



Narcissistic self-promotion is not moderated by the strength of situational cues[☆]

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ABSTRACT

The present study examined whether situational differences moderate the influence of narcissism on self-promotion. As the strong situation hypothesis would assume, personality influences would be lowest in strong situations that include clear cues for self-promotion. Therefore, 219 participants received different situational cues (no prime, subliminal prime, or explicit request to self-present) prior to the task to self-describe. We rated the self-descriptions to the degree of a favorable and narcissistic impression (in an agentic or communal way). Results showed that all participants promoted themselves more favorably and narcissistically in situations with an explicit request only. The impact of narcissism on self-promotion was invariant across conditions. It was concluded that narcissism leads to enhanced self-promotion irrespective of situational strength. Implications for the way we study the strong situation hypothesis are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Narcissists¹ are expected to permanently self-promote (e.g., Collins & Stukas, 2008; Grijalva & Zhang, 2015). The current study asks to what degree situational strength moderates the influence of narcissism on self-promotion. Is it possible that individual differences in narcissistic self-promotion diminish in strong situations, as the strong situation hypothesis would suggest (e.g., Cooper & Withey, 2009)?

1.1. Situational influences

Research has largely agreed on the notion that people are able to distort their personality traits when explicitly asked to do so (e.g., Ziegler & Bühner, 2009). Besides such explicit situational influence, implicit cues trigger self-promotion, as well. Tyler (2012) found large effect sizes (up to $d = 3.79$) for the differences in positive impressions between a subliminal priming condition (impression-related words were used as primes) and a condition with neutral primes. Furthermore, the priming effects were comparable to those from an explicit instruction.

1.2. Personality influences

Although almost all people use self-presentational tactics (Alicke & Sedikides, 2009), individual differences in narcissism and self-esteem seem to be most relevant to self-promotion. For example, narcissists stress or exaggerate their competencies within high-stakes situation (e.g., a job interview; Paulhus, Westlake, Calvez, & Harms, 2013) but also in situations that demand modesty (e.g., after receiving negative feedback; Morf, Ansara, & Shia (2001) as cited in Morf & Rhodewalt (2001)).

Like narcissists, high “self-esteemers” think of themselves to be better than the average and have an acquisitive self-promotional style (Brown, 1986). In general, self-promotion overlaps with self-esteem, as does narcissism with self-esteem (Raskin, Novacek, & Hogan, 1991). The difference between narcissists and high self-esteemers might lie in the width of self-promotion: Narcissists stress agentic traits (e.g., competence) universally but high self-esteemers emphasize agentic as well as communal traits (e.g., agreeableness) flexibly (Campbell, Rudich, & Sedikides, 2002).

1.3. Person-situation-interaction

Personality expressions depend on two situational aspects: trait relevance and situation strength (e.g., Tett & Burnett, 2003; Tett & Guterman, 2000). For example, trait-relevant situations for narcissistic self-promotion would offer the opportunity to talk about oneself because this would match the narcissists' motive for admiration (Wallace & Baumeister, 2002). Strong situations (as opposed to weak situations) have the potential to diminish individual differences in

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¹ The terms “narcissism” or “narcissist” are used as an abbreviation for people with higher scores on methods assessing subclinical grandiose narcissism.

personality manifestations (e.g., nobody tells jokes during a funeral; Cooper & Withey, 2009). For example, a situation with an explicit request to self-promote should lead to more people engaging in narcissistic self-promotion.

It seems common sense that the strong situation hypothesis is correct. Interestingly, though, convincing empirical evidence for person-situation-interactions is still missing (Cooper & Withey, 2009; Sherman, Rauthmann, Brown, Serfass, & Jones, 2015).

1.4. The current study

The present study aims at examining the impact of strong situations on narcissistic self-promotion by experimentally manipulating different degrees of situation strength but keeping trait relevance constant. Trait-relevance (i.e., cues that are relevant for the expression of narcissistic self-promotion) was ensured by a task to self-describe. The strength of this situation differed in terms of the existence of certain primes: Participants either received subliminally presented primes, no primes, or an explicit request for positive self-presentations. Thereby, we followed the general approach of Tyler (2012) and thus, expected the subliminal primes to have a similar positive effect like the request to self-promote. We assumed that higher levels of narcissism would result in more favorable and narcissistic self-descriptions independent of the situational strength. We derived this hypothesis based on the findings by Cooper and Withey (2009) questioning the truth of the strong situation hypothesis. The rare person-situation-interactions found in previous studies (Sherman et al., 2015) further support the hypothesis. Finally, Paulhus et al. (2013) showed that narcissists present themselves more favorably in high-stakes situations such as selection interviews. The concept of agency (“get ahead”) and communion (“get along”) plays an important role for self-promotion or narcissism (e.g., Grijalva & Zhang, 2015). Thus, we differentiated agentic- and communal-narcissistic impressions. We tested the following hypotheses:

H1. Situations that include either an explicit request or a subconscious prime to promote oneself increase levels of a) favorable, b) agentic-narcissistic, and c) communal-narcissistic self-promotions in all participants.

H2. Higher levels of narcissism increase levels of a) favorable, b) agentic-narcissistic but not c) communal-narcissistic self-promotions.

H3. The strength of situational cues does not significantly moderate the influence of higher levels of narcissism on a) favorable, b) agentic-narcissistic, and c) communal-narcissistic self-promotions.

In addition, we were controlling for self-esteem, psychopathy and Machiavellianism. Only when controlling for the overlap with these traits the specific effect of narcissism can be interpreted distinctively (e.g., Campbell et al., 2002; Jones & Paulhus, 2014).

2. Method

2.1. Sample and procedure

The sample consisted of 219 subjects (141 women, nine participants did not report their demographics) with different educational backgrounds (34% university degree), which have been recruited through the experimental server of Humboldt Universität zu Berlin. On average, subjects were 37.52 ($SD = 16.93$) years old. All participants rated their own personality during an online survey. Afterwards, they were invited to the laboratory and assigned² to one of four experimental groups:

priming group, neutral group, instruction group and control group. The procedure (see Sections 2.1.1–2) was derived from the approach of Tyler (2012). All subjects received the cover story to take part in an experiment that deals with vocabulary and personality.

2.1.1. Experimental groups

The priming group was subliminally primed with 15 impression-related words (e.g., impression, presentation, image) and 15 neutral words (e.g., book, window, jump). These words were the same that Tyler (2012) used. Following his procedure primes had been masked by a row of “xxx” (225 ms) and stayed on the screen for 17 ms, followed by a lexical decision task. In this task subjects were provided with single words on a screen that had to be evaluated as an “existing word” (e.g., protagonist) versus “non-existing word” (e.g., camper).

After a pause of 1500 ms, the next round began (30 rounds in total). In the neutral group, the same neutral primes were used twice. The control and instruction groups fulfilled the lexical decision task only, without being primed in any direction. Following Ziegler and Bühner (2009), the instruction group got the request to “present yourself in a positive light by stressing your favorable characteristics without exaggerating or lying” instead.

The priming and instruction groups were seen as including strong external rewards for narcissistic self-promotion because they received (sub)consciously presented signals to describe oneself particularly positive to a potential new friend. The neutral and control groups, however, are considered to incorporate weak external rewards because they were not primed.

2.1.2. Self-description

After finishing the lexical decision task, subjects received the following assignment: “Imagine yourself to be new in town. Someone from your sports class, whom you have been rarely in touch with, wants to get to know you better. How would you describe yourself?” This task is trait relevant because narcissistic impressions are associated with self-introductions (Back, Schmuckle, & Egloff, 2010). Furthermore, the scenario intrinsically rewarded positive self-promotions through the pleasure of talking about oneself.

After finishing the self-description, participants answered the manipulation check question “How committed did you feel to the goal of making a special impression?” (from 1 = “not at all” to 7 = “completely”). This question was used to inspect whether participants from the priming group were aware of the primes. We expected that only people from the instruction group would be sensitive for their goal to convey a special image.

2.2. Variables and instruments

2.2.1. Personality questionnaires

The German version of the Short Dark Triad Scale (Jones & Paulhus, 2014; 9 items for narcissism, $\alpha = 0.70$; 10 items for Machiavellianism, $\alpha = 0.78$; 9 items for psychopathy $\alpha = 0.70$; 5-point Likert scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”)³ was used to measure the Dark Triad constructs.

To assess self-esteem the Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale in its German version (Collani & Herzberg, 2003; 10 items; $\alpha = 0.92$; 4-point Likert scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”) was used.

² During the assignment procedure, it was ensured that all groups have been matched according to the subjects’ narcissism scores and gender. Consequently, groups did not differ due to their levels of narcissism or gender, $F(3, 206) = 0.18, p = 0.91, \eta^2 = 0.003$ and $\chi^2(3) = 0.03, p = 1.00, \Phi = 0.01$, respectively.

³ We used a first unpublished version of this scale with 28 items. However, the narcissism scale was the same in both versions.

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