

# Research debunks belief about narcissism

April 6 2015, by Angela Carey

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Excessive use of first-person singular pronouns, or 'I-talk,' is not clearly linked to a sense of self-importance and an overabundance of self-focus.

Contrary to popular belief, excessive use of first-person singular pronouns such as "I" and "me" does not necessarily indicate a narcissistic tendency, according to a research team led by psychologists from the University of Arizona.

"There is a widely assumed association between use of first-person singular pronouns—what we call 'I-talk'—and narcissism, among laypeople and scientists, despite the fact that the empirical support for this relation is surprisingly sparse and generally inconsistent," said Angela Carey, a third-year doctoral candidate in psychology at the UA and lead author of the study, which was published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

Narcissists have an unrealistic sense of superiority and self-importance and an overabundance of self-focus, said Matthias Mehl, a UA psychology professor and a co-author of the study. Therefore, it would be reasonable to assume that narcissists would be more prone to I-talk, Mehl said.

Early testing of this hypothesis was conducted at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1988 and confirmed the association, but it consisted of only 48 participants. Since then, scientific studies have been unable to consistently replicate the finding. Because it appears to be such a pervasive belief in modern society, the researchers felt it was important to give the hypothesis a rigorous scientific vetting.

Carey and Mehl teamed with researchers from four other universities in the U.S. and two in Germany to recruit more than 4,800 people for the study (67 percent were female, mostly undergraduate students). Participants were asked to engage in one of six communications tasks in which they wrote or talked about themselves or an unrelated topic. Researchers also scored the participants for narcissism using five different narcissism measures, including the common 40-item Narcissistic Personality Inventory. Their narcissism score was then compared with their use of first-person singular pronouns in the communication tasks.

The researchers could find no association between pronoun use and narcissism. When they analyzed data by gender, they found that men had a slightly higher correlation than women, but neither was statistically significant nor practically meaningful.

"The most interesting finding is that the results did not vary much across two different countries, multiple labs, five different narcissism measures and 12 different samples," Mehl said. "We were surprised by how consistent of a near-null finding it was."

Identifying narcissists is important, Carey said, because over time their grandiosity, self-focus and self-importance can become socially toxic and can have negative consequences on relationships.

"The next question, of course, is how else, if not through I-talk, [narcissism](#) is revealed through language," she said. "We are working on this question in a follow-up study using the same data."

Provided by University of Arizona

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