

Narcissism and the Motivation to Engage in Volunteerism

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Abstract Two studies investigated the extent to which narcissism was associated with volunteer motivation. Study 1 investigated a sample of United Way volunteers and Study 2 examined a sample of college student volunteers. As hypothesized, results found that narcissists tend to volunteer for self-interest rather than for humanitarian values. Results remained significant even while controlling for self-esteem (Studies 1 and 2) and empathic concern (Study 2). Discussion involves the current climate for volunteerism, which includes mandated volunteering as part of high school graduation and other requirements.

Keywords Volunteer · Narcissism · Entitlement · Motivation

What motivates someone to volunteer? The idea of contributing time and energy without compensation has inspired both researchers and organizations to better understand volunteerism. A recent survey conducted by the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS 2012) found that 64 million Americans volunteered in 2011, which equates to 7.9 billion hours of unpaid work. Trends since 1974 reveal the volunteer rate to be at a 30-year high (CNCS 2006a), which might suggest that people are more caring, empathic, or selfless than ever before. However, although empathy predicts volunteering (e.g., Unger and Thumhuri 1997), a meta-analysis showed empathic concern to be decreasing between 1979 and 2009 (Konrath et al. 2011). Therefore, this peak in volunteerism is unlikely to be due to greater empathy and/or compassion for others.

Another explanation is that the climate for volunteering has changed such that more individuals volunteer due to external pressures, such as school or job requirements, than

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they did before. For example, one of the major age groups driving the volunteer rate are teens aged 16 to 19 years old (CNCS 2006a), whose rate of volunteering has almost doubled, from a rate of 13.4 % in 1989 to 26.4 % in 2006 (CNCS 2006a). Although some teens may be driven to volunteer because of a desire to serve, high school students have recently faced more requirements from their schools, resulting in “involuntary volunteering”—volunteering because of an imposed requirement (Planty et al. 2006). Additionally, community service has been ranked highly in college admissions considerations (Do Something 2011). Thus, teens’ volunteerism may simply serve to get an edge on the competition.

College students may also be facing increasing pressure to volunteer, which might be reflected in a college student volunteer rate that is growing faster than the overall rate of volunteering (CNCS 2006b). Although college students might currently be volunteering more than in the past, they simultaneously focus their life goals around obtaining money, fame, and image rather than affiliation, community, and altruistic work (Twenge et al. 2010, 2012). Taken together, it seems unlikely that college students’ record rate of volunteerism is related to greater humanitarianism. Instead, volunteerism may reflect self-serving motivations such as service-learning requirements or getting a competitive edge when applying for jobs or graduate school.

One of the most common personality characteristics associated with self-serving motivation is narcissism. We believe that when narcissists volunteer, they do so for self-serving reasons. Before explaining why, we first detail an overview of narcissism.

An Overview of Narcissism

Narcissism refers to individuals who have inflated self-views, feelings of entitlement, and beliefs that they are better, unique, or more special than others (Raskin and Terry 1988). Narcissists also tend to be selfish, experience less guilt and empathy, and show disinterest in intimate relationships (e.g., Brunell et al. 2011; Watson et al. 1984).

According to Twenge and Campbell (2009), the current generation is more narcissistic than ever before due to society’s changing value system that focuses on extrinsic values such as status and wealth rather than on intrinsic reward or desire to help others. The authors claim that this “epidemic” has long-term consequences that are damaging to the self and to society due to the promotion of an unrealistic and unattainable lifestyle. In a cross-temporal meta-analysis, mean narcissism scores, as measured by the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin and Terry 1988), increased 30 % among college student samples between 1979 and 2006 (Twenge et al. 2008), suggesting that young people currently endorse more narcissistic traits than previous generations.

Although narcissism is associated with benefits to the self, such as a competitive edge (Campbell et al. 2005) and emergent leadership (Brunell et al. 2008), it is also associated with several costs—to the self *and* to others. Narcissists overestimate their abilities (Gabriel et al. 1994; Paulhus et al. 2003), and make volatile, risky decisions (Chatterjee and Hambrick 2007). Narcissism is associated with workplace deviance (Judge et al. 2006), less effective leadership (Neivicka et al. 2011), and even white collar crime (Blickle et al. 2006), making it likely that narcissistic involvement in volunteer organizations could produce negative outcomes.

Volunteer Motivation

One way to examine volunteer motivation is to use a functional analysis, which investigates the reasons, purposes, plans, and goals that underlie people's behavior (Snyder 1993). That is, although behavior may be the same (i.e., people are volunteering), the underlying motivational processes and the functions served through behavior may manifest themselves differently (Clary et al. 1998). Clary and colleagues propose six functions that can be served through volunteerism. The *values* function expresses altruistic or humanitarian concerns for others, as the concern for others is often a characteristic of those who volunteer (Anderson and Moore 1978). The *understanding* function enables one to obtain new learning experiences or provide the opportunity to employ one's knowledge, skills, and abilities that might otherwise go unused. The *social* function concerns interpersonal relationships such as expanding one's social network or meeting new people with similar interests. The *career* function involves resume-building or obtaining other benefits (e.g., acquiring skills). The *protective* function entails the self-protection of the ego, by avoiding guilt and/or other negative feelings. Lastly, the *enhancement* function allows for enhancing mood, boosting self-esteem, or developing personally. With these functions in mind, Clary et al. (1998) developed the Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI) to assess volunteer motivation.

To the best of our knowledge, no study has examined the link between narcissism and volunteer motivation. In the present studies, we assessed the extent to which narcissism was associated with volunteer functions. We expected a positive relationship between narcissism and the career and social functions inasmuch as when narcissists volunteer, they are likely to do so as a means to some other ends, such as building a resume or expanding a social network. We expected a negative relationship between narcissism and the values function because narcissists tend to lack empathy and altruistic concerns. Because narcissists over-rely on self-enhancement strategies to inflate their egos (e.g., Hepper et al. 2010; Vazire and Funder 2006), we expected a positive association between narcissism and the enhancement and protective functions. We had no a prior hypothesis concerning the understanding function.

Study 1: United Way Volunteers

Method

Participants

Participants were 75 male and 112 female volunteers for the United Way's "Day of Caring" event that took place in North-Central Ohio. Most of the participants self-identified as White (91.5 %) and were 43.63 years old on average ($SD=13.20$).

Materials and Procedure

During the "kickoff" of the United Way's Day of Caring, a day in which many volunteers organize to work for local non-profit organizations, participants were asked

to complete a survey about their personalities and why they volunteer. The survey was kept brief to avoid taking too much time away from volunteer activities.

First, volunteers completed a shortened version of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (Ames et al. 2006), which is a 16-item measure of narcissism created for use when time pressure or respondent fatigue is a concern. Respondents choose between two response options (e.g., “I think I am a special person” versus “I am no better or worse than most people”). Narcissistic response options are assigned scores of 1 whereas non-narcissistic responses are scored as 0. Scores are then summed; higher scores indicate higher narcissism ($\alpha=.75$, $M=3.75$, $SD=3.05$).

Second, as a control variable, participants completed the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg 1965), a commonly used measure of self-esteem. A sample statement includes: “I feel that I have a number of good qualities.” Individuals use 5-point scales (1=“strong disagreement” and 5=“strong agreement”) to indicate the extent to which they agree with each statement. Overall scores are summed across the ten statements, with higher scores representing higher self-esteem ($\alpha=.83$, $M=42.95$, $SD=5.36$).

Respondents completed the 30-item VFI (Clary et al. 1998), which is a reliable and valid measure of volunteer motivation. Each function consists of six items; 7-point scales indicate the extent to which each item is a reason they volunteer (1=“not at all true” and 7=“very true”). Each function score is computed by summing the scores for the six items of each subscale. Sample items, α , means, and standard deviations are presented in Table 1.

Results

First, given the age range in this sample, a correlation between narcissism and age was computed. Narcissism and age were not confounded ($r=-.11$, $p=.11$).

To examine the extent to which narcissism was associated with volunteer motives, a series of stepwise regression analyses were computed, with gender and age entered in the first step and narcissism and self-esteem entered at the second step. Each volunteer function was entered as an outcome variable. See Table 2 for a summary of results.

We hypothesized a positive relationship between narcissism and the Career, Social, Enhancement and Protective functions. Results revealed positive associations between narcissism and Career, Social, and Protective functions, suggesting that those with

Table 1 Means, standard deviations, and sample items of volunteer functions

Volunteer function	Sample item	α	M	SD
Career	Volunteering can help me get my foot in the door at a place where I'd like to work	0.85	15.30	5.36
Social	My friends volunteer	0.81	20.58	7.24
Values	I am concerned about those less fortunate than myself	0.86	28.35	5.87
Understanding	I can learn more about the cause for which I am working	0.84	24.94	6.61
Enhancement	Volunteering makes me feel important	0.79	22.80	6.73
Protection	No matter how bad I've been feeling, volunteering helps me to forget	0.84	15.78	7.43

Each function is computed by summing the scores for the six items on each subscale

Table 2 Study 1: Variables predicting volunteer functions of United Way volunteers

		VFI dimensions					
		Career	Social	Values	Understanding	Enhancement	Protect
Variables:							
Step 1	Sex	0.03	-0.09	0.31***	0.21**	0.12	0.12
	Age	-0.28***	0.03	0.17*	-0.02	-0.07	0.01
R ²		0.07	0.01	0.10	0.04	0.01	0.01
Step 2	Sex	0.08	-0.04	0.27***	0.18*	0.15 [#]	0.16*
	Age	-0.24**	0.06	0.10	-0.06	-0.04	0.09
	NPI short	0.16*	0.17*	-0.16*	-0.12	0.11	0.16*
	Self-esteem	-0.11	-0.07	0.24***	0.11	-0.06	-0.29***
R ²		0.09	0.04	0.16	0.06	0.03	0.08

Values represent betas (β) from regression analyses. [#] $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. For sex, 1 = male and 2 = female

higher narcissism reported greater career, social, and protective motives than those with lower narcissism. Contrary to our hypothesis, narcissism was not associated with the Enhancement function.

We also hypothesized that narcissism would be associated with lower endorsement of the Values function. Results supported this hypothesis; higher narcissism scores were negatively associated with the endorsement of the Values function.

We made no a priori hypothesis concerning narcissism and the Understanding function. Results suggest no relationship between these two variables.

We further examined the associations between self-esteem and the volunteer functions and found a positive association between self-esteem and the Values function and a negative association between self-esteem and the Protective function. Those with higher self-esteem were more likely to volunteer for humanitarian reasons and less likely to volunteer to protect their egos. Self-esteem was not a significant predictor of the remaining volunteer functions.

Regression analyses revealed that women were more likely than men to endorse the Values, Understanding, and Protective functions. Lastly, age was a significant predictor of the career function; younger people were more likely to endorse career motives than older people.

Discussion

Results from Study 1 suggest that in a sample of volunteers, narcissism was a relevant variable in one's motives to engage in volunteer work. As predicted, narcissists used volunteer opportunities to enhance the self—such as by gaining career experience, social networking, or purging themselves of negative emotions. They were significantly less likely to volunteer to help the less fortunate. These findings emerged despite a sample of volunteers with relatively low NPI scores (cf. Ames et al. 2006; NPI scores ranged between 4.8 and 6.4 in younger, college student samples). In our sample, narcissism failed to predict Enhancement motivations, contrary to prediction,

suggesting that volunteering is not a means that narcissists use to “feel good” about themselves.

In addition, age was a relevant factor in understanding volunteerism, with younger volunteers reporting volunteering due to the Career function and older volunteers reporting volunteering due to the humanitarian values. This finding supports Twenge et al.’s (2012) claim that the current generation has different values that underlie their behavior than do older generations (e.g., “Baby Boomers”). However, it is important to note the cross-sectional design of our study. Although younger volunteers may be more self-focused than other-focused, our sample reflects volunteers who are at different life stages, with younger people pursuing career success and older people having established careers already.

One question that remains concerns which facets of narcissism are associated with volunteerism. Although the NPI is the most commonly-used measure of narcissism in the general population, it does not adequately assess the facets of narcissism because of problems with psychometric properties, such as low subscale reliabilities (e.g., Brown et al. 2009; Brunell et al. 2013). Furthermore, the NPI does not fully encompass narcissistic characteristics of exploitativeness, grandiosity, and entitlement (Brown et al. 2009; Brunell et al. 2013). For these reasons, in Study 2 narcissism was measured using scales assessing entitlement, grandiosity, and exploitativeness instead of using the NPI. We sought to determine the extent to which these aspects of narcissism predict volunteer motivation beyond empathy and self-esteem. Our choice to examine empathy, in particular, stems from research that suggests (a) narcissists lack empathy (Watson et al. 1984) and (b) empathy for others is associated with volunteerism (Unger and Thumhuri 1997). Although we predicted positive relationships between narcissism and the career, social, protective, and enhancement functions and a negative relationship between narcissism and the values function, our examination of how the facets of narcissism predicted volunteer motivation was exploratory in nature.

Study 2: College Student Volunteers

Method

Participants

One hundred thirty male and One hundred sixty two female undergraduate students at a small regional campus of a Midwestern University participated in exchange for partial course credit. The average age of participants was 19.29 years ($SD=3.39$), and the majority of participants self-identified as Caucasian (81.4 %).

Materials and Procedure

Participants were asked to complete questionnaires that included the three key aspects of narcissism: grandiosity, entitlement, and exploitativeness. The Narcissistic Grandiosity Scale (Rosenthal et al. 2007) consists of 16 grandiose adjectives (e.g., “superior”) followed by 7-point scales (1=“not at all” and 7=“extreme”) that participants use to indicate the degree the adjectives were self-descriptive. Total scores are

computed by summing scores across the 16 items; higher scores indicate greater levels of grandiosity ($\alpha=.94$; $M=54.25$, $SD=17.66$).

The Psychological Entitlement Scale (Campbell et al. 2004) consists of nine statements in which participants use 7-point scales (1=“strong disagreement,” 7=“strong agreement”) to rate the degree to which these statements reflect their self-beliefs. A sample statement includes, “I deserve more things in my life.” Total scores are computed by summing scores across the nine items; higher scores indicate greater levels of entitlement ($\alpha=.85$; $M=30.25$, $SD=10.13$).

The Interpersonal Exploitativeness Scale (Brunell et al. 2013) assesses the extent to which people take advantage of others. Participants rate their agreement or disagreement with six statements using 7-point scales (1=“strong disagreement,” 7=“strong agreement”). A sample statement includes, “Vulnerable people are fair game.” Total scores are computed by summing scores across the six items; higher scores indicate greater levels of exploitativeness ($\alpha=.88$; $M=13.91$, $SD=7.67$).

In addition, we asked participants to complete the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg 1965; $\alpha=.82$; $M=38.48$, $SD=6.13$) and the empathic concern subscale of the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (Davis 1983), which presents participants with 7 scenarios (e.g., “When I see someone being taken advantage of, I feel kind of protective towards them”) and then asks how well the scenarios describe them (1=“does not describe me well” and 5=“describes me very well”). Higher scores indicate greater levels of empathy ($\alpha=.76$; $M=26.88$, $SD=4.48$).

Participants were then asked to indicate whether or not they had volunteered during the past 12 months. Participants who reported volunteering ($n=214$) were asked to rate the 30-item VFI (Clary et al. 1998; lowest $\alpha=.80$; $M_{\text{CAREER}}=21.02$, $SD=7.64$; $M_{\text{SOCIAL}}=19.70$, $SD=6.71$; $M_{\text{VALUES}}=26.79$, $SD=6.14$; $M_{\text{UNDERSTAND}}=26.02$, $SD=5.54$; $M_{\text{ENHANCE}}=23.83$, $SD=6.25$; $M_{\text{PROTECT}}=19.85$, $5=7.28$)

Results

A series of stepwise regression analyses were computed, with gender and age entered at the first step. Psychological entitlement, grandiosity, exploitativeness, self-esteem and empathy were entered at the second step. Each form of motivation from the VFI served as an outcome variable. See Table 3 for results.

For both the Career and Social functions, psychological entitlement was a significant positive predictor: those who scored higher on entitlement reported greater career and social motives than those who scored lower on entitlement. Age was a significant negative predictor of the Career and Social functions: younger people were more likely to endorse these functions than older people. No other variable was statistically significant in either model.

For the Values function, participants’ sex and empathic concern were positive and significant variables. Women reported greater endorsement than men of the values function, and those who scored higher on empathic concern also reported greater endorsement than those who scored lower on empathic concern. No other variables were significant.

For the Understanding function, empathic concern and exploitativeness were positive predictors. Those who scored higher on empathic concern and exploitativeness

Table 3 Study 2: Variables predicting volunteer functions of college students

		VFI dimensions					
		Career	Social	Values	Understanding	Enhancement	Protect
Variables:							
Step 1	Sex	0.07	-0.05	0.29***	0.17*	0.18*	0.21**
	Age	-0.22**	-0.20**	0.005	-0.14*	-0.16*	-0.22**
	R ²	0.04	0.04	0.09	0.05	0.05	0.09
Step 2	Sex	0.06	-0.07	0.20**	0.11	0.10	0.14*
	Age	-0.24***	-0.20**	0.02	-0.11	-0.14*	-0.18*
	Exploitativeness	0.12	0.11	0.07	0.20*	0.09	0.07
	Entitlement	0.30***	0.18*	0.02	0.01	0.13	0.09
	Grandiosity	0.03	-0.02	-0.04	-0.01	-0.05	-0.02
	Rosenberg	-0.09	-0.08	0.02	0.02	0.15*	-0.30***
	Empathic concern	0.07	0.11	0.47***	0.40***	0.35***	0.21*
	R ²	0.16	0.10	0.27	0.17	0.14	0.21

Values represent betas (β) from regression analyses. * $p \leq .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. For sex, 1=male and 2=female

were more likely to endorse the Understanding function than those lower on these variables.

Three variables emerged as significant predictors of the Enhancement function: age, empathic concern, and self-esteem. Age was a negative predictor of the Enhancement function; younger people reported greater enhancement motives. Empathic concern and self-esteem were positive predictors of the Enhancement function; those who scored higher on self-esteem, and those who scored higher on empathic concern reported greater enhancement motives.

Sex and self-esteem were significant negative predictors of the Protective function. Younger people and those with lower self-esteem were more likely to endorse the protective function than those with higher self-esteem. Gender was a significant positive predictor, suggesting that women were more likely to endorse the Protective function than men were.

An additional analysis using logistical regression was computed to assess if sex, age, self-esteem, empathic concern, and the facets of narcissism predicted the likelihood of having reported volunteering over the past year. The only predictor that was significant was Psychological Entitlement ($\beta = .11$, $p < .05$), indicating that those who reported more entitlement were less likely to report volunteering over the past year.

Discussion

Study 2 results suggest that entitlement may be the facet that drives the association between narcissism and volunteerism. Those who scored higher on psychological entitlement tended to report volunteering to build their resumes or to engage with their social network. This suggests that volunteer work, for narcissists, serves as a means to achieve status, pave a path for a career, or serve some other agentic goal.

Also of interest was that exploitativeness was associated with the understanding function. Those who scored higher on exploitativeness reported that when they volunteer, they do so to utilize their under-used skills or to learn more about the world. Thus, more exploitative people appear to be motivated by self-interest and gain than concern for others.

People with lower self-esteem were more likely to engage in the protective function. It appears that volunteer work serves the purpose of helping people with low self-esteem feel better about themselves through service to others. People who scored higher on empathic concern, by contrast, appear to be motivated more by concern for others or the opportunity to use their knowledge, skills, and time to serve others. In other words, it is concern for others that drives those with higher empathy to volunteer rather than concern for the self.

An interesting and unexpected finding of Study 2 was that self-esteem and the facets of narcissism did not predict the enhancement function, but empathic concern was associated with this function. Those who scored higher on empathic concern reported that volunteer work boosts their mood, and helps them grow personally. One possible reason for this finding is that those who experience greater empathic concern might also experience more sadness and pain from seeing others in need (e.g., Dovidio 1984). Consequently, they might feel better when they volunteer because they help improve the situation (e.g., relieve the distress of others). Additional research is needed to examine the link between empathic concern and the Enhancement function.

General Discussion

Although previous research had found that those with higher self-esteem invest more time in volunteer work (Thoits and Hewitt 2001), and volunteering appears to increase self-esteem (Brown et al. 2012; Thoits and Hewitt 2001), no research had yet to examine the association between self-esteem, narcissism and the motivation to volunteer. Across two studies, the present results indicated that narcissism was associated with volunteer motives, namely the functions that serve the self rather than the functions that serve others. In addition, the link between narcissism and volunteerism appears to be driven by psychological entitlement and partly by exploitativeness. Those who felt more entitled appeared to be more interested in volunteering as a means of building a network for future career success than to help others, while those who were more exploitative were more likely to volunteer to use their skills or increase their learning. Those with higher self-esteem, by contrast, appeared motivated by humanitarian concerns and significantly less motivated by self-interest. However, the present findings offer some promise in that individuals tended to endorse functions that reflected care for others, or the opportunity to apply skills to help others, to a greater extent than functions that assessed self-interest. This information should be reassuring for volunteer organizations that rely heavily on volunteers for success and continuation of their goals.

There are several potential limitations of these studies. First, these studies relied on self-report, and a potential bias could have been a concern for social desirability. In addition, in Study 2, the volunteerism measure asked participants to reflect on their volunteerism over the past 12 months. Volunteers may not have remembered why they chose to volunteer, which could have influenced their responses. Also, volunteers may

have worked on multiple occasions, in which case it is unclear to which time they reported their motivation. In contrast to this weakness of Study 2, a particular strength is that Study 1 examined a sample of volunteers on the day they were volunteering, which offered greater accuracy in reporting their motivation. The samples from Study 1 and Study 2 also differed in demographic background. Study 2 was a sample of college students who may have volunteered over the course of 12 months because of high school graduation requirements or service components of college-level classes. For this reason, it is possible that these participants engaged in more “involuntary volunteering” than the United Way volunteers.

Future research should go beyond *why* individuals choose to volunteer and examine what impact narcissistic individuals have *when* they volunteer. For example, how well do narcissists perform in volunteer organizations? Are they rated favorably by their supervisors? Do they do good work, make good decisions, and behave ethically? Are narcissists participating in long-term volunteer service or are they participating in short-term, episodic volunteering?

In contrast to narcissism, when people experience empathy, they tend to engage in prosocial behavior (e.g., Batson et al. 1987). However, if people lack empathy and are focused on the self instead, how will they contribute to the needs of others or the community? With the increase in narcissism and decrease in empathic concern among today’s youth, combined with the increase in “involuntary” volunteering, it is important to monitor these trends and their impact on the nature of volunteer motivations and performance.

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