Forgiveness and overt-covert narcissism
: The mediating effects of attribution style

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Abstract

The aim of study was to investigate the role of attribution style on overt-covert narcissism and forgiveness. Even though covert narcissists exhibit high degrees of psychological symptoms, the literature on the relationship between forgiveness and narcissism had almost exclusively focused on overt narcissism. Many previous studies suggested that both causal and responsibility attributions are robust predictors of forgiveness as well as important variable for narcissism. Therefore, it was hypothesized that overt-covert narcissism show different patterns in the relation of forgiveness, and that the association between overt-covert narcissism and forgiveness will be mediated by causal and responsibility attribution.

Participants were 286 undergraduate students who completed self-report measurement assessing overt-covert narcissism (NPI, CNS), causal attribution (ASQ), responsibility attribution (RAM), and state forgiveness (EFI-K). The findings of this study demonstrated that only covert narcissism is associated with forgiveness, which indicates that covert narcissists are less forgivable than overt narcissists. Besides, this study provides evidence that causal attribution plays a mediating role in association between covert narcissism and forgiveness, while responsibility attribution mediates the relationship between genuine factor of covert narcissism and forgiveness. This study has the significance in the sense that it explores a possible mechanism between covert narcissism and forgiveness.

Keywords: Overt and covert narcissism; Forgiveness; Causal and responsibility attribution.

only OVERT narcissism is forgiving

1. Introduction

It has been demonstrated that forgiveness has both intrapersonal and interpersonal benefits by releasing anger and resentment as well as prompting restoration of damaged relationship after the hurtful events (Park, 2003; Freedman & Enright, 1996; McCullough, 2000; Ysseldyk, Matheson, & Anisman, 2007). In interpersonal aspects, forgiveness promotes pro-social changes toward offender by reducing victim's avoidance and revenge motivation and increasing benevolence motivation (McCullough, 2000). At the same time, forgiveness reduces victim's psychological distress, such as anger, bitterness and anxiety, as well as helps to let go of hurt feelings(Enright, Gassin, & Wu, 1992).

A number of researches have examined personal characteristics which influence forgiveness, including agreeableness, emotional stability, spirituality, and narcissism (McCullough, 2001). Especially, narcissism is known to predict forgiveness (McCullough, 1998). Narcissism is characterized by self-admiration, superiority, and interpersonal exploitation. Narcissists have been found to respond more aggressively than others to insults and negative feedback and to report a higher number of interpersonal transgressions in their daily interaction (McCullough, Emmons, Kilpatrick, & Mooney, 2003).

Recently, several clinical psychologists suggest that two different types of narcissism exist - overt and covert narcissism (Akhtar & Thompson, 1982; Cooper, 1981; Wink, 1991). Both types of narcissists are extraordinarily self-absorbed and arrogant, but in other respects, overt and covert narcissists are distinguishable (Rose, 2002). This distinction has been theoretically accepted as well as empirically supported (Hendin & Cheek, 1997; Wink, 1991). Overt narcissists experience a grandiose sense of self, tend to demand others' attention, and are socially charming even though they are relatively oblivious of other's needs. Covert narcissists, on the other hand, feel profoundly inferior to others, are hypersensitive to others' evaluations, and are generally dissatisfied. Furthermore, Baeck (2004) found covert narcissists have a tendency to suppress their anger and more hostility than overt narcissists. It suggests that covert narcissists are more maladaptive than overt narcissists.

Nevertheless covert narcissists have more subjective discomfort and psychological maladaptation than overt narcissists, the overwhelming majority of studies has focused on overt narcissism and forgiveness, whereas only

few studies did on covert narcissism. According to the precedent studies about association between forgiveness and overt narcissism, the results were not consistent. Exline, Baumeister, Bushman, Campbell, & Finkel(2004) found a moderate negative association between narcissism and forgiveness, whereas Eaton, Struthers, & Santelli(2006) reported a weak negative relationship between narcissism and forgiveness, and Brown(2004) found no relationship at all. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate the relationship between overt-covert narcissism and forgiveness.

Differences between overt and covert narcissist influence the way they attribute to life events including transgression. It was demonstrated that overt narcissists have a tendency to make a self-enhancing attribution toward positive life events (Farwell, Wohlwend-Lloyd, 1998). In Contrast, the special attribution style of overt narcissists about negative events was not found in previous studies (Hartouni, 1992, Rhodewalt &Morf, 1995; Ladd et al, 1997), However, all these researches assessed attribution styles with hypothetical scenarios. When attribution was measured from actual negative experiences, Holdren(2004) found that overt and covert narcissists have different attribution to negative events. The result confirmed that individuals with high level of overt narcissism tend to make a defensive attribution, perceiving causality of negative events to be more external, specific, and unstable. On the other hands, covert narcissists showed passive attribution style, contributing the cause of negative events to be more internal, global, and stable.

Still many previous literatures which compared attribution style on two types of narcissism have limitations to understand its relation with transgression, especially with the way attributions were measured. In previous studies, assessment on attribution by asking participants to recall times when they felt hurt at work or relationships during last week. Therefore, to fully understand the differences of attribution styles between overt and covert narcissism on transgression, it is important to limit negative event to harmful or hurtful ones. It has been suggested that attribution styles influence how the individuals perceive or interpret transgressions and play major role in process of forgiveness (Al-Mabuk, Dedrick, & Vanderah, 1998)

There has been a theoretical distinction between causal and responsibility attribution (Fincham & Jaspars, 1980). Causal attribution relates to the perception of who or what caused the event, whereas responsibility attribution concern with who is accountable and needs to be blamed of the event. It has been examined that both causal and responsibility attributions are robust predictors of forgiveness (Fincham, 2000; Fincham, Jackson, & Beach, 2005; Takaku, 2001). For the causal attribution, when the victim makes internal, global, and stable attributions for transgression, he or she may percept transgression more negatively. In contrast, external, specific and unstable attributions are more likely to lead positive reaction toward transgressor. Responsibility attribution includes the degrees of selfish motivation, negative intent of offender, and how blameworthy the transgressors are. When the individuals attribute offence to be intentional, selfishly motivated, and blameworthy, which conceptualized as conflict-promoting attribution, it affects victim's willingness to forgive negatively (Fincham, Paleari, & Regalia, 2002). It was demonstrated that responsibility attribution increased the influence of subject severity on forgiveness (Fincham, Jackson, & Beach, 2005).

The aim of study was to investigate the role of attribution style on overt-covert narcissism and forgiveness. In present study, we attempted to differentiate between overt and covert narcissism in the relation of forgiveness. Given researches on the characteristics of overt and covert narcissism, it was predicted that overt and covert narcissism would show different patterns in the relation of forgiveness. Specifically, based on the findings in Holdren(2004) and previous researches that covert narcissist show more psychological symptoms(Rose, 2002; Baeck, 2004), it was predicted that covert narcissists will make more conflict-prompting attribution and are less forgivable than overt narcissists. Furthermore, it was hypothesized that the association between overt-covert narcissism and forgiveness might be mediated by causal and responsibility attribution.

2. Method

2.1. Participants
Participants were 286 undergraduate students(100 men, 186 women) from Chung-Ang university in Seoul, South Korea. The average age was 21.59 years.

2.2. Measures
Overt narcissism was assessed with Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Ruskin & Hall, 1979), developed for subclinical populations, which consist of forced-choice items (where 1=true, 2=false). In the present study, 32-item version of the original 54-item measure, suggested by Jung(2001) was used. Jung(2001) uncovered a four-factor solution involving 32 of the 54 original NPI item, consisted of 4 sub scales: leadership/confidence, exploitive/entitlement, grandiose/exhibitionistic, and superiority.

Covert narcissism was measured with Covert narcissism Scale (CNS; Kang, Jung, 2002), 45-item, 5-point scale, which developed for non-clinical population. CNS is composed of genuine factors of covert narcissism (hypersensitive/vulnerable, unstable goal-seeking and timid/lack of confidence subscales) and common factors of narcissism (grandiose/exhibitionistic and exploitative subscales).

Forgiveness was measured with Korean version of Enright Forgiveness Inventory (EFI-K; Kim, 1999). EFI assesses state forgiveness and participants were asked to response about their specific hurtful events. Responses were measured on 6-point scale(1=disagree strongly, 6=agree strongly). EFI-K consists of 60 items assessing participant's emotion, behavior and cognition toward transgressor.

To assess causal attribution, Korean reconstructed version by Lee(1993) of Attribution Style Questionnaire (ASQ; Peterson et al, 1982) was used. ASQ measures causal attribution in three categories; locus(internal/external), stability, and globality attribution. The higher score means that participants' behaviors are more external, more stable, and more global. In this study, participants rated their causal attribution based on their certain transgression reported in EFI-K, instead of hypothetical events.

Responsibility attribution was measured with responsibility attribution subscale of Relationship attribution measure (RAM) developed by Fincham and Bradbury (1992). RAM consists of 10 possible transgression events that might happen to marital situation, and participants were asked to rate their agreement with 3 items of causal attribution and 3 items of responsibility attribution. In this study, however, instead of using hypothetical negative events, participants were asked to respond to their own offending experiences that reported in EFI-K.

3. Results

3.1. The Correlations between overt-covert narcissism, attribution style, and forgiveness

Table 1 shows the correlations between overt-covert narcissism and genuine factors of covert narcissism. It may be seen from Table 1 that overt narcissism was negatively related to covert narcissism($r = -.167$, $p < .01$), common factors of narcissism (grandiose/exhibitionistic and exploitative subscales) were negatively related($r = .248$, $p < .01$; $r = .229$, $p < .01$), whereas genuine factors of covert narcissism (hypersensitive/vulnerable, unstable goal-seeking and timid/lack of confidence subscales) were positively related($r = -.276$, $p < .01$; $r = -.229$, $p < .05$; $r = -.442$, $p < .01$).

Table 2 shows the correlations between overt-covert narcissism, genuine factors of covert narcissism, responsibility attribution, causal attribution, and forgiveness. Forgiveness was not significantly related to overt narcissism, whereas covert narcissism was significantly related negatively($r = -.197$, $p < .01$). Genuine factors of covert narcissism significantly correlated with forgiveness as well($r=-.200$, $p < .01$). Responsibility attribution and causal attribution were positively related($r = .261$, $p< .01$) and as predicted, responsibility attribution and causal attribution were negatively related to forgiveness significantly($r = -627$, $p < .01$; $r = -.229$, $p < .01$).

Overt narcissism was not significantly related to responsibility attribution and causal attribution. Covert narcissism was not significantly related to responsibility attribution, however, it was positively related to causal attribution significantly($r = .230$, $p < .01$). Interestingly, genuine factors of covert narcissism were significantly related to responsibility attribution($r = .121$, $p < .05$).

Table 1. The correlations between overt-covert narcissism and genuine factors of covert narcissism.

	Overt narcissism	Covert narcissism	Grandiose/ exhibitionistic	Exploitative	Unstable goal-seeking	Hypersensitive/ vulnerable	Timid/lack of confidence
Overt narcissism	1.00	-	-	-	-	-	-
Covert narcissism	-.167**	1.00	-	-	-	-	-
Grandiose/ exhibitionistic	.248**	.572**	1.00	-	-	-	-
Exploitative	.229**	.626**	.328**	1.00	-	-	-
Unstable goal-seeking	-.276**	710**	.130*	.325**	1.00	-	-
Hypersensitive/ vulnerable	-.229**	.845**	.393**	.411**	.487**	1.00	-
Timid/ lack of confidence	-.442**	.671**	.263**	.160**	.313**	.600**	1.00

*$p < .05$. ** $p < .01$

Table 2. The correlations between narcissism, genuine factors of covert narcissism, attribution, and forgiveness.

	Overt narcissism	Covert narcissism	Genuine factors	Responsibility attribution	Causal attribution	Forgiveness
Overt narcissism	1.00	-	-	-	-	-
Covert narcissism	-.167**	1.00	-	-	-	-
Genuine factors	-.384**	.927**	1.00	-	-	-
Responsibility attribution	-.035	.110	.121*	1.00		-
Causal attribution	-.065	.230**	.230**	.261**	1.00	-
Forgiveness	.095	-.197**	-.200**	-.627**	-.229**	1.00

*$p < .05$. ** $p < .01$

3.2. The mediating effect of attribution styles between covert narcissism and forgiveness

  To examine whether causal and responsibility attributions serve as a mediator between covert narcissism and forgiveness, we used the three-step hierarchical regression analysis recommended by Baron and Kenny(1986). Based on correlation analysis, regression analysis was focused on relationship between covert narcissism and forgiveness. Hierarchical regression was conducted to investigate mediating effects, after controlling for apology.
  It revealed that covert narcissism on forgiveness was partially mediated by causal attribution. (table 3). Also, responsibility attribution mediated the relationship between genuine factors of covert narcissism and forgiveness (table 4).

Table 3. The mediating effect of causal attribution between covert narcissism and forgiveness.

Predictor	B	SE B	β	ΔR^2
Step 1				
	-43.985	7.654	-.324***	.324
Step 2				
Apology	-42.286	7.568	-.312***	.365
Covert narcissism	-.603	.201	-.168**	
Step 3				
Apology	-40.563	7.478	-.299***	
Covert narcissism	-.468	.202	-.130*	.402
Causal attribution	-5.577	1.820	-.173**	

*$p < .05$. ** $p < .01$

Table 4. The mediating effect of responsibility attribution between genuine factors of covert narcissism and forgiveness.

Predictor	B	SE B	β	ΔR^2
Step 1				
Apology	-44.295	7.654	-.326***	.326
Step 2				
Apology	-42.282	7.568	-.312***	.369
Genuine factors	-.805	.201	-.173**	
Step 3				
Apology	-24.519	7.478	-.181***	
Genuine factors	-.539	.202	-.116*	.663
Responsibility attribution	-12.253	1.820	-.570***	

*$p < .05$. ** $p < .01$

4. Discussion

In present study, we examined possible mediation by causal and responsibility attribution on the relationship between overt-covert narcissism and forgiveness. As a result, covert narcissists tended to be less forgivable toward harm-doer, whereas there was no association between overt narcissism and forgiveness. It supports previous studies that demonstrated that covert narcissists, compare to overt narcissism, experienced more psychological discomfort and maladjustment. (Kang, 2004; Back, 2004; Rose, 2002).These findings are also consistent with the results of Brown(2004)'s research that argued overt narcissism was not significantly related to forgiveness. At the same time, our results conflict with few studies that examined the positive correlation between overt narcissism and forgiveness (Eaton et al., 2006; Exline et al., 2004; McCullough, 1998).

Differences between our findings and several previous studies (Eaton et al., 2006; Exline et al., 2004; McCullough, 1998) may partly due to the measurement that was used. In present study, state-forgiveness was assessed, whereas Exline and his colleagues (2004) measured trait-forgiveness. In this term, our findings may suggest that low level of trait forgiveness in overt narcissists does not necessarily leads to low level of forgiveness in actual aversive incidents. Secondly, there were also differences between measurements used to assess state-forgiveness as well. McCullough(1998), who supported the relation between overt narcissism and forgiveness, used TRIM (Transgression Related Interpersonal Motivations scale). TRIM is widely-used measurement which assesses forgiveness by rating low level of motivation to revenge and avoidance, which means that TRIM technically measures unforgiveness. In contrast, in this study we used EFI-K which assesses cognition, emotion, and behavior attitudes toward transgressor. Recently, it has been suggested that unforgiveness and forgiveness cannot be explained in continuum aspects and that they are not opposite concept. For example, predictor of forgiveness was positively correlated with forgiveness, but not negatively correlated with unforgiveness(Wade & Worthington, 2003). Besides, forgiveness did not increase over time, whereas unforgiveness tend to decreased. Our results can be comprehensive in the context of these previous studies. Our results give evidence to the importance of distinction between unforgiveness and forgiveness.

As predicted, causal and responsibility attributions explained forgiveness significantly, while compared to responsibility attribution, causal attribution explains more of forgiveness. It means that appraisal to intention or motivation of offender influences a level of forgiveness more than appraisal to causality. Hierarchical regression analysis revealed that causal attribution mediated relationship between covert narcissism and forgiveness. Interestingly, responsibility attribution mediated between only genuine factor of covert narcissism and forgiveness. It suggests that their perception relating to who is responsible for the offence and how blameworthy the offender is affected by hypersensitive/vulnerable, unstable goal-seeking and timid/lack of confidence tendency.

These different effects of responsibility and causal attributions can be explained by Entailment Model proposed by Bradbury and Fincham(1990). Although causal attribution and responsibility attribution are theoretically distinguished, Entailment Model suggested that responsibility attributions presuppose causal attribution. Thus, when the victim makes internal, global, and stable attributions to the transgression, it affects their appraisal to responsibility to transgression and he or she may less likely to forgive offender (Davey et al., 2001). In particular, Davey and his colleagues(2001) investigated that causal attribution and marital relationship conflicts are mediated by responsibility attribution, which supports Entailment Model. In initial study, the findings that both causal and responsibility attributions mediated the relationship between covert narcissism and forgiveness provide evidence that Entailment Model can apply to the process of forgiveness in covert narcissists. In therapeutic view, intervention that prompts more benign attribution in both causal and responsibility would be effective to increase forgiveness in the individuals with high covert narcissism.

There are few limitations to be mentioned in this study. Firstly, it was conducted with undergraduate students which can make it hard to generalize our results to narcissistic personality disorder patients. Second, because we used self-rating questionnaire, we cannot exclude the possibility that narcissistic individuals exaggerated or distorted the degrees of forgiveness. Thus, it would be needed to repeat this research with experimental study to exclude possibility of distortion. Lastly, in present study, relationship quality or intimacy was not considered enough. Especially, previous researches in responsibility attribution and forgiveness focused on the intimate relationships, such as marriage, and revealed that responsibility attribution explained forgiveness effectively in

conflict in intimate relationship(Bradbury & Fincham, 1992; Fincham et al., 2002). Therefore, focusing the transgression on the intimate partners would demonstrate the relationship between covert narcissism and forgiveness more precisely.

==To conclude, our findings draw attention to the distinction between overt and covert narcissism on forgiveness. The findings of this study demonstrated that only covert narcissism is associated with forgiveness, which indicates that covert narcissists are less forgivable than overt narcissists. This findings implicit covert narcissist is more likely to experience psychological dysfunction.== Besides, this study provides evidence that causal attribution plays a mediating role in association between covert narcissism and forgiveness. This study has the significance in the sense that it explores a possible mechanism between covert narcissism and forgiveness. In addition, the results of present study also add further validity to the distinction made in previous research between the overt and covert faces of narcissism.

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