



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Monday, April 6, 2015

CONTACT: Jim Sliwa
(202) 336-5707
jsliwa@apa.org

RESEARCH DEBUNKS COMMONLY HELD BELIEF ABOUT NARCISSISM

Overuse of “I” and “me” not associated with pathology, study finds

WASHINGTON -- Contrary to popular belief, excessive use of first-person singular pronouns such as “I” and “me” does not necessarily indicate a narcissistic tendency, according to research published by the American Psychological Association.

“There is a widely assumed association between use of first-person singular pronouns, what we call I-talk, and narcissism, among laypeople and scientists despite the fact that the empirical support for this relation is surprisingly sparse and generally inconsistent,” said Angela Carey, MA, a third-year doctoral candidate in psychology at the University of Arizona and lead author of the study. It was published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

Narcissists have an unrealistic sense of superiority and self-importance and an overabundance of self-focus, said Matthias Mehl, PhD, a psychology professor at the University of Arizona and a co-author of the study. It would therefore be reasonable to assume that narcissists would be more prone to I-talk, he said.

Early testing of this hypothesis was conducted at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1988 and confirmed the association, but consisted of merely 48 participants. Since then, scientific studies have been unable to consistently replicate the finding. Because it appears to be such a pervasive belief in modern society, the researchers felt it was important to give the hypothesis a rigorous scientific vetting.

Carey and Mehl teamed with researchers from four other universities in the United States and two in Germany to recruit over 4,800 people for the study (67 percent female, mostly undergraduate students). Participants were asked to engage in one of six communications tasks in which they wrote or talked about themselves or an unrelated topic. Researchers also scored the participants for narcissism using five different narcissism measures, including the common 40-item Narcissistic Personality Inventory. Their narcissism score was then compared with their use of first-person singular pronouns in the communication tasks.

The researchers could find no association between pronoun use and narcissism. When they analyzed data by gender, they found men had a slightly higher correlation than women but neither was statistically significant nor practically meaningful.

“The most interesting finding is that the results did not vary much across two different countries, multiple labs, five different narcissism measures and 12 different samples,” said Mehl. “We were surprised by how consistent of a near-null finding it was.”

Identifying narcissists is important because over time their grandiosity, self-focus and self-importance can become socially toxic and can have negative consequences on relationships, said Carey.

“The next question, of course, is how else, if not through I-talk, narcissism is revealed through language,” she added. “We are working on this question in a follow-up study using the same data.”

Article: “Narcissism and the Use of Personal Pronouns Revisited,” by Angela Carey, MA, and Matthias Mehl, PhD, University of Arizona; Melanie Brucks, BS, Stanford University; Albrecht Küfner, PhD, and Mitja Back, PhD, University of Münster; Nicholas Holzman, PhD, Georgia Southern University; Fenne große Deters, Dipl. Psych., Free University of Berlin; M. Brent Donnellan, PhD, Texas A & M University; and James Pennebaker, PhD, University of Texas at Austin. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, published online March 31, 2015.

Full text of the article is available from the [APA Public Affairs Office](#) and at

<http://www.apa.org/pubs/journals/releases/psp-p0000029.pdf>.

Contact: Angela Carey at acarey@email.arizona.edu or (913) 634-8991.

The American Psychological Association, in Washington, D.C., is the largest scientific and professional organization representing psychology in the United States. APA's membership includes more than 122,500 researchers, educators, clinicians, consultants and students. Through its divisions in 54 subfields of psychology and affiliations with 60 state, territorial and Canadian provincial associations, APA works to advance the creation, communication and application of psychological knowledge to benefit society and improve people's lives.

www.apa.org

If you do not want to receive APA news releases, please let us know at public.affairs@apa.org or 202-336-5700.