NARCISSISM AND ATTRIBUTION THEORY

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Abstract

While surprising little research has focused on Narcissist Personality Disorder, a plethora of research has focused on narcissist traits within the nonclinical population and the differences found within this population. Individuals who score high on narcissism are more likely to have more fragile self-esteems. According to attribution theory, students may protect self-esteem by internalizing success while externalizing failure. Participants in this study were college students enrolled at a small, southeastern university. Participants completed a difficult analogy task selected to result in failure for virtually all participants. They were then given the results of their performance and asked to explain why they scored low. Participants also completed a Social Desirability Scale (SDS), the Narcissism Personality Inventory (NPI), and demographics questions. The results confirmed previous research that found narcissist traits decrease as one ages, although only marginally significant. An ANOVA also showed marginally significant results between NPI and SDS, when NPI was broken down into three groups. Attribution theory has important implications within the classroom. It is important for students to understand what habits contributed to success and what habits contributed to failure. Good grades don't always indicate mastering the material while lower grades don't always indicate a failure of understanding.

1. Introduction

According to the 4th edition Text Review of the American Psychiatric Association Diagnostic Statistical Manual 2000, "Narcissist Personality Disorder (NPD) is a pervasive pattern of grandiosity, need for admiration, and lack of empathy that begins by early adulthood and is present in a variety of contexts".[1] However trait narcissism research focuses on the same diagnostic characteristics that are present in the nonclinical population but not to the pervasive point indicated in the manual. In other words, "trait narcissism is a part of 'normal' psychology".[2] The most commonly used measure for trait narcissism is the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI) and was constructed using the criteria for NPD in 3rd edition of the DSM as a conceptual template to build a comprehensive list of dyadic items that were then reduced through validity testing.[3] In other words the inventory includes two options, one representing the narcissistic option and one representing the non-narcissistic option.

Listed in the DSM-IV are 9 diagnostic criteria for NPD. The 3rd criterion states that s/he believes they are "special" and unique and should only associate with other "special" or unique individuals. The 4th diagnostic criterion states that NPDs require excessive admiration.[1] These two criteria are the two main contributors to a NPD very fragile self-esteem because of the inability to receive criticism.

Given that there are varying levels of narcissism within the nonclinical population; one can then collect data on how this interacts with other variables within the population. One possibility is the interaction between narcissist traits and attribution theory. Based on Weiner's model of attribution that states performance based criticism will cause an outcome-dependent emotional reaction followed by a search for explanation for given performance. The attribution chosen, internal or external, will lead to an attribution-dependent affect. External attributions are linked

with failure while internal attributions are linked in success.[5] Attribution becomes one strategy for preserving the self-esteem on a trait narcissist. Confirming expectations, Stucke found that people who scored high on the NPI were more likely to attribute success to ability and failure to outside factors.[5] Narcissists are also known to preserve self-esteem through self-enhancement by over predicting performance.[4]

Then based on trait narcissism research, looking for the same diagnostic criterion in the nonclinical population, it is understood that people who score high on the NPI will also have fragile self-esteems. Thus in the face of criticism or negative feedback, the trait narcissist will have to find a way to preserve their grandiose perception of themselves, i.e. contributing failure to external factors. Conversely those who score low on the NPI will have stronger levels of self-esteem and will be more likely to take responsibility for failure and this attribute it to internal factors.

2. Methodology

Participants in this study were college students enrolled at a small, southeastern university. Students from various majors registered in psychology courses received partial course credit, referred to as PAL credits, or extra credit for participating. There were a total of 42 participants, of which 30 or 71.4% were female while only 12 or about 28.5% were male. The majority of participants ages ranged from 18 to 27 with two outliers aged 49 and 50 and the average age was 23.8. All participants self-identified as either White or Caucasian. Seniors accounted for 18 or 42.8% of participants, while Juniors accounted for another 13 or 30.9%. Freshman, Sophomores, and Post-Bachelor were included in the remaining participants and were 5, 2, and 4 respectively.

Participants completed five separate instruments: An analogy test, with analogies chosen because of their inherent difficult nature; a Socially Desirability Scale (SDS), and a 16 item Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI). The SDS is to control for participants who might try and control their responses on the NPI to fit expected social standards. The NPI measures narcissist traits. Both were renamed to help disguise the goal of the research. Finally the measure contains attribution questions and a basic demographics section.

Participants first completed the analogies section. Then they were given the SDS and NPI to complete while their analogies were graded. Next, they were given their grade and asked to complete the attribution and demographic questions.

3. Results

Analyses were conducted to examine the relationship between narcissism and demographics variables. Additional analyses examined differences between individuals based on narcissism scores. An ANOVA was calculated to investigate the differences between current year in school and score on the NPI. There were no significant differences on NPI due to year in school. There was a marginal negative correlation between age and score on the NPI (r=.27, p=.08); however, there was no significant correlation between age and score on the SDS. Surprisingly, there was no significant correlation between score on the NPI and score on the SDS.

Scores on the analogies ranged from 0 to 6 out of 10 with an average score of 2.69 and a Standard Deviation of 1.33. These low scores indicated that this was truly a failure task; furthermore, there was no correlation between GPA and score on the analogy section.

Next, participants were broken down into three groups based on their NPI score: low, medium and high. An ANOVA was then calculated comparing the three groups and their scores on the SDS. The results were marginally significant with Low-NPI scores also scoring the lowest mean on the SDS and Medium-NPI and High-NPI having similar means on the SDS (F(2,39) = .004, p = .996). The SDS measures how socially desirability of someone's actions. However the Standard Deviations were fairly large for all three groups.

Finally, there were no relationships between any of the following: GPA, Narcissism, score on the Analogies, and Attribution.

4. Discussions

The results did confirm previous research that Narcissist traits diminish as one ages and showed a marginal negative correlation between NPI and age.[6] Surprisingly there was no correlation between age and score on the SDS. One might assume that as one gets older and their narcissist traits diminish, their desire to fit in socially would also

diminish, however; our results do not reflect this reasoning. The lack of correlation between score on the NPI and score on the SDS is surprising given similar reasoning. If a participant possesses a low number of narcissist traits then it could be assumed they would also forego being socially desirable. Also, it could be assumed that if a participant possesses a high number of narcissist traits then their externally balanced levels of self-esteem would be susceptible to social criticism and lead to higher levels of socially desirable behavior. This reasoning was not reflected in our results.

Previous research has relied on some level of deception during their performance task, whether using an impossible task[7] or false feedback[5]. Our current study chose to avoid deception by using a global failure task. This was created by choosing very difficult analogies from the GRE website which also added an intimidation factor given a fair number of college students are scared of analogies. Then given the overall low performance, test difficulty was chosen overwhelmingly first, by two-thirds of participants, as the most important contributing factor to performance. Almost the remaining one-third of participants attributed intellectual ability as the number one reason for their performance. Given that most participants scored very low on this section it is unclear whether they were pleased or displeased about their score and thus consider their intellectual ability low or high. The overall low scores and the majority of test difficulty attributions do lead to one obviously conclusion. Most participants, no matter how many narcissistic traits they possessed, have a need to protect themselves from failure. This is not surprising considering the negative emotions failure can cause and the life-long need to participate in situations where failure may be possible.

Also, given the lack of correlation between score on the NPI and scores on the analogy section and the use of the global failure task, it was impossible to find results anywhere similar to the previously noted research and expected results.

5. Limitations

The first limitation was the use of a small number of students from the same small public university. Ideally a sample should reflect the population as a whole and young, white college students probably doesn't fulfill this requirement. This can cause all sorts of problems when trying to link trends in the greater population to a small subset of the population.

Another limitation of this study was the lack of success on the analogy task. This gave no opportunity to compare the present study to previous research on success and attribution. However the global failure also became a strength of the study. It shows that failure can produce the same feelings in all participants no matter how many narcissist traits they possess.

6. Suggestions for Future Research

One suggestion would be to use the 40 item NPI scale instead of the 16 item scale. The 16 item scale was chosen because the estimated time to complete the entire study was overestimated. Asking the participants to complete 24 more items probably wouldn't have pushed completion time beyond a reasonable limit and could have produced greater variance in the NPI scores. This may have led to a change in the NPI scores' relationships with the other variables.

Another suggestion would be to complete a longitudinal study with both the NPI and SDS and determine if there is a correlation between the two. Whether their fluctuations are dependent on each other or are they fluctuate independently.

Yet another suggestion would be to use a task that is not only difficult but also allow for some level of success. These tasks take time to develop because the participant needs to feel they can succeed but also challenged to a level that can cause failure. This would open up the possible for greater variability in the attribution theory questions.

7. References

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