

Narcissism and apologizing: The role of empathy and guilt (2016)

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The personality trait of narcissism refers to a self-centred, dominant, self-aggrandizing, entitled, and manipulative interpersonal orientation. We were concerned in this research with the relation between narcissism and apologizing. Specifically, we wondered whether narcissists would be unwilling to apologize to their victims, thus exhibiting hubristic behaviour. Narcissism is characterized by low levels of empathy. Low empathy is related to low levels of guilt. Low guilt, in turn, is associated with reluctance to apologize after an interpersonal transgression. Thus, we expected narcissists to be unwilling to apologize, as they experience low levels of empathy and, by implication, low levels of guilt.

We conducted three studies. In Study 1, a correlational investigation, we tested 190 participants. We assessed narcissism, empathy, guilt, and willingness to apologize. In Study 2, a scenario investigation, we tested 101 participants. We assessed narcissism first and then obtained measures of in-the-moment empathy, guilt, and willingness to apologize. In Study 3, an experiment, we tested 162 participants. We induced higher versus lower levels of narcissism, and then measured in-the-moment empathy, guilt, and willingness to apologize. The results of the studies converged. Narcissism was negatively associated with willingness to apologize due to low levels of empathy and ensuing reductions in guilt. Stated otherwise, narcissists are reluctant to apologize, as they experience little empathy with their victims, resulting in lower levels of guilt for their transgressions.

Empathy then, or the lack of it, is at the root of narcissists' hubristic behaviour. In particular, narcissists are deficient in two key empathetic components. These are cognitive empathy (the ability to understand others by taking their perspective or placing oneself in their situation) and affective empathy (the proclivity to respond to others by sharing their emotions or feeling compassion). It is this empathetic deficiency that accounts for narcissists' hardened social behaviour.

Interventions might be able to begin mending this deficiency. Such interventions (eg. humanizing others via detailed information or via immersion in their situation) would aim to increase empathic responding among narcissists.

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