

Narcissism, Exploitative Attitudes, and Academic Dishonesty: An Exploratory Investigation of Reality Versus Myth

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Renewed interest in the effects of narcissism in the media has generated a closer examination of the phenomenon. This coupled with an increase in academic misbehavior among both high school and university students has provided an opportunity to scrutinize the effects of narcissism on attitudes toward academic dishonesty. The authors investigated this relationship and the presence of intervening variables such as academic entitlement and exploitativeness. The results indicate that the relationship between narcissism and academic dishonesty may be mediated by exploitative attitudes.

Keywords: academic dishonesty, academic entitlement, exploitative attitudes, narcissism

INTRODUCTION

A study reported in *USA Today* claimed that narcissistic tendencies are an increasing trend (Pinsky & Young, 2009). Narcissism was identified as a personality disorder by the American Psychiatric Association in the 1980s. A study in 2008 found that narcissism prevalent as a disorder among 6.2% of the population (Grant et al., 2008). Other studies have suggested that America's celebrity-obsessed culture is impacting the behavior of high school and college age groups (Twenge & Campbell, 2009). Studies of social networking behaviors have indicated some increase in narcissism (University of Georgia, 2008).

The psychology literature on the phenomenon of narcissism links narcissism to other behaviors and attitudes, some of which are dysfunctional; these involve entitlement and academic entitlement, Machiavellianism and exploitation, and dishonesty, including academic dishonesty. In the present empirical study we examined whether a relationship exists between narcissism, academic entitlement, exploitative attitudes, and academic dishonesty, or whether the previous claims are exaggerated.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of narcissism evolved from the behavior of Narcissus. Researchers such as Sigmund Freud have incorporated the concept in their analysis of the human psyche. Studies indicate that narcissists have three distinguishing traits. First, they tend to have a highly positive self-concept (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001; Rose, 2002). It leads them to believe that they are better or more effective on various dimensions than they may really be (John & Robins, 1994). This attitude and related ego involvement seem to be evident in traits such as status, intelligence, importance, and attractiveness (Campbell, Bosson, Goheen, Lakey, & Kernis, 2007; Campbell, Rudich, & Sedikides, 2002; Morf, Weir, & Davidov, 2000).

Second, narcissism is correlated with lower intensity for traits such as intimacy (Carroll, 1987), an increased willingness to exploit others for personal gains (Campbell, Bush, Brunell, & Shelton, 2005), and to some extent to Machiavellianism (McHoskey, 1995). Finally, narcissists tend to bolster their positive self-view by self-regulating behavior. Some of these behaviors are interpersonal in nature, such as trying to gain attention (Buss & Chiodo, 1991) and to appear entertaining and colorful (Paulhus, 1998). These three traits seem to differentiate narcissists from those that possess high self-esteem.

Although some prior research indicates that narcissists have negative views of themselves and thus have a constant drive for self-improvement, there is some evidence to

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suggest that they view themselves the same on the outside as on the inside (Association for Psychological Science, 2007). Narcissists were found to have positive views of themselves with regard to their status, dominance, and intelligence. Yet, other studies suggest narcissists' desire for power drive them to seek leadership positions and eventually emerge as leaders (Association for Psychological Science, 2008). The implication is that this trait may pose problems in other aspects of an individual's life, including in their academic experience.

The results of a recent survey of 18–25-year-olds, when asked about their generation's most important goals, indicated certain narcissistic trends (Twenge & Campbell, 2009). Eighty-one percent of them selected "being rich" as their most important goal followed by "being famous" (51%). The group saw these two goals as far more important than others such as being charitable, helping the community or becoming spiritual.

The focus on inflated self-esteem to some extent seems to be a recent phenomenon, at least among college students. For instance, more than 80% of recent college students scored higher when compared to the average among their cohorts in the 1960s (Twenge & Campbell, 2009). Narcissistic attitudes seemed to be pervasive, with about 25% responding with "yes" to a majority of items on the commonly used narcissism scale. According to Twenge and Campbell, about 10% of those in their twenties have experienced certain symptoms of the Narcissistic Personality Disorder.

Data from 37,000 college students has shown that narcissistic personality traits rose just as fast as obesity from the 1980s to the present, with the shift especially pronounced for women (Twenge & Campbell, 2009).

Narcissism among the college students can manifest itself in many ways. In a study of Facebook users, in which personal pages were content analyzed, the number of friends and wall posts that individuals had on their profile pages tended to correlate with their level of narcissism (University of Georgia, 2008). The authors of the study concluded that those who are narcissistic use Facebook in a self-promoting way that can be identified by others, even to those who are untrained observers. Many university students use Facebook, but narcissistic students tend to have greater number of friends and narcissistic college students tend to upload more provocative pictures of themselves on social networking sites compared to students who are more humble (Twenge & Campbell, 2009).

If the increase of narcissism is found only in social behaviors, perhaps it may not be an academic problem. However, there are indications that narcissistic attitudes pervade academic behaviors as well. Twenge and Campbell (2009) reported that 30% of college students agreed with the statement: if I show up to every class, I deserve at least a B. In another recent study, 52% of students considered themselves customers of the university and hence expected good customer service for the price paid by them (Schings, 2009). In

another experiment, students were told that their essays were graded by other students with harsh comments by the graders. Those students who had higher narcissistic tendencies were more aggressive in their reaction to the grades and comments compared to those who were less narcissistic (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998). The study reported that those high in both self-esteem and narcissism were the most aggressive—more than those high in narcissism but low in self-esteem, or those low in narcissism but high in self-esteem or those low in both.

The evidence does not all point in one direction. Other studies have found no evidence that young people have inflated impressions of themselves compared to the youth of previous generations (Association of Psychological Science, 2008). The investigators in this study found no evidence of increasing levels of narcissism between studies of college students in late 1970s—mid 1980s and 1996–2007.

Academic Entitlement

Narcissism has often been linked to a sense of entitlement. Narcissists feel special and that the world owes them something. These notions among narcissists translate to achieving success or material wealth at all costs without regard to social responsibilities to others. Schings (2009) suggested a relationship between students' attitudes and behaviors and their perceptions as university customers. Based on a survey of 1,025 undergraduates, Schings found that those who considered themselves as university customers were more likely to feel entitled and to complain. Greenberger, Lessard, Chuanshen, and Farruggia (2008) reported that academic entitlement is strongly related to an overall sense of entitlement and to narcissism among students.

Dishonest Behavior: The Everybody Cheats Syndrome

Cheating has become a rampant problem in schools and universities. In many cases, there is an association between negative academic attitudes and cheating. Whitley (1998) reported that cheating can be most observed among those who believe that it is the norm and acceptable.

In the academic world, cheating is most associated with exams, and assignments or project reports. It seems prevalent both in high schools and universities. Seventy-four percent of high school students admitted to cheating in 2002 compared to 61% in 1992 and 34% in 1969 (Twenge & Campbell, 2009). The win-at-all-costs belief that seems to prevail among some students. In 2007, 80% of Texas A&M students admitted to cheating (Twenge & Campbell). In recent years, there has been a wealth of anecdotal and reported evidence of the use of cell phones, PDAs, and the Internet as tools of the trade among cheaters. The success of websites such as Turnitin.com are a testament to the concern among educators about this problem. According to the site, over half a million instructors utilize their services (Turnitin, 2009). Cheaters

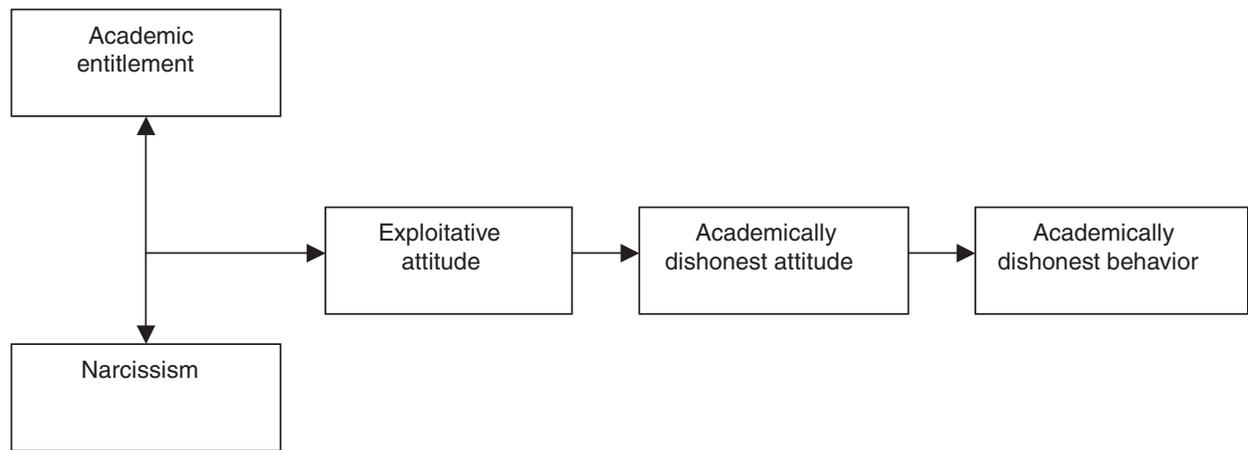


FIGURE 1 Framework for narcissistic influence on academic dishonesty.

often see nothing wrong about their actions and believe that it does not hurt anyone in the process. Whether it is survival strategy or one that is related to other traits, some believe that cheating is rampant in the academic world.

DEVELOPMENT

Study Development

The literature review indicates a few things germane to the present discussion. First, the review supports the opinion that there appear to be higher levels of narcissistic behavior and attitudes today than there have been in the past (Twenge & Campbell, 2009). Furthermore, entitlement and academic entitlement are also more prevalent today than in the past (Schings, 2008). The link to manipulation or Machiavellianism is less well proven, as is the conclusion that narcissistic tendencies encourage students to cheat (Lau, Williams, Westlake, & Paulhus, 2005; Whitley, 1998).

In the present study, we examined the variables identified in prior studies as indicators or potential effects of narcissism. In particular, we investigated the relationship between narcissism, academic entitlement, exploitative attitudes (Machiavellianism), and academically dishonest attitudes. Figure 1 depicts the model tested in the study.

Proposition Development

The literature review suggests that the present college generation exhibits higher levels of narcissistic behavior including a sense of entitlement. The entitlement claimed by the youth of today includes higher levels of academic entitlement. Therefore, the first proposition investigated was that narcissism is positively correlated with academic entitlement.

The literature review also suggests that both narcissism and academic entitlement are related to a tendency to manipulate. In other words, higher levels of narcissism and

academic entitlement result in a higher level of manipulation, especially in terms of an attitude toward manipulation. Therefore, the second research proposition was narcissism and academic entitlement are predictors of exploitative attitudes.

Finally, in the college environment, higher levels of narcissism have coincided with higher levels of academic dishonesty. The dishonesty is both an attitude (everybody does it) and a behavior (I do it). We focused on the attitudinal component. Therefore, the final research proposition was narcissism, academic entitlement, and exploitative attitude are predictors of academically dishonest attitudes.

METHOD

Instrument Development

The items included on the data collection instrument were developed from three sources. First, the Narcissism Inventory formed the primary base for items targeted at the primary focal area; that is, narcissistic tendencies and attitudes (Raskin & Hall, 1979). Second, the Machiavellian Index (Mach 4) was used to develop items focusing on manipulation and exploitation (Christie & Geis, 1970). These measures are directed at the exploitative attitude variable. Finally, for items related to the academically dishonest attitude we used items based on research from other work in the field (Holdren, 2004).

Narcissism inventory. The inventory itself is not constructed in a format that can easily be used in Likert-type scales (Raskin, 1979). Therefore, we used statements in the inventory that were consistent with the dimensions of narcissism, and used these statements in the survey instrument. This approach is consistent with other research projects (Daig, Klappe, & Fliege, 2009; Soyer, Rovenpor, & Kopolman, 2001). The statements were edited for clarity and

effectiveness, with care taken to ensure that no meaning was changed.

Exploitative attitude (Machiavellian index). The items in this index are constructed to be used in Likert-type scales (Christie & Geis, 1970). Therefore, the insertion of these items was straightforward. Once again, the items were edited for clarity, with care taken with respect to meaning.

Academic entitlement. There is some research in different literatures concerning this variable. The most recent research indicates that academic entitlement is a separate and distinct variable; one that is moderately correlated with overall entitlement and moderately correlated with exploitative attitude (Greenberger et al., 2008). Based on this recent finding, the scales used in the area were included in this study in a similar manner to those mentioned previously.

Academically dishonest attitude. Prior work in the field of dishonest attitudes has come primarily from the fields of education (Sims, 1993), psychology (Ehrlinger & Dunning, 2003), and ethics (Kidwell, Wozniak, & Laurel, 2003). The reported work in the field of business education is relatively limited. The reported work indicates academic dishonesty (distinct from general dishonesty) is as prevalent in business education as it is on others. Furthermore, the work on honor codes suggests that there is a more pervasive attitude toward accepting academic dishonesty than there is actual dishonest behavior (Kidwell et al.). Items for the present study were gleaned from this prior literature. However, most studies used a dishonest behavior variable in the research rather than dishonest attitude. Therefore, the researchers used a small subset of items to measure this latent variable.

Survey Construction

The scales were edited and formatted into a four-page survey. The preamble informed the respondents that responses were in confidence and there was no method of tracking responses. This was reinforced by the use of a staff member to collect data rather than a faculty member.

In addition to the content of the items, we determined that a weighting of the response was necessary as well. This additional measure would then permit us to determine whether specific items were considered important by those surveyed. The weighting was achieved by using a 3-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*very important to me*) to 3 (*not important to me*). The weighting scale was positioned immediately to the right of the specific item to ensure that respondents were able to track their responses more easily.

Data Collection

The instrument was administered to six student groups. The students were participants in courses at a medium-sized state

TABLE 1
Factor Reliability

Scale	Initial Cronbach's α	Number of items removed	Final Cronbach's α
Narcissism	0.771	5	0.836
Academic entitlement	0.821	1	0.887
Exploitative attitude	0.801	1	0.824
Academically dishonest attitude	0.422	1	0.753

university in the southeastern United States. Both undergraduate and graduate students participated. The completed questionnaires were collected by an administrative staff member, not by a faculty member, to avoid participant discomfort related to the study subject. The data were collated and entered into an excel spreadsheet and then analyzed using SPSS (version 16.0).

Results

Initial Data Analysis

A small subsample was extracted to evaluate the reliability of the scales used in the study. The responses were analyzed by reporting Cronbach's alpha results and are presented in Table 1. The scales were used as predictor and dependent variables in regression models. The models were the following: (a) Proposition 1: Narcissism is positively correlated with academic entitlement; (b) Proposition 2: Narcissism and academic entitlement are significant predictors of exploitative attitude; and (c) Proposition 3: Narcissism, academic entitlement, and exploitative attitude are significant predictors of academically dishonest behavior.

The first proposition was tested using a Pearson correlation test. The correlation was .369 ($p = .000$). Therefore, the first proposition is supported by the data.

Table 2 reports the results of the first regression model. The predictor variables were narcissism and academic entitlement. The dependent variable was exploitative attitude. The model was statistically significant, $F = 31.444, p = .000$. The t values for both predictors were also significant, for

TABLE 2
Model: Narcissism + Academic Entitlement = Exploitative Attitude

Variable	t	p
Constant	3.788	.000
Narcissism	3.949	.000
Academic entitlement	4.933	.000

Note. $F = 31.44, p = .000. R^2 = .328$.

TABLE 3
Model: Narcissism + Academic Entitlement +
Exploitative Attitude = Academically Dishonest
Attitude

Variable	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Constant	0.348	.729
Narcissism	-1.084	.283
Academic entitlement	1.096	.275
Exploitative attitude	5.563	.000

Note. $F = 16.659$, $p = .000$. $R^2 = .273$.

narcissism, $t = 3.949$, $p = .000$; for academic entitlement, $t = 4.933$, $p = .000$. This model reported an R^2 of .328. The results of the regression support Proposition 2 and are provided in Table 2.

Table 3 presents the results of the second regression equation including all prior reported variables as predictors, with academically dishonest attitude as the dependent variable, $F = 16.659$, $p = .000$. However, only one of the variables reported a t value that is significant at the .05 level, exploitative attitude $t = 5.563$, $p = .000$. The R^2 for the model was .273. Therefore, the regression results partially supported Proposition 3, in that only one of the variables is a significant predictor of academically dishonest attitude (Table 3).

DISCUSSION

The central premise of the study was to determine whether narcissism is related to academic entitlement, exploitative attitude, and academic dishonesty. The results reported previously indicate support, or at least partial support, for the study propositions.

According to the results, narcissism is correlated with academic entitlement (Pearson correlation = .369). Narcissism and academic entitlement are statistically significant predictors of an exploitative attitude, $F = 31.44$, $p = .000$, with both predictor variables significant at the .01 level. So far so good! The last regression model is not fully supportive of the proposition, in that even though the model was significant, $F = 16.659$, $p = .000$, only one of the independent variables was a statistically significant predictor of academically dishonest attitude, exploitative attitude, $t = 5.563$, $p = .000$. The proportion of variance explained by the two regression models is relatively low, at .329 (Model 1) and .278 (Model 2), indicating that other variables with a significant impact are not included in the model.

The most obvious explanation for the above results is that exploitative attitude mediates the relationship between narcissism and academic entitlement, and academic dishonesty. The implication in this exploratory study is that higher levels of narcissism do not have a direct impact on academically dishonest attitude, but have an indirect relationship. That is, if a person is not prone to exploiting others, or does not think exploiting is worthwhile, then their attitude toward cheating

is not changed. Therefore, just because students appear to be more narcissistic does not mean they are more likely to think cheating is acceptable.

There are a number of limitations that must be noted. First, the study was based on a smaller sample at one southeastern university at a specific point in time. The robustness of these results can only be tested with larger and repeated administrations in other institutions. The internal validity of the scales appeared to be good (see Table 1); however, additional items could have been that would have captured the focal variables more effectively.

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