

## EFFECTS OF NARCISSISTIC PERSONALITY ORGANIZATION ON CAUSAL ATTRIBUTIONS<sup>1</sup>

ZIZIK S. HARTOUNI

*Los Angeles, California*

*Summary.*—The present study addressed a central, although neglected, aspect of research into narcissism and attributions, the role of cognitive-perceptual processes and cognitive styles of individuals with narcissistic personality disorder in their causal explanation of events. The extent to which narcissistic personality organization may be a determinant of attributional style was examined. The sample consisted of 20 individuals with narcissistic personality disorders and 20 with neurotic disorders. Participants completed the Narcissistic Personality Inventory-40 and the Attributional Style Questionnaire. A significant association between narcissistic personality disorder and internal, stable attributions for positive outcomes was observed. The reformulated learned helplessness model of depression was used to interpret the attributional style of the narcissists as means to obliterate experience of helplessness. The results are discussed in terms of the role of self-esteem and maintenance of self-presentation in the skewed attributional biases of narcissists.

To date, researchers have not yet addressed cognitive style and cognitive functioning in narcissistic personality disorder. Although clinical observations have provided theoretical explanations for characterological styles of functioning in narcissism, the absence of cognitive theoretical descriptions of perceptual-cognitive processes in narcissism reflects limited understanding of how narcissists perceive the world. This study was designed to examine the attributional style of individuals with narcissistic personality disorders. Attributional style (Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978) is based on attribution theory (Heider, 1958), which is a cognitive theory of causality concerned with the process by which individuals interpret events in their environment.

Inferring causality in response to environment involves processing of information and ordering of perceived events to ascertain the location of causes (Kelley, 1967). An effect is assigned to a cause either in the environment (external) or in the person (internal) (Heider, 1958). Like all other perceptual and cognitive processes, assignment of causality in the attributional process is highly subjective and subject to errors and distortions (Kelley, 1967).

Attributional errors are the results of making egocentric assumptions, ignoring situational factors, experiencing significant affective consequences,

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<sup>1</sup>This article is based on a doctoral dissertation in psychology (Hartouni, 1992) completed at California Graduate Institute, West Los Angeles, California. Committee chair was Dr. L. Weisbender; Drs. A. Panajian and J. Grotstein were readers. Their support, guidance, and expertise are gratefully acknowledged. Address correspondence to Zizik S. Hartouni, Ph.D., 116 N. Robertson Blvd., Suite 508, Los Angeles, CA 90048.

and misleading surrounding situations (Heider, 1958). Ross (1977) used the term fundamental attribution error to describe an individual's attributive tendency to underestimate the impact of situational factors (environmental factors) and overestimate the role of dispositional factors (personal factors). Yet, another attributional error, termed false consensus effect, is the tendency to assume erroneously commonness of one's own reactions and to attribute them to others (Ross, 1977).

Additional attributional distortions occur through attributional biases. A causal asymmetry for attributional bias is the notion of self-serving biases, which include the concepts of ego-defensive bias (Miller & Ross, 1975) and counterdefensive bias (Weary-Bradley, 1978). Ego-defensive bias is the tendency to deny responsibility for negative behavioral outcome by attributing success to self and failure to external sources. Counterdefensive bias is the tendency to accept responsibility for negative outcomes, under certain conditions. This study viewed the attributional biasing process of narcissists as means to make self-enhancing attributions by utilizing ego defensive bias to maintain self-esteem, and counterdefensive bias to maintain public esteem. Attributional style is the particular manner in which individuals explain uncontrollable events in their environment. The attributional framework is based on the reformulated learned helplessness model of depression, which states that once people perceive noncontingency, they attribute their lack of control to a cause (Abramson, *et al.*, 1978). The kinds of attributions people make will affect their self-esteem and their expectations of future helplessness across situations and time. Such expectations influence the generality, chronicity, and type of one's symptoms of helplessness. Within the context of the role of attributions in symptomatology, these authors distinguished between universal and personal helplessness. Personal helplessness involves low efficacy and high expectations of outcome. Universal helplessness involves a low expectation for outcome. A dimension of internality and externality is drawn from this distinction. That is, universally helpless individuals tend to make external attributions for failure and personally helpless individuals make internal attributions. Universal and personal distinctions help clarify the relation of uncontrollability to failure and to low self-esteem.

The reformulated model explains helplessness in terms of generality or chronicity that serves as a second dimension of helplessness. Chronicity, when helplessness is long-lived, and transiency, when it is short-lived, represent the stability or instability of the revised hypotheses (Abramson, *et al.*, 1978). A third dimension considers the time course of perceived helplessness. These revisions have a direct implication for the learned helplessness model of depression which postulates that causes of uncontrollable negative events are due to internal, stable, and global factors of attributions that lead to lowered self-esteem, helplessness, and depression. This study adopted the

reformulated learned helplessness model of depression, interpreting the attributional style of narcissists as a reflection of characterological and primitive defense controls established to obliterate experiences of helplessness and lowered self-esteem.

The theoretical framework for this study is attribution theory, as derived from Heider's (1958) theoretical concepts of phenomenal description of perception and causal analysis of the perceptual process. Emphasis was placed on the learned helplessness hypotheses which address the debilitating effects of experiencing uncontrollability in inducing emotional, cognitive, and motivational deficits (Abramson, *et al.*, 1978).

#### METHOD

##### *Subjects*

The participants were recruited from clinical populations: 35 patients from private practice in Los Angeles and Orange Counties, five patients from a clinic in Los Angeles. Twenty patients were diagnosed as having diagnoses of Narcissistic Personality Disorder in accordance with DSM-III—R criteria, and another 20 were diagnosed as neurotic, without any personality disorders. It was assumed that the latter group had relatively low underlying pathological narcissistic traits. There were ten women and ten men in the narcissistic group, and 17 women and three men in the neurotic group. The greater number of female patients in this group is indicative of the difficulty in obtaining equal numbers of clinical male neurotic patients. Two of the neurotic patients had histories of hospitalization; however, personality disorder was not relevant in their hospitalization.

##### *Materials*

The Narcissistic Personality Inventory-40 measures individual differences in narcissism on a continuum. Authors of the inventory provided norms for the total scale score for men and women. For the purposes of this study, the inventory was used as a screening measure to exclude participants who did not score within a predetermined range of the scale. The standard errors for the norms were calculated for each sex, and a decision was made to eliminate narcissists who scored less than two times the standard error below the normative mean. For men, this cut-off score was 15.9 and for the women 14.2. Similarly, for the neurotic group, the cut-off score was calculated for each sex, and a decision was made to eliminate neurotic participants who scored more than two times the standard error of the mean above the normative means. For men, this cut-off score was 17.1 and for women 15.3.

The Attributional Style Questionnaire is a self-report inventory composed of 12 hypothetical events. Half of these events are good and the other half are bad. The questionnaire measures patterns of tendencies to select particular explanations for positive and negative events in terms of internal

versus external, stable versus unstable, and global versus specific dimensions. The focus on explanations and explanatory style yields scores for individual differences in testees tendency to use particular values of these three dimensions. The questionnaire was used to compare the scores of the narcissists with the scores of neurotics for positive and negative attributional events. Mann-Whitney *U* was used to test the difference between the scores of the two groups on attributional style.

#### *Design and Procedure*

A nonexperimental causal-comparative, *ex post facto* design was used for this study. The participants were provided a packet by their therapists. The packets included a consent form, the Demographic Questionnaire, the Narcissistic Personality Inventory-40 (Raskin & Hall, 1979), and the Attributional Style Questionnaire (Peterson, Semmel, von Baeyer, Abramson, Metalsky, & Seligman, 1982).

#### *Hypotheses*

Six hypotheses based on the premise that narcissists would score significantly higher than neurotics on the Attributional Style Questionnaire were constructed: Hypotheses 1, 2, and 3 speculated that narcissists would make more external, unstable, and specific attributions for negative events; and Hypotheses 4, 5, and 6 speculated that narcissists would make more internal, stable, and global attributions for positive events.

### RESULTS

The median age range for both groups was 31 to 40 years old. The median amount of education ranged from a two-year (AA) to a four-year (BA/BS) college degree. The median time of employment was 37 to 48 months. The median income range was \$25,000 to \$44,999. The median range of time in therapy was 13 to 18 months. The two groups were essentially the same except for gender and marital status: women comprised 63% of the neurotic group, men comprised 77% of the narcissist group. In terms

TABLE 1  
ATTRIBUTIONS FOR NEGATIVE EVENTS (*N* = 20)

Dimension	Group	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>z</i>
External	Narcissistic	19.9	36.8	.34
	Neurotic	21.2	36.8	
Unstable	Narcissistic	21.4	36.9	.45
	Neurotic	19.7	36.9	
Specific	Narcissistic	18.8	36.9	.91
	Neurotic	22.2	36.9	

*Note.*—The rating scale on each dimension is scored in the direction of increasing levels of internality, stability, and globality. The lower mean scores in Table 1 indicate less internality, stability, and globality and so *more* externality, instability, and specificity in attributions for negative events.

TABLE 2  
ATTRIBUTIONS FOR POSITIVE EVENTS ( $N = 20$ )

Dimension	Group	$M$	$SD$	$z$
Internal	Narcissistic	24.3	36.9	2.02*
	Neurotic	16.8	36.9	
Stable	Narcissistic	24.8	36.9	2.23†
	Neurotic	16.2	36.9	
Global	Narcissistic	21.6	36.9	.60
	Neurotic	19.4	36.9	

\* $p = .04$ . † $p = .02$ .

of marital status, 23% of the narcissists were married in comparison to 77% of the neurotics.

The six hypotheses addressing attributions for negative and positive events were tested at the .05 significance level. The lower mean scores on internality and globality indicating greater externality and specificity in attributions of narcissists for negative events did not reach statistical significance. In contrast to Hypothesis 2, the narcissists' high mean scores on instability turned toward greater stability in attribution of negative events. As a result, Hypotheses 1, 2, and 3 were not supported by these findings. Table 1 displays the results.

The mean score on internality for positive events among narcissists was 24.3, which compares with the mean score of 16.8 for neurotics. This finding is consistent with Hypothesis 4 since the mean of narcissists for positive

TABLE 3  
DISCRIMINANT VALIDITY FOR DSM-III-R AS INDICATED BY  
NARCISSISTIC PERSONALITY INVENTORY-40 ( $N = 20$ )

Variable	Group	$M$	$SD$
Total Score	Narcissistic	25.8*	36.9
	Neurotic	15.2	36.9
Authority	Narcissistic	23.9	36.5
	Neurotic	17.1	36.5
Exhibitionism	Narcissistic	24.0†	36.2
	Neurotic	17.0	36.2
Superiority	Narcissistic	24.4‡	36.2
	Neurotic	16.6	36.2
Entitlement	Narcissistic	24.0	36.3
	Neurotic	17.0	36.3
Exploitation	Narcissistic	22.8	35.9
	Neurotic	18.2	35.9
Self-sufficiency	Narcissistic	23.2	36.1
	Neurotic	17.8	36.1
Vanity	Narcissistic	23.0	35.7
	Neurotic	18.1	35.7

\* $p = .004$ . † $p = .05$ . ‡ $p = .03$ .

events is significantly higher than that of neurotics. Consistent with Hypothesis 5, the mean on stability for positive events among narcissists is also significantly higher at 24.8 than the mean of neurotics at 16.2. These groups' means on global attributions were not statistically significantly different so Hypothesis 6 was not supported. Table 2 provides the data relevant to Hypotheses 4, 5, and 6.

Also, the Total Narcissistic Personality Inventory-40 mean for narcissists is significantly higher than the mean of neurotics and the means of narcissists on subscales of exhibitionism and superiority are significantly higher than those of neurotics; see Table 3.

#### DISCUSSION

Based on the reformulated learned helplessness model of depression (Abramson, *et al.*, 1978), present data were examined to judge whether, given the personality organization and defenses of narcissists, their causal attributions would secure personal control, predictability over their environment, and ability. Narcissists' attributions were expected to involve the operation of their primitive defenses in the processing of perceptual and cognitive information.

Indeed, narcissists made significantly more internal and stable attributions for positive events, although attributions toward globality were not significant. Narcissists' idiosyncratic perceptual and cognitive functions that set selective controls in processing information by obliterating the experience of personal helplessness and lowered self-esteem, help maximize perceived control over their experiences. Such a cognitive style warrants consideration of the possible involvement of a cognitive component in the defenses of narcissists that may contribute to their misunderstanding of the location of a cause. Although their attributions for negative events were not statistically significant, the greater directionality toward externality and specificity suggests consideration of cognitive distortion in their attributions.

Another explanation for the attributions of narcissists can be found in the concept of the fundamental attributional error (Ross, 1977). The significant attributions for positive events support the attributional error. Cognitive distortions may play a role in the narcissists' misunderstanding of the allocation of attributes. Support may lie within the concept of false consensus effect (Ross, 1977). Perhaps narcissists err in the understanding of the allocation of their own unwanted attributes by projecting these attributes into aspects other than themselves. Such cognitive distortion may reflect disavowal and translocation of aspects of themselves for defensive and control purposes to ward off experience of inadequacy and low self-esteem.

Further explanation for the attributions of narcissists might be found in the self-serving ego-defensive (Miller & Ross, 1978) and counterdefensive (Weary-Bradley, 1978) attributional biases. Narcissists make greater use

of ego-defensive bias and self-enhancing attributions. They overestimate their dispositional factors in attributing positive events to internal causes. No statistical significance was observed however greater the globality for positive events. The anticipation of a reversal from defensive attributional style to counterdefensive attributional style in the dimension of stability was observed among narcissists. Findings suggest that the self-presentational style of narcissists differs from that of neurotics. Narcissists made significantly more dispositional nontransient attributions for positive events. However, the speculation that narcissists would make more situational transient attributions for negative events was not confirmed. Responses showed direction toward more stability. This finding entails the difficulty involved in identifying the conditions under which narcissists will assume responsibility for negative events. Perhaps after securing controls, narcissists are confident to confront negative events, thinking that they can overcome these.

From an object relations perspective, the attributions of narcissists could be viewed as representations of their identification with an omnipotent and frustrating internalized object. Such identification serves to defend against recognition of a separate identity between the self and the omnipotent object to avoid anxiety and obviate feelings of helplessness and dependency on anyone other than the self. The concept of projective identification and splitting (Grotstein, 1981) can be used to explain the attributional error of narcissists. To rid the self of unwanted aspects, narcissists attempt to translocate devalued parts by projecting them onto others and thereby disavow connection with them.

Narcissists' internalized object relations are, then, evident in the reexternalization of the overvalued aspects of their grandiosity and omnipotence through their projected attributions. The attributional processes of narcissists are imbued with commitment to self-sufficiency and control to protect them from the painful and frustrating consequences of dependency on others and to disavow the devalued and impotent aspects of themselves.

These results suggest several possibilities. First, the public esteem needs of narcissists seem to be met through display of omniscience that could perhaps include some responsibility for negative events to elicit admiration from others. Second, the reversibility of attributional bias among narcissists may exhibit an idiosyncratic and egocentric self-presentational style that is different from the attributions of neurotics. Third, the erroneous and misunderstood attributions of narcissists appear to reflect a cognitive style that corresponds to their characterological style of functioning. This study has demonstrated a tendency toward self-sufficiency and an asymmetrical self-perception among narcissists. The disturbances in self-experience of narcissists appear manifest in their excessive use of self-serving attributional biases in making causal inferences. The narcissists' inflated sense of self-importance

tance, portrayed in clinical observations, was depicted in their skewed attributional biases. However, lack of statistical significance for a number of the hypotheses may be accounted for by (a) the extent of the homogeneity of these two clinical populations, (b) gender differences in inferring causality, given the few male neurotic patients, (c) lenient cut-off scores on the Narcissistic Personality Inventory-40, and (d) a small sample of 40. More sophisticated studies might examine the role of cognition in Narcissistic Personality Disorder.

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*Accepted November 10, 1992.*