



# Narcissus the innovator? The relationship between grandiose narcissism, innovation, and adaptability



Mickey B. Smith<sup>a,\*</sup>, Brian D. Webster<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Mitchell College of Business, University of South Alabama, 5811 USA Drive South Mobile, AL 36688, United States

<sup>b</sup> Miller College of Business, Ball State University, 215 Whiting Business Building, Muncie, IN 47306, United States

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## ABSTRACT

The current study tests a model in which adaptability mediates the relationship between grandiose narcissism and innovation. Little research has investigated grandiose narcissism as a predictor of innovation, particularly innovation in the workplace. We test our proposed model via two studies. Study 1 is a lab study in which undergraduate students performed an innovative marketing task based upon the Heuristic Ideation Technique. The participants self-reported the focal variables and blind raters scored the innovativeness of the participant's marketing ideas. In a second study, working adults self-reported grandiose narcissism and adaptability and supervisors provided ratings of each employee's innovation at work. The findings from the two studies provide support for our model suggesting that grandiose narcissism indirectly influences innovation through adaptability. We discuss the implications for theory and practice as well as opportunities for future research in this area.

## 1. Introduction

Currently, a premium is being placed on innovation in the workplace. Accordingly, the study of innovation has grown tremendously in organizational psychology in the last two decades (Choi & Chang, 2009; Somech & Drach-Zahavy, 2013). As with other forms of performance, researchers have become particularly interested in the individual differences, namely personality, that distinguish innovative employees from others. Although personality researchers have investigated the role of specific traits in predicting creative behavior, research is only beginning to emerge that investigates trait-based antecedents of innovation: the process of putting novel ideas into practice (e.g., Madrid, Patterson, Birdi, Leiva, & Kausel, 2014; Wallace, Butts, Johnson, Stevens, & Smith, 2016). Furthermore, existing research investigating the personality-innovation relationship has focused mainly on normal-range or bright personality traits (for exceptions see Goncalo, Flynn, & Kim, 2010; Resick, Whitman, Weingarden, & Hiller, 2009; Wisse, Barelds, & Rietzschel, 2015; Zibarras, Port, & Woods, 2008). Indeed, in their recent review of the innovation literature, Anderson, Potočnik, and Zhou (2014) identified this limitation and called for more work investigating “dark side approaches to innovation” (p. 1323). One goal of the current study is to advance a full-spectrum perspective of personality traits that influence innovation by integrating grandiose narcissism as a predictor of employee innovation.

Narcissism is typically regarded as an undesirable trait with serious implications for negative employee behavior (Grijalva & Newman, 2015; O'Boyle, Forsyth, Banks, & McDaniel, 2012). For instance, narcissism is a particularly strong predictor of counterproductive work behavior among other deviant behaviors (Grijalva & Newman, 2015). However, growing evidence suggests that narcissism may be beneficial in situations requiring innovative behavior. For example, Gerstner, König, Enders, and Hambrick (2013) reported that narcissistic CEOs were aggressive in adopting new technologies, and Resick et al. (2009) found that CEO narcissism was indirectly related to innovation through risk-taking. However, beyond this work, there is little research investigating the relationship between narcissism and individual innovative behaviors. Moreover, specific facets of narcissism, such as grandiose narcissism, appear to align with certain aspects of innovative behavior—particularly the need to take risks in order to innovate. Thus, we explore the potential effects of grandiose narcissism related to innovation.

To explain how grandiose narcissism may relate to innovation, we draw upon the concept of adaptability. Self-reported adaptability indicates one's self-evaluated cognitive and emotional control in changing environments, whether they be crises, social interactions, or ambiguous situations (Ployhart & Bliese, 2006; Pulakos, Arad, Donovan, & Plamondon, 2000). Adaptability has been shown to be a critical attribute in the workplace, and we contend that narcissists

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [mbsmith@southalabama.edu](mailto:mbsmith@southalabama.edu) (M.B. Smith), [bdwebster2@bsu.edu](mailto:bdwebster2@bsu.edu) (B.D. Webster).

develop strong self-perceptions of adaptability, which lead to increased efforts to innovate. Specifically, we propose that grandiose narcissism is indirectly related to innovation through heightened levels of self-perceived adaptability. We investigate the narcissism-innovation relationship within two settings (i.e., lab study and field study) to assess the generalizability of our findings. Consequently, we test our model using two different samples (i.e., undergraduate students and working adults) and two other-rated sources measuring innovation (i.e., blind raters and supervisors).

### 1.1. Personality as a predictor of innovation

Anderson et al. (2014) defined innovation as “the subsequent stage [following creativity] of implementing ideas toward better procedures, practices, or products” (p. 1298). Innovation invokes the act of realizing the utility of something novel and useful (West & Farr, 1990). For instance, innovative employees may offer a new way of performing a critical task that enhances efficiency and effectiveness, or they may intentionally apply a new technology in a way that has yet to be used. Due to the importance placed on innovation, scholars have long studied organizational factors that lead to innovation (c.f. recent reviews on innovation and creativity: Anderson, De Dreu, & Nijstad, 2004; Anderson et al., 2014; Shalley, Zhou, & Oldham, 2004). These include leadership behaviors and styles (Mumford & Licuanan, 2004; Rosing, Frese, & Bausch, 2011; Tierney, Farmer, & Graen, 1999), organizational support (Eisenberger, Fasolo, & Davis-LaMastro, 1990; Zhou & George, 2001), and organizational climate (Wallace et al., 2016).

However, the study of individual differences in relation to innovation, such as personality traits, has lagged. Although limited, scholars have demonstrated innovativeness to be positively related to personality traits such as those in the Big 5 (Zhou & Hoever, 2014), proactive personality (Ng & Feldman, 2013; Seibert, Kraimer, & Crant, 2001), need for cognition (Wu, Parker, & de Jong, 2014), promotion focus (Wallace et al., 2016), and arrogance (Zibarras et al., 2008). Collectively, this research is promising, but more research is needed to explore the relationships between innovation and personality—specifically dark personality traits.

### 1.2. Grandiose narcissism and innovation

Grandiose narcissism is a facet of the broader narcissism trait that describes individuals who possess an inflated sense of self, an intent on seeking praise, and delusions of grandeur (Krizan & Herlache, 2017). The extant literature details several negative outcomes associated with narcissism such as misplaced blame (Campbell, Reeder, Sedikides, & Elliot, 2000) and ethically-questionable behaviors (Soyer, Rovenpor, & Kopelman, 1999). Narcissistic individuals possess positive self-perceptions that tread on the extreme and are exceedingly self-confident, which is indicative of the grandiosity facet. Furthermore, narcissists have the tendency to engage in self-enhancement (Grijalva & Zhang, 2016). That is, narcissists prefer to showcase what they perceive to be their superior qualities to garner attention and positive regard (Brown, Budzek, & Tamborski, 2009; Miller et al., 2011). However, there is commonly a disparity in narcissists' self-perceived abilities and the effective exhibition of those abilities (Goncalo et al., 2010; Grijalva & Zhang, 2016). In other words, interpreting a narcissist's self-perception of abilities should be done cautiously. In regards to understanding a narcissist's innovativeness, an alternative would be to obtain other-rated measures of innovation, which is how innovation is measured in the current study.

Nonetheless, grandiose narcissism is the exploitative facet of narcissism that draws upon social displays of ability. Narcissists not only believe that they are superior; they act in ways to reinforce their superiority. For instance, narcissists apply tactics of self-enhancement to sell themselves to others. Similarly, innovation, albeit part of the same process as creativity, consists of different behaviors that involve

‘selling’ novel ideas. A key stage in the innovative process is commercialization (Anderson et al., 2014), which involves justifying the use of a novel product, process, or service. Successful innovation is dependent upon mobilizing and marketing new concepts and ideas. Thus, we contend that narcissists, whether rated by knowledgeable others or blind raters, may indeed be perceived to be innovative, because innovation is largely about persuading others of the value of one's creative output. Indeed, there may be situations in which narcissists succeed because they are more likely to take chances in changing environments.

### 1.3. Grandiose narcissism, adaptability, and innovation

Adaptation is an important driver of innovation. According to Anderson et al. (2014), innovation requires individuals to monitor and alter their cognition or behavior to improve a standard procedure or implement a novel idea. Pulakos et al. (2000) defined adaptability as one's propensity to solve problems creatively and deal with situations through innovative means. Thus, the conceptualizations of innovation and adaptability assert that one cannot exist without the other. Specifically, for someone to innovate, he or she must first be able to adapt. Furthermore, adaptation in this context is volitional, which implies that successful adaptation is not an implicit phenomenon (Ployhart & Bliese, 2006; Pulakos et al., 2000). Instead, adaptation requires motivated action—that is, not simply the ability to adapt but also the willingness to take the risk. This indicates that individual differences should have an impact on perceptions of one's own ability to adapt.

Indeed, predictors of adaptability include dispositional attributes. Pulakos et al. (2002) reported various relationships among facets of adaptability and personality traits. Other scholars have reported similar findings (e.g., LePine, Colquitt, & Erez, 2000), but none of the existing research incorporates narcissism. In line with prior work, we conceptualize adaptability as a self-perceived ability, and we contend that narcissists will perceive themselves to be highly adaptive (Foster, Shenesey, & Goff, 2009; Grijalva & Zhang, 2016; Raskin & Hall, 1979). Opposed to other instances in which an inflated self-perception may not necessarily be beneficial, inflated self-perceived adaptability may lead individuals to not only take risks but also to effectively sell their ideas through their apparent confidence. In other words, self-perceived adaptability will lead individuals to act in innovative ways and motivate them to successfully justify their innovations to others.

### 1.4. Predictions and summary of studies

Below, we report the findings from two studies. In Study 1, we tested a mediated model in which we expected grandiose narcissism to indirectly relate to innovation through adaptability. Undergraduate business students self-reported grandiose narcissism and adaptability and generated new ideas and ways to market their ideas as innovative. We then had MBA students, who were blind to the participants' identity, scores on narcissism, and scores on adaptability, rate the new ideas on the grounds of innovativeness. In Study 2, we sought to replicate the results from Study 1 in a field setting. We tested our model on working adults using supervisor ratings of innovation. Ultimately, we were most interested in assessing the mediating effect of adaptability. The authors will provide resources used in the analysis of our data (e.g., materials, code/syntax) upon request.

## 2. Study 1

### 2.1. Sample and procedure

Undergraduate students in an upper-level management course from a public Midwestern university and a public Southeastern university participated in a laboratory study in exchange for extra credit. The sample consisted of 181 participants (106 males, 74 females, 1 not reported). A priori, we estimated a small-to-medium effect size and a

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