



Narcissism and celebrity [☆]

S. Mark Young ^{a,*}, Drew Pinsky ^b

^a *Marshall School of Business and Annenberg School for Communication, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA 90089, USA*

^b *Keck School of Medicine, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA 90089, USA*

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Abstract

We used the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI) to assess the degree of narcissism among celebrities. Results indicate that celebrities are significantly more narcissistic than MBA students and the general population. Contrary to findings in the population at large, in which men are more narcissistic than women, female celebrities were found to be significantly more narcissistic than their male counterparts. Reality television personalities had the highest overall scores on the NPI, followed by comedians, actors, and musicians. Further, our analyses fail to show any relationship between NPI scores and *years of experience* in the entertainment industry, suggesting that celebrities may have narcissistic tendencies prior to entering the industry.

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1. Introduction

Society's preoccupation with fame has existed since ancient times (Braudy, 1997); however, the current fascination with celebrity has reached a fever pitch. Our unrelenting quest for knowledge about the lives, loves and failures of the famous has been

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* Corresponding author. Fax: +1 213 747 2815.

E-mail address: mark.young@marshall.usc.edu (S. M. Young).

fueled by the explosive growth of the entertainment industry,¹ as well as by a zealous media. Attesting to our preoccupation is the public's devotion to television programs such as *Entertainment Tonight*, *The Insider*, *Inside Edition*, *Access Hollywood*, and *Extra*, which attract more than 100 million American viewers each week (Tapper & Morris, 2005).

Paradoxically, although celebrities are more exposed today than just about any other group in society, our knowledge of their behavior derives primarily from anecdotal evidence such as interviews and popular press articles (cf. Berlin, 1996). Further clouding our understanding is that information about celebrities is often carefully controlled by "cultural intermediaries" such as publicists, agents, managers (Rojek, 2001), and the celebrities themselves (Hagan & Marr, 2006).

Of significance, a search of the academic literature on celebrity across all social science disciplines reveals virtually no studies that have gathered systematic data from large or even moderately sized samples of celebrities.² Thus, we opine that celebrities are simultaneously the most widely exposed, yet one of the most understudied and least understood groups in our society.

In this research, we take an initial step to studying celebrity behavior by examining questions related to narcissism. Specifically, we use the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI) to: (1) examine whether celebrities are more narcissistic than other populations, (2) determine if the components of narcissism differ across various types of celebrities, and (3) assess whether individuals possess narcissistic characteristics before entering the industry.

2. Celebrities and narcissism

Celebrities are individuals who have achieved a level of fame that makes them well known in society. The proliferation of celebrity culture has spawned an intensive level of curiosity and speculation about the celebrity personality. In particular, when celebrities engage in sensational behavior, narcissism is often hypothesized as an explanation (Grigoriadis, 2005).

The term "narcissism" derives from the Greek myth of Narcissus, a youth who fell in love with his own reflection. Being narcissistic has both positive and negative consequences. On the positive side, narcissists appear to be less depressed (Watson & Biderman, 1993), are extraverted (Bradlee & Emmons, 1992), have strong initial likeability (Oltmanns, Friedman, Fiedler, & Turkheimer, 2004), and perform better in public than non-narcissists (Wallace & Baumeister, 2002). Their extraverted behavior and desire to be liked can make them enjoyable to work with initially. On the negative side, narcissists crave attention, are overconfident, and often lack empathy. These negative consequences make some narcissists difficult to work with at an interpersonal level, and often the initial positive impression they create can change to a negative one. If we find that celebrities have narcissistic tendencies, may knowledge may allow others, such as producers, directors, and others, to work with them more effectively and allow the public greater insight into their behavior.

¹ The entertainment industry is comprised largely of motion pictures, music, television, and games. Entertainment is the leading export of the United States and its expansion seems limitless (S&P Industry Study, 2004). The industry generated close to half a trillion dollars in revenues last year.

² The lack of studies with celebrity data is most likely due to limited researcher access. Most celebrities are "protected" by publicists and agents who screen everything that is sent to them.

Individuals may be clinically diagnosed as pathologically narcissistic and suffering from Narcissistic Personality Disorder (DSM-IV-R; American Psychiatric Association, 1994), or they may be studied at the subclinical level and classified as “normal narcissists.” Among other things, normal narcissism is characterized by self-centeredness, self-aggrandizement, and a manipulative interpersonal orientation (Emmons, 1984; Paulhus, 1998 & Sedikides et al., Sedikides, Campbell, Reeder, & Elliot, 2002). Our study was designed to address whether narcissistic traits do indeed exist among celebrities, as the anecdotal evidence suggests. We caution, however, that our research has been conducted at the subclinical level and was not designed to detect narcissistic personality disorder. Hereafter, when we use the term narcissism, we are referring to normal narcissism.

3. Method

3.1. Participants and procedures

Over a recent 20-month period, we administered a survey instrument to two subclinical groups of subjects. The first consisted of 200 celebrities (142 males and 58 females) with 12.03 average years of work experience (with a standard deviation of 8.36 years and a range of 1–38 years). These celebrities appeared as guests on the nationally syndicated radio show *Loveline*³ hosted by Dr. Drew Pinsky. The purpose of the show, which has a 20-year history, is to answer caller questions concerning drugs, sex, and relationships. Together with the host, celebrities offer advice to callers and promote their current projects. Our definition of a celebrity was someone of a high enough stature to be invited to appear on the show. As we discuss below, we cannot reveal the names of the celebrities because we guaranteed them complete anonymity; however, we can say that participants on the show appear frequently in the entertainment media and are chosen because of their ability to draw an audience.⁴

We used the following procedures to ensure the anonymity of the respondents. First, when guests came to the show, one of the researchers asked if they were interested in participating in the study. The researcher stated that he was studying personality characteristics of celebrities and that they were chosen to participate because of their celebrity status. Next, we asked for their voluntary, verbal consent, and we affirmed that they were under no obligation to participate. Consistent with our desire to maintain absolute confidentiality, we did not ask them to sign a consent form, as that would have provided a written record of their participation. Further, they were told that if they decided to participate, they could stop filling out the survey at any time. The researcher also stated that all data would be collected anonymously and confidentially, and that the results would be discussed only in aggregated statistical form. This and other information was also printed on the cover page of the survey. The researcher then left the room to minimize demand effects. After completing the survey, we debriefed each guest and asked if we could answer any questions.

³ Approximately 14 out of the 200 celebrities were contacted by the authors outside the radio show context, and were asked to fill out the survey voluntarily and anonymously. Each had either been a guest on the show previously or was of the same celebrity stature as the average guest. We used this procedure to complete our data collection because *Loveline* closed down for a December holiday period. The same level of confidentiality was provided for these participants.

⁴ *Loveline* is broadcast five nights a week for 2 h and is the highest rated show in its time slot (10 p.m.–12 a.m. PCT). The show has an average audience of two million listeners for each broadcast.

To further demonstrate to participants that we were sincere about the confidentiality of their participation, we employed the following procedure. Over the course of 2 months, each of the authors carried a large manila envelope containing a number of finished surveys. After the guest had completed the survey, we opened the envelope and took out the other surveys. We showed them that the other surveys contained no identifying marks and then asked the guest to place his or her survey in the pile and shuffle them. All surveys were placed back into the envelope. Every 2 months, we entered any accumulated new data into our database. As an added precaution, we were careful not to mention the names of others who had previously participated in the study to each new participant. Finally, we did not solicit participation every time the show aired but instead randomly chose the days on which we approached participants. Four participants failed to complete a survey as they had to leave the show early due to other commitments. All others who stayed for the entire show voluntarily filled out the survey. Our response rate was 98% (186/192) for the individuals who were asked to complete the survey in the studio. Our sample included actors, comedians, musicians, and reality television personalities.

A second group of respondents used for comparative purposes was 200 MBA students (average age 29, *SD* of 4, and a range of 23–48 years). These students had an average of five years of work experience. We chose MBA students because their aspirations towards corporate leadership have been linked to narcissism in previous studies (see Carroll, 1987; Hogan, Raskin, & Fazzini, 1990; John & Robins, 1994; Ladd, Welsh, Vitulli, Labbe, & Law, 1997), thus biasing against our finding greater narcissism among celebrities. We sent the request to participate in the study via email. If students agreed to participate, they clicked on a link to surveymonkey.com, a web-based program on which our survey was located. Surveymonkey does not keep track of respondents IP addresses when they respond to the survey thus providing a strong safeguard against students' identities being revealed. We sent emails to 245 MBAs and we received 203 responses, for an 83% response rate. In order to equate sample sizes, we randomly eliminated three of these responses. The relative proportion of male to female MBAs was very similar to the ratio of male to female celebrities.

3.2. Measures

To assess the degree of narcissism, all respondents completed the 40-item *Narcissism Personality Inventory* (NPI)—a well established instrument that measures narcissism in subclinical populations (Campbell, 1999; Raskin & Hall, 1979; Raskin & Terry, 1988; Rose, 2002). Raskin and Terry (1988) decomposed the 40-item NPI into seven component scales: *Authority*, *Exhibitionism*, *Superiority*, *Entitlement*, *Exploitativeness*, *Self-Sufficiency*, and *Vanity* and we used these component scales in the present study as in Foster, Campbell, and Twenge (2003). The years-of-experience variable was measured by asking each respondent: “How many years have you been a professional in the entertainment industry (since receiving your first paycheck)?”

4. Results

4.1. Celebrities

Our results (see Table 1) show that the average score on the NPI for all celebrities was 17.84. Female celebrities exhibited significantly more narcissistic tendencies than male celebrities [19.26 and 17.27 for female and male celebrities, respectively; $F(1, 198) = 5.83$,

$p < .05$]. This result runs counter to the finding in the general population that men are more narcissistic than women (DSM-IV-R). Driving this difference is that female celebrities scored significantly higher on *exhibitionism*, $F(1,199) = 5.31$, $p < 0.05$; *superiority*, $F(1,199) = 12.4$, $p < .01$, and *vanity*, $F(1,199) = 13.35$, $p < .001$ than male celebrities. These results suggest that female celebrities might have a greater preoccupation with their physical appearance compared to their male counterparts. Male celebrities did not score higher than females on any component scale.

We next compared the four different types of celebrities using a series of linear contrasts (Table 2). Reality television personalities had the highest overall NPI mean score ($M = 19.45$, $SD = 6.25$), followed by comedians ($M = 18.89$, $SD = 6.11$), actors ($M = 18.54$, $SD = 6.50$), and musicians ($M = 16.67$, $SD = 6.98$). Both reality television personalities and actors had significantly higher NPI scores than musicians ($p < .05$), although actors, comedians, and reality TV personalities did not differ significantly on their overall NPI scores.

An analysis of the NPI component scales showed that for *authority*, comedians, reality TV personalities, and actors scored significantly higher than musicians ($p < .05$). Regarding *exhibitionism*, both actors and comedians scored significantly higher than musicians ($p < .05$). For *superiority*, comedians scored higher than musicians and actors ($p < .05$). The results for *vanity* show that actors, reality TV personalities, and musicians scored higher than comedians, and that reality TV personalities and actors scored higher than musicians ($p < .05$). On *exploitativeness*, comedians scored higher than musicians and actors, whereas reality TV personalities also scored significantly higher than musicians and actors ($p < .05$).

The overall findings are that musicians appear to be the least narcissistic celebrity group. They did not score higher than any of the other categories of celebrities on any dimension. On the other hand, comedians had the highest average scores on five of the component scales—*authority*, *exhibitionism*, *superiority*, *entitlement*, and *exploitativeness*—and scored higher than musicians on all of these dimensions. Reality TV personalities and actors evince the highest overall average NPI score, and reality TV personalities did score higher than actors on *exploitativeness*. No other celebrity group scored statistically higher on any of the component scales than reality TV personalities.

We also wanted to gather preliminary evidence on whether the entertainment industry attracts narcissistic individuals or if individuals became narcissistic as a result of being in the industry. To address this question, we regressed NPI scores on *years of experience* for the full sample ($M = 12.03$ years; $SD = 8.36$; Range = 1–38 years), and then separately for male and female celebrities. We found no effect for *years of experience* in any of the regressions. The only component of narcissism that did increase over time was *authority* for the full sample ($p < .05$). Finally, to determine whether any particular celebrity group's narcissism changed with *years of experience*, we ran separate regressions on *years of experience* by celebrity type. Results showed no effect for any celebrity group ($p < .05$).

4.2. Celebrities and MBA students

The NPI score for MBA students was 16.18 ($SD = 6.32$). These results are consistent with those of John and Robins (1994) whose MBA students averaged 15.6 ($SD = 5.3$). The celebrities were also more narcissistic overall than the MBA students, $F(1,398) = 5.83$, $p < .01$. This was also true on the component scales of *authority*, $F(1,398) = 3.69$, $p < .05$;

Table 1
Descriptive statistics NPI and component scales for celebrities and MBA students means and standard deviations

Sample ^a	Gender	Authority	Exhibitionism	Superiority	Entitlement	Exploitativeness	Self-sufficiency	Vanity	NPI ^b
Celebrities	Male	4.93 (2.03)	2.35 (1.93)	1.67 (1.20)	2.01 (1.58)	1.97 (1.35)	3.33 (1.40)	1.01 (1.03)	17.27 (6.78) Range: 1–34
	Female	5.29 (1.75)	3.02 (1.67)	1.93 (1.12)	1.91 (1.45)	2.00 (1.45)	3.47 (1.48)	1.64 (1.07)	19.26 (6.34) Range: 9–34
	Total	5.04 (1.96)	2.54 (1.88)	1.75 (1.18)	1.99 (1.54)	1.98 (1.37)	3.37 (1.42)	1.19 (1.08)	17.84 (6.70) Range: 1–34
MBAs	Male	4.81 (1.90)	1.69 (1.71)	1.94 (1.20)	2.10 (1.50)	1.64 (1.33)	3.39 (1.49)	1.19 (1.12)	16.76 (5.77) Range: 3–32
	Female	4.22 (2.33)	1.82 (1.98)	1.68 (1.17)	1.65 (1.29)	1.55 (1.35)	2.75 (1.76)	1.18 (1.13)	14.85 (7.33) Range: 3–36
	Total	4.63 (2.05)	1.73 (1.79)	1.86 (1.20)	1.97 (1.45)	1.62 (1.33)	3.19 (1.60)	1.19 (1.12)	16.18 (6.32) Range: 3–36
Total	Male	4.87 (1.97)	2.02 (1.85)	1.80 (1.21)	2.06 (1.54)	1.81 (1.34)	3.36 (1.44)	1.10 (1.08)	17.01 (6.28) Range: 1–34
	Female	4.75 (2.13)	2.41 (1.92)	1.81 (1.15)	1.78 (1.37)	1.77 (1.41)	3.10 (1.66)	1.41 (1.12)	17.02 (7.18) Range: 3–36
	Total	4.83 (2.01)	2.13 (1.88)	1.81 (1.19)	1.98 (1.50)	1.80 (1.36)	3.28 (1.51)	1.19 (1.10)	17.01 (6.56) Range: 1–36

^a Total sample size is 400 individuals—200 celebrities and 200 MBAs. The breakdown is as follows: male celebrities 144; female celebrities, 56; male MBAs, 140; female MBAs, 60; total males, 284; total females, 116.

^b Note: NPI is scored out of a maximum of 40. The 40 points are allocated to each of the component scales as follows: *Authority* (8), *Exhibitionism* (7), *Superiority* (5), *Vanity* (3), *Exploitativeness* (5), *Entitlement* (6), and *Self-sufficiency* (6). This column provides the means, standard deviations, and the range for the NPI for each category.

Table 2
Descriptive statistics NPI and component scales for four-celebrity sub-groups means (standard deviations)

Celebrity sample ^a	Authority	Exhibitionism	Superiority	Entitlement	Exploitativeness	Self-sufficiency	Vanity	NPI ^b
Comedians	5.44 (2.09)	3.06 (1.92)	2.22 (1.31)	2.06 (1.39)	2.56 (1.38)	3.06 (1.26)	0.50 (0.92)	18.89 (6.11) Range: 7–29
Musicians	4.68 (2.13)	2.22 (1.84)	1.63 (1.24)	2.00 (1.55)	1.78 (1.29)	3.36 (1.38)	1.00 (1.01)	16.67 (6.98) Range: 1–33
Reality TV	5.50 (1.30)	2.82 (2.22)	1.73 (1.28)	1.59 (1.22)	2.41 (1.33)	3.50 (1.28)	1.82 (1.08)	19.45 (6.25) Range: 10–34
Actors	5.25 (1.73)	2.77 (1.73)	1.75 (0.97)	1.95 (1.61)	1.98 (1.51)	3.37 (1.60)	1.42 (1.03)	18.54 (6.50) Range: 9–34
Total	5.01 (1.96)	2.53 (1.88)	1.73 (1.18)	1.95 (1.51)	1.99 (1.39)	3.36 (1.43)	1.17 (1.07)	17.74 (6.72) Range: 1–34

^a Total sample size is 194 individuals. The breakdown is follows: Comedians, 20; Musicians, 97; Reality TV personalities, 24; Actors, 59.

^b Note: NPI is scored out of a maximum of 40. The 40 points are allocated to each of the component scales as follows: *Authority* (8), *Exhibitionism* (7), *Superiority* (5), *Vanity* (3), *Exploitativeness* (5), *Entitlement* (6), and *Self-sufficiency* (6). This column shows the means, standard deviations, and range for each category.

exhibitionism, $F(1, 398) = 18.56$, $p < .00$ and *exploitativeness*, $F(1, 398) = 7.70$, $p < .01$. The male MBAs were significantly more narcissistic than the female MBAs, $F(1, 398) = 3.88$, $p < .05$ and scored higher than the females MBAs on *entitlement*, $F(1, 398) = 4.09$, $p < .05$ and *self-sufficiency*, $F(1, 398) = 6.83$, $p < .01$. The results for gender with MBAs are consistent with those of the general population but the reverse of those found for celebrities.

4.3. Comparisons to the general population

How do our results among celebrities compare to other populations? Although many studies have used the NPI for specific populations, Foster et al. (2003) conducted a recent, comprehensive study of narcissism using 3445 individuals from six continents, representing many walks of life, and whose average age was 24.5 years ($SD = 9.1$; range 8–83). The overall NPI score for this large sample was 15.2 ($SD = 6.7$), and the mean NPI score for participants from the United States ($n = 2546$) was 15.3 ($SD = 6.8$)—the highest score across all continents.

Both groups in our sample scored higher than Foster et al.'s (2003) average NPI score. Recall that the average score for all celebrities was 17.84 (17% higher than Foster et al.'s U.S. sample's average) and 17.27 and 19.26 for male and female celebrities, respectively (see Table 1). The average score for MBA students was 16.18 (6% higher than Foster et al.'s U.S. sample's average) and 16.76 and 14.85 for male and female MBAs, respectively. To determine if these differences were significant we conducted two, one-sample *t*-tests using Foster et al.'s U.S. sample to define the population. Results showed that both the celebrity and MBA scores were significantly different than Foster et al.'s (2003) population [$t(199) = 5.20$, $p < .000$ for celebrities, and $t(199) = 1.98$, $p < .05$ for MBA students].

5. Discussion

This is the first study of which we are aware that has obtained data from a reasonably large sample of well-known celebrities regarding their personality characteristics. The results show that celebrities are a highly narcissistic group, with NPI scores significantly higher than that of MBA students. Further, based on Foster et al.'s study of the general population, the celebrity group's narcissism score was significantly higher than the average U.S. respondent.

Overall, female celebrities exhibited significantly greater narcissism than male celebrities, an effect that was also evident on the component scales of exhibitionism, superiority and vanity. These findings may result from a self-selection bias in which the industry attracts and retains women who place a very strong emphasis on their physical appearance.

Across celebrity types, reality television personalities had the highest narcissism scores (27% higher than Foster et al.'s average U.S. score), followed by comedians, actors, and musicians. Reality TV personalities and actors were significantly more narcissistic than musicians. Reality TV personalities also scored highest on vanity and self-sufficiency; however, comedians scored the highest on authority, exhibitionism, superiority, exploitativeness, and entitlement.

The findings for reality TV personalities relate directly to Lasch's comment (1979: 21): "The media give substance to and thus intensify narcissistic dreams of fame and glory, encourage the common man to identify himself with the stars and to hate the "herd," and make it more and more difficult for him to accept the banality of everyday existence."

Reality television has provided an outlet for narcissistic individuals, many with limited abilities, to believe that they can succeed in the entertainment industry. This desire to enter the industry may be fueled by the types of fantasy feelings of success, power and glory that narcissists seem to exhibit (Raskin & Novacek, 1991). It could also be the case that the producers of reality television shows have reasons for picking the most narcissistic contestants. First, as the literature shows, narcissists are liked initially (Paulhus, 1998); thus, casting agents and producers may be drawn to hire them. Second, from an audience standpoint, narcissists tend to create drama and, thus, are entertaining to watch, especially in competitive situations.

We found that scores on the NPI did not vary among celebrities based on their years of experience in the industry. There are two possible explanations for this finding. First, individuals who become celebrities may already have preexisting narcissistic tendencies and self-select into the industry. This explanation is consistent with recent research which suggests that narcissists may gravitate to environmental contexts in which the opportunities for high performance will lead to self-glorification (Wallace & Baumeister, 2002). It could also be the case, however, that individuals acquire narcissistic tendencies very early on in their careers and that those tendencies tend to stabilize fairly quickly. We suspect that the former explanation is the most accurate; however, only a longitudinal study of individuals' levels of narcissism, before and after they enter the entertainment industry, would tell us conclusively which explanation better accounts for the data.

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