



Do narcissists make better decisions? An investigation of narcissism and dynamic decision-making performance

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ABSTRACT

We investigated whether narcissism affected dynamic decision-making performance in the presence and absence of misleading information. Performance was examined in a two-choice dynamic decision-making task where the optimal strategy was to forego an option providing larger immediate rewards in favor of an option that led to larger delayed rewards. Information regarding foregone rewards from the alternate option was presented or withheld to bias participants toward the sub-optimal choice. The results demonstrated that individuals high in narcissistic traits performed comparably to low narcissism individuals when foregone reward information was absent, but high narcissism individuals outperformed individuals low in narcissistic traits when misleading information was presented. The advantage for participants high in narcissistic traits was strongest within males, and, overall, males outperformed females when foregone rewards were present. While prior research emphasizes narcissists' decision-making deficits, our findings provide evidence that individuals high in narcissistic traits excel at decision-making tasks that involve disregarding ambiguous information and focusing on the long-term utility of each option. Their superior ability at filtering out misleading information may reflect an effort to maintain their self-view or avoid ego threat.

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1. Introduction

The self-loving, center of the universe, arrogant egomaniac: narcissist or decision-making extraordinaire? Narcissists are continuously searching for ways to flaunt their abilities and demonstrate their superiority. They crave external exaltation to maintain their lofty self-image. Because of their motivation to boost their self-view, narcissists exhibit a cognitive bias toward ego-enhancing opportunities. They actively pursue self-enhancing situations and expect to excel in tasks with the potential for self-glory (Farwell & Wohlwend-Lloyd, 1998; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). While narcissism can be used in reference to the clinical construct of Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) listed in the DSM-IV-TR (American Psychiatric Association, 1994), it has also been widely studied as a non-clinical individual difference trait (e.g., Foster & Campbell, 2007; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001; Raskin & Terry, 1988).¹ Narcissism as a “normal” individual trait, as measured by relatively high scores

on the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (Raskin & Terry, 1988), can be both beneficial and disadvantageous. On the one hand, narcissists' desire for self-enhancement may allow them to focus better on a task and succeed (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001; Wallace & Baumeister, 2002). However, narcissists' success can be hindered by their own overconfidence.

The irony of narcissists' confidence in their abilities but failure to live up to their own expectations is well documented. In achievement domains, narcissists tend to over-rate their overall intelligence and cognitive ability (Campbell, Goodie, & Foster, 2004; Campbell, Rudich, & Sedikides, 2002; Gabriel, Critelli, & Ee, 1994; Paulhus, Harms, Bruce, & Lysy, 2003; Robins & Beer, 2001). In social settings, narcissists overestimate how well they are liked by their peers (Paulhus, 1998). They also believe that they contribute more in group discussions (John & Robins, 1994) and creativity tasks than others in the group (Farwell & Wohlwend-Lloyd, 1998). Overall, narcissists' overconfidence does not seem to be limited to any particular domain or buttressed by their actual abilities. Although narcissists approach self-enhancing opportunities with confidence, their inflated perception of their abilities does not predict their success.

While research supports the detrimental consequences of narcissistic traits on achievement and social success, the effect of narcissism on decision-making processes is less explored. One way narcissists can be thwarted in decision-making success is in their

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¹ In the present work we examine narcissism as a “normal” individual difference trait, as measured by relatively high scores on the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (Raskin & Terry, 1988), rather than the clinically diagnosed personality disorder. We will refer to individuals high or low in narcissistic tendencies, or to high and low NPI participants when distinguishing between groups of participants in our study.

willingness to take risks due to their inflated view of the potential benefits associated with risks (Foster, Shenese, & Goff, 2009). Increased willingness to accept risks has direct consequences in situations like gambling. In a task that assessed willingness to bet, participants were offered a chance to bet on their answers on a general knowledge test. Correct answers were given after participants' answers and bets had been selected. Even with performance feedback provided, narcissists were still more overconfident in their answers, more likely to take bets, and lost more points on the task (Campbell et al., 2004). Thus, narcissists' cognitive bias to maintain their self-concept seems to blind them from adverse betting costs.

In addition to risk-taking, narcissists also have an increased sensitivity for immediate gratification and reward (Rose & Campbell, 2004). To test narcissists' proclivity for choosing immediate rewards, Lakey, Rose, Campbell, and Goodie (2008) assessed performance on the Georgia Gambling Task (GGT) and the Iowa Gambling Task (IGT). As predicted, narcissists were more overconfident and accepted more bets in the GGT. On the IGT, narcissists and non-narcissists chose equally from the decks on the initial block of twenty draws. Thereafter, however, narcissists consistently chose the disadvantageous decks that had larger gains but also larger losses and an overall negative expected value more often than non-narcissists.

Overall, prior research indicates that the characteristic cognitive biases of narcissism, including self-enhancement, reward focus, and risk-taking, negatively affects their performance and success. There is evidence, however, that narcissism can boost performance in some situations. For example, narcissists have been shown to perform better under pressure on tests of motor coordination and math ability (Wallace & Baumeister, 2002). Moreover, narcissists' magnified self-focus can also impact their cognitive-perceptual style. Konrath, Bushman, and Grove (2009) found that narcissists demonstrated a superior ability at locating figures in the Embedded Figures Task, which reflects their field independent cognitive style. Narcissists are less likely to be influenced by others' beliefs and information when making decisions under ambiguous circumstances, so it is plausible that their disregard of social information carries over to the cognitive domain (Witkin & Goodenough, 1977). The combination of their disregard for external information and their superior ability in field independent conditions may benefit narcissists in decision-making situations involving uncertainty.

The present study uses a dynamic decision-making task that has been previously employed to study individuals' ability to discern the optimal decision strategy when each choice affects both the immediate and delayed rewards received from each option (Gureckis & Love, 2009; Worthy, Gorlick, Pacheco, Schnyer, & Maddox, 2011; Worthy, Otto, & Maddox, 2012). The dynamic aspect of the task refers to the *choice-history dependent* reward structure, meaning that the payoff on each trial is dependent on individuals' sequence of choices on previous trials. This choice-history dependent task reflects real-life decision-making situations in which the consequences of subsequent decisions hinge on those made previously. For example, choosing to study for an exam, rather than socialize with friends, is not immediately rewarding, but in the long-term it may boost a student's GPA and ultimately future job prospects. Similarly, a college graduate may make more money by taking a job immediately, but attending graduate or law school may lead to more income earned over the course of one's life. In the task the option that provides a larger immediate reward on each trial is the sub-optimal choice because selecting it causes future rewards for both options to decline. Good performance in the task requires forgoing the option that provides larger immediate rewards in favor of an option that provides smaller immediate rewards, but leads to larger long-term, cumulative reward.

Prior research on narcissism and decision-making has been limited to tasks that examine risk-taking and attraction to immediate reward, and there has been little emphasis on whether narcissism enhances the ability to ignore misleading information. Furthermore, prior research with other decision-making tasks, like the GGT and IGT, has shown that individuals high in narcissistic tendencies performed worse relative to those low in narcissistic tendencies (Lakey et al., 2008). The task used in the present work will allow us to investigate whether narcissistic personality tendencies can be an advantage in decision-making situations involving uncertainty and misleading information. Because narcissists tend to be less influenced by social and external information (Witkin & Goodenough, 1977), high narcissism individuals may perform better on a decision-making task when provided with information about the option that they did not select on each trial. The presentation of information regarding both the chosen and foregone reward has been shown to bias participants toward the sub-optimal choice by making immediate rewards more salient (Otto & Love, 2010). If individuals high in narcissistic tendencies are focused on immediate reward, then they should perform worse when presented with information showing them the more immediately rewarding deck, relative to non-narcissists. On the other hand, narcissists' indifference toward social information may extend to decision-making strategies. If they are more distrusting of the information about foregone rewards, then individuals with high narcissistic tendencies should ignore the information and persist in figuring out the optimal decision-making strategy without regard to the external information.

While narcissism has been shown to be detrimental in some decision-making situations involving immediate reward and risk-taking, we predict that it may be an advantage when it involves ignoring misleading information. Examining the possible effects of narcissism on dynamic decision-making performance may enhance our knowledge of how narcissistic traits can positively or negatively impact behavior in real-world situations. To our knowledge, no study has investigated how narcissists respond to misleading information and how that may influence their decision-making ability. The results of the current investigation may broaden our understanding of the effects of narcissism and its associated traits, like overconfidence, disregard for social information, and self-enhancement seeking, and determine if those traits transfer to decision-making domains.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

One hundred and sixteen (73 female, 43 male) undergraduate students at Texas A&M University participated in the experiment for course credit. In our between-subjects design, participants were randomly assigned to a condition in which foregone rewards were either present or absent. There were 55 participants in the foregone rewards present condition and 61 participants in the foregone rewards absent condition. Participants were divided into high NPI ($n = 59$) or low NPI ($n = 57$) personality groups based on a median split of scores from the NPI ($Mdn = 16$).

2.2. Materials and procedure

Participants completed the NPI and decision-making task on PC computers using Psychtoolbox for Matlab (version 2.5). Participants first completed the 40-item NPI in which they selected between one of two statements, a narcissistic statement and a neutral statement, that best described their personality. The NPI (Raskin & Terry, 1988) is a widely used research assessment designed for non-clinical populations to measure individual

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