Narcissistic leaders: the appearance of success

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SUMMARY

Many of the world's leaders have been said to possess narcissistic characteristics, for example Steve Jobs of Apple Computers or President Nicolas Sarkozy. At first glance, this does not seem surprising, as the narcissistic personality profile encompasses many prototypical leadership characteristics, such as confidence, perceived intelligence, extraversion, self-esteem and dominance. We all have an implicit idea of what constitutes an effective leader and if someone matches this prototype we tend to consider this person a leader (Lord et al., 1984; Offermann et al., 1994). But what if in addition to the above characteristics a person also lacks empathy, is exploitative and arrogant, and has sense of entitlement, as narcissists do? When and why would such a person be considered an effective leader? This is one of the questions I addressed in this dissertation.

Narcissistic individuals are self-absorbed, grandiose, and are chronically preoccupied with self-enhancement and scanning for opportunities in which they can exhibit their capabilities (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). Given these traits it is apparent why a leadership position would be particularly appealing to narcissists: It provides them with an ideal opportunity to influence others, show themselves as superior, and to solicit admiration. However, the two sided face of narcissists creates an interesting paradox regarding how others perceive them in leadership positions and how others perceive their effectiveness as leaders. On the one hand narcissists fit the implicit leadership prototype and are charming, confident, extraverted, and they espouse bold visions. On the other hand their overconfidence could lead them to make overly risky decisions and they have been found to be self-serving in the short-term at a long-term cost to others. Thus, their unrealistic optimism and overconfidence in their own abilities could potentially be disastrous for organizations.

My goal in this dissertation was to uncover the circumstances in which, and the reasons why, narcissistic individuals are perceived as effective leaders in the eyes of others. Furthermore, I investigated whether the perceptions of narcissists as leaders are actually aligned with reality, in terms of their impact on the performance of those they lead.

Main Findings

Chapter 2 of this dissertation examined the basic premise that narcissistic individuals search for social evaluation in order to bolster their ego and assert their superiority. I proposed that narcissists would be motivated to "shine" in highly interdependent social settings, which provide them with ample opportunity to demonstrate their competencies and influence others. I expected that the effect of having a narcissist in such a context would be twofold. First, I expected that narcissists' performance in highly interdependent settings would be higher than in low interdependent settings. Second, I expected that narcissists would emerge as leaders more often in highly interdependent settings as their leader-like behavior would be more evident to others. These predictions were tested using an experiment with four-person teams that completed an interactive team task. The results showed that narcissistic individuals emerged as leaders irrespective of the context. This could be due to the large overlap between narcissistic characteristics and those of a prototypical leader, and that this congruence is obvious even at lower levels of interaction.

Interestingly, additional results revealed that teams in which narcissists emerged as leaders reported being less verbal and having less individual decision-making opportunities. This inhibition of communication and decision making in other team members points towards the narcissist's dominance and a desire to solicit attention. With respect to individual performance, the results were in line with the prediction and showed that narcissistic individuals performed better in a highly interdependent context. All in all, these results reveal that narcissistic individuals are considered, and emerge, as leaders even at low levels of interaction, yet their individual performance is enhanced in a highly interactive context that motivates them to exhibit their skills and capabilities.

Chapter 3 focused on a specific context that was expected to especially enhance the emergence of narcissists as leaders, namely the crisis context. Crises engender anxiety, stress and uncertainty, which are psychological states that people instinctively wish to avoid or reduce. Thus, I proposed that especially under such circumstances the seeming confidence, decisiveness, dominance and toughness of narcissists will cause people to prefer high narcissists as leaders, despite their negative characteristics. The results of two studies consistently

showed that high narcissists indeed emerge as leaders more often than low narcissists, especially in crisis contexts. Study 3.1 utilized a scenario paradigm in which participants were required to choose between two potential leader candidates in a crisis versus non-crisis situation. The results showed that high narcissists were perceived to reduce uncertainty more than low narcissists, especially in a crisis, and were thus chosen more often as leaders than low narcissists. Study 3.2 built upon these findings and investigated whether high narcissists would also be chosen as leaders when people directly experience the threat of a crisis. The findings were in line with those of Study 3.1 and showed that when people directly experienced crisis they more often chose high narcissists as leaders than low narcissists, whereas in a non-crisis context there was no difference in preferences for a high or a low narcissistic leader. Furthermore, the results showed that when people feel greater pessimism about future outcomes they seek narcissistic leaders. All in all, these results showed that in a crisis situation, people seek to reduce uncertainty and prefer high narcissistic individuals as leaders.

In Chapter 4 I investigated whether people's perception of narcissists as leaders was dependent on another contextual factor: The degree of an organization's environmental dynamism. Furthermore, the focus here was on narcissistic leaders' perceived effectiveness, rather than leader emergence, as evidenced by their innovative behavior. Innovation has been consistently identified as a crucial element to organizational effectiveness and competitiveness in the market. If followers perceive their leader as innovative then they may be motivated to emulate their leader's behavior through role modeling and in turn stimulate organizational innovativeness.

A dynamic environment, for example one in which customer preferences change, or one of high competitiveness, creates a greater need for innovation because the organization must be responsive to the external changes. As a result, innovative behavior would be considered an indicator of success. For narcissistic leaders, being innovative thus represents an appealing avenue through which they can obtain glory, visibility and also portray how unique and different they are from others. In Chapter 4 I proposed that a dynamic environment would motivate narcissistic leaders to display innovative behavior.

The results of two field studies, which obtained responses from leaders as well as their followers, confirmed these predictions. The results of Study 4.1 and 4.2 showed that, in a highly dynamic environment, there was a positive relationship between leader's narcissism and perceived innovative behavior of the leader. Study 4.2 further showed that the leaders' individuation, i.e. behavior aimed at differentiating oneself from others, mediated this relationship. It was found that narcissistic leaders exhibited more differentiation behavior in general, which fits with their high need for uniqueness and being perceived as special, however, this behavior was accentuated in a dynamic environment.

To summarize, the results from Chapters 2 to 4 showed that narcissistic leaders tend to be perceived in a positive light. They are perceived as leaders in interactive team settings, they are chosen as leaders during crises, and they are perceived as innovative in highly dynamic environments. Taking a different approach, the aim of Chapter 5 was to examine whether these perceptions of narcissists as leaders also translate into superior performance of those they lead, i.e. groups or organizations. I proposed that the positive image of narcissists as leaders is in fact at discord with reality in terms of group performance. Indeed, the results of an experiment using three-person groups which engaged in a hidden profile task (a decision making task that requires group members to exchange information in order to reach a high quality decision; e.g., Stasser & Titus, 1985) supported this proposition. Despite being perceived as effective leaders by other group members, narcissistic leaders in fact inhibited the exchange of essential unshared information among group members. Consequently, groups with high narcissistic leaders made decisions of lower quality than groups with low narcissistic leaders. Although narcissists thus appear to be very skilled at projecting a favorable image of their leadership effectiveness, there is an evident disparity between these perceptions and the reality in terms of group performance. In fact, they hinder the very processes that are essential for reaching high quality decisions.

Overall Conclusion

Narcissists possess both positive (confidence, charisma, charm, extraversion, high self-esteem) and negative (exploitativeness, arrogance,

egocentrism, lack of empathy) characteristics, which raises questions as to their prevalence in leadership positions. In this dissertation I aimed to unravel the paradox of narcissists as leaders by examining why and when narcissistic individuals emerge and are perceived as effective leaders. Furthermore, this dissertation examined whether the perceptions of narcissists as leaders through the eyes of others are an accurate depiction of reality, in terms of how they affect the performance of those they lead. The series of field and experimental studies presented in this dissertation show that narcissists indeed emerge as leaders in group settings, and that there are certain conditions under which they individually perform better (Chapter 2), are especially preferred as leaders (Chapter 3) and are perceived to exhibit innovative behavior (Chapter 4). In other words, this dissertation shows that contextual influences are important in understanding the allure of narcissists as leaders and in motivating them to perform well at the individual level. The findings suggest that the 'bright' side of narcissistic leaders seems to stem from the way in which others perceive them, and in turn how these perceptions can have positive flow-on effects on followers. For instance, the presence of narcissistic leaders during crises can help diminish the uncertainty, stress and anxiety that followers may experience. As another example, the perceptions of narcissistic leaders as innovative may prompt their followers to emulate their innovative behavior through role modeling and thereby help enhance organizational innovativeness.

This dissertation also taps into a potential 'dark' side of narcissistic leaders and shows that people tend to make incorrect judgments when it comes to narcissistic leaders' capabilities. Because narcissistic leaders are characteristically self-absorbed and egocentric they actually inhibit the exchange of relevant information which is essential to high quality decision making and thereby diminish group performance. Nonetheless others still see them as effective leaders. It seems that narcissists are very skilled at self-presentation and portraying an image of competence, which also extends to the leadership domain. Therein seems to lie the secret of narcissists and why modern Western societies tend to elevate them to positions of power and prestige. This is aptly captured by the following quote: *"Nothing succeeds like the appearance of success"* (Lasch, 1991, p. 59). Yet one should also keep in mind the old adage that appearances can be deceiving.