



Are youths' feelings of entitlement always "bad"?: Evidence for a distinction between exploitive and non-exploitive dimensions of entitlement

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A B S T R A C T

Keywords:

Entitlement
Self-esteem
Personality
College students
Prosocial traits

Previous personality research (e.g., Campbell et al., 2004) has described the sense of entitlement as a unifactorial construct. In this study, we examined characteristics of two potential facets of entitlement: exploitive entitlement, characterized by exploitive interactions and expectations of special treatment, and non-exploitive entitlement, or entitled beliefs that rest on notions of self-worth and fairness. 466 college students (mean age = 20.5) completed a questionnaire consisting of unifactorial and two-factor measures of entitlement and other personality dispositions and attitudes. As expected, both exploitive and non-exploitive entitlement were positively related to the Psychological Entitlement Scale (PES; $r = .51$ and $r = .43$, respectively), a unifactorial measure of entitlement. In other respects, exploitive and non-exploitive entitlement had quite distinct correlates. Exploitive entitlement was uniquely related to higher levels of psychopathy and neuroticism, and lower levels of work orientation, social commitment, and self-esteem; whereas non-exploitive entitlement was uniquely associated with higher self-esteem.

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Entitlement has received an increasing amount of media attention in recent years, with much of this attention focusing on the societally harmful effects of individuals' sense of personal entitlement. A search of Lexis/Nexis (2009) reveals that references in the print media to the term "sense of entitlement" have increased almost six-fold over the last decade, from 148 mentions in 1998–863 in 2008. A large portion of these articles and commentaries focus on a perceived rise in entitled attitudes among adolescents and young adults in the context of school and the workplace. Entitlement has also attracted extensive empirical attention as a component of narcissism, with entitlement described as "the expectation of special privileges over others and special exemptions from normal social demands" (Raskin & Terry, 1988, p. 890). Other researchers, viewing entitlement as a construct of importance in its own right, have defined it as a "pervasive sense that one deserves more and is entitled to more than others" (Campbell, Bonacci, Shelton, Exline, & Bushman, 2004, pg. 31), and as an "expectation of special favors without reciprocating" (Emmons, 1984, pg. 292).

Trait entitlement, as operationalized in the Psychological Entitlement Scale (PES; Campbell et al., 2004) and in the Narcissistic Personality Inventory -Entitlement subscale (NPI-E; Raskin & Hall, 1979), is associated with a wide range of maladaptive personality characteristics, including distrustfulness, lack of self-control (Raskin & Terry, 1988), trait anger (Witte, Callahan, & Perez-Lopez, 2002), Machiavellianism (McHoskey, 1995), greed and aggression (Campbell et al., 2004), and interpersonal violence (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998). Entitlement also has been associated with

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measures of psychopathy (Benning, Patrick, Blonigen, Hicks, & Iacono, 2005; Mills, 2001). Entitled individuals are viewed by others as hostile or deceitful (Raskin & Terry, 1988).

Is inflated self-esteem the cause of youths' sense of entitlement?

Several researchers have noted that self-esteem has risen substantially over the last 40 years. In a meta-analytic study of college students who had taken the Rosenberg (1965) Self-Esteem Scale (RSE) between 1968 and 1995, Twenge and Campbell (2001) found that the level of self-esteem has risen substantially over that time, with the average student in the mid 1990s having a higher self-esteem score than 73% of their late 1960s peers. Some researchers and commentators have argued that entitlement, along with other narcissistic attitudes such as vanity, exploitativeness, and manipulativeness, have increased as a result of a recent emphasis on increasing adolescents' level of self-esteem (Twenge, 2006).

The self-esteem "movement," an effort designed to protect adolescents' sense of self-worth from parents' and teachers' harsh criticism and negative appraisals, began in the 1970s and became more prevalent during the 80s and 90s. Twenge, Konrath, Foster, Campbell, and Bushman (2008), Twenge (2006); contend that this movement has been largely responsible for the observed increases in self-esteem over time, but has had the unanticipated side-effect of artificially inflating adolescents' feelings of self-worth, independent of their actual abilities and accomplishments (Crocker & Knight, 2005). The result, they argue, has led to an increase in attitudes such as entitlement. In a recent meta-analysis, Twenge et al. (2008) found that scores on the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI) increased substantially between 1982 and 2006 ($d = .33$), although they did not report the trend for the Entitlement subscale. In contrast, Trzesniewski, Donnellan, and Robins (2008), in a meta-analytic study of California college students, did not find that scores on the NPI increased over time but did note that the Entitlement subscale of the NPI increased somewhat between 1982 and 2007 ($d = .17$). Twenge and Foster (2010) reanalyzed data from their earlier study and from Trzesniewski et al. (2008), controlling for university, as there are substantial mean level differences in NPI among universities. They found that NPI scores had increased substantially over time. Overall, these findings suggest that although there may be regional and other sources of variation in levels of narcissism and entitlement, there is substantial evidence that these attitudes have increased, at least in the United States, over at least the last 27 years.

If Twenge et al. and other researchers are correct that the self-esteem movement, and the concomitant rise in self-esteem, has been a significant driver in the rise of entitled attitudes, there should be a substantial positive association between self-esteem and entitlement. However, although many studies have shown a strong association between self-esteem and narcissism (meta-analytic $r = .29$; Campbell, 2001), few studies have found a substantial association between entitlement and self-esteem. Campbell and colleagues reported a modest association between the Psychological Entitlement Scale (PES) and the RSE ($r = .13$), several studies have not found a significant association between the Entitlement subscale of the NPI and the RSE (Bogart, Benotsch, & Pavlovic, 2004; Strelan, 2007), and other studies have found an inverse association between these two variables (Emmons, 1984, 1987). Additionally, in a study of entitlement in the academic domain (Greenberger, Lessard, Farruggia, & Chen, 2008), this variable had a modest, negative association with the RSE ($r = -.14$). These findings suggest that entitlement, as currently assessed, has little relation to self-esteem.

Further, entitlement beliefs are perceived to have increased greatly over time (Twenge, 2006), and by some measures, that seems to be the case. By the late 1980s, 80% of adolescents agreed with the statement "I am an important person", up from just 12% who agreed with that same statement in the 1950s (Newsom, Archer, Trumbetta, & Gottesman, 2003). Fifty-one per cent of recent high school graduates expect to obtain a graduate or professional degree, even though only 9% of adults actually obtain these degrees (Twenge, 2006). Similarly, 63% of these recent high school graduates expect to be working in a professional job by age 30, far more than the 18% of 30-year-olds who actually hold such positions (Reynolds, Stewart, MacDonald, & Sischo, 2006). However, although these unrealistically high aspirations are fairly pervasive, most older adolescents do not have very high levels of entitlement, as measured by the NPI-Entitlement subscale or the PES. For example, in one recent study, the average undergraduate participant agreed with 39% of the forced-choice NPI items. However, these participants agreed with only 24% of the Entitlement subscale items, suggesting that these views are not very widespread (Moeller, Crocker, & Bushman, 2009). Similarly, across a range of studies involving older adolescents, the average score on the PES was substantially below the midpoint, suggesting that most participants moderately disagreed with these items (Campbell et al., 2004; Moeller et al., 2009).

Is it possible to reconcile these research findings? Several areas of research have examined feelings of deservingness and entitlement that do not explicitly involve receiving special favors from others, but instead derive from one's feelings of self-worth and previous accomplishments in a given domain. Conceptually, self-esteem reflects a person's evaluation of his or her level of self-worth and self-acceptance (Rosenberg, 1965). Several items on the RSE, for instance, specifically tap the feeling that one is worthy of positive outcomes (e.g., "I feel that I am a person of worth, at least on an even plane with others"). Such beliefs – that one is worthy and has value and thus may be deserving of positive or beneficial outcomes – seem to tap into certain aspects of entitlement. A substantial amount of research suggests that having unstable self-esteem that is highly contingent on the ups and downs of daily experiences (Crocker & Knight, 2005; Kernis, Grannemann, & Barclay, 1989) has negative psychological consequences for the individual, such as feelings of anger, hostility, and frustration, as well as for interpersonal relationships (e.g., acts of aggression in ego-threatening situations; Kernis, 2003). These findings suggest that individuals with stable, high self-esteem may sometimes feel worthy of, or entitled to, positive outcomes, even in situations when their objective deservingness is unclear.

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