

Surprise: Narcissists are not always risk-takers

October 7 2015, by Jeff Grabmeier

The results surprised Amy Brunell, lead author of the study and associate professor of psychology at The Ohio State University at Mansfield.

"I thought that narcissists, given that they are impulsive and have high opinions of themselves, would take bigger risks. That's what other research would have suggested," Brunell said.

"But any association between narcissism and risk-taking that we found was very small and essentially meaningless."

One explanation for the discrepancy may be the fact that many of the studies linking narcissism and risk-taking were based on self-reports: Essentially, narcissists saying that they took risks in certain situations.

But self-reports may not be the best way to measure risk-taking for this group, Brunell said.

"When they're asked, narcissists may brag about taking big risks because they're showing off," she said. "But their own behavior in our experiments doesn't support their claims about being risk-takers."

Brunell conducted the study with Melissa Buelow, assistant professor of psychology at Ohio State at Newark. The results appear online in the *Journal of Behavioral Decision Making* and will be published in a future print edition.

The three experiments involved a total of 936 undergraduate students. Depending on the study, the researchers evaluated the participants with two different measures of narcissism. In one study, they also looked specifically at three narcissistic traits - grandiosity, entitlement and exploitativeness, to determine if any of them might have links to risky decision-making.

Participants completed a variety of decision-making tasks to measure risk-taking. In one task, the students played a computer game in which they pumped up 30 balloons, earning 5 cents for each pump until they decided to stop. But if the balloon popped, they lost all the money.

In the Iowa Gambling Task, participants were presented with four virtual decks of cards on a computer screen. With each card they chose, they won or lost money. Some decks were "good" decks in which they won more money and some decks were stacked with more losing cards.

In these and other tasks, the researchers wanted to know how much people who score high on narcissism were willing to risk compared to those who scored lower.

There were some slight differences in how people responded. For example, people who scored high on grandiosity (having an inflated sense of self-importance) were more likely to take risks in one of the experiments.

But none of the differences was large enough to have real practical significance, Brunell explained.

While there had been many self-report studies linking narcissism and risk-taking, Brunell said she could find only two other published papers that used lab experiments to examine whether there is such a link.

That may be because there is a bias in academic publishing toward publishing significant results, she said. Not many studies are published that find no linkages between two variables, as this study does.

"But in this case it is important to know that there is no relationship between [narcissism](#) and risky decision-making because it contradicts other research that used different methods," Brunell said.

However, she cautioned that this research doesn't mean that [narcissists](#) shun risky decision-making in all situations. For example, this study included college students, who may not always act the same way as older adults.

Also, in this research, the participants were taking risks that could hurt only themselves.

"Narcissists may act differently in situations where the [risks](#) of their decisions are borne at least somewhat by other people," she said.

More information: *Journal of Behavioral Decision Making* , onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/1002/1099-0771

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