The Curvilinear Relationships Between Narcissism and Career Success: Moderating Effect of Political Skill.

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Narcissism is a personality trait that has a potentially important impact on career development outcomes. The present study explored the relationships between narcissism and career success with moderate effect of political skill among a group of young professionals (N = 250) from a company in China. We assessed a model proposing that there is an inverted U-shaped relationship between narcissism and career success. The study found that leaders/employees with either extremely high or extremely low levels of narcissism have less chances for successful career development compared to those with a moderate level of narcissism. This research also tested the moderating effect of political skill to the relationship of the main variables of the study: narcissism and career success. Political skill predicted moderating the inverted U-shaped relationship between narcissism and career success, such that this relationship is more pronounced among employees lower with political skills, than to employees higher in political skill. We discuss the results regarding insights into when narcissism may lead to career success.

Contributions, practical implications, limitations, strengths, and future research directions are discussed.

Keywords: Human Resources, Narcissism, Career Success, Political Skill

INTRODUCTION

During the last decade, organizational researchers have become increasingly interested in narcissism, by means of recently evidenced through several insightful contributions (e.g., Campbell, Rudich, Hill, 2002; Capmbell, 2002; Amy, William, Campbell, Brian, Kari, & Kenneth, 2008; DuBrin, 2012; Christian, 2014; Gijalva, Harms, Newman, & Fraley, 2014; Paschen, Dihsmayer, 2014; Andreas, Vanessa, 2015). The popularity of narcissism rise in trying to understand this phenomenon with all positive and negative impacts within the framework of its influence on career success. An important reason for the current research is the increase in frequency of narcissists’ behaviors in the workplace, and an attempt to give an objective judgement to narcissism in context of its role in achieving career success.

To date, no meta-analysis has examined the frequently contradictory results surrounding narcissism and career success (whether narcissism “good” or “bad” for career success), leaving the overall magnitude, direction, and boundary conditions of narcissism’s relationship to career success unknown. In addition, no study empirically investigates the possibility of a curvilinear relationship between narcissism and leadership.

As the main negative traits of narcissism were mentioned such like: exploitive, arrogant (Amy B, 2008), relatively low desire for many aspects of interpersonal relatedness (Campbell, 2002), “Lack of political skill (no purpose to build long-lasting relationship), surface worker” (Campbell, 2009). But from the previous studies we know that employees possessing political skill are successful in the workplace because they have an ability to effectively negotiate ambiguous a conflict-laden environments (Ferris et al., 2005a, b). While they noted that no research has examined the moderate effect of the relationship between narcissism and career progress. In response, we issued a call for research investigating the effect of political skill on career success for narcissistic personalities.

In summary, the problem of achieving career success by narcissistic personality. Finding a balance that can profit not only for narcissistic personality him/herself, but to the organization and all individuals that they interact with while performing at work. Thus, present study aims to establish a conceptual framework by reviewing extensive literature to investigate the curvilinear relationship
between narcissism and career success, more precisely, we propose inverted U-shaped relationship between these two variables with moderate effect of political skill. A better understanding of conditions in which narcissism can facilitate career success will lead to correct work behavior that can compensate negative traits of narcissism at work place. The future prosperity in all spheres largely depends on talented, highly motivated and energetic people, who can build good relationships with others, bring themselves and others achieving important career goals, and organizational objectives.

BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESES
Narcissistic Personality Characteristic

Narcissism is the pursuit of gratification from vanity or egotistic admiration of one's individual attributes. Researches use narcissism to describe both a clinical condition and a normal personality trait, depending on the observation of different behaviors: positive or negative.

**Bright side of narcissism.** People high in narcissism are motivated to strive for their personal goals and have a desire to self-promote and engage in attention-seeking behaviors (O’Boyle et al., 2012). Therefore, they are more inclined to apply career strategies such as positioning behaviors, influence behaviors, and positive self-presentation that are deemed to be important for career success (King, 2004; Kuijpers & Scheerens, 2006).

Proactive career behaviors (i.e., career engagement) are a critical behavioral variable related to career development. Studies have shown that proactivity is positively related to indicators of objective and subjective career success (Fuller & Marler, 2009). The desire for power and recognition associated with narcissism should lead narcissistic people to try their best to accomplish their personal (career) goals and be more actively engaged in promoting their career via career behaviors such as gaining visibility, positioning behaviors, or self-presentation.

People with high narcissism can be assumed to more likely obtain the jobs and promotions that they desire.

**Dark side of narcissism.** Nevertheless there is another side of narcissism that is well known by everybody, but not that attractive. Narcissists believe that they are more intelligent and attractive than others (Gabriel, Critelli, & Ee, 1994) and judge themselves more favorably than others (John & Robins, 1994). They are overconfident individuals (Campbell, Goodie, & Foster, 2004) who exaggerate their beliefs about their abilities and achievements (John & Robins, 1994) and inflate their own performance in achievement domains (Farwell & Wohlwend-Lloyd, 1998).

In organizations narcissism is largely beneficial to the self and, to a lesser extent, to others (Campbell K., 2009), what may mean that narcissistic personality is not a good team player, as well as narcissistic leader don’t facilitate good communication between coworkers, trying to keep all power (knowledges) for himself/herself, and altogether because narcissistic managers define themselves in relationship contexts as being in a constant state of competition (Michael Paschen, Erich Dihsmaier, 2014).

Nonetheless if behaviors associated with narcissism are also associated with ineffective team players / leaders, why then narcissists succeed in career development and so often rise to positions of leadership and power?

Individuals diagnosed with narcissistic personality disorder (NPD) show “extreme forms which are manifested to a lesser extent in normal individuals” (Raskin & Hall, 1981), and when these behaviors are exhibited in less extreme forms, they could be regarded as a narcissistic personality trait (Emmons, 1987).

It must be emphasized, that narcissistic characteristics occur with different degrees of intensity. A certain dose of narcissism is necessary to function effectively. We all show signs of narcissistic behavior. A healthy dose of narcissism can facilitate career success, because a reasonable concern within yourself can assist to help on achieving important goals and being admired as a leader. The moderately narcissistic personality often appears to be self-confident and charismatic (Andrew DuBrin, 2012). Those who descend toward the extremes, however, give narcissism its negative reputation.
The previous study found that the poorest leaders are those with either extremely high or extremely low levels of narcissism (Gijalva, 2014): “With too little, a leader can be viewed as insecure or hesitant, but if you're too high on narcissism, you can be exploitative or tyrannical” (Grijalva, 2014). The best having moderate levels of narcissism “a nice balance between having sufficient levels of self-confidence, but do not manifest the negative” (Peter Harms, 2014).

**Hypothesis 1:** There is an inverted U-shaped relationship between narcissism and career success

**Effect of Political Skill**

**Career Success.** Nowadays, career success is an important subject in active management and in the daily lives of most workers; without a doubt, the popular press has produced many books on matters related to career development and promotion (Chambers, 1999; Ferris, Davidson, & Perrewé, 2005; Orth, 2004). Chambers (1999) suggested that to be promoted, is essential for leaders to develop relationships with powerful individuals, increase their visibility, and develop a positive perception of them within the organization, all of which needs a commitment to political work.

Furthermore, a number of authors have pointed out that promotion structures are often political in nature (Ferris & Buckley, 1990; Ferris, Russ, & Fandt, 1989; Markham et al., 1987; Riley, 1983). Political skill is an essential factor at work that helps to perform better in different contexts.

**Political Skill.** Narcissistic employees with low political skill usually represent an individual who is (over) confident, high in self-esteem, dominant, attention seeking, however also unwilling to take criticism, aggressive, lacking in true empathy, interpersonally exploitative and grandiose or even arrogant” (Campbell K., 2011). Narcissism is related to antisocial personality and psychopathy; narcissists demonstrate a rather low desire for several aspects of interpersonal empathy, because they often consider themselves in the relationship environments as being in a constant state of competition (Michael Paschen, Erich Dihsmaier, 2014).

By contrast, employees with higher political skill interpersonally skilled and charming, have propensity extreme confidence including change-oriented goals, facilitate workgroup creativity (O’Connor, Mumford, Clifton, Gessner&Connely, 1995), and tendency to take big risks, they can assist enormously to the growth of organizations by building strong truthful relationship with all the people they interact with during work performance. Therefore, interpersonal political skills embraces the ability to correctly measure social situations, communicate in an authentic manner, understand both inside and outside the organization, and use encouragement effectively (Kolodinsky, 2003), exactly what narcissistic personality is lacking of.

Consequently, we expect that narcissistic employees with higher political skill are more likely to get promoted at work and have their career development more successful, comparing to those with low political skill.

**Hypothesis 2:** Political skill will moderate the inverted U-shaped relationship between narcissism and career success, such that this relationship is more pronounced among employees lower with political skill, compared to employees higher in political skill.

**METHODS**

**Sample and procedures**

A survey assessing narcissism, career success and the moderating effect of political skill was e-mailed to employees of real-estate Company in Shanghai, China. The sample included 250 participants, including clerks, managers and interns. At the beginning of the practical part of the research, the idea and the aims of the research were first introduced to the participants. E-mailed links designed for the online questionnaires were provided by the company’s HR manager, and were sent out with the supervisors’ assistance. Confidentiality of individuals' responses was also assured. Respondents were promised a summary of the results upon return of a completed survey.
A total of 164 employees and their 86 supervisors (an average 1.9 subordinates per supervisor). Of the 300 surveys that were mailed, 250 were filled up (with a response rate of 83.3% average for both employees and supervisors). More than a half participants were male (51.2%), between 26 to 30 years old (43.6%), and well enough educated 70.4% had completed a bachelor degree in the university.

Measures

The measures used to operationalize the variables in the study were selected from the literature with appropriate modifications for use with a sample of entrepreneurs.

Career success was measured with a 5-item scale developed by Parasuraman et al. (1992), which appears to be the best measure available in the literature (Oberfield, 1993). The items asked respondents to indicate their level of satisfaction with their career progress and success, including progress made in meeting goals for income and development of new skills. The five items are: (1) I am satisfied with the success I have achieved in my career; (2) I am satisfied with the progress I have made toward meeting my overall career goals; (3) I am satisfied with the progress I have made toward meeting my goals for income; (4) I am satisfied with the progress I have made toward meeting my goals for advancement; (5) I am satisfied with the progress I have made toward meeting my goals for the development of new skills. An example is “How satisfied are you with the progress you have made toward meeting your overall career goals?” The response options were anchored on a five point scale from 1 (very dissatisfied) to 5 (very satisfied). The mean of the five items was used as a measure of career satisfaction (alpha.87).

Narcissism was measured with the short version of the German language adaptation of the narcissistic personality inventory (NPI; Raskin & Hall, 1979; Schutz, Marcus, & Sellin, 2004) consisting of 15 forced-choice items. Instead, we attempted to respect the various facets of narcissism captured by the full NPI, such as self-ascribed authority, superiority, and entitlement, as well as self-absorption. Participants rated their agreement with items such as “I think I’m a special person” (superiority) on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 2 (Strongly agree).

Political skill was assessed by Ferris et al. (2005a, b) 18-item political skill inventory (a = 0.90). Items include “I am particularly good at sensing the motivations and hidden agendas of others” and “It is easy for me to develop good rapport with most people”. Subordinates rated their agreement with the items using a five-point scale (1 – strongly disagree, 5 – strongly agree).

Control variables. On the basis of theory and prior research (e.g., Bolino & Turnley, 2003; Thacker & Wayne, 1995), race, age, gender, education, position and organizational tenure were included as demographic control variables in our analyses. We controlled for race and gender because previous research has shown that European and Chinese culture are too different, so studying phenomenon can be more pronounced in one country than in another, as well as the existence of some pro male biases can play a big role in the career area (Bowen, Swim, & Jacobs, 2000). Race was coded with 1 " Chinese and 2" other. Age was measured in years. Gender was dichotomously coded (1 " male, 2 " female). Finally, organizational tenure was measured in terms of years and months on the job and then transformed into the total number of months.

Level of education was taken from the Paul Ray Berndtson database, which contained information on the highest degree received (coded 1=bachelor's degree, 2 =master's degree or higher). And, finally, position was coded as 1" clerk 2" manager.

RESULTS

Confirmatory factor Analyses

Prior to start hypotheses testing, we used CFA procedures to assess the distinguishing feature of three variables involved in this study: career success (CS), narcissism (NA) and political skill (PS). We treated first-order dimensions of career success and political skill as indicators of their respective latent constructs in the analyses. For the last variable (narcissism), we formed three parcels of items as indicators for each latent construct by averaging the items with the highest and the lowest loadings respectively.
Against the hypothesized three-factor model we tested three alternative nested models. Model 1 and 2 were the two-factor models with the mediators as one-factor; model 3 was a one-factor model with all three variables merged into a single factor. Table 1 (Appendix), the three-factor model fits the data best compared with the two alternative models by using the chi-square change statistic (Bentler & Bonnet, 1980), compared with two-factor model Δχ2 (df) = 156.347 (7), p < 0.01; compared to another two-factor model Δχ2 (df) = 159.465 (2), p < 0.01; and compared with one-factor model Δχ2 (df) = 250.85 (3), p < 0.01. Changes in CFI between the three-factor model and the alternative were greater than 0.01, suggesting a significant improvement in model fit (Cheung & Rensvold, 2002). The hypothesized three-factor model was therefore the most appropriate representation of the factor structure of the items.

Descriptive Statistics

Means, standard deviations, and correlations for the variables appear in Table 2 (Appendix). Based on the bivariate correlations, career success is associated with narcissism (r = .308, p < 0.01), career success is also positively related to political skill (r = .434, p < 0.01).

Hypotheses Testing

Hypothesis 1 predicted that the relationship between narcissism and career success is U-shaped. To test this hypothesis, we first entered the control variables and the linear term of narcissism (Model 1), followed by the quadratic term of narcissism (labeled as narcissism squared in Model 2). As shown in Appendix Table 3 (Model 2), the effect for the narcissism squared on career success was significant (β=.098, p < 0.05). Thus, Hypothesis 1 was supported.

Hypotheses 2 predicted that political skill moderates the curvilinear relationship between narcissism and career success, such that the curvilinear relationship is more pronounced among those with lower levels of political skill compared to the ones with higher levels of political skill. To test this hypothesis, we entered political skill as its interaction with narcissism and the squared of narcissism into the random coefficient equation. Results presented in Table 3 show that the coefficient of the interaction term for political skill and the squared of narcissism was significant (β=.140, p < 0.05). As a conclusion, Hypotheses 2 received full support.

Figure 1 (Appendix) presents the findings mentioned above using procedures recommended by Preacher, Curran, and Bauer (2006). We first classified our moderator (political skill) into the high group (+1 SD) and low group (-1 SD), and subsequently tested the significance level of those simple slopes. Figure 1 presents the moderating effect of political skill, a close examination of the simple slopes of which revealed that at the lower level of narcissism, the slope is positive and significant for those low in political skill (β = 0.35, p < 0.05), but it is negative and not significant for those high in political skill (β= -0.09, ns); at the medium level of narcissism, the slope is positive and significant for those low in political skill (β = 0.51, p < 0.01), but it is positive and not significant for those high in political skill (β = 0.08, ns). Finally, at the higher level of narcissism, the slope is negative and significant for those low in political skill (β = -0.29, p < 0.05), but it is positive and significant for those high in political skill (β= 0.17, p < 0.05).

DISCUSSION

Our results provide insight into the relationships between narcissism and career success in organizations. Results indicate that there are inverted U-shaped relationships between narcissism and career success, consequently certain degree of narcissism can have a definite influence on work performance and career success in general. Specifically, individuals with moderate level of narcissism were more likely to perform better and achieve more goals in the career success field comparing to those with low and high degree of narcissism. Although most of the researches on narcissism and career success don’t consider narcissism as one personality characteristic that can facilitate achieving career success, our research proved that people with moderate level of narcissism can be successful in their career development. Finally, political skill that in previous studies was proved to have direct impact on career success, but in the current study it was found to moderate the inverted U-shaped relationship between narcissism and career success. Therefore that this relationship is more
pronounced among employees’ lower with political skill, compared to employees higher in political skill. This suggests that political skill might be more important than the degree of narcissism in career domains, so career success advancement depends less on personality and more on the social skills one possess.

Theoretical implications

Our study makes several contributions to the literature. First, we draw attention to the general possibility that narcissism is nonlinear related to career success as a possible explanation for why previous studies have produced inconsistent findings. Our findings also imply that prior studies reporting a positive relationship between narcissism and career success might have recruited participants experiencing relatively low to moderate levels of narcissism in addition to studies reporting negative relationship between narcissism and career success have recruited participants experiencing relatively moderate to high levels of political skill.

Another theoretical implication of the study is the importance of the fact that career success advancement depends less on personality and more on the skills an individual applies, in other words negative traits of a narcissistic personality may not play an important role in pursuing career success in case if an employee applies necessary skills while performing at the workplace.

Finally, although our primary contribution is to the narcissism and career success literatures, this research also extends our understanding of the political skill literature. This literature has shown that political skill is an important factor in pursuing career success, showing a positive effect of political skill of employee performance. In this study was taken a different approach by examining political skill as a moderator to the existing relationship between narcissism and career success. In this case, we can highlight how political skill, not only predicts career success directly, but also indirectly, by modifying employees’ social skills while performing at work, diminishing the existing curvilinear effect of the narcissism on career success.

Practical implications

Our results provide insights into how organizations might promote political skill in spite of the employees’ level of narcissism. By designing organizational training for employees regarding how to use political skill at work, as one of the ways for building a virtuous relationship within an organization, as well to eliminate employees’ negative traits of narcissism. For instance, managers can promote among employees behavior based on using political skill as a fundament of social interacting used by employees at work. Also, employees can engage in training sessions in which they consider challenging work-related situations to generate possible actions that allow to solve the problem in a win-win way for all the members of the discussion or dispute, in order to increase professional ethics. Our results suggest that if these kinds of interventions are successfully implemented, managers will be able to reduce the negative consequences of narcissistic personality’s behavior.

At the same time, we can emphasize promoting political skill for achieving career success in general. Specifically, we suggest to promote inside of organizations not only behavior associated with independent work and ability to handle different tasks by the employees themselves, but also, what is more important is being a good team player. People that are good as team members are better in political skill. At the same time good work of a team brings success not only to the company, but promotion and salary increase to all employees, as a result more success in the career field. Therefore, promotion of good teamwork may help employees to learn better how to apply political skill, then as a result advance their communicative skills and making good impression skills that enhance the chances of future promotions at work. Furthermore, stable work of a whole team predicts success of a company, as well as it can open more doors for employees’ personal career success.

Limitations and future research directions

Despite the importance and potential contributions of the present study, there are certain limitations that must be acknowledged. First, the participants of the research all are people with different levels of narcissism and while answering the questionnaires, those that are with high level of
narcissism can exaggerate their own work performance and achieved career success, meanwhile those with low level of narcissism may underestimate their own success. In the next research there can be different questionnaires prepared for both employees and their managers, therefore the same employee can get two evaluation data: his/her own and the other one that is filled up by his/her manager or colleagues, this can provide more objective evaluation of one’s career advancement. The only complication lies in the data collection and analysis.

Second, we sampled young professionals and it’s possible that the observed effects would be different for employees with longer work histories affecting their career success.

CONCLUSION
In conclusion, the results of this study enrich our understanding of the implications of narcissism in the work domain.

In this study, we proposed and tested a curvilinear relationship between narcissism and career success. We found that employees with moderate level of narcissism are able to achieve more success in the career field, while employees with high and low level of narcissism are more likely to have a less successful performance at work.

We also found that this curvilinear relationship was more pronounced among employees with lower political skill, comparing to employees with higher political skill.

Our results imply that one reason for the positive career advancement of narcissists might lie in their balance (moderate level of narcissism) or in applying political skill.

LITERATURE REVIEW


