

'Narcissism creep?': Evidence for Age-Related Differences in Narcissism in the New Zealand General Population

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International research has suggested that levels of narcissism (excessive belief in self-worth, associated with excessive self-promotion and enhancement) vary across the lifespan, such that younger people are more narcissistic than their older forebears. Indeed, it has even been suggested that this represents a generational (rather than developmental) effect – younger people are more narcissistic now than they used to be. The majority of this research, however, has been conducted in the United States, and to date there has been no consideration of whether this age-related pattern extends to New Zealand. In two general population samples (N's 6,507 and 2,525) that completed measures of narcissism (an abridged Psychological Entitlement Scale and the full Narcissistic Personality Inventory, respectively), we report evidence of a curvilinear age-effect. Increasing age was associated with lower narcissism scores (flattening as age increased), and males recorded higher narcissism scores than females. This research provides normative data for the baseline rates of narcissism across men and women of different ages in the New Zealand population in 2009. However, while this provides evidence for age-related differences in narcissism it does not, in itself, provide evidence for a cultural narcissism shift.

We are unlikely to be alone in our experience of students' fascination for lectures on the topic of Narcissism ("Wow! You just perfectly described my ex-boyfriend/ girlfriend/ flatmate, etc" is a typical after-class comment). While numerous historical case-studies of the Narcissistic personality (characterised by an inflated view of the self, efforts aimed at self-enhancement, and social extraversion coupled with a lack of intimacy) abound, few have captured the New Zealand public interest as much as convicted murderer Clayton Weatherston. Indeed, the foundation of Weatherston's defence was that his offence could be understood as a consequence of his fragile narcissism. There followed a flurry of popular media stories (for example, Clarkson, 2009; Hartevelt, 2009; Polaschek, 2009; Sinclair, 2009). Weatherston's case is

not just an extreme example of allegedly clinical narcissism, but also the context for this paper and collection of one set of data presented here.

In the Weatherston case, psychiatric experts testified that the defendant displayed Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD), and that this explained his actions when confronted with what he perceived as a threat to his self-esteem. Lifetime prevalence for clinical narcissism may vary from around 1% to 6%, with males more likely to receive the diagnosis (Reich, Yates, & Ndvaguba, 1989; Stinson et al., 2008). At the same time, and as with other personality disorders, there has been considerable debate around whether or not narcissism is a taxon or an extreme manifestation of a normally distributed set of traits (e.g., Foster & Campbell, 2007, 2010; Haslam, 2003).

That everyone displays, to a greater or lesser extent, the characteristics of narcissism opens up the possibility of sub-clinical narcissism in the general population, a proposition that has led to the development of a range of self-report measures designed to assess the extent of narcissistic traits in non-clinical populations.

The most popular of these measures in the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Terry, 1979) that asks respondents to indicate whether or not a set of statements applies to them. The NPI has been used extensively in a range of populations, and testing a range of theoretical propositions (e.g., Bizumic & Duckitt, 2008; Barelds & Dijkstra, 2009). In fact, it appears likely that the diagnosis of Narcissistic Personality Disorder will be 'omitted' in the fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-V) of the American Psychiatric Association, as part of a revision of the taxonomic treatment of personality disorders consistent with dimensional continua of personality functioning (APA, 2011).

However, there has been little New Zealand-based published research on the topic of narcissism (for an exception, see Bizumic & Duckitt, 2008). Our intention here is to take a first step towards the ongoing international debate concerning whether or not cultural shifts over the past 40 years have encouraged an increase in narcissistic traits in the general population (e.g., Foster, Campbell, & Twenge, 2003; Trzesniewski, Donnellan, & Robins, 2008; Pinsky & Young, 2009). The

thesis that there has been a culturally-conditioned 'narcissism creep' is most prominent in popular works such as Pinsky and Young's (2009) 'The Mirror Effect' and Twenge and Campbell's (2009) 'The Narcissism Epidemic', but dates back to the 1970s (see Lasch, 1979).

Empirical efforts to assess the proposition of a narcissism creep, however, only started in earnest in the early 2000s. Foster et al., (2003) report results from an internet-based survey that indicate that men report higher narcissism levels than women (after controlling for narcissism-related variables such as income and age); respondents from individualistic cultures report higher narcissism scores' and that after controlling for gender and income, increasing age was associated with decreasing narcissism ($\beta = -.22$). Additionally, Foster et al. also reported that African Americans reported the highest narcissism scores in the sample. Based on a sample of over 35,000 general population participants Stinson et al. (2008) report a similar trend for the symptoms associated with clinical narcissism – incidence of NPD-like symptoms are three times as common among people aged 20-29 than amongst over-65's. Once again men more than women, African Americans more than other ethnic groups, and single/separated/divorced participants reported greater NPD symptoms. Foster and colleagues' (2003) finding that men score higher on narcissism is consistent with other research on both narcissism and self-esteem (e.g., Robins & Trzesniewski, 2005; Wright, O'Leary & Balkin, 1989).

Support for cultural effects on narcissism also comes in the form of studies that show associations between narcissism and variables associated with culture. For example, Jonason, Li, and Teicher (2010) examined the nature of social strategies associated with scores on Narcissism, Psychopathy and Machiavellianism, reporting that all three were associated with individualism and competition. Similarly, Kurman (2001) reports that people from individualistic cultures are more likely to use self-enhancement strategies in pursuing personal achievements. As well as the argument that any increases in

narcissism might be the consequence of a cultural shift, Foster et al. (2003) suggested several other explanations for the finding that narcissism decreased with age – that narcissism (as a disorder) tends to decline in individuals as they age, and that as one ages one has more opportunities to experience failure (therefore undermining narcissistic beliefs). As well as representing the first empirical test of the age-narcissism relationship, Foster et al's (2003) study is also important because it is based on a non-undergraduate sample. This is particularly important for the study of personality because of issues relating to the age at which personality becomes 'crystalized' (see Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010; Sears, 1986). It is our intention in this paper to replicate and extend these initial studies in samples of the New Zealand general population.

At the same time, the cross-sectional nature of their analysis, however, did not allow Foster et al. (2003) to disentangle the extent to which such a finding reflects age (individuals start out a little more narcissistic on average and get less so as they age), as opposed to cohort (individual levels of narcissism don't change very much but members of younger cohorts are just more narcissistic than older cohorts), effects. Subsequently, Twenge, Kannath, Foster, Campbell, and Bushman (2008) presented a meta-analysis of more than 80 studies measuring undergraduate college students' narcissism using the same instrument (the NPI) conducted over a 27-year period, and report that the more recent the year of data collection, the higher the NPI scores for the samples.

What might we expect to find in New Zealand samples? In terms of international comparisons, research has typically identified New Zealand as a relatively individualistic culture (Diener & Diener, 2009; Fischer, Hanke, & Sibley, in press; Hofstede, 1991), and New Zealand is increasingly exposed to international consumption and media trends. Indeed, Allen and colleagues (2007) showed an increase in endorsement of individual-centric values in New Zealand between 1982 and 2002. As a result, then, we might expect to see a similar age-related decrease in levels of

narcissism. Though Foster et al's (2003) results were based on statistics that typically assume linearity (correlations and regression), they present a figure that suggests the relationship may be more complex than that (they report that the relationship is better described as linear than parabolic however). This is important as modelling non-linear relationships using traditional analyses based on assumptions of linearity may, at the very least, underestimate the strength of associations between variables and, at the worst, miss meaningful relationships entirely. Therefore, we also assessed whether or not any age-narcissism relationship might be modelled most appropriately not only as a linear relationship but also as curvilinear. In the absence of reasons to expect the contrary, we also predicted that males would score higher on narcissism than females, and that income would be associated with narcissism (specifically, that increasing income might be associated with increasing narcissism).

Method

Sample 1 procedure and participant details

This study analyzed data from the 2009 New Zealand Attitudes and Values Study (NZAVS-2009). The NZAVS-2009 questionnaire was posted to 40,500 participants from the 2009 NZ electoral roll. Roughly 1.36% of all people registered to vote in New Zealand were contacted and invited to participate. The overall estimated response rate (adjusting for address accuracy of the electoral roll and including anonymous responses) was 16.6%.

The NZAVS-2009 contained responses from 6,507 participants (3,864 women, 2,640 men and 3 unreported). The sample thus over-represented women (59.4%). The mean age of people sampled was 47.80 years ($SD = 15.80$). In terms of ethnicity, 17.9% of the sample were coded as Māori ($n = 1,163$), 3.6% were of Pacific Nations ancestry ($n = 234$), 4.6% were of Asian ancestry ($n = 302$), 0.5% were of Middle Eastern, Latin American or African ancestry ($n = 32$), 71% were Pakeha/NZ European ($n = 4,618$) and 2.5% were coded as 'other' ($n = 193$).

All analyses of the NZAVS data were weighted to correct for sampling bias in gender and ethnicity relative to proportions observed for adults in the 2006 NZ census.

Sample 2 procedure and participant details

Sample 2 comprised viewers of the New Zealand version of the 60-Minutes current affairs show. Two weeks prior to airing a series of special reports on the Clayton Weatherston case, viewers were invited by the host (at the end of the show) to visit the broadcaster's website if they wished to participate in a 'Personality Study'. The survey officially closed on the day the Weatherston special edition aired, and a follow-up describing some of the results was aired a week after that.

In total, 4,145 people participated in the survey, 2525 of whom completed the version that included the NPI. The sample averaged 29.57 years of age ($SD=11.66$), 59% were female, and 77% identified as Pakeha/European New Zealander (15% as Maori and 3% Pasifika). The median personal income was identified as '\$20,000 to \$40,000 a year (\$385-\$769 a week)' and the median highest level of education reported was 'Completed 7th form'.

Ethical approval was granted for these studies.

Sample 1 Measurement of narcissism

In order to maximize response rate, the NZAVS employed shortened versions of all inventories. Because of this, we measured Narcissism using three of the highest-loading items from the Psychological Entitlement Scale (PES) developed by Campbell, Bonacci, Shelton, Exline, and Bushman (2004): 'Feel entitled to more of everything', 'Deserve more things in life' and 'Demand the best because I'm worth it.' The PES has, in turn, been shown to be strongly correlated with Narcissism as assessed using the NPI (see Campbell et al., 2004). Participants rated their level of agreement on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The Cronbach's alpha for this shortened scale was .70 ($M = 3.30$, $SD = 1.37$).

Table 1. Regression model testing age cohort effects in Narcissism (three-item PES) for New Zealand men and women in the 2009 NZAVS (N = 6358).

	B	se	β	t
Constant	-.119	.023		
NZ Deprivation Index	.055	.004	.159	13.00*
Gender	.189	.032	.094	5.96*
Age	-.011	.001	-.175	-10.12*
Age Squared	.000	.000	.033	1.88+
Gender X Age	.002	.002	.021	1.22
Gender X Age Squared	-.000	.000	-.008	-.38

* $p < .05$ + $p < .10$.

Sample 2 Measurement of narcissism

Participants in sample 2 completed a range of personality measures, some of which varied across different versions of the survey. 2525 of the surveys included the 40-item Narcissistic Personality Inventory (Raskin & Hall, 1979; Raskin & Terry, 1979). Cronbach's alpha for the scale in this sample was .84 ($M = 15.33$, $SD = 7.10$). As part of a demographic section participants were asked to provide a rough estimate of their before-tax income (Up to \$20,000 a year (\$384 per week), in \$20,000 increments as far as \$100,000 pa, then '\$100,001 - \$150,000 a year (\$1924 - \$2884 a week)' and finally 'More than \$150,000 a year (\$2885 or more a week)').

Results

Both samples showed a significant negative relationship between age and narcissism measure (Sample 1: $r(6356) = -.16$, $p < .001$; Sample 2: $r(2523) = -.20$, $p < .001$). However, consistent with our expectation that the relationship might not be linear we went on to assess whether a quadratic age term explained

additional variation in narcissism.

We tested regression models to determine the line of best fit for the curvilinear association between age and Narcissism for men and women. We tested comparable models in both samples. In Sample 1 we included the NZ Deprivation Index for the neighbourhood in which each participant lived as a covariate (White, Gunston, Salmond, Atkinson, & Crampton, 2008). In Sample 2 we included income as a covariate. These covariates controlled for the main effect of differences in affluence or income when examining the association between age and narcissism.

We tested for gender differences in the curvilinear association between age and Narcissism by controlling for the linear effect of age, the exponential effect of age (age squared), and the gender interaction terms with both the linear (gender x age) and exponential (gender x age x age) effects of age on Narcissism. The regression model for Sample 1 is presented in Table 1. The regression model for Sample 2 is presented in Table 2.

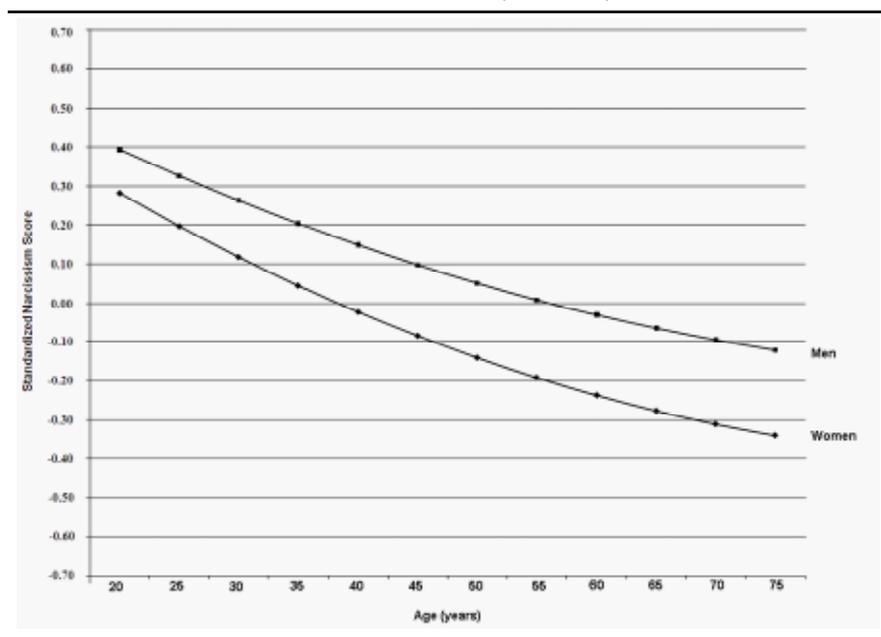
The regressions of narcissism

Table 2. Regression model testing age cohort effects in Narcissism (Narcissistic Personality Inventory) for New Zealand men and women in sample 2 (N = 2525).

	B	Se	β	t
Constant	-.181	.032		
Income	.087	.018	.112	4.83*
Gender	.392	.051	.191	7.64*
Age	-.028	.003	-.320	-9.43*
Age Squared	.000	.000	.093	2.89*
Gender X Age	.011	.004	.081	2.61*
Gender X Age Squared	-.001	.000	-.088	-2.56*

* $p < .05$

Figure 1. Cohort effect for age differences in Narcissism (three-item PES) for New Zealand men and women in the 2009 NZAVS ($N = 6358$).



measure onto the predictors accounted for significant variance in both samples (Sample 1: Multiple- $R=.23$, $R^2=.05$, $F(6,5351)=58.84$, $p<.001$; Sample 2: Multiple- $R=.28$, $R^2=.08$, $F(6,2519)=35.76$, $p<.001$). For both samples, we observed reliable gender differences in mean level of Narcissism and a strong negative linear effect for age. We also observed a significant exponential effect for age in Sample 2, which was moderated by gender as expected. All effects in Sample 1 were in the same direction, with a marginally significant exponential effect for gender, although the slope for this effect did not reliably differ for men and women in this sample.

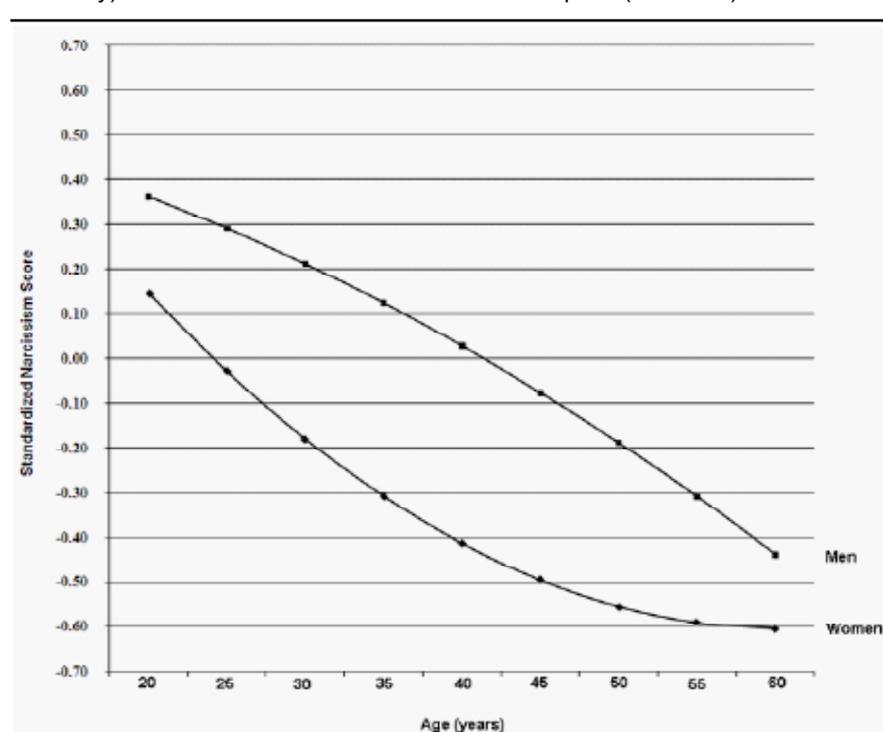
We derived the line of best fit for the curvilinear (exponential) association between age and narcissism adjusted for the linear effect separately for men and women using the procedures outlined in Cohen, Cohen, West and Aiken (2003). The cohort effect for age differences in narcissism for men and women in Samples 1 and 2 are presented in Figures 1 and 2 respectively. These slopes are plotted against standardized (z-scored) levels of Narcissism to adjust for differences in the metrics used to measure this construct in the two samples.

As can be seen in Figures 1 and 2, men were reliably higher than women in Narcissism in both samples, and there was a strong cohort effect for age.

People in the twenties scored the highest in levels of narcissism, and levels of narcissism decreased in a relatively linear fashion across age cohorts. The data presented in Figure 2 suggested that the shape of this age cohort effect differed subtly across men and women, with women showing a steeper initial decrease in Narcissism across the age range relative to men.

Discussion

Figure 2. Cohort effect for age differences in Narcissism (Narcissistic Personality Inventory) for New Zealand men and women in sample 2 ($N = 2525$).



As predicted, and consistent with international studies, we found that decreasing narcissism (measured using the NPI and the reduced PES) was associated with increasing age, after accounting for financial status. Indeed, the correlation between narcissism and age in our samples is roughly comparable with that reported previously (e.g., Foster et al., 2003). Males also scored higher than females on both measures. Inconsistent with previous literature however, this relationship was non-linear, with the gradient of the decrease flattening as participant age increased, excepting for males in Sample 2 (who showed a weak pattern in the opposite direction).

What does it mean that younger people are significantly more narcissistic than their elders? At the very least, it means that the negative aspects of narcissism are most common among a group less well equipped to deal with them. There are good reasons why extreme manifestations of narcissism are treated as a pathology, as research has also shown narcissism and closely related traits to be a potential risk factor for engaging in sexually coercive behaviour (e.g., Bushman, Bonacci, van Dijk, & Baumeister, 2003), increased levels of prejudice (Sibley, Harding,

Perry, Asbrock, & Duckitt, 2010), self-interest at the expense of the common good (Campbell, Bush, Brunell, & Shelton, 2005), aggression (Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996), conduct disorders in youth (Barry, Frick, & Killian, 2003), and counterproductive work behaviour (Penney & Specter, 2002), not to mention the distress and stress of seeking continuous affirmation for those who experience clinical levels of narcissism (Thomaes, Bushman, De Castro, & Stegge, 2009). In educational and work contexts, excessive entitlement may be associated with lack of effort, and frustration at a lack of recognition.

While it would be nice indeed to think that New Zealand has been immune to the kinds of cultural influences that might be argued have led to the cohort-type effects reported by Twenge and colleagues, this is likely more than a little naive. At the same time, that there have been narcissism cohort effects in New Zealand is currently untested – there is simply not enough data available to conduct the over-time analyses that Twenge et al. (2008) report. Even if there were enough data to conduct similar analyses, this would still not provide a true test of the extent to which any age-related differences in narcissistic traits might be due to individual-level change (individuals becoming more or less narcissistic), cohort effects (people of different age cohorts displaying different levels), or the interaction between the two. This is one of the reasons that longitudinal studies such as the New Zealand Attitudes and Values Study (and other endeavours such as the Dunedin Multidisciplinary Health Study) are so important. Until we have such data, and lots of it, it will be difficult to determine not only whether the kind of effects reported here are attributable to development or generational change, but also why in the specific pattern we have reported – why does narcissism drop more steeply initially against age, before beginning to plateau? If it is a generational change then it may be possible to identify social and historical events/factors that might allow us to speculate along these lines.

Lasch (1979) clearly identifies the causes for increasing self-involvement and self-promotion in a competitive social world in which the markers

of status are perceived to be also the markers against which life success is measured. He argues that this pursuit also serves to undermine social bonds, and the value given to community. Pinsky and Young (2009) argue that the popular media play a role in setting this agenda by providing a forum for celebrity. At the same time, mass media and ‘celebrities’ are part of a broader context that also includes academic (and educational) commentators – Twenge and Campbell (2009) show that while there has been a modest increase in academic publications on the subject of narcissism since the 1970s, there has been a dramatic increase in both academic and popular reports on self-esteem. They suggest that the well-meant attempts to improve people’s self-esteem may in turn also be encouraging narcissism. While self-esteem and narcissism might be strongly correlated (Raskin, Novacek, & Hogan, 1991, report a median correlation of .40), however, the life course development of self-esteem does not show the same pattern of results as reported by Foster et al., (2003) and Twenge et al., (2008) – self-esteem is highest among those aged 9-12 and 60-69 years of age, and lowest among those aged 18-22 and 80 years of age and older (Robins & Trzesniewski, 2005).

Part of the answer may lie in the nature of self-esteem. For example, Baumeister et al., (1996) argue that, far from self-esteem being the cause of violent behaviour, there is evidence to suggest the opposite. That is to say, they note that violent behaviour frequently occurs in the context of external threats to high subjective self-worth. Kernis, Lakey, and Heppner (2008) make a similar point – some individuals displaying high self-esteem (‘fragile’ self-esteem) act defensively when that self-esteem is threatened. The distinction between ‘fragile’ and ‘robust’ concepts of self-worth is an important one in this context.

Trzesniewski and Donnellan (2010) disagree that age-related differences in narcissism indicate a generational effect, arguing instead for a developmental explanation. They marshal data from a massive (almost half a million) sample of high school seniors on a range of psychological measures, and

conclude that while there is evidence that more recent cohorts are more cynical than their forebears, there was little evidence that recent students were more egotistical and selfish than those previously. At the same time, the surveys used did not measure narcissism directly, using instead proxies such as egotism and selfishness. The problem, empirically, is that there is in fact very little research that has investigated the developmental trajectory of narcissism (Thomaes et al., 2009).

In both samples, men were also consistently higher than women in narcissism. This gender difference occurred across the entire age range, with men of a given age being, on average, reliably higher in narcissism than women of that same age. Generally speaking, our results indicate that, men lag behind women in terms of decreasing levels of narcissism by between 10 to 15 years. This means that, given narcissism decreases with age, a 30 year old man will have a similar level of narcissism to a 20 year old woman, and so on. There are a number of possible reasons for this gender difference. Our reading of the literature suggests that the most likely explanation is some form of interaction between personality or other stable and possibly biological aspects of individuals and exposure to socialization practices and gender roles in society. It could be, for instance, that as gender roles become less demarcated in New Zealand society that the gender gap in narcissism rates will continue to shrink. This would certainly be consistent with our data, as the curvilinear effects we identify suggest that the gender gap in narcissism is at its smallest among younger cohorts, and then that the gap tends to widen among older cohorts, before possibly shrinking again in the oldest age groups we examined (at least in Sample 2).

The question remains, however, as to the extent to which gender differences in narcissism may be driven by gender role socialization or reflect a stable possibly biologically-based gender difference. Social Dominance Theory, for example, states that all else being equal, men will always be higher in Social Dominance Orientation (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Social Dominance Orientation is a trait that tends to be partially caused by

high narcissism and related constructs such as low Agreeableness and low Honesty-Humility (Sibley & Duckitt, 2008; Sibley et al., 2010). However, there is some evidence that gender differences in traits such as Social Dominance Orientation may also result partially from differences in the strength of gender identification (Wilson & Liu, 2003). So there is good evidence for a socialization effect on this trait (see also Guimond, Dambrun, Michinov, & Duarte, 2003). Future research could examine the possibility of gender role socialization and gender identity as factors that might moderate gender differences in narcissism in a similar manner to that identified by Wilson and Liu (2003) with regard to Social Dominance Orientation. In addition to providing information about the possible effects of gender socialization on levels of narcissism, such research might also inform the debate on the extent to which gender differences in Social Dominance Orientation are a product of more distal gender differences in the personality traits that cause this ideological orientation.

While we feel that there are numerous strengths to studies presented here, there are also potential weaknesses. Firstly, though we argue that the abridged Psychological Entitlement Scale used in sample 2 is reliable, we cannot be certain that it fully taps the broader construct it is drawn from, or indeed narcissism more generally. That results from the two samples (and scales) are broadly comparable should provide some assurance that they are superficially at least working in the same way. However, sample 2 is also less diverse than the New Zealand population as a whole, and was collected in the context of a television programme. It is unclear what types of bias such a relatively unusual method might eventuate in the data collected. Eschewing the ever-popular undergraduate 'convenience' sample, our samples are large and, in the case of the NZAVS sample 1 in particular, broadly representative. While the NZAVS sample 1 pragmatically trades off the use of a full narcissism measure in favour of sample size, the smaller 60 Minutes sample 2 includes a full version of one of the most common non-clinical measures of narcissism. Indeed,

these are two of the largest national personality studies ever conducted in New Zealand.

An advantage of large samples is that they allow the statistical power to conduct tests of the type reported here – modelling not just linear relationships but also investigating the nature and extent of potential non-linear relationships. The inability in this study to disentangle age and cohort effects notwithstanding, these results provide the most comprehensive investigation of personality-age effects conducted in this country, and generally indicate that increasing age is associated with lower levels of narcissism in the New Zealand population.

Authors' Note

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