

The Impact of Narcissism on Persuasive Messages

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The study examines the impact of narcissism on persuasive messages. Using scores from the NPI (Raskin & Hall, 1979), both a high and low narcissistic persuader generated a persuasive message on the topic, volunteer work. 154 student-participants evaluated these messages on a 45-item Narcissistic Language Variable Inventory (NLVI). Half of the participants evaluated the low narcissist's message and half evaluated the high narcissist's message. Results revealed that the message produced by the low narcissistic persuader was rated more positively than the message produced by the high narcissistic persuader. In addition, both males and females reacted more favorably to the low narcissist's message. These results suggest that the style and content of a persuasive message is, in part, a function of the personality traits of the speaker.

Keywords: narcissism, persuasive messages, speaker's personality traits

INTRODUCTION

“Mirror, mirror, on the wall . . . who's the fairest of them all?” While this familiar question was originally posed in a novel of German folk tales, one may notice a striking similarity between the witch's mirror-gazing obsession and current societal trends (Grimm & Grimm, 1904). Many theorists label this self-absorbed preoccupation, “Narcissism” (Gottschalk, 1988; Lasch, 1979; Restak, 1982; Scodari, 1987).

Literature suggests that an individual's personality characteristics reveal themselves in the messages one uses to communicate (Baxter, 1984; Boster, 1985; Boster & Stiff, 1984; Canary, Cody, & Marston, 1986; Hample & Dallinger, 1987; O'Hair & Cody, 1987). “Personality theories” provide an explanation for effective and ineffective persuasion based on the personality traits of the agent. By examining particular personality characteristics, researchers have attempted to better understand the process of persuasion.

The assumption underlying personality theories of persuasion is that individual personality traits influence the persuasive situation. These traits are manifest in the message characteristics used in a persuasive situation. These characteristics can be examined by focusing on specific structural units of language known as message variables. The use of message variables such as types of appeals and strategy of argumentation depend to a large degree on the personality traits of the persuader. No message variable is exclusive to any one personality trait; however, some personality traits determine the degree or likelihood that a message variable will be utilized. While an extensive amount of research has examined the impact of

personality traits on persuasion, limited research addresses the impact of narcissistic personality characteristics on persuasive messages.

A crucial deficit exists in research examining narcissism. Raskin and Novacek (1989) compared the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI) to the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI) and identified numerous personality characteristics of the narcissist. However, little work exists which examines the manifestation of these traits in tangible, verbal, or written messages. Vangelesti, Knapp, and Daly (1989) examined conversational qualities of the narcissist, but they did not focus on specific language variables. Raskin and Shaw (1988) studied the narcissistic use of personal pronouns in conversation, but he did not focus on other forms of language typically used by a narcissist.

Wald and McQuillen (1990) argue that a relationship exists between persuasion and one's narcissistic tendencies. Based on the results of an exploratory study, these authors found that messages constructed by low narcissists were preferred over those constructed by high narcissists. Wald and McQuillen (1990) argue that the differences in preference are due to the type of language and style of content used to construct a message. Wald and McQuillen (1990) interpret these message differences as being the function of self-absorption, lack of empathy, and grandiose sense of self, all structural elements of narcissism. These authors' interpretation is consistent with current literature that suggests the narcissist is exploitative and manipulative (Emmons, 1987; Freud, 1957; Goldstein, 1985; Kernberg, 1975; Kohut, 1976; Raskin & Novacek, 1989).

In addition, research suggests a relationship between sex stereotypes and one's degree of narcissism (Akhtar & Thompson, 1982; Watson, Taylor, & Morris, 1987). According to reviewed literature, a participant's gender will affect his/her level of narcissism. Characteristics of low levels of narcissism, such as empathy and sensitivity are more stereotypical feminine qualities (Mehrabian & Epstein, 1972). Consistent with these findings, Raskin and Shaw (1988) argue that women who score high on select masculine narcissistic dimensions (e.g., self-sufficiency, entitlement), often reject the traditional female roles in favor of more masculine interests. Further research examining sex stereotypes and narcissism report that males are more prone to pathological narcissism. Scholars argue that this propensity is based on the stereotypical masculine traits of selfishness, exploitativeness, and self-aggrandizement (Akhtar & Thompson, 1982; Haaken, 1983; Lasch, 1984). Substantial research indicates that an association exists between one's degree of narcissism and identification with sex stereotypes. It is therefore assumed in the current study that a relationship between sex role identification and narcissism may exist.

In studies of persuasion, many personality variables have been investigated. This study is an initial step in describing how the narcissistic personality trait influences communication. However, a distinction must be made regarding the focus of the current study. This study does not examine the persuasibility of the narcissistic individual. Rather, this study examines a posed relationship between the level of narcissism of a speaker and the content of the persuasive message generated by that speaker. Accordingly, differences in the communicative styles are attributed to the personality differences of the high and low narcissist. These personality differences are translated into behaviors that in turn result in message differences which reflect those psychological traits. This study examines the specific message variables used by the low narcissistic persuader compared to those used by the high narcissistic persuader in persuasive situations. Further, based on audience ratings, the study examines the strength of association of these specific message variables with high and low narc persuasive messages.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Empathy

Empathy is a personality characteristic that researchers have linked to persuasion. An empathic persuader is imaginative to the point of anticipating another's feelings and perceiving a situation as it is perceived by another. The empathic persuader accomplishes this task through the use of sensitivity, compassion, and understanding. Given these qualities, the empathic persuader is preferred and more successful than an unempathic persuader (Delia & Clark, 1977; Delia, Kline, & Burleson, 1979; Howie-Day, 1977; McQuillen, 1986; O'Keefe & Delia, 1978).

Studies correlating narcissistic traits with empathy have found that high narcissistic participants scored lower on scales measuring empathy (Biscardi & Schill, 1985; Watson, Grisham, Trotter, & Biderman, 1984). Because of their “calculating seductiveness,” narcissists are frequently viewed as being exploitative and unempathic (Lasch, 1979, p. 113). Thus, in a persuasive situation, the narcissistic individual is not expected to be creative or imaginative; rather, the high narcissist appears to be manipulative and exploitative. To an audience, the narcissist may appear insensitive and non-adaptive.

Need for Achievement

McClelland and his associates have done a great deal of research focusing on personal need for achievement, or “n-achievement,” (McClelland, Atkinson, Clark, & Lowell, 1953; McClelland, 1961). While the relationship between n-achievement and persuasion has not been extensively examined, a small body of literature linking the two does exist. This literature is mostly focused in the area of “message topic.” Message topics that “promise” a way to advance one’s social standing are more likely to be persuasive than messages that promise nothing but encourage the target to “give up something.” Most researchers agree that a high n-achiever will be more persuaded if the content of the message is aimed at increasing personal wealth, popularity, or wisdom. It is posited that in a persuasive situation, the high n-achievement persuader will behave in the same manner as the high n-achievement receiver. The high n-achiever is expected to offer tangible, explicit benefits for compliance (e.g., monetary reward, career advancement), while the low n-achiever will offer affective, implicit benefits for compliance (e.g., emotional rewards).

The narcissistic personality is characterized as seeking power and achievement. A 1987 study examining the need for power among students in Business Administration found a significantly positive relationship between the need for power and narcissism (Carroll, 1987). We might expect the high narcissist to behave much like the high n-achiever in a persuasive situation by clearly stating the benefits to be gained when complying with the message. It is likely the high narcissist will offer goal- and success-oriented benefits to the receiver to increase compliance. When comparing these “extrinsic” benefits to other types of benefits, the high n-achiever/high narcissist will stress personal gain, while the low n-achiever/low narcissist will stress intrinsic benefits relating to the “nature of the situation.”

Self-Esteem

A large portion of persuasion research centers on the self-esteem of the receiver. This research examines the relationship between susceptibility to the persuasive argument and the receiver’s level of self-esteem. In recent years, however, an attempt has been made to examine self-esteem and persuasion from the point of view of the sender.

Despite the scarcity of research in this area, available research suggests that an increase in self-esteem will usually result in increased attempts at persuasion (Cohen, 1959). These findings suggest that individuals with high self-esteem devote more attention to the persuasive act. Further, these findings suggest the high self-esteem individual offers the receiver more reasons to comply. Based on these findings, it can be proposed that the high self-esteem individual will encourage compliance by devoting time to developing multiple reasons and citing multiple target-centered benefits.

Narcissism has been used to describe and explain psychological processes such as poor self-esteem and self-image (Freud, 1948/1957; Stolorow, 1975; Val, 1982). Narcissists are characterized as having a grandiose self-image that serves as a “front” for low self-esteem. Narcissistic research supports the point of view that an individual scoring high on the NPI would be expected to score low on measures of self-esteem (Catt, 1986; Kohut, 1976, Kernberg, 1975; Svrakic, 1985). Because of their low self-esteem, narcissists artificially inflate their egos. Lowen (1985) notes: “By identifying with a grandiose image, one can ignore the painfulness of one’s inner reality” (p. 74). These findings suggest that the reverse can be expected from the low self-esteem individual who devotes less time to attempts at persuading others. The low self-esteem persuader will offer fewer reasons to comply and will offer fewer benefits enticing one to comply.

While the high narcissist appears to have high self-esteem, this seemingly confident air masks the individual’s low self-esteem (DSM III, 1987). Consistent with this argument, the high narcissist will use

appeals similar to those used by an individual with low self-esteem. The high narcissist will use appeals that imply some type of threat (e.g., negative emotion-based tactics) and call for immediate action. The low narcissist will use positive or “warm” emotional appeals. The high narcissist with low self-esteem is likely to employ negative appeals since this individual tends to lack sensitivity. In contrast, the low narcissist tends to have high self-esteem and is sensitive. The low narcissist would likely employ sincere emotional appeals.

Given the relationship between the high narcissist and the low self-esteem individual, in a persuasive situation a high narcissist will behave as an individual with low self-esteem. The high narcissist will devote less attention to the persuasive situation as compared to a low narcissist. As is the case of an individual with low self-esteem, the high narcissist’s arguments are expected to be less lengthy than the low narcissist’s message. Further, the high narcissist is expected to offer fewer reasons to compliance.

Machiavellianism

Research suggests that in persuasive situations, the high Machiavellian (mach) individual will typically rely on manipulative behavior (Christie & Geis, 1970) and actively resort to the use of negative emotion-based tactics such as ingratiation, deceit, and certain forms of assertiveness (Christie & Geis, 1970; Pandey & Rastogi, 1979; Roloff & Barnicott, 1978; Ruffner & Burgoon, 1981, p. 130). In contrast, the low mach is guided by emotions, and tends to employ positive emotional appeals in his/her messages (Ruffner & Burgoon, 1981, p. 130).

Christie and Geis (1970), developers of the Machiavellianism V Scale, found those scoring high on the scale to be manipulative and pragmatic. In a related study, Hunter, Gerbing, and Boster (1982) identified negativism as a subcomponent of Machiavellianism. Hunter and his colleagues’ results indicate that participants that are highly negative tend to be more verbally aggressive.

Studies examining the use of lies in persuasive situations found the high mach persuaders to be highly skilled at the art of deceit in persuasion (Exline, Thibaut, Hickey, & Gumpert, 1970). Where the high mach is manipulative and deceitful, the low mach believes that people can be trusted and that lying is inexcusable (Bettinghaus & Cody, 1987).

Certain similarities exist between the machiavellian personality and the narcissistic personality. Using the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory to describe the narcissistic personality, Raskin and Novacek (1989) characterized the narcissist as being manipulative and deceitful. The narcissistic manipulator tries to find his/her victim’s weakness by using charm and buoyancy (Restak, 1982).

Biscardi and Schill (1985) found a significant positive correlation between narcissism and Machiavellianism when assessing interpersonal exploitativeness. Research by Raskin and Hall (1979) suggested the saliency of the characteristic of exploitativeness and social manipulation to the narcissistic personality. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual III (1987) includes the concept of interpersonal exploitativeness as a criterion for the diagnosis of narcissistic personality disorder. Based on this evidence, it is argued the high narcissist is perceived as manipulative and is inclined to exploit his/her audience through using techniques such as guilt.

In sum, a relationship appears to exist between narcissism and certain personality traits. Research supports the notion that psychological traits influence communication behavior. Therefore, messages produced by individuals with differing levels of narcissism will demonstrate differences in message quality that may affect message preference. Studies examining Machiavellianism, self-esteem, empathy, and need achievement yield consistent results when focusing on the use of emotional appeals in persuasive communication. Based on the established association between Machiavellianism, self-esteem, and the narcissistic personality, it is argued that in persuasive situations the high narcissist’s behavior would be similar to a persuader high in Machiavellianism, low in self-esteem, low in empathy, and high in need for achievement.

Despite extensive research on personality traits and persuasion, some limitations exist. The critical limitation is that narcissism, a construct that has a potentially powerful impact on communication, has been overlooked. The construct of narcissism is composed of a large group of personality traits. Many of these traits have been used independently to explain persuasive communication; however, collectively these traits

can be subsumed under the “umbrella-label” of narcissism. The communication researcher could unify and clarify research efforts by considering these individual personality traits as components of one personality construct. This construct-view could provide a clearer picture of the inter-relationship of this concept and may make interpretations of results clearer.

The relationship between narcissism and persuasion has received little attention by communication research. Therefore, a need exists to address this potentially fruitful area. The current study addresses the following:

RQ1: *What are the differences between ratings of persuasive messages generated by high and low narcissists?*

RQ2: *Will the sex of the receiver have an effect on the observed differences between ratings of persuasive messages?*

METHOD

The study was conducted in three phases: (1) Experimental Treatment Development, (2) Questionnaire Validation, and (3) Experimental Manipulation.

Experimental Treatment Development

Participants

The participants for the pre-study consisted of 42 undergraduate women enrolled in the introductory speech course at a large midwestern university. The women ranged in age from 18 to 41 years. At the onset of the study, the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI) was administered to all participants. From the 42-member sample, four women were asked to participate in phase one of the study.

Message Generation

After all tests had been scored, the lowest 30% of scores and the highest 30% of scores were selected from the sample. The NPI scores ranged from four to 28 (the highest possible score was 40). The lowest 12 scores ranged from four to 12 and the highest twelve scores ranged from 21 to 28. From these scores, five low scorers and five high scorers were randomly chosen to participate in the study. Each of these ten participants were asked to write a persuasive speech on “volunteer work.” Each participant was given identical instructions and each participant had 30 minutes to produce his/her argument.

Of the 10 arguments that had been generated, the pool was reduced to two arguments by a rating procedure conducted by the experimenter and an expert rater. The ratings were averaged and the highest score from each group (1 high-narc message, 1 low-narc message) was chosen for the next portion of the study.

Questionnaire Validation

Based on a review of literature related to personality traits and persuasion, a list of characteristics for the high and low narcissist were deduced. From this list of characteristics, a 127-item instrument was developed. Each item made an assertion about the speaker. These assertions were to be rated on a 5-point, Likert scale ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree.” Participants were asked to rate each statement in response to one of the two pre-generated scenarios.

Participants

The participants for the validation phase were 154 undergraduate students enrolled in speech courses at a large Midwestern university.

Materials

The stimulus materials for this study consisted of a booklet containing a persuasive argument and the 127-item Narcissistic Language Variable Inventory (NLVI). Half of the participants received a high narcissist's persuasive argument and half received a low narcissist's argument.

Procedures

The cover of each questionnaire booklet contained instructions, a sample question, and an introductory message thanking the participant for his/her time. The instructions were as follows:

You have been asked to participate in an on-going research project, the results of which will help improve the curriculum of the basic Speech course at our university. Please follow all instructions carefully. Do not put your name or I.D. number on the questionnaire. Your answers will be kept confidential. Your participation is greatly appreciated.

You are asked to carefully read a short speech. The speech represents a speaker's attempt to present information on volunteering. After reading the speech, answer the set of questions related to the speaker's message. Do not read the speaker's message again, just answer the questions based on your impressions of the message. Remember that there are no right or wrong answers. Answer the questions by circling the number/response that best describes your feelings. See the sample question for clarification. Again, thank-you for your participation.

Test administrators were asked not to answer any questions that might arise during the testing period. To avoid the threats of ordering to the validity of the overall questionnaire, the items were randomly arranged for each individual booklet. Both the high and low narcissist's messages were randomly divided among the sample. Participants were given 20 minutes to complete the 127-item questionnaire.

Validation Results

The results of the validation narrowed the 127-item questionnaire to 45-items. The valid items were determined using a Pearson Product Moment Correlation. Each individual item was compared to the overall test score. The criterion for selection was a correlation level of .66 or above and probability level of less than .001. All the final 45 items met the critical values set by the Pearson Correlation acceptance criteria (for a copy of the 45-item instrument, see Appendix B).

Experimental Manipulation

Participants

Participants for the experimental manipulation, were 143 undergraduate men and women enrolled in the introductory speech course at a large Midwestern university. The sample consisted of 73 males and 70 females. Ages ranged from 18 to 30 years old, and the average age was approximately 20 years.

The sample was randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions: high narcissist's persuasive message or low narcissist's persuasive message. The procedures followed the same steps used in the Questionnaire Validation phase.

Design

A 2 x 2 factorial design was used to examine differences between condition and sex of participants within condition. A one-way ANOVA and posteriori contrast tests were used to examine the effects of sex and condition on the rating of message characteristics. The variable, experimental condition, had two levels (high narcissist/low narcissist) and the variable, sex of participant, had two levels (male/female). The dependent measure for this analysis was the participant's mean score on the NLVI. Scores on the 45 items of the NLVI served as the dependent measure. Each item was designed to match one of the language qualities that is characteristic of either a high or low narcissist's message. These characteristics were deductively generated from a review of literature related to psychological traits and Marwell and Schmitt's (1967) typology of compliance-gaining strategies. These major categories were further divided into two subclasses believed to encompass behavior typical of the high and low narcissist.

Category I represents characteristics believed to be evident in the argument generated by the low narcissist. Category II represents characteristics believed to be evident in the argument generated by the high narcissist.

RESULTS

Two research questions were posed as the basis of this study. First, do participant's ratings of persuasive messages generated by high and low narcissists differ? Second, will the sex of the receiver have an effect on the observed differences between ratings of persuasive messages?

Differences Between Ratings

To examine the different ratings of persuasive messages of high and low narcissist's, an independent sample t-test procedure was performed comparing participants' NLVI scores in the high narc condition to those scores in the low narc condition. A significant difference between ratings for high and low narcissist's messages ($t(141) = 5.96, p < .0001$) was found. The mean score for participants rating the high narc message was 3.22 and the mean score for participants rating the low narc message was 3.60. These results offer statistical support for a more positive response to the message produced by the low narcissist's message.

Effects of Sex on Ratings

In an elaboration analysis of the significant difference between participants' ratings of high and low narcissist's messages, a first level control variable, sex of participant, was added to the analysis. The results of an ANOVA on persuasive condition and sex of participant on participants' ratings of the NLVI revealed a significant main effect for message condition ($F(1,139) = 34.70, p < .05$) and a significant difference for sex of participant ($F(1,139) = 4.62, p < .05$). However, the two-way interaction of sex and condition did not achieve statistical support ($F(1,139) = 2.549, p > .05$). These results indicated that sex and condition independently affected ratings, but the interaction of the two had no significant impact on the results of the standard rating.

Based on the inspection of cell means, the following relations were observed. First, male participants rated the low narc condition significantly higher than they rated the high narc message ($t(71) = 3.49, p < .001$). Second, females rated the low narc message significantly higher than the high narc message ($t(68) = 4.75, p < .001$). Finally, female participants consistently achieved higher mean ratings of conditions (condition 1 $X = 3.717$ /condition 2 $X = 3.243$) than male participants (condition 1 $X = 3.479$ /condition 2 $X = 3.206$).

These analyses support the notion that both males and females react more favorably to messages generated by low narcissists. Results of both testing procedures supported the hypothesis that messages generated by low narcissists are preferred more than the same messages constructed by high narcissists.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this investigation suggest that the quality and content of a message is, in part, the result of the personality type of the speaker. In addition, differences in the content and quality of the messages by two distinct personality types were recognizable to the sample audience. Specifically, differences existed in the overall ratings of persuasive arguments generated by high and low narcissists. Second, the sex of the target audience affected the level of acceptance of the persuasive arguments.

Differences in Ratings

Analysis of data relevant to the first hypothesis revealed that messages produced by low narc persuaders were perceived by receivers as being significantly different from those produced by high narc persuaders. A low narc persuasive message was rated more positively than a high narc persuasive message.

These results suggest that those with narcissistic personality traits develop persuasive messages with recognizable characteristics. These differences are subtle, yet they have an impact. An explanation for this difference may become clear by briefly examining the characteristics of the narcissistic personality as defined by Kernberg (1975) and Kohut (1976). The high narcissist requires constant attention and admiration, they tend to take advantage of others, they are often manipulative, and they lack empathy (Kernberg, 1975; Kohut, 1976).

In an earlier study, Vangelesti et al. (1989) found that high narcissists behave differently in conversations. These differences were attributed to the personality traits of the narcissist. Similarly, Raskin and Terry (1988) found high and low narcissists use personal pronouns differently. Raskin attributed the differences in part to the characteristics of the narcissistic individual. In the current study then, it was not surprising to find that differences existed in the persuasive styles of the high and low narcissists.

Sex Effects

Results relating to the second hypothesis revealed an unexpected sex effect. The overall findings appear to support Akhtar and Thompson's (1982) and Haaken's (1983) hypothesized association between sex and narcissism. These authors point to the parallels that exist between the narcissistic personality and male stereotypes by suggesting that males are more prone to pathological narcissism. Based on this research, one would expect males to react more favorably to messages generated by the high narcissist since the high narcissist personality is more stereotypic of males (Carroll, 1987).

In the present investigation, sex differences were discovered in the rating of the high and low narcissist's arguments. Unlike previous findings, both male and female participants in the present experiment reacted more positively to the message generated by the low narcissist. A possible explanation for these results is that while men are stereotypically seen as narcissistic, they use narcissism as a mask to hide their emotional selves. Therefore, they find positive emotional messages more acceptable. It was not surprising to find that the female sample rated the low narcissist's message higher than the high narcissist's message since the characteristics of the low narcissist are more stereotypic of females (Mehrabian & Epstein, 1972).

The findings of the current experiment clearly suggest that both males and females react more favorably to messages generated by low narcissists. One explanation for this may be that both sexes find empathic and "warm" persuasive arguments produced by the low narcissist persuader to be more pleasing.

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