche's study found no positive association between narcissism and communal or compromising behaviors, indicating that the core motivations of narcissists—whether self-enhancement or self-defense—are fundamentally incompatible with the requirements of constructive conflict: "focusing on the problem itself and balancing the needs of both parties [2]." Finally, the moderating role of self-esteem suggests that the negative impacts of narcissism are not irreversible; when individuals' sense of self-worth is stable, narcissism does not necessarily lead to destructive conflict responses.

It is inevitable that existing research still has limitations. In this session, most samples are from western universities or organizational cultures, which may amplify the "self-dominant" motivation in individualistic environments and limit the generalizability of results. Moreover, most studies use self-report scales and cross-sectional designs, which may lead to social desirability bias and difficulties in causal inference. Therefore, when applying these findings to adolescents' romantic relationships, full account should be taken of the moderating roles of cultural background, developmental stage, and individual psychological resources.

Thus, this research indicates that narcissism, as a multidimensional construct encompassing grandiose, vulnerable, and rivalrous subtypes, predicts adolescents' destructive conflict styles through specific situational triggering mechanisms, while self-esteem stability and admiration-based narcissism can exert buffering effects on these negative impacts. However, existing studies have limitations in terms of samples and methodologies, and future research should focus on representative adolescent samples and adopt longitudinal and cross-cultural approaches to fill the research gaps.

While existing research provides a good base for understanding how narcissism relates to conflict styles, there are still obvious gaps. First, most studies use college students or adults as participants, and there are few studies with adolescents. Since teenagers are very different from adults in how they develop their sense of self, manage emotions, and experience romantic relationships, it is difficult to directly apply current findings to them. Second, romantic relationships in young teenagers are very dynamic and depend a lot on situations, but most studies only use one-time self-reported surveys. To some extent, these cannot show how narcissism is triggered during real interactions. This review suggests that future research should include more representative groups of teenagers and use long-term studies and real-time experience tracking. This do help researchers that gain deeper insights into how narcissism shapes conflict in real-life situations. What's more, cross-cultural studies are recommended. These studies aim to understand how different components of narcissism manifest and change in teens' close relationships.

Based on the above findings, a core mechanism emerges conflict style. Specifically, narcissistic subtypes affect adolescents' interpersonal outcomes through this pathway. Therefore, the next step is to conduct research examining how different conflict styles influence interpersonal satisfaction.

3. Conflict styles and relationship outcomes

3.1. Conflict styles

Conflict style intertwines within romantic relationships, especially true for teen dating. Teen dating supports identity formation and emotional development in adolescents [5]. In a romantic relationship, teens start to "practice negotiation, emotional regulation, and communication skills", which makes conflict style a strong predictor of relationship satisfaction. There are two branches in conflict style: the destructive conflict style and the constructive conflict style. Destructive conflict styles are described by hostility, coercion, and withdrawal. These characteristics are significantly associated with lower relationship satisfaction among adolescents [6]. Constructive conflict resolution, including negotiation and problem solving, was related to greater relationship closeness and satisfaction in adolescent romantic relationships [5].

3.2. Associations between conflicts and relationship outcomes

Since, different narcissistic traits shape adolescents' conflict strategies. The review tries to understand how conflict styles influence relationship satisfaction. Different narcissistic subtypes lead to distinct relational outcomes. This understanding is essential for clarifying why that happens.

This section will evaluate how conflict style shapes relationship satisfaction in adolescent romantic relationships through analyzing different papers.

Bonache, Gonzalez-Mendez, and Karhe cooperated in conducting a large-scale study of romantic attachment, conflict resolution styles, and teen dating violence victimization [6]. In the study, they tested the correlation between the three factors by measuring how conflict styles correlated with dating violence victimization. The study's population sample consists of adolescents aged 13-18 from eight high schools in Spain. The authors use the ECR-R to measure anxious and avoidant attachment, and the CRSI to measure destructive behavior. It was shown that "anxious attachment was related to both forms of victimization via self-reported conflict engagement and conflict engagement attributed to the partner" [6]. The result leads to a statistically significant correlation between conflict resolution styles and attachment affect teen relationships: teens with high attachment anxiety were more likely to respond to conflict by criticizing, attacking, or losing control, which then led to psychological and physical victimization [6]. Additionally, the study tested how withdrawal attachment coping style makes patterners of the withdrawal style seem to take a larger responsibility for the conflict. These results show that destructive conflict styles both lead to damaging behaviors and form wrong perceptions by acting in harmful ways to their partner and viewing their partners as more hostile [6]. However, this study has a limitation: reliance on self-report measures and a single cultural sample. To increase the generality of the conclusions, further research can focus on cross-cultural participants and longitudinal studies. Despite these constraints, the study provides strong empirical evidence that destructive conflict resolution is a robust predictor of negative relational outcomes.

Another study, which further specifically tested how conflict style and relationship satisfaction in late adolescent couples, provides more insights into this correlation. This study is a two-year observational study that samples from 40 couples, mean age of 17-18 years old [7]. The sample population is recruited from participants in a "revealed differences" task in which each couple discussed their most significant area of disagreement. The study tested the correlation through direct discourse analysis rather than self-reported studies. The discourse analysis is conducted by recoding and transcribing the communications, and coding the communication into different categories: confrontation, negotiation ability, positive affect, minimization, and criticism. The analysis distinguished three patterns of conflict styles: downplaying, integrative, and conflictive [7]. Downplaying is characterized as couples who "hardly allow themselves to admit that a disagreement exists and quickly try to downplay it," whereas Integrative couples were characterized by a "good ability to negotiate their disagreement within an atmosphere of positive affect." Specifically, conflictive couples conduct "the discussion does not lead the couple to new ground," which can even escalate disagreements [7]. The study conducted a three-month follow-up to assess the longevity and quality of the relationships across different conflict styles. Integrative couples overwhelmingly "kept their relationship intact for over the period of the 2 years, whereas nearly all Conflictive couples had dissolved by the three-month follow-up [7]. Although this study has limitations due to a small and non-representative sample, it highlights that constructive conflict behaviors, demonstrated as clarifying disagreements, negotiating mutually acceptable solutions, predict long-term stability. On the other hand, destructive behaviors predict early dissolution [7].

There are other empirical studies which further illustrate the association between conflict styles and relationship outcome. To begin with in Simon and Furman's study, they claimed and proved that adolescents who possessed traits associated with constructive conflict style reported higher relationship satisfactions and fewer breakups [8]. However, declining satisfactions occurs when adolescents use dismissal or avoidance strategies, which are traits of destructive conflict styles in dealing with disagreements [8]. The results from those two empirical studies align with Shulman et al.'s conclusion that integrative conflict strategies support stability [7]. Similarly, in a multinational sample, Seiffge-Krenke demonstrated that constructive conflict style leads to better relationship stability, while avoidant conflict styles were linked to disengagement and dissatisfaction [9]. Bonache et al.'s observation that adolescents who withdraw are more vulnerable to negative relational dynamics, particularly when withdrawal is combined with anxious attachment, further supported these findings [6].

Additional, conflict frequency alone does not predict satisfaction but rather focuses on how people deal with conflicts [10]. Conflicts and differences often occur between some partners. Those partners who show empathy, effective communication and problem-solving ability will give priority to resolving these differences. Despite the frequent conflicts, these partners still give a positive evaluation of their intimate relationship. Nonetheless, some teenagers will use coercive or hostile tactics when dealing with conflicts. These teenagers reported low satisfaction with intimate relationships, and they also thought their relationships were very unstable. This distinction is crucial because it shows that the conflict itself is not harmful [10]. On the contrary, destructive conflict handling will damage the satisfaction and stability of the relationship [10].

Many empirical studies have found some common themes. Constructive conflict styles characterized by consultation, empathetic and open communication are associated with higher intimate relationship satisfaction, emotional intimacy and long-term stability [5,7-10]. Destructive conflict styles, including attack, confrontation, coercion, retreat and understatement, foreshadows unsatisfactory, unstable, and more susceptible to psychological and physical harm [6,8,9]. Moderating factors, such as attachment style, gender, dyadic communication patterns, will influence how conflict behaviors impact relational outcomes. These factors play a role by regulating emotional responses and behavioral adjustments in adolescent intimate relationships.

It is worth noting that adolescence is a critical period for the rapid development of emotional regulation. This developmental feature will amplify the impact of negative conflict behaviors in adolescent intimate relationships. There have been studies that have explored this topic in a variety of methods such as questionnaires and observation methods. The evidence obtained by these different research methods is consistent. The main conclusion is that conflict style is an important predictor of the function of adolescent intimate relationships.

4. Conclusion

This review discusses a key topic that different subtypes of narcissism impact adolescents' conflict-resolution strategies. These strategies, in turn, shape relationship outcomes which are measured by relationship satisfaction. These studies revealed a clear and consistent pattern. Three maladaptive narcissistic subtypes, such as vulnerable, grandiose, and rivalrous narcissism, tend to predict destructive conflict styles. These destructive conflict styles are characterized by withdrawal, hostility, coercive dominance, and heightened reactivity to interpersonal threats. Such styles are associated with reduced relationship satisfaction and increased relationship instability. Admiration-based narcissism is largely unrelated to negative interpersonal behaviors. Under certain conditions, it may co-occur with more cooperative or less defensive responses. However, there is no robust

evidence that it predicts constructive conflict. Any cooperative tendencies observed among adolescents high in admiration-based narcissism appear to depend heavily on emotion-regulation capacity and self-esteem stability—two developmental areas that remain fragile during adolescence.

Future research should conduct longitudinal studies and use multi-method assessments in order to provide more insights into this topic. These approaches will connect narcissistic traits, conflict behavior, and relational outcomes. Based on the findings, practical applications include school-based intervention programs. These programs strengthen emotional regulation and encourage constructive conflict skills. They also help adolescents develop stable self-concepts. These self-concepts buffer defensiveness.

In conclusion, the review builds a framework that links the narcissistic subtype, conflict style and the satisfaction of adolescent romantic relationships. This study broadens understanding of how personality differences influence conflict coping. Additionally, emphasizing the early emotional development is vital. Early emotional development helps maintain healthy and intimate relationships. These relationships are maintained at critical life stages.

Authors contribution

All the authors contributed equally and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

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