

Beyond Avoidance: Psychological Coping in Non-Detachable Relationships with Narcissistic Personality Traits

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Abstract: ***Background:** People may remain in family, intimate, friendship, or workplace relationships in which they perceive the other person to display narcissistic personality traits, even when disengagement is difficult. The psychological correlates of these experiences across relationship contexts warrant further study. **Objective:** To examine associations between perceived narcissistic personality traits and depression, anxiety, and stress, and to describe differences in psychological distress across major relationship contexts. **Methods:** This online, quantitative study used a cross-sectional correlational analysis of the initial survey phase. Of 122 completed responses, one response received after the data-collection cutoff was excluded from score analyses, leaving 121 participants. Participants reported on one continuing relationship. Perceived narcissistic personality traits were assessed using an adapted Narcissistic Personality Inventory–40 (NPI-40), and psychological distress was assessed using the Depression Anxiety Stress Scales–42 (DASS-42). Pearson correlations examined associations between NPI-40 and DASS-42 scores. One-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) compared distress across family/partner, friend/relative, and workplace groups. **Results:** Mean NPI-40 score was 16.26 ($SD = 6.99$). Mean DASS-42 scores were 16.24 ($SD = 9.97$) for depression, 15.51 ($SD = 9.38$) for anxiety, and 18.30 ($SD = 9.38$) for stress. Perceived narcissistic traits were positively associated with depression ($r = .205$, $p = .024$) and anxiety ($r = .179$, $p = .050$); the association with stress was not statistically significant ($r = .167$, $p = .067$). Across the three relationship-context groups, ANOVAs indicated differences in depression, $F(2, 115) = 3.53$, $p = .033$, and anxiety, $F(2, 115) = 3.60$, $p = .030$, but not stress, $F(2, 115) = 1.83$, $p = .165$. The workplace group had the highest descriptive means on all three outcomes. **Conclusion:** In this convenience sample, higher perceived narcissistic personality-trait scores were associated with modestly higher depression and anxiety scores. Psychological distress also differed by relationship context for depression and anxiety. The cross-sectional design, small effect sizes, self-report measures, adapted NPI-40, and lack of post-hoc comparisons limit interpretation. These findings do not establish causation or diagnose the person being described.*

Keywords: narcissistic traits; interpersonal relationships; depression; anxiety; stress; relationship context; psychological distress

1. Introduction

Narcissism is commonly conceptualized as a dimensional personality construct, with expressions that may include self-enhancement, entitlement, admiration seeking, and interpersonal rivalry (Back et al., 2013; Pincus & Lukowitsky, 2010). These characteristics are not equivalent to a clinical diagnosis of narcissistic personality disorder, which requires a broader clinical assessment. Interpersonal research has examined how narcissistic characteristics relate to relationship functioning and interpersonal difficulties (Grove et al., 2019; Hopwood et al., 2013).

Much of the discussion of difficult relationships focuses on intimate or family settings, yet ongoing interpersonal contact also occurs in friendships, extended-family relationships, and workplaces. In these settings, complete avoidance may be impractical because of emotional ties, shared responsibilities, or occupational roles. Stress-and-coping theory emphasizes the appraisal of demands and the resources available to manage them (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Understanding distress from the perspective of the person experiencing the relationship may therefore help describe how perceived interpersonal traits relate to psychological well-being across contexts.

The present study examined perceived narcissistic personality traits in a person identified by the participant, rather than attempting to diagnose that person. The primary objective was to examine associations between perceived

trait scores and depression, anxiety, and stress. A secondary objective was to compare distress scores across family/partner, friend/relative, and workplace relationship contexts. Given the observational design, the analyses were intended to assess associations and group differences, not causal effects.

2. Methods

Design and setting

The study used an online, quantitative, non-randomized, multi-phase design. This article reports on the initial survey phase as a cross-sectional correlational study. Data was collected through Google Forms, with recruitment through accessible personal and online networks. The questionnaire asked participants to consider one continuing interpersonal relationship.

Participants

Adults aged 18 years or older who voluntarily consented were eligible. A total of 122 people completed the initial survey. One response received after the data-collection cutoff was excluded from the numerical analyses, resulting in an analytic sample of 121 for NPI-40 and DASS-42 score analyses. Demographic information was available for all 122 submitted responses. Participants identified relationships in categories including friend/relative, family/partner, and workplace. The person being described did not need to have a formal diagnosis.

Measures

Perceived narcissistic personality traits were assessed using an adapted form of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory–40 (NPI-40; Raskin & Terry, 1988). Items were reworded to ask about the person being described, rather than the participant. Scores therefore represent participants' perceptions and should not be interpreted as a validated diagnosis or as direct clinical assessment of the other person. The adaptation and its psychometric properties require further validation.

Depression, anxiety, and stress were assessed using the Depression Anxiety Stress Scales–42 (DASS-42; Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995). The instrument was used to describe self-reported symptom dimensions and not to establish psychiatric diagnoses.

Procedure and ethics

Participants were provided with study information and gave informed consent before completing the survey. Participation was voluntary; participants were not required to name or provide identifying details of the person they described. Responses were anonymized for analysis, and findings were reported in aggregate.

Statistical analysis

Descriptive statistics summarized demographic characteristics, NPI-40 scores, and DASS-42 scores. Pearson correlation coefficients were used to examine associations between NPI-40 total scores and depression, anxiety, and stress scores. One-way ANOVAs compared mean distress scores across the three principal relationship-context groups. The dissertation reports $\alpha = .05$. Post-hoc pairwise tests and adjustment for multiple comparisons were not reported in the dissertation and should not be implied here.

3. Results

Participant characteristics and descriptive scores

The demographic summary for 122 submitted responses showed that 69 participants (56.6%) were aged 26–35 years and 32 (26.2%) were aged 36–45 years. The sample included 73 men (59.8%) and 49 women (40.2%). The most frequently reported relationship context was friend/relative (53, 43.4%), followed by family/partner (47, 38.5%) and workplace (19, 15.6%). Three responses used other descriptions.

Among the 121 participants included in score analyses, NPI-40 scores ranged from 3 to 32 ($M = 16.26$, $SD = 6.99$). DASS-42 depression scores had a mean of 16.24 ($SD = 9.97$; range 0–42), anxiety scores a mean of 15.51 ($SD = 9.38$; range 0–42), and stress scores a mean of 18.30 ($SD = 9.38$; range 0–42).

Associations between perceived traits and distress

Variables	Pearson r	p value
NPI-40 and depression	.205	.024
NPI-40 and anxiety	.179	.050
NPI-40 and stress	.167	.067

Perceived narcissistic personality-trait scores were positively associated with depression ($r = .205$, $p = .024$) and anxiety (r

$= .179$, $p = .050$). The positive association with stress did not reach the conventional significance threshold ($r = .167$, $p = .067$). The observed correlations were small in magnitude.

Differences by relationship context

Relationship context	n	Depression mean	Anxiety mean	Stress mean
Family/partner	47	14.96	13.74	16.43
Friend/relative	53	16.32	15.66	19.45
Workplace	18	20.06	18.67	20.44

For the three principal relationship-context groups ($N = 118$), the workplace group had the highest descriptive mean for depression, anxiety, and stress. One-way ANOVA indicated differences between groups for depression, $F(2, 115) = 3.53$, $p = .033$, and anxiety, $F(2, 115) = 3.60$, $p = .030$. The difference for stress was not statistically significant, $F(2, 115) = 1.83$, $p = .165$. Because post-hoc pairwise tests were not reported, these omnibus tests do not identify which specific groups differed.

4. Discussion

In this sample of adults reporting on continuing relationships, perceived narcissistic personality-trait scores showed small positive associations with depression and anxiety. The association with stress was also positive but did not reach the conventional significance threshold. These results suggest that perceived interpersonal traits may be one correlate of psychological distress, but the small correlations indicate that they account for only a limited part of the variation in participants' reported symptoms.

The relationship-context analysis showed higher descriptive distress means in the workplace group than in the family/partner group, with omnibus differences for depression and anxiety. The findings should be interpreted cautiously: group sizes were unequal, the workplace subgroup was smaller, and no post-hoc tests were reported. The study was based on convenience recruitment and self-report, so the sample may not represent the broader population of people in difficult or hard-to-avoid relationships.

The use of an adapted NPI-40 is an important methodological limitation. The original NPI-40 was developed as a self-report measure of narcissistic traits; rewording it to rate another person changes the assessment target. The resulting scores should be treated as exploratory perceptions unless the adapted version's validity and reliability are established. The study cannot determine whether the individuals described have narcissistic personality disorder.

The broader dissertation included a follow-up phase in which 10 participants practiced coping strategies for approximately three weeks. Those observations are not used to make efficacy claims in this article. The dissertation reports that baseline DASS-42 numerical scores could not be reliably linked to the corresponding follow-up DASS-21 records, preventing a valid paired analysis. In addition, the follow-up had no control group. Therefore, changes in severity categories cannot establish that coping strategies

caused an improvement. A future study should use consistent measurement, pre-specified participant identifiers, validated measures, a larger sample, and an appropriate comparison condition.

5. Limitations

Several limitations should be considered. First, convenience sampling limits generalizability. Second, the cross-sectional design cannot establish temporal order or causality. Third, all key variables were self-reported, creating potential shared-method and perception biases. Fourth, the adapted NPI-40 has not been shown here to retain the psychometric properties of the original measure when used to rate another person. Fifth, the relationship-context analyses involved unequal group sizes, and the reported ANOVAs were not followed by pairwise tests. Finally, the analysis involved several statistical tests; the reported p values should be rechecked against the original output and interpreted in light of multiplicity.

6. Conclusion

Higher perceived narcissistic personality-trait scores were modestly associated with higher depression and anxiety scores in this convenience sample of adults reporting on continuing interpersonal relationships. Mean distress scores varied by relationship context, with omnibus group differences for depression and anxiety but not stress. These findings are exploratory and do not demonstrate causation, validate the adapted measure, or diagnose the people described. Replication using validated measures, stronger sampling, and pre-registered analysis is needed.

Declarations

Informed consent: Informed consent was obtained from participants before survey participation, as described in the dissertation.

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Data availability: De-identified data can be shared, and under what conditions, consistent with consent and institutional requirements.

Author contributions: Reshma Razak: conceptualization, methodology, data collection, analysis, and writing.

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