



Terry Kaufman Ph.D.
[Beautiful Minds](#)

[Home](#) [Find a Therapist](#) [Topics](#) [Get Help](#) [Magazine](#) [Tests](#)

Do Narcissists Know They Are Narcissists?

Surprising research on what they know about themselves and how others see them.

- [SHARE](#)
- [TWEET](#)

Like 5.3k

Posted Mar 25, 2011

- [SHARE](#)
- [EMAIL](#)



Source: Dmytro Vietrov/Shutterstock

Think of your friendly neighborhood narcissist—status-seeking, grandiose, loud-mouthed, brash, and flamboyant. Many researchers have also theorized that a *lack of self-awareness* is a hallmark trait of narcissists. My personal experience does not support this: It seems to me as though such people are not only *aware* of who they are, but they *embrace* it.

Luckily, I don't have to rely on personal anecdotes. To get to the bottom of this question, [Erika Carlson \(http://www.self-other.com/ErikaCarlson.html\)](http://www.self-other.com/ErikaCarlson.html) and her colleagues at Washington University in St. Louis conducted three very well-constructed studies to determine whether narcissists have insight into their personality (/basics/personality) and reputation. The results will soon be published in the prestigious *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (<http://www.apa.org/pubs/journals/psp/>).

The researchers administered a number of different measures of narcissism to college students and

looked at how high-scorers were seen by others; how they saw themselves; and how they *believed* they were seen by others. They looked across social contexts, and interviewed new acquaintances as well as friends and family.

Their results across the three studies are strikingly consistent. Unsurprisingly, they found that narcissists do think they are hot stuff. Those scoring high in narcissism measures tended to rate themselves as more intelligent, physically attractive, likeable, and funny than others. Interestingly, they also rated themselves as having higher levels of *negative* aspects of narcissism, such as being power-oriented, impulsive (/basics/self-control), arrogant, and prone to exaggerate their abilities. In other words, narcissists are aware that they are narcissists.

There was also a strong positive correlation between narcissism and having a *reputation* for narcissism: These individuals were definitely perceived as narcissists, even though other people didn't think the narcissists were nearly as great as the narcissists thought they were. And the narcissists were *well aware* of their reputation: When asked how others perceived them on the positive traits, their results were closer to how they were actually perceived than their own self-perceptions of the very same traits.

These results suggest that narcissists do indeed have self-awareness of themselves and that they know their reputation. This raises the question: *How can narcissists maintain their inflated self-image (/basics/identity) even though they know full well how they are perceived by others?*

The researchers suggest a few intriguing possibilities.

Perhaps narcissists assume that others are just failing to realize how *awesome* they really are. They may think that people are just "too dim to recognize their brilliance." Another possibility is that narcissists may think critics are "jealous (/basics/jealousy) of them." They may take in negative feedback but then think to themselves: *those haters are just jealous!*

This may explain why narcissists behave in arrogant ways. Instead of compensating for some deep-seated insecurity (<http://pss.sagepub.com/content/18/3/227.extract>), bragging may be their way of demanding the recognition they truly believe they deserve. Narcissists score at the top of the scale on measures of entitlement. As the researchers note, this idea is consistent with self-verification theory (<http://homepage.psy.utexas.edu/HomePage/Faculty/Swann/docu/north%20and%20swann%202009.pdf>):

"Narcissists believe that they are exceptional people and may behave in arrogant ways

because they are attempting to bridge the gap between their self-perceptions and their meta-perceptions."

The researchers also suggest it's possible that narcissists maintain their self-image by misconstruing the *meaning* of narcissism. When told they are arrogant, instead of thinking they are "someone who is confident without merit," they may take it as a *compliment*, thinking to themselves: *Sure I'm arrogant, if by that you mean "deservedly confident."* As the researchers note, "Narcissists seem to choose honest arrogance when describing themselves and their reputation."

The results of this study as well as [prior studies \(http://www.sciencedirect.com/science?_ob=ArticleURL&_udi=B6V9F-45RDM71-8D&_user=10&_coverDate=07%2F31%2F1992&_rdoc=1&_fmt=high&_orig=gateway&_origin=gateway&_sort=d&_docanchor=&view=c&_searchStrId=1693740600&_rerunOrigin=scholar.google&_acct=C00050221&_version=1&_urlVersion=0&_userid=10&md5=1ef77a2aaa0409bfdb40f463e31a4c9a&searchtype=a\)](http://www.sciencedirect.com/science?_ob=ArticleURL&_udi=B6V9F-45RDM71-8D&_user=10&_coverDate=07%2F31%2F1992&_rdoc=1&_fmt=high&_orig=gateway&_origin=gateway&_sort=d&_docanchor=&view=c&_searchStrId=1693740600&_rerunOrigin=scholar.google&_acct=C00050221&_version=1&_urlVersion=0&_userid=10&md5=1ef77a2aaa0409bfdb40f463e31a4c9a&searchtype=a) suggest that narcissists do care more about being perceived as superior on *agentive* traits (industriousness, [assertiveness \(/basics/assertiveness\)](/basics/assertiveness), dominance) than on *communal* traits (agreeableness and honesty). Narcissists don't seem to care whether they are perceived as good people; **they'd rather be admired than liked** (<http://www.columbia.edu/~da358/npi16/raskin.pdf>). So perhaps the narcissists in this study construed supposedly negative aspects of narcissism (e.g., arrogance) as desirable.

Of course, it's also possible that narcissists are fully aware of the meaning of narcissism and the negative impact they have on others, but **just don't care** as long as it doesn't get in the way of their [goals \(/basics/motivation\)](/basics/motivation).

The researchers also found that *new* acquaintances viewed narcissists more positively than well-acquainted others. Those who just met the narcissists did tend to have a favorable impression of those individuals, whereas those who knew them much longer tended to have a much more negative impression.

Again, the narcissists in their sample were *fully aware* of this. The results suggest that narcissists understand that they make positive [first impressions \(/basics/first-impressions\)](/basics/first-impressions) that deteriorate over time. These results are consistent with prior research showing that [narcissists have trouble forming long-term relationships](http://www.psych.northwestern.edu/~finkel/documents/Campbelletal_2002_001.pdf) (http://www.psych.northwestern.edu/~finkel/documents/Campbelletal_2002_001.pdf). **They tend to think they are "too good" for most people and are always seeking "better" relationship alternatives.**

The results are also consistent with research showing that narcissists are masters of making first impressions (<http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/beautiful-minds/201001/why-are-narcissists-initially-so-popular>). As researchers have suggested, the narcissist's success at creating initial attraction may make short-term contexts more rewarding for them than longer-term contexts:

"It is possible that narcissists discontinue relationships early on because they cannot bridge the gap between their positive self-perceptions and relatively negative meta-perceptions."

Practical Implications

It's well known that narcissists rarely change, mostly because they don't *want* to. They love (</basics/relationships>) their lifestyle. Researchers trying to reform narcissists have noted that a major impediment is their *lack* of self-awareness. They have speculated that if narcissists received true feedback, they would change. The Carlson and colleagues' study suggests this is *not* the case: Narcissists are fully aware that they are narcissistic (</basics/narcissism>) and that they have a narcissistic reputation.

Instead, the researchers suggest that a better intervention would be to "(http://faculty.haas.berkeley.edu/chatman/papers/13_KnowingYourPlace.pdf) emphasize the interpersonal and intrapsychic costs of being (http://faculty.haas.berkeley.edu/chatman/papers/13_KnowingYourPlace.pdf) seen (http://faculty.haas.berkeley.edu/chatman/papers/13_KnowingYourPlace.pdf) as narcissistic by others (http://faculty.haas.berkeley.edu/chatman/papers/13_KnowingYourPlace.pdf)". Narcissists are unlikely to change unless they think changing will *benefit* their achieving what they desire, such as status and power.

Are You a Narcissist?

You may be reading this and wondering whether you are a narcissist yourself. An implication of the results I just reviewed is that if you *are* a narcissist, you probably already know it!

In reality, all of us are at least a little narcissistic. In the studies just reviewed, the researchers administered a narcissistic questionnaire to college students. Even though the students scored across the spectrum, it's not as if there was anyone who was *completely* non-narcissistic. All of us, throughout our day, ebb and flow in and out of the mindset. Still, if you worry that you may be consistently *extremely* narcissistic, there are plenty of rubbish tests all over the Internet claiming to be good

measures of narcissism. Forget them. This is just about the best test I've found so far:

Step 1: Take a moment to think about yourself.

Step 2: If you made it to Step 2, you are not a narcissist.

Follow me on Twitter (<http://twitter.com/sbkaufman>) **or Facebook**

(<http://www.facebook.com/pages/Scott-Barry-Kaufman-PhD/154057141272057>). **Contact me here**

(<http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/bloggers/scott-barry-kaufman-phd>)!

© 2011 by Scott Barry Kaufman

[SHARE \(https://facebook.com/dialog/share?](https://facebook.com/dialog/share?app_id=220580041311284&display=popup&href=https%3A//www.psychologytoday.com/blog/beautiful-minds/201103/do-narcissists-know-they-are-narcissists&redirect_uri=https%3A//www.psychologytoday.com/blog/beautiful-minds/201103/do-narcissists-know-they-are-narcissists)

[app_id=220580041311284&display=popup&href=https%3A//www.psychologytoday.com/blog/beautiful-minds/201103/do-narcissists-know-they-are-narcissists&redirect_uri=https%3A//www.psychologytoday.com/blog/beautiful-minds/201103/do-narcissists-know-they-are-narcissists\)](https://facebook.com/dialog/share?app_id=220580041311284&display=popup&href=https%3A//www.psychologytoday.com/blog/beautiful-minds/201103/do-narcissists-know-they-are-narcissists&redirect_uri=https%3A//www.psychologytoday.com/blog/beautiful-minds/201103/do-narcissists-know-they-are-narcissists)

• [TWEET \(https://twitter.com/share?](https://twitter.com/share?text=Do%20Narcissists%20Know%20They%20Are%20Narcissists%3F%20%7C%20Psychology%20Today&url=https%3A//www.psychologytoday.com/blog/beautiful-minds/201103/do-narcissists-know-they-are-narcissists&related=PsychToday)

[text=Do%20Narcissists%20Know%20They%20Are%20Narcissists%3F%20%7C%20Psychology%20Today&url=https%3A//www.psychologytoday.com/blog/beautiful-minds/201103/do-narcissists-know-they-are-narcissists&related=PsychToday\)](https://twitter.com/share?text=Do%20Narcissists%20Know%20They%20Are%20Narcissists%3F%20%7C%20Psychology%20Today&url=https%3A//www.psychologytoday.com/blog/beautiful-minds/201103/do-narcissists-know-they-are-narcissists&related=PsychToday)

• [SHARE \(https://plus.google.com/share?url=https%3A//www.psychologytoday.com/blog/beautiful-minds/201103/do-narcissists-know-they-are-narcissists&hl=en-US\)](https://plus.google.com/share?url=https%3A//www.psychologytoday.com/blog/beautiful-minds/201103/do-narcissists-know-they-are-narcissists&hl=en-US)

• [EMAIL \(https://www.psychologytoday.com/printmail/57596?destination=blog/beautiful-minds/201103/do-narcissists-know-they-are-narcissists\)](https://www.psychologytoday.com/printmail/57596?destination=blog/beautiful-minds/201103/do-narcissists-know-they-are-narcissists)

[72 Comments](#)

Beautiful Minds (/blog/beautiful-minds)

Musings on the many paths to greatness.