Facets of grandiose narcissism predict involvement in health-risk behaviors

Melissa T. Buelow [a],[*], Amy B. Brunell [b]

[a] Department of Psychology, Ohio State University Newark, United States
[b] Department of Psychology, Ohio State University Mansfield, United States

ABSTRACT

Why do adolescents and young adults engage in risk-taking behaviors? The present study sought to examine the role of grandiose narcissism, as well as narcissistic traits (entitlement, exploitativeness, grandiosity), in the prediction of involvement in risk-taking behaviors. Participants were 630 undergraduates, split into two subgroups, who completed measures assessing likelihood of and actual involvement in risk-taking behaviors, perceived risks and benefits of the behaviors, delay discounting, grandiose narcissism, and narcissistic traits. Greater levels of grandiose narcissism predicted reported likelihood of risk-taking and risk-taking behaviors in the past 30 days. This relationship appears driven by grandiosity and exploitativeness rather than entitlement. Grandiose narcissism and entitlement were independently associated with a preference for smaller, more immediate gains over larger, temporally distant rewards. Implications for understanding reasons behind risk-taking behaviors and future studies of narcissism are discussed.

© 2014 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Individuals engage in risky behaviors that can have negative effects on physical and mental health and well-being. For example, 15.1% of individuals aged 18–24 endorsed at least 12 episodes of binge drinking in the past year (Centers for Disease Control [CDC], 2012). Marijuana use is endorsed by 18.5% of young adults (ages 18–25; CDC, 2012), and 20 million new sexually transmitted diseases occur each year (CDC, 2013). Given the high risk to individuals and society as a whole, it is important to understand the factors, such as personality characteristics, that could affect involvement in these risk-taking behaviors.

One such personality characteristic is narcissism. Narcissism can be defined as a personality disorder (i.e., Narcissistic Personality Disorder [NPD]; American Psychiatric Association, 2000), but in a less extreme form (i.e., grandiose narcissism) it is an individual differences variable (Raskin & Terry, 1988) associated with traits such as attention-seeking, feelings of entitlement, and arrogance (Buss & Chiodo, 1991; Campbell, Goodie, & Foster, 2004; Gabriel,

Critelli, & Ee, 1994; John & Robins, 1994). Grandiose narcissists exploit others for personal gain (Campbell, Bush, Brunell, & Shelton, 2005), fail to learn from their mistakes (Campbell, Bonacci, Shelton, Exline, & Bushman, 2004), and are motivated by potential rewards (Campbell et al., 2005; Campbell & Foster, 2007; Foster, Misra, & Reidy, 2009; Foster & Trimm, 2008).

Grandiose narcissism is associated with several variables that predict risk-taking behaviors. Grandiose narcissists report high levels of impulsivity (Crysel, Crosier, & Webster, 2013; Foster & Trimm, 2008; Miller et al., 2009; Vazire & Funder, 2006) and engage in gambling behaviors (Lakey, Rose, Campbell, & Goodie, 2008). Narcissists also tend to discount the future effects of their decisions (Jonason, Koenig, & Tost, 2010) and prefer smaller, more immediate rewards over temporally distant rewards (Crysel et al., 2013; Jonason et al., 2010). In addition, narcissists perceive greater benefits from engaging in risk-taking behaviors (Foster, Shenesey, & Goff, 2009). Higher rates of grandiose narcissism have been shown in aggressive driving (Malta, Blanchard, & Freidenberg, 2005), risky sexual behaviors (Martin, Benotsch, Lance, & Green, 2013), binge drinking (Luhtanen & Crocker, 2005), and risky financial investments (Foster et al., 2009). Thus, it appears that there is a link between grandiose narcissism and involvement in risk-taking behaviors.

One study that examined specific narcissistic traits using subscales of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin &

* Corresponding author. Address: Department of Psychology, Ohio State University Newark, 1179 University Drive, Newark, OH 43055, United States. Tel.: +1 740 755 7808; fax: +1 740 366 5047.

E-mail address: buelow.11@osu.edu (M.T. Buelow).

Terry, 1988), the most commonly used measure of grandiose narcissism, found that exhibition and entitlement predicted risky driving behaviors (Schreer, 2002). Although total NPI scores have adequate psychometric properties, researchers have questioned the use of the subscales of the NPI because inadequate psychometric properties of these subscales make it difficult to assess which particular facet of grandiose narcissism predicts behavior (Brown, Budzek, & Tamborski, 2009). To resolve this problem, researchers have developed scales to assess specific narcissistic traits such as entitlement (Campbell, Bonacci, et al., 2004), exploitativeness (Brunell et al., 2013), and grandiosity (Rosenthal, Hooley, & Steshenko, in preparation). Thus, some scholars have argued that these narrower traits of grandiose narcissism should be assessed in addition to total NPI scores (Brown et al., 2009; Miller, Price, & Campbell, 2012).

It is possible that narcissistic traits, including exploitativeness, entitlement, and grandiosity, may differentially predict risk-taking behaviors. Most previous research has focused on assessment of overall grandiose narcissism only. However, individuals endorsing high levels of entitlement and exploitativeness engage in more selfish (Brunell et al., 2013; Campbell, Bonacci, et al., 2004) and unethical behaviors (Tamborski, Brown, & Chowning, 2012). These same characteristics could appear in individuals who engage in high levels of risk-taking behaviors, as they entail short-term positive gains for the individual (e.g., alcohol makes me feel more happy) at the expense of long-term outcomes (e.g., physical consequences to high alcohol consumption). However, to date no studies have examined how narcissistic traits predict involvement in risk-taking behaviors. Examining how both the NPI total score and separate narcissistic traits predict risk-taking behaviors can allow researchers to further understand which aspects of narcissism predict health-risk behaviors and to examine the utility of the NPI to predict these behaviors.

1.2. Objectives and hypotheses

The present study had several aims. First, we sought to replicate previous research utilizing total NPI scores to predict involvement in risk-taking behaviors, as the NPI remains the most commonly used measure of grandiose narcissism (and total scores are both reliable and valid; Miller et al., 2012). We hypothesized that grandiose narcissism would predict involvement in risk-taking behaviors, even after controlling for perceived risks and benefits of the behaviors. Next, we sought to expand previous research by assessing the utility of narcissistic traits of narcissism (namely interpersonal exploitativeness, psychological entitlement, and narcissistic grandiosity) to predict involvement in risky behaviors. We hypothesized that grandiosity and entitlement would predict involvement in risk-taking behaviors in general. We also predicted that exploitativeness would be associated with risky ethical, financial, and social behaviors, due to the potential to exploit others for one's personal gain in these situations. Lastly, we sought to investigate how narcissistic traits related to a preference for more immediate rewards.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

Participants were 630 undergraduate students (266 male; mean age = 19.16, SD = 3.92) enrolled in psychology courses in which credit was given for participation in research studies. Participants were primarily Caucasian (74%). Participants were split into two subgroups: those who completed just the NPI (n = 436) and those who completed the NPI and measures of narcissism facets (n = 194).

2.2. Measures

Domain-Specific Risk-attitude Scale (DOSPERT). The DOSPERT was designed to assess risk-taking behaviors across five domains: Ethical (illegal/lying/cheating behaviors), Financial (gambling, risky lending practices, and risky financial ventures), Health/Safety (substance use and other health-risk behaviors), Recreational (risky sport- and non-sport behaviors), and Social (admitting differences from friends/family; Weber, Blais, & Betz, 2002). The present study utilized the revised, 30-item version of this scale (Blais & Weber, 2006). All three subscales were administered: likelihood of engaging in, perceived risk associated with, and perceived benefit associated with the risky behavior. Participants responded using the following scales: Likelihood (1 = extremely unlikely, 7 = extremely likely), Risk (1 = not at all risky, 7 = extremely risky), and Benefit (1 = no benefits at all, 7 = great benefits). Average scores were calculated, with higher values indicating greater likelihood of involvement, perceived risk, or perceived benefit of the behavior. Internal consistency was moderate to high (Likelihood: α = .65–.85; Risk: α = .77–.85; Benefit: α = .69–.89).

Cognitive Appraisal of Risky Events (CARE). The CARE was developed to assess involvement in risk-taking behaviors, including illicit drug use, aggressive/illegal behaviors, risky sexual behaviors, alcohol use, involvement in high-risk sports, and risky academic/work behaviors (Fromme, Katz, & Rivet, 1997). The three subsections assess: frequency in the past 30 days, and perceived risk and benefit of the behavior. Participants responded to each of the 30 items with the following scales: 30-day frequency (1 = 0 times, 7 = 100 or more times), and risk/benefit (1 = not at all likely, 7 = extremely likely). Average scores were calculated for each subscale, with higher values indicating greater involvement or likelihood of experiencing a risk/benefit associated with the behavior. Internal consistency was moderate to high (30-day frequency: α = .71–.82; Risk: α = .79–.95; Benefit: α = .81–.91).

Delay Discounting Task. The 27-item delay discounting task revised by Kirby, Petry, and Bickel (1999) was utilized. Participants selected between smaller, more immediate rewards and larger, delayed rewards. Previous research has shown associations with impulsivity and drug use (Bickel, Odum, & Madden, 1999; Kirby et al., 1999; Madden, Petry, Badger, & Bickel, 1997). k-Values were calculated for each participant, with higher values indicating a preference for smaller, more immediate gains.

Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI). The NPI contains 40 items (Raskin & Terry, 1988) that ask respondents to choose between two options (e.g., "I think I am a special person" versus "I am no better or worse than most people"). Narcissistic responses are assigned scores of 1 and non-narcissistic responses are assigned a 0. Scores are summed, with higher scores reflecting higher levels of narcissism. Mean NPI score in the present sample was 16.14 (SD = 10.15). Internal consistency was high (α = .85).

Narcissistic Grandiosity Scale (NaGS). The NaGS (Rosenthal et al., in preparation) consists of 16 grandiose adjectives (e.g., "envied," "superior"). Respondents used 7-point scales (1 = "not at all" and 7 = "extreme") to indicate the degree to which they believed the adjectives were self-descriptive. Higher summed scores indicate greater levels of grandiosity. Mean NaGS score in the present sample was 50.44 (SD = 21.12). Internal consistency was high (α = .96).

Interpersonal Exploitativeness Scale (IES). The IES (Brunell et al., 2013) is a six-item measure assessing the extent to which people are inclined to exploit or take advantage of others (e.g., "Vulnerable people are fair game"). Participants rated their agreement or disagreement with each statement on a 7-point scale (1 = "strong disagreement" and 7 = "strong agreement"). Higher summed scores