Oral Defense Announcement
University of Missouri – St. Louis Graduate School

An oral examination in defense of the dissertation for the degree
Doctor of Philosophy in Education with an emphasis in Counseling

Michelle D. Roberts

MEd, December, 2014, University of Missouri-St. Louis
M.S. in Journalism, August, 1993, Northwestern University, Evanston, Ill.
B.A. in Journalism, December, 1992, Arizona State University, Tempe, Ariz.

Moth to a Flame: An Investigation of the Personality Traits and Early-Life Trauma Histories of Women Who Have Survived Adult Relationships with Men with Pathological Narcissism

Date: March 22, 2021
Time: 1:00 p.m. to 3:00 p.m.
Place: Remote

Abstract
Although emotional and psychological abuse, in addition to physical assault, are now commonly accepted as aspects of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV), narcissistic abuse as a subset of IPV is not widely recognized or understood. Due to the extremely debilitating, chronic mental health effects of narcissistic abuse (Bremner, 2008; Campbell, 2002; Yoon et al., 2009), this study sought to explore the abuse experiences, personalities, early-life trauma histories and mental health outcomes of heterosexual women who self-identify as having been in an adult romantic relationship with a man with pathological narcissism. Specifically, this study aimed to identify whether early-life trauma and/or elevations in certain personality traits predicted the likelihood of serious mental health outcomes, mainly Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (C-PTSD). A cross-sectional online survey was utilized to test the research questions. The sample consisted of 1,995 participants who identified as female survivors of narcissistic abuse between the ages of 18 and 99 with a mean age of 46. Key findings include: 1) women scored four times higher than normative scores for the presence of early-life trauma; 2) almost three-fourths (73.3%) of participants met the clinical criteria needed to diagnose C-PTSD, yet only 4.2% had been diagnosed with the disorder; 3) the presence of early-life trauma predicted greater intensity and severity of C-PTSD-related symptoms; 4) slightly more than half of participants reported above average empathy, with 12.6% scoring as super empathizers (the highest category); 5) elevated empathy predicted greater intensity and severity of C-PTSD-related symptoms, although the effect size was very small; 6) The presence of narcissistic abuse predicted greater intensity and severity of C-PTSD-related symptoms when controlling for early-life trauma; and 7) the presence of altruistic and self-directed personality traits predicted greater intensity and severity of C-PTSD-related symptoms when controlling for early-life trauma. These findings may help researchers and clinicians to better understand the impact of narcissistic abuse on survivors and positively impact prevention and intervention efforts by helping to identify both risk and protective factors. Directions for future research regarding personality traits, early-life trauma and the limitations of present research are discussed.

Defense of Dissertation Committee
Susan Kashubeck-West, Ph.D.
Mary Lee Nelson, Ph.D.
Michael Griffin, Ph.D.
Emily Brown, Ph.D.