



## Self-serving bias or simply serving the self? Evidence for a dimensional approach to narcissism

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### ABSTRACT

Previous research has suggested that narcissism can be conceptualized as a multidimensional construct consisting of the related, but unique, dimensions of grandiosity and entitlement. The current studies examined the divergent associations of grandiosity and entitlement with respect to different types of self-serving strategies. In Study 1, we found that narcissistic grandiosity, but not entitlement, was positively associated with a self-enhancing strategy of unrealistic optimism. This association was not mediated by self-esteem. In Study 2, narcissistic entitlement, but not grandiosity, was predictive of unethical decision-making, an interpersonal self-promotional strategy that advances the self at the expense of others. Together, both studies support a model of narcissism consisting of a relatively intrapersonal dimension of grandiosity and a relatively interpersonal dimension of entitlement.

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### 1. Introduction

Narcissism has been described as a paradoxical construct (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). On one hand, narcissists tend to think very highly of themselves and have an inflated sense of self-worth. On the other hand, they often behave in ways that suggest an underlying vulnerability of the self (Jordan, Spencer, Zanna, Hoshino-Browne, & Correll, 2003; Zeigler-Hill, 2006). In part because of this paradox, many researchers have either distinguished between multiple forms of narcissism (e.g., Watson & Biderman, 1993; Wink, 1991) or identified various subfactors of narcissism (e.g., Emmons, 1984; Raskin & Terry, 1988). Others have also characterized narcissism as a combination of high agentic and low communal traits (Campbell & Foster, 2007) or high extraversion and low agreeableness (Paulhus, 2001). Despite these seemingly different ways of categorizing narcissism, many conceptualizations make a distinction between components of narcissism generally characterized by a grandiose and inflated sense of self-worth and components characterized by high levels of entitlement, exploitation, and similar traits (Emmons, 1984, 1987; Raskin & Novacek, 1989; Watson & Biderman, 1993).

Consistent with these interpretations of narcissism, the entitlement/exploitativeness subscale (E/E) of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Hall, 1979) diverges from the remaining subscales of the NPI with respect to a host of variables associated

with narcissism (see Brown & Tamborski, 2012, for a discussion). Given this trend, Brown, Budzek, and Tamborski (2009) suggested a conceptualization of narcissism as comprising two overarching dimensions: a predominantly *intrapersonal* dimension of grandiosity and a predominantly *interpersonal* dimension of entitlement.

Brown et al. (2009) argued that the grandiosity dimension orients the narcissist toward maintaining an internal sense of self-importance, whereas the entitlement dimension orients the narcissist toward maintaining the status of the self vis-à-vis others. Brown and colleagues demonstrated that grandiosity, but not entitlement, predicted mental health (an intrapersonal outcome). Furthermore, they found that entitlement, but not grandiosity, predicted overt cheating, when behavior unambiguously violated social norms to satisfy self-interest. When cheating was more subtle and rationalizable, grandiosity, but not entitlement, predicted cheating.

Previous research has clearly demonstrated a link between narcissism (as measured by the NPI) and a variety of intrapersonal strategies. For example, narcissists tend to report lower actual/ideal self discrepancies (Emmons, 1984; Raskin, Novacek, & Hogan, 1991; Rhodewalt & Morf, 1995), display greater confidence in their responses to general knowledge questions (but not greater accuracy; Campbell, Goodie, & Foster, 2004), overestimate the potential benefits from risky ventures (Foster, Shenese, & Goff, 2009), and discount the importance of a task after receiving negative feedback (e.g., Campbell, Reeder, Sedikides, & Elliot, 2000; Farwell & Wohlwend-Lloyd, 1998). Narcissists are also more willing than non-narcissists are to violate pro-social norms in order to protect their ego or to promote their own self-interests (i.e., interpersonal

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strategies). In particular, narcissism is associated with responding aggressively to insults, even if the victim is not responsible for the insult (Martinez, Zeichner, Reidy, & Miller, 2008; Twenge & Campbell, 2003). Narcissism is also positively associated with vengeance seeking (Brown, 2004), and punitiveness (Bushman, Bonacci, van Dijk, & Baumeister, 2003).

Fewer studies have reported correlations between self-enhancement tendencies and the NPI subscales, but those that do support a grandiosity/entitlement distinction. For example, Rhodewalt and Morf (1995, Study 3) found that the non-E/E subscales of the NPI were positively correlated with self-evaluative ratings in various domains (e.g., intelligence) and the certainty of those ratings. However, E/E was uncorrelated with both. In the same study, the composite NPI was negatively correlated with actual/ideal self-discrepancies, yet E/E was positively correlated with this discrepancy. Additional studies have reported a similar divergence between E/E and the rest of the NPI in predicting self-esteem (Bogart, Benotsch, & Pavlovic, 2004; Rose, 2002) and positive illusions (Hickman, Watson, & Morris, 1996).

In contrast with intrapersonal self-enhancement, studies that have examined the associations between the NPI subscales and interpersonal strategies suggest that they are primarily driven by E/E. Using a version of the NPI with seven subscales (Raskin & Terry, 1988), Reidy, Zeichner, Foster, and Martinez (2008) found that only entitlement and exploitativeness uniquely predicted the intensity and duration of an electric shock that participants administered to a competitor. Similarly, Antes et al. (2007) demonstrated that E/E was the only NPI subscale that consistently predicted unethical decisions. Finally, Exline, Baumeister, Bushman, Campbell, and Finkel (2004) showed a negative relationship between entitlement and forgiveness, but no relationship between the remaining NPI subscales and forgiveness. Thus, the composite E/E or the singular entitlement subscale of the NPI appears to be associated with promoting the self at the expense of others. Likewise, the remaining subscales are specifically associated with intrapersonal self-enhancing biases, such as overly positive self-evaluations and smaller actual/ideal self-discrepancies.

In the following studies, we examine the distinction between grandiosity and entitlement by exploring their roles in predicting a relatively intrapersonal self-enhancing strategy (i.e., unrealistic optimism) and a more interpersonal strategy that focuses on self-promotion without regard for the well-being of others (i.e., unethical decision-making). Previous research has already suggested such a dissociation using the NPI subscales (Antes et al., 2007; Hickman et al., 1996). However, these subscales suffer from unacceptably low internal reliabilities, questionable item content, and ambiguity regarding the most appropriate number of subscales (Tamborski & Brown, 2012). Furthermore, none of the aforementioned studies investigated whether E/E might interact with the remaining subscales. Therefore, we assessed grandiosity and entitlement with reliable and highly face-valid scales specifically designed to measure these two dimensions of narcissism.

## 2. Study 1

Study 1 examined whether narcissistic grandiosity and entitlement exhibit divergent associations with unrealistic optimism – a form of intrapersonal self-enhancement (Regan, Snyder, & Kassir, 1995). Because previous research has found that the NPI (particularly the non-E/E subscales) is positively associated with optimism (Farwell & Wohlwend-Lloyd, 1998; Hickman et al., 1996), we hypothesized that grandiosity would likewise be positively associated with unrealistic optimism. Additionally, Brown et al. (2009) reported a positive association between grandiosity and mental health (which included a simple index of optimism) that was only

partially accounted for by self-esteem. For this reason, we expected that grandiosity would similarly demonstrate a positive relationship with unrealistic optimism that was not dependent on self-esteem. We also hypothesized that this relationship would be largely independent of entitlement, which we did not expect to be associated with optimism. Furthermore, the measure of optimism that we used allowed us to explore whether grandiosity and entitlement were related to optimism in general, or whether any associations might occur more strongly for positive versus negative events.

## 3. Method

### 3.1. Participants

One hundred ten undergraduates from the University of Oklahoma participated in partial fulfillment of a research exposure requirement in an introductory psychology course. Three participants did not complete half the items on our optimism scale and were excluded from the analyses. The majority of the remaining 107 participants were female (65%) and Caucasian (79%).

### 3.2. Measures and procedure

At least three weeks prior to the study, participants completed measures of grandiosity and entitlement, as well as the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale ( $\alpha = .87$ ; Rosenberg, 1965). To assess grandiosity, we used the Narcissistic Grandiosity Scale (NaGS; Rosenthal, Hooley, & Steshenko, in preparation). The NaGS ( $\alpha = .94$ ) consists of 16 adjectives (e.g., glorious, omnipotent) that participants rated for their self-descriptiveness on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (extremely). In addition to being highly face valid, the NaGS is moderately correlated with non-entitlement subscales of the NPI ( $r$ s ranging from .35 to .49; Brown et al., 2009).

To assess entitlement, we used the Psychological Entitlement Scale (PES; Campbell, Bonacci, Shelton, Exline, & Bushman, 2004). The PES ( $\alpha = .86$ ) contains nine statements (e.g., “If I were on the Titanic, I would deserve to be in the first lifeboat!”) to which participants rated their agreement on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Campbell et al. (2004) found the PES to be strongly correlated with NPI-assessed entitlement ( $r = .54$ ) and predictive of selfish behaviors, such as taking candy meant for children.

During a separate laboratory session, participants completed a measure of unrealistic optimism. Thirty-six items describing potential future events were selected from previous research (Chambers, Windschitl, & Suls, 2003; Weinstein, 1980). The events were balanced in terms of valence and likelihood, including items such as “Going blind,” and “Winning a sweepstakes.” Participants responded to these items by indicating the probability that each event would happen to them compared to other students at their university of the same age and gender, using a response scale anchored by “well below average” (1) and “well above average” (5). Negative events were reverse scored, with higher scores indicating greater optimism. Reliability coefficients for the composite optimism measure, the positive events subscale, and the negative events subscale were .71, .77, and .82, respectively.

After completing the unrealistic optimism scale, participants engaged in several other tasks not relevant to the current study. After completing all tasks, participants were fully debriefed and dismissed.

## 4. Results and discussion

Grandiosity was positively correlated with entitlement and self-esteem, but self-esteem was not associated with entitlement

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