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Why do narcissists take more risks? Testing the roles of perceived risks and benefits of risky behaviors

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ABSTRACT

Much prior research demonstrates that narcissists take more risks than others, but almost no research has examined what motivates this behavior. The present study tested two potential driving mechanisms of risk-taking by narcissists (i.e., heightened perceptions of benefits and diminished perceptions of risks stemming from risky behaviors) by administering survey measures of narcissism and risk-taking to a sample of 605 undergraduate college students. Contrary to what might be expected, the results suggest that narcissists appreciate the risks associated with risky behaviors just as much as do less narcissistic individuals. Their risk-taking appears to instead be fueled by heightened perceptions of benefits stemming from risky behaviors. These results are consistent with a growing body of evidence suggesting that narcissists engage in some forms of potentially problematic behaviors, such as risk-taking, because of a surplus of eagerness rather than a deficit of inhibition.

1. Introduction

Several studies have linked narcissistic personality, typically measured by the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Hall, 1979; Raskin & Terry, 1988), to elevated risk-taking. These studies include those that have investigated specific risky activities, such as gambling (Lakey, Rose, Campbell, & Goodie, 2008), aggressive driving (Britt & Garrity, 2006), and financial investment strategies (Foster, Misra, & Reidy, in press). In addition, there are studies that link narcissism to general traits associated with risk-taking, such as sensation seeking (Emmons, 1981) and impulsivity (Foster & Trimm, 2008; Vazire & Funder, 2006).

While it is apparent that narcissists[1] take more risks than others, almost no research has examined why they engage in risky behaviors. A notable exception is Lakey et al.'s (2008) study of narcissism and gambling, in which they observed that narcissists were especially prone to accepting low probability, high value wagers (i.e., high risk, high reward wagers) rather than high probability, low value wagers. The authors suggest that narcissists focus on the potential rewards and dismiss potential risks when deciding whether to engage in risky behaviors such as gambling. In other words, their myopic focus on reward is in part what makes narcissists prone to risk-taking behavior.

With the exception of Lakey et al. (2008) there are few if any published studies that explicitly examine why narcissism is linked to risk-taking. The purpose of the present study was to directly test two potential driving mechanisms of narcissistic risk-taking. Specifically, we tested whether narcissists are prone to risk-taking because (i) they perceive more substantial reward stemming from risky behavior, (ii) they perceive less risk stemming from risky behavior, or (iii) they perceive both greater reward and less risk stemming from risky behavior. Lakey et al. (2008) appear to favor the third possibility. They suggest that "narcissists are myopically focused on reward, which biases their appraisals of reward and loss likelihoods" (p. 129). In other words, narcissists overestimate the probability of reward and underestimate the probability of punishment stemming from risky behavior. Another possibility, however, is that narcissists are in fact cognizant of the risks associated with risky behavior, but are nevertheless motivated to take risks because they are hypersensitive to the rewards that sometimes result from risky behavior. This position is supported by research that links narcissistic personality to approach and avoidance motivation.

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[1] Narcissistic personality is best thought of as a dimension rather than a category (Foster & Campbell, 2007). We use the term "narcissist" in the present study as a matter of convenience to refer to individuals who score above the sample mean on measures of narcissism, such as a the NPI.

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2. Approach–avoidance motivation

The concepts of approach and avoidance motivation encompass a collection of prominent theoretical perspectives that propose distinct systems (e.g., neurological systems) that encourage movement either toward desirable outcomes (approach motivation) or away from undesirable outcomes (avoidance motivation). Examples of these theories are Eysenck's PEN model (Eysenck & Pervin, 1990), Davidson's (1998) neurophysiologic model of approach/withdrawal, and Freud's (1961) structural model of psychoanalysis.

One of the most prominent of these theories is Gray's (1970, 1982; Gray & McNaughton, 2000) reinforcement sensitivity theory (RST). According to RST, personality is the combined product of at least two[2] neural systems that are responsive to conditioned stimuli. The Behavioral Approach System (BAS) is sensitive to conditioned appetitive stimuli and the Behavioral Inhibition System (BIS) is sensitive to conditioned aversive stimuli. Therefore, BAS activation underlies approach motivation and BIS activation underlies avoidance motivation. Likewise, individuals who possess highly sensitive BAS tend to be more sensitive to and motivated by reward opportunities, whereas individuals with highly sensitive BIS tend to be more sensitive to and motivated by threats of punishment (see Corr, 2008b for overview).

3. Narcissism and approach–avoidance motivation

Two recently published papers, that included a total of five studies, directly tested the links between narcissistic personality and approach–avoidance motivation using multiple measures of BIS/BAS (Foster & Trimm, 2008; Foster et al., in press). Across all of these studies, elevated narcissism predicted high approach motivation (+BAS) coupled with low avoidance motivation (−BIS), that is, narcissists reported that they were strongly motivated by reward acquisition and weakly motivated by punishment avoidance. The authors labeled this motivational pattern the unmitigated approach model (UAM) of narcissism and suggested that it might be rooted in parental (Horton, Bleau, & Drwecki, 2006; Otway & Vignoles, 2006) and societal (Foster, Campbell, & Twenge, 2003; Twenge & Foster, 2008; Twenge, Konrath, Foster, Campbell, & Bushman, 2008a, 2008b) overindulgence, overvaluation, and overprotection of young people that combine to produce both high narcissism and strong approach/weak avoidance motivation. According to this view, children who are given whatever they want (i.e., overindulged), told that whatever they do is wonderful (i.e., overvalued), and not allowed to fail (i.e., overprotected) are more likely to develop into highly narcissistic adults (granted, these are extreme examples, but even weaker variants should still promote narcissism). Likewise, these messages should also promote strong approach motivation and weak avoidance motivation. Essentially, when individuals are taught that reward is the most likely outcome stemming from their behavior, then reward should serve as their primary motivator (Foster & Trimm, 2008). In short, the UAM is based in part on the idea that narcissistic personality and approach–orientation share similar developmental roots.

The component of the UAM that links narcissism to strong approach/weak avoidance motivation has received consistent empirical support. One source of ambiguity, however, lies with how strongly narcissism relates to approach and avoidance motivation. In two of the five previously published studies on narcissism and approach–avoidance motivation (studies 1 and 2 in Foster & Trimm, 2008) narcissism displayed equally strong associations with approach and avoidance motivation. In the remaining three studies, however, narcissism showed considerably stronger ties to approach motivation than avoidance motivation. For example, in both studies that appeared in Foster et al. (in press), the correlations between narcissism and BAS ($rs = 0.58$ and 0.60, $ps < 0.001$) were more than twice the strength of the correlations between narcissism and BIS ($rs = -0.21$ and -0.26, $ps < 0.05$). Therefore, while narcissism relates to both strong approach motivation and weak avoidance motivation, the stronger and more defining motivational feature of narcissism may be strong approach motivation. In light of this, one might predict, in the context of the present study, that risk-taking by narcissists will be driven more strongly by high perceived benefits than low perceived risk.

There is also research that has examined the extent to which approach and avoidance motivation mediate associations between narcissism and various outcomes (Foster, Misra, & Goff, 2009; Foster & Trimm, 2008; Foster et al., in press). Across these studies, strong approach motivation significantly mediated every outcome examined (e.g., impulsivity, financial decision-making, social goals, self-esteem). Weak avoidance motivation was a less consistent mediator. In particular, weak avoidance motivation may be somewhat less important when explaining some of the dysfunction associated with narcissism. For example, the link between narcissism and heightened dysfunctional impulsivity – that is, impulsivity that results in negative outcomes (Dickman, 1990) – is mediated by strong approach motivation, but not weak avoidance motivation (Foster & Trimm, 2008). Cumulatively, these findings suggest that weak avoidance motivation may be less critical of a factor than strong approach motivation when explaining certain outcomes associated with narcissism, in particular, dysfunctional outcomes. In other words, narcissists may get themselves into trouble not because they lack awareness of potential problems associated with their behaviors, but rather because they find the lure of rewards connected to these behaviors irresistible.

In some respects this view of narcissism is similar to a contemporary view of narcissism's sister trait psychopathy (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). In particular, studies by Newman and colleagues suggest that weak avoidance motivation may not be one of the defining features of psychopathy (see Wallace & Newman, 2008 for review). For example, psychopaths perform as well as control subjects on tasks that require punishment avoidance by itself, such as not responding to punishment cues (Newman & Kosson, 1986). The performance of psychopaths suffers relative to control subjects, however, on tasks that require both non-response to punishment cues and response to reward cues. In these dual-contingency tasks, psychopaths are particularly prone to making errors of commission (i.e., responding when they should not). In short, it appears that psychopaths are not simply insensitive to punishment, rather they seem unable, in the words of Wallace and Newman (2008), "to regulate behavior to avoid adverse consequences when the avoidance of an adverse outcome requires overriding a prepotent response inclination" (p. 402). To the extent that narcissism and psychopathy operate similarly in this domain, and to the extent that narcissists are more powerfully motivated by reward acquisition than punishment avoidance, we should expect that narcissistic behavior, such as risk-taking, which involves both potential rewards and punishments, will be fueled more strongly by approach than avoidance motivation.

[2] A relatively recent revision of RST posits the existence of a third system called the Fight-Flight-Freeze System (FFFS; Gray & McNaughton, 2000). As has been noted (Corr, 2008a), a very limited amount of empirical testing of the FFFS has been conducted. Because so little is known about the FFFS and because most RST researchers continue to focus on BIS and BAS exclusively, we do not include the FFFS in our discussion of RST.

4. Present research

Following the above logic, we made the firm prediction that narcissists would engage in risk-taking behavior because of their heightened sensitivity to potential rewards associated with risky behaviors. In other words, narcissists should perceive greater benefits stemming from risky behaviors and this should mediate the link between narcissism and risk-taking. We were somewhat less confident in the prediction regarding risk perception. It was possible that narcissists would also engage in risk-taking because they are dismissive of the risks that accompany such behavior. However, based on the emerging literature on narcissism and approach–avoidance motivation reviewed above, we suspected that narcissists might appreciate the risks that accompany risk-taking just as much as less narcissistic individuals, but nevertheless be driven to take risks because of the overwhelming lure of potential benefits.

5. Method

5.1. Subjects

A sample of 605 University of South Alabama undergraduate students (M age = 20, 66% female, 69% Caucasian) were recruited for this study. They received partial credit toward their research participation requirement in exchange for participation.

5.2. Materials and procedure

Subjects completed scale measures to assess narcissistic personality, the probability that they would engage in 30 different risk-taking behaviors, how much benefit they think they would receive from engaging in each of the risk-taking behaviors, and finally, how much risk they perceived stemming from each of the risk-taking behaviors. Each of these measures is described in more detail below.

5.2.1. Narcissism

Subjects completed the 40-item NPI (Raskin & Hall, 1979; Raskin & Terry, 1988). Each item of the NPI contains two self-descriptive statements (one narcissistic statement and one neutral statement). Subjects select the statement that fits them best. One point is given for each narcissistic statement selected (e.g., "I am an extraordinary person"). Thus, total scores on the NPI can range from 0 to 40, with higher scores indicating elevated narcissism. The mean NPI score for the present sample was 17.80, $SD = 7.48$, $\alpha = 0.87$.

5.2.2. Risk-taking

The three aspects of risk-taking investigated in this study (i.e., probability of engaging in risk-taking behaviors, perceptions of rewards, perceptions of risk) were assessed using the domain-specific risk-taking scale (DOSPERT; Blais & Weber, 2006; Weber, Blais, & Betz, 2002). The DOSPERT assesses (i) the likelihood that subjects will engage in 30 different risky behaviors (e.g., "Investing 5% of your income in a very speculative stock"), (ii) how much benefit subjects think they will receive from engaging in the 30 behaviors, and (iii) how much risk subjects perceive in the 30 behaviors. These three aspects of risk-taking are referred to respectively as *risk-taking*, *benefit perception*, and *risk perception*. For each aspect of risk-taking, subjects respond to the 30 behaviors using seven-point Likert scales (risk-taking: 1 = extremely unlikely, 7 = extremely likely; benefit perception: 1 = no benefits, 7 = great benefits; risk perception: 1 = not at all risky, 7 = extremely risky). Scores for each aspect of risk-taking were computed by averaging responses to the 30 behaviors (M risk-taking = 3.29, $SD = 0.80$, $\alpha = 0.86$; M benefit perception = 2.95, $SD = 0.72$, $\alpha = 0.86$; M risk perception = 4.92, $SD = 0.82$, $\alpha = 0.90$). It is worth noting that the three DOSPERT scales can each be broken apart into five subscales representing specific domains of risk-taking (i.e., ethical, financial, health and safety, recreational, social). Doing so in the present study, however, did not prove to be any more enlightening than analyzing the scales as a whole. Therefore, our analyses focus on the total scores of the three DOSPERT scales.

6. Results

Replicating prior research using the DOSPERT (Blais & Weber, 2006; Weber et al., 2002), risk-taking was significantly predicted by benefit perception ($r = 0.66$, $p < 0.001$) and risk perception ($r = -0.35$, $p < 0.001$). That is, subjects reported higher probability of engaging in risk-taking behaviors to the extent that they perceived greater benefits and less risk stemming from the behaviors.

Consistent with prior research on narcissism and risk-taking (e.g., Lakey et al., 2008), scores on the NPI were positively correlated with risk-taking ($r = 0.30$, $p < 0.001$). Most critical to the present investigation, however, was the finding that narcissism was positively linked to perceived benefits ($r = 0.22$, $p < 0.001$), but unrelated to perceived risks ($r = -0.02$, $p = 0.64$) stemming from engagement in risk-taking behavior.

Like prior research that has examined narcissism and dysfunctional behavior (Foster & Trimm, 2008), the present findings suggest that narcissistic risk-taking is fueled by heightened sensitivity to reward rather than insensitivity to punishment. That is, narcissists are motivated to take more risks because of the rewards that sometimes accompany risky behaviors, not because of any sort of insensitivity to punishment, which of course also sometimes accompanies risky behaviors. To better test this hypothesis, we next conducted a set of analyses to establish whether the link between narcissism and risk-taking was mediated by perceived benefits. We followed Baron and Kenny's (1986) causal steps approach. Accordingly, we have already established that narcissism is significantly linked to the proposed mediator (i.e., perceived benefits) as well as risk-taking. Likewise, we have established that the proposed mediator is also significantly linked to risk-taking. The final step is to simultaneously regress risk-taking onto narcissism and perceived benefits and determine to what degree the association between narcissism and risk-taking has been degraded. Fig. 1 shows the proposed mediation model and results. Controlling for perceived benefits caused the association between narcissism and risk-taking to fall to, $\beta = 0.17$, $t = 5.52$, $p < 0.001$, suggesting partial mediation (benefit perception and risk-taking link remained very strong, $\beta = 0.63$, $t = 20.49$, $p < 0.001$). Note that the large sample size makes even very weak associations statistically significant. We therefore tested whether the extent of the mediation observed was statistically significant using Sobel's test and found that it was, $z = 3.88$, $p < 001$.

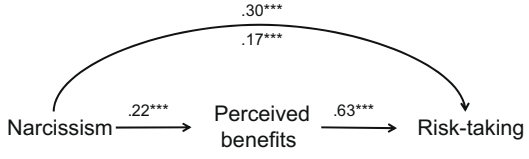

Fig. 1. Partial mediation of narcissism and risk-taking by perceived benefits. Numbers are standardized regression coefficients. Coefficient atop curved arrow is the zero-order correlation between narcissism and risk-taking. Number below curved arrow is the correlation between narcissism and risk-taking while controlling for perceived benefits. ***$p < .001$.

7. Discussion

To summarize, the results of the present study suggest that narcissism positively predicts propensity to engage in risk-taking behaviors as well as perceptions of benefits derived from risky behaviors. In contrast, narcissism does not predict perceptions of risk associated with risk-taking. In short, narcissists appear to appreciate that risky behaviors are risky just as much as less narcissistic individuals. What distinguishes narcissists is their sensitivity to the rewards that sometimes accompany risk-taking. Narcissists perceive greater benefits derived from risky behaviors and this in part fuels their tendency to engage in risk-taking behavior.

7.1. Study implications

The present findings further connect narcissistic personality to the concepts of approach and avoidance motivation. Although approach–avoidance motivation was not directly measured in the present study, perceptions of risk and benefit are reasonably analogous. In at least one respect, risk/benefit perceptions are potentially less confounded than traditionally used purpose-built measures of approach–avoidance motivation (Carver & White, 1994; Torrubia, Avila, Molto, & Caseras, 2001). We have suggested in prior research that correlations between narcissism and approach–avoidance motivation may be confounded to some degree by the tone of the statements used in the scale measures of approach and avoidance motivation (Foster et al., 2009). In particular, some of the statements that appear in measures of approach motivation may be inferred as reflecting self-assuredness and strength (“I’m always willing to try something new if I think it will be fun”; Carver & White, 1994) whereas some of the statements that appear in measures of avoidance motivation may be inferred as reflecting uncertainty and weakness (“I worry about making mistakes”; Carver & White, 1994). Therefore, narcissists may report strong approach motivation and weak avoidance motivation in part because they infer positive connotations from approach motivation scale items and negative connotations from avoidance motivation scale items. This is one of the reasons why it is important to test the UAM using a variety of indicators of approach–avoidance motivation. To date, research has been conducted using indicators of approach–avoidance motivation including social goals (Foster et al., in press) and financial decision-making (Foster et al., 2009, in press). The present study’s focus on benefits and risk associated with risk-taking add to this expanding body of literature.

The present findings also add to a recent albeit growing body of evidence suggesting that reward sensitivity rather than punishment insensitivity may be at the core of behavioral problems associated with narcissism (Foster & Trimm, 2008). According to this view, narcissists engage in behaviors that get them into trouble not because they are insensitive or otherwise fail to appreciate potential problems that might arise from their behaviors. Rather, they engage in potentially dysfunctional behaviors (e.g., they act impulsively and take more risks) because the lure of potential benefits stemming from such behaviors is overwhelming. Put differently, narcissists engage in these potentially problematic behaviors because of a surplus of eagerness, not a deficit of inhibition.

As discussed earlier, the view that narcissistic behavior is more strongly fueled by reward sensitivity rather than punishment insensitivity is consistent with research on psychopathy (Wallace & Newman, 2008), a trait that shares many similarities with narcissism (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). To date, we are not aware of any published research that has experimentally tested links between narcissism and approach–avoidance motivation as has been done with psychopathy. Earlier, we discussed research showing that psychopaths perform normally on tasks that require simple avoidance of punishment, but perform worse than normal on tasks that require both punishment avoidance and reward acquisition (Newman & Kosson, 1986). Similar research would be useful in terms of more firmly establishing narcissism’s connections to approach and avoidance motivation. Psychometric tests on narcissism have thus far produced mixed results. In some studies (Foster et al., 2009, in press), including the present, narcissism appears to be much more strongly characterized by strong approach motivation than weak avoidance motivation. In other studies (Foster & Trimm, 2008), narcissism shows relatively equivalent connections to approach and avoidance motivation. Likewise, in some studies, approach and avoidance motivation both mediate outcomes associated with narcissism, whereas in others only approach motivation mediates. Therefore, it is still unclear whether narcissism should be thought of as characterized by strong approach motivation or strong approach motivation coupled with weak avoidance motivation – and to what extent specific situational variables moderate this description. Again, we think that experimental research may offer more conclusive evidence.

7.2. Limitations, caveats, and future research directions

As is true with most studies, the present set of findings probably generates more questions than answers. Some of these questions are the result of study limitations. The use of a correlational design, of course, precludes us from making causal inferences. For example, because we did not experimentally manipulate perceptions of risks/benefits associated with risky behaviors, we cannot be sure that heightened benefit perceptions actually cause narcissists to do risky activities. Additionally, because survey measures were employed to measure the outcome variables, we cannot be certain that participants in the present study would actually take the risks they reported they would, or take them for the reasons they reported. Therefore, we think future experimental research that examines actual behavior is critical to further our understanding of narcissism, risk-taking, and perceptions of risk/benefit.

We have taken the position that narcissists in the present study reported greater benefit perception and normal risk perception because these perceptions reflect underlying approach–avoidance motivation. A reasonable alternative view is that elevated risk perception might represent to narcissists an additional benefit associated with risk-taking.[3] We often respect and admire individuals who take risks, and generally the riskier the activity the more respect and admiration one receives. Considering this, it makes sense that narcissists, who crave the respect and admiration of others, would engage in behaviors that they themselves perceive as risky. One potential problem with this account, however, is that if narcissists “play up” the risks associated with risky behaviors, we might expect to find a positive association between narcissism and risk perceptions rather than the zero correlation observed in the present study. Regardless, this account certainly merits further research.

Another potential take on the present study’s results is that narcissists appreciate the risks that accompany risky behaviors, but feel that they have the resources necessary to overcome such risks. In essence, this account implies that narcissists are realists when it comes to assessing risks, but are unrealistic in terms of assessing their prowess. This is certainly a reasonable explanation that may account for the pattern of results observed in the present study. Future research that assesses perceived ability may provide an effective test of this interesting hypothesis.

[3] We thank an anonymous reviewer for proposing this account and the one discussed in the next paragraph.

8. Conclusion

The results of the present research suggest that narcissists perceive more benefit, but not less risk stemming from risky behaviors. The enhanced benefit perceived by narcissists partly accounts for their propensity to engage in risk-taking. In general, these results further suggest the utility of applying the concepts of approach–avoidance motivation to the study of narcissism. More specifically, they build upon the recent but growing body of literature suggesting that narcissism is linked to outcomes, especially potentially dysfunctional behavior (e.g., impulsivity, risk-taking), via hyperactive systems that regulate approach motivation (e.g., BAS) rather than hypoactive systems that regulate avoidance motivation (e.g., BIS). According to this view, narcissists engage in behaviors that get them into trouble not because they are insensitive or otherwise fail to appreciate the potential problems that might arise from these behaviors. Rather, they engage in these behaviors because they find irresistible the lure of possible rewards stemming from them. Put simply, narcissists engage in dysfunctional behaviors because of a surplus of eagerness, not a deficit of inhibition.

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