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SHINING ON THE STAGE: NARCISSISM AND PERFORMING ARTS

Abstract

Narcissism is defined as a personality disorder by clinical psychologists, who consider narcissists as seekers of admiration with a lack of empathy. According to social psychologists, narcissists are self-assured individuals with leadership traits and excessive interest in themselves. This study makes a literature review to find out about the beneficial and non-beneficial characteristics of narcissists, their relationships, anger management and decision making processes, as well as the reflections of these features on performing arts, which may force artists to be narcissistic. Narcissists' interpersonal relationships are generally weak and they tend to be aggressive towards criticism and negative feedback. They focus on reward and give risky decisions due to overconfidence, making them attractive and dangerous at the same time. Performers should distinguish between an inner self and a commercial self in order to eliminate the harmful effects of narcissism and to have a more peaceful and healthy performing life.

Keywords: Narcissism, narcissist, performing arts

İCRADA ÖNE ÇIKMAK: NARSİSİZM VE SAHNE SANATLARI

Özet

Narsisizm klinik psikologlar tarafından hayranlık arayışını ve empati yoksunluğunu içeren kişilik bozukluğu olarak tanımlanır. Sosyal psikoloji ise narsisistleri kendine güvenen, liderlik vasıfları olan, kendisiyle aşırı ilgili olan bireyler olarak betimler. Bu çalışmada; narsisizmin faydalarının ve zararlarının

irdelendiği, narsisistlerin birbirleriyle olan ilişkilerinin, öfke yönetimlerinin, karar verme süreçlerinin ve tüm bu özelliklerin sanatçıların narsisistik olmalarını teşvik eden performans sanatlarındaki etkilerinin araştırıldığı bir literatür taraması yapılmıştır. Narsisistlerin başkalarıyla olan ilişkileri genellikle zayıftır; eleştirilere ve olumsuz geri bildirimlere karşı saldırgan yaklaşımlarda bulunurlar. Ödül odaklı davranırlar ve aşırı özgüvenden dolayı verdikleri riskli kararlar onları çekici ve aynı zamanda tehlikeli gösterir. Performans sanatçıları narsisizmin olumsuz etkilerini geçersiz kılmak ve daha huzurlu ve sağlıklı bir performans hayatı için öz benliklerini ve mesleki benliklerini birbirinden ayrı tutabilmelidirler.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Narsisizm, narsisist, sahne sanatları

INTRODUCTION

Narcissism

Narcissism is defined as an overly excess pattern of need for admiration, self-glorification and lack of empathy by clinical psychologists, who call it a personality disorder (Wallace, 2015: 2). According to clinical psychology, narcissists are manipulative, vain, seekers of admiration from others. In contrast, personality psychology accepts narcissism as a normal and beneficial personal trait related to self-assurance, leadership and determination (Dionne and Davis, 2012: 135-140). Social psychologists define narcissism as an excessive interest in one's self (Wallace, 2015: 2). Although some amount of narcissism is inherent in all people, the ones with high amounts are described as being self-absorbed and self-admiring, possessing extremely positive self-beliefs which is often detrimental to others and themselves (Higgs, 2009). People with low levels of narcissism show low levels of self-love (Wallace, 2015: 2).

The narcissistic personality disorder involves a tendency to accept one-self as a grandiose individual and a selfish lack of concern for other individuals' needs. Narcissists consider themselves as being entitled to admiration and special treatment. They fantasize about having high status in life and envy successful people (Ashton, 2013). Narcissists' need for admiration and hypersensitivity to criticism may be viewed as coping mechanisms with threats, due to their underlying fragile self-esteem (Dionne and Davis, 2012: 135-140).

METHOD

This study involves literature review about narcissistic behaviors, their beneficial and dangerous features, narcissists' relationships, aggression, decision-making and stage performances.

RESULTS

Narcissistic Body Image

Narcissism has important effects in a healthy self-concept development, especially body image. Today's culture makes people share their most intimate deeds and thoughts on social media. Thus psychologists have started to turn their attention to narcissism.

The term ‘narcissism’ originates from Narcissus who is a Greek mythological figure, captivated by his own beautiful reflection, leading him to untimely death. The first empirical evidence to it was seen in 1990s by Jackson and her coworkers in the psychology literature. They pointed out that narcissists favor their physical condition, sexuality and appearance. Behavioral studies show that they involve in beauty and fitness activities, wear expensive and brand name clothes more than non-narcissistic individuals. Indeed, narcissists are rated as more attractive than non-narcissists, although years of personality research showed no associations between personality and attractiveness (Dionne and Davis, 2012: 135-140).

Narcissistic Relationships

Narcissistic individuals believe that they are ‘special’ and that only other special people can understand them. These patients tend to use other people involuntarily. They are unwilling to identify with others’ needs and feelings, thus they have a lack of empathy. Their self-esteem is fragile, and they have a lack of trust towards other people. Their egotism and self-awareness are abnormally increased; making them feel socially uncomfortable and be afraid of negative opinions (Shulman, 2015). Furthermore, some narcissists are aware of their undesirable side, such as arrogance and bragging; and that others do not see them as favorable as they see themselves (Carlson, 2013).

Narcissism is correlated to dissatisfaction and dysfunction in interpersonal relationships (Lamkin et al, 2017: 224-228). In romantic relationships, they use their partners as an object to boost and encourage their own self-esteem (Shulman, 2015). According to a study, women with higher levels of narcissism showed significantly higher levels of hostility compared to their male partners. If female partners had higher levels of narcissism, males displayed more anger. In romantic relationships, women’s narcissism is correlated to more difficulties for both partners (Lamkin et al, 2017: 224-228).

Narcissistic Aggression

Studies showed that aggression is associated both with narcissism and low self-esteem. The people who commit aggressive behaviors deal with feelings of inferiority and worthlessness, as well as arrogant sense of superiority over others. In contrast, individuals who are less likely to show aggression are the ones who have adequate self-esteem and do not feel worthless or inferior (Ashton, 2013).

Narcissists tend to act aggressively when they receive a reaction that does not match their superior self-views and their ego is threatened (Nevicka *et al.*, 2015: 809-823). If narcissists are criticized, they may react with rage, humiliation or shame. Their dissatisfaction leads to anger, depression, lack of empathy and disturbed relationships (Shulman, 2015). Some specific problems of these patients are their tendencies for depressive crises due to an insult (Saß, 2001) or lack of special attention. Narcissists may show aggressive outbursts directed to themselves or other people in terms of a suicidal attempt (Bronisch, 2001: 233-246).

Narcissistic Decision-Making

Narcissists tend to give risky decisions because of overconfidence and focusing on reward. They focus on the rewarding side of risky choices and neglect their potential costs. They make self-serving attributions for successful results (Lakey *et al.*, 2008). Grandiose narcissists are associated with greater risk taking (Brunell and Buelow, 2017: 3-14). High

narcissistic individuals are more likely to accept monetary offers, especially unfair ones. They are hypersensitive to rewards and try to maximize their personal profit instead of enforcing fairness norms (Fatfouta *et al.*, 2018: 12-16). Moreover, narcissists neglect negative feedback and warnings about high risk. They even behave in a riskier manner when the threat rises (Jordan and Audia, 2012: 211-231). The expression of “better risky than sorry” describes narcissistic self-regulation very well, letting one make wrong decisions (Morf and Horvath, 2010: 129).

According to indirect evidence, narcissists may recognize errors. In other words, they do not necessarily consider that negative feedback is wrong (Morf and Rhodewalt, 2001: 177-196). They are slow to adjust their decisions in decision-making contexts to outcome feedback (Jordan and Audia, 2012: 211-131). Narcissists are proposed to have deficiencies in error monitoring and action updating. After a high-risk decision outcome, high narcissists show a weaker capacity of action updating. Therefore, they are less likely to change their wrong behavior patterns such as risky choices after feedback (Yang *et al.*, 2018). In a study, low and high narcissists were given a monetary gambling task in which they needed to choose either a high-risk or low-risk option. Low and high narcissists differed generally in the high-risk situation. After high-risk decision outcomes, high narcissists made riskier decisions at the behavioral level (Yang, *et al.*, 2018: 889-897).

In another study, the researchers searched if narcissism influenced dynamic decision-making performance in the absence and presence of misleading information. According to the results, narcissistic people show a great ability to ignore misleading information, and demonstrate a decision-making advantage in the presence of it. They can easily focus on the long-term utility of each option. Moreover, males perform better than females in the case of the presence of foregone rewards. The narcissists’ superior ability at filtering the ambiguous information may be due to their effort to avoid ego-threat (Byrne and Worthy, 2013: 112-117).

Narcissists are prone to gambling, investing on volatile stock markets and losing money (Yang *et al.*, 2018: 889-897). Vulnerable narcissists are prone to compulsive buying and aggressive driving. Grandiose narcissism is correlated with sexual aggression, illicit drug/alcohol use and abuse, gambling, compulsive buying behaviors and aggressive driving (Buelow and Brunell, 2018: 233-242).

Narcissistic Stage Performance

Live performance is an area of activity that prepare psychological traps to the artists. Fragile self-esteem can lead to self-destructive behaviors that are found among artists who can achieve but cannot sustain success. Artists in the entertainment industry mainly share a common fate in which they succeed after years of sacrifice, leading to hubris, drug and alcohol use followed by a spectacular crash. However, during artistic development one should be able to distinguish between an innate sense of self and a more commercial self (Linden, 2010: 135) in order to have a healthier, more successful and meaningful life.

Narcissistic people consider themselves as better, more attractive and knowledgeable leaders than other individuals are. Celebrities have higher narcissism scores than non-celebrities, leading to the question whether narcissistic people actually are more attractive or knowledgeable than others. The degree to which narcissists’ ratings of their attractiveness are

inflated relative to others' ratings of their attractiveness were researched rarely (Bleske-Rechek, et al, 2008: 420-424).

According to a study, where the degree of narcissism was measured by Narcissistic Personality Inventory, celebrities were found to be significantly more narcissistic than MBA students and the general society. Female celebrities were found to be more narcissistic than males, in contrast to the society at large, in which men were more narcissistic than women. The most narcissistic celebrities were reality television personalities, followed by comedians, actors and musicians. The study could not find any relationship between the years of experience in the entertainment business and narcissism. It may suggest that celebrities may have narcissistic traits before entering the industry (Young and Pinsky, 2006: 463-471).

There is not a clear theory about how the excessive love for oneself is related to performance. Narcissistic people consider themselves as great performers, although the researchers find no consistent relationship between performance and narcissism (Wallace and Baumeister, 2002). According to Guedes' study, people with high narcissistic traits over-evaluate their performances, so it can be concluded that narcissists are not the greatest performers in reality (Guedes, 2016). It is also suggested that narcissistic performers are very difficult to work with and can be destructive to the organizations (Campbell, *et al*, 2011).

Some studies point out that narcissistic people improve their performances when faced with self-enhancement opportunities. Thus, narcissism does not always end with negative outcomes. Narcissistic artists are more successful at getting positions of greater power within performing arts. One of the reasons behind this fact is that performers respond to ego-threatening situations through self-protecting and self-enhancing behavior. When their egos are threatened, hypervigilant narcissists engage in self-preserving behaviors compared to non-narcissists, and achieve more favorable performance evaluations. If self-preserving behaviors are not engaged during ego-threatening situation, people have unfavorable performance evaluations (Wallace, 2015: v). In a study, four experiments were conducted using different performing tasks and manipulations of self-enhancement opportunity. When the self-enhancement opportunity was higher narcissists performed better. However, the performance of participants with low narcissistic traits was unaffected by self-enhancement opportunity. It is suggested that self-enhancement motivation of narcissistic people comes from an urge to gather admiration rather than a desire to self-evaluate (Wallace and Baumeister, 2002).

According to another study favoring narcissism (Martinsen *et al*, 2019: 166-171) the relationship between narcissism and creativity was investigated. Narcissism was measured using Narcissistic Personality Inventory (Emmons, 1987) and creative personality with Creative Person Profile (Martinsen, 2011). The results of 1375 young adults showed that narcissism has strong relationships with creative personality traits such as motivation, ambition and agreeableness. Also, Nevicka *et al*. propose that narcissism can fuel performance after ego threat. Higher non-clinical narcissism was related to greater willingness to perform tasks that let them show their abilities and increase creative performance (Nevicka *et al.*, 2015: 809-823). In short, being an inspirational and visionary narcissist is considered to be beneficial for performance.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Narcissists are evaluated as excessively self-concentrated, self-admiring and self-absorbed individuals. They are in the center of their worlds, and all the others' needs are trivial for them. They over-evaluate everything about themselves including body image, and their relationships with other people are weak and unsuccessful. They expect admiration from everyone and envy successful people around them. They are over-sensitive about criticisms, and easily get frustrated and aggressive with negative feedbacks.

Stage performers generally tend to have narcissistic personal traits. The studies showed that narcissistic performers are visionary and inspirational (Campbell, *et al*, 2011). Many times the society adores, watches, follows and loves them because they are determined and self-assured leaders (Dionne and Davis, 2012: 135-140). Their courage on risk-taking (Brunell and Buelow, 2017: 3-14) is interesting and exciting to watch because normal and standard actions are safe but boring. Thus it can be concluded that the society forces performers to be narcissistic to some extent, since performers should be applauded, liked, admired and gone after. If performers do not adore their own selves, nobody does.

The theory that low narcissistic individuals do not try hard to prove themselves to anybody and do not use self-enhancement opportunities (Wallace and Baumeister, 2002) strengthens the idea that narcissism brings success. It can be concluded that if narcissistic performers face negative feedback, sarcasm or criticism, they can get angry, frustrated and disappointed. Since the reaction was seen as an ego-threat, they can see this as an opportunity to prove their future success and work harder. Moreover, the study of Martinsen points out that narcissists have creative personalities and strong motivation (Martinsen *et al*, 2019: 166-171). This fact enables narcissistic stage performers to be more successful since stage is a creative working area. The coworkers and the audience of narcissists would be excited, and appreciate creativity and motivation which contribute a lot to the performance.

Some studies pointed out that narcissistic performers may be destructive coworkers because of their high self-evaluations and egotism (Campbell, *et al*, 2011). They consider themselves as great performers (Wallace and Baumeister, 2002) and better than their coworkers. This fact can harm a live play/show and the overall atmosphere of the performance. Their aggressive reactions towards criticism may be dangerous for the individuals around them. Therefore, excessive and unhealthy narcissistic behaviors should be warned and stopped for the general success of the stage performance and well-being of everyone.

In short, performing arts may favor artists with narcissistic traits for a more successful, appreciated and applauded stage life. Healthy narcissism is essential for every performer and it is tolerable to some extent. When the limits are exceeded, things turn out to be dangerous for the psychological health of the performers and everyone around them. Performers should be able to separate stage life from their own personal lives, and be open-minded toward criticism. Thus they can handle possible downfalls during performance career in a healthier way. There were not many studies about narcissistic stage performers, so future studies may include these individuals, their performing lives, their relationships with coworkers, the audience and their own selves. The coping mechanisms with narcissism may be studied and evaluated for a healthier life and the well-being of the performers.

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