



## Short Communication

## Narcissism and career success: Occupational self-efficacy and career engagement as mediators

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## ABSTRACT

Narcissism is a personality trait that has potentially important effects on career development outcomes, yet empirical research on this issue is sparse. The present study explored the relationships between narcissism and two indicators of career success (i.e., salary and career satisfaction) among a group of young professionals ( $N = 314$ ). We assessed a model proposing that the effect of narcissism on career success is mediated by increased occupational self-efficacy beliefs and career engagement. While correlations between narcissism and the two indicators of career success were minimal, the results showed a significant indirect effect on salary via occupational self-efficacy and indirect effects on career satisfaction via self-efficacy and career engagement. We discuss the results regarding insights into why narcissism may lead to career success.

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## 1. Introduction

Narcissism, in the social-personality view, is a normally distributed trait characterized by a sense of grandiosity, self-love, and inflated self-view (Foster & Campbell, 2007). Recently, researcher became interested to investigate to what extent “dark personality” traits, such as narcissism, might be related to work and organizational outcomes, for example, in relation to leadership and job performance (Campbell, Hoffman, Campbell, & Marchisio, 2011; O’Boyle, Forsyth, Banks, & McDaniel, 2012). While dark personality traits are usually related to a range of negative outcomes, particularly in interpersonal relationships (O’Boyle et al., 2012), little empirical research exists regarding the relationship between narcissism and work-related behaviors and outcomes. Existing research in this regard is mixed with evidence of positive, negative, or no effects across different outcomes (O’Boyle et al., 2012). Moreover, to our knowledge, there is no research regarding the relationship between narcissism and career success. It also remains unclear by which processes narcissism and career success might be related. Addressing these questions would be important to better understand how narcissism might affect career development

processes and outcomes. The present study explores the relationships between narcissism and two of the most commonly reported indicators of career success that represent both its objective and subjective dimensions (Ng, Eby, Sorensen, & Feldman, 2005): salary and career satisfaction. Specifically, we examined a model in which the effects of narcissism on career success are mediated by increased occupational self-efficacy beliefs and more engagement in proactive career behaviors. The results enhance our understanding of how and why narcissism is related to career success and contribute to the literatures on narcissism and career development.

## 1.1. Narcissism and salary

Because people high in narcissism are good at impression management and have a sense of high self-worth, they should make better first impressions in selection contexts and in groups (Campbell et al., 2011). As a consequence, they should be more likely to get the job that they want. In addition, people high in narcissism are motivated to strive for personal goals and have a desire to self-promote and engage in attention-seeking behaviors (O’Boyle et al., 2012). As such, they might be 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). Even though there seems to be no strong relationship between narcissism and job performance ratings (O’Boyle et al., 2012), these behaviors might help high-narcissistic people to self-promote their

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way into leadership positions (Brunell et al., 2008). As these aspects should be related to higher obtained salaries, we propose:

**Hypothesis 1.** Narcissism is positively correlated with salary.

### 1.2. Narcissism and career satisfaction

Research showed that narcissism is generally slightly negatively related to job satisfaction (Bruk-Lee, Khoury, Nixon, Goh, & Spector, 2009) possibly because employees high in narcissism think that they deserve a better job than they actually possess (Mathieu, 2013). Career satisfaction differs from job satisfaction as the former refers to the evaluation of one's entire working career (Greenhaus, Parasuraman, & Wormley, 1990). Due to the processes described above, people with high narcissism can be assumed to more likely obtain the jobs and promotions that they desire. Moreover, because people high in narcissism have high levels of self-approbation, they should evaluate their own accomplishments positively (O'Boyle et al., 2012). As a consequence, we propose that they should more favorably evaluate their career progress:

**Hypothesis 2.** Narcissism is positively correlated with career satisfaction.

### 1.3. Occupational self-efficacy beliefs and career engagement as mediators

To explain why the effects of narcissism on career success might occur, we draw upon current career development research and theory (Sullivan & Baruch, 2009) that has emphasized self-directedness and human agency as the main drivers of career success. Specifically, we focused on two pivotal factors as mediators in this regard: occupational self-efficacy beliefs and engagement in career management behaviors.

#### 1.3.1. Narcissism and occupational self-efficacy beliefs

Occupational self-efficacy refers to the belief that one is capable of mastering the tasks and challenges in one's work (Rigotti, Schyns, & Mohr, 2008). Self-efficacy beliefs are regarded as one key factor for positive career development and empirical research showed that self-efficacy beliefs are positively related to objective and subjective career success (Abele & Spurk, 2009). Because people high in narcissism have an inflated self-view and are overconfident, it is not surprising to find a positive relationship between narcissism and generalized self-efficacy beliefs (Mathieu & St-Jean, 2013). Therefore, high scores in narcissism may also be related to higher occupational self-efficacy beliefs.

**Hypothesis 3.** Narcissism is positively related to occupational self-efficacy beliefs.

According to social-cognitive career theory (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994), more distal factors (e.g., personality traits) exert their effects on career outcomes via more proximal career attitudes and behaviors. Thus, we hypothesize that occupational self-efficacy beliefs mediate the effects of narcissism on career success:

**Hypothesis 4.** There is an indirect effect of narcissism on (a) salary and (b) career satisfaction through increased occupational self-efficacy beliefs.

#### 1.3.2. Narcissism and engagement in proactive career behaviors

Engagement in proactive career behaviors (i.e., career engagement) is 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 be more motivated to strive for the accomplishment of personal (career) goals and be more actively engaged in promoting their career via career behaviors such as gaining visibility, positioning behaviors, or self-presentation. We hence hypothesize:

**Hypothesis 5.** Narcissism is positively related to career engagement.

In line with the reasoning presented above, we propose that the effects of narcissism on career success are mediated by more active career behaviors.

**Hypothesis 6.** There is an indirect effect of narcissism on (a) salary and (b) career satisfaction through increased career engagement.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants and procedure

We recruited alumni of three universities in Germany who were contacted by sending an email ( $N = 634$ ) to addresses provided in a previous study on career development, with a 50% ( $n = 314$ ) response rate, 68% female, age  $M = 29$  years ( $SD = 4$ ), and 2.1 ( $SD = 2.8$ ) years of working experience. A minority of 33% had a Bachelor's degree, 59% had a Master's degree, and 8% had other degrees. They worked in a diverse range of industries, most commonly in business administration (21%), education (18%), and advertising and marketing (12%). Participation was voluntary and a total value of 1150 Euros was offered in lottery drawings as an incentive.

### 2.2. Measures

Means, standard deviations, Cronbach's alpha estimates, and correlations between measures are displayed in Table 1.

#### 2.2.1. Narcissism

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.

#### 2.2.2. Occupational self-efficacy beliefs

We applied the six items of the occupational self-efficacy scale developed and validated by Rigotti et al. (2008). Participants were asked to respond on a six-point Likert scale.

#### 2.2.3. Career engagement

We used the career engagement scale (Hirschi, Freund, & Herrmann, 2014), which assesses the general degree to which a person has demonstrated various proactive behaviors to develop his or her career in the past 6 months. Answers were provided on a five-point Likert scale.

#### 2.2.4. Salary

We asked respondents to indicate their salary according to one of seven categories ranging from below 10,000 Euro to above 60,000 Euro gross annual income, in steps of 10,000 Euro per category. This resulted in a normally distributed scale with a skew of 0.02 ( $SD = 0.14$ ). Thus, no further transformation of the scale was necessary.

**Table 1**

Summary of intercorrelations, means, standard deviations, Cronbachs' alpha among the assessed constructs.

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Narcissism	5.81	3.22	(.76)				
2. Self-efficacy	4.53	0.55	.27***	(.83)			
3. Career engagement	3.42	0.81	.22***	.21***	(.87)		
4. Salary <sup>a</sup>	–	–	.11 <sup>†</sup>	.21***	.01	(–)	
5. Career satisfaction	3.70	0.74	.10 <sup>†</sup>	.42***	.25***	.32***	(.85)

Note: N = 314 for variables 1, 2, 3, and 5.

<sup>a</sup> N = 291, because not all participants indicated their salary; entries in parentheses in diagonal are the Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients.<sup>†</sup> p < .05.

\*\*\* p &lt; .001 (one-tailed).

**Table 2**

Specific direct, indirect, and conditional indirect effects on salary and career satisfaction.

Predictor	Salary (N = 291)				Career satisfaction (N = 314)			
	B	SE	t	p	B	SE	t	p
Constant	3.59	0.73	4.90	<.001	5.63	1.45	3.89	<.001
Self-efficacy	0.84	0.03	3.23	.001	0.39	0.52	7.45	<.001
Career engagement	–0.01	0.01	–0.74	.46	0.09	0.03	3.36	<.01
Narcissism	0.03	0.04	0.92	.36	–0.07	0.07	–0.95	.34
Indirect effects								
Mediator	Point estimate	SE	Bootstrapping BC 95% CI		Point estimate	SE	Bootstrapping BC 95% CI	
			Lower	Higher			Lower	Higher
Self-efficacy	0.38	0.14	0.01	0.07 <sup>a</sup>	0.15	0.36	0.08	0.23 <sup>a</sup>
Career engagement	–0.01	0.01	–0.03	0.01	0.05	0.02	0.02	0.11 <sup>a</sup>
Total indirect effect	0.03	0.02	0.00	0.06 <sup>a</sup>	0.20	0.04	0.13	0.29 <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> 95%-CI does not include zero. Sample sizes vary because not all participants indicated their salary.

### 2.2.5. Career satisfaction

We used the German version (Abele & Spurk, 2009) of the career satisfaction scale by Greenhaus et al. (1990). The scale includes five items with a five-point Likert scale.

## 3. Results

The results in Table 1 show that narcissism showed a weak but significant correlation with salary and career satisfaction, confirming Hypotheses 1 and 2, respectively. Narcissism also moderately correlated with occupational self-efficacy and career engagement, confirming Hypotheses 3 and 5, respectively.

To assess the proposed indirect effects of narcissism on career success via occupational self-efficacy and career engagement, we conducted a multiple mediation model with 5000 bootstrapping samples and the PROCESS syntax for SPSS by Hayes (2013). Occupational self-efficacy, but not career engagement or narcissism, had a specific direct effect on salary beyond that of the other assessed variables (Table 2). The bootstrapping results revealed a specific indirect effect of narcissism on salary through increased occupational self-efficacy, but not on career engagement, confirming Hypothesis 4a and refuting Hypothesis 6a. Using career satisfaction as the outcome, occupational self-efficacy and career engagement, but not narcissism, showed specific direct effects. The bootstrapping results confirmed significant specific indirect effects for both mediating variables, confirming Hypotheses 4b and 6b, respectively. The models explained 5% variance in salary,  $F(3, 289) = 4.70$ ,  $p < .01$ , and 21% variance in career satisfaction,  $F(3, 310) = 26.77$ ,  $p < .001$ .

## 4. Discussion

Our study advances extant research that focused on the relation between narcissism and organizational variables and shows that

narcissism is positively correlated with career development variables. However, the correlations with the examined career success indicators were very small. For career satisfaction, this suggests that traits such proactivity or neuroticism, for which larger correlations were observed in meta-analytic findings (Ng & Feldman, 2014b; Ng et al., 2005), might be more important than narcissism. However, the weak correlation with salary is comparable to that found for other traits and confirms that salary depends less on personality and more on parental socio-economic status or obtained educational level (Ng & Feldman, 2014a; Ng et al., 2005).

We could show that narcissism might exert indirect effects on both career success indicators. The results for the mediation model suggest that there are different pathways explaining why narcissism is related to objective and subjective career success. Occupational self-efficacy seems to be important for both objective and subjective success, while career engagement only mediated the effect of narcissism on career satisfaction but not on salary. First, these results confirm that objective and subjective indicators of career success can depend on different antecedents (Ng et al., 2005). Second, it corroborates the importance of self-efficacy in the career domain as a pivotal predictor of career outcomes and a mediator of more distal traits (Lent et al., 1994). Third, it reflects meta-analytic findings (Ng et al., 2005) that proactivity and career planning (indicators of career engagement) are more strongly related to career satisfaction than to salary.

## 5. Limitations and conclusions

There are some limitations to consider when evaluating our findings. First, we obtained self-reported, cross-sectional data. Ratings by other people, archival data on objective career success, or longitudinal assessment of effects might further strengthen the validity of the obtained results. Additionally, the cross-sectional nature of our data does not allow making causal claims as to

whether narcissism causes the assessed career development variables or whether other factors not assessed in this study can explain their relationships. Second, we sampled young professionals and it is possible that the observed effects would be different for employees with longer work histories affecting their career success.

In conclusion, the findings of this study enrich our understanding of the implications of narcissism in the work domain. Researchers have speculated about why narcissistic people often get ahead in their careers, focusing on the positive impression that narcissistic people make in recruiting and promotion settings (Campbell et al., 2011). Our findings imply that one reason for the positive career advancement of narcissists might lie in their more active and confident approach to career development. Because narcissists feel special and entitled to success, they seem to possess more confidence in mastering challenges in their careers and are more engaged in proactively promoting and managing their careers. In combination, these attitudinal and behavioral career variables seem to be important factors that go beyond mere impression management in explaining their career success.

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