Why do narcissists disregard social-etiquette norms? A test of two explanations for why narcissism relates to offensive-language use

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A B S T R A C T

Narcissists often fail to abide by norms for polite social conduct, but why? The current study addressed this issue by exploring reasons why narcissists use more offensive language (i.e., profanity) than non-narcissists. In this study, 602 participants completed a survey in which they responded on a measure of trait narcissism, rated several offensive words on the degree to which the words were attention-grabbing and offensive, and then indicated how frequently they used the words. Consistent with the idea that narcissists use offensive language to gain attention, narcissists were incrementally more likely to use offensive language if they perceived such language to be highly attention-grabbing, and they were also more likely to perceive offensive language as attention-grabbing. Consistent with the idea that narcissists use more offensive language because they are less sensitive to the offensiveness of the language, an additional mediation analysis showed that narcissists perceived offensive language as less offensive than non-narcissists, a perception that, in turn, enhanced use of offensive language. Thus, this study provides evidence for two mechanisms that underlie narcissists' frequent use of offensive language, and broadly contributes to the understudied issue of *why* narcissists violate social-etiquette norms.

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1. Introduction

Narcissists seem to disregard social-etiquette norms. For example, narcissists are more likely to brag (Buss & Chiodo, 1991), behave aggressively toward others (Barry, Chaplin, & Grafeman, 2006; Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Stucke & Sporer, 2002; Twenge & Campbell, 2003), and use offensive language (DeWall, Buffardi, Bonser, & Campbell, 2011; Holtzman, Vazire, & Mehl, 2010). Although it is well-known that narcissists are prone to break social-etiquette norms, the underlying causes for this tendency remain largely unclear. One possibility is that narcissists break social-etiquette norms as a means of grabbing people's attention (the "attention-seeking" hypothesis; Buss & Chiodo, 1991; DeWall et al., 2011). An additional possibility is that narcissists, for various reasons, simply perceive such norm violations as less offensive than non-narcissists (the "insensitivity" hypothesis; Collins & Stukas, 2008). The present paper seeks to add some clarity to this issue in the context of the link between narcissism and offensive-language use (DeWall et al., 2011; Holtzman et al., 2010). Specifically, we explore the following two, non-competing explanations for why narcissists (vs. non-narcissists) are more likely to use offensive language: (a) narcissists use offensive language more often because offensive language represents a means for narcissists to satisfy their goal to be the center of attention (e.g., "Everyone, look at me!"); and (b) narcissists use offensive language more frequently because they are less aware that such language is offensive (e.g., "No one is really too offended by swearing.").

To date, two studies have directly investigated the link between narcissism and offensive-language use. In one exploratory study (Holtzman et al., 2010), participants carried a device that intermittently recorded segments of naturalistic speech for four days, and then they responded on a series of personality questionnaires. Among other things, the researchers found that narcissists used offensive words more frequently than non-narcissists. Nevertheless, this study did not posit a theoretical explanation for this finding. A follow-up study examined whether narcissists use offensive language more frequently as a means of attracting attention to themselves (DeWall et al., 2011). In this study, participants responded on a narcissism questionnaire, and then they wrote three essays about themselves. DeWall and colleagues (2011) hypothesized that narcissists tend to use either offensive language or first-person singular pronouns as a means of grabbing attention. The data conformed to this hypothesis: in cases where narcissists used relatively few first-person singular pronouns, they used relatively more offensive language. The authors concluded that narcissists tend to use offensive language as a means of grabbing attention. Although this "attention-seeking" explanation seems

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plausible, it is also plausible that heightened self-awareness (as indexed by the use of singular pronouns; Davis & Brock, 1975) reduced narcissists' antisocial orientation (e.g., Prentice-Dunn & Rogers, 1982; Scheier, Fenigstein, & Buss, 1974; Zimbardo, 1970) and, in turn, reduced narcissists' use of offensive language. With this alternative interpretation in play, there is a need for additional testing of the attention-seeking hypothesis. One goal of the present research is to provide some novel tests of this hypothesis.

An additional possibility is that narcissists use offensive language more frequently because they perceive the words as less offensive (the "insensitivity" hypothesis). For example, because narcissism is negatively correlated with empathy and perspective-taking (Watson, Grisham, Trotter, & Biderman, 1984; Watson & Morris, 1991), it is possible that narcissists are less aware of people's offended reactions and therefore underestimate the offensiveness of offensive language. In addition, some researchers (Collins & Stukas, 2008; Sedikides, Campbell, Reeder, Elliot, & Gregg, 2002) have suggested that narcissists may become insensitive and underplay the offensiveness of their actions because such insensitivity can act to facilitate their aggressive pursuit for admiration. To address the insensitivity explanation for the narcissism-profanity link, the present research explored the hypothesis that narcissists use offensive language more frequently because they are insensitive to its offensiveness.

In this study, participants responded on the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Terry, 1988), and then they rated several words (offensive words and "control" words) on each of three dimensions: *frequency-of-use*, *attention-grabbing* and *offensiveness* (for relations between these dimensions, see Table 1). This design allowed us to assess some predictions generated from the attention-seeking and insensitivity hypotheses. In line with the attention-seeking hypothesis (DeWall et al., 2011), we predicted that narcissists (vs. non-narcissists) would indicate that offensive language was more attention-grabbing. For example, because narcissists place greater emphasis on attention-seeking goals (Buss & Chiodo, 1991; DeWall et al., 2011), and because goals increase recognition of opportunities to fulfill the goal (e.g., Atkinson & Birch, 1970; Lewin, 1926; Shah, 2003), narcissists should be particularly likely to recognize offensive-language use as a means for getting attention. Furthermore – also in line with the attention-seeking hypothesis – we predicted that narcissists (vs. non-narcissists) would indicate using offensive words more frequently than non-narcissists, but that this relation would become less pronounced when individuals viewed offensive words as less attention-grabbing. Because goals enhance the production of *only* those behaviors that are effective for satisfying the goals (Atkinson & Birch, 1970; Greenwald, 1982; McClelland, 1985), it follows that when offensive-word use is perceived as an ineffective means to get attention, the effect of narcissism would be reduced. In line with the insensitivity hypothesis (e.g., Collins & Stukas, 2008; Sedikides et al., 2002), we examined whether narcissists would rate offensive words as less offensive and whether this lowered sensitivity would mediate the relationship between narcissism and frequency of offensive-word use.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Six hundred and two undergraduate students (465 women) at Eastern Kentucky University, in the year 2012, were recruited to participate in an online survey on personality and offensive language. Specifically, these participants were offered a link to the study on a website that offers research-participation opportunities to psychology students. Participants completed the study in exchange for partial course credit in their Introductory Psychology course. Mean age was 20.77 (SD = 5.47). The sample consisted of 322 Freshman, 145 Sophomores, 81 Juniors, and 51 Seniors (three participants did not specify their academic year).

2.2. Design

The study utilized a correlational design. To address our hypotheses, the study included the following measures: (1) a measure of dispositional narcissism; (2) participants' ratings of "attention-grabbing" for various offensive (and non-offensive) words; (3) participants' ratings of offensiveness for a variety of offensive (and non-offensive) words; (4) participants' frequency of use for a variety of offensive (and non-offensive) words. These measures are described in more detail in Section 1.4.

2.3. Procedure

Participants completed the study online. After reading the participant information sheet, each participant responded to a measure of dispositional narcissism. Next, participants rated 25 offensive words and 10 "control" words on frequency-of-use, attention-grabbing, and offensiveness. All items in this second section were counter-balanced. Finally, participants responded to some demographic questions, and then they were debriefed.

2.4. Materials

2.4.1. Offensive word selection and ratings

To determine which offensive words to use, and to determine how participants should be asked to rate these words, we followed methods from Janschewitz's (2008) article on offensive language. In the appendix of this article, there are lists of which offensive words ranked highest on a variety of dimensions (e.g., use, offensiveness, etc.). In the current study, we used 20 words from these lists, and we added five more based on our intuition. In continuing to follow this prior research, participants were asked to rate these 25 offensive words (e.g., buttfuck, cunt, shit head) and 10 "control" words (e.g., teacher, nun, medicine) on a 9-point scale to measure *frequency-of-use* (How often do you use the word?), *attention-grabbing* (How exciting is the word? Consider how much the word grabs your attention.), and *offensiveness* (How offensive is this word to you?).

Prior to data analysis, as a validity check on our offensive words, we measured whether participants rated offensive words as more offensive than control words. To do this, first, we computed a control-word-offensiveness mean score, which was the average offensiveness rating for the control words (α = .88). Next, we conducted paired-samples *t*-tests comparing the offensiveness ratings of the control-word-offensiveness mean score to the mean offensiveness rating of each of the 25 individual offensive words. Out of our original 25 offensive words, participants rated 24 offensive words as significantly more offensive than the average of the control words (*p*s < .001). Participants rated the remaining offensive word (*Randy*) as significantly *less* offensive than the average control

Table 1
Intercorrelations among variables.

	1	2	3
1. Frequency-of-use			
2. Narcissism	0.35[**]		
3. Attention-grabbing	0.36[**]	0.11[**]	
4. Offensiveness	−0.25[**]	−0.20[**]	0.21[**]

[**] *p* < .01.