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REFLECTED SELF IN OTHERS: NARCISSISM AS MOTIVATION FOR MORAL CONDUCT

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Abstract

Past research has found that narcissists strategically show off their superiority by attempting to beat others in performance settings. However, an entirely different way in which narcissists' can achieve their goal of being superior—of carrying out a desirable behavior that few others perform—is to act morally in a public setting. This social aspect of narcissism would have the outward appearance of being other-oriented but actually stems from a self-centered desire. This study assessed the relationship between narcissism and morality by having participants complete the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI) and respond to moral scenarios that varied in the opportunity for admiration from others. The results revealed that female narcissists were more eager to conduct moral behavior than male narcissists, although the manipulation of the opportunity for public admiration affected men's interest in moral conduct more than women's. This suggests that narcissists' motivation for moral conduct may depend on gender, perhaps because of different gender norms for prosocial behavior.

Keywords: narcissism, morality, gender differences.

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INTRODUCTION

The fourth version of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM), the handbook used by mental health professionals in the United States to define and diagnose psychological conditions, described narcissistic personality disorder as possessing a "pervasive pattern of grandiosity," excessive "need for admiration," "lack of empathy," belief in one's own special uniqueness that only other special or high-status people (or institutions) can understand, and an "interpersonally exploitative" quality (DSM-IV, 1994). Narcissists love themselves as they are; there seems to be no room within them for an inclination to change or an interest in other people. This description of narcissism creates an impression of people living a passive fantasy in which they do nothing other than adore themselves while feeling superior and grandiose. However, narcissists are actually more active figures than might be expected (Wallace & Baumeister, 2002).

For example, Wallace and Baumeister (2002) explored the relationship between narcissism and performance. Their four experiments investigated how different performance conditions (e.g., money, level of difficulty, self-evaluation, public evaluation) and tasks (e.g., physical task, cognitive test, brainstorming task) were related to narcissists' and non-narcissists' motivation to perform well. Participants were asked to complete one of the tasks (e.g., math problems) twice, under one of the conditions mentioned above. Narcissists, as measured by a questionnaire called the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Hall, 1979), were more likely than non-narcissists to strive for better performance during the second attempt when the task was highly challenging (Studies 1 and 2), when they experienced time pressure (Study 3), and when they were being publicly evaluated (Study 4). Each of these manipulations should increase the likelihood of failure for the average person, so narcissists seem to have viewed them as particularly good opportunities to show how their abilities were superior to others'.

In other words, narcissists were more motivated by challenging tasks (e.g., difficult math questions involving more pressure) than non-narcissists were. Indeed, narcissists performed better under challenge relative to low-challenge and under public evaluation than private evaluation, while non-narcissists exhibited the opposite pattern. Wallace and Baumeister (2002) concluded that narcissists want to impress other people with great performance on a challenging task or in a stressful situation because it is precisely those situations where others are expected to fail and, therefore, narcissists can appear superior. Narcissists also tend to use comparative strategies for self-enhancement and to steal credit for other people's effort when they work on a cooperative task (Campbell, Reeder, Sedikides, & Elliot, 2000). All together, these findings demonstrate that narcissists' motivation to perform well stems from a desire to elicit favorable evaluations from others rather than a desire to reassure themselves about their own abilities. Their craving for admiration is based on the need for "reflected greatness," which refers to an admirable impression of themselves in the minds of other people (Wallace & Baumeister, 2002; Watson & Biderman, 1993). The idea that narcissists want to feel superior by having others

see them favorably (i.e., admiration) reveals the mental process behind their behavior. The positive reflection from others should provide confidence for narcissists, which they can use as fuel to maintain or even enhance their inner superiority (Wallace & Baumeister, 2002).

Another way to elicit favorable reactions from others is to perform a good deed. Despite narcissists' self-centered motivation, good deeds have the outward appearance of being contributions to society that involve other people. This notion is supported by Baumeister's (1982) remark that the desire to look good, in general (irrelevant to people's level of narcissism), promotes helping behavior. Perhaps narcissists eventually cannot be satisfied with just ordinary manifestations of their contributions to society that most others are also able to perform; that is, they may want a more sophisticated and challenging task, such as practicing moral conduct. Moral conduct can be a promising step toward this goal because it is highly beneficial to society, yet hardly achieved by most people due to its nature of needing to take risks and sacrificing one's own benefits (cf. Lothane, 1995).

Although the phrase "moral" implies motivations that are pure and selfless, social and moral motivations are largely indistinguishable (see Hogan, 1973; Tsujimoto & Nardi, 1978). This implies that moral conduct does not just entail behavior derived from one's conscience. Hogan (1973) makes a clear statement that moral behavior is actually social conduct that is under the rules of a given social context. Morality cannot be isolated from human relations or communication by people in society, even though a great amount of one's own conscience is certainly involved (cf. Graham, Nosek, Haidt, Iyer, Koleva, & Ditto, 2011). Lothane (1995) also points out that values of altruism are related to human relatedness. Literally, "morality has a social job to do" (Hogan, 1973, p. 219).

In terms of morality, even though narcissists appear to be less morally responsible due to their lack of empathy (e.g., DSM-IV, 1994; Watson & Morris, 1991), they can contribute to social welfare (i.e., practicing moral conduct) by engaging in the social domain of morality, no matter what their motivation is (e.g., winning admiration, enhancing self-esteem). The presence of other people—and therefore possible admiration from those people—should particularly elicit moral conduct in narcissists, relative to situations where no one is present (Campbell, Rudich, & Sedikides, 2002).

An additional factor that may influence narcissists' moral behavior is gender. Gender plays a key role in narcissism, as most individuals with diagnosed narcissistic personality disorder are men (DSM-IV, 1994). In a recent meta-analysis of past research on narcissism, Grijalva et al. (2015) also found that men were more narcissistic than women regardless of age. Consistent with traditional gender roles (e.g., DeSouza, 2013), men and women also vary in how they exhibit their narcissism. For example, Grijalva et al. note that men's greater feeling of entitlement, which may stem from their expectations and assumptions about male leadership in modern society, may contribute to their higher narcissism. This speculation is evidenced, for example, in the works of Carroll (1987) and Philipson (1985), which showed that men's tendency to express narcissism was a means

of controlling their environment (also see Richman, & Flaherty, 1990). Because entitlement involves social competition, evaluative situations are more appealing to male narcissists than female narcissists (Morf, Weir, & Davidov, 2000).

Considering these gender differences in narcissism, there are multiple possibilities for how narcissism and gender may interact in moralistic settings. On the one hand, as men tend to be more narcissistic overall, narcissistically-derived motivation for moral or righteous behavior may be more intensely evoked in men than women. On the other hand, men and women may have different beliefs about the social conditions they think will enhance their image if they act morally. Although narcissism typically features indifference to others and a lack of empathy (DSM-IV, 1994), women are expected to be more altruistic and communal than men (Eagly & Crowley, 1986), so narcissism might predict moral conduct differently in men and women. For example, male narcissists might be generally disinterested in helping others, whereas female narcissists may perceive moralistic situations as ideal opportunities to attract attention from others by behaving in an admirable fashion.

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate the moralistic tendency of narcissists with an empirical method. Participants completed a quantitative measure of narcissism and responded to a set of scenarios in which there was an opportunity to appear moral by behaving prosocially. There were two versions of the scenarios: no-admiration situations vs. admiration-salient situations. It was predicted that (1) men would score higher on the NPI, replicating previous research on the gender differences in narcissism, (2) those with high narcissistic tendencies would show higher motivation to behave morally in the admiration-salient condition, and (3) independent of any effects of condition, male narcissists would show lower morality (i.e., lack of motivation to help others) than women.

METHOD

Participants

The participants were 40 college undergraduate students (17 women and 23 men) enrolled in introductory psychology classes at a small liberal arts college in the Midwest who agreed to participate for a course requirement, for extra credit, or as a volunteer. Their ages ranged from 18 to 23 years old (M = 18.63, SD = 1.08).

Materials

Each participant received a packet of questionnaires, which contained the 40-item Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Hall, 1979; Raskin & Terry, 1988; see also, Wallace & Baumeister, 2002) and a set of scenarios to assess motivation for moral conduct.

The NPI is a forced-choice instrument (meaning participants pick which of two answers best describes them) and it originally contained 54 items, but this study used its 40-item version for the sake of brevity (Raskin & Terry, 1988; see also, Wallace & Baumeister, 2002). The administration of the NPI to a college student sample is justified because it was intentionally devised for use in nonclinical populations to measure the degree of narcissistic tendencies in ordinary individuals (i.e., the level of narcissism as a personality trait; Emmons, 1984; Watson & Biderman, 1993). In three studies assessing the construct validity of the full 54-item NPI scale and the 40-item version in undergraduate student samples, the NPI was found to capture seven distinct components of narcissism (Exhibitionism, Superiority, Vanity, Exploitativeness, Entitlement, and Self-Sufficiency), and the 40-item short version of the NPI was highly correlated with its 54-item version (cf. Raskin & Hall, 1981), r = .98 (Raskin & Terry, 1988). The internal consistency of the scale has been further supported by other researchers: Emmons (1984) reported a Cronbach alpha coefficient of .86 for the 54-item NPI, and del Rosario and White (2005) observed $\alpha = .80$ for the 40-item NPI.

The moral scenarios used in this study were created by the first author to assess participants' motivation for moral conduct in various situations. Four scenarios were constructed using the Sociomoral Reflection Measure (Schonfeld, Mattson, & Riley, 2005) and the Moral Comprehension Questionnaire (Marx, Job, White, & Wilson, 2007) as a starting point. Each scenario described a moral issue, such as cheating on an exam or helping another person. For example, the Moral Comprehension Questionnaire has an item about stealing money, so for this study a scenario describing a dilemma about whether to steal money was created. The scenario read: "When walking with a friend, you found \$1000 on the street. Nobody was around. Your friend said, 'We can have it. You'll have \$500, and I'll have \$500. It's between you and me.""

Three of the four scenarios concerned care for others (i.e., charity and helping others in need), and one concerned fairness (i.e., cheating and stealing), which are two of five basic moral domains advocated by Graham et al. (2013). There were two versions of each moral scenario. The moral behavior was the same, but the admiration-salient version was written to appeal to the admiration-seeking quality of narcissism. Specifically, in the admiration-salient version the moral task allowed the rater to predict that he or she could be treated as "special" (e.g., being respected, being recognized by authorities), obtain favorable attention from an audience, or show off his or her superiority by behaving morally. The no-admiration scenarios did not imply any reaction from others and only measured the respondent's motivation to perform morally good deeds.

For example, the no-admiration version of the previously described scenario read, "At this point, how motivated are you to bring the money to a police station?" The admiration-salient version of this scenario (in which the potential for praise and gratitude is highlighted) read, "Suddenly, you recalled that you had just seen a person looking for something on this street, though your friend did not appear to remember that. At this point,

how motivated are you to bring the money to a police station?" Participants responded on a scale of 0 (*extremely unmotivated*) to 4 (*extremely motivated*). Each participant's final moral conduct score was the mean of their responses across all scenarios.

Procedure

Each participant received a packet of questionnaires, which contained the 40-item Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Hall, 1979; Raskin & Terry, 1988; see also, Wallace & Baumeister, 2002) and a set of scenarios to assess motivation for moral conduct.

RESULTS

Means and standard deviations for the total rating scores on the moral scenarios in the no admiration and admiration-salient groups are provided in Table 1.

<u>Table 1</u>. Means and Standard Deviations of the Total Rating Score on NPI

	Gender	Mean	St. Deviation	N
NPI	Men	20.87	2.96	23
	Women	19.41	5.59	17
	Total	20.25	4.28	40

Note: Higher scores indicate greater tendency towards narcissism. NPI = Narcissistic Personality Inventory.

Mean NPI scores did not differ by gender, t(38) = -1.07, p = 0.29, contrary to Hypothesis 1.

A multiple regression analysis investigated how morality scores were predicted by condition (coded as 1 = admiration and 0 = no-admiration), NPI score (centered), gender (coded as 1 = female and 0 = male), and all two-way interactions. The three-way interaction was not considered because it was not relevant to the hypotheses. As seen in Table 2, there were significant main effects of the total NPI score, condition, and gender. Overall, moral conduct was lower among people high in narcissism, higher in the admiration-salient context, and higher among women.

<u>Table 2</u>. Summary of Multiple Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Morality Score (N = 40)

Predictor (R^2 =.46)	b	SE of b	β	p	
NPI Total Score	-0.23	0.78	-0.97	.005	
Condition	1.28	0.39	0.63	.02	
Gender	1.15	0.38	0.56	.005	
Condition*NPI	-0.003	0.68	-0.007	.97	
Condition*Gender	-1.32	0.57	-0.52	.03	
NPI*Gender	0.18	0.08	0.62	.03	

Note: NPI Total Score was centered at its mean. Higher scores on the morality scenarios indicate greater motivation for moral behavior.

Beyond these main effects, the interaction between NPI score and gender was significant, as well as the interaction between condition and gender. A simple slope test revealed that female narcissists were significantly more motivated to conduct moral behavior than male narcissists (b = 3.90, t(33) = 10.32, p < .001), but there was no difference among non-narcissists (b = 0.40, t(33) = .85, p = .40). Also, men were significantly less motivated to conduct moral behavior than women in the no-admiration condition (b = 2.47, t(33) = 2.81, p = .008), but there was no gender difference in the admiration-salient condition (b = -0.16, t(33) = .39, p = .70).

Although Hypothesis 2 (an interaction of narcissism and condition) was not supported, the results do support Hypothesis 3, which concerned gender differences in the relationship between narcissism and moral conduct. Male narcissists exhibited lower moral motivation than female narcissists, which shows a gender difference in how narcissism is expressed in a social setting.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between narcissism and moralistic tendency in moral scenarios varying in the opportunity for public admiration. This research represents the first exploration of narcissism and motivation for moral conduct.

Although the hypotheses were not fully supported, a notable finding was that narcissistic men were generally less motivated to engage in moral behavior than narcissistic women. This is promising evidence of gender differences in the relationship between narcissism and morality, and perhaps between gender and narcissism more generally. This combined with the negative relationship between narcissism and motivation for moral conduct as a function of gender may indicate that narcissism is more pronounced in men

than in women because of the different gender roles required in social communication (Philipson, 1985; Grijalva et al., 2015). In the culture studied here, women are expected to cooperate with others and build caring relationships with them (DeSouza, 2013; Gilligan, 1982). So, women might satisfy their narcissism through social interaction with others or by being needed by others (which is the case in a moral situation), compared to men whose narcissism may be derived from personal attention and praise. The different social expectations for men and women's morality and helping behavior are also evident in the significantly higher ratings on the moral scenarios by women.

Another possibility is that the behavior required to appear moral is a critical factor in whether men and women perceive the situation as an opportunity to gain favor. A meta-analysis of gender differences in helping behavior found that men engage in more heroic, action-oriented (or "rescue") help whereas women engaged in more communal, care-giving help, which is consistent with social norms about how men and women "should" behave (Eagly & Crowley, 1986). The moral situations used in the current study are better categorized as helping through concern about others rather than helping through heroism or rescue, and therefore women may have seen a greater potential social value of helping than men did. Because narcissism involves being sensitive to the social value—and therefore the opportunity for admiration—of situations, the gender by narcissism interaction can be explained by female narcissists perceiving greater social value to behaving morally in these situations.

These results are consistent with other evidence that narcissism predicts different behaviors in men and women. For example, O'Leary and Wright (1986) demonstrated that, in a pathologically narcissistic population, female narcissists showed more shame avoidance than men. This tendency may prevent female narcissists from actively participating in competition-based opportunities that would normally appeal to narcissists' need for admiration. Likewise, narcissism might differ in men and women at the cognitive level. Hibino, Yukawa, Kodama, and Yoshida (2005) found that, using a sample of Japanese junior high school students, the "need for admiration" characteristic of narcissism directly predicted boys' anger expression, whereas in girls the characteristic first led to the cognition of victimhood, which then predicted their urge to act aggressively. All together, these findings from previous research on gender differences among narcissists suggest that how the admiration-seeking quality of narcissism is expressed may make men look more like "typical" narcissists than women. The importance of potential admiration as a trigger for narcissists' tendency to show off their superiority may depend on gender as well as differing social roles and expectations about opportunities for admiration inherent in a situation (e.g., men may gain more admiration from heroism, while women gain more from appearing caring).

The interaction between condition and gender also highlights gender differences in self-presentation (i.e., attempting to look good) and impression formation more generally (cf. Manago, Graham, Greenfield, & Salimkhan, 2008). Men may be more sensitive to

potential self-presentation opportunities in a situation and flexibly conduct their actions accordingly. This is evidenced in differences in men and women's level of trait selfmonitoring, which refers to how much people observe and control themselves in response to current situational cues about what kinds of public behaviors are desirable (Snyder, 1974). Men tend to self-monitor by adjusting their emotional expressions according to the situation more than women (Levine & Feldman, 1997; see also Day, Schleicher, Unckless, & Hiller, 2002). Self-handicapping is another manifestation of men's greater motivation for positive public self-presentation. Specifically, men are more likely than women to create obstacles to sabotage their own performance (i.e., self-handicap) so an audience will see any performance failures as caused by that obstacle rather than lack of ability (e.g., Berglas & Jones, 1978). Of course, as with helping behavior, differing social norms about acceptable behavior for men and women may produce different types of self-presentation. For example, Vohs, Baumeister, and Ciarocco (2005) found that men were more likely to self-present in a task-based competition while women self-presented more in an interpersonal competition. If the moral conduct situations used in the present research provide opportunities for interpersonal self-presentation, then the greater moral conduct among female narcissists than male narcissists would be consistent with this research as well.

Gender differences in the expression of narcissism represent a promising direction for future research. Controlling for related concepts, such as self-esteem and self-consciousness, may also elucidate the relationship between the distinct characteristics of narcissism and outward behavior (Shabad, 2004; Sheldon, 1996). Measuring other concepts, like self-concept clarity (i.e., how much people feel they understand themselves), might help distinguish the effects of narcissism from overall self-esteem as well (Stucke & Sporer, 2002). How the subcategories of narcissism (i.e., overt narcissism, covert narcissism, and sexual narcissism) affect moral behavior would also be an interesting direction for future research (Ryan, Weikel, & Sprechini, 2008).

The current research is not without limitations, including a small sample size and the use of novel morality scenarios. Future research with a larger sample size may show clearer directions in gender differences involving narcissism. The morality scenarios were not obtained from past research or pilot tested, although the significant differences observed in this research suggest that the scenarios did elicit appropriate reactions from participants. Despite such limitations, the current study represents an important step in understanding how narcissistic traits predict behavior in ordinary populations. It also has practical value by demonstrating how narcissistic traits may sometimes result in behavior that is outwardly productive, acceptable, and even desirable.

Modern cultural norms in the United States encourage the development of high selfesteem because high self-esteem is considered an individually and socially desirable characteristic (Twenge & Campbell, 2003). In the educational system, raising children's self-esteem is considered beneficial so they can become personally and socially well-

adjusted figures. However, if high self-esteem includes a narcissistic component, it is considered unhealthy. Narcissistic high self-esteem is likely to have negative effects not only on narcissists themselves but also on interpersonal relationships. As Twenge and Campbell describe, it is not realistic to get a perfect score on every exam or to be the most popular person at school, which means narcissists may struggle when their expectations for self-esteem satisfaction are not met. Twenge and Campbell suggest the importance of considering how to reduce or prevent narcissism when fostering self-esteem. They argue that efforts to increase empathy and perspective taking, which is absent in narcissism, could be made in a classroom setting. With a better understanding of narcissism's development and outcomes, educators can guide their students to find confidence in their actual abilities and satisfaction with their true selves, without being obsessed with competitions or having the unrealistically favorable self-view that causes narcissism. This approach may eventually contribute to preventing narcissists' possible interpersonal problems.

Now is an ideal time to consider how emphasizing self-esteem while neglecting unintentional narcissism affects society and what direction should be taken for the sake of future generations. Hopefully, this study makes a contribution to a better understanding of the complicated mechanisms of narcissism and provides a useful direction for future research.

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