

# Gender Differences in the Correlates of Self-Referent Word Use: Authority, Entitlement, and Depressive Symptoms

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**ABSTRACT** Past research shows that self-focused attention is robustly positively related to depression, and women are more likely than men to self-focus in response to depressed mood (e.g., R. Ingram, 1990; S. Nolen-Hoeksema, 1987). The goal of the current study was to further delineate gender differences in the correlates of self-focus as measured through the frequency of spontaneous use of self-referencing words. The frequency of such word use during a life history interview was correlated with self-reports, observations by clinically trained interviewers, and personality judgments by acquaintances. Results indicated that the relationship between self-reference and observations of depressive symptoms was stronger for women than men, and the relationship between self-reference and narcissistic authority and entitlement was stronger for men than for women. Acquaintance ratings supported these correlates. These findings illuminate the importance of using multiple measures and paying attention to gender differences in research on self-focus.

Self-focus has long appeared to be related to depression, but this relationship may be different for women and men. Considerable evidence indicates that self-focused attention is positively related to depressive symptoms within clinical and normal samples (e.g., Ingram,

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Lumry, Cruet, & Sieber, 1987; Ingram & Smith, 1984; see Ingram, 1990, for a review). Other studies indicate that women are more likely than men to self-focus in response to depressed mood (Nolen-Hoeksema, 1987). A recent meta-analysis concluded that it is important for future research to develop reliable new methods to assess self-focused attention—which has usually been measured using self-report scales—and to delineate how the dynamics of self-focus might differ between men and women (Mor & Winquist, 2002).

A few studies have measured self-focus through frequency of self-referent word use, and the findings have not been consistent. One study of an all-female sample found self-referent word use related to depressive symptoms (Rude, Gortner, & Pennebaker, 2004); another study including an equal number of men and women found such word use to be correlated with narcissism<sup>1</sup> (Raskin & Shaw, 1988). This pair of findings raises the possibility that the implications of self-referent word use might be differentially associated with depressive symptoms and narcissism for men and women. The current study examines this possibility along with other correlates of self-referent word use.

### Self-Focused Attention and Depressed Mood

Historically, research on self-focused attention stems largely from theories of self-regulation (Carver & Scheier, 1981; Duval & Wicklund, 1972; Pyszczynski & Greenberg, 1987). These theories propose that when people experience negative life events or fail to meet important goals, particularly events or goals that are closely tied to one's sense of self-worth, they tend to self-focus and self-examine. This response can be a normal and adaptive response that leads to revised strategies and productive changes in behavior, if it does not go on too long. However, sustained nonproductive self-focus can lead to, exacerbate, and prolong depression.<sup>2</sup>

1. None of the variables in this study showed significant mean differences between men and women, and a partial correlation between self-reference and narcissism controlling for gender did not substantially change the correlation between self-reference and narcissism. However, the article did not report a direct statistical test of the difference in magnitude of correlations between self-focus and narcissism across gender.

2. The theories by Duval and Wicklund (1972) and by Carver and Scheier (1981) are intended to explain the relationship between self-focus and negative affect, whereas Pyszczynski and Greenberg's (1987) theory is intended to specifically explain the relationship between self-focus and major depression. However, most

Several studies support these theories. In one common paradigm, self-focus is measured through a self-report questionnaire, usually the Private Self-Consciousness Subscale, and these scores are correlated with self-ratings of depression. The Private Self-Consciousness Scale (PSCS; Fenigstein, Scheier, & Buss, 1975) measures individual differences in the tendency to direct attention toward one's own thoughts and feelings and includes items such as "I'm always trying to figure myself out" and "I'm alert to changes in my mood." In another research paradigm, self-focus is induced and the effect on self-reported depressed mood is observed. Such inductions include seating participants in front of a mirror (Gibbons et al., 1985) and asking them to write an essay using the words "I" and "me" (Pyszczynski, Holt, & Greenberg, 1987). Both paradigms show a consistent positive relationship between self-focus and self-reported depression or negative affect in clinical and normal samples (Ingram, 1990).

Further research suggests that women are more likely than men to ruminatively self-focus in response to depressed mood (Butler & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1994), and the gender difference in rumination mediates gender differences in depression (Nolen-Hoeksema & Jackson, 2001). However, a nonzero correlation between self-focus and negative affect is consistently found among men, and this relationship has received little attention. Mor and Winquist (2002) suggested that it is important to delineate how self-focused men might differ from self-focused women and Ingram, Cruet, Johnson, and Wisnicki (1988) further suggested that excessive self-focused attention might be related to different vulnerabilities across gender.

It is not clear to what self-focus is specifically related among men, beyond negative affect, because past studies have been limited in two important ways. First, Thomsen (2006) noted that most past studies have correlated self-focus with *broad* measures of depression and negative affect. Detecting the specific maladaptive patterns involved in self-focus for men might require correlating self-focus with a wider variety of more fine-grained characteristics. Second, existing studies have mostly relied on *self-reports* of depression and negative affect. Descriptions of individuals who vary in self-focus by acquaintances who know those individuals well and/or by trained professionals might provide information above and beyond what

researchers recognize all three theories in discussions of self-focus and depression because negative affect is highly correlated with depression.

can be gathered through self-report. Another concern involves the measurement of self-focused attention. Mor and Winquist (2002) observed that too much research in this area relies solely on the Private Self-Consciousness Scale and other questionnaire methods of sometimes low reliability and that it would be useful to develop different means for measuring self-focused attention.

### Self-Referent Word Use and Depressed Mood

A potential alternative method for measuring self-focused attention involves counting the number of self-referencing words (e.g., *I* and *me*) that people spontaneously use in their writing or speech. Fast and Funder (2008) recently reported that word use is a strong marker of personality characteristics, and Weintraub (1981) specifically suggested that the frequency with which individuals self refer might indicate the degree to which they are self-focused. From a psycholinguistic perspective, individuals produce language by conceptualizing an idea to be expressed, formulating a linguistic plan, and articulating the plan (Carroll, 1999). Therefore, it is plausible to infer that persistent thoughts—in any domain—might influence the ongoing process of planning speech and choosing specific words to articulate one's ideas. In the present context, the end result might be an association between greater self-focus and greater spontaneous use of self-referencing words.

A possible shortcoming of measuring self-focus through self-referent word use is that the method captures a broad version of the construct. Self-report and experimental induction allow researchers to concentrate on specific aspects of self-focus (e.g., attention to positive vs. negative self-aspects) and these aspects have been found to be differentially related to depressed mood and negative affect (Mor & Winquist, 2002). However, some advantages of self-referent word use are that it provides a new way to assess self-focus beyond the methods commonly used in past research, and this method has been shown to have good reliability because individual differences in self-referencing word use are remarkably consistent across time and context. Pennebaker and King (1999) gathered daily diaries written on 18 separate days by patients in treatment and gathered 10 essays on different topics written by students over a 2-week period. The alpha reliability for self-referencing word use across these language samples was .86 and .61, respectively. Also, Mehl (2004) obtained spoken samples over 10 days across a variety of contexts using the

electronically activated recorder (EAR) and the alpha reliability for self-reference was .71.

Measuring self-focus through word use can also address limitations of experimental and self-report methods that have received relatively little attention. Research that uses experimental manipulation cannot speak to whether or not those who are more depressed actually manifest a higher level of self-focus in real life. Perhaps asking depressed individuals to think deeply about themselves makes them feel worse in the laboratory, but it is uncertain whether they spontaneously engage in such rumination on their own. In contrast, research that uses self-report is limited to the extent that people may be unable and/or unwilling to introspectively assess how self-focused they really are. Individuals higher in depression have been particularly observed to exhibit a wide range of cognitive biases (Mineka, Rafaeli-Mor, & Yovel, 2003), and because self-focus has a robust relationship with depression, self-reports of self-focus may be less than accurate. Counting the frequency with which individuals self refer in spontaneous speech allows self-focus to be examined through a nonmanipulated subtle behavioral indicator and bypasses potential problems of self-report.

Stirman and Pennebaker (2001) found that poets who successfully completed suicide used significantly more self-references in their poems than poets who died of natural causes. In another study, female college students wrote for 20 minutes about their “deepest thoughts and feelings about coming to college” and the essays were computer analyzed for frequency of self-references (Rude et al., 2004). Results indicated that those who were currently depressed used significantly more self-references than those who had never been depressed. Weintraub (1981) also found that when hospitalized depressed patients and a control group spoke uninterrupted for 10 minutes about whatever they wanted, depressed patients used the word “I” significantly more frequently than controls. Finally, Mehl (2006) used the electronically activated recorder (EAR: Mehl, Pennebaker, Crow, Dabbs, & Price, 2001) to sample people’s natural word use over 2 days and found that those who used more self-references were rated higher in depression by judges who listened to their EAR recordings.

### **Self-Referent Word Use and Narcissism**

Self-reference has also been studied in relation to a construct that seems at odds with depression. In a sample including equal numbers

of men and women, Raskin and Shaw (1988) found that individuals who used more self-references in monologues were higher in total self-reported narcissism scores. Although this finding raises the possibility that self-referent word use lacks discriminative power and may be correlated with any construct that involves excessive self-focus, it is also possible that there are gender differences in the correlates of self-reference. Perhaps self-reference by women is more strongly related to depressed mood whereas self-reference by men is more strongly related to narcissism. Most of the studies mentioned did not assess gender differences in the correlates of self-referent word use, nor did Raskin and Shaw; so it is difficult to evaluate this possibility on the basis of presently available evidence.

It does seem reasonable to suspect that the correlates of self-referent word use might differ across gender. As previously mentioned, it is well established that self-focused rumination mediates the gender difference in depression. This suggests that self-reference should be more strongly related to depressed mood for women than men. In contrast, Morf and Rhodewalt (2001) proposed a theory of narcissism that suggests that narcissists constantly engage in self-regulation to maintain their grandiose self-views. Narcissists vigilantly search the environment for self-relevant information and “find endlessly inventive means of casting feedback and social information in ways that reinforce their grandiose self” (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001, p. 185). This description implies that narcissists are extremely self-focused and that self-reference might be positively related to narcissism.

Morf and Rhodewalt (2001) further observed that men score higher in narcissism than women and suggest that narcissistic behaviors are more socially acceptable for men than for women. If narcissism is positively related to self-reference and men are higher in narcissism and narcissistic behaviors than women, it seems possible that self-reference would be more strongly related to narcissism for men than women. This possibility might seem at odds with the previously mentioned consistent nonzero correlation between self-focus and negative affect for men because narcissism is positively correlated with self-esteem (Emmons, 1984) and self-esteem is associated with higher positive affect (Wood, Heimpel, & Michela, 2003). However, studies show that narcissists have higher day-to-day fluctuations in self-esteem and higher fluctuations in daily positive and negative affect than those lower in narcissism (Rhodewalt, Madrian, & Cheney, 1998, and Emmons, 1987, respectively).

### Current Study

The goal of the current study is to examine the possibility that self-reference by women is more strongly related to depressive symptoms, whereas self-reference by men is more strongly related to narcissism. Self-referent word use will be measured from life history interviews and correlated with self-reported and professionally observed depressive symptoms, self-reports of narcissism, and ratings by the self and by close acquaintances along 100 specific personality characteristics. These correlations will be examined for gender differences.

### METHOD

Data for the current study were gathered as part of a larger research project, the Riverside Accuracy Project–Phase II (RAP-II). RAP-II was designed to examine the factors involved in accurate personality judgment. The project involved several sessions and, because some participants missed one or more of these sessions, the *n* for particular analyses varies. Many papers have come out of the RAP-II data set, and the analyses of the current study do not overlap with previous projects (Fast & Funder, 2008; Fast, Reimer, & Funder, 2008; Letzring, Block, & Funder, 2005; Letzring, Wells, & Funder, 2006; Nave, Sherman, & Funder, 2008; Vazire & Funder, 2006; Wagerman & Funder, 2007) or with future planned projects.

#### *Participants*

The current study used data from 181 (90 women, 91 men) undergraduate target participants from the University of California, Riverside. Target participants were recruited through the placement of flyers throughout the campus and announcements made in psychology courses. Each participant was paid \$10/hr to participate and could earn up to \$100 if he or she showed up for every session. The ethnic breakdown for targets is as follows: 41% Asian, 22% Hispanic, 14% Caucasian, 12% African American, and 11% other or not specified.

#### *Acquaintances*

Each target participant was asked to provide contact information for two acquaintances who knew him or her well and were locally available. The acquaintances (182 women, 148 men) were then contacted by project staff and scheduled to visit the laboratory to provide personality judgments of the target participants with whom they were acquainted. The acquaintances were paid \$10/hr for their participation. The average length of

acquaintanceship was 34 months ( $SD = 43$  months, range = 1–407 months). Eighty-four percent of acquaintances were nonromantic friends, 10% were romantic partners, 2% were family members, 2% were friends from work, and 2% other/not specified.

### *Overview of Procedures*

Participants were paid to visit the laboratory on four separate occasions and to complete take-home packets. Only the laboratory visits and materials relevant to the current study are reviewed. During the first session, targets were given a take-home packet that consisted of several personality questionnaires, and they were asked for the names and contact information of two local acquaintances (as described above). In the final visit, targets were interviewed by a clinically trained psychologist for approximately 1 hr.

### *Measures*

*The California Adult Q-set.* The California Adult Q-set (CAQ; Block, 1961, as modified for use by nonprofessionals by Bem & Funder, 1978) consists of 100 items that describe a broad range of personality characteristics (e.g., “Behaves in a giving way toward others,” “Is introspective and concerned with self as an object,” and “Is calm, relaxed in manner”). The self and acquaintances rated each Q-item separately on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*extremely uncharacteristic*) to 9 (*extremely characteristic*). Ratings from two acquaintances were gathered when possible. One hundred fifty-four of the target participants were rated by two acquaintances, 22 targets were described by one acquaintance, and 5 targets had no acquaintances. A composite score was created for targets with two acquaintances by averaging the two ratings for each CAQ item. The average interrater correlation per item is intraclass  $r = .29$  ( $SD = .15$ ).

*The Beck Depression Inventory–II.* The Beck Depression Inventory–II (BDI-II; Beck, Steer, & Brown, 1996) is a 21-item self-report scale that updates a widely used instrument for measuring the severity of depression (BDI: Beck, Ward, Mendelson, Mock, & Erbaugh, 1961). Items are responded to using a 4-point scale ranging from 0 to 3 (e.g., *Sadness*: “I do not feel sad” (0), “I feel sad much of the time” (1), “I am sad all the time” (2), or “I am so sad or unhappy that I can’t stand it” (3)). BDI-II scores are calculated by summing the ratings on all 21 items. The average BDI-II score in our sample was 10.93 ( $SD = 8.61$ ), scores ranged from 0 to 37, and the full scale coefficient alpha was .89. This is comparable to the mean and alpha coefficient obtained in Beck et al.’s (1996) Canadian college sample ( $M = 12.56$ ,  $SD = 9.93$ , and  $\alpha = .93$ ).



*The Brief Psychiatric Rating Scale.* The Brief Psychiatric Rating Scale (BPRS; Overall & Gorham, 1962) was developed for quick assessment of important psychopathological symptoms by clinical psychologists. It consists of 24 relatively independent symptoms identified through factor analyses of large sets of items (e.g., Lorr, Jenkins, & Holsopple, 1953; Lorr, McNair, Klett, & Lasky, 1960). Examples of symptoms are depressed mood, grandiosity, suspiciousness, disorientation, and self-neglect. In the current study, symptoms were rated by the clinically trained interviewer as either *present to a notable degree* (1) or *not present* (0). Only symptoms relevant to depression were analyzed herein. Based on the *DSM-IV* criteria for major depressive episode and dysthymic disorder (the symptoms for which are largely overlapping), the following symptoms were included in analyses: Depressed mood (“mood—sadness, unhappiness, anhedonia (no pleasure) and cognitions”), anxiety (“reported apprehension, tension, fear, panic, or worry”), and somatic concern (“degree of concern over present bodily health”).

*The Narcissistic Personality Inventory.* The Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Terry, 1988) was developed using the *DSM-III* criteria for narcissistic personality disorder. For each of 40 items, participants are asked to indicate which of two attitudes they most agree with (e.g., “I try not to show off” vs. “I will usually show off if I get the chance”). The NPI includes a total scale score and seven subscales delineating various aspects of narcissism. The subscales are labeled Authority (desire for power and influence), Self-sufficiency (beliefs in self-competence), Superiority (beliefs that one is superior to others), Exhibitionism (desire to be the center of attention), Exploitativeness (belief in one’s ability to manipulate others), Vanity (obsession with one’s body), and Entitlement (belief that one deserves things from the world). The alpha reliability coefficient for the total scale was .84 and for each of the subscales was Authority (.75), Self-sufficiency (.52), Superiority (.61), Exhibitionism (.56), Exploitativeness (.64), Vanity (.68), and Entitlement (.51). These are consistent with the alphas found by Raskin and Terry, which ranged from .73 to .50 for the subscales and was .83 for the total scale.

### *Life History Interviews*

Each target individually participated in a 1-hr life history interview that was conducted by one of four clinically trained and licensed psychologists (e.g., MSW, MA in counseling, or PhD in clinical psychology). These psychologists had experience working with clients of the same age as our college student sample. To diminish demand characteristics from the knowledge that they were seeing a clinical psychologist, participants were

told that they would be interviewed by a “professionally trained interviewer.” The interviews were videotaped with consent of the participants.

The clinicians conducted a semistructured interview that was adapted from a protocol used for many years by the Institute of Personality Assessment and Research (IPAR; Craik et al., 2002). Interview topics in the current study were adapted to better apply to college students and to capture a broad range of information without explicitly asking about risky behaviors and sensitive topics. All participants were asked the same questions in the same order; however, there was time to linger on a topic or diverge from predetermined topics if the participants initiated further conversation. Each interview began with the question, “Tell me something about yourself.” Subsequent topics included college and academic experiences, future plans, interpersonal relationships, and childhood and family history. Each interview was concluded by asking participants to “Describe a defining event in your life that had a significant impact on or changed your life in some way.”

### *Textual Analysis*

Each target’s life history interview was transcribed and analyzed separately after deleting everything the interviewer said. The transcripts were analyzed using the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count program (LIWC; Pennebaker, Francis, & Booth 2001). LIWC analyzes language samples on a word-by-word basis. For each target, LIWC counted the number of self-referencing words used in his/her language sample. The following words were counted as self-references: *I, I’d, I’ll, I’m, I’ve, me, mine, my, and myself*. Self-reference scores were expressed as percentages, or a proportion of words that match the self-reference word category to the total number of words used. For example, if a target used 10 self-references and spoke a total of 100 words, that target’s score would be 10% or .10.<sup>3</sup>

## **RESULTS**

### *Descriptive Statistics*

Women used an average of 605 ( $SD = 203$ ) self-references throughout the life history interview and men used an average of 530

3. To determine the degree to which self-references were used consistently across the interview, each participant’s language sample was split into five segments and the raw number of self-references used in each segment was then counted and correlated. The average correlation between the number of self-references used across the five segments was  $r = .81$  ( $R = .96$ ).

( $SD = 193$ ). Women used significantly more self-references than men,  $t(181) = 2.58$ ,  $p = .01$ ,  $r = .19$ , suggesting that women are higher in self-focus than men. Self-referencing word use ranged from 234 to 1,231 words for women and from 132 to 1,210 words for men. The broad range of number of self-references used in the life history interview is impressive given that the vast majority of questions in the interview were about the self. One might have expected this to restrict the range of self-reference, but that does not appear to have been the case. Also, considering that the interview was only about 60 min long, the highest scoring individuals were using approximately one self-reference every 3 s!

The following is a quote taken from the interview of the woman who used the highest proportion of self-references in our sample: "I'm so emotional . . . every little thing hurts my feelings . . . sometimes I just, I think I would be better off if I was dead . . . when you're dead you have no feelings, no emotions." Next is a quote from the interview of the man who used the highest proportion of self-references: "People sometimes think . . . you have a moody personality or you are very volatile, but it's not like that. I am very transparent . . . if I feel angry right now, I'll just show it." These quotes are interesting because the interviews were selected based solely on the proportion of self-references used and both participants are clearly talking about interpersonal difficulties—but of a different kind.

### *Research Questions*

To examine the relationship between self-referent word use and self-reported depressive symptoms for women and men, we correlated each participant's self-reference score with his/her self-ratings on the BDI. The correlation for women was  $r = .23$ ,  $p = .03$  and the correlation for men was  $r = .17$ ,  $p = .10$ . Contrary to our expectation, the correlation between self-referencing word use and self-reported depression was not significantly larger for women than men ( $p = .32$ ).<sup>4</sup> Moving beyond self-report to an examination of observed

4. All significance tests of the difference between correlations in the current study were calculated using the meta-analytic formula for testing the difference between correlations provided by Rosenthal and Rosnow (1991). For these analyses,  $p$  values are one-tailed.

depressive symptoms, we correlated each participant's self-reference score with ratings of him/her on the Brief Psychiatric Rating Scale provided by the clinical psychologist who conducted the life history interview. The correlations between self-reference and depressive, anxious, and somatic symptoms for women were  $r = .36$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $r = .22$ ,  $p = .04$ , and  $r = .21$ ,  $p = .05$ , respectively, whereas the correlations with these symptoms were near 0 for men,  $r = -.04$ ,  $p = .71$ ,  $r = .03$ ,  $p = .78$ , and  $r = .03$ ,  $p = .78$ , respectively. Consistent with our expectation, the correlations between observed symptoms and use of self-references were significantly larger for women than men with respect to depressive ( $p < .01$ ) and anxious ( $p = .10$ ) symptoms and approached significance for somatic symptoms ( $p = .12$ ).

To examine the relationship between self-referent word use and narcissism, we correlated each participant's self-reference score with his/her scores on the Narcissistic Personality Inventory, and the results are displayed in Table 1. Although self-referent word use was not significantly correlated with full-scale narcissism scores, revealing correlates with some of the subscales emerged. Men who self-referred more frequently rated themselves significantly higher on authority and entitlement, suggesting that they desire power and influence and believe that the world owes them something, respectively. Unexpectedly, they also rated themselves significantly lower on self-sufficiency, suggesting that they have a lower sense of self-competence. In contrast and unexpectedly, women who frequently self-referred rated themselves significantly higher on exhibitionism, suggesting that they enjoy being the center of attention, and also rated themselves significantly lower on self-sufficiency.

The correlation between use of self-references and authority was significantly larger for men than women ( $p = .03$ ), the correlation with entitlement was marginally significantly larger for men than women ( $p = .09$ ), and none of the other significant correlations with the NPI subscales were significantly different across gender. However, we expected gender differences in correlations with total narcissism scores rather than the subscales. Bonferroni adjustments indicate that each test must be significant at  $p = .03$  to maintain an overall alpha of .10. According to this criterion, the gender difference in the correlation between self-reference and authority is marginally significant, and the gender difference in the correlation between self-referencing and entitlement is not significant.

**Table 1**  
Correlations Between Self-Referencing Word Use and Narcissism

	Women	Men
Total Narcissism	.02	.11
Authority	−.06	.21*
Self-Sufficiency	−.19 <sup>†</sup>	−.31**
Superiority	.01	.04
Exhibitionism	.20 <sup>†</sup>	.13
Exploitativeness	.08	.11
Vanity	.16	.09
Entitlement	−.01	.19 <sup>†</sup>

\*\* $p \leq .01$ . \* $p \leq .05$ . <sup>†</sup> $p \leq .10$ .

Finally, we correlated self and acquaintance ratings of the CAQ with self-referent word use for men and women. To examine the possibility that the pattern of CAQ correlates is dissimilar across gender, we correlated women’s self-reference scores with their self-ratings on the 100 CAQ items, creating a column of 100 correlations for women. We also correlated men’s self-reference scores with their self-ratings on the 100 CAQ items, creating a column of 100 correlations for men. We then correlated the two columns, and this “vector correlation” provides an index of the degree to which the pattern of self-reference correlates is similar across gender. The vector correlation was  $r = .12$ . This procedure was repeated using acquaintance composite ratings of the 100 CAQ items and the vector correlation was  $r = -.07$ . Previous research suggests that vector correlations lower than  $r = .25$  indicate a noteworthy degree of dissimilarity in correlate patterns (Fast & Funder, 2008), and, for this reason, the personality correlates of self-referent word use for men and women will be reported separately.

In the forthcoming analyses, self-referent word use will be correlated with the 100 CAQ items four times (among women and men, and with self-reports and acquaintance ratings). The large number of correlations computed raises a concern with Type I error. In response, we employed a resampling procedure to determine the exact number of correlations that would be expected by chance (Edgington, 1995; Yu, 2003). We repeated permutation tests without replacement at alpha level .10—the criterion for inclusion in the tables—over 10,000 iterations for each of the four self-reference  $\times$  CAQ

combinations, allowing empirical sampling distributions to be derived. Results indicate that the probability of observing the 30 correlations in Table 2 by chance is  $p < .01$ ; the probability of observing the 12 correlations in Table 3 by chance is  $p = .20$ ; the probability of observing the 17 correlations in Table 4 by chance is  $p = .04$ ; and the probability of observing the 11 correlations in Table 5 by chance is  $p = .29$ . This suggests that the correlations in Tables 3 and 5 should be interpreted with an extra degree of caution.

Beginning with the analyses for women, Tables 2 and 3 display the correlates between self-referent word use and CAQ self and acquaintance ratings. As expected, women who used relatively more self-references were more likely to describe themselves as higher in depressive characteristics. They described themselves as higher in depressed mood (e.g., feels a lack of personal meaning in life and is not cheerful), negative affect (e.g., anxiety and tension find outlet in bodily symptoms), insecurity (e.g., is vulnerable to real or fancied threat and compares self to others), and negativity toward others (e.g., expresses hostile feelings directly and does not behave in a sympathetic or considerate manner), and lower in self-competence (e.g., is self-defeating and does not have a high aspiration level for self).<sup>5</sup> Similar to how they describe themselves (the vector correlation between self and acquaintance CAQ personality correlates is  $r = .38$ ), acquaintances described frequently self-referencing women as higher in insecurity (e.g., has a brittle ego defense system) and self-focus (e.g., is introspective and concerned with the self as an object and tends to ruminate), and lower in self-competence (e.g., reluctant to commit self, gives up and withdraws with frustration, and is self-defeating).

Tables 4 and 5 display the correlates between self-referent word use and CAQ self and acquaintance ratings among men (the vector correlation between self and acquaintance CAQ personality correlates is  $r = .32$ ). Men who used relatively more self-references were more likely to describe themselves as higher in social preoccupation and suspiciousness (e.g., evaluates the motivation of others, aware of impression made on others, distrustful of people in general) yet higher in social pleasantness (e.g., facially and/or gesturally expressive, respond to humor, and turned to for advice and reassurance). They also described themselves as higher in self-focus (e.g., tends to ruminate and is introspective and concerned with the self as an ob-

5. Q-item content is abbreviated.

**Table 2**  
**Correlations Between Self-Referencing Word Use and Female CAQ**  
**Self-Personality Ratings**

No.	Q-item description	Female
Positive correlations		
10	Anxiety and tension find outlet in bodily symptoms	.35**
94	Expresses hostile feelings directly	.31**
22	Feels a lack of personal meaning in life	.28**
55	Is self-defeating	.26**
78	Feels cheated and victimized by life	.24*
73	Perceives different contexts in sexual terms	.23*
47	Has a readiness to feel guilt	.22*
82	Has fluctuating moods	.20 <sup>†</sup>
27	Shows condescending behavior with others	.18 <sup>†</sup>
40	Is vulnerable to real or fancied threat	.18 <sup>†</sup>
89	Compares self to others	.18 <sup>†</sup>
Negative correlations		
70	Behaves in an ethically consistent manner	-.36**
84	Is cheerful	-.33**
71	Has a high aspiration level for self	-.31**
24	Prides self on being "objective," rational	-.30**
26	Is productive	-.30**
28	Arouses liking and acceptance	-.29**
29	Is turned to for advice and reassurance	-.29**
63	Judges self and others in conventional terms	-.29**
17	Behaves in a sympathetic or considerate manner	-.24*
8	Appears to have a high degree of intellectual capacity	-.23*
74	Subjectively unaware of self-concern	-.23*
2	Genuinely dependable and responsible	-.22*
57	An interesting, arresting person	-.21*
5	Behaves in a giving toward others	-.20 <sup>†</sup>
51	Genuinely values intellectual matters	-.20 <sup>†</sup>
96	Values own independence and autonomy	-.19 <sup>†</sup>
54	Emphasizes being with others	-.18 <sup>†</sup>
64	Socially perceptive of a wide range of interpersonal cues	-.18 <sup>†</sup>
92	Has social poise and presence; socially at ease	-.18 <sup>†</sup>

*Note.* CAQ item content is abbreviated.

\*\* $p \leq .01$ . \* $p \leq .05$ . <sup>†</sup> $p \leq .10$ .

**Table 3**  
**Correlations Between Self-Referencing Word Use and Female CAQ**  
**Acquaintance Personality Ratings**

No.	Q-item description	Female
Positive correlations		
42	Reluctant to commit self; delays or avoids action	.32**
16	Is introspective and concerned with the self as an object	.26**
30	Gives up and withdraws with frustration	.26**
55	Is self-defeating	.24*
45	Has a brittle ego-defense system	.19 <sup>†</sup>
79	Tends to ruminate; preoccupying thoughts	.19 <sup>†</sup>
43	Is facially and/or gesturally expressive	.18 <sup>†</sup>
Negative correlations		
100	Does not vary roles	-.35**
74	Subjectively unaware of self-concern	-.25*
26	Is productive	-.22*
7	Favors conservative values	-.21*
84	Is cheerful	-.20 <sup>†</sup>

*Note.* CAQ item content is abbreviated.

\*\* $p \leq .01$ . \* $p \leq .05$ . <sup>†</sup> $p \leq .10$ .

ject) and negative affect (e.g., has a readiness to feel guilt, basically anxious, and feel cheated and victimized by life). In contrast, acquaintances were more likely to describe men who self-referred more frequently as relatively volatile (e.g., overreactive to minor frustrations, unpredictable and changeable in attitudes/behavior, experiencing fluctuating moods, and feeling hostility toward others) and higher in the need for power (e.g., power oriented and shows condescending behavior with others).

## DISCUSSION

The main goal of the current study was to examine the possibility that self-reference by women is more strongly related to depressed mood than is self-reference by men, whereas self-reference by men is more strongly related to narcissism than is self-reference by women. Results largely supported this conjecture in several ways, if not quite all. Among women, the frequency of self-referent word use was significantly positively correlated with self-reported and professionally



**Table 4**  
Correlations Between Self-Referencing Word Use and Male CAQ  
Self-Personality Ratings

No.	Q-item description	Male
Positive correlations		
44	Evaluates the motivation of others	.35**
79	Tends to ruminate; preoccupying thoughts	.32**
4	Is talkative	.27**
41	Is moralistic	.27**
43	Is facially and/or gesturally expressive	.24*
47	Has a readiness to feel guilt	.24*
16	Is introspective and concerned with the self as an object	.23*
32	Aware of impression made on others	.23*
1	Is critical, skeptical, not easily impressed	.22*
49	Is distrustful of people in general	.21*
68	Is basically anxious	.21*
78	Feels cheated and victimized by life	.21*
56	Responds to humor	.20 <sup>†</sup>
29	Is turned to for advice and reassurance	.19 <sup>†</sup>
82	Has fluctuating moods	.19 <sup>†</sup>
34	Overreactive to minor frustrations	.18 <sup>†</sup>
Negative correlations		
74	Subjectively unaware of self-concern	-.19 <sup>†</sup>

*Note.* CAQ item content is abbreviated.

\*\* $p \leq .01$ . \* $p \leq .05$ . <sup>†</sup> $p \leq .10$ .

observed depressive symptoms, and the correlations between self-reference and observed depressive symptoms were significantly stronger for women than men. Frequently self-referencing women also described themselves on the CAQ as higher in depressed mood, negative affect, insecurity, and negativity toward others and lower in self-competence, and their acquaintances described them as higher in insecurity and self-focus and lower in self-competence. These are correlates of depressive symptoms commonly found among women in college samples (Furr & Funder, 1998).

Frequent self-reference by women was also significantly positively correlated with NPI exhibitionism and negatively correlated with self-sufficiency. Although these correlations were unexpected, the negative correlation with self-sufficiency makes sense given that frequently self-

**Table 5**  
**Correlations Between Self-Referencing Word Use and Male CAQ**  
**Acquaintance Personality Ratings**

No.	Q-item description	Male
Positive correlations		
34	Overreactive to minor frustrations	.24*
38	Has hostility toward others	.24*
52	Behaves in an assertive fashion	.24*
91	Is power oriented; values power in self and others	.22*
4	Is talkative	.21*
50	Is unpredictable and changeable in attitudes/behavior	.21*
82	Has fluctuating moods	.21*
99	Is self-dramatizing; histrionic	.20 <sup>†</sup>
27	Shows condescending behavior with others	.18 <sup>†</sup>
Negative correlations		
97	Is emotionally bland; has flattened affect	– .24*
33	Is calm, relaxed in manner	– .20 <sup>†</sup>

*Note.* CAQ item content is abbreviated.

\* $p \leq .05$ . <sup>†</sup> $p \leq .10$ .

referencing women described themselves and were described by their acquaintances as lower in self-competence. Perhaps women who used more self-references were higher in exhibitionism because they seek attention and social support for their depressive symptoms by talking about themselves. Coyne (1976) suggested that depressed women have a constant need for attention and constantly report depressive symptoms, and the toll that this takes on their interpersonal relationships leads to social rejection, which further exacerbates depression.

In contrast, frequently self-referencing men described themselves as higher in social preoccupation, self-focus, need for power, entitlement, depression, and negative affect and lower in self-sufficiency. Their acquaintances described them as volatile and high in the need for power. These findings support a key tenet of Morf and Rhodewalt's (2001) theory of narcissism. They argue that narcissists enter social interactions with the purpose of finding self-relevant information to validate their self views. The correlations with social preoccupation and self-focus suggest that frequently self-referencing men closely monitor the social environment and perhaps search for self-relevant information. Moreover, because frequently self-referencing

men were found to be higher in the need for power, they may specifically search for information that is relevant to their power in contrast to others. Finally, frequently self-referencing men rated themselves lower in self-sufficiency, suggesting doubts that they are capable of achieving the power that they desire and believe they deserve. Perhaps this is one reason why frequently self-referencing men are vulnerable to depression and negative affect and their acquaintances view them as volatile. This is consistent with previous research that shows that narcissists have higher fluctuations in self-esteem (Rhodewalt et al., 1998) and negative affect (Emmons, 1987) than those lower in narcissism.

### *Limitations*

Several limitations in the present research should be acknowledged. The first limitation concerns Type I error. The gender differences in the correlation between self-reference and entitlement were not significant after Bonferroni adjustments, and the permutation tests suggest that the number of correlations obtained between self-referent word use and acquaintance-rated CAQ items for both genders could have occurred by chance at a probability level that is higher than traditional, highly conservative cutoffs. Replication of the findings in future studies would be highly desirable.

However, the permutation tests we employed only estimate the *number* of correlations expected by chance and do not take into account the *nature* of the CAQ correlates. For example, the correlations between male self-reference scores and acquaintance CAQ ratings are not haphazard; the specific items that correlate with male self-reference are items that appear specifically related to narcissism. Raskin and Terry (1988) found that one of the strongest CAQ correlates of the NPI authority scale was "Behaves in an assertive fashion" and one of the strongest CAQ correlates of the NPI entitlement scale was "Is power oriented." Both of these items appear in acquaintance correlates of self-reference by men, and these correlates are supported by the correlations between self-reference scores and the NPI subscales. Similarly, the specific CAQ items that correlate with frequency of self-reference among women in Table 3 are items that appear specifically related to depression, are supported by the correlates between self-reference among women and their self-ratings on the CAQ, by the self-reference correlates of the BDI scales, and by the correlates with observations by clinically trained observers.

Another limitation of the current study concerns the ratings of depressive symptoms by clinical psychologists. Although the clinicians had a minimum of a master's degree, were licensed therapists, and had experience counseling individuals similar in age to those of our sample, we did not provide additional training in the use of the Brief Psychiatric Rating Scale and we could not evaluate reliability because each participant was rated by a single clinician. In a similar vein, interrater agreement between acquaintance ratings on the CAQ items was lower than what might be desired. However, reliability is relevant to the extent that it puts a ceiling on validity, and the results of the current study suggest that clinician and acquaintance ratings evidenced a reasonable degree of validity; they correlated with self-reference in a sensible manner.

A final limitation concerns the degree to which the results of the current study generalize to the broader literature on self-focused attention. There is a subtle but important difference between asking individuals to rate themselves on items that indicate self-focused attention and counting the number of times that individuals self-refer. The former measures the degree to which an individual explicitly perceives him/herself as self-focused, whereas the latter measures the degree to which an individual brings attention to him/herself in language, of which people may or may not be aware. A ripe question for future research involves delineating how these two methods might capture different kinds of self-focus.

### *Implications*

The current findings have several implications for research on self-focused attention. First, they illuminate the importance of using constructs beyond depression and negative affect and constructs that are specific rather than global to detect gender differences in the correlates of self-focus. By using measures of depression, facets of narcissism, and 100 fine-grained characteristics of personality, the current study supported previous findings that highly self-focused women are higher in depressive symptoms (Butler & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1994; Nolen-Hoeksema & Jackson, 2001); however, we also found that highly self-focused men are higher in narcissistic authority and entitlement. The current results also emphasize the importance of using methods that go beyond self-report. In particular, the correlates of male self-referent word use with acquaintance reports and professional observations added information beyond what was

gained through self-report. Men who frequently self-referred described themselves as higher in negative affect, whereas clinically trained interviewers did not view them as higher in depression, and their acquaintances described them as higher in a variety of negative characteristics that were not apparent through self-report (e.g., over-reactive, hostile, and unpredictable). In short, highly self-focused men may hold different views of themselves compared to how they are viewed by others.

Future research would also benefit from examining the possibility that men and women characteristically engage in different kinds of self-focused attention. It is already well established that women are more likely than men to ruminatively self-focus (e.g., passively focus on the causes of depressed mood), and Nolen-Hoeksema (1987) suggested that this is because women are socialized to be more emotional and passive than men. However, the correlates of self-reference by men in the current study suggest that men are more likely than women to engage in self-focus that involves social comparison. Morf and Rhodewalt (2001) suggested that one reason why men score higher in narcissism than women is that men are socialized to be more dominant and status-oriented than women. Moreover, Bogart, Benotsch, and Pavlovic (2004) found that individuals higher in narcissism, particularly those who score higher on the authority and entitlement facets, have a greater tendency to make social comparisons than individuals lower in narcissism. Taken together, there seems to be indirect evidence that women are more likely to ruminatively self-focus whereas men are more likely to social comparatively self-focus, and future research should examine this by measuring different types of self-focus (e.g., rumination and social comparison) separately for men and women.

Another direction for future research involves examining the possibility that self-focus in conversation has different implications for women and men. Based on the correlates of self-reference across gender in the current study, it seems possible that women talk about themselves as a means of bringing attention to their distress in order to solicit support from others, whereas men might talk about themselves as a means of directing attention toward themselves in order to assert power or dominance. Joiner, Metalsky, Katz, and Beach (1999) reviewed several studies that observed that those higher in depression (e.g., women) are more likely to excessively seek reassurance from others. However, depressed individuals doubt the sincer-

ity of reassuring responses from others, which leads to more reassurance seeking, and this pattern is repeated until others eventually reject the depressed person. In contrast, Henley and Kramarae (1991) suggested that men use language to maintain power and status. Perhaps those higher in the need for power (e.g., men) are highly sensitive to cues regarding their status and use self-references to ensure that the attention of others is where it belongs: on themselves. Moreover, this pattern might lead to negative evaluations by others as they grow tired of the excessive need for attention. Future research could examine this possibility by coding conversational language samples by men and women for the degree to which self-referencing statements are focused on depressive symptoms and reassurance-seeking versus those focused on asserting dominance and power. Personality descriptions by close acquaintances of the people for whom language samples are gathered would also provide valuable information concerning the interpersonal implications of self-focus across gender.

Finally, a concern for future research involves disentangling the relationships between self-focus, depression, anxiety, and general negative affect. Some researchers argue that self-focus plays a unique role in depression (Pyszczynski & Greenberg, 1987), whereas others argue that excessive self-focus puts people at risk for a variety of negative affects and disorders (Ingram, 1990). Frequently self-referencing women in the current study rated themselves higher on a variety of negative attributes and were rated by clinical psychologists as higher in depression and anxiety, and frequently self-referencing men were rated higher in a variety of negative attributes by their acquaintances. These results seem to support the latter idea that excessive self-focus is a general risk factor for many different kinds of pathology. Future research should measure self-focus, depression, anxiety, and negative affect for both men and women in a single study to determine the degree to which these constructs might be highly correlated and to address the possibility that the intercorrelations between these constructs vary by gender.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of the present results is that they were generated by simply counting the number of words that people used in spontaneous speech. Regardless of the kind of self-focus measured through self-referent word use, use of self-references seems to be related to depressive symptoms for women and to issues of power for men. Moreover, the life history interview from which word use derived was a context that would seem to restrict the range

of self-referent word use, yet we found tremendous variability. The current study was able to discern important and previously overlooked gender differences in the correlates of self-focus by using a broader variety of data than is usual. This variety allowed for a deeper understanding of the psychological relevance of self-referent word use and self-focused attention.

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