

Perspectives On Problem-Solving: Narcissistic Traits And Conflict Resolution

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Personality traits are a set of characteristics that help define the entirety of a personality for many people. Some people may identify with positive personality traits such as conscientiousness, agreeableness, sociability, etc. These different traits influence various aspects of life and interpersonal relationships, including how a person approaches arguments and conflict resolution skills. Conflict resolution skills are the ability to conclude a conflict or argument and can be positively managed by practicing strategies like accommodation, compromise, collaboration, and through other alternative avenues. The ability to resolve a conflict is an important skill utilized in daily life and can determine how someone is viewed in a workplace, educational setting or in friendships and romantic relationships. Because of this, expanding the research on how personality traits related to narcissism such as lack of empathy, grandiosity and a sense of entitlement have a relationship to being able to effectively solve disputes is integral in the understanding of how people communicate, and how intertwined specific personality disorders like narcissistic personality disorder can be with severe interpersonal disruptions.

Narcissistic personality disorder (NPD) is a mental health condition recognized by the DSM-IV with presenting symptoms such as elevated levels of self-importance, superiority, envy, arrogance, impatience, and difficulty with managing emotions and behavior. In prior studies, NPD has been linked to significant interpersonal difficulties. According to one study examining interpersonal problems associated with narcissism among psychiatric patients, “High levels of narcissistic features were significantly associated with greater levels of distress and interpersonal problems, specifically with domineering, vindictive, and intrusive behavior. Even when controlling for other Cluster B personality disorders (histrionic, antisocial, and borderline),

narcissism uniquely predicted interpersonal problems, especially in the domineering and vindictive dimensions” (Cheek, et al., 2018, p. 27). In this study, outcomes focused on assessing the association between narcissism and interpersonal problems while assessing whether narcissism is associated with treatment outcomes. Fifty-three consecutively admitted patients from the University of Alberta Hospital day treatment program participated in this study, and the association between narcissism and interpersonal impairment at both baseline and post-therapy was examined using partial correlation analyses. The findings supported that of the research study being replicated, originally authored by Ogdorniczuk et al. (2009), which underscored prominent interpersonal impairment associated with narcissism and supporting the notion of NPD as a valid clinical construct.

In addition, a study conducted by Litrell et al. (2018) hypothesized that narcissism and impulsiveness are negatively related to measures of cognitive reflection and positively related to intuitive thinking, which may contribute to difficulties in interpersonal relationships. In their methodology, 100 participants were recruited to complete a Narcissism personality inventory, hypersensitive narcissism scale, Barratt impulsiveness scale, Cognitive reflection test- long, Rational-experiential inventory, and a self-reflection and insight scale, and results were determined with linear regression models to test the predictive value of narcissism and impulsiveness for each of the cognitive reflection measures. This study is significant in the understanding of how those with higher levels of narcissism reflect on their responses and interactions with others, as those with traits consistent with grandiose narcissism were more likely to rely on an intuitive response, such as immediately responding with aggression or annoyance. Additionally, vulnerable narcissism negatively predicted metacognitive insight (the ability to understand one’s thoughts). This contributes to the idea that problem-solving and

conflict resolution could present as more of a hindrance for those with narcissistic personality traits, because cognitive reflection allows individuals to consider how their words and actions may affect others and makes a person more likely to override their intuitive (or “gut”) response to be more thoughtful in their interactions.

According to another study done by McGregor et al. (2023), the dynamics of narcissism at the intra-personal, person-level and within-person level (i.e., fluctuation of displayed narcissism in a person) may be helpful in explaining the variance in perceived social rank conflict and dominance behaviors in teams and allow insight on how this may impact the perception of conflict resolution for those with narcissistic traits in a group setting. The participants in the sample were undergraduate engineering students enrolled in a project design course and were followed throughout the year. The end results outlined determined that rivalry positively predicted status conflict at both the between- and within- person levels, and social rank conflict positively predicted dominance at the between-person level. Later in the discussion section of the study, it is explained that “A key insight from our findings is that the tendency to view one's social world through an antagonistic lens may drive dominance-related behavior. Specifically, individuals high in narcissistic rivalry appear to infer social rank conflict in situations where others do not, which partially explains their greater tendency to engage in antagonistic self-protective behaviors” (McGregor et al. 2023, p. 4).

The findings of this study aid in explaining why specific conflicts, arguments or even neutral situations could be misconstrued by those with narcissistic personality traits as situations requiring dominance and social ranking. These traits, while potentially helpful in some team formats and individual performance, can also be displayed in a way that can be perceived as antagonistic and difficult to work with. This combined with intuitive reactions and significant

negative interpersonal relationships contributes to our understanding of why there is need to further dissect the extent to which narcissistic personality traits are truly correlated with conflict resolution.

With the concepts and significant findings drawn from the referenced past studies, we have gathered the understanding that the abilities of an individual to utilize cognitive reflection and metacognition can be dependent on the levels of narcissistic traits displayed. This ability to use cognitive reflection to pause and think about the impact of specific words, actions, and attitudes ties into the ability to effectively problem-solve in a peaceful and non-antagonistic manner. We have also been able to observe that the perception of social ranking in team and individual settings can become a predictor of domineering and/or antagonistic behavior. This relationship of assuming a social ranking while possessing a higher frequency of displayed narcissistic traits could also contribute to the receiver of communication from domineering individuals to feel intimidated or discouraged while attempting to resolve conflict. Moreover, we predict that there is a negative correlation between higher frequency of narcissistic personality traits and the ability to resolve conflicts. To expand, we believe that an observed higher frequency of narcissistic personality traits will have a relationship with a low frequency of conflict resolution skills.

Method

Participants

The participants were 70% female, 27.5% male, and 2.5% responded with “prefer not to answer”. Additionally, 40% of participants were Hispanic/Latinx, 37.5% were white/Caucasian, 12.5% were black or African American, 5% were Asian, and 5% responded with “prefer not to answer”. Ages ranged from 18 to 26 ($M = 18.43$, $SD = 1.55$). Participants were recruited through

SONA and were given .5 credit for applicable Psychology classes upon completion of the survey.

Design

The design for this study is correlational as it is observing the relationship between two variables without outside manipulation or control from the researcher. The study fits this design because there are two variables: level of narcissism in personality and conflict resolution skills; and the variables are not dependent upon each other.

Measures

The questionnaire used in this study has questions related to conflict resolutions skills, such as: *When there is a disagreement, I gather as much information as I can to keep the lines of communication open* (Conflict Management Questionnaire, n.d.). In addition, the questionnaire also asks questions or makes statements related to personality and the extent of narcissistic traits; for example: *I really like to be the center of attention* and *I insist upon getting the respect that is due to me* (Ames et. al., 2006). The questionnaire included thirty-one questions and were answered in Likert-scale format (1- strongly disagree, 7- strongly agree). Demographics collected were age, race, and gender. Demographics collected were used to describe our sample.

Procedure

Participants were recruited through the online recruiting tool used by the Angelo State University psychology department, and data was collected through Qualtrics, a secure platform for collecting data online. Participants were first presented with the consent form and upon agreement, the questionnaire. After finishing the questionnaire and demographics, they were shown the debriefing page that included more information about the study, related articles and contact information for the faculty advisor in case of questions or concerns.

Results

The prediction for this study was that there would be a negative correlation between narcissistic personality traits and conflict resolution skills. To test the hypothesis, a Pearson correlation test was used to assess if there was a significant negative correlation.

There was no significant negative correlation between the mean of the responses measuring conflict resolution and the mean of the responses measuring narcissistic personality traits, Pearson's $r(40) = -.16, p = .34$. The hypothesis was not supported, and the null hypothesis was not rejected.

Discussion

The prediction for this research study was that there would be a negative correlation between frequency of narcissistic personality traits and conflict resolution skills, as we believed that those who had more displayed narcissistic personality traits would have significant struggles with resolving conflict. Although there was a small negative correlation, the results for this study were insignificant. The implications of the findings of this study are that in past research, there has been a significant relationship between interpersonal difficulties and narcissistic personality traits or NPD (Cheek, et al., 2018, p. 27), which offers the possibility that those with higher levels of narcissistic traits are able to discern socially acceptable responses or identify responses that align best with conflict resolution skills and answer within the scope of social desirability. Alternatively, some may answer questions in the survey similarly regardless of the alignment of their personality. For example, someone may read the question: *Being at odds with other people makes me feel uncomfortable and anxious*. An individual reading this question could feel uncomfortable because they feel frightened by direct confrontation, while another person may identify with those feelings because they dislike a person disagreeing with them at all.

The limitations of this study were the number of participants included, with the participant size being 40. In addition, providing more nuance in the experiment design such as considering other personality traits and running a subsequent correlational test between those traits and conflict resolution could allow additional insight. In future studies on this topic, it may also be helpful to allow for a more generalizable population with a wider age range, such as ages 18 to 60 and expanding the recruitment method to outside of the Angelo State University population.

Despite limitations, this research is useful insight for future studies and designs on this topic. The population that participated in the study, as mentioned above, ranged from 18-26 years old, and were individuals affiliated with Angelo State University. Findings in this study did not corroborate with others with differing populations, which may shed some light on the potential differences in self-reporting for young adults and college students. NPD and narcissistic traits in general are becoming increasingly well-known and shared across various social media platforms, contributing to de-stigmatization and awareness of NPD symptoms. This could contribute to changes in future studies as people become more aware of actions that align with NPD and adjust their answers and actions to what they believe may be more socially acceptable.

The potential to expand on studies between the levels of narcissistic traits and conflict resolution creates many avenues to expand upon in consequent research or as a follow-up. Understanding how personal attributes such as self-importance, grandiosity and entitlement play into a person's ability to come to a compromise and understand another's point of view is essential to many aspects of life, and can be beneficial in major industries like business, economics, and mental health professions.

References

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