



# I only like the idea of you: Narcissists tolerate others' narcissistic traits but not their corresponding behaviors



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## ABSTRACT

Do narcissists *really* like other narcissists? Although some research suggests that the answer is 'yes,' the current study demonstrates that the answer to this question is not so simple. In this study, participants ( $N = 370$ ) completed a survey in which they responded on a measure of trait narcissism and then were randomly assigned to rate the likability of people who were described by either 13 narcissistic traits (abstract-trait description condition) or 13 behavioral manifestations of these traits (concrete-behavior description condition). Results showed that narcissists (vs. non-narcissists) rated narcissistic others significantly more positively in the abstract-trait description condition, whereas this effect was non-significant (and slightly reversed) in the concrete-behavior description condition. Interestingly, this interaction effect was not modified by the contextual salience of one's own (non)narcissistic identity. In sum, the present research presents a case of 'narcissistic hypocrisy' – narcissists claim to be more forgiving of narcissistic traits but do not follow through with this claim when led to confront manifestations of these traits. This finding adds to a growing body of work examining narcissists' attitudes toward narcissism.

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## 1. Introduction

Narcissism is associated with an overly positive view of personal significance and entitlement (Campbell & Foster, 2007). Narcissists<sup>1</sup> seem highly motivated for self-enhancement, seem highly adept at motivated reasoning (e.g., John & Robins, 1994; Rhodewalt & Eddings, 2002), and their motivational system seems more sensitive to gains than losses (Foster & Trimm, 2008). Interpersonally, narcissists tend to come across as arrogant, self-centered, rude, and braggarts (Adams, Florell, Alex Burton, & Hart, 2014; Buss & Chiodo, 1991; Paulhus, 1998), and they are often unforgiving and vindictive in response to personal slights (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Exline, Baumeister, Bushman, Campbell, & Finkel, 2004; McCullough, Emmons, Kilpatrick, & Mooney, 2003).

Recently, there have been several attempts to understand how narcissists regard narcissistic traits (e.g., Carlson, 2013; Hart & Adams, 2014; Carlson, Vazire, & Oltmanns, 2011). For example,

some studies suggest that narcissists are more forgiving of their own narcissistic traits (Carlson, 2013; Carlson et al., 2011). Interestingly, narcissists also seem more tolerant of *others* who possess narcissistic traits (Hart & Adams, 2014). On the surface, this latter finding is rather counter-intuitive because narcissists are often considered to be interpersonally harsh and unforgiving of others' abrasiveness (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Exline et al., 2004; McCullough et al., 2003). Due to the counter-intuitive nature of this finding, the current work set out to clarify its interpretation and possibly expose an instance of 'narcissistic hypocrisy'—narcissists might *claim* to be forgiving of others' abrasive, narcissistic traits, but they may not follow through with this claim when they are made to confront behavioral manifestations of these traits (i.e., the 'narcissistic-hypocrisy hypothesis').

To this point, there are reasons to suspect that narcissists might evaluate others' narcissistic traits more positively than others' narcissistic behaviors. For one, perhaps throughout a lifetime of being labeled with narcissistic traits (e.g., "you are so rude!"), narcissists might affectively habituate to the negative implications of these traits without necessarily habituating to the negative implications of the specific behavioral instantiations of the traits (e.g., Dijksterhuis & Smith, 2002; Horton, Bleau, & Drwecki, 2006; Millon & Everly, 1985). Additionally, although narcissists may want to interpret narcissistic behaviors and traits in a positive light to maintain their own self-esteem (Hart & Adams, 2014; Rhodewalt

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<sup>1</sup> We refer to individuals who score high on dimensional, sub-clinical trait measures of narcissism (typically the Narcissistic Personality Inventory; NPI; Raskin & Terry, 1988) 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.

& Eddings, 2002), narcissists should find it easier to interpret narcissistic traits (vs. behaviors) in a positive light (e.g., Kunda, 1990). Consider that traits are inherently more ambiguous than behaviors, and as a result, traits are more open to interpretation (e.g., Dunning, Meyerowitz, & Holzberg, 1989; Kunda, 1990). For these reasons, narcissists might show a tendency to regard narcissistic traits more positively without necessarily regarding *behavioral instantiations* of these traits more positively.

Furthermore, some available research seems generally in line with the narcissistic-hypocrisy hypothesis. For example, in contrast to research that demonstrates narcissists' tolerance of narcissistic traits (Hart & Adams, 2014), some research suggests that narcissists are quite punitive toward others' 'narcissistic behaviors' (see Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Exline et al., 2004; McCullough et al., 2003). Nevertheless, it is possible that narcissists simply have a lower threshold for engaging in punitive behavior, and their punitive behavior might not necessarily denote interpersonal disliking. Hence, the narcissistic-hypocrisy hypothesis seems plausible, albeit direct evidence in support of the hypothesis is lacking.

An alternative to the narcissistic-hypocrisy hypothesis is the possibility that narcissists are *truly* (and universally) more tolerant of other narcissists (as has been implied by Hart & Adams, 2014). For example, narcissists may be more callous and in turn less harsh evaluators of others' abrasive narcissistic traits and displays. Various lines of work converge on the idea that narcissists' motivational system is geared more toward identifying positive stimuli than negative stimuli (Foster, Shenese, & Goff, 2009; Foster & Trimm, 2008). Presumably, this motivational pattern can create a reduced sensitivity to negative stimuli and manifest as callousness. If narcissistic callousness is generalized, narcissists might evaluate other narcissists less harshly even when the narcissism of these others is instantiated by concrete narcissistic behaviors.

To test the narcissistic-hypocrisy hypothesis, in the present study, participants completed a survey in which they responded on a measure of trait narcissism, rated the likability of people who were described by 13 narcissistic traits (abstract description condition) or 13 behavioral manifestations of these traits (concrete-behavior description condition), and rated their own self-possession of the narcissistic traits. We predicted that narcissists (vs. non-narcissists) would rate people described by abstract narcissistic traits more favorably but that this effect would vanish when rating people described by concrete instantiations of narcissistic traits.

Additionally, note that the order of the last two measures ('rating of other;' 'rating of self') was randomly varied across participants. In this way, because rating the self on narcissistic traits should amplify the salience of one's own (non)narcissistic identity, we could explore whether the *salience* of one's own (non)narcissistic identity moderates the narcissistic-hypocrisy effect. On the one hand, because people often seek to defend aspects of their identity that are contextually salient (e.g., Shih, Pittinsky, & Ambady, 1999; Steele & Aronson, 1995), it is possible that the enhanced salience of one's own narcissistic identity might promote more vigorous attempts to rationalize the narcissistic traits of others, which might amplify – or possibly be required to produce – greater liking for others linked to narcissistic traits. On the other hand, because narcissists' greater tolerance for narcissistic traits may be driven by their recall of more positive stored attitudes toward the traits (e.g., Horton et al., 2006; Millon & Everly, 1985), the enhanced salience of one's own narcissistic identity might fail to influence the effect of narcissism on liking for others described by narcissistic traits. By randomizing the order in which participants evaluated their own and others' narcissistic tendencies, we aimed to explore this issue.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants & design

Four hundred and forty-one (150 male) undergraduate students were recruited to participate in an online study in exchange for course credit. Participants' average age was 19.1 years ( $SD = 1.40$ ; range: 17–29 years). The study used a completely randomized between-subjects design. The main independent variables were dispositional narcissism (continuous) and experimental condition: *Abstract-trait description condition* vs. *concrete-behavior description condition*. The dependent variable was participants' likability ratings ('*narcissist likability*').

### 2.2. Materials and procedure

Participants were informed that they would complete two unrelated studies. The first study dealt with personality, and the second study dealt with people's perceptions of their own and others' traits. In the "first study," participants completed the NPI (Raskin & Terry, 1988;  $\alpha = .85$ ;  $M = 16.20$ ;  $SD = 7.07$ ) and the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE; Rosenberg, 1965;  $\alpha = .88$ ;  $M = 30.52$ ;  $SD = 5.04$ ). These scales were correlated,  $r = 0.34$ ,  $p < .001$ .

In the "second study," participants were randomly assigned to either the *abstract-trait description condition* or the *concrete-behavior description condition*. Procedures were similar to those outlined in Hart and Adams (2014). In each of these conditions, participants rated the likability of a person whose behavior (directed toward the participant) reflected one of 16 traits (presented in random order). Eleven narcissistic traits (*rude*, *aggressive*, *bossy*, *selfish*, *flashy*, *arrogant*, *gentle* [r], *submissive* [r], *modest* [r], *timid* [r], & *sensitive* [r]) were taken from Hart and Adams (2014). Additionally, participants were asked about *bragging* and *agreeableness*. These two traits were added because they have been shown to rather strongly relate to narcissism in prior research (Bradlee & Emmons, 1992; Buss & Chiodo, 1991), and we wished to create a more encompassing measure. As in Hart and Adams (2014), participants also rated the likability of three narcissism-irrelevant traits (e.g. funny) to reduce the salience of the study's purpose. In the *abstract-trait description condition*, these items generally took the form: "Imagine a person acts very [trait] toward you. How would you feel about that? (1 = I would STRONGLY DISLIKE the person; 9 = I would LIKE the person a lot)." For some traits, this language was adapted slightly (e.g., "Imagine a person brags a lot to you..."). An aggregate *abstract-trait likability index* was computed by averaging ratings on the 13 narcissistic traits ( $\alpha = .67$ ;  $M = 3.25$ ;  $SD = 0.69$ ). In the *concrete-behavior description condition*, participants rated the likability of a person who engaged in concrete behaviors that represented each of the 16 traits. The behavior descriptions were matched to traits on an intuitive basis, and a pilot study revealed strong links between the traits and behaviors.<sup>2</sup> For example, to reflect the trait *aggressive*, in the *concrete-behavior description condition*, participants responded on an item that read, "Imagine a person honks and 'flips you off' in traffic. How would you feel about that person? (1 = I would STRONGLY DISLIKE the person; 9 = I would LIKE the person a lot)." An aggregate *concrete-behavior likability index* was computed by averaging ratings on the 13 narcissistic trait

<sup>2</sup> To ensure that the 13 abstract narcissistic traits (in the *abstract-trait description condition*) were well aligned with the 13 concrete instantiations of these traits (in the *concrete-behavior description condition*), we administered a survey to 104 participants. Participants rated the extent to which each behavior reflected its targeted narcissistic trait (1 = not at all; 9 = very much). Thirteen one-sample *t*-tests showed that each of these ratings was significantly higher than the scale midpoint (all  $ps < .001$ ). The average rating ( $M = 7.2$ ,  $SD = 0.92$ ) was also significantly higher than the scale midpoint,  $t(103) = 24.63$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 2.42$  (95% CI = 2.03; 2.79). Participants thought each concrete instantiation was descriptive of its targeted abstract narcissistic trait.

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