

# Narcissism, Fame Seeking, and Mass Shootings

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## Abstract

For many years, the conventional wisdom was that most acts of aggression and violence stem from insecurities and low self-esteem. The possibility that some mass shooters have low self-esteem, low self-worth, or painful personal insecurities should not lead us to overlook another more likely possibility: that a significant number of mass shooters may have large egos and narcissistic tendencies. This article will (a) describe the psychological concepts of narcissism and narcissistic traits; (b) review previous research on links between narcissism, aggression, and violence; (c) review evidence that some mass shooters exhibit narcissistic traits; and (d) discuss the implications of narcissistic mass shooters for society and the media coverage of their shooting rampages.

## Keywords

narcissism, ego threat, aggression, fame seeking, mass shootings

For many years, the conventional wisdom was that most acts of aggression and violence stem from insecurities and low self-esteem (Baumeister, Bushman, & Campbell, 2000). Despite this apparent consensus, however, neither a compelling theoretical rationale nor a persuasive body of empirical evidence exists to support the overarching assumption that aggressive and violent people usually suffer from low self-esteem. Nevertheless, this view has been extended to school shooters. Following a series of school shootings in the United States, several organizations (including the U.S. Department of Education) prepared lists of alleged warning signs for identifying

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possible school shooters, and many of the lists included low self-esteem (e.g., Lord, 1999; O'Toole, 1999).

However, mass shootings are extremely complex events influenced by multiple psychological factors, often acting together, and of course not all mass shooters are the same (Bushman et al., 2016). The possibility that some mass shooters have low self-esteem, low self-worth, or painful personal insecurities should not lead us to overlook another important possibility: that a significant number of mass shooters may have large egos and narcissistic tendencies.

If that is the case, it would be consistent with many historical examples of aggressive and violent leaders who also seemed to think very highly of themselves. For example, Genghis Khan appeared to have a huge ego, wanted to rule the world, and used military force to acquire the largest contiguous empire in history. He told his people, "With Heaven's aid I have conquered for you a huge empire. But my life was too short to achieve the conquest of the world." Another example is Joseph Stalin, the leader of the former Soviet Union's Communist Party who initiated the "Great Purge" (also called the "Great Terror"), which led to countless deaths. Stalin also appeared to have a big ego; he once compared himself favorably to the Pope, bragging, "The Pope? How many divisions has he got?" Napoléon Bonaparte, the French military and political leader who conquered much of Europe, famously said, "France has more need of me than I have need of France." Similarly, Adolf Hitler seemed to love the crowds of admirers who saluted him and chanted, "Heil Hitler!" And there are many other examples of violent historical figures who may have had big egos and narcissistic tendencies, such as Attila the Hun, Benito Mussolini, and Saddam Hussein.

Of course, narcissism is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for becoming a mass shooter. Not all mass shooters are narcissists, and not all narcissists are mass shooters. Furthermore, even among narcissistic mass shooters, there are many other important factors that help explain these individuals' psychology and behavior. However, understanding the narcissistic elements of their personalities may be an important step forward. This article will (a) describe the psychological concepts of narcissism and narcissistic traits; (b) review previous research on links between narcissism, aggression, and violence; (c) review evidence that some mass shooters exhibit narcissistic traits; and (d) discuss the implications of narcissistic mass shooters for society and the media coverage of their shooting rampages.

## **Narcissism and Narcissistic Traits**

The term narcissism comes from the Greek myth about a handsome young man named Narcissus who fell in love with his own image reflected in the still water. Narcissus said, "I burn with love for me!" In its extreme form, narcissism is a personality disorder defined as a pervasive pattern of grandiosity (in fantasy or behavior), a constant need for admiration, and a lack of empathy (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). In its less extreme form, narcissism is found at subclinical or "normal" levels in the general population. In other words, narcissism can be a personality trait as well as a personality disorder.

The personality trait of narcissism is typically measured using the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Terry, 1988), which contains 40 pairs of forced-choice items such as the pair: “The thought of ruling the world frightens the hell out of me” (nonnarcissistic response) versus “If I ruled the world it would be a better place” (narcissistic response). Shorter self-report measures have also been developed, such as a 16-item version of the NPI (Ames, Rose, & Anderson, 2006), a 4-item version (Jonason & Webster, 2010), and even a Single Item Narcissism Scale (Konrath, Meier, & Bushman, 2014). There is also a narcissism scale for children 7 years and older (Thomaes, Stegge, Bushman, Olthof, & Denissen, 2008). Before about age 7, children tend to have unrealistically positive self-views, and they have difficulty making social comparisons.

The ability to make social comparisons is a critical component of narcissism—narcissists think they are superior to others. Narcissism is also strongly correlated with unstable high self-esteem (Rhodewalt, Madrian, & Cheney, 1998), which has been linked to hostile tendencies (Kernis, Grannemann, & Barclay, 1989). Narcissists typically have very thin skins—they are hypersensitive to criticism and ego threats.

## Links Between Narcissism, Aggression, and Violence

Although there is never complete consensus in any field, the overwhelming majority of studies reject that traditional view that low self-esteem is linked to aggression and violence, and instead support the view that narcissism is linked to aggression and violence. In their comprehensive literature review, Baumeister, Smart, and Boden (1996) cited a broad array of empirical observations that aggressive and violent people often hold highly favorable self-views. They proposed instead that aggression and violence most commonly result from *threatened egotism*, which occurs when favorable self-views are attacked or questioned by others. They concluded that a subset of individuals with favorable self-views (especially inflated and unstable beliefs in personal superiority) are most likely to commit aggressive and violent acts. This subset of individuals appears to have narcissistic tendencies.

Previous research has supported the hypothesis that narcissists are especially likely to aggress against other when they experience an ego threat. In one seminal experiment (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998), participants were given the opportunity to aggress against a person who insulted or praised them or against an innocent third person. The highest aggression levels were shown by narcissists who aggressed directly against the person who insulted them. People with low self-esteem were not more aggressive than others. Importantly, narcissism levels were positively related to how threatening the insult was, which, in turn, was positively related to aggression levels.

There is also a link between narcissism and violent criminal behavior. In another study (Bushman & Baumeister, 2002), researchers gave violent male offenders ( $N = 65$ ) who were serving jail time for murder, assault, rape, or robbery standardized measures of self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1965) and narcissism (Raskin & Terry, 1988). The researchers compared these subjects' self-esteem and narcissism scores with the results from more than 9,200 subjects who were not incarcerated (and presumably far less violent).

The results showed that the violent offenders did not have lower self-esteem than the control group, but they had much higher narcissism scores ( $M = 21.82$ ) than the noncriminal subjects ( $M = 17.09$ ,  $p < .0001$ ,  $d = 0.63$ ). A link between narcissism and violence has also been observed in psychiatric patients (Schulte, Hall, & Crosby, 1994; Svindseth, Nøttestad, Wallin, Roaldset, & Dahl, 2008). Separately, another review of 25 independent samples of adults (Lambe, Hamilton-Giachritsis, Garner, & Walker, 2016) found that narcissism was a significant predictor of violence in clinical and forensic samples, with a 1.2- to 11.5-fold increase in violence. Narcissism was also predictive of aggression in nonclinical samples (mainly college students), especially following ego threat. Narcissistic individuals also have more positive attitudes toward violence and think it is more acceptable (Blinkhorn, Lyons, & Almond, 2016).

Similar effects have been reported for children and adolescents. For example, multiple studies have found a positive relation between narcissism and dating violence (e.g., Liao, Zhao, Liu, & Yang, 2015; Ryan, Weikel, & Sprechini, 2008). Another study found that narcissistic personality disorder symptoms in adolescence predicted violent criminal behavior in adulthood (Johnson et al., 2000). In laboratory experiments, narcissistic children are also more aggressive than others, especially following an ego threat (e.g., Thomaes et al., 2008). Narcissistic children are even more aggressive against their own parents compared with other children (Calvete, Orue, Gamez-Guadix, & Bushman, 2015).

Because of its associations with aggression and violence, narcissism has become part of what is known as the “Dark Triad of Personality” (Paulhus & Williams, 2002), along with psychopathy and Machiavellianism. Psychopaths are callous and unemotional individuals who mainly focus on obtaining their own goals, regardless of whether they hurt others in the process. The term “Machiavellianism” comes from the Italian philosopher and writer Niccolò Machiavelli, who advocated using any means necessary to gain raw political power, including aggression and violence. Taken together, these three dark personality traits embody the lack of empathy, sense of entitlement, and motivation to gain power that appear to facilitate involvement in aggressive and violent acts.

Skeptics might wonder whether the aforementioned evidence that links narcissism, aggression, and violence is directly applicable to mass shooters or not. After all, in terms of their behavior and psychology, mass shooters who attack victims in public places (e.g., a school, workplace, church, movie theater, shopping mall, supermarket, etc.) seem like outliers—they are very different from most other aggressive and violent individuals (Fox & Levin, 1998; Lankford, 2016; Madfis, 2014).

However, it actually seems like mass shooters may be significantly *more likely* to have narcissistic traits than many other violent criminals. For example, in general, most homicides are not premeditated—they are typically crimes of passion, in which an argument turns nasty and someone loses control of their temper—or crimes of escalation, in which someone involved in a robbery or burglary loses control of the situation and ends up killing someone in the heat of the moment (Lankford, 2016). In many of these cases, poor self-control, alcoholic intoxication, drug use, or desires for money or stolen goods seem to play an important causal role—factors that do not seem directly connected to narcissism. By contrast, mass killers typically commit premeditated acts

of mass murder after they have “externalized blame” and failed to take responsibility for what has gone wrong in their lives (Fox & Levin, 1998). Importantly, their crimes are often preceded by major ego threats that would be particularly infuriating for narcissists. One of the catalysts for mass murder is often the offender’s “humiliating loss of face,” such as being fired or laid off from work, suspended or expelled from school, rejected by a significant other or spouse, or struggling with some other crisis (Levin & Madfis, 2009, p. 1295). As reviewed earlier, narcissists tend to be hypersensitive to criticism and likely to respond to ego threats with aggression and violence. This seems like a fitting description of exactly what many mass shooters do.

## **Evidence That Mass Shooters Exhibit Narcissistic Traits**

Narcissism has been cited by some government experts and scholars as a common factor among school shooters. For example, narcissism is included as a risk factor on several lists of risk factors for school shooters, including the Federal Bureau of Investigation list (O’Toole, 1999). Another list includes “displaying narcissistic personality traits” as one of the seven most important risk factors for school shooting shootings, along with more standard risk factors, such as experiencing peer rejection (e.g., bullying), experiencing a significant loss (e.g., college non-admittance), and having a negative school climate (Bondü & Scheithauer, 2011).

Analyses of school shootings often find that the offenders exhibit narcissistic traits as well. For example, a 1999 study of 18 U.S. school shooters found a narcissistic attitude of superiority as a potential risk factor (McGee & DeBernardo, 1999). Another study conducted a decade later found narcissistic tendencies in 14% to 20% of U.S. school shooters (Langman, 2009). Similarly, Helen Smith, a forensic psychologist who has interviewed over 4,000 violent youths (many of them murderers) has testified in court and before state judiciary committees that narcissism is a “distinct personality trait that stands out in school shooters” (Tatum, 1999). Beyond the United States, a 2009 analysis of German school shooters found “evidence of narcissism” in 86% of shooters (6 of 7) selected for close examination (Hoffmann, Roshdi, & Robertz, 2009).

Because mass shootings are so rare, most of the evidence on these offenders is based on intensive case history studies (e.g., Langman, 2017; Newman, Fox, Harding, Mehta, & Roth, 2004) as well as analyses of databases such as the “School-Associated Violent Deaths” maintained by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2014). Below are several examples of individuals who had narcissistic personality disorder or exhibited narcissistic traits, according to the mental health professionals who had intimate knowledge of their cases. Although not all of these offenders killed four or more victims—which is one of several different definitions used for “mass shooting” (Ingraham, 2016)—they may have all attempted to do so. Consider these examples, listed chronologically.

1. On December 14, 1992, a gunman killed two and wounded four others at Simon’s Rock College of Bard in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, before surrendering to the police. A court-appointed psychiatrist said the gunman

suffered from narcissistic personality disorder, which gave him an “overinflated image of his own importance” (Yen, 2000, p. 24).

2. On October 1, 1997, a gunman killed two students and injured seven others at his high school in Pearl, Mississippi. In a court-ordered evaluation, three psychologists independently agreed that the shooter had narcissistic traits (Cloud/Springfield, 2001).
3. On May 9, 2003, a gunman entered Case Western University, in Cleveland, Ohio, where he killed one and wounded two others before being apprehended by a SWAT team. A forensic psychologist who spent over 11 hours with the gunman testified that he had narcissistic personality disorder (State v. Halder, 2007).
4. On July 22, 2011, a gunman dressed as a police officer killed 69 people at a youth camp on the Norwegian island Utøya. The gunman was diagnosed with narcissistic personality disorder, along with several other mental disorders (Faccini & Allely, 2016). Narcissistic tendencies can also be seen in his manifesto, where he rewrites his life history by fabricating his supposed accomplishments (e.g., being part of one of the toughest gangs, being a prominent graffiti artist with works all over the city, being a high-ranking Freemason), and describes himself as a revolutionary leader, an international political leader, and a patriot with a large number of followers.
5. On December 13, 2013, a gunman entered Arapahoe High School that he attended in Centennial, Colorado, armed with a shotgun, a machete, three Molotov cocktails, and 125 rounds of ammunition. He shot one student and tried to burn the school down before committing suicide. His school psychologist believed he was a narcissist (Steffen, 2014).

Other mass shooters have also made explicitly narcissistic statements. For example, on April 20, 1999, two Columbine High School students launched a massacre in their high school in Littleton, Colorado, murdering 13 and wounding 23 before turning the guns on themselves. One of the students was the son of Wayne and Kathy Harris, and the other was the son of Tom and Sue Klebold. Both Harris and Klebold appeared to have narcissistic personality traits. Indeed, as presented in Table 1, several of their comments resemble items on the NPI (Twenge & Campbell, 2003). They also made other narcissistic statements. Harris called his journal “The Book of God.” He wrote “Ich bin Gott” (German for “I am God”) in several yearbooks and in his school planner (Langman, 2014b, pp. 3-4). Harris said, “I would love to be the ultimate judge and say if a person lives or dies—be godlike” (Langman, 2014b, p. 4). Similarly, Klebold said, “I know we’re gonna have followers because we’re so fucking God-like” (Gibbs & Roche, 1999).

Another example of narcissistic statements comes from the incident on April 16, 2007, when a senior at Virginia Tech University launched a massacre, murdering 32 and wounding 17 before killing himself. In a video before the shooting, the killer said in a Manifesto that included photos of him brandishing guns:

**Table 1.** Examples of Narcissistic Personality Inventory Items That Match the Columbine Shooters’ Statements.

Narcissistic Personality Inventory item	Columbine shooters’ statement
“I insist upon getting the respect that is due me.”	“Isn’t it fun to get the respect that we’re going to deserve?”
“I wish someone would someday write my biography.”	“Directors will be fighting over this story; Tarantino . . . Spielberg.”
“I can make anyone believe anything I want them to.”	“I could convince them that I’m going to climb Mount Everest, or I have a twin brother growing out of my back. I can make you believe anything.”
“If I ruled the world it would be a better place.”	“You and me are the ones who should be running the world.”

Note. Adapted from Langman (2014b) and Twenge and Campbell (2003).

Thanks to you I die like Jesus Christ, to inspire generations of the Weak and Defenseless people. . . . Like Moses, I spread the sea and lead my people—the Weak, the Defenseless, and the Innocent Children of all age . . . I set the example of the century for my Children to follow. (Langman, 2014a, p. 7).

He viewed himself as the leader of a revolution, and said: “It will be the start of a revolution” (Langman, 2014a, p. 11).

Another example comes from May 23, 2014, when a gunman killed 6 people and injured 14 others before killing himself near the campus of University of California, Santa Barbara. In a video, the gunman refers to himself as the “perfect guy,” a “supreme gentleman,” the “superior one,” and the “true alpha male” and said, “I’ll be a *god* compared to you” (Garvey, 2014). He also said, “You are animals and I will slaughter you like animals. And I will be a god. Exacting my retribution on all those who deserve it.” These statements seem consistent with someone who has narcissistic traits. One final example comes from the Las Vegas mass shooting on October 1, 2017, that left 58 victims dead and more than 400 wounded. According to the sheriff in charge of that investigation, the perpetrator was a status obsessed narcissist who had recently lost a significant amount of wealth. These financial losses may represent the type of ego threat that has been shown to prompt aggressive responses among other narcissists.

**Narcissistic Mass Shooters: Implications for Society and the Media**

If narcissistic traits indeed drive the psychology and behavior of mass shooters, as the previously reviewed evidence suggests, that has important and far reaching implications. Research has shown that narcissism levels are increasing over time in American college students (Twenge, Konrath, Foster, Campbell, & Bushman, 2008). Several scholars have lamented this fact. For example, they have warned that “Celebrity

Narcissism is Seducing America” (Pinsky & Young, 2008), they have identified what they refer to as “The Narcissism Epidemic” (Twenge & Campbell, 2009), and they have bemoaned our “Culture of Narcissism” (Joiner, 2017). The rise of narcissism over time could provide a partial explanation for why mass shootings seem to be becoming more common over time (King, Bialik, & Flowers, 2015). It would also suggest that if narcissism continues to flourish as a subclinical but influential personality trait of many members of the population, we may see even more narcissistic mass shooters in the years to come.

Given the potential consequences, this would seem like the worst possible time for the media to incentivize narcissistic behavior. For comparison, if pyromaniac tendencies were becoming more common among young people, how dangerous would it be if society started incentivizing and rewarding fire building, arson, and bomb making? The risk is that there appears to be a direct link between the attention-seeking desires of many narcissists and the attention-granting rewards offered by media coverage of their behavior. Narcissists deeply crave attention and admiration from others, and some of the items on the NPI (Raskin & Terry, 1988) specifically assess this tendency, which is often called exhibitionism, with items such as “I like to start new fads and fashion” and “I really like to be the center of attention.” Although narcissists may have the desire to seek many types of attention, the temptation of widespread fame is likely to attract them the most.

Unfortunately, the media provide a stage for narcissistic individuals to become “stars” through extreme acts of violence, such as mass shootings. In an interview following the Newtown school shooting, Harvard Professor Steven Pinker said, “[If] you want to do something that guarantees that your name will be on the lips of everyone in the country, what are your options? There’s only one, and that is kill a lot of innocent people” (NOVA, 2012). As another scholar noted, “mass shootings also generate incredible media attention. Perhaps some perpetrators are not as preoccupied with killing as with fame, with murder serving as the vehicle of their own elevation to what seems to them like celebrity status” (Langman, 2016, p. 1).

These observations are consistent with statements from some of the mass shooters with narcissistic tendencies discussed previously. For example, one of the Columbine killers said “I want to leave a lasting impression on the world” (Associated Press, 2006) and thought directors such as Tarantino and Spielberg would be fighting over the rights to make a movie about their massacre. The Virginia Tech gunman said “The vendetta you have witnessed today will reverberate throughout every home and every soul in America” (Langman, 2014a, p. 15). The Norwegian gunman practiced extensively for the possible interviews he might do following the attacks (Pantucci, 2011). He even hired an organization to cleanse the online profiles of him after the mass shooting, so that his grandiose image would be preserved.

To draw public attention, several mass shooters have also written manifestos and publicized them prior to the shooting. In today’s digital age, one does not have to wait for the FBI or *New York Times* to release the manifesto. One can easily find the manifesto on the Internet, such as on YouTube or Facebook. As one reporter wrote, “This is



becoming a disturbing recurring motif—online manifestos followed by mass shootings” (Weeks, 2011).

Something needs to change. As one scholar has suggested,

Police and the news media should do everything possible to avoid glamorizing mass shooters. Many active shooters seem to be motivated by a desire for fame or recognition, so you will never hear me mention one of these people by name. It’s enough to refer to them as “the attacker” or “the shooter.” (Blair, 2014, p. 7).

The FBI seems to have a similar philosophy. On June 12, 2016, a gunman entered the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Florida, where he killed 49 victims and wounded 58 others. Following the shooting, the FBI deliberately avoided showing photos of the gunman and using his name (Eversley, 2016).

Although most people with narcissistic tendencies will never commit mass shootings, some people with narcissistic tendencies seem addicted to attention and fame. To help address this problem, the amount of media attention given to them should be minimized. The public does not need to know their names or see photos of their faces, and continuing to reward them for committing mass murder may only exacerbate the problem.

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