Narcissism and Negotiation: Economic Gain and Interpersonal Loss

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Successful negotiation involves satisfying two seemingly contradictory goals: maximizing personal gain while forming a positive interpersonal relationship with negotiation counterparts. We hypothesized that individuals high on narcissism would gain economically but loose interpersonally in a negotiation. Seventy MBA students engaged in a negotiation simulation, completed a measure of narcissism, reported their emotional states, evaluated their negotiation counterparts’ emotional states, and evaluated how much they trusted and liked their counterparts. Consistent with the hypothesis, results revealed that in negotiations, narcissistic personality characteristics can lead to economic gain but are accompanied by interpersonal loss.

Negotiations are ubiquitous: Friends negotiate about which restaurant to eat at; couples decide which automobile to purchase; political leaders seek resolutions to international conflicts. Negotiations often consist of two simultaneous but (arguably) contradictory goals: maximization of personal payoffs and minimization of partner conflict (Thompson, 1990). Successful achievement of the first goal requires the willingness to exploit a counterpart’s weaknesses for personal gain, whereas achievement of the second goal requires understanding and acknowledging the counterpart’s position (Karrass, 1992; Mnookin, Peppet, & Tulumello, 2000). Individuals high on narcissism, notoriously self-focused, entitled, and insensitive, can bring complicated dynamics into the negotiation process. Specifically, their lack of empathy and sense of entitlement may help them engage in weakness seeking and exploitation, which are helpful for achieving the goal of personal gain. This gain, however, is perhaps at the expense of building a trusting and positive relationship with their negotiation counterparts. The goal of the current research was to test exactly that hypothesis: In a one-shot two-party negotiation, increases in narcissism will predict better economic outcomes but worse interpersonal outcomes.

DEFINITION OF ECONOMIC AND INTERPERSONAL SUCCESS IN NEGOTIATION

There are two ways to define negotiation success: economic and interpersonal (Thompson, 1990). Economic
success focuses on outcomes and does not typically include the social processes involved in a negotiation. In contrast, interpersonal success emphasizes negotiators’ perceptions of the negotiation and each other, both of which are important for building working relationships. Current theorizing about optimal negotiators focuses on the successful achievement of both: maximization of economic gains and development of reciprocal social capital (Bazerman, Curhan, & Moore, 2001; Mnookin et al., 2000; Pruitt & Carnevale, 1993; Thompson, 1990).

ARE NARCISSISTS BETTER NEGOTIATORS? WHAT DO WE KNOW SO FAR?

Some research suggests that negotiators who possess a “willingness to exploit power” achieve more economic value in negotiations than others (Karrass, 1992) and that coercion and exploitation are successful strategies in one-shot negotiations (Lewicki 1983). In addition, Ma and Jaeger (2010) found that assertiveness predicted successful negotiation outcomes. Thus, one needs to take only a short mental leap to hypothesize that individuals with narcissistic traits may have an advantage in negotiation as these negotiation enhancing “skills” of exploitativeness, assertiveness, entitlement, and the tendency to be low on empathy happen to be the same attributes that serve as the core of narcissism.

Indeed, research has found that narcissists exploit common resources that they share with others for a short-term benefit to self but at a long-term cost to the whole group (Campbell, Bush, Brunell, & Shelton, 2005). In addition, narcissism is related to Machiavellianism, a willingness to manipulate others for one’s own good (Paulhus & Williams, 2002) and the expression of exploitative, manipulative, and insensitive behaviors during negotiation accompanied by a lack of concern for future working relationships (Greenhalgh & Gilkey, 1997).

Although narcissistic tendencies may lead to better economic outcomes in negotiation, the same tendencies—especially lack of empathy—are likely to lead to less interpersonal success. Developing good interpersonal relationships requires empathic accuracy, the ability to accurately understand others’ needs, motivations, and emotions (Harvey, Zaki, Lee, Ochsner, & Green, 2012; Ickes, 2001). Indeed, a number of studies have shown that empathic accuracy is related to positive interpersonal consequences in personal relationships as well as in various work settings such as medicine, business management, and counseling (for a review, see Hall, Andrzzejewski, & Yopchick, 2009). Thus, narcissists, well known for a lack of empathy or empathic accuracy (e.g., Ames & Kammrath, 2004; Watson, Grisham, Trotter, & Biderman, 1984), may fail to form a trusting relationship with their negotiation counterparts.

Although the positive link between empathic accuracy and interpersonal relationships is frequently observed, whether it is conducive to economic success in negotiation is unclear. Some researchers argue that the ability to “read” another person’s underlying emotions, goals, and motivations improves negotiation performance (e.g., Elfenbein, Foo, White, Tan, & Aik, 2007). However, others argue that “caring too much” or being too sensitive to a negotiation counterpart’s underlying needs and emotions may lead negotiators to be exploited by their counterparts, resulting in poor performance (e.g., Amanatullah, Morris, & Curhan, 2008).

THE PRESENT STUDY

In the present research, we investigated whether and to what extent narcissists simultaneously achieve (or fail at) two seemingly contradictory goals, which are both critical to a successful negotiation: simultaneously maximizing economic and interpersonal gain. MBA students completed a measure of narcissism (Raskin & Terry, 1988) and engaged in a negotiation simulation for 30 min. Immediately after the negotiation, participants evaluated their negotiation counterparts, reported their own emotional states, and estimated their counterparts’ emotional states. Following Thompson (1990), negotiation success was split into the two types of performance: economic and interpersonal. Economic gain was assessed by how many points participants accrued in the negotiation simulation as they settled four issues. Interpersonal gain was assessed by the extent to which participants were able to build trust and liking during the negotiation.

Our hypotheses were (a) narcissism would simultaneously predict economic gains and interpersonal losses, (b) participants’ empathic accuracy would predict negotiation counterparts’ trust evaluations, and (c) empathic accuracy would mediate the (negative) relation between participants’ narcissism and their negotiation counterparts’ trust evaluations. The relation between empathic accuracy and economic gain was exploratory and we were agnostic about the outcome—past research would predict both a positive and a negative relation.

METHOD

Participants

A total of 70 Masters of Business Administration students at Columbia University (44 male, 23 female, and three unreported) participated for partial course credit. The mean age was 27.76 years (SD = 2.32), and all had 2 or
Materials and Procedure

Narcissism. Approximately 2 weeks before the negotiation task, participants completed the 40-item Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Terry, 1988). They responded on a 5-point scale to indicate how accurately each statement described them. Although the original NPI required participants to select one of two opposing statements that best described them, the Likert response format has been successfully used in previous studies (Jordan, Spencer, Zanna, Hoshino-Browne, & Correll, 2003; McGregor, Nail, Marigold, & Kang, 2005; Park & Colvin, in press). The NPI includes items such as “I really like to be the center of attention” and “I am an extraordinary person.” Responses across the 40 items were averaged. Cronbach’s alpha for the present sample was .94.

Negotiation simulation. Participants completed a negotiation simulation with a randomly determined partner who was also a participant, resulting in 35 pairs. Although participants were not complete strangers, they did not know each other well at the time of the negotiation. The negotiation lasted for approximately 30 min.

A widely used and well-validated negotiation paradigm was used (Bontempo & Iyengar, 2008). Participants were randomly assigned to one of two roles: an entrepreneur who wants to sell his or her family business or an executive at a multinational company who wants to buy the entrepreneur’s company. The instructions for the negotiation simulation indicated that most of the acquisition had been settled but there were four remaining issues to be finalized. Economic values were represented in points. Points were assigned to each issue depending on how it was settled in the negotiation. One of the issues was a zero-sum issue; that is, the interests of one negotiation partner were perfectly inversely related to the interests of the other negotiation partner (commonly referred to as a “distributive” issue in negotiation parlance). Another issue was equally desired by both parties, and both individuals had the potential to gain equally (a “compatible” issue). The final two issues were such that one issue was much more important to the entrepreneur, and the other issue was much more important to the executive (a pair of “integrative” issues). The maximum point-value obtainable by one party was 5,500 points, and the maximum point-value obtainable by the negotiation pair was 7,500 points.

RESULTS

There were no significant differences between entrepreneurs and executives (i.e., the two roles in the negotiation) on narcissism, economic gain, empathic accuracy, or negotiation counterparts’ trust evaluation.1 As is typically the case (e.g., Farwell & Wohlwend-Lloyd, 1998; Gabriel,

Trust evaluation. Immediately after the negotiation, participants evaluated each other on trust by responding to two items on a 5-point scale: “How much do you trust your partner?” and “Would you want to work with this person to do another deal in the future?” The two items were averaged to represent negotiation counterparts’ trust evaluations of participants ($r = .64$).

Empathic accuracy task. Following the trust evaluations, participants reported their own emotional states and estimated their negotiation counterparts’ emotional states by rating them on eight terms (e.g., excited, powerful, nervous, dominant, in charge, anxious, happy, powerless) using a scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (extremely). For each pair, a participant’s ratings of his or her counterpart’s emotional states on the eight items were correlated with the counterpart’s ratings of his or her own emotional states on the same eight items (i.e., profile correlation). If the two sets of scores were similar, this analysis would result in a high positive correlation coefficient. The resulting correlation coefficient per pair was calculated and represented the participant’s empathic accuracy, with higher scores indicating more accurate judgments of counterpart’s emotional states (for previous research using this profile correlation approach, see Carney, Colvin, & Hall, 2007; Snodgrass, Hecht, & Ploutz-Snyder, 1998).2

3 Empathic accuracy scores were analyzed both with and without Fisher’s r-to-z transformation. The results from both analyses were very similar. The results reported in this article were based on correlation coefficients without the transformation.

4 As is the case with most accuracy measures, there is a “criterion problem” with this particular operational definition, too. The criterion problem indicates the difficulty of obtaining an objective gold-standard against which judgments can be based. The particular instantiation of the criterion problem in our study is that participants’ ratings were compared to negotiation counterparts’ self-reports. This leaves open the possibility that any accuracy we observed was underestimated because self-reported emotional states may have included error variance.

5 Our data are nested, which may or may not be a problem—depending on whether scores from two dyad members correlate with each other. Specifically, when participants are nested within dyads, it is possible that scores from the dyad are interdependent (i.e., correlated), in which case dyadic analyses using multilevel modeling are used. We examined this possibility by correlating the dyad members’ scores per variable (e.g., participants’ narcissism was correlated with partners’ narcissism). However, none of them were significant, indicating that multilevel modeling was not necessary.

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Criticelli, & Ee, 1994), narcissism was slightly higher in men \((M = 3.26, SD = 0.61)\) than women \((M = 2.95, SD = 0.55)\), \(t(65) = 2.05, p = .04\). Although male participants scored higher on narcissism than female participants, the same pattern of results was observed when the analyses were conducted on men and women separately; therefore, results are reported collapsing across gender.

Consistent with our first hypothesis, individuals scoring higher on narcissism did, indeed, enjoy more economic gain in the negotiation while suffering more interpersonal loss. Table 1 shows descriptive statistics and intercorrelations for narcissism, performance on the empathic accuracy task, trust ratings, and economic gain in the negotiation. Specifically, narcissism was positively related to economic gain—in other words, individuals scoring higher on narcissism performed better in the negotiation by securing a better business deal for themselves (i.e., earning more points in the negotiation simulation). However, this economic performance was at a cost: Participants’ narcissism was negatively related to participants’ empathic accuracy when judging their negotiation counterparts’ emotional states. Participants’ narcissism was also negatively related to their negotiation counterparts’ trust evaluations. In other words, individuals scoring higher on narcissism were (a) insensitive to their negotiation counterparts’ thoughts and feelings and (b) were less trusted by their negotiation counterparts. Empathic accuracy was negatively related to economic gain providing support for the argument that “caring too much” about the other party may be related to or even cause worse economic outcomes in negotiation, as suggested by Amanatullah et al. (2008) but inconsistent with research by Elfenbein et al. (2007). However, it should be noted that empathic accuracy unfolding in real time in a negotiation between two people (as was the case in the current research) may be an entirely different phenomenon than the one observed by Elfenbein et al., in which a measure of emotion-detection ability was administered 2 weeks after the negotiation took place.

We also found a positive relation between participants’ empathic accuracy and their negotiation counterparts’ trust evaluations, supporting the second hypothesis. That is, negotiation counterparts expressed a desire to build long-term working relationships with participants who accurately perceived their thoughts and feelings. This finding parallels the previously observed association between interpersonal sensitivity and positive interpersonal consequences (Hall et al., 2009).

Given that empathic accuracy is related to interpersonal success and that narcissism and empathic accuracy are negatively related, we speculated that empathic accuracy might mediate the negative relation between participants’ narcissism and their negotiation counterparts’ trust evaluations (third hypothesis). As shown in Figure 1, the relation between narcissism and counterparts’ trust evaluations was no longer significant after controlling for empathic accuracy, Sobel’s \(z = -2.01, p = .04\). This finding suggests that people, such as those scoring high on narcissism, who are emotionally insensitive and who have diminished empathic abilities, are significantly less likely to be trusted in a negotiation.

We tested an alternative explanation for the negative association between participants’ narcissism and their counterparts’ trust evaluations. Considering that narcissists acquired more economic value, the negative relation between narcissism and counterparts’ trust evaluations may have been a function of economic gain in that, perhaps, people do not appreciate those who are perceived to “take” money from them. To examine this possibility, trust evaluations were regressed on both narcissism and economic gain. The results revealed that narcissism remained a significant predictor \((\beta = -.32, t = -2.54, p = .01)\), whereas economic gain was no longer significant \((\beta = .06, t = 0.46, p = .65)\). In other words, negotiation counterparts’ low trust evaluations of narcissists were not due to economic losses. Thus, no support for this alternative explanation was found.

FIGURE 1 Standardized regression coefficients for the relation between participants’ narcissism and negotiation counterparts’ trust as mediated by participants’ empathic accuracy. Sobel’s \(z = -2.01, p = .04\). The numbers in parentheses indicate zero-order correlations. **\(p \leq .01\). ***\(p \leq .001\).

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 1</th>
<th>Intercorrelation Matrix of Narcissism, Economic Gain, Empathic Accuracy, and Negotiation Counterparts’ Trust Evaluation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Narcissism</strong></td>
<td><strong>Economic Gain</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Narcissism</td>
<td>.34**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic gain</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathic accuracy</td>
<td>-</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>M</strong></td>
<td>3.17</td>
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<td><strong>(SD)</strong></td>
<td>(0.59)</td>
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*p ≤ .05, **p ≤ .01. ***p ≤ .001.

DISCUSSION

We examined the costs and benefits of narcissism in a negotiation simulation. Results showed that adult
professionals higher in narcissism gained more economic value for themselves in the negotiation. However, relative to less narcissistic individuals, their judgments of negotiation counterparts’ thoughts and feelings were less accurate, which cultivated distrust. Furthermore, the negative relation between narcissism and trust evaluations was mediated by empathic accuracy. Put differently, narcissists failed to understand their negotiation counterparts’ thoughts and feelings, which in turn led to a lack of trust by their counterparts. Given that trust is the cornerstone of relationship development and maintenance and is necessary for the development of short- or long-term social capital in business relationships and in life, this finding suggests that narcissists may have difficulty developing trusting relationships with others.

People high in narcissism do, however, seem to have an advantage in at least one fundamental aspect of the negotiation process: obtaining economic value. Our results suggest that individuals high in narcissism are likely to do well as one-shot negotiators when relationship development is unnecessary or even undesirable. However, unlike a laboratory experiment, negotiation in real life is not often a “one-shot strategic game” and is almost always an ongoing process in which both parties are best served by building a relationship based on trust that is enjoyed as experienced in the present and potentially leveraged in the future (Greenhalgh & Gilkey, 1997).

It is noteworthy that empathic accuracy was negatively related to economic performance in the negotiation simulation. Past research has argued and found evidence to support the idea that emotionally and socially sensitive people are good at “reading others” and that this ability allows them to perform well because they can accurately “read” and anticipate their negotiation counterpart’s underlying needs, goals, and motivations (Elfenbein et al., 2007; Mueller & Curhan, 2006). However, empathically accurate people may not perform as well as they could in negotiations. Specifically, whereas their sensitivity to others’ thoughts and feelings allows them to accurately read others in a negotiation, the unfolding real-time negotiation may heighten this kind of person’s sensitivity—leading them to accurately feel how the other person is feeling which could hamper performance (Amanatullah et al., 2008). In addition, sensitive people may find it difficult to put their own needs (and profits) before the needs (and profits) of others. Finally, sensitive individuals may care so much about the relationship that they disproportionately focus on relationship building at the expense of economic gain.

On a related note, whether emotion-detection measures of different kinds lead to different negotiation outcomes could potentially be an interesting research avenue to explore. In the current research, we examined real-time empathic accuracy as it occurred in the heat of the negotiation. However, other work has used standardized tests of emotion-detection ability administered either before or after the negotiation. This simple temporal difference may be enough to explain differences between the current findings and those of Elfenbein et al. (2007).

One limitation of the present study is that we did not have complete control over the degree of acquaintanceship among participants. Thus, it was possible that participants knew each other and had already formed some impressions, which in turn affected evaluations of participants. However, our negotiation task was the first interaction between the two randomly paired MBA students, and so potential acquaintanceship was randomly distributed. In addition, it was confirmed that no pairs knew each other very well. This concern raises a potentially important research question, which is related to the topic of relationship building and trust in negotiation—the role of acquaintanceship in negotiation strategies and outcomes.

In conclusion, possession of narcissistic traits can be beneficial in business contexts—in the short term. However, such individuals are likely to be costly to organizations over the long term—especially those organizations that depend on the development of new, and maintenance of existing, relationships within and outside of the firm. Organizations would do well to consider the “fit” between an individual’s narcissistic proclivities and the kinds of business ventures (i.e., ones that require no relationship building) assigned to him or her.

REFERENCES


