Are narcissists bad for the workplace: a meta-analytic path analysis of mediators between narcissism and CWB

Abstract

Prior research has established that there is a positive relationship between narcissism and counterproductive work behavior (CWB), but little is known about how or why this relationship exists. The present study explores possibly mediators of the relationship between narcissism and CWB using meta-analytic path analysis. Impulsivity, job constraints, aggression, justice, and job satisfaction are all considered as possible mechanisms through which narcissism is related to increased CWB.

The Narcissism is defined by the *DSM*-V’s Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) as “xxx” (p.). and is associated with “…psychopathy, interpersonal problems and relational dysfunction, substance use and abuse, aggression and sexual aggression, impulsivity, homicidal ideation, and parasuicidal/suicidal behaviors (Pincus and Lukowitsky, 2010: p. 423).” More specifically, narcissism is “…conceptualized as one’s capacity to maintain a relatively positive self-image through a variety of self-, affect-, and field-regulatory processes, and it underlies individuals’ needs for validation and affirmation as well as the motivation to overtly and covertly seek out self-enhancement experiences from the social environment (Pincus and Lukowitsky, 2010: p. 423).”

In the personality literature, narcissism is typically considered a trait, rather than a disorder, and is commonly characterized by three sub-facets: Leadership/authority, grandiose exhibitionism, and entitlement/exploitativeness (Ackerman et al., 2012). Like clinicians, personality psychologists generally measure narcissism using the Narcissism Personality Inventory, although other measures have recently emerged that seem to capture other facets of narcissism, including vulnerable narcissism in particular (Dickinson and Pincus 2003; Miller et al 2010). In the personality literature, narcissism has been linked to other personality traits, of most particular interest being the other two members of the “Dark Triad” of personality: Machiavellianism (Bruk-Lee et al. 2009; Crysel et al. 2013; Kerig and Stellwagen 2010) and psychopathy (Crysel et al. 2013; Jones and Paulhus 2011; Lau and Marsee 2013). Other traits that have been demonstrated as correlates with narcissism include those traits commonly referred to as the Big Five personality traits: openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, neuroticism (Paulhus and Williams 2002); leadership (Grijalva, Harms, Newman, Gaddis, and Fraley 2013; Grijalva 2013); cultural and generational differences (Twenge 2011); and interpersonal emotions/traits, such as empathy (Watson, Grisham, Trotter, and Biderman 1984), romantic relationships (Campbell, Brunell, and Finkel 2006), self-enhancement (Paulhus 1998; Farwell and Wohlwend-Lloyd 1998); and craving approval from others (Baumeister and Vohs 2001).

In addition to the facets studied in the clinical and personality psychology literatures, other correlates with narcissism have been studied in disciplines such as organizational behavior/management, such as justice (interpersonal, distributive, and procedural) (Burton and Hoobler 2011; Penney and Spector 2002) and job satisfaction (Bruk-Lee, Khoury, Nixon, Goh, and Spector 2009; Che 2012). Each of the aforementioned relationships in these three academic disciplines has been studied at length, but to date no study has reviewed the combined effects of all of many these variables and narcissism, and certainly not with narcissism and other particular outcomes such as counterproductive work behaviors.

**Counterproductive work behaviors and narcissism**

Perhaps one of the most interesting relationships between narcissism and some other construct is that with counterproductive work behaviors (CWB). This relationship between narcissism and CWB has become a topic of interest amongst psychologists and organizational behavior (OB) scholars in recent years (Grijalva and Newman, 2014; Penney and Spector 2002, 2005; Spector, Fox, and Domagalski 2006), and additionally, many of the facets and predictors of both narcissism and CWB have been studied together. However, to date, no study exists that meta-analyzes the mediation model which captures narcissism as an independent variable, CWB as a dependent variable, and mediators of the relationship. This study is a comprehensive meta-analysis of the following group of mediators to the relationship between narcissism and counterproductive work behaviors: aggression, organizational constraints, impulsivity, job satisfaction, justice, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy.

CWB are negative volitional extra-role actions or behaviors engaged in by workers with the intention of doing harm to their organization (CWB-Os)\* or some other target(s) within the organization such as customers, colleagues/coworkers, supervisors, or groups (CWB-Is)[[1]](#footnote-1) (Michel and Bowling 2013; Mount, Ilies, and Johnson 2006; Penney and Spector 2002). Examples of CWBs abound, but many studied examples include minor forms such as gossiping, loafing and time/material wasting, work slowdowns/stoppages, and littering, as well as more destructive and harmful forms such as aggression, harassment, theft/sabotage, and threats or acts of physical violence (Mount et al. 2006; Penney and Spector 2002). Some researchers have even gone so far as to include extreme acts of workplace violence, such as assault, rape, arson, and murder in the workplace as forms of CWB (Neuman and Baron 1998).

Many studies have been done which show a positive relationship between narcissism and CWB, such that as narcissism increases, proclivity to engage in CWB increases as well. Postulations as to why this relationship exists include inflated ego, meaning that the narcissist is entitled and selfish, and might feel justified in committing CWBs in order to receive better rewards (Michel and Bowling 2013). Other explanations for the positive relationship between narcissism and CWB include a construct overlap with impulsivity, perceptions of victimization leading to justification of interpersonal CWBs (McCullough, Emmons, Kilpatrick, and Mooney 2003), hypervigilance to threats (Bushman and Baumeister 1998), and threats to sense of self (Stucke and Sporer 2002; Wu and LeBreton 2011). In addition to the commonly-studied relationship between narcissism and CWB, Moscoso and Salgado (2004) showed that a *negative* relationship exists between narcissism and contextual performance, suggesting that, alternatively to CWB, narcissists are less likely to engage in volitional, helpful, extra-role behaviors intended to benefit the organization or some targets within the organization (Moscoso and Salgado 2004).

Much like narcissism, CWB has also been linked to several individual traits and organizational behaviors/perceptions, many which overlap with narcissism. Traits include impulsivity (Maloney, Grawitch, and Barber 2012; Spector 2011), aggression (Ilie et al. 2012; Penney and Spector 2002), justice (Sprung and Jex 2012), job satisfaction (Bolton, Becker, and Barber 2010; Penney and Spector 2005), organizational constraints (Sprung and Jex 2012), Machiavellianism (Giacalone and Knouse 1990; O’Boyle, Jr., Forsyth, Banks, and McDaniel 2012)), and psychopathy (O’Boyle, Jr. et al. 2012). The present study seeks to examine the mediating effect of these indicator variables on the relationship between narcissism and CWB in order to determine the mechanisms through which narcissism is related to increased performance of counterproductive behavior in the workplace.

**Impulsivity and narcissism**

Impulsivity has gone by many names including “impulsiveness,” “sensation seeking,” and “sensitivity to reward” (Eysenck, 1993; Zuckerman, 1994; Gray, 1982). For the purpose of this meta-analysis, we are defining impulsivity in the same manner as Carver: “tendency to act spontaneously and without deliberation” (2005; p. 313, found in Cross, Coppling, & Campbell, 2010). This trait has been linked to several important organizational outcomes including job productivity and counterproductive work behaviors (e.g., Day & Silverman, 1989 and Everton, Mastrangelo, & Jolton, 2005, respectively).

Impulsivity has been found to be a combination of high Extraversion and low Conscientiousness (e.g., Whiteside & Lynam, 2001; Costa & McCrae, 1992a), though it has been linked to Neuroticism as well (Costa & McCrae, 1992b). Psychopathy is correlated with low Conscientiousness and Neuroticism; whereas narcissism and psychopathy are both correlated with extraversion (Palhous & Williams, 2002). It follows that impulsivity has been tied to psychopathy and narcissism (Jones & Palhus, 2011).

Impulsivity has also been linked to CWBs such as verbal slurs (Baumeister, Heatherton, & Tice, 1994) and coercive actions (Hyban & Grush, 1986). Impulsivity has also been linked to aggressive behaviors which can be extended to workplace aggression, a type of CWB (Baron & Richardson, 1994).

**Job Constraints and narcissism**

Another theoretically relevant construct we investigated was job constraints. To define constraints for the purpose of this meta-analysis, we go to Spector and Jex’s (1998) definition of organizational constraints: “situations or things that prevent employees from translating ability and effort into high levels of job performance.” These constraints are a restriction on employees who are attempting to achieve a higher level of performance. Instead of being restricted from doing CWBs, they’re being restricted from excelling, usually in a fashion that would benefit the organization.

Thus, employees who perceive having job constraints would be more likely to perform CWBs (Fox & Spector, 1999). When considering narcissistic employees, this barrier to higher job performance is theorized to be ego-threatening. When a narcissist’s ego is threatened, he has been shown to be more likely to act out with behaviors classified as CWBs. (Penney & Spector, 2002).

**Aggression and narcissism**

The literature on aggression generally characterizes the construct as either aggressive behavior or dispositional aggression, where “…dispositional (i.e., trait) aggression refers to extent to which people are predisposed to hostile cognitions and angry emotion (Michel and Bowling 2013, p. 95).” The Aggression Questionnaire demonstrates that aggression is comprised of the following four sub-facets: physical aggression, verbal aggression, anger, and hostility (Buss and Perry 1992; Michel and Bowling 2013). The General Aggression Model (GAM) proposed by Anderson and Bushman (2002) is popular due to its integrative approach to explaining aggressive behavior as a process involving inputs, routes, and outcomes. The GAM is considered to be better suited for explaining aggressive behaviors due to the fact that it is (a) more “parsimonious” (Michel and Bowling 2013) than the Aggression Questionnaire, (b) it accounts for internal states such as cognitive, affective, and arousal within individuals (Anderson and Bushman 2002), and (c) aggressive behavior is situationally/contextually dependent (Anderson and Bushman 2002; Michel and Bowling 2013).

The role of narcissism in determining aggressive behaviors has received much attention (Barry et al. 2006, 2007; Baumeister et al. 1996; Kerig and Stellwagen 2010; Miller et al. 2009; Rhodewalt and Morf 1998). Consistent with past literature, and given the aforementioned sub-facets of narcissism, the GAM explanation is a conceptually sound means of understanding the internal processes that occur when an interaction between narcissism and dispositional aggression takes place. “Narcissists can manipulate others by outwardly being nice to people in a strategic way or by being overtly forceful and engage in more aggressive behaviors. Narcissists who are also higher in trait aggression are more likely to go with the latter, and thus engage in more aggressive workplace behaviors to attain desired goals (Michel and Bowling 2013, pp. 95-96).”

The relationship between aggression and CWBs is a complicated one, due in large part to the fact that many researchers have either defined CWB in part as aggressive behavior or have used the terms workplace aggression, counterproductive work behavior, and workplace deviance interchangeably (Douglas and Martinko 2001; Neuman and Baron 1997; Spector et al. 2006). The general consensus is that aggressive *behavior* is considered a CWB when the behavior occurs in a workplace context (Spector et al. 2006), while trait aggression is predisposition to performing CWBs under certain circumstances (Anderson and Bushman 2002; Michel and Bowling 2013).

**Justice and narcissism**

Narcissists feel entitled to positions of power, admiration from others, and the respect they feel they are owed. Thus, the way in which procedures are carried out, the way in which resources are allocated, and the way in which decisions are handled is important to the identity of a narcissistic employee. If a narcissist believes a workplace policy is disadvantaging him/her, that resources are being given to other, lesser employees, or that decisions are being made without his/her knowledge or input, then that individual will lack the admiration and support from others that he/she craves. These instances of perceived workplace slights map onto the literature outlining perceptions of injustice in the workplace. The justice literature draws upon social equity theories in order to describe perceptions of fairness in organizations. Three types of justice have been identified in the organizational psychology literature: procedural justice, distributive justice, and interactive justice (Moorman, 1991; Greenberg, 2009). Procedural justice occurs when an employee perceives the organization to use a fair process when making decisions about policies or outcomes; distributive justice occurs when the employee believes that resources are being distributed fairly amongst employees; and interactional justice occurs when employees perceive these outcomes and procedures to be communicated in a fair and respectful manner (Greenberg, 2009).

Organizational justice is frequently proposed as a moderator between individual characteristics and important workplace outcomes and attitudes, such as counterproductive work behavior and organizational commitment. Given that a narcissist’s identify depends on whether or not his/her expectations of how others treat them are satisfied, it is not surprising that researchers have considered the role justice plays in moderating the relationships between narcissism and workplace outcomes. However, the evidence is somewhat mixed. Burton and Hoobler (2011), for instance, found that narcissism interacts with interactional justice perceptions to predict workplace aggression (i.e., when narcissists perceive a lack of interactional justice, they are more likely to be aggressive than when they perceive interactional justice to be present). Other evidence suggests that justice does not moderate the relationship between narcissism and workplace outcomes. Gallagher (2009), found that people low in narcissism were more likely to perform counterproductive computer usage when they perceived unfairness in their organizations, but narcissists performed the same amount of counterproductive computer usage regardless of their perceptions of fairness. The present study will investigate whether or not perceptions of justice act as a mechanism through which narcissism leads to CWB.

**Job satisfaction and narcissism**

One of the most studied job attitudes is job satisfaction, which has been found to be associated to varying degrees with important workplace outcomes such as turnover, withdrawal, CWB, organizational commitment, and job performance (Spector, 1997). It is unclear from the theoretical development of narcissism whether narcissists should have higher or lower job satisfaction compared to people low in narcissism. Michel and Bowling (2013) hypothesized that narcissism should be positively correlated with job satisfaction because narcissists are motivated to see their jobs as highly important and desirable. Yet, Soyer et al. (2001) posited that narcissists have strong feelings of inferiority and are consequently less satisfied with their jobs. In fact, most evidence suggests that there is no relationship either way between narcissism and job satisfaction (Bruk-Lee et al., 2009). While it appears as though job satisfaction is not necessarily associated with narcissism in general, it is unclear whether or not job satisfaction may mediate the relationship between narcissism and CWB. The present study will examine job satisfaction as mediator, where narcissists’ tendency to perform CWB may be buffered by higher, rather than lower, job satisfaction.

**Research Questions**

To contribute meaningfully to the literature, we wish to examine the relationship between narcissism and CWB with the theoretically relevant variables: impulsivity, job constraints, justice, and job satisfaction. There is sufficient evidence presented to show that the literature has found these variables to be linked. Thus, we propose the following research question:

*Research Question 1:* What variables (or combination of variables) mediate the relationship between narcissism and CWB?

We are interested in the mechanisms through which narcissists perform CWBs. Do they perceive job constraints, act impulsively and then perform a CWB? Do they have low job satisfaction and perceive injustice then perform a CWB? We will examine various mediation models to find an answer to that question.

With that question addressed, we will then turn to the moderating relationships.

*Research Question 2:* What variables moderation the mediation model relating narcissism to CWB?

We hope that addressing these questions will provide new research questions and propel the literature forward to find meaningful paths from narcissism to CWB.

**Method**

**Compilation of Studies**

To gather the effect sizes needed for this analysis, we searched the online databases of ERIC and PsycINFO. We used search terms specific to each relationship we were interested in. For example, when searching for impulsivity's relationship with narcissism, we used the search terms: *impulsivity, impulsiveness, planfulness, narcissism,* and *narcissist.* We expanded our search to include dissertations and conference papers when looking for additional unpublished data to limit the file drawer effect on our analysis. These searches included contacting authors of relevant papers that did not include all of the data that we needed in order to ensure that our meta-analysis was as comprehensive as possible.

Our search procedures generated over #### studies, however not all were relevant to this paper. When processing the papers, we only found that ### were usable for this meta-analysis. Combining the samples from the various sources, we had a total of ### independent samples comprised of ###### people. These sources were used to investigate the various relationships of interest. Table 1 provides a list of studies we included.

The studies included met the following criteria: the variables for which data was utilized in the meta-analysis included all necessary statistics (correlations and reliability) and included enough information about the measurement of these variables to ensure that the operationalization of the variables fit the conceptualization of the variable for this meta-analysis. For example, we included low planfulness as a variable within the impulsivity construct due to its nearly identical conceptualization. Also, we included job autonomy within the job constraints construct under the same reasoning.

**Meta-Analytic Techniques**

In order to fill our correlation matrix, we had to perform several meta-analyses of our own. Each pair of variables needed to have a meta-analytic correlation. Thus, our meta-analysis required the completion of several other meta-analyses, following the Hunter and Schmidt technique (1990), if a meta-analytic correlation was not present in the literature. Thus, we have ## meta-analyses completed in order to investigate our research questions.

To analyze our path model, we used the meta-analytic structural equation model (Viswesvaran & Ones, 1995). We had to address the main three problems with this technique: what to do if there is a correlation missing and what do we do when there are varying sample sizes when computing the standard errors for the path coefficients? To address these questions, we simply did not include a variable unless there was sufficient literature such that there was already a meta-analyzed relationship with all the other variables included or such that we could conduct a meta-analysis of the missing relationships ourselves, as described previously. To address the sample size problem, we used the harmonic mean (k/((1/N1)+(1/N2)+…+(1/Nk))) where k is the number of study correlations and N is the sample sizes for each of the studies. This was the technique suggested by Viswesvaran and Ones (1995).

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1. Mount et al 2006 call counterproductive work behaviors “CPBs”, organizational counterproductive work behaviors “CPB-Os”, and individually-targeted counterproductive work behaviors “CPB-Is” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)