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Abstract

Although college students have been overrepresented in the participant samples of grandiose narcissism research, the accumulated evidence offers surprisingly few details about how narcissistic students approach their academic responsibilities. Our study asked college students (most of whom were first-years) for their general academic attitudes and to report how they would respond to various specific academic scenarios. Participant narcissism was measured with the Narcissistic Personality Inventory. We found that relatively narcissistic students were more likely to view their academic skill set as fully developed, and they were more comfortable relying on their gut instinct. Narcissistic students were also more confident within a classroom of peers, more comfortable asking questions in class, and more willing to engage with professors and visit office hours. They also reported willingness to skip class, ask for extensions, blame professors for poor grades, and strategically compliment professors. Overall, our interpretation is that the characteristics of narcissistic students are probably well-aligned with the realities of the academic reward structure to the extent that their corner-cutting facilitates maintaining good grades without high effort.

Is Being Narcissistic an Academic Advantage for College Students?

One of the best predictors of college GPA is achievement motivation and academic self-confidence (Mancuso, Newton, Kim, & Wilcox, 2013; Putwain, Sander, & Larkin, 2013). Student success is a joint effort of success in academics and satisfaction in life, and there is a relationship between self-efficacy, confidence in one's own abilities, and a higher GPA (Mancuso et al., 2013; Putwain et al., 2013). The goal of the current study was designed to test if there is a relationship between academic behaviors that are advantageous or disadvantageous to students and narcissistic behaviors in college students. There is research on college students because they are sampled frequently, but few have actually examined the academic behaviors of college students in relation to narcissism. There is behavior in academia educators and administrators would not endorse, such as cheating, but engaging in these behaviors might lead someone to the top through short cuts, and these scholastic behaviors might be adaptive in the sense of reward structure.

We are examining narcissism not as a disorder, but rather on a continuous scale from high to low. This study investigates whether being high in narcissism has advantages or disadvantages in academics. Narcissism has been studied extensively, but the research is interested in professors, disciplines, and the general population. College students have been research subjects over and over again, but college students have not been focused on in their own academic behaviors.

It is common to think of narcissists in two categories, grandiose and vulnerable, and our focus is on the grandiose type. Grandiose narcissists are confident and less sensitive, entitled, superior and have high self-esteem, not prone to shame, and think very highly of themselves

(e.g., Besser & Priel, 2010; Gramzow & Tangney, 1992; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). Our focus is on areas where grandiose narcissism would be adaptive and where it wouldn't be in academic settings. Research in narcissism has investigated the adaptive and maladaptive aspects of narcissism in personality, behaviors, leadership, power, self-esteem, entitlement, cheating, social loafing, and a myriad of other characteristics (Brunell, Staats, Barden, & Hupp, 2011; Campbell, Rudich, & Sedikides, 2002; Campbell & Seidor, 2016; Vazire & Funder, 2006; Walco & Risen, 2017; Wallace & Baumeister, 2002; Williams, Nathanson, & Paulhus, 2010). These aspects of narcissism have not been connected to academia yet and whether they are beneficial or not. We take into account a few overarching behaviors that could be maladaptive or adaptive in academia.

One category is unethical behaviors such as cheating, taking credit for other's work, and plagiarism. Narcissists report a lack of guilt towards cheating and a willingness to do so for self-enhancement (Brunell et al., 2011; Campbell & Seidor, 2016; Williams et al., 2010). Narcissism is also positively linked to fraud and deception (Rijsenbilt & Commandeur, 2012). In order to protect their identity, narcissists justify their unethical behavior and fail to see wrong in their doings (Duchon & Drake, 2009). We predict narcissists to agree that they would engage in these unethical behaviors in the classroom.

Narcissists motives are concerned with social dominance, and are low in morality and agreeableness, but have inflated views of the self in openness, intelligence, and extraversion (e.g., Campbell et al., 2002; Hart, Sedikides, Wildschut, Arndt, Routledge, & Vingerhoets, 2011). They tend to not like low-status positions making group work less effective due to narcissists focusing on their own ideas and needs (Benson, Jordan, & Christie, 2016). When

effort and success is indistinguishable from others, they act as social loafers, and allow others to carry the weight (Wallace & Baumeister, 2002). We predict narcissists to not particularly engage in group work, and instead allow the other members to do the work while taking credit for it.

Narcissists often exaggerate and brag about themselves to others and in the face of a threat to their ego, they react with aggression (Vazire & Funder, 2006). They often feel as if they are above others in power and intelligence (e.g., Campbell et al., 2002). Narcissists will follow their intuition, even with the knowledge that their intuition is wrong (Walco & Risen, 2017). One of most influential factors for academic success in participation is student and professor interaction outside of the classroom and having confidence would be a benefit here (Mancuso et al., 2013). We predict that narcissists will be confident in themselves and their ideas with no or little self-doubt.

Psychological health is positively correlated with narcissism and narcissists are low in depression, loneliness, neuroticism, and anxiety, but high in well-being and self-esteem leading to positive psychological health (Sedikides, Rudich, Gregg, Kumashiro, & Rusbult, 2004). Narcissists are shown to be low in anxiety and we predict this to be an advantage in presentations, tests, and performances in class (Sedikides, et al., 2004).

Our study is designed to pinpoint behaviors that students high in narcissism might engage in, and whether these behaviors are adaptive or not. In order to accurately portray academic behaviors, a survey was created to study what areas of behavior students high in narcissism engage in compared to students low in narcissism. This is a novel study, so there are no baseline questions and predictions for how they would react or answer in every situation or question.

Method

Fifty six introductory psychology students at Trinity University participated individually for extra course credit (35.7% male and 62.5% female). Four participants were excluded from the data due to failure on attention checks. The survey was administered by email. The participants were told the study was about academic attitudes and behaviors. They were informed their participation was voluntary and that the survey was anonymous.

Survey items consisted of questions pertaining to academics and behavior on a 7 point Likert scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Sample items include "I enjoy giving oral presentations" and "In writing a research paper, I might cite an academic journal even if I only had access to the article's abstract".

Narcissism was measured using two scales, the 13 item forced choice Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Gentile, Miller, Hoffman, Reidy, Zeichner, & Campbell, 2013) and the 18 item NARQ (Back, Kufner, Dufner, Gerlach, & Rauthmann, 2013). The NPI is a well validated scale ($\alpha = .62$), and the scores range from 0 to 13, with the higher the number meaning the person is higher in narcissism. Sample items include "I like having authority over people" and "I don't mind following orders" or "being in authority doesn't mean much to me" and "people always seem to recognize my authority". The NARQ was administered on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from not agree at all to agree completely. Sample items "I am great" and "I manage to be the center of attention with my outstanding contributions".

The Rosenberg self-esteem scale is a 10 item scale measuring global self-worth and is answered using a 4-point Likert scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree (Rosenberg, 1965). Sample items include "on the whole, I am satisfied with myself" and "I feel I do not have much to be proud of". On a scale of 1 to 10, higher scores indicate higher self-esteem.

The achievement goal framework (Elliot & McGregor, 2001) is a 12 item scale measuring performance approach, mastery avoidance, mastery approach, and performance avoidance goals. It is answered using a 7 point Likert scale from not at all true of me to very true of me. Some sample items are "it is important for me to do better academically than other students" and "I want to learn as much as possible in my classes".

The Brief-Pathological Narcissism Inventory (B-PNI; Schoenleber, Roche, Wetzel, & Pincus, 2015) is a 16 item inventory to assess vulnerable narcissism. It is on a Likert scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Some sample items are "when people don't notice me, I start to feel bad about myself" and "It's hard for me to feel good about myself unless I know other people like me".

The 10 item big 5 personality scale (Gosling, Rentfrow, & Swann, 2003) was used to assess personality traits. The items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from disagree strongly to agree strongly. Some sample items are "I see myself as extraverted and enthusiastic" and "I see myself as critical and quarrelsome".

For the purpose of this study, we are only going to discuss narcissism as it relates to the NPI. Participants completed the survey at the time and place of their choosing. They gave consent, answered their willingness to engage in certain behaviors, and completed the personality measures.

Results

As shown in Table 1, scores on the NPI ($M = 3.59$, $SD = 2.40$) and RSE ($M = 33.48$, $SD = 6.11$; $\alpha = .86$) were significantly correlated, $r = .51$, $p < .001$. The NPI was correlated with the performance approach only, $r = .25$, $p = .06$.

Table 2 shows confidence items and their correlations with NPI scores. Narcissism is correlated with confidence items having to do with not doubting their abilities to generate ideas, $r = -.42$, $p = .001$, and to creatively solve problems, $r = .26$, $p = .05$. NPI scores are also correlated with thinking that they are smarter than most of the students at their school, $r = .31$, $p = .02$, but not correlated with ability getting straight A's, $r = .11$, $p = .43$, or being an excellent student in any major they happen to choose, $r = .05$, $p = .73$. Narcissism is correlated with going with their gut, $r = .30$, $p = .023$, and they believe their academic skill set is fully developed, $r = .35$, $p = .009$.

Table 3 shows social loafing items and their correlations with NPI scores. High NPI scores are correlated with feeling comfortable asking other students for notes, even when they have nothing to offer in return, $r = .33$, $p = .013$. A high NPI score was negatively correlated with feeling bad about not carrying the weight in a group project, $r = -.27$, $p = .04$. Narcissism is correlated with taking courses taught by easy professors, $r = .39$, $p = .003$, and not correlated with taking interesting classes taught by difficult professors, $r = -.12$, $p = .39$. Narcissism and academic bullshitting are also correlated, $r = 0.28$, $p = .037$.

Table 4 shows unethical behavior items and their correlations with NPI scores. Narcissists report willingness to skip class without an excuse, $r = 0.27$, $p = .04$, and that they would not feel guilty doing so, $r = -0.37$, $p = .006$. High NPI scores are correlated with giving professors bogus excuses in order to receive more time on assignments, $r = 0.31$, $p = .02$. Narcissists might also give a professor a compliment in hopes of receiving a better grade, $r = 0.31$, $p = .003$. When writing papers, narcissists report that they would cite an paper, even if they only had access to the abstract, $r = 0.28$, $p = .036$. NPI scores and behaviors such as resenting the

professor for a bad grade, $r = .22$, $p = .11$, and trashing the professor on an evaluation were not significant, $r = .23$, $p = .092$.

Table 5 shows claiming education items and their correlations with NPI scores. Narcissism is correlated with feeling comfortable knocking on a professor's door to ask questions even if it was closed and that professor was not having office hours, $r = 0.44$, $p = .001$. Narcissism is negatively correlated with feeling bad about taking up a professor's time, $r = -0.31$, $p = .02$. Narcissism is also negatively correlated with hesitating the ask questions in class because the answer might be obvious to other students, $r = -.41$, $p = .002$.

Table 6 shows anxiety items and their correlations with NPI scores. Narcissism is negatively correlated with feelings of anxiety while thinking about oral presentations, $r = 0.27$, $p = .045$, and negatively correlated with feeling high anxiety while delivering oral presentations, $r = -0.32$, $p = .017$. Narcissism is not quite correlated with enjoyment of giving oral presentations, $r = 0.23$, $p = .092$, and preferring to have the most time on stage during oral presentations, $r = 0.22$, $p = .099$.

Discussion

This study represents the preliminary attempts to determine where narcissism is adaptive in academic settings as a college student. The results of this study suggest that narcissists engage in academic behaviors that are self-enhancing, negatively correlated with anxiety, social loafing, approach oriented, confident, and unethical.

Narcissists report having confidence in their abilities and ideas. Confidence is a combination of self-esteem and self-efficacy. Self- efficacy is a belief in one's ability to succeed in specific situations or accomplish a task and has been linked to success in college (Mancuso et.

al., 2013; Putwain et. al., 2013). Confident people are seen as more competent and able to attain

a higher status than unconfident people (Anderson, Brion, Moore, & Kennedy, 2012). Professors

have limited contact with their students over the course of a few months in one semester.

Students with confidence are able to get away with aggrandizement due to this limited contact.

Narcissists also reported the belief that their academic skillet is fully developed and that they go

with their gut, this reveals an assurance and certainty within themselves. Confidence is possibly

an adaptive advantage for narcissists in college and has the possibility to aide in surpassing

classmates.

The confidence items and education claiming items go hand in hand. Performance

approach goals are associated with a high need for achievement and competence (Darnon,

Harackiewicz, Butera, Mugny, & Quiamzade, 2007). Narcissists were associated with

performance approach and are unafraid to get answers from professors at any time and are

willinging to take up as much of the professor's time as they please. They are also unafraid to

ask questions in class, even if the answer to the question could be obvious to others. Interacting

with professors in and out of class is shown to be an indicator of success in college (Mancuso et

al., 2013). Narcissists abilities to claim their education and be approach oriented are adaptive in

the sense that they might have relationships with professors that other students would not.

Results show that narcissists engage in social loafing in group projects and the classroom.

When self-enhancement is not attainable, narcissists performance decreases (Wallace &

Baumeister, 2002). The advantage in the classroom from social loafing is doing less work, but

still achieving a good grade through the effort of peers. Narcissists would then have more time

for other college activities and through academic bullshitting would be able to talk their way around an answer they did not know or a presentation they did little work for.

Many studies have shown narcissists engage in unethical behaviors and fail to feel guilty about doing so (Brunell et al., 2011; Campbell & Seidor, 2016; Duchon & Drake, 2009; Rijsenbilt & Commandeur, 2012; Williams et al., 2010). Our study reveals many similar results such as skipping class, citing papers that have not been read, and bamboozling professors for extra time or better grades. These behaviors are adaptive in that narcissists are not afraid to use shortcuts to achieve success. They are maladaptive in the consequences of getting caught, but until they get caught, and there is no guarantee they will, they are outperforming others through means of cheating the system.

Anxiety was found to be negatively correlated with narcissism, per our prediction. Being high in anxiety is maladaptive in college, due to success being based off of performance, testing, and presentations. Narcissists are low in anxiety making them more likely to succeed in performance, and low anxiety is also adaptive for psychological health (Sedikides, et al., 2004).

Limitations and Future Directions

This study contained a few limitations. The first is the small sample size, and expanding the sample size is a future direction. Having a larger sample size will possibly bring forth more behaviors characteristic of narcissists and lead to stronger correlations. Self-report surveys leave room for error and possible lying about answers. Our questions also asked "would you do this" not "do you do this", which could imply that the participant would possibly do this and maybe does not actually partake in these behaviors. The participants also all come from the same institution, so only the demographics of this particular institution are taken into account. For

future research, we are going to see what behaviors students and professors find adaptive or

maladaptive in academic settings. This is an important direction of our study because our

hypothesis and conclusions suggest that narcissists engage in academic behaviors that are

adaptive. Distinguishing between what is and is not perceived as an adaptive behavior by

professors and students will strengthen our results.

Concluding Thoughts

College success is a pathway to personal success in the long-term and leads to achieving

career goals leading to life success and satisfaction (Mancuso et. al., 2013). Our results and

previous research, suggest that being high in narcissism is an adaptive advantage in college. The

behaviors and attitudes associated with narcissism are also associated with overall performance

in academic settings.

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Appendix

Table 1

Scale Correlations between Personality and Performance Motivation Types

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. NPI score	-					
2. RSE score	0.51*	-				
3. AG: Performance approach	0.25*	-0.01	-			
4. AG: Performance avoidance	-0.05	-0.19	0.18	-		
5. AG: Mastery approach	-0.07	0.07	-0.06	0.00	-	
6. AG: Mastery avoidance	0.08	-0.08	-0.02	0.23*	0.01	-

Note. Correlations above 0.2 are statistically significant ($p < .05$) Achievement goal is abbreviated "AG".

Table 2

Scale Correlations between NPI Scores and Items Portraying Confidence

Item	NPIr	M
I doubt my ability to generate ideas that are truly novel.	-0.42*	4.52
I feel that I am creative, in the problem-solving sense.	.26*	4.68
I often lose faith in my ideas.	-0.28*	4.21
When writing papers for class assignments, I often question the worthiness of my ideas.	-0.29*	4.66
If I really wanted to, I could get straight-As in college.	0.11	4.71
I could be an excellent college student in any major that I happened to choose.	0.05	3.73
I am probably smarter than most of the students at my college.	0.31*	2.93

In college, going with my gut works well for me.	.30*	4.16
My academic skillset is fully developed	.35*	2.09

Note. Correlations above 0.25 are statistically significant (p < .05)

Table 3

Scale Correlations between NPI Scores and Items Portraying Social Loafing

Item	NPIr	M
I would feel comfortable asking a fellow student to share his/her notes, even if I had nothing to offer in return.	0.33*	4.70
In a group study session, I would feel bad if I was not prepared enough to make a contribution.	-0.23	6.09
I would feel bad if my partners thought I was not carrying my weight for an academic group project.	-0.27*	6.09
I try to take courses taught by professors with a reputation for being easy graders.	0.39*	3.59
I often engage in academic bullshitting.	0.28*	3.82
If a course had a reputation for being extremely difficult but also really interesting, I would want to take it	-0.12	5.14

Note. Correlations above 0.25 are statistically significant (p < .05)

Table 4

Scale Correlations between NPI Scores and Items Portraying Unethical Behavior

Item	NPIr	M
If I got a bad grade on an important exam or assignment, I would probably feel resentment toward my professor.	.22	3.36
Every now and then, skipping a class without a legitimate excuse is okay.	.27*	4.34
If I skipped a class without a legitimate excuse, I would feel guilty.	-.37*	4.96
I might give a professor a bogus excuse in hopes of receiving more time to complete an assignment.	.31*	2.93
I might strategically offer a compliment to a professor in hopes that it would benefit my grade.	.39*	2.73
In writing a research paper, I might cite an academic journal article even if I only had access to the article's abstract	.28*	3.04
If I didn't like a professor, I would feel comfortable trashing him or her on the course evaluation form.	.23	3.57

Note. Correlations above 0.25 are statistically significant (p < .05)

Table 5

Scale Correlations between NPI Scores and Items Portraying Claims of Education

Item	NPIr	M
If I had a question about exam content one hour before an exam, I would feel comfortable emailing the professor to try to get an answer.	.22	3.16
If my professor's door was closed, and she/he was not holding office hours, I would feel comfortable knocking on the professor's door if I wanted to ask him/her a question.	.44*	.442

If I had a lot of questions for a professor in a visit to his/her office, I might feel bad about taking up a lot of his/her time.	-.31*	4.70
I sometimes hesitate to ask questions in class because I think the answer might be obvious to others.	-.41*	5.34

Note. Correlations above 0.25 are statistically significant (p < .05)

Table 6

Scale Correlations between NPI Scores and Items Portraying Anxiety

Item	NPIr	M
Thinking about oral presentations I will deliver in the future makes me anxious.	-.27*	4.96
I enjoy giving oral presentations.	.23	3.05
I often feel high anxiety when giving oral presentations.	-.32*	5.25
When giving a team presentation, I would prefer to have the most time on stage.	.22	3.02

Note. Correlations above 0.25 are statistically significant (p < .05)