



## Sounds like a narcissist: Behavioral manifestations of narcissism in everyday life

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### ABSTRACT

Little is known about narcissists' everyday behavior. The goal of this study was to describe how narcissism is manifested in everyday life. Using the Electronically Activated Recorder (EAR), we obtained naturalistic behavior from participants' everyday lives. The results suggest that the defining characteristics of narcissism that have been established from questionnaire and laboratory-based studies are borne out in narcissists' day-to-day behaviors. Narcissists do indeed behave in more extraverted and less agreeable ways than non-narcissists, skip class more (among narcissists high in exploitativeness/entitlement only), and use more sexual language. Furthermore, we found that the link between narcissism and disagreeable behavior is strengthened when controlling for self-esteem, thus extending prior questionnaire-based findings (Paulhus, Robins, Trzesniewski, & Tracy, 2004) to observed, real-world behavior.

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### 1. Introduction

Narcissists love attention. Lucky for them, they have recently received a considerable amount of it from academic psychologists, especially in laboratory settings (e.g., Back, Schmukle, & Egloff, 2010; Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Campbell, Foster, & Finkel, 2002; Miller et al., 2009). This laboratory research has led to several wide-reaching theories about why narcissists do what they do (Holtzman & Strube, 2010a; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001; Twenge & Campbell, 2009; Vazire & Funder, 2006). Despite all this attention from researchers, however, we still know little about what narcissists actually do in their everyday lives. The aim of this paper is to help create an empirical basis for a more complete understanding of narcissism by exploring behavioral manifestations of narcissism in everyday life. Thus, we intend to answer a simple, yet largely unanswered question: What do narcissists do on a day-to-day basis?

The surge in narcissism research in the last 20 years has led to the development and validation of new instruments to measure narcissism, to landmark experiments, and to lively theoretical debates. However, most of this work has relied on self-reports and laboratory studies. While the existing body of research on narcissism has led to a much better understanding of the intrapsychic and interpersonal processes that define narcissism (Campbell et al., 2002; Paulhus, 1998), there are several reasons to think that the scientific portrait of narcissists remains incomplete without

naturalistic behavioral observation (Baumeister, Vohs, & Funder, 2007).

First, laboratory-based studies often involve very brief interactions, which may be unlike most real-life interpersonal interactions. Because research has shown that narcissists tend to make good first impressions that are often fleeting (Paulhus, 1998), it is possible that the impressions narcissists elicit in the laboratory are not representative of the impressions they elicit in their everyday lives. Second, lab studies are ideal for creating controlled conditions, but they may have limited ecological validity. Some common interpersonal situations are difficult or impossible to recreate in laboratories, such as an intimate conversation with a close friend. As a result, little is known about how narcissists interact with their friends, enemies, parents, and romantic partners. Third, laboratory studies minimize opportunities for people to choose situations. A paradigm that allows people to select situations could reveal important behavioral patterns characteristic of narcissists, such as seeking out interactions with potential mates, or skipping class. Finally, most lab studies rely on self-reports, and self-reports by narcissists have an important limitation: narcissists have a penchant for deceiving both themselves and others (Campbell et al., 2002). While we can expect narcissists to freely admit to some behaviors (e.g., pursuing a short-term mating strategy; Reise & Wright, 1996), we cannot expect narcissists to provide entirely honest reports of other daily behaviors.

Naturalistic observation of narcissists' everyday lives can, at least in part, address these limitations as it does not rely on self-reported behavior, it would provide information about interactions beyond first impressions, and it would provide insights into how narcissists behave in their self-selected environments. Here, we examine the habitual, real-world behaviors associated with

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narcissism by collecting naturalistic, non-reactive measures of everyday behavior using the Electronically Activated Recorder (EAR; Mehl, Pennebaker, Crow, Dabbs, & Price, 2001). The EAR allows researchers to unobtrusively record sounds directly from people's daily lives by asking participants to wear a small, pocket-sized digital audio recorder that periodically records snippets of ambient sounds. The data captured by the EAR is objective (i.e., traceable) and, due to the sampling intervals, it is representative of the ecology of participants' real-world social situations and behaviors. Thus, the EAR is well-suited to examining behavioral manifestations of narcissism in everyday life.

A key question in using the EAR for the naturalistic observation of narcissists' daily social lives is which behaviors we should examine. Drawing on the large body of previous research, we created four categories of behaviors that we expected to be associated with narcissism: (a) extraverted acts, (b) disagreeable acts, (c) academic disengagement, and (d) sexual language use. Indeed, previous research has shown that narcissism is characterized by a combination of high extraversion and low agreeableness (Bradlee & Emmons, 1992; Paulhus, 2001). There is particularly strong evidence that narcissists behave in disagreeable ways (e.g., aggressively) in laboratory situations (Twenge & Campbell, 2003). Moreover, the relation between narcissism and disagreeableness increases when self-esteem is taken into account (Paulhus et al., 2004). To test these associations in the naturalistic setting of participants' daily lives, we examined the association between narcissism and extraverted acts (i.e., talking, being in a group, socializing, and using words about friends) and between narcissism and disagreeable acts (i.e., arguing, using swear words, and using anger words). These acts were selected on the basis of previous research documenting associations between traits and behavior (Mehl, Gosling, & Pennebaker, 2006; Ramirez-Esparza, Mehl, Alvarez-Bermudez, & Pennebaker, 2009) and based on current theories about narcissism.

Research has also shown that narcissists are inclined to engage in impulsive behaviors that provide short-term rewards but have long-term costs (Vazire & Funder, 2006). For example, narcissism is associated with positive illusions about academic outcomes, which are associated with higher rates of academic disengagement (Robins & Beer, 2001). To test the role of everyday behavior in this phenomenon, we examined the association between narcissism and attending class.

Narcissists' impulsivity is also manifested in their promiscuous sexual strategies (Reise & Wright, 1996). For example, narcissism is correlated with ex-partners' reports of relationship infidelity (Campbell et al., 2002). To explore a potential indicator of this overt sexuality, we examined the relationship between narcissism and everyday sexual language use.

Based on research examining narcissists' intrapsychic life and laboratory-based behavior, we predicted that in naturalistic contexts narcissism would be positively correlated with extraverted behavior, disagreeable behavior, academic disengagement, and sexual language use. Thus, the goals of our study were to extend laboratory-based research to naturalistic settings—exploring actual behavior—and to extend our empirical knowledge of narcissism by revealing narcissistic behaviors that are less likely to manifest in laboratories (e.g., the use of taboo sexual words; Jay, 2009).

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participant

Participants were 80 undergraduate students at the University of Texas at Austin (79 provided valid EAR data), recruited mainly from introductory psychology courses and by flyers in the psychol-

ogy department. The sample was 54% female, and the ethnic composition of the sample was 65% White, 21% Asian, 11% Latino, and 3% of another ethnicity. Participants ranged from 18 to 24 years old ( $M = 18.7$ ,  $SD = 1.4$ ). Participants were compensated \$50. Data from this sample were also reported in Vazire and Mehl (2008), where further information can be found about the study.<sup>1</sup>

### 2.2. Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI)

The NPI is a 40-item test of narcissism that is reliable and well-validated (Raskin & Terry, 1988). The items on this forced-choice test contain pairs of statements such as "Sometimes I tell good stories" (non-narcissistic) versus "Everybody likes to hear my stories" (narcissistic). In our study, the NPI exhibited good reliability ( $\alpha = .83$ ). As seen in Table 1, we also calculated means and reliabilities for four facets (Emmons, 1987).

### 2.3. The single item self-esteem scale

This single item measure is a reliable and valid measure of self-esteem (Robins, Hendin, & Trzesniewski, 2001). The item is "I see myself as someone who has high self-esteem." The item was measured on a 7-point Likert-type scale, from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree".

### 2.4. Big Five Inventory (BFI)

We further assessed participants' personalities at the level of the Big Five dimensions using the 44-item BFI (John, Naumann, & Soto, 2008). Specifically, prior to the EAR monitoring, participants rated themselves on the BFI items using a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). The alpha reliabilities for extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability, and openness to experience were .89, .79, .76, .82, and .85.

### 2.5. EAR monitoring

The EAR consisted of a digital audio recorder with an external lapel microphone. The device could be carried in one's pocket or purse and the microphone could be attached to one's shirt collar. The EAR recorded 30-s intervals every 12.5 min (4.8 recordings per hour). Participants could not know when the recorder was on.

Participants wore the EAR for four consecutive days during their waking hours (Friday afternoon to Tuesday night). They were informed about the study's privacy and confidentiality policies which included an opportunity to review and censor their recordings before releasing them to the experimenters. Participants were encouraged to remove the EAR only when its functioning was in jeopardy. On average over the 4-day monitoring period, the EAR provided 300 valid waking recordings per participant ( $SD = 104$ ), reflecting high overall levels of compliance (see Vazire & Mehl (2008), for more details about EAR compliance and obtrusiveness). Although several participants made use of the opportunity to listen to their recordings, they erased less than 0.01% of the recorded sound files.

### 2.6. LIWC

Research assistants transcribed participants' utterances captured by the EAR and submitted the transcripts to Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC; Pennebaker, Francis, & Booth,

<sup>1</sup> Data from this study have been reported in several papers (Hasler, Mehl, Bootzin, & Vazire, 2008; Mehl, Vazire, Holleran, & Clark, 2010; Mehl, Vazire, Ramirez-Esparza, Slatcher, & Pennebaker, 2007; Vazire & Mehl, 2008). The present analyses do not overlap with the analyses reported in those papers.

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