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# Vulnerable Narcissism and First-Person Singular Pronoun Use

Hannah L. Dorough  
*Georgia Southern University*

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*Vulnerable Narcissism and First-Person Singular Pronoun Use*

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in  
Psychology.

By  
Hannah Dorough

Under the mentorship of Dr. Nicholas Holtzman

ABSTRACT

Who talks about themselves most frequently? Recent research has explored the top correlates of self-focused language use. Depression and negative emotionality tend to appear as key positive correlates. Surprisingly, narcissism—which is largely known for its trait of self-centeredness—is not a major correlate of self-focused language use. Studies demonstrating this null effect have only measured grandiose narcissism, while entirely neglecting vulnerable narcissism. By using a survey methodology with carefully-selected trait inventories and a language task, the purpose of this study is to fill the gap in the literature—to see whether vulnerable narcissism accounts for talking about oneself, above and beyond the common correlates of depression and negative emotionality. Our findings from a large number of college students (valid  $N = 471$ ) indicated that vulnerable narcissism is significantly positively correlated with first-person singular pronoun use; however, it does not predict the outcome above and beyond traditional predictors. Along with establishing this novel correlation, these findings have clear practical implications which will be detailed further in this paper.

Thesis Mentor: \_\_\_\_\_

Dr. Nicholas Holtzman

Honors Director: \_\_\_\_\_

Dr. Steven Engel

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Department of Psychology  
University Honors Program  
Georgia Southern University

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### Vulnerable Narcissism and First-Person Singular Pronoun Use

Who talks about themselves? Recent research has explored the top correlates of self-focused language use. Depression and negative emotionality tend to appear as key positive correlates (Edwards & Holtzman, 2017; Tackman et al., in press). Surprisingly, narcissism—which is largely known for its trait of self-centeredness—is not a major correlate of self-focused language use (Carey et al., 2015). Studies demonstrating this null effect have measured grandiose narcissism, while entirely neglecting vulnerable narcissism. The purpose of this study is to fill this gap in the literature—to see whether vulnerable narcissism accounts for talking about oneself, above and beyond common correlates (e.g., depression and negative emotionality).

Two correlates of I-talk are depression and negative emotionality. Depression is a narrow concept which refers to an ongoing mood disorder, usually diagnosed at the clinical level, that negatively affects one's emotional state. People who have been diagnosed with depression typically experience a markedly diminished interest in most activities and a negative mood for most of their days. Negative emotionality is a much broader concept, which encompasses depression. This term is also commonly referred to as neuroticism, a Big Five trait that characterizes one's tendency to regularly experience negative emotions, such as sadness, frustration, and anger (Miller et al., 2013; Tackman, et al., in press). Both depression and negative emotionality are well-established correlates of self-focused language use at this point.

Grandiose narcissism (i.e., the dimension of narcissism found to be correlated with extraversion, self-assurance, exhibitionism, and aggression [Wink, 1991]) is a plausible candidate as a positive correlate of I-talk as well, because it entails self-

centeredness. Because of this egocentricity and feeling of superiority, it would make sense intuitively that people high in narcissism would talk about themselves incessantly. This common belief, to experts' surprise, is not backed by empirical studies. A large-scale study had participants from 14 different samples across numerous locations in the United States and Germany. The researchers measured both narcissism and self-esteem levels using multiple inventories. Across all samples and pronoun types, narcissism was shown as unrelated to I-talk,  $r = 0.02$  (Carey et. al., 2015).

This null effect led researchers in a new direction; newer research examines the relationship between broader aspects of personality and language use. One similar study holds particularly high importance due to its large-scale measure of the relationship between depression, negative emotionality, and first-person singular pronoun use. The study included 4,754 participants, across six different labs and various cultures, who were responsible for completing both a language task and a depression and negative emotionality measure. Across all locations and contexts of the study, both negative emotionality and depression were found to be positively but moderately correlated with I-talk,  $r = .13$  and  $r = .10$ , respectively. There was little evidence of any gendered associations of first-person singular pronoun use as related to depression, and the correlation did not vary by pronoun type or communication context (Tackman et. al., in progress).

A gap in this literature is whether vulnerable narcissism is a positive correlate of I-talk. Vulnerable narcissism is a dimension of narcissism which is positively correlated with introversion, defensiveness and anxiety (Wink, 1991; see also: Miller et al., 2011). While grandiose narcissism is centered around feelings of true dominance, vulnerable

narcissism is often an imitation of grandiosity as a defense of a fragile ego (Miller et. al., 2011). There are several reasons as to why vulnerable narcissism might be a positive correlate of I-talk. Not only is vulnerable narcissism a correlate of both depression and negative emotionality (two positive correlates of I-talk), but vulnerable narcissism also retains the self-centeredness that is an integral part of grandiose narcissism. So, it makes sense that vulnerable narcissism would correlate with I-talk like depression and negative emotionality. In addition, because vulnerable narcissism also has a flair for self-centeredness, we have theoretical reason to investigate whether vulnerable narcissism might be an even larger correlate of I-talk than the other predictors (i.e., depression and negative emotionality).

In summary, the main goal of this study is to test the hypothesis that vulnerable narcissism will be positively correlated with I-talk, based on previous research linking this specific dimension of narcissism with other predictors of I-talk. The hypothesis is that, over and above depression and negative emotionality, vulnerable narcissism will positively predict first person pronoun use.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Undergraduate students at a large southeastern university in the United States were recruited through the SONA system, a cloud-based research management platform that allows students to participate in studies to acquire extra credit points in psychology courses. There was a total of 1,160 respondents, and 471 of these responses were used. Embedded in every survey was an item to catch invalid respondents. Any participant who

responded in an invalid way at all during the study was excluded from all analyses--these criteria excluded respondents who incorrectly answered the catch questions and those who did not write at least 100 words in response to the prompt discussed below.

The participants were all 18 years or older, ranging from 18 to 25 years of age ( $M_{age} = 19.57, SD = 2.65$ ). This sample was 66.57% female. 64.92% of the respondents were white, 25.07% of the respondents were African American, and all other races are represented in the remaining 10.01%. All participants performed the study through the Qualtrics survey software. Data was collected until April 2018.

### **Measures**

**Demographics.** To better understand the sample and the individual variations within it, we asked a few demographic questions: age, gender, race/ethnicity, marital status, and sexual orientation. The demographic questions also were about what type of hometown (rural or urban) the participant was from and the participant's current financial resource status (ranging from impoverished to affluent).

**Depression Scale (CESD-R).** To assess depressive symptoms, we used the revised Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (Radloff, 1977). This self-report questionnaire includes 20 items and asks participants to rate how often they have experienced certain symptoms in a week using a rating scale, ranging from 1 (*Rarely or none of the time*) to 4 (*Most or all of the time*) (Radloff, 1977; Eaton et al, 2004). An example item from this measure is "I lost interest in my usual activities." This measure has been validated through studies performed on diverse communities and within samples of students and has exhibited good psychometric properties (Van Dam & Earleywine,

2011). In our study, it produced acceptable internal reliability, with a Cronbach's alpha of .72.

**Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI).** To assess grandiose narcissism, in keeping with prior research (Carey et al., 2015), we used the Narcissistic Personality Inventory, which has been widely used in the United States and other English-speaking countries. This is a self-report, 40-item, forced-choice measure (Raskin & Terry, 1988). A sample narcissistic response is "I have a natural talent for influencing people." The measure has been validated (e.g., Raskin & Terry, 1988), and it produces good internal consistency reliability within this study ( $\alpha = .77$ ).

**Neuroticism measure.** To measure neuroticism, we used the "Neuroticism" factor of the Big Five Aspects Scale, which includes the aspects of Volatility and Withdrawal (DeYoung, Quilty, & Peterson, 2007). The Neuroticism scale within the BFAS is a 20-item self-report questionnaire with a Likert rating scale that ranges from 1 (*Not like me at all*) to 6 (*Very much like me*). The measure has been found to accurately measure neuroticism versus emotional stability and its facets (DeYoung, Quilty, & Peterson, 2007). With a Cronbach's alpha equaling .71, the measure produced an acceptable internal consistency within this study.

**Pathological Narcissism Inventory (PNI).** To assess the seven dimensions of pathological narcissism, we used the PNI, which is a 52-item, self-report measure that encompasses traits of both grandiose and vulnerable narcissism (Pincus et al., 2009). For our study, we are using the PNI as a measure of vulnerable narcissism only. Self-report ratings ranged from 1 (*Not like me at all*) to 6 (*Very much like me*). An example of a narcissistic response is "I often fantasize about being admired and respected." The

measure has been validated (Pincus et al., 2009) and had acceptable reliability within this study ( $\alpha = .70$ ).

### **Procedure**

Participants signed up for and participated in the study online via the SONA system. After informed consent was obtained, participants proceeded to answer several questions regarding demographics, followed by all the trait inventory questionnaires, which were randomized. Items were also randomized within each questionnaire.

At the end of the study, participants were asked to provide a typed response to the following prompt: “For the next 20 minutes, write about whatever comes to your mind. Think about what your thoughts, feelings and sensations are at this moment. Write about them as they come to you; follow where your mind naturally goes. Please do not include any identifying information in your writing, like your name. Please write below in the text box.” This language task is modeled after a stream-of-consciousness personality study performed by Holleran and Mehl (2008), which in turn was modeled after Pennebaker and King (1999). After the language task was completed, participants were debriefed and logged off. The language text was then submitted to the LIWC (Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count) system to establish counts of first-person singular pronoun usage.

## Results

Descriptive statistics of all potential predictor variables are provided in Table 1. The calculated correlations are displayed in Table 2. As predicted, vulnerable narcissism was correlated positively and significantly with first person singular pronoun use,  $r(470) = .107, p = .021$ .

Table 1. Descriptives of the study.

<i>Measure</i>		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Scale Anchors</i>
First-person singular pronouns		12.259	3.214	471	
CESD	Depression	1.697	0.589	471	1 - 4
NPI	Grandiose Narcissism	1.591	0.176	471	1 - 2
PNI	Vulnerable Narcissism	3.235	0.915	471	1 - 6
BFAS	Neuroticism	2.982	0.704	471	1 - 6

Table 2. Correlations among major variables in the study.

	1	2	3	4	5
1. First Person Singular Pronoun Use	1.000				
2. NPI Average (Grandiose Narc.)	0.017	1.000			
3. CESD Average (Depression)	<b>0.132</b>	<b>0.201</b>	1.000		
4. BFAS -- Neuroticism	<b>0.127</b>	<b>0.207</b>	<b>0.575</b>	1.000	
5. PNI -- Vulnerable Narc.	<b>0.107</b>	<b>0.082</b>	<b>0.435</b>	<b>0.568</b>	1.000

Note:  $N=471$  for all correlations shown. Correlations in bold are significant,  $p < .05$ .

Second, we ran a hierarchical regression, in which there were two steps. In the first step were the traditional predictors of first-person singular pronoun use (grandiose narcissism, depression, and neuroticism); in the second step, vulnerable narcissism was added. Results can be seen in Table 3. Contrary to expectation, it was evident that

vulnerable narcissism did not predict the outcome above and beyond the traditional predictors.

Table 3. Hierarchical regression.

	B Coeff.	SE	Beta	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI LL	95% CI UL
Model 1							
$R^2 = .022, MSE = 35.101$							
Intercept	10.900	1.371		7.950	< .001	8.206	13.594
NPI (grandiose narc.)	-0.315	0.857	-0.017	-0.368	.713	-1.999	1.369
CESD (depression)	0.505	0.315	0.090	1.606	.109	-0.113	1.124
BFAS neuroticism	0.337	0.240	0.079	1.403	.161	-0.135	0.808
Model 2							
$R^2 = .023, MSE = 27.374$							
Intercept	10.704	1.405		7.616	< .001	7.942	13.466
NPI (grandiose narc.)	-0.281	0.859	-0.015	-0.327	.744	-1.969	1.407
CESD (depression)	0.471	0.319	0.084	1.477	.140	-0.156	1.099
BFAS neuroticism	0.262	0.267	0.061	0.982	.327	-0.262	0.786
PNI (vulnerable narc.)	0.130	0.203	0.036	0.642	.521	-0.269	0.530

Note:  $R^2$  increases due to model 2 (in which vulnerable narcissism was included) was .001,  $F(1,466) < 1.00, p = .521$

## Discussion

In this study, vulnerable narcissism was significantly positively correlated with first-person singular pronoun use. This result from my fairly large sample helps to establish the correlation between vulnerable narcissism and first-person singular pronoun use. However, the results did not show that it does so above and beyond the standard predictors of depression and negative emotionality which have been outlined in past literature (Edwards & Holtzman, 2017; Tackman et al., in press). This comes as a surprise, as vulnerable narcissism is positively related to both predictors.

The study's results are consistent with previous literature concerning language use as a predictor of certain psychological traits. Our findings indicated that first-person, singular pronoun use was significantly correlated to both depression and negative emotionality, which follows prior research (Edwards & Holtzman, 2017; Tackman et al., in progress). Consistent with prior research (Carey et. al., 2015), we also found that grandiose narcissism was not correlated with first-person, singular pronoun use. The consistency of these findings further validates the trait inventories that were used throughout our study. In addition, this finding reiterates a point made in previous literature: why do people continue to associate narcissism with I-talk, although research has provided no correlation and one study even states that this type of language often cannot be consciously processed (Pennebaker et. al., 2003)?

Readers and fellow researchers may be surprised at another finding in this study: both depression and neuroticism are shown as significantly positively correlated to grandiose narcissism. This does not align with all the previous literature (e.g., Sedikides et al., 2004). Certain studies have demonstrated quite the opposite, claiming that narcissistic traits can be beneficial, at least in emerging adulthood. Currently, research links narcissistic traits with better adaptability to changing environments (Hill & Roberts, 2012). Our finding is an interesting addition to this research, suggesting a potential gap and showing that those who rank high in grandiosity can and sometimes do display levels of neuroticism.

Our findings have clear practical implications. As established in previous research, narcissistic traits do have a significant impact on an individual's everyday life, especially when concerning their interpersonal behaviors and relationships. These

individuals come off as agreeable to others at first, but that enhanced feeling does wear off over time (Paulhus, 1998). Studies that dive into this concept provide results suggesting that, when another individual is ranked as more dominant, narcissists tend to be overcome with hostility and antagonistic behaviors (Wright, et. al., 2017), which can lead to the more disagreeable behaviors and actions. Because language use can potentially be used as a defining marker of vulnerable narcissism, this could be applied to a clinical setting. Analysis of client's language use could lead to better understanding and treatment of vulnerable narcissism.

Some limitations do exist within the current study, and these can aid in providing direction for future research. First, like a majority of research on narcissism and other psychological phenomena, the construct was self-reported. Response bias has the potential to cloud our ability to truly understand the link between vulnerable narcissism and first-person, singular pronoun use. To offset this limitation, we did use catch questions and a minimum time allowance on the language task to eliminate a total of 689 respondents. Additionally, due to the smaller scope of this project, all participants were college-aged students at a university located in the southeastern United States. The sample was largely female, and a majority of the participants were white. Although these demographic facts do not directly affect our interpretation of the results, it would be compelling to conduct a similar study with a different population to measure the potential for cultural differences.

We do hope that our finding of the significant correlation between first-person, singular pronoun use and vulnerable narcissism inspires future research endeavors. It would be interesting to see results in a tightly-controlled lab environment in which direct

manipulation is used. Research may be expanded so that narcissistic traits are measured through activities and naturally-observed behaviors rather than self-report measures, potentially decreasing the potential for biases or inaccuracies. This placement of individuals in a lab setting would certainly provoke interest, as it would reduce the possibility of distraction while conducting the written language aspect of the study. Another possible extension to this study could include topic modeling with the current text data. By analyzing what topics were of most interest to individuals ranked high in narcissism, one could expect to find results that would be an interesting addition to existing literature.

## **Conclusions**

Our original hypothesis was partially correct—vulnerable narcissism was positively and significantly correlated with first-person singular pronoun use, but it did not predict the outcome above and beyond the traditional predictors as we had assumed.

Consistent with prior research (Carey et al., 2015; Edwards & Holtzman, 2017; Tackman et al., in progress), we found that grandiose narcissism was not correlated with first-person, singular pronoun use, but it was significantly correlated to both depression and negative emotionality. The significant positive correlations between depression, neuroticism and grandiose narcissism did come as a surprise through its confliction with current literature (Sedikides et al., 2004; Hill & Roberts, 2012). All these findings are clearly relevant to real-world issues. The novel correlation of first-person singular pronoun use and vulnerable narcissism suggests that language use can potentially be used as a defining marker of this dimension of narcissism. When applied to a clinical setting, it

could assist at the diagnosis and treatment levels. We anticipate that this significant finding can serve as a platform for future research, as there is much to be contributed to our knowledge of vulnerable narcissism and human behavior.

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