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Does Communal Context Bring the Worst in Narcissists?

Abstract: *The present experiment (N = 95) investigated the relations of narcissism with social value orientation under façade conditions of testing communal or agentic traits (or none – in a control condition). The results indicated that narcissism predicted less willingness to share resources with others and more competitive orientation in a façade communal condition compared to the remaining two conditions: control and agentic. The results confirm narcissistic disregard for communal domain and are consistent with the extended agency model of narcissism and the “success as a drawback” effect.*

Key words: *narcissism, social value orientation, communion, agency, “success as a drawback” effect*

Better a murder than a misdiagnosis.
 “Dr House” tv series, “Instant Karma” episode

Narcissists want to be the best. However, they do not desire to excel in everything. What they endeavor is to bask in glory of success and achievement exclusively in an agentic domain. According to the extended agency model of narcissism (Campbell & Foster, 2007) they focus on what benefits them personally, with little regard for how their actions may benefit (or harm) others. When they perceive an opportunity to self-enhance in an agentic domain, they do not hesitate to exert more effort and persistently pursue their goal (Wallace, Ready, & Weitenhagen, 2009) resulting in often being able to strongly improve their performance in tests of their agentic abilities (Wallace & Baumeister, 2002). However, they show little interest in excellence in a communal domain such as helping others or sharing resources (Sedikides, Campbell, Reeder, Elliot, & Gregg, 2002). In fact, recent research suggests that positive and praiseful information on their high communal abilities (generally undesired by them) is likely to elicit their

aggression – a phenomenon explained in terms of “success as a drawback” effect (Drat-Ruszczak & Bazińska, 2010) – an effect complementary to the “failure as an asset” one (Reinhard, Stahlberg, & Messner, 2008).

Present research was designed to answer a specific question on a particular self-presentational effect of narcissism. We aimed to experimentally test whether high narcissists would tend to excel in a communal domain by showing strong prosocial orientation if they were informed that the test they were performing was in fact measuring their agentic skills. Similarly, we wanted to see whether simply labelling the very same test explicitly as a test of their communal qualities would lead them to show low prosocial and high pro-self orientations. In other words, we tested a general hypothesis that simply manipulating façade information concerning the purpose of some activity so that it seemed to offer “an opportunity to win glory” (Wallace & Baumeister, 2002) in an agentic domain was sufficient to trigger high narcissists desire for excellence thus leading to their high performance in a communal domain.

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Overview and Predictions

The purpose of the present study was to examine the connections between narcissism and social value orientation under different façade conditions of testing agency, communion or no information – in a control condition. Based on extant literature it was hypothesized that narcissism would show different relations with social value orientation (an index of communion) under these conditions. It would relate to higher prosocial and lower pro-self (individualistic and competitive) orientations in an agentic condition than in a control and communal conditions – i.e. when participants were informed that the test measured their agentic qualities instead of communal ones or in condition of no information. Similarly, it was expected that narcissism would relate to lower prosocial and higher pro-self orientations in communal condition than in the two remaining ones. No exact predictions with regard to the direction of the relations in a control condition were made – i.e. in a condition in which participants received no information regarding the purpose of the study.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Participants were 95 technical university students (54 women) between the ages of 19 and 43 years ($M = 22.60$; $SD = 3.43$). They were informed that the study involved measurement of personality and were offered feedback on their personality traits in return for participation. Upon arrival at the laboratory, participants completed a measure of narcissism before they were randomly assigned to one of three conditions differing exclusively in bogus façade information about the purpose of the study and personality traits measured. Then they were asked to complete a measure of social value orientation – the Triple Dominance Measure (Van Lange, Otten, de Bruin, & Joireman, 1997), thanked and debriefed.

Experimental Manipulation

Participants were randomly assigned to one of three façade conditions: communal, agentic or control. They differed purely in the information concerning the topic and objective of the study. In the agentic condition ($n = 32$) participants read that “the study is a part of a project on leadership potential (interpersonal skills, social intelligence and the ability to manage people), executed in the Institute of Psychology.” The whole information was provided in a bigger font (14 pt), highlighted by a double frame and the agentic keywords (“leadership potential, interpersonal skills, social intelligence and the ability to manage people”) were bolded. In a communal condition ($n = 32$) participants were informed that “the study is a part of a project on traits serving altruism (sensitivity to other people, openness and moral standards), executed in the Institute of Psychology” and the respective relevant information was highlighted in an analogous manner as in the agentic condition. In the

control condition ($n = 31$) participants received information that „the study is a part of the project executed in the Institute of Psychology.” In all conditions participants provided information on their sex, age and email address to which they wanted to receive feedback.

Measures

Narcissism was assessed using the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Hall, 1979). The validated Polish version of the NPI (Bazińska & Drat-Ruszczak, 2000) consists of 34 items (e.g., “I really like to be the center of attention.”) and responses for each item are provided using scales that range from 1 (*does not apply to me*) to 5 (*applies to me*). Items were summed to create an index of grandiose narcissism ($\alpha = .90$).

Social Value Orientation (SVO) is defined in terms of the weights people assign to their own and others’ outcomes in situations of interdependence (Messick & McClintock, 1968). It was assessed with the 9-item Triple Dominance Measure of Social Values¹ (TDM, used by Van Lange et al. (1997), one of the most commonly used measures of SVO in the world. In this decomposed game-based measure participants were asked to allocate point amounts to themselves and another person across nine scenarios. The instruction read:

In this task we ask you to imagine that you have been randomly paired with another person, whom we will refer to simply as the “Other”. This other person is someone you do not know and that you will not knowingly meet in the future. Both you and the “Other” person will be making choices by circling either the letter A, B, or C. Your own choices will produce points for both yourself and the “Other” person. Likewise, the other’s choice will produce points for him/her and for you. Every point has value: the more points you receive, the better for you, and the more points the “Other” receives, the better for him/her.

It was then followed by an example of a choice situation with an elaborate explanation of all possible decisions. Individuals’ choices then reflect not only what they want but what they want a hypothetical other to get, therefore the measure is considered to assess social strategies and is a good indicator of communal orientation. Based on the allocation patterns, three typologies could be identified: prosocial, competitor, and individualist (each participant is identified as prosocial/competitive or individualist). Instead of using categorizations, we derived continuous measures for prosociality, competitiveness, and individuality by counting the number of responses corresponding to each style (so each participant is characterized by three scores – one per each orientation with the possible maximum score equal to nine). These variables are not independent by definition (e.g. increasing number of prosocial responses implies decreasing the number of proself: competitive and individualistic responses). We also used variables based on

¹ The measure is available for free at <http://www.socialdilemma.com/content/instruments>.

the sums allocated to self and to other, as well as a ratio of these two indices. Theoretical minima and maxima for each of these variables are as follows: Sum Allocated to Self, min = 4470, max = 5020, Sum Allocated to Other, min = 900, max = 4490, Ratio of Sums Allocated to Self and to Other, min = 1, max = 5.02, respectively, however the values of these variables are also interdependent. Both approaches (the categorical and continuous ones) are used in the literature (e.g. Jonason, Li, & Teicher, 2010). Here the continuous one was selected for its greater precision.

Results

Table 1 presents values of dependent variables for each condition, results of omnibus tests and comparisons between conditions. We also checked the distribution of narcissism in each experimental condition. Table 2 presents the means, standard deviations and intercorrelations for the measures included in the present study.

We sought to determine whether narcissism would be associated with more prosocial and less prosocial orientation in agentic condition compared to a communal condition. We ran a series of multiple hierarchical regression analyses of social value orientation indices: Sum Allocated to Self, Sum Allocated to Other, Ratio of Sums Allocated to Self and Others, and Prosocial Orientation, Individualistic

Orientation and Competitive Orientation². Narcissism and condition (dummy coded as two instrumental variables representing the difference between communal and control condition, C1, and the difference between agentic and control condition, C2, respectively) were entered as predictors in the first step, along with Sex and Age as control variables. These were followed by interactive products of narcissism and each of the dummy variables entered in the second step. Next, as the control variables: Sex and Age yielded no significant effects, they were subsequently removed from further analyses. Similarly, as no significant effects involving C2 dummy variable were noted, neither main nor interactive, it was subsequently dropped from the equation. Therefore C1 represents the vector of difference between communal and the two remaining conditions in the analyses. Results of the analyses are presented in Table 3. (See page - 467)

Results show that none of the variables predicted Sum Allocated to Self. Sum Allocated to Other was significantly predicted by an interaction effect of Narcissism with dummy variable C1 now representing the difference between communal condition and the two other conditions together. We then ran a test of simple effects including all three conditions. Simple slope analysis indicated that Narcissism predicted less resources allocated to other in a communal condition ($b = -.42$, $SE = .16$, $t = -2.60$, $p = .011$)

Table 1. Values Of Dependent Variables for Each Experimental Manipulation. Results of Omnibus Tests And Comparisons between Conditions. Means Subscripted With A Different Letter Differ At $p < .05$.

Dependent variable	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	η^2	Agentic condition: M(SD)		Control condition: M(SD)		Communal condition: M(SD)	
Sum Allocated to Self	1.45	0.24	0.03	4731.92	(227.70) _a	4642.26	(186.49) _a	4668.28	(192.11) _a
Sum Allocated to Other	2.03	0.14	0.05	3937.31	(782.80) _a	3668.39	(997.85) _{ab}	3398.62	(1138.54) _b
Ratio of Sums Allocated to Self and to Other	1.19	0.19	0.04	1.27	(0.35) _a	1.50	(0.98) _a	1.72	(1.18) _a
Prosocial Orientation	0.62	0.54	0.01	4.73	(3.88) _a	5.65	(3.48) _a	4.72	(3.69) _a
Individualistic Orientation	1.46	0.24	0.03	4.12	(3.87) _a	2.58	(3.15) _a	3.07	(3.27) _a
Competitive Orientation	1.61	0.21	0.04	0.15	(0.46) _a	0.80	(2.35) _a	1.21	(2.83) _a

Table 2. Intercorrelations and Descriptive Statistics for Variables in the Study.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Narcissism							
2. Sum Allocated to Self	.00						
3. Sum Allocated to Other	-.20†	-.31**					
4. Ratio of Sums Allocated to Self and to Other	.19†	.03	-.90***				
5. Prosocial Orientation	-.13	-.80***	.76***	-.60***			
6. Individualistic Orientation	.01	.99***	-.33**	.05	-.81***		
7. Competitive Orientation	.20†	-.23*	-.76***	.94***	-.40***	-.21†	
<i>M</i>	102.22	4678.14	3658.72	1.5	5.06	3.21	0.74
<i>SD</i>	17.47	202.66	1083.66	0.93	3.66	3.44	2.20

Note. *** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$; † $p < .10$

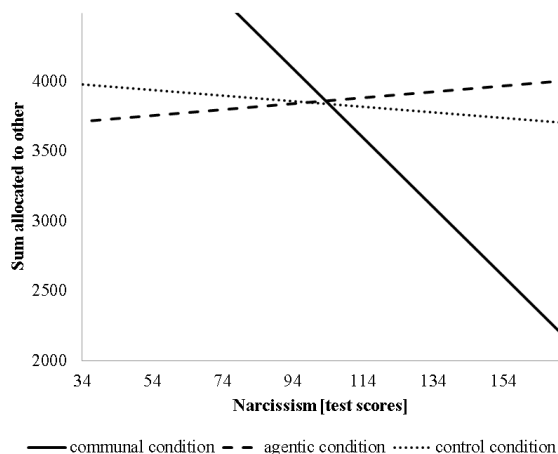
² As the distribution of Competitive Orientation (based on number of competitive choices) was positively skewed ($\gamma = 3.28$) due to a large number of zero values, Box-Cox transformation was applied with a shift and iteration of 1000. It yielded optimal lambda of -3.753 but the resultant distribution was not normal. Following Schwab's (2012) instruction we are therefore presenting analyses using the original variable - the results must be approached with caution as confidence intervals might be slightly biased.

Table 3. Standardized Regression Coefficients for Predictors of Sum allocated to other, Ratio of sums allocated to self and other and Competitive orientation

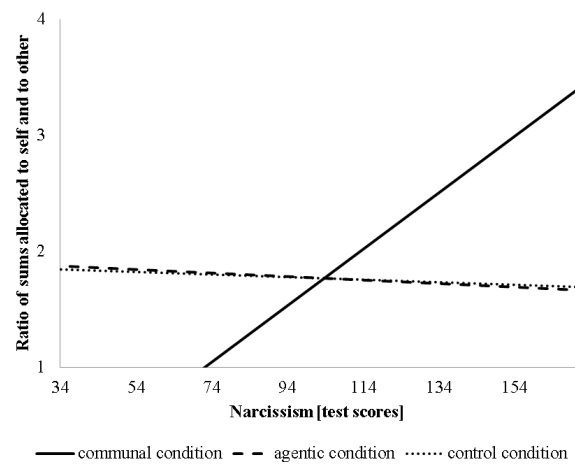
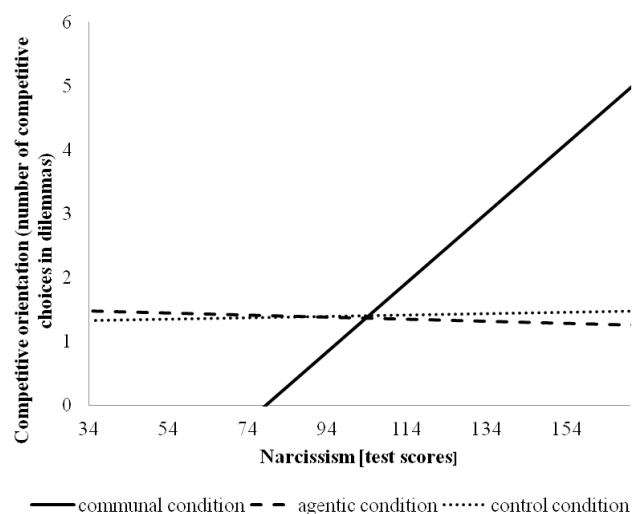
	β		
	Sum Allocated to Other	Ratio of Sums Allocated to Self and to Other	Competitive Orientation
Narcissism	-.15	.15	.15
C1	-.12	.10*	.09
Narcissism*C1	-.21*	.23*	.20*
Model parameters			
R^2 (Adj. R^2)	0.10(0.07)	0.10(0.07)	0.09(0.06)
F	3.31	3.44	2.92
df1	3	3	3
df2	91	91	91
P	0.02	0.02	.04

Note. * $p < 0.05$; all categorical predictors were centered. Variable C1 represents the vector of difference between communal and the two remaining conditions in these analysis.

but not in a control condition ($b = -.03$, $SE = .18$, $t = -0.19$, $p = .85$) nor in an agentic condition ($b = .04$, $SE = .17$, $t = 0.21$, $p = .84$). The slopes in control and agentic conditions did not differ significantly ($p = .79$; Figure 1). Similarly, Ratio of Sums Allocated to Self and other was significantly predicted by an interaction effect of Narcissism with dummy variable C1. Simple slope analysis including all conditions indicated that Narcissism predicted higher ratio of resources allocated to self compared to other in a communal condition ($b = .44$, $SE = .16$, $t = 2.78$, $p = .01$) but neither in a control nor agentic conditions ($ps > .16$). The slopes in a control and agentic conditions did not differ significantly ($p = .43$; Figure 2).

Figure 1. Plot of simple slopes of Sum Allocated to Other on Narcissism in experimental conditions. Only the slope for communal condition was significant.

Regression analyses of Prosocial and Individualistic Orientations yielded no significant effects. Competitive Orientation was predicted by interactive effect of Narcissism with dummy variable C1. Simple slope analysis including all conditions indicated that Narcissism predicted more Competitive orientation in a communal condition ($b = .41$, $SE = .16$, $t = 2.58$, $p = .01$) but neither in a control nor agentic conditions ($ps > .13$). The slopes in a control and agentic conditions did not differ significantly ($p = .50$; Figure 3).

Figure 2. Plot of simple slopes of Ratio of Sums Allocated to Self and Other on Narcissism in experimental conditions. Only the slope for communal condition was significant.**Figure 3. Plot of simple slopes of Competitive Orientation on Narcissism in experimental conditions. Only the slope for communal condition was significant.**

Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to examine the connections between narcissism and social value orientation under different façade conditions of testing agency, communion (or no information – in a control condition). It was hypothesized that narcissism would relate to higher prosocial and lower pro-self (individualistic and competitive) orientations in an agentic condition than in a communal condition. No predictions with regard to the direction of relations were made for a control condition. The results indicated that the manipulation of façade information failed to influence sums allocated to themselves by narcissistic people. However, it had influence on their sharing, namely it influenced the sums allocated to other people. Narcissism related to low generosity, less sharing and higher pro-self competitive orientation in a communal condition compared to the two other conditions. This paradoxical effect indicates that high narcissists show low communion – present strong preference for having advantage over the other, by diminishing the other's payoff – when they are explicitly informed that the test they are performing measures their communal qualities instead of agentic ones – the qualities which they disregard. There was no difference in the relations of narcissism with the indicators of communion between agentic and control conditions which might suggest that narcissistic participants tended to interpret the test in a condition of no information in a similar way to the agentic one. The fact that results do not support our first hypothesis (that narcissism would relate to higher prosocial and lower pro-self orientations in an agentic condition than in control and communal conditions) may suggest that indeed the means by which narcissists achieve their glory are not meaningless to them but instead, they seem to matter. In other words, narcissists do not show readiness or willingness to resort to communal means to achieve glory even when they are explicitly informed that that 'glory' at stake concerns agentic abilities. One therefore cannot conclude that narcissists would dare anything for a reward, self-enhancement in an agentic domain: the current results show that agentic end does not justify communal means for them.

These results corroborate earlier evidence showing that highly narcissistic individuals are generally disinterested in communion (Campbell & Foster, 2007) and show explicit disregard for communal characteristics. They present themselves as not communal. The paradoxical effect of particularly low communion manifested by them in a communal condition suggests that indeed success in a communal domain in absence of any agentic rewards is both unwelcome and could be perceived by them as a drawback (Drat-Ruszczak & Bazińska, 2010). These findings suggest that when dealing with highly narcissistic individuals and in particular when trying to engage them in a prosocial activity it would be beneficial to either present the activity as an agentic challenge or provide no information on its true purpose instead of explicitly appealing to their communal side. The latter can paradoxically bring an effect opposite to the desired one: indeed communal context seems to bring the worst in narcissists.

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