



## Narcissism and punitiveness in a non-ego-threatening condition

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### ABSTRACT

Punitiveness of overt and covert narcissists was examined in a non-ego-threatening condition. In judging fictitious criminal cases, high scorers in overt narcissism were as punitive as low scorers; this result was independent of crime severity. For covert narcissism, however, high scorers were more punitive toward a serious crime and more lenient toward a mild crime, when compared to low scorers. This study provides pioneering data on narcissists' punitive judgments in the absence of ego threat, which has been overlooked by previous research. The findings not only support the theoretical distinction between the overt and covert subtypes of narcissism, but also help clarify the meaning of punishment to narcissists.

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### 1. Introduction

Despite its origin as a clinical condition, narcissism has received considerable interest from social and personality psychologists in recent years because of its relationship to various social behaviors and personality constructs. In general, the clinical, social and personality perspectives agree that narcissism is characterized by inflated positive self-views and negative views toward others (Besser & Priel, 2010; Campbell, Rudich, & Sedikides, 2002; Dickinson & Pincus, 2003). Such a social perception explains why narcissists score low in empathy measures, and are punitive and unforgiving toward others' misdeeds (Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996; Exline, Baumeister, Bushman, Campbell, & Finkel, 2004; Munro, Bore, & Powis, 2005; Okada, 2010). This conclusion, however, may be overgeneralized because previous studies have focused solely on ego-threatening conditions and assumed that punishment is driven by retaliative motives only (e.g. Bushman & Baumeister, 1998). In addition, some of these studies have overlooked the distinction between two narcissistic subtypes – overt and covert narcissism (Wink, 1991). To fill this void, the current study examines how overt and covert narcissists perceive and punish wrongdoers in a non-ego-threatening condition.

#### 1.1. Punitiveness in ego-threatening conditions

Previous studies have consistently demonstrated narcissists' punitive reaction against people who have offended them. For in-

stance, Bushman and Baumeister (1998) reported that narcissists tended to deliver a more intense and enduring blast of sound to a person who had given a negative evaluation of them before. Similarly, Bushman, Bonacci, Van Dijk, and Baumeister (2003) found that narcissists assigned less money to a confederate who had rejected their sexual request than did non-narcissists. Exline et al. (2004) replicated the findings in a variety of hypothetical transgression scenarios and further established the importance of self-entitlement, which is a defining feature of narcissism, in predicting retaliative and unforgiving behaviors. All these findings are in line with the theory of threatened egotism (Baumeister et al., 1996), which states that the aggressive and punitive behaviors of narcissists are often initiated by a threat to the grandiose self (e.g. rejection and criticism). Punishing the offender in such circumstances not only serves as retaliation, but also prevents others from giving a similar evaluation and thereby protects their self-esteem.

From the above studies, it can be concluded that narcissists are more punitive than non-narcissists in ego-threatening conditions. However, it should be noted that punitive judgments sometimes do not involve ego threat or interpersonal conflict. In sports games, for example, a referee punishes a player when the player commits a foul, not because there is a conflict with the player. Interestingly, different referees may have different preferences for penalty level, especially in ambiguous plays where objective rules cannot be applied directly. Such individual predispositions are in accord with the definition of punitiveness found in the criminological literature. For example, Almond and Colover (2010, p. 326) referred to punitiveness as “a preference for excessive, disproportionate and severe forms of punishment”, which is not limited to ego-threatening conditions. Given that the current understanding of narcissists' punitiveness is incomplete, this

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study aims to further the knowledge to non-ego-threatening conditions.

### 1.2. Punitiveness in non-ego-threatening conditions

We believe that the relationship between narcissism and punitiveness in non-ego-threatening conditions is likely to be complicated by the theoretical distinction between two subtypes of narcissism – overt and covert narcissism. Since the pioneering work of Wink (1991), recent research has supported the existence of these two narcissistic subtypes. Both subtypes share the features of self-grandiosity and self-entitlement, but differ in the way these features are expressed and regulated. In an interpersonal conflict, for instance, overt narcissists would regulate the self by direct self-enhancement, devaluing others, ignoring negative comments and even aggression (Dickinson & Pincus, 2003; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). On the other hand, being sensitive to social evaluation (Hendin & Cheek, 1997; Pincus & Lukowitsky, 2010), covert narcissists are more subtle and defensive in regulating the grandiose yet fragile self (Zeigler-Hill, Clark, & Pickard, 2008). They tend to cover up their hostility and regulate the self by seeking others' approval and faking socially desirable traits (Besser & Priel, 2010; Dickinson & Pincus, 2003).

The current study utilized two fictitious crime scenarios of different severity (serious, mild). In each scenario, participants decided the punishment to an offender who had physically harmed another person. These scenarios involved no ego threat, as they had no direct connection to the participants. Based on the distinct features of the two narcissistic subtypes, we formulate two hypotheses on their punitive judgment. For overt narcissism, we hypothesize that in both crime scenarios high scorers and low scorers do not differ in terms of level of punitiveness. This prediction corresponds to the dismissive nature of overt narcissists who are concerned about the well-being of the self rather than unknown others (i.e. offender and victim). Covert narcissists, however, are sensitive to social evaluation and cautious about making socially undesirable decisions (Koritzky & Yechiam, 2010; Paulhus & John, 1998). According to social comparison theory, this social desirability tendency causes attitude shift to the extreme level so that one can stand out favorably from the average (Isenberg, 1986). One possible outcome of this shift is that covert narcissists would endorse heavier punishment in a serious crime but lighter punishment in a mild crime. An interaction effect between covert narcissism and crime severity is thus expected.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

Two hundred and sixty-eight Hong Kong undergraduates voluntarily participated in this study. Seven cases were discarded due to incorrect response format, leaving 261 effective respondents (149 women and 112 men;  $M_{\text{age}} = 21.63$  years and  $SD = 3.16$ ). They received a questionnaire packet that contained the following materials.

### 2.2. Materials

#### 2.2.1. Crime scenarios

Each participant was randomly assigned to read one of the two crime scenarios adopted from Darley, Carlsmith, and Robinson (2000). The scenarios differed in severity (serious vs. mild): The serious scenario depicted a murder provoked by a quarrel ( $n = 134$ ), while the mild scenario depicted a physical assault that caused non-fatal injury ( $n = 127$ ). To ensure that crime severity

was properly manipulated, we collected data from a sample ( $N = 203$ ; 102 women and 101 men;  $M_{\text{age}} = 30.02$  years and  $SD = 4.57$ ) recruited through Amazon's Mechanical Turk (Mason & Suri, 2012). These participants were asked to rate the severity of the two scenarios on a 7-point scale. In line with Darley et al. (2000), the serious crime scenario ( $M = 6.79$ ;  $SD = .78$ ) was rated as significantly more severe than the mild crime scenario ( $M = 4.95$ ;  $SD = 1.37$ ),  $t(202) = 18.90$ ,  $p < .001$ , evidencing the validity of this manipulation.

#### 2.2.2. Punitiveness

Punitiveness, the dependent variable, was operationalized in two ways. First, participants responded to two items (Item 1: "The punishment for David should be very heavy"; Item 2: "David deserves very severe punishment") on a 7-point scale (1 = *Strongly disagree*, 7 = *Strongly agree*). The two items had similar descriptive statistics ( $M_{\text{item1}} = 3.28$ ,  $SD_{\text{item1}} = 1.70$ ;  $M_{\text{item2}} = 3.23$ ,  $SD_{\text{item2}} = 1.75$ ) and were strongly correlated ( $r = .93$ ,  $p < .01$ ), implying that they measured the same construct (hereafter named *Punishment level*). For simplicity, responses to these two items were averaged to provide a single indicator of participants' subjective punitive judgment toward the offense.<sup>1</sup>

In the second operationalization, participants decided the sentence for the offender on a 12-point scale. This item simulated a more realistic punitive judgment by providing a clear anchor at each scale point (e.g. 1 = *No punishment*, 2 = *Probation/Community service order*, up to 12 = *Life sentence*; see Appendix 1) and has been proven effective in previous studies (Carlsmith, Darley, & Robinson, 2002; Darley et al., 2000). However, the fact that some of the options are unquantifiable (e.g. probation) and not equal-interval (Robinson & Darley, 1995, p. 8) may pose problems to the subsequent parametric tests (i.e. ANOVA, *t*-test). As an alternative, we also conducted nonparametric tests using the Aligned Rank Transform (ART) procedure (Wobbrock, Findlater, Gergle, & Higgins, 2011) and yielded similar results. For simplicity, we only report the results from the parametric tests, as what previous research did (e.g. Darley et al., 2000). Lastly, the core findings are identical whichever operational definition is used for the dependent variable.

#### 2.2.3. Overt narcissism

Participants completed the 23-item version of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Corry, Merritt, Mrug, & Pamp, 2008). On each item, they were asked to choose from a pair of narcissistic and non-narcissistic items (e.g. "People always seem to recognize my authority" vs. "Being an authority doesn't mean that much to me"). This 23-item version was developed with stringent statistical criteria to tackle problems in its original version such as unstable factor structure, low internal reliability in some sub-scales, and outdated and redundant items. The Cronbach's alpha was .76 in this study.

#### 2.2.4. Covert narcissism

Participants completed the 10-item Hypersensitive Narcissism Scale (HSNS; Hendin & Cheek, 1997). This scale assesses covert narcissists' vulnerable self-esteem and hypersensitivity to social comparison (e.g. "My feelings are easily hurt by ridicule or by the slighting remarks of others"). Participants responded on a 5-point scale (1 = *Very uncharacteristic of me*; 5 = *Very characteristic of me*). The Cronbach's alpha was .73 in this study.

<sup>1</sup> Analyzing the two items separately revealed similar findings.

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