You remind me of someone awesome: Narcissistic tolerance is driven by perceived similarity

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ABSTRACT

Previous research suggests that narcissists (vs. non-narcissists) may be more tolerant of other narcissists. However, previous research on this topic has involved methodologies that rely on trait-relevant priming rather than observations of actual behavior, thus limiting the generalizability of the findings. The current study examined whether narcissists tolerate narcissists by assessing participants' reactions to actors behaving in a narcissistic or non-narcissistic fashion. Narcissism was positively associated with liking in the narcissistic-actor condition and negatively associated with liking in the non-narcissistic-actor condition. Path modeling suggested that this interaction was mediated by perceived similarity and tendencies to selectively interpret the actor's behavior. These findings have implications for how narcissists view other narcissists and interpret social information.

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1. Introduction

The narcissistic-tolerance theory states that narcissists[1] are more tolerant and fond of their narcissistic peers due to a perceived similarity (Hart and Adams, 2014). The theory represents an explanatory framework for understanding correlational work showing that narcissists tend to fraternize with narcissistic others (Campbell, 1999; Keller et al., 2014; Maaß, Lämmle, Bensch, and Ziegler, 2016; Moskowitz, Rieger, and Seal, 2009), presents an alternative to the idea that narcissists are generally hostile, intolerant people (Bushman and Baumeister, 1998; Exline, Baumeister, Bushman, Campbell, and Finkel, 2004; McCullough, Emmons, Kilpatrick, and Mooney, 2003), and reflects the intriguing idea that narcissists might actually see less wrong with projecting a narcissistic identity to audiences (Hart, Adams, and Burton, 2016). The theory has gathered support (Adams, Hart, and Burton, 2015; Hart and Adams, 2014; Wallace, Grotzinger, Howard, and Parkhill, 2015), and, in the current study, we seek to provide a stronger test of the theory by addressing methodological weaknesses associated with past tests.

Despite the apparent support in the literature for narcissistic-tolerance theory, the scope of the theory remains unclear (e.g., Wallace et al., 2015) and the validity of the tests is questionable. Each prior test of the theory has examined reactions to individuals described by a narcissistic trait (e.g., *arrogant*) or a trait-relevant action (Carl *bragged* about an accomplishment). As a result, narcissistic tolerance could simply reflect narcissists' more positive evaluations of trait-relevant terms (e.g., *arrogant*) rather than true tolerance for narcissistic behavior (Hart and Adams, 2014). A more robust test of the theory would involve an assessment of participants' responses to the actual behaviors of narcissists, rather than semantically implied narcissistic tendencies. Another validity issue stems from methods using a measure of trait narcissism and responses to (non)narcissistic others within the same experimental session. This leaves open the possibility that relations between the measures could reflect a response bias wherein people provide consistent (narcissistic or non-narcissistic) responses (e.g., Krosnick, Judd, and Wittenbrink, 2005). Ideally, trait narcissism might be measured well in advance of impressions toward narcissistic and non-narcissistic others, which was the case in the current study.

Given these issues, the present research seeks to advance prior work in two key ways. First, in response to calls for more ecologically valid tests of narcissistic tolerance (Hart and Adams, 2014; Wallace et al., 2015), participants in the present study rated the likability of actual narcissists (instead of simply reading descriptions of narcissists, as in prior research). Specifically, participants viewed an actor that gave either highly, moderately, or non-narcissistic responses to interview questions. Then, participants rated how much they liked the actor. If, consistent with narcissistic-tolerance theory, narcissists are *selectively* more tolerant of others who exhibit narcissistic behavior, there should be an interaction between trait narcissism and experimental condition such that narcissists (vs. non-narcissists) like the actor more in the highly narcissistic and moderately narcissistic conditions, but less in the non-narcissistic condition. Second, to mitigate the threat of response biases, we measured trait narcissism during a pre-screening session, so

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[1] We refer to individuals who score high on dimensional, sub-clinical trait measures of narcissism as "narcissists" and those scoring low as "non-narcissists." This labeling was chosen because it is conventional and concise. We are not referring to a categorical, clinical distinction.

participants were probably unaware of their responses on the narcissism measure during the current study.

We also assessed ideas concerning the mechanisms that are presumed to underlie narcissistic tolerance. For example, it has been suggested that the effects of narcissism on tolerance for others' narcissism might be driven by perceived similarity (Hart and Adams, 2014) as well as tendencies to cast others' narcissistic displays in a more favorable light (Hart and Adams, 2014; Adams et al., 2015). But neither of these possibilities has been studied. Here, we included measures of perceived similarity and measures of selective interpretation of the actor's behavior (e.g., seeing a behavior as "up-front" vs. "rude"). We anticipated that these two measures – perceived similarity and selective interpretation – might be positively related.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and design

Participants ($N = 317$) were undergraduates participating in exchange for course credit. The design had three experimental conditions (highly, moderately, or non-narcissistic). Participants' data were removed if they: were unable to view the video clips due to technology-related issues ($n = 38$), recognized the actors ($n = 5$), or failed to complete the Narcissistic Personality Inventory during mass prescreening ($n = 52$). Thus, the final sample consisted of 222 participants (170 females; $M_{age} = 18.6$).

2.2. Materials and procedure

2.2.1. Trait narcissism
Prior to the study, participants completed the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin and Terry, 1988) in a separate, mass prescreening survey. The NPI is a measure of trait narcissism in which participants endorse responses that either do or do not reflect narcissism. Narcissistic responses were summed onto a single index of narcissism ($\alpha = 0.85$; $M = 15.6$; $SD = 7.1$), with higher scores reflecting greater levels of narcissism.

In the introduction to the online study, participants completed all measures under the pretense that the study aimed to explore how people form first impressions.

2.2.2. Video clips
Participants were told they would watch recordings of a past participant (who was actually an actor) respond to 10 interview questions. Participants viewed each interview question as text on the computer screen (e.g., "*If you were given the opportunity to teach your PY 101 course, how do you think you would do?*"), followed by an actor's video response to the question.

2.2.2.1. Crafting actors' responses within each condition. Depending on the experimental condition, actors' responses were either a highly narcissistic ($n = 84$; "*I'd probably do better than the other 101 teachers at this school*"), moderately narcissistic ($n = 65$; "*I'd do better than the other students in my class, but probably not my teacher*"), or non-narcissistic ($n = 73$; "*I don't have a degree in psychology, so probably not too great*") response. To select the actors' responses, participants ($N = 287$) completed an online pilot survey in which they viewed 12 interview questions, one at a time, in a random order. When each interview question was presented, participants were asked to imagine another person said one of nine randomly-selected responses to the question. Then, they were asked "*If someone answered the question in this way, would you say that person was…*" and rated the participant on narcissism ($1 = $ *Not at all narcissistic*, $10 = $ *Extremely narcissistic*). For each interview question in the highly narcissistic and non-narcissistic conditions, the responses with the highest and lowest narcissism rating were selected, respectively. For the moderately narcissistic condition,

we selected responses that had a significantly higher narcissistic rating than the non-narcissistic response and a significantly lower narcissistic rating than the highly narcissistic response. When multiple responses satisfied this criterion, the response that was rated closest to the midpoint of the narcissism scale rating was chosen. One-sample t-tests demonstrated that all highly narcissistic and non-narcissistic responses were significantly above and below the midpoint of the scale, respectively. Additionally, moderately narcissistic responses did not significantly differ from the midpoint, except for one item that was retained because it was within one scale point of the midpoint. Ultimately, two of the 12 interview questions were removed because no moderately narcissistic response satisfied the aforementioned criteria.[2]

2.2.2.2. Actors. Four undergraduates (two male, two female) served as the actors. To reduce the influence of actor attractiveness, we conducted a pilot test to ensure the actors were moderately attractive. In the pilot study, participants ($N = 21$) rated the attractiveness of a picture of each actor, and each actor's attractiveness fell within the middle two quartiles of a 1–10 scale of attractiveness (range $= 4.2$–6.8). In the video clips, each actor provided all possible experimental responses to each of the interview questions (i.e., each actor performed all lines for the highly narcissistic, moderately narcissistic, and non-narcissistic responses). However, participants were randomly assigned to see only one actor throughout the experiment.

After participants completed the video clip task, they completed a questionnaire containing two measures of selective processing and one measure of perceived similarity (in a random order). Afterward, the final measures were presented in the order they are described.

2.2.3. Selective-interpretation indices
In one part of this task, participants were asked to write down five trait terms they would use to describe the actor. Following this listing task, they used a 10-point scale ($1 = $ *Very negative*, $10 = $ *Very positive*) to rate how favorably they view each of these traits. A mean score was computed for the ratings of all the traits they listed ($\alpha = 0.83$; $M = 5.2$; $SD = 2.3$). On this measure of "subjective trait positivity," a higher score indicated that participants viewed the actor's participant-generated traits in a more positive way.

In the other part of this task, participants rated the actor on a series of 10-point bipolar trait scales that had a negatively valenced narcissistic trait on one end and a positively valenced narcissistic trait on the other that could, in theory, be used to describe the same behaviors ($1 = $ *self-absorbed*, $10 = $ *individualistic*; $1 = $ *self-confident*, $10 = $ *arrogant* [r]; $1 = $ *exploitative*, $10 = $ *strategic*; $1 = $ *assertive*, $10 = $ *aggressive* [r]; $1 = $ *self-promoting*, $10 = $ *braggart* [r]; $1 = $ *upfront*, $10 = $ *rude* [r]). A mean score was computed ($\alpha = 0.84$; $M = 5.2$; $SD = 2.0$) for the six items to create a single index of "valenced trait interpretation," with a higher score indicating participants viewed the actor as possessing primarily positively valenced traits. Because the two conceptualizations of selective interpretation were highly related ($r = 0.70$, $p < 0.001$), we z-scored both variables and averaged them into an index of selective interpretation ($M = -0.03$; $SD = 0.93$).

2.2.4. Perceived similarity
Participants used a 10-point scale ($1 = $ *Strongly disagree*, $10 = $ *Strongly agree*) to rate the following three statements: *I think Casey and I are similar in a lot of ways*; *I have a completely different personality than Casey* [r]; *Casey and I probably have a lot of things in common*. After reverse scoring the appropriate item, a mean score was computed to yield a single index of perceived similarity ($\alpha = 0.93$; $M = 4.0$; $SD = 2.3$).

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[2] One moderately narcissistic response was not significantly lower than the highly narcissistic response, but it was retained because it was nearly significant ($p = 0.057$).