Personality and Individual Differences 114 (2017) 103–107

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Personality and Individual Differences

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/paid

Strategically out of control: A self-presentational conceptualization of narcissism and low self-control

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 6 September 2016
Received in revised form 16 March 2017
Accepted 19 March 2017
Available online 5 April 2017

Keywords:
Impression management
Narcissism
Self-control
Self-presentation

ABSTRACT

Vazire and Funder (2006) suggested that narcissists struggle to control themselves and their characteristic narcissistic behaviors reflect this struggle. Here, we seek to propose a different perspective on narcissists' apparent struggle with low self-control. Because power is associated with freedom and autonomy and because narcissists have a heightened motivation to exude power, we suggest that they may *intend* to act in ways that imply they do *not* inhibit their urges (i.e., are low in "self-control"). In the present study, participants ($N = 542$) completed an index of power motivation, their prizing of low-self-control characteristics (e.g., being "uninhibited"), their strategic displays of these characteristics, and trait indices of low self-control. A path model revealed that narcissism was positively associated with power motivation, which in turn, related to prizing low-self-control characteristics. This enhanced prizing of low self-control characteristics, in turn, predicted participants' strategic displays of these characteristics, which, in turn, related to scoring lower self-control trait measures. The evidence is in line with the view that narcissists' apparent battle with self-control is actually a strategy.

1. Introduction

Vazire and Funder (2006) proposed that narcissists behave narcissistically because of their lack of self-control and impulsive nature. Their work largely conceptualized self-control as *ego control*, which refers to the ability to inhibit impulses and delay gratification (Block & Block, 1980; Kremen & Block, 1998; Roberts, Lejuez, Krueger, Richards, & Hill, 2014). Their meta-analysis reported a moderate-to-large relation (weighted mean r of 0.41) between narcissism and low self-control and reasoned that "there is no internal subjective logic to [narcissists'] behavior, they are simply overcome by impulses that they fail to contain" (p. 158). Their data and ideas are intriguing, in part, because they challenge conventional ideas that narcissists—at least non-pathological grandiose narcissists, as indicated by the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Terry, 1988)—are rational (Hart, Adams, Burton, & Tortoriello, 2017), well-adjusted (Sedikides, Rudich, Gregg, Kumashiro, & Rusbult, 2004), socially and financially successful, and gritty people (Hirschi & Jaensch, 2015; O'Reilly, Doerr, Caldwell, & Chatman, 2014; Wallace, Ready, Weitenhagen, 2009). Perhaps narcissists are good at compensating for their low self-control, or perhaps there is more to their low self-control than meets the eye. Here, we argue that Vazire and Funder's conceptualization of narcissists' low self-control is incomplete. Specifically, we suggest that narcissists deliberately alter their behavior to *appear* low in self-control to project a desired identity.

This suggestion coheres with a model of narcissism inspired by broad theories of self-presentation (Schlenker, 1980, 2003). Self-presentation theory suggests that human behavior is often designed to project subjectively desired identity images to audiences. This theoretical tradition has re-conceptualized apparently irrational and self-defeating patterns of human behavior such as mental illness (e.g., schizophrenia; Braginsky, Braginsky, & Ring, 1969), gambling (Holtgraves, 1988), antisocial behavior (Tedeschi & Felson, 1994), and substance use (Leary, Tchividijian, & Kraxberger, 1994) as, in part, behavioral choices intended to project desired identities (Leary, 1995; Schlenker, 1980). In this tradition, the self-presentation model of narcissism was proposed to situate narcissists' supposed "irrational" or "self-defeating" behavior in light of their attempts to control self-relevant images to audiences (Hart, Adams, & Burton, 2016; Hart et al., 2017).

Operating within this framework, we suggest that narcissists' low self-control can be re-conceptualized as, at least in part, a self-presentation process that might follow from narcissists' ardent desire to appear powerful and their disagreeable nature. First, because power and privilege allow for freedom of expression and personal autonomy (French & Raven, 1959; Magee & Galinsky, 2008), behaviors indicative of low self-control (e.g., *not* inhibiting urges) can be strategically enacted at opportune times to project these desired images (Korda, 1975; Sturm & Antonakis, 2015). Indeed, previous research reveals that power-priming manipulations cause a variety of behaviors that map onto low-self-control behaviors such as selfishness, risk taking, self-indulgence, and quick

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2017.03.046
0191-8869/

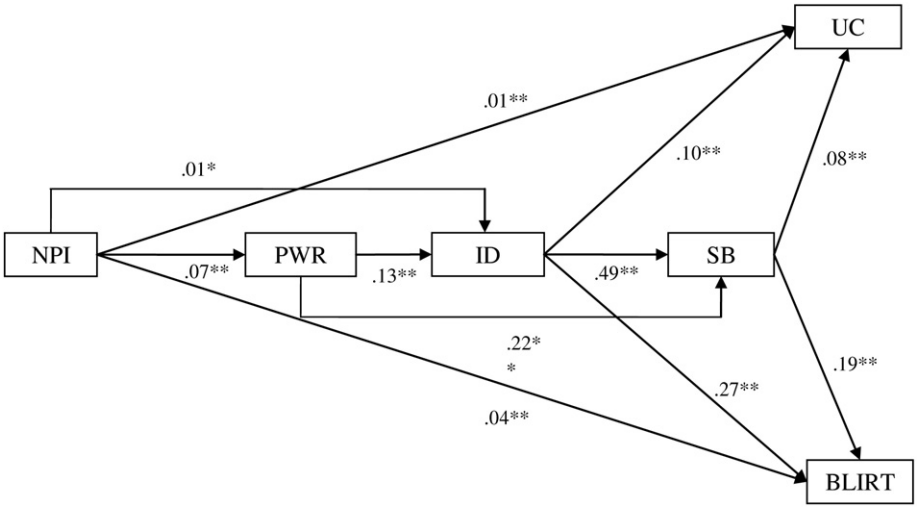

Fig. 1. Path model. *Note*. Final model with unstandardized regression weights. NPI = Narcissistic Personality Inventory; PWR = power motivation; ID = image desirability; SB = strategic behavior; UC = Ego-undercontrol Scale; BLIRT = Brief Loquaciousness and Interpersonal Responsiveness Test.

and decisive action (Sturm & Antonakis, 2015). Second, because free expression and personal autonomy can sometimes result in being disliked, narcissists' reduced concerns for being liked (Martinez, Zeichner, Reidy, & Miller, 2008) should result in their perceiving a low self-control image as less undesirable. Basically, our idea suggests that effects of narcissism on indices of low self-control (e.g., Vazire & Funder, 2006) might reflect, in part, strategic attempts to control desired images (e.g., uninhibited) that convey a sense of power.

1.1. The present research

We asked participants to indicate the extent to which they (a) want to project various characteristics associated with low self-control ("image desirability;" e.g., how much does one wish to appear *uninhibited*?) and (b) will *strategically* alter their behavior to project these characteristics ("strategic behavior"). Image desirability and strategic behavior are related but distinct constructs in the tradition of impression management theory (Schlenker, 1980). Image desirability refers to a desire to project an image (Schlenker, 1980), and strategic behavior refers to actions intended to accomplish this desire. Strategic behavior is complex and influenced by image desirability, the self-concept, social reputations, and social roles (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). Participants also completed the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (indexing narcissism; NPI; Raskin & Terry, 1988) and two measures of trait low self-control that have already been linked to narcissism: the Ego-undercontrol Scale (UC, an index of ego control (r); Letzring, Block, & Funder, 2005) and the Brief Loquaciousness and Interpersonal Responsiveness Test (BLIRT, an index of low verbal self-control; Swann & Rentfrow, 2001). Participants also completed a measure of power motivation and psychological entitlement. We theorized that narcissists' enhanced power striving should enhance their desire to project low-self-control traits, which should create tendencies to strategically alter their behavior to convey these traits; such strategic tendencies should relate to claiming a low self-control identity on trait measures. Indeed, people who strategically convey a trait later rate the self as higher on the trait (e.g., Schlenker, Dlugolecki, & Doherty, 1994).

2. Method

2.1. Participants and design

542 residents of the US (326 females) were recruited from Amazon's Mechanical Turk and paid $0.40. The average age was 36.6 years (SD = 12.5). The sample was 77.7% Caucasian (8.7% African American; 7% Hispanic; 3.3% Asian).

2.2. Procedure and materials

Prior to providing demographic information and being debriefed, participants completed the following measures in the following order.[1]

2.2.1. Image desirability and strategic behavior

Participants' desire to be regarded as low in self-control and their strategic behavior to appear low in self-control were assessed separately. First, participants rated the extent to which they wanted to be regarded as possessing 8 traits or trait descriptors associated with low self-control (e.g., "unpredictable," "uninhibited," "do exactly what I want," "say exactly how I feel," "act on my gut") and four traits or trait descriptors associated with high self-control (e.g., "always needing a plan;" "worried about mistakes") using a 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*) scale (for similar procedures, Hart et al., 2016). These traits and trait descriptors were motivated by Letzring et al.'s (2005) work correlating scores from their UC scale with ratings of trait characteristics provided by clinician-interviewers, acquaintances, and the self. To ensure we were assessing identity images that were highly relevant to ego control, we selected the trait characteristics that had the strongest positive and negative correlations with people's scores on the UC scale. The choice to use high and low self-control traits is critical because ego control is presumed to contain elements of both "under-control" and "over-control" (Letzring et al., 2005). Hence, we averaged the high and low control items to create a single index of low-self-control image desirability, which we labeled "image desirability" ($\alpha = 0.75$, $M = 3.38$, $SD = 0.55$). To measure the extent to which people engaged in strategic low-self-control behavior, they were presented the same 12 descriptors and asked to consider the extent to which they strategically monitor their behavior to appear

[1] A pilot study within our main study assessed the extent to which participants associated power with low restraint. We assumed people perceived a negative relation between power and restraint, but were unaware of research that directly examined this assumption. Participants imagined an interaction between a person with high power and low power and responded to six questions regarding the likelihood of either person engaging in restraint (e.g., "*Who is more likely to stop themselves from doing what they want*") using a −3 (*The person with LOW POWER is definitely more likely to do this*) to 3 (*The person with HIGH POWER is definitely more likely to do this*) scale. 392 participants' responses were recorded. Responses were averaged into a single index of participants' perception of the power-restraint relationship in which negative scores represent the belief that high power is negatively related to restraint ($\alpha = 0.85$). The mean of the variable ($M = -1.78$, $SD = 1.16$) dramatically differed from zero, $d = -1.54$, suggesting that people anticipate a substantial negative relation between power and restraint.

these ways, using a 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*) scale. For the same reasons, we averaged the items to create a single index of engagement in strategic low-self-control behavior, which we labeled "strategic behavior" ($\alpha = 0.73$, $M = 3.16$, $SD = 0.6$). Of note, five unrelated filler traits (e.g., good-looking) were included in each measure to reduce suspicion of the study's purpose.

2.2.2. NPI

The NPI (Raskin & Terry, 1988) is a validated index of narcissism and the most widely used measure of narcissism in social-personality psychology. Participants choose the most self-descriptive option for 40 pairs of statements, wherein one statement is narcissistic ("*I will usually show off if I get the chance*") and one statement is non-narcissistic ("*I try not to be a show off*"). Selected narcissistic statements were summed into a total NPI score ($\alpha = 0.89$, $M = 12.54$, $SD = 7.79$).

Ackerman et al. (2011) suggested that NPI narcissism contains three components: leadership/authority (L/A), grandiose exhibitionism (G/E), and entitlement/exploitativeness (E/E). We also created three subscales of the NPI based on Ackerman et al.'s (2011) model: L/A ($\alpha = 0.81$, $M = 4.2$, $SD = 3.05$); G/E ($\alpha = 0.79$, $M = 2.5$, $SD = 2.47$); E/E ($\alpha = 0.53$, $M = 0.88$, $SD = 1.07$).

2.2.3. The Ego-undercontrol Scale (UC)

The UC scale is a validated index of ego under-control (Letzring et al., 2005). Participants rated agreement (1 = *disagree very strongly*; 4 = *agree very strongly*) to 36 self-descriptive statements (e.g., "*I often do and say things on the spur of the moment, without stopping to think*"). We averaged scores across items ($\alpha = 0.81$, $M = 2.38$, $SD = 0.33$).

2.2.4. BLIRT

BLIRT is a validated index of low (verbal) self-control (Swann & Rentfrow, 2001). Participants rated agreement (1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*) to eight self-descriptive statements (e.g., "*I always say what's on my mind*"). We averaged scores across items ($\alpha = 0.83$, $M = 2.94$, $SD = 0.79$).

2.2.5. Power motivation

Cassidy and Lynn's (1989) Dominance and Status Aspiration scales have been combined into a validated index of "power motivation" (e.g., Cassidy & Lynn, 1989; Maner, Gailliot, Butz, & Peruche, 2007). Participants rated their agreement (1 = *disagree very strongly*; 5 = *agree very strongly*) to six dominance-related items (e.g., "*I like to give orders and get things going*") and seven status aspiration-related items (e.g., "*I like to be admired for my achievements*"). We averaged scores across the 13 items ($\alpha = 0.93$, $M = 3.08$, $SD = 0.83$).

2.2.6. Psychological entitlement scale

The Psychological Entitlement scale is a validated index of psychological entitlement (Campbell, Bonacci, Shelton, Exline, & Bushman, 2004). Participants rated agreement (1 = *strongly disagree*; 7 = *strongly agree*) with nine statements (e.g., "*I deserve more things in my life*"). We averaged scores across items ($\alpha = 0.9$, $M = 3.44$, $SD = 1.28$).[2]

3. Results

The path modeling was conducted using AMOS 22. Bootstrapping methods were used to evaluate statistical significance (5000 samples; 95% percentile CIs). Model fit was assessed using the comparative fit index (CFI), normed fit index (NFI), and the root mean squared error of approximation (RMSEA). For CFI and NFI, values above 0.90 are usually deemed acceptable. For RMSEA, values below 0.06 are usually deemed acceptable (Hu & Bentler, 1999). In addition, a chi-square test is reported; a non-significant chi-square indicates a close fit between the implied and observed covariances.

[2] We included an index of hypersensitivity (Hendin & Cheek, 1997) for exploratory purposes. Because hypersensitivity seems linked with haphazard, unfocused, and fluctuating self-presentation styles and identity goals (Hart et al., 2017), we did not have clear predictions.

Table 1
Correlations (r) between variables in path model.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. NPI									
2. L/A	0.87**								
3. G/E	0.8**	0.55**							
4. E/E	0.56**	0.35**	0.38**						
5. PWR	0.68**	0.68**	0.5**	0.3**					
6. ID	0.26**	0.29**	0.16**	0.01	0.28**				
7. SB	0.37**	0.41**	0.24**	0.1*	0.43**	0.53**			
8. UC	0.38**	0.3**	0.32**	0.3**	0.34**	0.32**	0.34**		
9. BLIRT	0.45**	0.46**	0.27**	0.18**	0.35**	0.35**	0.37**	0.15**	

Note. NPI = Narcissistic Personality Inventory; L/A = leadership/authority; G/E = grandiose exhibitionism; E/E = entitlement/exploitativeness; PWR = power motivation; ID = image desirability; SB = strategic behavior; UC = Ego-undercontrol Scale; BLIRT = Brief Loquaciousness and Interpersonal Responsiveness Test.
** $p < 0.01$.
* $p < 0.05$.

Fig. 1 displays our path model. Of note, we allowed disturbances in UC and BLIRT to co-vary, assuming these two variables share similar causes (e.g., trait impulsivity) not included in the model. This model fit the data well, χ^2 (3) = 6.13, $p = 0.11$ (CFI = 0.99; NFI = 0.99; RMSEA = 0.044). The model shows the following anticipated effects: narcissism had a direct effect on power motivation; power motivation had a direct effect on image desirability; image desirability had a direct effect on strategic behavior; and strategic behavior had a direct effect on UC and BLIRT.

As anticipated, the model also revealed significant indirect (mediated) paths between narcissism and UC (95% CI: 0.002, 0.006) and narcissism and BLIRT (95% CI: 0.006, 0.014). These indirect effects were decomposed into "specific indirect effects" (see Table 2 for tests of all the paths). Particularly important for testing the plausibility of our theory was the indirect path wherein narcissism influences power motivation, which in turn influences image desirability, which in turn influences strategic behavior, which in turn influences scores on UC and BLIRT. As shown in Table 2, each of these paths was significant. Hence, the data supported our theorized chain of relations and suggest that narcissists' higher scores on UC and BLIRT may reflect strategic self-presentation of desired characteristics indicative of power. Notably, the direct effect of narcissism on UC and BLIRT remained upon controlling for the mediators, which implies that the relation between narcissism and low self-control traits involves mechanisms that we did not address.

Tables 2 and 3 provide significance tests of additional paths. Two findings from these analyses seem noteworthy. First, it appears that some of the effect of narcissism on image desirability is direct (unmediated by power motivation), which suggests that narcissists' have reasons that extend beyond power motivation which lead them to desire low self-control traits, strategically present these traits, and score high

Table 2
Indirect effects of narcissism on trait self-control measures.

Indirect path	Estimate	*SE*	95% CI	
NPI → PWR → ID → SB → UC	0.0001	0.000	0.000	0.001
NPI → PWR → ID → UC	0.001	0.000	0.000	0.002
NPI → PWR → SB → UC	0.001	0.000	0.000	0.002
NPI → ID → SB → UC	0.0001	0.000	0.000	0.001
NPI → ID → UC	0.001	0.001	0.000	0.002
NPI → PWR → ID → SB → BLIRT	0.001	0.000	0.000	0.002
NPI → PWR → ID → BLIRT	0.002	0.001	0.001	0.005
NPI → PWR → SB → BLIRT	0.003	0.001	0.001	0.006
NPI → ID → SB → BLIRT	0.001	0.001	0.000	0.003
NPI → ID → BLIRT	0.003	0.001	0.000	0.005

Note. For notes on abbreviations, please see Table 1.

Table 3
Indirect effects of narcissism on ID and SB.

Indirect path	Estimate	*SE*	95% CI	
NPI → PWR → ID → SB	0.004	0.002	0.002	0.008
NPI → PWR → ID	0.009	0.002	0.003	0.015
NPI → PWR → SB	0.016	0.002	0.011	0.020
NPI → ID → SB	0.235	0.048	0.151	0.340

Note. For notes on abbreviations, please see Table 1.

on trait measures. For example, perhaps narcissists also desire low-self-control traits because such traits can serve as excuses for narcissistic behavior ("*I am not really mean, I'm just impulsive*."). Second, it appears that some of the effect of image desirability on UC and BLIRT is direct (unmediated by strategic behavior). This might reflect spontaneous strategic self-presentation of desirable traits on the UC and BLIRT that occurs independently of acknowledging past strategic behavior.

3.1. Comparisons with alternative models

We compared our model (Fig. 1) against three plausible alternative models. First, it is possible that power motivation precedes narcissism in the chain of relations. To assess this, we interchanged power motivation and narcissism in Fig. 1. This model had poor fit (χ^2 (3) = 95.31, p = 0.001; CFI = 0.90; NFI = 0.90; RMSEA = 0.24) and fit worse than our theorized model (χ^2 difference = −89.18). Second, it is possible that UC and BLIRT precede image desirability and strategic behavior in the chain. For example, narcissists might be merely saying their lack of self-control is desirable (and strategic) because they acknowledge their low self-control *ability* and wish to put a positive spin on it. In an alternative model, we indicated UC and BLIRT as each causal of image desirability and strategic behavior. The model had good fit (χ^2 (3) = 11.39, p = 0.01; CFI = 0.99; NFI = 0.99; RMSEA = 0.07), but had poorer fit than our model (χ^2 difference = −5.29). Although we cannot dispel this alternative model based on our data, its assumptions seem inconsistent with some evidence. For example, grandiose narcissists do not appear to be lacking in self-control capacity. They do not score higher on measures of impulsivity (Miller et al., 2009) and seem highly capable of self-regulating their behavior when challenged (Wallace et al., 2009). Third, it is likely that image desirability and strategic behavior are reciprocally determined such that image desirability promotes strategic behavior (Schlenker, 1980) and strategic behavior influences image desirability (e.g., Bem, 1967); thus, it seemed reasonable to also model strategic behavior as preceding image desirability. We reversed the directional path between image desirability and strategic behavior. This model had good fit (χ^2 (3) = 3.94, p = 0.27 (CFI = 0.99; NFI = 0.99; RMSEA = 0.02)) and fit slightly better than our model (χ^2 difference = +2.17). Hence, it seems reasonable to model the data this way, which in no way challenges our main conclusions.

Table 4
Indirect effects of narcissism sub-scales on trait self-control measures through ID and SB.

Indirect path	95% CI	
L/A → PWR → ID → SB → UC	0.0001	0.002
G/E → PWR → ID → SB → UC	0.0003	0.002
E/E → PWR → ID → SB → UC	0.0004	0.004
L/A → PWR → ID → SB → BLIRT	0.0000	0.004
G/E → PWR → ID → SB → BLIRT	0.001	0.007
E/E → PWR → ID → SB → BLIRT	0.001	0.010

Note. Results are based on 5000 bootstrapped samples, and 95% CIs are the percentile bootstrap confidence intervals around indirect effects. Confidence intervals not containing zero imply significant mediation. For notes on abbreviations, please see Table 1.

3.2. Sub-scale analyses

Rather than build separate path models to address each narcissism subscale—which was beyond the intended scope of inquiry—we used PROCESS (Hayes, 2013) to examine the most central serial mediation path in relation to each subscale (i.e., [narcissism component] → PWR → ID → SB → [self-control trait measure]). These results appear in Table 4. They each support the mediation findings with the total NPI. Nonetheless, it should be noted that the zero-order relation (i.e., "total effect") of E/E on image desirability was non-significant (see Table 1), which suggests that E/E is associated with other (unmeasured) features that oppose the influence of power motivation on image desirability.

4. Discussion

Vazire and Funder (2006) proposed that narcissists struggle with self-control. This apparent struggle belies the fact that narcissists seem happier and, by some indicators, more successful than their non-narcissistic peers. Here, we suggested that there may be more to narcissists' low self-control than meets the eye. Notably, we suggested that their low self-control is strategic and driven by concerns for power. Indeed, our findings generally supported this perspective. A path analysis showed that narcissism was associated with power motivation that, in turn, was associated with desiring a low-self-control image, and desiring a low-self-control image was associated with strategic displays of low self-control. As anticipated, these strategic displays, in turn, were associated with higher scores on trait measures of low self-control (e.g., Schlenker et al., 1994). Nevertheless, all the measures were self-report, which raises the potential for biased and inaccurate responding. Furthermore, given the cross-sectional design and reliance on correlational analyses, we were unable to conclusively demonstrate causal relations or show that narcissists' low self-control necessarily arises from a self-presentation process.

Despite the study's limitations, it has theoretical significance. Broadly, these results are consistent with the self-presentation theory of narcissism. Without discounting other perspectives on narcissism, this theory suggests that narcissists' behavior could be understood, in part, as reflecting their desired identities (e.g., powerful) and their ideas about successfully presenting these identities (e.g., appear uninhibited and self-indulgent). The theory has offered a novel perspective on narcissists' self-enhancement, aggression, and entitlement. Here, the model offered a novel perspective on narcissists' low self-control that holds some promise in uniting Vazire and Funder's (2006) results with models suggestive of "narcissistic rationality" (Hart et al., 2016; Krizan & Johar, 2015; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). We hope the model's apparent utility will lead to more comprehensive tests involving narcissism and self-presentation parameters.

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