

On Risks and Side Effects: Does Creative Accomplishment Make us Narcissistic?

Emanuel Jauk

Technische Universität Dresden, Germany

E-mail address: emanuel.jauk@tu-dresden.de

Natia Sordia

Tbilisi State University, Georgia

E-mail address: natia.sordia900@pes.tsu.edu.ge

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ABSTRACT

Kaufman (2018) calls for a research agenda on outcomes of creativity. Despite its many conceivable positive consequences, we focus on narcissism as a potentially less socially desirable outcome of creative accomplishment in this commentary. Evidence from cross-sectional studies suggests a systematic link between different indicators of creativity and narcissism. We argue that - irrespective of methodological challenges associated with this research - it seems indeed plausible that creativity is associated with narcissism. The link is presumably strongest in individuals who engage in creativity for recognition motives. Narcissistic strivings might ignite creative endeavors, and positive social feedback for creative accomplishments might fuel narcissism. While more research needs to be done to understand the causal nature of the effects, the available evidence points to narcissism as a socially undesirable aspect of creativity which is not commonly discussed.

In the target article, James Kaufman (2018) argues that creativity researchers need to extend their scope from predicting creativity to viewing creativity itself as a predictor variable. This perspective seems highly relevant as it might augment our understanding of individual and social consequences of creativity. While Kaufman calls for a research agenda on positive outcomes, we want to make a point about potentially less desirable outcomes here. If we consider creativity an individually and socially influential factor, we must also take into account its potential “adverse effects”. These likely exist for any influential variable, at least in the long run, and could even be regarded as a proof of concept for the general impact of creativity as a predictor variable¹.

¹ As an analogy, consider pharmaceuticals being advertised as totally harmless, no matter which dosage is being used. This naturally raises skepticism about the effectiveness of the drug.

Narcissism is a prime example of socially undesirable characteristics of highly creative individuals. Narcissistic tendencies such as exaggerated feelings of self-importance, arrogance, and entitlement are readily apparent in a number of artistic and scientific creators. Pablo Picasso, for instance, is reported to having said: “God is really an artist, like me... I am God, I am God, I am God”, which can be considered a very outright expression of narcissistic self-aggrandizement (Goncalo, Flynn, & Kim, 2010). More subtle expressions might be evident in the general population. Consequently, research has begun to unveil the associations between creativity and narcissistic personality traits, suggesting a systematic link: narcissism moderately correlates with self-rated creative potential (Furnham, Hughes, & Marhsall, 2013; Goncalo, Flynn, & Kim, 2010; Jonason, Abboud, Tomé, Dummett, & Hazer, 2017; Jonason, Richardson, & Potter, 2015), everyday creative activities (Furnham et al., 2013; Martinsen, Arnulf, Furnham, & Lang-Ree, in press; McKay, Karwowski, & Kaufman, 2017), and also with creative achievement (Galang, Castelo, Santos, Perlas, & Angeles, 2016; McKay et al., 2017).

While the observation of narcissistic tendencies in eminent, big-C creators is probably not surprising, the systematic relations between narcissism and creativity in little-C or pro-C samples (reflecting everyday creative activities or professional creativity, cf. Kaufman & Beghetto, 2009) are rather unexpected findings. These raise the question: does a narcissistic personality structure lead to engagement in creative activities, or do creative accomplishments even make us narcissistic? Though the existing research on the topic is cross-sectional in nature and cannot speak to causal effects, both pathways seem plausible on the basis of prevailing theories of both, narcissism and creativity. Narcissism reflects a constant striving for admiration from the social environment to maintain a grandiose self (Back et al., 2013; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). Given that *recognition* - in terms of need for acknowledgement, popularity, and status - also represents a common motive for engaging in creative activities (Benedek, Bruckdorfer, & Jauk, in press), it seems well plausible that narcissistic strivings might ignite creative motivation². Individuals who have a high need for admiration might be more likely to enter creative domains in the first place. This might be true for creative domains of high social visibility such as the arts, but also for the sciences (Lemaitre, 2017).

A second plausible pathway that might account for the relation between creative accomplishments - particularly in terms of pro-C / creative achievement (Galang et al., 2016; McKay et al., 2017) - and narcissism can be seen in the positive feedback creative individuals receive from their social environment, which might fuel narcissism. This view

² Though there are other and relatively more important motives such as *enjoyment* or *expression*, we focus on *recognition* here. Many paths may lead to the observed behavior of creative activity in terms of equifinality.

is supported by social-cognitive perspectives on narcissism, which highlight the role of excessive praise for the development of narcissism (Brummelman et al., 2015), provide evidence for increases in narcissism following life events (Grosz et al., 2017), and for the stabilization of self-esteem through positive interpersonal events in narcissism (Rhodewalt, Madrian, & Cheney, 1998). Narcissism can also increase following gains in social power (Mead, Baumeister, Stuppy, & Vohs, 2018) which are a likely by-product of creative achievement, particularly in the scientific field (Lemaitre, 2017). From this point of view, it might indeed be the case that overly positive feedback for creative accomplishments can foster individual narcissism levels. These effects might at least partially account for the observed correlations.

It could further be speculated that, besides the positive feedback accomplished creators receive, a lack of negative feedback (who dares to overtly criticize an established artist or influential scientist?) additionally consolidates narcissistic tendencies. Yet, in case negative feedback actually occurs, it may trigger goal disengagement and depression (Hu, Creed, & Hood, 2017; Nepon, Flett, Hewitt, & Molnar, 2011), which might particularly apply to individuals for whom being creative is an integral part of their personal identity (Lebuda & Csikszentmihalyi, 2017).

Taken together, both causal paths offer plausible explanations for the correlation between narcissism and creative accomplishment: those with a need for recognition and admiration might engage in creative activities more frequently, and feedback for creative accomplishments might foster narcissistic tendencies in creative individuals. To this end, those engaging in creative endeavors mainly for recognition purposes might also be more attentive to positive feedback, which could induce mutual feedback effects. The consequences of creative engagement as a means to satisfy narcissistic needs may be manifold and can range from the creation of praised artworks to scientific misconduct. For instance, striving for skill demonstration - a motive related to narcissism in science - explains questionable research practices in psychology researchers (Janke, Daumiller, & Rudert, 2018).

Though there is accumulating evidence for a positive association between creative accomplishment and narcissism in the general population, findings from existing research are limited by two methodological factors: first, part of the shared variance between self-reports of creativity and narcissism might be due to overclaiming tendencies associated with narcissism (e.g., Grijalva & Zhang, 2016). This is substantiated by the finding that narcissistic individuals overestimate their performance on tests of cognitive creative potential (Goncalo et al., 2010). Second, and even more importantly, the effects discussed above might actually not be specific to creativity. Any kind of human endeavor, including those not

commonly considered creative, can be pursued for narcissistic motives, and positive feedback for any kind of achievement, including noncreative ones, can fuel narcissism. Thus, it might be the case that the relationship between creative accomplishment and narcissism can be explained by differences in achievement motivation and receptiveness for performance feedback, which are well documented for narcissism (e.g., Besser & Priel, 2010).

To sum up, several studies suggest that there is indeed a relationship between creative accomplishment and narcissism in the general, non-eminent population. This effect is likely partially due to narcissism as a predictor of creativity, and partially due to creativity as a predictor of narcissism. Longitudinal research and studies comparing creative to noncreative domains are needed to understand the causality and the specificity of the effect. Up to now, existing studies can enrich our understanding of creativity as they shed light on potentially socially undesirable aspects of creativity, which are commonly discussed less upfront.

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Corresponding author at: Emanuel Jauk, Clinical Psychology and Behavioral Neuroscience, Technische Universität Dresden, Germany, Chemnitzer Straße 46, 01187 Dresden, Germany.

E-mail: emanuel.jauk@tu-dresden.de

Corresponding author at: Natia Sordia, Tbilisi State University, Georgia

E-mail: natia.sordia900@pes.tsu.edu.ge

