



Entitlement, exploitativeness, and reasoning about everyday transgressions: A social domain analysis



Christopher Daddis*, Amy B. Brunell

The Ohio State University, United States

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ABSTRACT

Social domain theory was used to examine the role of entitlement and exploitativeness in reasoning about everyday transgressions in two studies. Exploitativeness was positively associated with believing that transgressing was acceptable, whereas entitlement was negatively associated. Exploitive participants justified these judgments using personal (e.g., appeal to choice) and less moral (e.g., appeal to welfare of others) reasoning, whereas highly entitled people used more prudential but less personal reasoning. Exploitive participants were less likely to acknowledge the relevance of non-personal concerns (i.e., morality, conventions, and prudence) when considering transgressions. The association between exploitativeness and acceptability of transgressing was mediated by the degree to which issues were believed to involve a concern for others. Implications for narcissistic behavior and decision-making are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Psychologists use the term narcissism to describe a pathological personality disorder (also called “pathological” or “vulnerable” narcissism, e.g., Miller et al., 2011; Pincus et al., 2009) as well as a personality trait that exists in the normal population (also called “grandiose” narcissism, see Miller et al., 2011). Narcissists are described as arrogant, exploitive, and lacking in empathy for others. They have inflated self-views, believe they are special and unique, exaggerate their talents, feel more deserving than others, and demand admiration. Moreover, narcissists are unlikely to be concerned about how their decisions affect others.

Research has indicated a consistent link between grandiose narcissism and moral behavior (e.g., Brown, Sautter, Littvay, Sautter, & Bearnes, 2010; Cooper & Pullig, 2013; Godkin & Allcorn, 2011). Less is known, however, linking grandiose narcissism with moral reasoning. One exception is a study (Traiser & Eighmy, 2011) that examined college students' grandiose narcissism and moral reasoning using the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Terry, 1988) to assess grandiose narcissism and the Defining Issues Test (DIT-2; Rest, Narvaez, Thoma, & Bebeau, 1999) to assess moral reasoning. The NPI is widely used by personality researchers as a general assessment of grandiose narcissism where high levels

of grandiose narcissism are defined by high levels of composite NPI scores. Similar to Kohlberg's (1984) assessment of moral stages, the Neo-Kohlbergian, DIT-2 is a quantitative assessment tool used to evaluate participants' schemas of moral reasoning that range from least (Personal Interests Schema) to most developmentally advanced (Postconventional Schema). When analyzing the association between the NPI and the DIT-2, Traiser and Eighmy (2011) found no relationship between grandiose narcissism scores and level of moral reasoning.

The present research, in contrast, examined associations between grandiose narcissism and moral reasoning with more nuance by investigating grandiose narcissism with a dimensional approach and moral reasoning through a social domain approach. Accordingly, the following review describes the utility of assessing narcissism dimensions instead of composite scores as well as the utility of examining moral reasoning in the context of various other domains of social reasoning. The last section presents specific predictions about the relationship between narcissistic dimensions, entitlement and exploitativeness, and moral and social cognitive reasoning.

1.1. Assessment of narcissism

In the context of the present study's goals, we argue that a lack of association between the grandiose narcissism and moral reasoning results from employing an aggregate sum total of responses to all of the NPI items, a methodology that conflates the qualitatively

* Corresponding author at: Department of Psychology, The Ohio State University, 1465 Mt. Vernon Avenue, Marion, OH 43302, United States.

E-mail address: daddis.1@osu.edu (C. Daddis).

different meanings of particular facets of narcissism (e.g., leadership/authority, superiority/arrogance, exploitativeness/entitlement, and self-absorption/self-admiration; Emmons, 1987). When adaptive and maladaptive facets of narcissism are combined into a composite score, their particular impacts on moral reasoning may be nullified. Accordingly, the present research was designed to examine the effects of distinct narcissism traits, specifically the maladaptive dimensions of entitlement and exploitativeness (e.g., Emmons, 1984; Raskin & Novacek, 1989). We chose to examine the exploitativeness/entitlement aspect because, relative to the other facets, it has the strongest correlations with engagement in moral transgressions (Grijalva et al., 2014). For example, exploitativeness/entitlement dimension uniquely predicts theft at work and harassing co-workers (Grijalva et al., 2014), aggression (Reidy, Zeichner, Foster, & Martinez, 2008), and cheating (Brown, Budzek, & Tamborski, 2009). Moreover, being highly interpersonal in nature (Brown et al., 2009; Brunell et al., 2013), we believed that differences in exploitativeness and entitlement would act as useful lenses to examine how individuals coordinate self-other considerations when making social judgments and justifications. As will be discussed, consideration of potential consequences that an action has on other people is an essential, if not defining criterion of moral decision making (Smetana, 2011; Turiel, 1998).

Although entitlement and exploitativeness are correlated, they are distinct constructs and predict different outcomes (Brunell et al., 2013). The *exploitativeness* dimension is oriented outward toward others and involves a willingness to take unfair advantage of others (Brunell et al., 2013). Accordingly, exploitativeness has been associated with greater risk-taking when competing against others (Buelow & Brunell, 2014), greater retaliation, and the destruction of shared resources (Brunell et al., 2013). *Entitlement* involves the expectation of reward or resources as part of a social contract (Campbell, Bonacci, Shelton, Exline, & Bushman, 2004) maintenance of increased self-importance and attempts to inflate the self in the eyes of others (Tamborski, Brown, & Chowning, 2012). It has been associated with social outcomes such as unethical decision-making (Antes et al., 2007; Tamborski et al., 2012) and greed (Campbell et al., 2004).

Although we believe that composite NPI scores are useful in its assessment of grandiose narcissism more generally (see also Miller, Price, Gentile, Lynam, & Campbell, 2012), they fail to offer adequate assessment of constructs when scholars are interested in examining narcissism at the facet level (Brown et al., 2009; Brunell et al., 2013). In fact, there is considerable debate about the factor structure of the NPI and items loadings, with some arguing for seven factors (Raskin & Terry, 1988), while others argue for four (e.g., Emmons, 1984), three (Ackerman et al., 2011; Kubarych, Deary, & Austin, 2004), or even two (Corry, Merritt, Mrug, & Pamp, 2008; Kubarych et al., 2004). In the present research, we were specifically interested in examining the distinct roles of exploitativeness and entitlement, which are especially difficult to adequately assess with the NPI for multiple reasons. First, inadequate psychometric properties result in unreliable measurement when examining the entitlement dimension [Raskin and Terry (1988) report $\alpha = .50$ for the entitlement dimension], the exploitativeness dimension [Raskin and Terry (1988) report $\alpha = .52$ for the exploitativeness dimension], or a dimension that combines the two [e.g., Ackerman et al. (2011) report $\alpha = .46$ for the entitlement/exploitativeness dimension]. Second, many of the factor structures combine the entitlement or exploitativeness items into one factor (e.g., Ackerman et al., 2011; Corry et al., 2008), rather than into separate and distinct factors. Moreover, in the particular case of the concept of exploitativeness, there are both conceptual and empirical problems with relying on NPI items. While items such as “I can usually talk my way out of anything” and “Everybody likes to hear my stories” may load with items

labeled “exploitativeness”, they do not reflect the willingness to take unfair advantage of others, which is the very definition of exploitation. Taken together, there is a need to abandon the use of the NPI for the specific assessment of entitlement and exploitativeness, especially when more reliable and valid measures exist, such as the 9-item Psychological Entitlement Scale (PES; Campbell et al., 2004) and the 6-item Interpersonal Exploitativeness Scale (IES; Brunell et al., 2013).

1.2. Social domain theory

Presented as a response to Kohlberg's (1984) structural theory of moral development, social domain theory has emerged as a dominant view of social and moral cognition in the developmental psychology literature (Lourenco, 2014). From the lens of social domain theory, everyday decision making involves coordination and consideration of not only moral concerns but of consideration of personal, conventional, and prudential concerns. A moral judgment involves more than deciding whether an issue is right or wrong.

Domain theory begins with the constructivist tenet that thought is organized and structured out of individuals' interactions with the environment. Cognitive representations do not stem from exact copies of interactions; individuals actively interpret, select, and organize these interactions (Smetana, 2011; Turiel, 1998). Not all aspects of thought, however, comprise a single way of thinking. Various experiences afford qualitatively different interactions with others, which result in the construction of distinct, irreducible domains of social knowledge (Smetana, 2011). These include the moral, social conventional, personal, and prudential domains.

The *moral* domain is comprised of acts and issues that are held to be prescriptive judgments of right and wrong that pertain to acts' intrinsic, negative consequences to others (Smetana, 1995). Examples of moral issues include physical harm, psychological harm, and fairness or justice. Although *social conventions* also coordinate interactions among individuals, their instructive nature is tied directly to the context. Conventions are agreed-upon behavioral uniformities that coordinate social interactions and because they are derived through consensus, they are considered *relative*. Manners and etiquette, sex-role expectations (e.g., in U.S. culture, boys should not wear pink), and modes of address (e.g., using Mr. or Mrs., calling a professor by first name) are examples of social conventions (Daddis & Smetana, 2014).

To demonstrate that people distinguish among domains, researchers have asked participants to make judgments about definitional criteria that differentiate among domains (*criterion judgments*). Furthermore, individuals' judgments about various events or acts (e.g., “Is it OK to make a rule about the event?”, or “Is it OK to engage in the act?”, etc.) have been assessed using semi-structured interviews along with their *justifications* of the criterion (e.g., “Why is it OK to make a rule about the event?”, or “Why is it OK to engage in the act?”, etc.). Across ages, participants have been found to judge moral issues as generalizable, independent of rules, and independent of authority dictates. In contrast, participants consistently judge conventional issues as relative to the social context, dependent on existing or explicit rules, and dependent on the dictates and presence of authority.

The prescriptive domains of morality and convention also have been differentiated from psychological knowledge, which includes an individual's understanding of self and other. First, the *personal domain* is tied to notions of selfhood that pertain only to the actor (Nucci, 2001). Issues within the personal domain are considered beyond justifiable social regulation and moral concern; they are not issues of right and wrong, but are issues of personal preference and choice (Smetana, 2002). A number of studies have

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