



2009

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Recommended Citation

(2009) "Will Narcissists Distort? Personal Perceptions of Success and Failure in Narcissistic Individuals," *Intuition: The BYU Undergraduate Journal of Psychology*. Vol. 5 : Iss. 1 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/intuition/vol5/iss1/6>

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Will Narcissists Distort? Personal Perceptions of Success and Failure in Narcissistic Individuals

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ABSTRACT *This study examines the relationship between participants' levels of narcissism and their perceptions of success. The researchers hypothesized that more narcissistic individuals would perceive greater success on a word unscrambling test compared to less narcissistic participants. Seventy-eight BYU undergraduates completed the NPI-16 (a measure of narcissism), followed by an easy or difficult word unscrambling test, and then a demographic questionnaire. Results showed that more narcissistic participants did perceive greater personal success than less narcissistic participants, regardless of test difficulty. These findings show support for self deception as a key to grandiose narcissism. Further research could investigate whether task difficulty influences narcissistic self deception, and whether non-grandiose narcissists engage in similar self deception.*

Will Narcissists Distort?

It is estimated that about one percent of the population suffers from clinical narcissism, a personality disorder characterized by lack of empathy, fixation on self, and grandiosity. The DSM III-TR first introduced Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) as a mental health diagnosis in 1980. As with any disorder, NPD is made up of many facets which are still being studied (Raskin & Terry, 1988). Narcissists generally exhibit greater autonomy, willfulness, and hypersensitivity (Wink, 1992). Maladaptive narcissism is characterized by infatuation with the self to the exclusion of others and an overwhelming drive towards self gratification, relying on self deception to maintain the illusion of self importance (Raskin, Novacek & Hogan, 1991). Narcissists tend to react differently than others to success and failure, often attributing failure to external causes or sources (Stucke, 2003). Doing so allows them to avoid the anger and sadness that result from the revelation of their faults. Narcissists experience a greater than normal emotional response to success and failure (Rhodewalt & Morf, 1998), but little research has been

done regarding the narcissist's ability to perceive his or her own success or failure (John & Robins, 1994).

Because few studies have documented the relationship between self perception and narcissism, the present study investigated narcissists' ability to accurately perceive success and failure. Narcissists, as defined in the DSM-IV, exhibit grandiose ideation. They often engage in self deception to preserve their aggrandized view of themselves (Raskin et al., 1991) and show consistent distortion of perception in regards to their performance (Gabriel, Critelli, & Ee, 1994). Narcissists will consistently overrate their personal ability when compared to others' performance or to clinicians' assessments. There seems to be a lack of information specifically concerning narcissism and personal perceptions of success when failure is experimentally induced. The present study evaluated participants' reactions to induced failure, and theorized that those with higher levels of narcissism would significantly distort their perception of success.

Narcissism is specifically described as psychological self absorption (Akhtar & Thomson, 1982). The narcissistic focus on self becomes unpalatable to those who recognize their own faults. Grandiosity, an inflated appraisal of one's worth, power, knowledge, importance or identity, serves to enable narcissistic thinking. As described in the DSM-IV, one of NPD's primary traits is grandiosity. Better stated, grandiose constructs comprise one of the two major themes of narcissism (Cain, Pincus, & Ansell, 2007). Grandiosity relies on the belief in a fictional ideal self and denial of reality (Raskin et al., 1991) and this aspect of narcissism is the focus of the present study.

Narcissists routinely overestimate their own success, using comparative enhancement strategies in addition to non-comparative enhancement strategies (Campbell, Reeder, Sedikides & Elliot, 2000). Non narcissistic individuals are likely to underreport their success, whereas highly narcissistic individuals greatly over report their

success (John & Robins, 1994). For non narcissists, viewing their performance leads to decreased self enhancement; for narcissists, self enhancement of performance increases in these situations (Robins & John, 1997). Additionally, narcissists report a high level of interpersonal sensitivity despite the fact that they consistently show very low levels of interpersonal sensitivity (Ames & Kammrath, 2004). Narcissism also positively correlates with self reported intelligence (Gabriel et al., 1994). Because grandiose narcissism and self-deception are positively correlated, it was expected that participants with higher levels of grandiose narcissism would unconsciously replace the failure they experienced with a feeling of success, or possibly relative success.

In subjective settings, narcissists report greater success than people inside and outside their social circumstances (John & Robins, 1994). However, current and past research concerning narcissism and success or failure is not complete. While much research shows motivation for distortion of perception and actual distortion of perception in regards to performance, no research has experimentally demonstrated reportable amounts of alteration to perception. The next step is to measure perception of success with regards to actual, concretely measurable success in the context of narcissism. Rather than measuring specific traits of narcissism or effects of specific feedback on narcissistic individuals, the goal of the present study was to correlate levels of narcissism and test difficulty with perceptions of success or failure.

It was hypothesized that participants with higher levels of narcissism would have greater perceptions of personal success, regardless of test difficulty. An alternative hypothesis was that test difficulty would affect distortions of success; for example, narcissistic participants may have perceived higher levels of success only if the test were easy as opposed to difficult. Nevertheless, it was hypothesized that, in general, participants who scored higher on the narcissism scale would rate themselves as more successful, compared to less narcissistic individuals who would rate themselves as less successful. Analysis included participants' perceptions of success or failure in comparison to their actual success or failure.

Methods

Design

This cross-sectional study was conducted within three weeks at Brigham Young University. Participants first completed the NPI-16, which assessed level of narcissism. Participants then completed one of two forms of a word unscrambling test. The unscrambling test consisted of ten items, which were words to be unscrambled by the participant. The participants were told that they could guess on any item even if they weren't sure of the correct answer. The "easy" test consisted of ten words which were short in length and easily decipherable. The hard test was compiled of ten words, two of which were actual words (although not in the least bit common), and the rest being letter combinations that could not possibly be unscrambled into words. In order to manipulate the independent variable (test difficulty), half of the participants received an easy test, while the other half received a difficult test. The participants were unaware that different forms of the test were handed out. Following a 10 minute time limit, the tests were collected and then a questionnaire, including questions about demographics, was distributed. To validate the manipulation of test difficulty, participants marked a 10-point Likert scale how difficult they believed their test was, regardless of their performance. Participants then marked a 10-point Likert scale, which assessed the dependent variable, participants' perceptions of personal success or failure, as well as filled out demographic information. Confounding variables may have included GPA and differing abilities in completing the test; thus, questions about GPA and previous experience with word unscrambling were included in the follow up questionnaire as well.

Participants

Seventy-eight BYU undergraduates from psychology courses were recruited without respect to gender, race, age, or socioeconomic status. No inclusion or exclusion criteria were employed in the selection of research participants. IRB approval was obtained prior to beginning the study, and all participants signed an informed consent form.

Materials

The NPI-40 has been used as the leading indicator of

TABLE 1

Summary of Demographic Information, Manipulation Check, and Covariates

Variable	Difficult Test Group	Easy Test Group	<i>p</i> value
Demographics			
Age	22.03 (6.1)	21.49 (3.1)	.736
Gender (% Female)	54.1%	53.7%	.972
Ethnicity (% White)	83.8%	90.2%	.394
Class/Year (% Soph)	37.8%	22.0%	.317
Major (% Psych)	48.6%	53.7%	.415
English (% Native)	97.3%	95.1%	.539
Manipulation Check			
Test Difficulty	7.78 (2.1)	5.39 (2.4)	<.001
Covariates			
Text Twist	1.54 (0.5)	1.59 (0.5)	.631
Text Twist Frequency	1.94 (0.7)	2.59 (1.1)	.829
GPA	3.46 (0.4)	3.4 (0.5)	.734

Narcissistic Personality Disorder since its creation and is statistically reliable ($\alpha=0.84$), valid, and shows accurate levels of narcissism in any given individual (Raskin & Terry, 1988). This study employed a shortened version of the NPI, called the NPI-16, which includes 16 questions and has slightly less reliability than the NPI-40 ($\alpha=0.72$); these two measures were correlated at $r=0.90$ ($p < .001$). The participant must select one of two choices that best describe their personality, such as: a) "I am an extraordinary person," or b) "I am much like everybody else." One of the choices is attributed to a narcissistic personality and the other is not, and the responses are scored accordingly. This shortened version of the NPI has roughly the same reliability and validity scores as the original NPI-40, and is practical in situations where time is limited (Ames, Anderson & Rose, 2006).

The level of perceived success for each participant was measured with a questionnaire using a 10-point Likert scale. The scale asked the participant to rate their perceived level of success based on points ranging from 1 (very unsuccessful) to 10 (very successful). Participants reported perceptions of test difficulty, which served as a manipulation check.

Procedure

At the time of testing, the researchers greeted participants briefly with a simple welcome and thanks for volunteering. The measure was administered in a group setting, and a brief introduction to and explanation of the study ensued, including that the purpose was to determine success and failure on a specific task. The participants were informed that the experiment would occur in three parts: first filling out a personality questionnaire, taking

a word unscrambling test, and then completing a follow-up questionnaire and demographics sheet. After signing the consent form, participants filled out the personality questionnaire (NPI-16). An explanation of the "scrambled-word test" followed, and it was indicated that each participant would receive the same test. Different forms of the test were randomly assigned to participants; in each session of the experiment, half of the participants received a difficult test and the other half received an easy test. Participants had a 10 minute time limit for this portion of the experiment, but completion of the task was not required. Following the 10 minute time limit, participants filled out the self-report questionnaire, which assessed participants' perceptions of success. They also rated the difficulty of the test, regardless of their personal perception of success or failure, and this served as the manipulation check. A quick debrief took place at the end of the experiment, and participants understood that there were, in fact, two forms of the word unscrambling test. Any further inquiries were answered on an individual basis.

Results

Data was analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. All analyses were conducted using the SPSS 15.0 computer program. Means and standard deviations (or percentages) were used to descriptively examine if there were any differences between the experimental groups. To inferentially analyze the main effect of narcissism and perceptions of success, the General Linear Model procedure was used to obtain ANOVA data.

The means and standard deviations (or percentages) for the main variables are presented in Table 1. The dependent variable (perception of success) was normally distributed, having no significant outliers or problems with skewness or kurtosis. The two experimental groups did not differ on the demographic measures of age, gender, ethnicity, year in school, English as a native language, or major, indicating that the groups were roughly equal demographically (See Table 1). The manipulation check showed that participants in the difficult test group rated their test as significantly more difficult, as compared to

TABLE 2

Summary of Demographic Information, Manipulation Check, and Covariates

Dependent Variable: Perceptions of Success		
Source	F	p value
Level of Narcissism	5.104	.027
Level of Narcissism * Test Group	.241	.625

TABLE 3

Level of Narcissism and Number of Questions Participants Believed They Answered Correctly

Dependent Variable: Correctly Answered		
Source	F	p value
Level of Narcissism	3.901	.052
Level of Narcissism * Test Group	.186	.668

the ratings of the participants in the easy test group ($p < .001$; see Table 1), indicating that the experimental treatment had the desired effect.

The main hypothesis was that participants with higher levels of narcissism would distort their perceptions of success and rate themselves as more successful, regardless of which test form they completed. Participants filled out the NPI-16 questionnaire, then took the word-unscrambling test. The participants whose NPI-16 responses were above average (mean) when compared to the other participants were labeled as "high narcissists". Those measuring below the mean were labeled as "low narcissists." A 2 (narcissism level) by 2 (test difficulty) ANOVA revealed a main effect of narcissism on perceived success rating ($F(1, 76)=5.10, p < .05$) (See Table 2). In the difficult test group, participants who were more narcissistic rated success on the 10-point Likert Scale at a mean of 3.00 ($SD=2.4$), while participants who were less narcissistic rated success at a mean of 1.89 ($SD=1.7$). In the easy test group, participants who were more narcissistic rated success on the 10-point Likert Scale at

Figure 1. Graph of perceptions of success on a 10-point Likert scale.

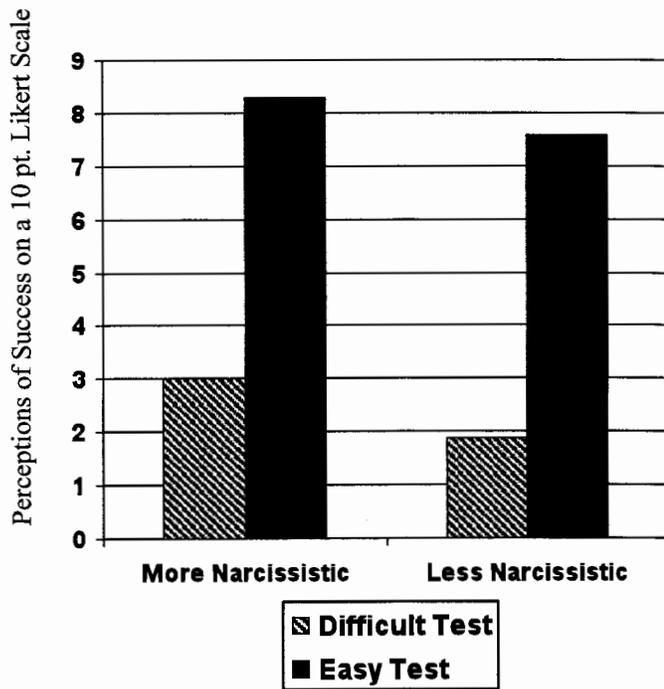
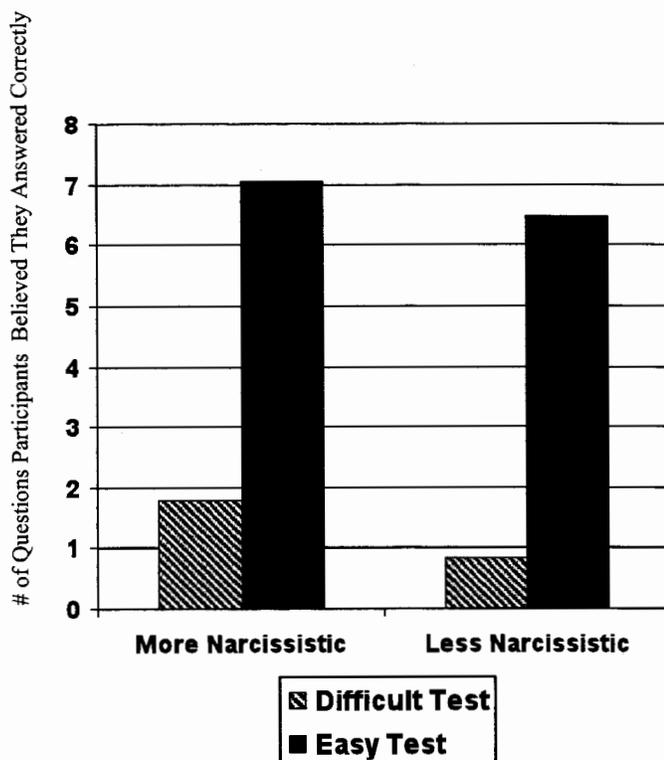


Figure 2. Graph of perceptions of success based on how many questions participants believed they answered correctly.



a mean of 8.29 (SD=1.3), while participants who were less narcissistic rated success at a mean of 7.58 (SD=1.5) (See Figure 1). Perceptions of success were also measured by asking participants how many questions out of 8 they believed they answered correctly. This measure approached significance ($F(1, 76)=3.90, p < .052$; See Table 3). In the difficult test group, participants who were more narcissistic believed they correctly answered a mean of 1.78 questions correctly (SD=2.4), while those who were less narcissistic believed they correctly answered a mean of .84 questions correctly (SD=1.6). In the easy test group, participants who were more narcissistic believed they answered a mean of 7.06 questions correctly (SD=1.0), while those who were less narcissistic believed they answered a mean of 6.46 questions correctly (SD=1.6) (See Figure 2). Thus, the main hypothesis received support that narcissism affects perceptions of success.

An alternative hypothesis was that participants with higher levels of narcissism would distort perceptions of success differently depending on which test form they completed (See Table 2). The data do not support this hypothesis, however ($p=.625$), indicating that narcissists distorted regardless of the task difficulty.

Discussion

As was hypothesized, narcissists perceived their level of success to be higher than non-narcissists on both the hard and easy tests. One goal of the study was to see if the actual abilities of narcissists to perceive levels of success were altered due to the high levels of the trait prevalent in their personality. The experiment was constructed in a way to determine if those with higher levels of narcissism exhibit a greater amount of perceived personal success. Previous studies have shown that narcissists generally will self enhance in ego involving situations (John & Robins, 1994). A potential weakness of previous studies has been the subjective nature of performance measurement. The main purpose of this study was to clarify the nature of narcissists' self deception by demonstrating self deception objectively. By showing an increase in perception of success despite the impossible nature of the difficult test, the results support the idea

that narcissists actually deceive themselves—that they inflate their perception of success.

Previous research demonstrates the correlation of grandiose narcissism to self-deception (Raskin et al., 1991). This correlation was further demonstrated by studying the relationship between self and other's perception of success on a business task (John and Robins, 1994). Due to the subjective nature of that task, much effort was needed to demonstrate the validity of neutral observers' reports of success on a business task. The findings from the present experiment support the idea that narcissists actually inflated their self-perception. More narcissistic individuals reported greater perception of success on both the relatively easy and difficult word unscrambling tests. As mentioned above, the impossible nature of the difficult test supports the idea that narcissists self-deceive; the fact that a similar increased perception of success exists for narcissists who took the easy test supports the idea that narcissistic self-deception is not limited to impossible tasks, but instead takes place in all tasks. This study adds credibility to the conclusions of previous research, further demonstrating the link between narcissism and self-deception.

Narcissists confronted with their failure exhibit a greater than average emotional response. Most people feel discomfort when something they believe turns out to be false; narcissists, whose self-esteem is more directly linked to self-perception, feel personally threatened or even attacked when their false perceptions are exposed. This explains the fragile nature of their self-esteem—because their self-esteem is based on misperceptions, they will often be confronted with evidence showing their self-perceptions to be false. They must then either accept a blow to their self-esteem or continue to self-deceive and preserve their grandiose self-image.

Additionally, the results show that narcissistic grandiosity applies specifically to performance on tests. Those administering personality tests or other measures must account for self-deception when testing narcissists. All measures specifically used to study narcissists must take this self-deception into account. Even non-written assessments should consider the tendency of narcissists to distort the facts.

Although the results seem definitive, there are some weaknesses in the study. Because the participants in this study were all students of BYU, the represented

sample population could in fact be different from other populations. The levels of narcissism could have been significantly different than that representative of a normal population, consequently causing a difference in results. Also, the sample was taken from a highly religious population of Latter-day Saint students. Certain practices or beliefs, such as prohibitions against lying or self-aggrandizement could have been potential confounds that affected the data.

The study's main goal was to examine perceptions of success with regards to performance on a test. Though the analyzed results showed there was a significant difference between the ratings of test difficulty, it was expected that the differences would be even greater. Perhaps the easy test was not easy enough to provide a good contrast to the hard test. Secondly, not much effort was put into ensuring that participants weren't looking on other participants' answers. Cheating would have added a new confound into the procedure that could have skewed results in a few cases.

Due to inherent factors with the methods used, other explanations of the collected data are possible. The difficult test had words that did not exist. It is possible that some of the participants realized this, and raised their level of perceived success because they knew that the test was impossible. Another alternative explanation could have come from the NPI-16 that was administered prior to taking the word unscrambling test. Because many of the questions on the NPI-16 contained words that are generally associated with confidence and self-reliance, the words could have primed the participants to illicit more confident responses in the demographics and follow-up questionnaire. Lastly, the use of a Likert scale can only result in relative responses from each student. Using a scale implies that each participant would need to have similar judgment on how to rate their performance and difficulty of the test received. Each participant having unique and entirely different backgrounds could have caused a difference in judgments when given a scale based entirely on judgment. This could have caused confounds in the data. Similarly, experiences that might have occurred prior to participating in the examination had the potential to change the self-esteem of any given individual for a period of time. A negative or positive experience could have caused participants to answer questions on the NPI or follow-up questionnaire differently.

This study improves the understanding of narcissists' tendency to distort self perception, but leaves some significant questions unanswered. For instance, the data showed slightly greater differences between more narcissistic and less narcissistic individuals on the difficult test than on the easy test. While the differences were not statistically significant in the present study, further research more directed towards this aspect of self perception could be helpful in clarifying this effect. Narcissistic inflation of self perception could either vary based on the difficulty of the task they engage in, or remain fairly constant regardless of test difficulty; either result would be interesting. Variance of self deception depending on difficulty implies an important relationship between self deception and ego enhancement; otherwise, constant rates of self deception could allow research into corrections in self report surveys based on level of narcissism.

Another angle of approach would be to use the NPI-40 or other inventories of narcissism to measure the link between specific traits of narcissism and self deception. Narcissism is divided into at least two subtypes, grandiose and vulnerable (Wink, 1991). Grandiose narcissism is specifically correlated to self deception (Raskin et al., 1991), but further research could investigate the vulnerable subtype of narcissism. By demonstrating the relationship between vulnerable narcissism and self perception, greater understanding of the similarities and differences of narcissistic subtypes could be obtained.

In sum, narcissists tend to inflate their perceptions of success, even when actual success is impossible. Understanding narcissistic cognitions and behavior patterns may lead to better test instruments for analysis of narcissism, as well as a better understanding of the narcissistic assessment of self.

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