Narcissism and academic dishonesty: The exhibitionism dimension and the lack of guilt

Amy B. Brunell [a,*], Sara Staats [a], Jamie Barden [b], Julie M. Hupp [a]

[a] Ohio State University at Newark, United States
[b] Howard University, United States

ABSTRACT

Narcissism is associated with morally questionable behavior in the workplace, but little is known about the role of specific dimensions of narcissism or the mechanism behind these effects. The current study assessed academic dishonesty among college students. One hundred and ninety-nine participants either self-reported or reported others' cheating behavior and completed the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Terry, 1988). The exhibitionism dimension of the NPI predicted greater cheating; this effect was explained by the lack of guilt. The effects of exhibitionism held for the self but not other-report conditions, highlighting the key role of the self in narcissism. Findings held when controlling for relevant demographic variables and other narcissism factors. Thus the narcissists' ambitions for their own academic achievement lead to cheating in school, facilitated by a lack of guilt for their immoral behavior.

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1. Introduction

Narcissism has been used to describe both a clinical condition and a normal personality trait. Individuals with narcissistic personality disorder (NPD; Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders IV-TR; American Psychiatric Association, 2000) exaggerate their talents and think that they are special and unique. Interpersonally, narcissists are arrogant, exploitive, and lack empathy for others. Personality-social psychologists, in contrast, view narcissism as a personality dimension that is measured in the normal population (for reviews, see Campbell, Brunell, & Finkel, 2006; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). One can conceptualize a narcissist as someone who has inflated, positive self-views, a self-regulatory style that maintains these self-views, and shallow interpersonal relationships. For example, narcissists are self-serving (Rhodewalt & Morf, 1998), self-centered (Emmons, 1987), and unlikely to consider how their decisions can affect others (Campbell, Bush, Brunell, & Shelton, 2005). In interpersonal contexts, a narcissist's goal is to acquire social status by associating with high-status people (Campbell, 1999). They desire admiration (Campbell, 1999; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001) and will show-off, brag, and draw attention to themselves (Buss & Chiodo, 1991) to get it.

One challenge for narcissists is how to appear impressive when there are clear measures of performance. Narcissists use many approaches to maintain a positive self-image. Narcissists inflate their performance in achievement domains (Farwell & Wohlwend-Lloyd, 1998) and frequently fail to acknowledge the contributions of others (Campbell, Reeder, Sedikides, & Elliot, 2000; Farwell & Wohlwend-Lloyd, 1998; John & Robins, 1994). Narcissists shine when there is an opportunity for glory, but underperform when such opportunities are not available (Wallace & Baumeister, 2002). This drive for performance may push narcissists to set aside ethical norms to maintain inflated self-views. Thus, it is probably not too surprising that in the workplace, narcissism is associated with several negative behaviors, such as impulsive, risky decision-making (Chatterjee & Hambrick, 2007), counterproductive workplace behavior (Judge, LePine, & Rich, 2006; Penney & Spector, 2002), and white collar crime (Blickle, Schlegel, Fassbender, & Klein, 2006), which indicate that narcissists will do what it takes to get ahead.

Excellence in academics is highly valued in many societies and is seen as a gateway to status and power. This presents a challenge for narcissists because performance is often measured against standards that allow for direct comparison to peers. Overall, little is known about the role of narcissism and violating ethical norms in academics, such as cheating to achieve academic performance. One study (Brown, Budzek, & Tamborski, 2009, Study 3) found that narcissism was associated with rationalized cheating, which is when people do not explicitly intend to cheat, but rather explain away their behavior so they can interpret it as something other than cheating (see von Hippel, Lakin, & Shakarchi, 2005). However,

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* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 740 366 9262; fax: +1 740 366 5047.
E-mail address: brunell.2@osu.edu (A.B. Brunell).

in the case of deliberative cheating, when people cheat through explicit intention, the positive association with narcissism was not reliable (Brown et al., 2009, Study 3). Such findings highlight the use of rationalization in narcissistic functioning (e.g., Mykel, 1985). Thus, while research in workplace settings indicate a generalized tendency to set aside moral standards in order to get ahead, the impact of narcissism on similar behaviors in academics remains unanswered.

In the domain of morality, it is often the case that the experience or anticipation of negative emotions, such as shame and guilt, determines whether or not moral behavior will take place (e.g., Tangney, Stuewig, & Mashek, 2007). For example, among college students, guilt-proneness was negatively associated with the likelihood of stealing (Tangney et al., 2007) and self-reported criminal activity (Tibbetts, 2003). It follows, then, that the experience or anticipation of shame and guilt would deter students from engaging in academic misconduct (Staats, Hupp, & Hagley, 2008). Narcissists are less likely than non-narcissists to experience guilt (Campbell, Foster, & Brunell, 2004), leaving them more susceptible to engaging in immoral behavior, such as academic misconduct. Thus, a lack of guilt could be expected among those who are more likely to engage in behaviors that violate moral standards.

In the present study, we examine the extent to which narcissism predicts self-reported academic misconduct. Recently, scholars have described narcissists as individuals who (a) desire power, (b) show off whenever they get the chance, and (c) believe that they are special (Kubarych, Deary, & Austin, 2004). A case can be made that each of these dimensions of narcissism could predict cheating. Narcissists desire power, as demonstrated by their high achievement motivation (e.g., Emmons, 1984; Raskin & Novacek, 1991; Raskin & Terry, 1988) and desire for prestigious and influential occupations (Roberts & Robins, 2000). In their pursuit for power, it could be that narcissists are willing to engage in immoral behavior, including academic dishonesty. Narcissists have been described as exhibitionists because of their tendency to show off to gain admiration. It has been suggested that exhibitionism is narcissists' mechanism for flaunting their superiority to others (Rose & Campbell, 2004). In their quest to demonstrate impressive academic performance, it could be that narcissists are willing to engage in academic dishonesty. Finally, narcissists believe that they are special and unique, and therefore entitled to more than others are. Because the closely related variable of entitlement is associated with cheating intentions (Brown et al., 2009, Study 3), believing that one is a special person could also be associated with academic dishonesty. Thus, the current research explores the role of narcissism in academic dishonesty, focusing on which dimensions within narcissism are most directly involved.

In the present study, participants were first asked to complete the NPI (Raskin & Terry, 1988) and a questionnaire concerning either (a) their own cheating behavior and guilt for cheating, or (b) their perception of the typical student's cheating behavior and guilt for cheating. With its emphasis on the self, narcissism is expected to be associated with greater cheating by the self, but narcissism is not expected to be associated with reports of cheating by others. Thus, this manipulation should highlight whether the self is required for any observed relationships between narcissism and reported cheating behaviors. It is likely that responses will represent a self-enhancing pattern of responding where others are seen as more likely to engage in cheating behavior than the self, as in past research (Staats et al., 2008). In addition, participants reported gender and age, which have also been associated with academic dishonesty (McCabe & Trevino, 1997), with males and college students being more likely to cheat. Finally, because academic dishonesty is inversely related to academic achievement (McCabe & Trevino, 1997), participants reported their grade point average.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were 199 Introductory Psychology students (56.3% women) at a regional Midwestern college. Participants were 19.87 years old on average (SD = 4.29).[1]

2.2. Materials and procedure

Narcissism was measured using the 40-item NPI (Raskin & Terry, 1988), which is a forced choice measure. Each item on the NPI contains a pair of statements (e.g., "I am no better or no worse than most people" versus "I think I am a special person"); a score of 1 is assigned to the narcissistic response and a score of 0 is assigned to the non-narcissistic response. Scores are summed across the 40 items; higher scores represent higher levels of trait narcissism. The NPI is a commonly used self-report measure of narcissism in normal populations and has adequate reliability and validity (Raskin & Terry, 1988; Rhodewalt & Morf, 1995). Internal reliability was good for the present sample (α = .83, M = 16.66, SD = 6.78). Kubarych et al. (2004) describe a 3-factor solution to the NPI that contains the 10-item power dimension (α = .73, M = 4.5, SD = 2.52), the 5-item exhibitionism dimension (α = .67, M = 1.52, SD = 1.38), and the 8-item special person dimension (α = .57, M = 3.05, SD = 1.65). These subscales were computed by summing the responses to items on each dimension. The remaining NPI items were not used in creating the subscales.

Self-esteem was assessed as a control variable using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Inventory (RSE; Rosenberg, 1965). Internal reliability across the 10-item scale was good (α = .85, M = 39.89, SD = 6.37).

The next questionnaire assessed academic dishonesty and any associated feelings of guilt. Participants were randomly assigned to conditions by receiving cheating questionnaires referring to either the Self (n = 99) or a typical student on campus (Other; n = 100). Guilt concerning academic dishonesty was assessed using four questions from the Agnew and Peters (1986) measure of the neutralization of guilt. The first question asked how guilty participants would feel in general for cheating on an exam (1 = *not too guilty*, 2 = *somewhat guilty*, 3 = *very guilty*). The next three questions used the same scale and asked how guilty they would feel for cheating if (a) the instructor gave an overly difficult exam, (b) classmates refused to share notes or help out, and (c) friends pressured the participant to cheat. Reliability for the measure of guilt was adequate (α_{Self} = .82, α_{Other} = .64).

The next three questions asked participants about academic dishonesty. The first two questions asked participants the number of times they (others) cheated on exams and assignments during the past 12 months. Respondents indicated the number of times they (others) have cheated using the following categories: 0 times, 1–2 times, 3–5 times, 6–10 times, and more than 10 times. The third question asked respondents to use a five-point scale (1 = *strongly agree*, 5 = *strongly disagree*) to indicate the extent to which they agree with the statement, "In the next 30 days, I (the typical student on campus) will cheat in one of my (their) classes." Reliability for this measure was good (α_{Self} = .79, α_{Other} = .74).

Finally, participants reported their grade point average, gender and age.

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[1] Eight participants were dropped for failure to complete all measures. Restricting the sample to the 199 participants did not meaningfully alter any results.