

Self-admiration or Helping Others? A Study on the Influence of Employee Narcissism on Prosocial Behavior

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Abstract

This study integrates dual narcissism theory and trait activation theory to examine the influence mechanisms of admiration narcissism and rivalry narcissism on employee prosocial behavior, with a thorough analysis of the mediating effects of employee relationship approach motivation and relationship avoidance motivation, as well as the moderating effect of task interdependence. Through analyzing 235 employee-coworker dyadic data collected in two stages, the results reveal that: admiration narcissism has a significant positive effect on employee prosocial behavior, while rivalry narcissism has a significant negative effect; relationship approach motivation mediates the relationship between admiration narcissism and employee prosocial behavior, whereas relationship avoidance motivation does not mediate the relationship between rivalry narcissism and employee prosocial behavior; task interdependence not only positively moderates the direct effect of admiration narcissism on employee relationship approach motivation, but also positively moderates the indirect effect of admiration narcissism on prosocial behavior through relationship approach motivation.

Full Text

Self-Admiration or Helping Others? A Study on the Influence of Employee Narcissism on Prosocial Behavior

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Abstract

This study integrates the Narcissistic Admiration and Rivalry Concept (NARC) with trait activation theory to examine the mechanisms through which narcissistic admiration and narcissistic rivalry influence employee prosocial behavior. We specifically analyze the mediating roles of relational approach motivation and relational avoidance motivation, as well as the moderating role of task interdependence. Based on 235 employee-colleague dyadic data collected in two stages, the results reveal that narcissistic admiration has a significant positive effect on employee prosocial behavior, whereas narcissistic rivalry has a significant negative effect. Relational approach motivation mediates the relationship between narcissistic admiration and prosocial behavior, but relational avoidance motivation does not mediate the relationship between narcissistic rivalry and prosocial behavior. Furthermore, task interdependence not only positively moderates the direct effect of narcissistic admiration on relational approach motivation but also positively moderates the indirect effect of narcissistic admiration on prosocial behavior through relational approach motivation.

Keywords: narcissistic admiration, narcissistic rivalry, relational approach motivation, relational avoidance motivation, prosocial behavior, task interdependence

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Narcissism is a personality trait characterized by an inflated self-view, strong psychological superiority and entitlement, and low empathy (Emmons, 1987; Miller & Campbell, 2008). According to Twenge and Campbell (2009), narcissism has become increasingly prevalent among new-generation employees, showing substantial growth compared to 30 years ago (Twenge & Foster, 2010). A 2013 *Time* magazine survey on individual narcissism found that 40% of employees believed they deserved a promotion every two years regardless of their performance. Given the ubiquity of narcissists in organizations, colleagues inevitably interact with them. Understanding the behavioral patterns of narcissists during interpersonal interactions can help organizational leaders grasp their behavioral regularities and effectively manage narcissistic employees. Moreover, scholars have called for empirical research to explore the relationship between narcissistic traits and prosocial behavior, particularly in the context of interpersonal interactions (Konrath & Tian, 2018).

Previous research has yielded inconsistent findings regarding the relationship between narcissism and prosocial behavior. Some scholars argue that narcissists' self-focus and lack of empathy (Hepper et al., 2014; Watson et al., 1984) lead them to exhibit less prosocial behavior overall (He & Zhu, 2016; Judge et al., 2006; Lannin et al., 2014; Qureshi et al., 2015). However, others suggest that narcissists may strategically display prosocial behavior to enhance their reputation or status (Liu et al., 2021; Konrath et al., 2016; Konrath & Tian, 2018). Some empirical studies have even found a positive correlation between narcissism and prosocial behavior (Ding et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2018; Zhou et

al., 2010; Kauten & Barry, 2014, 2016; Konrath et al., 2016). These inconsistent conclusions indicate that fundamental questions about narcissism and prosocial behavior remain unanswered: Does employee narcissism affect prosocial behavior? How and when does this influence occur?

To address these controversies, this study integrates the Narcissistic Admiration and Rivalry Concept (Back et al., 2013; Back, 2018) with trait activation theory (Tett & Burnett, 2003; Tett & Guterman, 2000; Tett et al., 2013) to construct and test the underlying mechanisms and boundary conditions of employee narcissism's influence on prosocial behavior. The NARC framework conceptually distinguishes between narcissistic admiration and narcissistic rivalry, which trigger different motivational processes and consequently produce divergent effects on subsequent prosocial behavior (Back et al., 2013). Specifically, narcissistic admiration tends to adopt self-promotion strategies, activating relational approach motivation during interpersonal interactions and promoting prosocial behavior that enhances one's charm (Fatfouta, 2017). In contrast, narcissistic rivalry tends to adopt self-defense strategies, activating relational avoidance motivation during interpersonal interactions and inhibiting prosocial behavior (Tracy et al., 2011). Furthermore, Back et al. (2018) developed a supplementary model for the NARC framework, explicitly stating that whether employee narcissism produces positive or negative outcomes depends on situational factors, with interactive situational factors being particularly critical (Back et al., 2018, p. 312). Task interdependence, defined as the degree to which employees need to communicate, collaborate, and coordinate with colleagues to complete tasks (Van der Vegt et al., 2003), represents an important interactive situational factor. High task interdependence reflects a high-interaction context, whereas low task interdependence reflects a low-interaction context.

Whether task interdependence can “catalyze” the positive effects of narcissistic admiration or “restrain” the negative effects of narcissistic rivalry remains unexplored in academic research. Therefore, this study integrates the NARC framework with trait activation theory to examine the mechanisms and boundary conditions through which narcissistic admiration and narcissistic rivalry influence employee prosocial behavior. The research model is shown in [Figure 1: see original paper].

[Figure 1: see original paper]

1.1 Literature Review and the Narcissistic Admiration and Rivalry Concept

In recent years, narcissism has attracted widespread scholarly attention (Twenge & Campbell, 2009), primarily in clinical psychology, psychiatry, and social-personality psychology (Cain et al., 2008; Campbell & Miller, 2011; Pincus & Lukowitsky, 2010). Clinical psychologists view narcissism as a personality disorder (Pincus & Lukowitsky, 2010), with the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* providing detailed de-

criptions of narcissistic personality disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Social-personality psychologists typically distinguish between grandiose narcissism and vulnerable narcissism, with Cain et al. (2008) offering a detailed comparison of these two forms.

Initially, social-personality psychologists treated grandiose narcissism as a unidimensional construct. Research found that vulnerable narcissism's consistently negative characteristics produced stable negative predictive effects (Weiss & Miller, 2018). However, studies on grandiose narcissism yielded contradictory results. For instance, grandiose narcissists are often described as confident yet hostile, seeking social approval yet disinterested in others, charming yet selfish. They can make positive and lasting first impressions on colleagues and leaders but eventually cause relationship conflicts and ruptures (Back, 2018; Campbell & Campbell, 2009). Consequently, scholars began focusing on grandiose narcissism and recognized that it is not a simple unidimensional construct but rather comprises two distinct yet interrelated types.

Based on the contradictory nature of grandiose narcissism, Back et al. (2013) proposed the Narcissistic Admiration and Rivalry Concept, dividing grandiose narcissism into narcissistic admiration and narcissistic rivalry. The NARC framework posits that narcissists' fundamental goal is to maintain a grandiose self, which they can achieve through two distinct pathways, each associated with unique cognitions, motivations, and behaviors (Back et al., 2013; Manley et al., 2019). Narcissistic admiration describes the process of maintaining a grandiose self through self-promotion strategies, triggering positive cognitions, activating relational approach motivation, and displaying charismatic behaviors, thereby leading to positive social outcomes (e.g., increased popularity, praise, and acquisition of social resources and status) (Back et al., 2013; Helfrich & Dietl, 2019). In contrast, narcissistic rivalry describes the process of maintaining a grandiose self through self-defense strategies. Anticipating threats to their desired self-image triggers negative cognitions, activates relational avoidance motivation, and elicits self-protective antagonistic behaviors such as power struggles, derogation of others, and aggressive acts, resulting in negative social outcomes (e.g., unpopularity, criticism, and relationship ruptures) (Back et al., 2013; Grove et al., 2019).

1.2 Narcissistic Admiration, Narcissistic Rivalry, and Prosocial Behavior

Narcissistic admiration refers to a narcissistic tendency whereby employees maintain positive self-evaluation by seeking social admiration (Back et al., 2013; Back, 2018). We hypothesize that it may increase employees' prosocial behavior. First, employees with narcissistic admiration adopt self-promotion strategies, which can be summarized as "demonstrating one's abilities to others" and "making others admire oneself," manifesting as extraversion, openness, confidence, and warmth in interpersonal interactions (Back et al., 2013; Fatfouta, 2017; Grove et al., 2019). Therefore, employees with narcissistic admiration exhibit prosocial

behavior toward others to maintain positive self-awareness. Empirical research also indicates that employees with narcissistic admiration possess positive cognitions and emotions and are more willing to engage in helping behavior (Geukes et al., 2017; Lange et al., 2016).

Narcissistic rivalry refers to a narcissistic tendency whereby employees maintain positive self-evaluation by avoiding social failure (Back et al., 2013; Back, 2018). We hypothesize that it may reduce employees' prosocial behavior. First, employees with narcissistic rivalry adopt self-defense strategies, which can be summarized as "protecting oneself from harm" and "preventing others from bringing one down," manifesting as coldness, low conscientiousness, and impulsivity in interpersonal interactions (Lange et al., 2016; Miller et al., 2016; Rogoza et al., 2016). Consequently, employees with narcissistic rivalry exhibit more antagonistic behaviors (e.g., dominance, derogation, and aggression) to maintain positive self-awareness, correspondingly reducing prosocial behavior. Empirical studies also show that employees with narcissistic rivalry possess negative cognitions and emotions and are unwilling to engage in helping behavior (Back et al., 2013; Lange et al., 2016; Leckelt et al., 2015).

H1a: Narcissistic admiration has a significant positive effect on prosocial behavior.

H1b: Narcissistic rivalry has a significant negative effect on prosocial behavior.

1.3 The Mediating Role of Relational Approach and Avoidance Motivation

According to the NARC framework, narcissistic admiration and narcissistic rivalry trigger two distinct motivational processes within individuals, producing different effects on subsequent prosocial behavior (Back et al., 2013; Back, 2018). Because employees with narcissistic admiration pursue self-promotion and desire others' admiration, this directly triggers relational approach motivation—the strong desire to approach or obtain interpersonal relationships—during interpersonal interactions (Cheng et al., 2021; Back et al., 2013; Gable & Harmon-Jones, 2008; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). Conversely, because employees with narcissistic rivalry exhibit self-defense and want to protect themselves from harm, this directly triggers relational avoidance motivation—the strong desire to avoid or escape interpersonal relationships—during interpersonal interactions (Cheng et al., 2021; Back et al., 2013; Gable & Harmon-Jones, 2008; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001).

Furthermore, relational approach and avoidance motivations influence employees' subsequent behavioral expressions (Elliot, 2008). Specifically, relational approach motivation encourages employees to strive toward the goal of obtaining interpersonal relationships, manifesting as friendly and warm attitudes toward others and displaying prosocial behavior (Tracy et al., 2011). In contrast, relational avoidance motivation drives employees toward the goal of avoiding interpersonal relationships, manifesting as cold and defensive attitudes toward

others and refusing to display prosocial behavior (Elliot, 2008).

H2a: Relational approach motivation mediates the relationship between narcissistic admiration and prosocial behavior.

H2b: Relational avoidance motivation mediates the relationship between narcissistic rivalry and prosocial behavior.

1.4 The Moderating Role of Task Interdependence

Back (2018) supplemented the NARC framework from a person-situation interaction perspective to address when positive versus negative pathways are activated (Back, 2018, p. 312), explicitly stating that interactive situational factors are key to the expression of narcissistic admiration and rivalry traits. During interpersonal interactions, task interdependence serves as an important interactive situational factor (Wang et al., 2017), with its level directly reflecting the frequency and intensity of interactions between individuals and their colleagues. Therefore, we propose that task interdependence may moderate the expression of narcissistic admiration and rivalry traits.

Specifically, trait activation theory emphasizes that individual traits are activated and expressed only when situational factors match those traits (Liu et al., 2020; Tett & Guterman, 2000). In high task interdependence situations, individuals need to communicate, collaborate, and coordinate closely with colleagues (Van der Vegt & Janssen, 2003). This high-interaction context matches the expectations of employees with narcissistic admiration for self-promotion and desire for interpersonal relationships but does not match the expectations of employees with narcissistic rivalry for self-defense and desire to escape interpersonal relationships. Therefore, in high task interdependence contexts, narcissistic admiration traits are activated, leading to higher relational approach motivation and more prosocial behavior, whereas narcissistic rivalry traits are not activated, and the context does not strengthen the effects of narcissistic rivalry on relational avoidance motivation and prosocial behavior. In low task interdependence situations, individuals do not need to communicate, collaborate, or coordinate with colleagues (Sargent & Sue-Chan, 2001). This low-interaction context matches the expectations of employees with narcissistic rivalry, activating their traits and leading to higher relational avoidance motivation and less prosocial behavior. However, this low-interaction context does not match the expectations of employees with narcissistic admiration, leaving their traits unactivated and not strengthening their effects on relational approach motivation and prosocial behavior.

H3a: Task interdependence positively moderates the relationship between narcissistic admiration and relational approach motivation, such that the relationship is stronger when task interdependence is high.

H3b: Task interdependence negatively moderates the relationship between narcissistic rivalry and relational avoidance motivation, such that the relationship is stronger when task interdependence is low.

H4a: Task interdependence positively moderates the strength of the mediating effect of relational approach motivation, such that the indirect effect is stronger when task interdependence is high.

H4b: Task interdependence negatively moderates the strength of the mediating effect of relational avoidance motivation, such that the indirect effect is stronger when task interdependence is low.

2.1 Research Sample

This study employed a questionnaire survey method to collect employee-colleague dyadic data in two stages from seven small and medium-sized enterprises in Hubei Province, covering manufacturing, information technology, materials, and construction industries. First, the researchers contacted enterprise leaders through personal connections to explain the research purpose, format, and data usage. After obtaining consent, they coordinated with human resources departments to acquire staff lists and arrange survey timing. Second, the researchers randomly selected participants from the staff lists and assigned codes. The selection process involved randomly choosing one participant from 3–4 person teams, two participants from 5–6 person teams, and three participants from 7–10 person teams. Each participant was randomly matched with a colleague for evaluation. If the designated colleague was unavailable, another colleague was randomly invited on-site to complete the evaluation, ensuring each participant was matched with a unique colleague. Finally, the research team administered questionnaires on-site to ensure proper completion and emphasized the confidentiality of responses. To minimize common method bias, we used a time-lagged data collection method for the paired data (Podsakoff et al., 2012). At Stage 1, we collected demographic information and employees' self-ratings of narcissistic admiration, narcissistic rivalry, and task interdependence, distributing 300 questionnaires and receiving 278 responses. At Stage 2 (approximately one month later), employees rated their relational approach and avoidance motivations, while colleagues rated the employees' prosocial behavior, distributing 278 questionnaires and receiving 235 valid responses (78.33% response rate). Among the employee sample, 57.4% were male, with an average age of 29.05 years ($SD = 6.59$). The highest education level was bachelor's degree, accounting for 49.4% of participants.

2.2 Research Instruments

All measurement scales used in this study were established scales published in top international journals. Following a rigorous back-translation procedure assisted by English professionals and human resources management professors, we adapted them into Chinese. All variables except control variables were measured using 7-point Likert scales (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree).

Narcissistic Admiration: We used the Narcissistic Admiration Scale developed by Back et al. (2013), comprising nine items rated by employees. A sample

item is “I should be seen as a great person.” Cronbach’ s α was 0.93.

Narcissistic Rivalry: We used the Narcissistic Rivalry Scale developed by Back et al. (2013), comprising nine items rated by employees. A sample item is “I think most other people are losers.” Cronbach’ s α was 0.89.

Relational Approach Motivation: We adapted the approach motivation scale developed by Ferris et al. (2013) to measure relational approach motivation, comprising six items rated by employees. A sample item is “My goal is to fulfill my potential in relationship interactions.” Cronbach’ s α was 0.90.

Relational Avoidance Motivation: We adapted the avoidance motivation scale developed by Ferris et al. (2013) to measure relational avoidance motivation, comprising six items rated by employees. A sample item is “I sometimes feel anxious in relationship interactions.” Cronbach’ s α was 0.95.

Task Interdependence: We used the Task Interdependence Scale developed by Bishop and Dow Scott (2000), comprising four items rated by employees. A sample item is “I must frequently cooperate with colleagues.” Cronbach’ s α was 0.94.

Prosocial Behavior: We used the Prosocial Behavior Scale developed by Grant and Sumanth (2009), comprising five items rated by colleagues in one-to-one evaluations. A sample item is “He/she likes to do things that have a positive impact on others.” Cronbach’ s α was 0.91.

Control Variables: Based on previous research, we controlled for demographic variables correlated with our dependent variable: gender, age, and education level. Gender was controlled because meta-analytic findings show that men are more helpful than women (Eagly & Crowley, 1986). Age was controlled because prosocial behavior decreases with age (Ding & Lu, 2016). Education level was controlled because lower-educated employees are more willing to engage in prosocial behavior (Piff et al., 2010). Gender was coded as 1 for male and 0 for female. Age was calculated in years. Education level was coded as 1 = junior high school or below, 2 = high school or technical secondary school, 3 = junior college, 4 = bachelor’ s degree, and 5 = graduate degree. Additionally, because industry type affects prosocial behavior (Miao et al., 2017), we controlled for industry type (manufacturing, information technology, materials, and construction) by creating three dummy variables.

3.1 Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Given that some variables had numerous items, which could increase standard errors due to the large number of parameters to be estimated (Little et al., 2002), and because our focus was on the distinctiveness among measured variables rather than the internal correlations among items within each variable, item parceling was theoretically appropriate (Wu & Wen, 2011). We therefore parceled all variables using random assignment, with each variable’ s items randomly assigned to three parcels.

After parceling, we conducted confirmatory factor analysis using Mplus 7.4 to examine discriminant validity. As shown in , the six-factor model ($\chi^2(120) = 374.99$, CFI = 0.94, TLI = 0.92, RMSEA = 0.10, SRMR = 0.06) not only met established criteria (Schermelleh-Engel et al., 2003) but also fit significantly better than five alternative models, demonstrating good discriminant validity among the six key variables.

3.2 Common Method Bias Test

We used two methods to test for common method bias. First, we conducted Harman's single-factor test using SPSS 24.0. Following Podsakoff et al. (2003), a cumulative variance explained by a single factor below 40% is acceptable. Our results showed the first factor explained 21.25% of variance, below the 40% threshold, suggesting minimal common method bias. Second, after conducting confirmatory factor analysis, we added a common method factor to the six-factor model (Tang & Wen, 2020). The resulting seven-factor model could not be fitted in Mplus 7.4, confirming that serious common method bias was not present.

3.3 Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis

We conducted descriptive statistics and correlation analysis using SPSS 24.0. Means, standard deviations, and correlation coefficients are presented in . Narcissistic admiration was significantly positively correlated with prosocial behavior ($r = 0.18$, $p < 0.01$) and relational approach motivation ($r = 0.18$, $p < 0.01$), while relational approach motivation was significantly positively correlated with prosocial behavior ($r = 0.44$, $p < 0.01$). Narcissistic rivalry was significantly negatively correlated with prosocial behavior ($r = -0.20$, $p < 0.01$) but significantly positively correlated with relational avoidance motivation ($r = 0.20$, $p < 0.01$), and relational avoidance motivation was significantly negatively correlated with prosocial behavior ($r = -0.19$, $p < 0.01$). These results provide preliminary support for H1a and H1b.

3.4 Hypothesis Testing

We tested all hypotheses using full-model path analysis in Mplus 7.4 (Edwards & Lambert, 2007). As shown in [Figure 2: see original paper], narcissistic admiration had a significant positive effect on prosocial behavior ($b = 0.36$, $SE = 0.11$, $p = 0.001$), and narcissistic rivalry had a significant negative effect ($b = -0.34$, $SE = 0.12$, $p = 0.005$), supporting H1a and H1b. Narcissistic admiration also had a significant positive effect on relational approach motivation ($b = 0.36$, $SE = 0.12$, $p = 0.003$), which in turn had a significant positive effect on prosocial behavior ($b = 0.37$, $SE = 0.06$, $p < 0.001$). The indirect effect of narcissistic admiration on prosocial behavior through relational approach motivation was 0.14 ($SE = 0.05$), with a 95% confidence interval of [0.05, 0.24] that excluded zero, indicating significant mediation and supporting H2a.

However, narcissistic rivalry's effect on relational avoidance motivation was not significant ($b = 0.16$, $SE = 0.08$, $p = 0.058$), and relational avoidance motivation's effect on prosocial behavior was also not significant ($b = -0.03$, $SE = 0.10$, $p = 0.792$). The indirect effect of narcissistic rivalry on prosocial behavior through relational avoidance motivation was -0.004 ($SE = 0.02$), with a 95% confidence interval of $[-0.05, 0.03]$ that included zero, indicating non-significant mediation. Thus, H2b was not supported.

Additionally, the interaction term between standardized narcissistic admiration and task interdependence had a significant positive effect on relational approach motivation ($b = 0.14$, $SE = 0.06$, $p = 0.022$), supporting H3a. In contrast, the interaction term between standardized narcissistic rivalry and task interdependence did not significantly affect relational avoidance motivation ($b = -0.07$, $SE = 0.06$, $p = 0.261$), so H3b was not supported.

[Figure 2: see original paper]

To clarify the moderating effect of task interdependence on the relationship between narcissistic admiration and relational approach motivation, we plotted the interaction following Aiken and West (1991), using values one standard deviation above and below the mean to represent high and low task interdependence, respectively. As shown in [Figure 3: see original paper], simple slope tests indicated that the positive relationship between narcissistic admiration and relational approach motivation was not significant under low task interdependence ($\beta = 0.06$, $p = 0.447$) but was strong under high task interdependence ($\beta = 0.34$, $p = 0.001$), providing further support for H3a.

[Figure 3: see original paper]

We also used bootstrap methods to estimate the indirect effects of narcissistic admiration on prosocial behavior through relational approach motivation at high and low levels of task interdependence, as well as the difference between these indirect effects. As shown in , under low task interdependence, the indirect effect was 0.06 ($SE = 0.05$) with a 95% confidence interval of $[-0.02, 0.16]$ that included zero, indicating non-significance. Under high task interdependence, the indirect effect was 0.21 ($SE = 0.07$) with a 95% confidence interval of $[0.08, 0.36]$ that excluded zero, indicating significance. The difference between the indirect effects at high and low task interdependence was 0.14 ($SE = 0.07$) with a 95% confidence interval of $[0.03, 0.30]$ that excluded zero, supporting H4a. Because H3b regarding the moderating effect of task interdependence on narcissistic rivalry and relational avoidance motivation was not supported, H4b regarding the moderated mediation was also not supported.

4 Research Conclusions and Discussion

Previous research on narcissism has focused excessively on narcissistic leadership (Li et al., 2020; Liao et al., 2016; Liao et al., 2016). However, individual narcissism has become increasingly common, prompting many studies to ex-

amine employee narcissism (Chen et al., 2018; Liu et al., 2020; Yang & Zhang, 2021; Treadway et al., 2019; Zhou et al., 2020). Many scholars have investigated the relationship between employee narcissism and prosocial behavior, but findings remain inconsistent. To explain these contradictory conclusions, this study integrates the NARC framework with trait activation theory to examine the relationships between narcissistic admiration, narcissistic rivalry, and prosocial behavior, exploring the mediating roles of relational approach and avoidance motivations and the moderating role of task interdependence.

Analysis of 235 employee-colleague dyadic data revealed that employees with narcissistic admiration engage in more prosocial behavior, whereas those with narcissistic rivalry engage in less. Further, narcissistic admiration positively influences prosocial behavior through relational approach motivation, whereas the indirect effect of narcissistic rivalry through relational avoidance motivation was not significant. The non-significant mediation of relational avoidance motivation may be attributed to the relatively low average level of task interdependence in our sample, which may have prevented narcissistic rivalry from significantly affecting relational avoidance motivation. Additionally, relational avoidance motivation may be more predictive of defensive behaviors than of prosocial behavior. Task interdependence positively moderated both the direct effect of narcissistic admiration on relational approach motivation and the indirect effect on prosocial behavior. However, task interdependence did not significantly moderate the direct effect of narcissistic rivalry on relational avoidance motivation or the corresponding indirect effect.

4.1 Theoretical Implications

First, this study examines the double-edged effects of narcissistic admiration and narcissistic rivalry on employee prosocial behavior, offering an explanation for inconsistent findings in previous research. While some scholars argue that narcissists' low empathy (Hepper et al., 2014; Watson et al., 1984) implies they are generally unwilling to engage in prosocial behavior, others contend that narcissists may strategically display prosocial behavior to enhance their reputation or gain rewards (Konrath et al., 2016; Konrath & Tian, 2018). By treating narcissism as a dual-dimensional concept with both positive and negative aspects (Back et al., 2013), this study distinguishes between narcissistic admiration and rivalry and finds that the former positively predicts prosocial behavior while the latter negatively predicts it, providing a new perspective for reconciling previous inconsistent findings.

Second, this study explores the mechanisms through which narcissistic admiration and rivalry influence prosocial behavior based on the NARC framework. Although the mediating role of relational avoidance motivation was not supported, this finding suggests that future research could independently examine the effects, mechanisms, and boundary conditions of narcissistic admiration and rivalry without being overly constrained by the NARC framework. While previous research has typically examined both dimensions simultaneously to explore

their double-edged effects (Back et al., 2018; Benson et al., 2019; Cheshure et al., 2020; Fatfouta et al., 2015; Grove et al., 2019; Helfrich & Dietl, 2019; Manley et al., 2020), recent studies have begun to independently examine the effects of narcissistic rivalry (Fehn & Schütz, 2021). Future research could develop unique theoretical frameworks for each dimension to better understand their distinct value.

Third, by integrating trait activation theory, this study investigates the important role of an organizational situational factor (task interdependence) in the relationships between narcissistic admiration, narcissistic rivalry, and prosocial behavior, helping managers better understand the contexts in which these traits operate. Previous research on employee narcissism has rarely examined task interdependence. According to trait activation theory, traits are activated only when situational factors match them (Liu et al., 2020; Tett & Guterman, 2000). The high-interaction context reflected by high task interdependence matches the expectations of employees with narcissistic admiration for self-promotion and relationship acquisition, thereby increasing relational approach motivation and prosocial behavior. However, the non-significant moderating effect of task interdependence on narcissistic rivalry suggests that this situational factor does not effectively “restrain” the negative effects of narcissistic rivalry. Future research should explore other boundary conditions that may influence the effects of narcissistic rivalry to enhance understanding of its impact and help managers learn how to manage employees with narcissistic rivalry.

4.2 Practical Implications

First, this study helps organizations recognize that narcissists are not always harmful and should be viewed dialectically. Previous research has focused on the “arrogant, conceited, and low empathy” characteristics of narcissistic rivalry while neglecting the “confident, decisive, and charismatic” features of narcissistic admiration, leading to widespread rejection of narcissistic employees. Organizations should correctly understand the dual nature of narcissism, leveraging the positive effects of narcissistic admiration while mitigating the negative effects of narcissistic rivalry. During recruitment, selection, and placement, organizations can use personality tests to identify candidates with narcissistic admiration traits and minimize the entry of those with narcissistic rivalry.

Second, organizations can enhance the positive effects of narcissistic employees by assigning interdependent tasks. This study found that in high task interdependence environments, employees with narcissistic admiration have higher relational approach motivation and exhibit more prosocial behavior. Therefore, organizations should increase interdependence among employees in task design to foster mutual assistance and long-term cooperation. Leaders can restructure work tasks and arrangements to create interdependence, thereby enhancing relational approach motivation, increasing interpersonal interactions, and ultimately promoting prosocial behavior among narcissistic employees.

Finally, organizations can simultaneously implement “soft culture” and “hard policies” to suppress the negative effects of narcissistic employees. On one hand, promoting a collaborative organizational culture that emphasizes mutual assistance and solidarity can strengthen relational approach motivation among employees with narcissistic admiration and increase prosocial behavior while mitigating the negative interpersonal effects of narcissistic rivalry. On the other hand, incorporating peer helping behavior into performance evaluation and establishing regulations requiring employees to actively help colleagues when capable and time permits can counteract narcissistic employees’ self-focus and lack of empathy.

4.3 Limitations and Future Directions

First, our sample was drawn exclusively from several small and medium-sized enterprises in Hubei Province, which may limit generalizability. While this enhances internal validity, future research should expand the sampling scope to improve external validity.

Second, although we found a significant negative relationship between narcissistic rivalry and prosocial behavior, the expected mediation through relational avoidance motivation was not significant. This suggests other mechanisms may be at play, such as increased negative affect or decreased positive affect reducing prosocial behavior (Lannin et al., 2014; Sauls & Zeigler-Hill, 2020). Future research should explore alternative mechanisms linking narcissistic rivalry to prosocial behavior.

Third, we only examined the moderating effect of task interdependence. Future research should enrich the boundary conditions, particularly cultural factors such as humility and collectivism, which are highly valued in Chinese culture. Owens et al. (2015) found that humility can counterbalance the negative effects of narcissism. Additionally, because Chinese culture emphasizes collectivism, which may inhibit narcissistic expression (Foster et al., 2003), future research could examine the role of organizational collectivistic culture in the relationship between narcissism and prosocial behavior (Li et al., 2017).

Fourth, while this study followed the NARC framework to examine both dimensions simultaneously, recent research has begun to independently examine the effects of narcissistic rivalry (Fehn & Schütz, 2021). Building on this work, we encourage future research to independently investigate the effects, mechanisms, and boundary conditions of narcissistic admiration or rivalry to uncover the unique value of each dimension.

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