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# Trait Narcissism and Contemporary Religious Trends

*Anthony Hermann*

Department of Psychology, Bradley University, 1501 W. Bradley Ave.,

Peoria, IL 61625

*ahermann@bradley.edu*

*Robert Fuller*

Department of Religious Studies, Bradley University, 1501 W. Bradley Ave.,

Peoria, IL 61625

*rcf@bradley.edu*

## Summary

In a large sample of adult Americans, we examined trait narcissism among those who identify as nonreligious, traditionally religious, or “spiritual but not religious” (SBNR). Our study reveals that: 1) those who identify as traditionally religious and those who identify as SBNR exhibit fairly similar levels of narcissism; 2) contrary to conventional wisdom, nonreligious Americans are lower in narcissism than religious/spiritual Americans (with nonreligious individuals particularly lower in the NPI subscales of self-absorption/self-admiration); and 3) higher levels of church attendance are not associated with lower NPI scores, though higher levels of church attendance are associated with higher NPI scores in SBNR individuals.

## Keywords

narcissism – religion – spirituality – SBNR – nonreligious – atheism – church attendance

## Introduction

A recent Pew Research Center (2015) report titled “U.S. Public Becoming Less Religious” documents a sustained drop in overall rates of religious affiliation.

Indeed, one of the fastest-growing categories of Americans is the category of individuals with no religious affiliation, commonly referred to as “nones” (i.e., “no religious affiliation”). In the 1950s, only 2% of the American population reported no religious affiliation. In the 1970s, this number grew to about 7%. The Pew Study found that by 2014, nearly 23% reported no religious affiliation whatsoever. This trend is especially true among younger Americans. Only 27% of Americans born after 1981 report attending religious services on a weekly basis, compared with 38% of Baby Boomers and 51% of those born between 1928-1945. Similarly, the share of Americans who say they are “absolutely certain” God exists has dropped from 71% in 2007 to 63% in 2014. Overall, Americans are also engaging in less religious behavior as “the percentages who say they pray every day, attend religious services regularly and consider religion to be very important in their lives also have ticked down by small but statistically significant margins” during the past decade (Pew Research Center, 2015, p. 1).

It is important to note that many religiously unaffiliated Americans are nonetheless to varying degrees personally or subjectively religious (Fuller, 2001; Mercadante, 2014). Robert Wuthnow (1998) proposes that we make a distinction between “spiritual dwellers” who approach the sacred through religious communities and “spiritual seekers” who approach the sacred outside the boundaries of organized religion. Daniel Batson’s (1982) notion of “quest spirituality” similarly identifies a form of personal religiosity that resists closure in the way of belief, affirming that all beliefs should therefore be continually revised in light of life’s challenges and tragedies. The most common label for unchurched spirituality, however, has been the designation of being “spiritual, but not religious” (Fuller, 2001; Zinnbauer & Pargament, 2005; Zinnbauer, Pargament et al., 1997). Since 2000, both the Pew Research Center and Gallup have conducted multiple studies of contemporary American religion asking individuals to self-identify as religious, nonreligious, or SBNR. It is important to note, however, that some scholars caution against making “religious” and “spiritual” binary categories (Ammerman, 2013; Mercadante, 2014; Murphy, 2017). With this caution in mind, it is nonetheless useful to take note of the growing trend toward unchurched forms of American religious life and to acknowledge empirical evidence indicating that traditionally religious and SBNR individuals can be distinguished or categorized in terms of distinct clusters of personality and cognitive traits (Saucier & Skrzypinska, 2006).

Contemporary Americans thus increasingly fall into three main categories: 1) those who are agnostic or atheist and do not identify with a spirituality at all, 2) those who are “spiritual, but not religious” in the sense that they embrace a more subjective and individualized approach to spirituality, and 3) those who

are conventionally or traditionally religious in that they rely on trusted sources of authority (such as scriptures or a church) that are a shared reference point for an enduring religious institution.

### Religion, Culture, and Narcissism

Many believe that the “unchurching” of America is related to an overall rise in narcissism. Although researchers continue to debate our understanding and assessment of narcissism, most modern conceptualizations include the following features: an inflated sense of self; a sense of entitlement; a relative lack of interest in interpersonal relationships and intimacy; and the use of interpersonal strategies that promote self-enhancement (Campbell & Green, 2008; Morf, Torchetti, & Schürch, 2011). While extreme levels of narcissism are associated with considerable dysfunction and can lead to diagnosis of a personality disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), there is now general agreement among social psychologists that narcissism is a personality trait that varies among individuals and can be reliably measured via self-report questionnaires like the Narcissistic Personality Inventory or NPI (Raskin & Terry, 1988).<sup>1</sup> Psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut (1966, 1972) and social theorist Christopher Lasch (1979) were among the first to draw attention to the possibility that levels of narcissism were increasing in Western societies. Some empirical investigations using the NPI indicate that narcissism has become more prevalent in the United States over the past few decades (Twenge & Foster, 2008; Twenge, Konrath, Foster, Campbell, & Bushman, 2008).

Religious spokespersons, social scientists, and the general public have all speculated about the relationship between narcissism and tendencies to be traditionally religious, *SBNR*, or nonreligious (Capps, 1993; Carrette & King, 2005; Homans, 1981; Pruyser, 1978; Schmidt, 2012). A recent study shows, for example, that most people perceive nonreligious individuals to be highly narcissistic (Dubendorff & Luchner, 2016). Scholars, too, often suggest that narcissism is a principal characteristic of those Americans who move away from traditional, institution-centered religion owing to a narcissistic preoccupation with self (e.g., Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985). And, indeed, there is at least some evidence suggesting that nonreligious individuals report less

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1 The focus of this study is grandiose narcissism rather than other related constructs such as vulnerable narcissism or pathological narcissism (Miller et al., 2012). The general term *narcissism* is used throughout as shorthand for grandiose narcissism.

modesty than religiously affiliated individuals, suggesting they may be more narcissistic (Rowatt, Kang, & Haggard, 2014).

It is important to consider that traditionally religious, SBNR, and nonreligious people may differ, if they actually differ at all, on all or only some dimensions of narcissism. Using Emmons' (1987) four-factor model of the NPI, which identifies *leadership*, *superiority*, *self-admiration*, and *interpersonal exploitativeness* as the main dimensions of narcissism, we can speculate how the three categories might differ on this multi-dimensional construct.<sup>2</sup> For example, it would be particularly informative if either religious or SBNR individuals measured especially high or low on the leadership dimension since this dimension has been linked to increased subjective well-being and is commonly understood to be the most adaptive aspect of narcissism (Ackerman et al., 2011; Corry, Merritt, Mrug, & Pamp, 2008). Likewise, if nonreligious participants measured higher interpersonal exploitativeness, which is usually considered maladaptive, it would reinforce commonly held beliefs that the irreligious are not trustworthy members of a social group (Norenzayan et al., 2016). It would also be telling if groups differed on the dimensions of superiority and/or self-admiration given long-standing arguments on both sides regarding whether believers or non-believers have a more accurate perception of their place in the universe. It is noteworthy that Dubendorff and Luchner's (2016) participants believed atheists to be more narcissistic on all four of these dimensions, and it would thus seem important to examine the accuracy of these perceptions.

Understanding possible links between recent increases in narcissism and decreases in traditional religiosity is hampered by a lack of empirical evidence pertinent to some very basic questions: Are nonreligious people more narcissistic than religious people? How do levels of narcissism vary between those who self-identify as traditionally religious and those who self-identify as SBNR? Which facets or dimensions of narcissism are associated with the three religious categories? What is the relationship between church attendance and narcissism and does this relationship hold true within each of the three religious categories?

This study aims to gather preliminary evidence addressing these questions about the relationship between narcissism and religious identification and self-reported behavior. We recruited participants to our study using Amazon.com's online crowdsourcing service, Mechanical Turk (MTurk). Previous research indicates that MTurk participants are more representative of the national

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2 Emmons (1987) provided labels for the four subscales that correspond to these dimensions: leadership/authority (LA), superiority/arrogance (SA), self-absorption/self-admiration (SS), and exploitativeness/entitlement (EE).

population than other convenience sample groups such as undergraduate students and that MTurk samples evidence strong internal validity (Berinsky, Huber, & Lenz, 2012; Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011; Iyengar, 2011). MTurk participants are, however, more Caucasian, wealthier, younger, more educated, less racially diverse, and more Democratic than the national population as a whole (Berinsky, Huber, & Lenz, 2012). Of particular relevance to this study, MTurk participants are less religious than the nation as a whole, significantly over-representing seculars and underrepresenting traditional Catholics and evangelical Protestants (Lewis, Djupe, Mockabee, & Su-Ya Wu, 2015). Thus, MTurk provides an excellent way to oversample participants who identify as SBNR or as “none” and pursue an initial investigation into links between trait narcissism and spiritual identity and orientation.

## Method

### *Participants*

Six-hundred and forty-five workers on Amazon.com’s Mechanical Turk (MTurk) service completed an online questionnaire limited to workers from the US in return for \$0.50. Consistent with recommendations for excluding highly inattentive respondents (Maniaci & Rogge, 2014), 11 participants who completed the experiment extraordinarily fast (i.e., the fastest 2%,  $M = 2.9$  minutes,  $SD = 1$  minute) were dropped from analysis.<sup>3</sup> This yielded a sample ( $N = 634$ ) that, on average, completed the study in a realistic amount of time ( $M = 12.0$  minutes,  $SD = 6.2$  minutes). The sample had average age of 38.1 ( $SD = 12.9$ ) and 95% reported being born in the US. It included more female respondents (57.3%,  $n = 363$ ) and was predominantly White (82%,  $n = 519$ ), with smaller samples of Blacks (8.2%,  $n = 52$ ), Asians (5.2%,  $n = 33$ ), Hispanics/Latin Americans (3.3%,  $n = 21$ ), and other groups (1.1%,  $n = 7$ ). The sample also predominantly identified as Protestant (23.5%,  $n = 149$ ), Catholic (17.9%,  $n = 113$ ), “spiritual but not affiliated with a conventional religion” (15.0%,  $n = 95$ ), non-denominational Christian (11.0%,  $n = 70$ ), or having no religious affiliation at all (23.5%,  $n = 149$ ). Smaller portions of the sample identified as Jewish (1.6%,  $n = 10$ ), Muslim (1.3%,  $n = 8$ ), and Buddhist (3.4%,  $n = 8$ ). The remaining respondents either

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3 Although Maniaci and Rogge (2014) recommend excluding inattentive responses and dropping participants who complete surveys in less than half the average completion time, this approach would have excluded 66 participants, 10.1% of the sample, which is outside the range of their 3-9% estimate of inattentive responders in a typical dataset. We opted for a more conservative approach that retained more data but also excluded inattentive responses.

did not report an affiliation or affiliated with other groups with fewer than five other respondents (e.g., Mormon, Wiccan, Jehovah's Witnesses, etc.).

### *Materials and Procedures*

Participants chose to participate in a survey regarding spiritual beliefs and religious practices in exchange for compensation on mturk.com. Immediately after offering their informed consent, participants completed the following questionnaires in the following order. Descriptive statistics and correlations between all measures can be seen in Table 1.

#### Spiritual Orientation Items

First, participants completed items designed to assess the degree to which they are religious or spiritual using three separate scales. We selected several items from the Expressions of Spirituality Inventory-Revised (ESI-R; MacDonald, 2000) that best represented the two core dispositions identified by Saucier and Skrzypinska (2006), tradition-oriented religiousness and subjective spirituality (or mysticism). The four tradition-oriented religiousness items ("I believe that going to religious services is important," "I trust church leaders for religious guidance," "Studying the Bible is an important part of spiritual life," "I see myself as a religiously oriented person") exhibited strong internal reliability ( $\alpha = .92$ ) and the items were summed to create an index of traditional religiousness (TR). Similarly, the five subjective spirituality items ("I have had an experience in which I seemed to be deeply connected to everything," "I believe that witchcraft is real," "I have had an experience in which I seemed to merge with a power or forces greater than myself," "It is possible to leave your body," "I do not believe in the spirit world") showed good internal reliability ( $\alpha = .81$ ) and were summed to create an index we labeled mystical beliefs (MB).

In addition, we modified ESI items to create an index that reflected a belief in the importance of spirituality without reference to traditional religiosity. These four items ("Spirituality is an important part of who I am as a person," "My life has benefited from my spirituality," "I believe that attention to one's spiritual growth is important," "I am more aware of my lifestyle choices because of my spirituality") exhibited good internal reliability ( $\alpha = .81$ ) and were summed to create an index of spiritual beliefs (SB).

#### Narcissistic Personality Inventory

The Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Terry, 1988) is a widely used and well-validated measure of trait-level grandiose narcissism. The NPI consists of 40 forced-choice dichotomous items in which participants endorse

the item from each pair that they believed best describes them. Example items include “I am much like everybody else” or “I am an extraordinary person” and “I can usually talk my way out of anything” or “I try to accept the consequences of my behavior.” We obtained NPI scores by summing the number of narcissistic responses an individual endorsed. Our sample yielded similar central tendency, variability, and inter-item reliability (see Table 1) to other recent samples (e.g., Miller, Price, & Campbell, 2012; Simpson, Hermann, Lehtman, & Fuller, 2016).

#### Religious Involvement, Identification, and Demographic Items

Last, participants completed items to assess their religious identification, frequency of religious service attendance, and other basic demographic information. First, in order to classify themselves as traditionally religious, SBNR, or not religious, participants indicated which of the following three statements best described them: “I consider myself religious/spiritual and a member of a religious group,” “I consider myself religious/spiritual at a personal level, but I am not affiliated with any religious group,” “I do not consider myself particularly religious/spiritual.” Next, they indicated their religious affiliation and then the frequency with which they typically attend religious services on a 7-point scale: 6 = *three times a week or more*; 5 = *twice a week*; 4 = *once a week*; 3 = *1-2 times per month*; 2 = *2 or 3 times a year*; 1 = *once a year*; 0 = *never (other than funerals and weddings)*. Last, they indicated their gender, age, and race.

## Results

### *Characteristics of the Three Religious Categories*

A series of regression analyses using dummy-coded condition variables examined whether there was a significant effect for the group factor and then whether the groups differed from each other on key measures. In the first set of analyses, two dummy coded variables were created (TR = 1, all others = 0; SBNR = 1, all others = 0) examined whether the groups differed from the NR group, and the second set examined whether the groups differed from the TR group (SBNR = 1, all others = 0; NR = 1, all others = 0).

Analyses comparing the self-reported religious groups on the three spiritual orientation measures and religious activity were consistent with Saucier and Skrypinska's (2006) findings that conventional religiosity and the SBNR orientation are empirically independent. All analyses indicated statistically significant effect of group (i.e., all  $\Delta R^2$ s > .37,  $F_{\text{change}} > 188$ ,  $ps < .001$ ) on these

TABLE 1 Descriptive statistics and correlations of key measures

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>NPI</i>	<i>LA</i>	<i>SS</i>	<i>SA</i>	<i>EE</i>	<i>SB</i>	<i>MB</i>	<i>TR</i>	<i>attendance</i>
<i>NPI scores</i>	11.94	7.91	0.90								
<i>LA subscale</i>	2.88	2.41	0.82**	0.81							
<i>SS subscale</i>	2.36	2.17	0.79**	0.53**	0.75						
<i>SA subscale</i>	2.11	1.79	0.81**	0.60**	0.54**	0.63					
<i>EE subscale</i>	.23	.24	0.72**	0.46**	0.46**	0.56**	0.68				
<i>spiritual beliefs (SB)</i>	13.99	4.74	0.03	0.04	0.08*	0.05	-0.09*	0.94			
<i>mystical beliefs (MB)</i>	15	4.85	0.19**	0.17**	0.20*	0.20*	0.04	0.71**	0.81		
<i>traditional religiosity (TR)</i>	11.45	5.08	0.04	0.02	0.05	0.08*	0.00	0.76**	0.46**	0.92	
<i>service attendance</i>	1.74	1.78	0.08*	0.07	0.03	0.08	0.07	0.56**	0.33**	0.76**	-
<i>gender</i>	-	-	-0.15**	-0.08*	-0.09*	-0.09*	-0.18**	0.25**	0.20**	0.14**	0.09*

Note. \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*  $p < .05$ . Gender: female = 1; male = 0. LA = leadership/authority; ss = self-absorption/self-admiration; SA = superiority/arrogance; EE = exploitativeness/entitlement. Italicized values in the diagonal are Cronbach's alphas.

measures. More specifically, all tests on individual coefficients indicated that the nonreligious group to report lower mystical beliefs, less traditional religiosity, less general spiritual beliefs, and less frequent religious service attendance (all  $ps < .0001$ ) than the traditionally religious and the SBNR groups, respectively. The SBNR group reported less traditional religiosity, general spiritual beliefs, and service attendance (all  $\beta ps < .0001$ ), but equal levels of mystical beliefs to the traditionally religious group ( $p = .61$ ). See Table 2 for all means and inferential statistics.

Regarding our main hypotheses, analyses indicated a marginal effect of group on total narcissism scores,  $\Delta R^2 = .01$ ,  $F_{\text{change}}(2, 631) = 2.90$ ,  $p < .06$ . Tests on the individual coefficients indicated the non-religious group ( $M = 10.88$ ) to be less narcissistic than the SBNR group ( $M = 12.81$ ;  $b = 1.93$ ,  $SE = .81$ ,  $p = .02$ ), but not the traditionally religious group ( $M = 12.04$ ;  $b = 1.16$ ,  $SE = .76$ ,  $p = .13$ ). The traditionally religious and the SBNR groups exhibited similar levels of narcissism ( $b = .76$ ,  $SE = .75$ ,  $p = .31$ ).

Examination of the NPI subscales indicated that the group differences on the SS subscale ( $\Delta R^2 = .02$ ,  $F_{\text{change}}[2, 631] = 6.02$ ,  $p = .003$ ) and on the SA subscale ( $\Delta R^2 = .01$ ,  $F_{\text{change}}[2, 631] = 2.40$ ,  $p = .09$ ) at a marginal level. Tests on the individual coefficients for the SS subscale indicated that the non-religious group ( $M = 1.94$ ) reported less self-admiration than both the SBNR group ( $M = 2.69$ ;  $b = .76$ ,  $SE = .22$ ,  $p = .001$ ) and the traditionally religious group ( $M = 2.41$ ;  $b = .48$ ,  $SE = .21$ ,  $p = .02$ ). The traditionally religious and the SBNR groups exhibited similar levels of self-admiration ( $b = .28$ ,  $SE = .20$ ,  $p = .17$ ). Similar to the pattern on overall NPI scores, tests on individual coefficients for the SA subscale indicated that the non-religious group ( $M = 1.88$ ) reported less superiority than the SBNR group ( $M = 2.26$ ;  $b = .28$ ,  $SE = .20$ ,  $p = .17$ ), but similar levels to the traditionally religious group ( $M = 2.17$ ;  $b = .28$ ,  $SE = .20$ ,  $p = .17$ ). The traditionally religious and the SBNR groups exhibited similar levels of superiority ( $b = .09$ ,  $SE = .17$ ,  $p = .58$ ).

No differences were observed on the LA ( $\Delta R^2 = .00$ ,  $F_{\text{change}}[2, 631] = .63$ ,  $p = .53$ ) or EE ( $\Delta R^2 = .00$ ,  $F_{\text{change}}[2, 631] = .01$ ,  $p = .99$ ) subscales.<sup>4</sup> Gender did not moderate any of the group analyses noted here (all  $ps < .25$ ).

Additional internal analyses in which the SBNR and traditionally religious groups were combined to form a spiritual group revealed a similar pattern, indicating that the non-religious group was less narcissistic ( $M = 10.88$ ;  $SD = 7.77$ )

4 We also conducted similar analyses using indexes based on Ackerman et al.'s (2011) three-factor model for NPI subscales and observed a conceptually similar pattern. Analyses indicated differences between the groups on the Grandiose Exhibitionism subscale ( $p = .002$ ) subscales, but not the Leadership Authority ( $p = .17$ ) or the Exploitativeness Entitlement ( $p = .65$ ) subscales.

than those who practiced some form of religion/spirituality ( $M = 12.38$ ;  $SD = 7.93$ ;  $b = 1.50$ ,  $SE = .69$ ,  $p = .03$ ). Similar patterns were observed on the SS subscale ( $M_{spirit} = 2.54$ ,  $M_{nr} = 1.94$ ;  $b = .33$ ,  $SE = .16$ ,  $p = .03$ ) and the SA subscale ( $M_{spirit} = 2.21$ ,  $M_{nr} = 1.88$ ;  $b = .60$ ,  $SE = .19$ ,  $p = .001$ ). No differences were observed on the LA ( $b = .24$ ,  $SE = .21$ ,  $p = .27$ ) or EE subscale ( $b = .00$ ,  $SE = .02$ ,  $p = .93$ ).

### *Narcissism and Spiritual Orientation*

Analysis of the relationship between NPI scores and the spiritual orientation measures revealed narcissism to be unrelated to both traditional religiosity and general spiritual beliefs, but positively and weakly related to church attendance ( $r = .08$ ). Surprisingly, a medium-sized, positive correlation was observed between narcissism and mystical beliefs ( $r = .19$ ). In order to investigate the degree to which the correlation between narcissism and mystical beliefs could be accounted for by the observed differences in narcissism between those who are religious and/or spiritual, we conducted additional regression analyses in which we entered both narcissism and group membership simultaneously into an equation predicting mystical beliefs. These analyses indicated that the effect could not be fully accounted for by either religious/spiritual combined group identification or by church attendance. Both NPI scores ( $b = .14$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and membership in the religious/spiritual combined group ( $b = .60$ ,  $p < .001$ ) each uniquely predicted mystical beliefs when entered into the equations simultaneously. A similar pattern was observed for NPI scores ( $b = .16$ ,  $p < .001$ ) when entered into the equation simultaneously with church attendance ( $b = .31$ ,  $p < .001$ ).<sup>5</sup> Gender did not moderate any of the correlations noted here (all  $ps < .34$ ).

Using software designed to examine the interactive effects of nominal and quantitative predictors (PROCESS v2.16; Hayes, 2013), we conducted exploratory analyses to examine whether the correlations narcissism and the religious orientation and service attendance measures were moderated by self-reported religious category. We specified Model 1 to conduct ordinary least squares path analysis utilizing bias corrected bootstrap confidence intervals based on 10,000 bootstrap samples, and reporting unstandardized coefficients with 95% confidence intervals. To probe interactions, we examined the simple effects of narcissism for each group separately.

5 Analyses of the relationship between mystical beliefs and Emmon's (1984) four narcissism subscales indicated a similar pattern for SS ( $r = .20$ ,  $p < .001$ ), SA ( $r = .21$ ,  $p < .001$ ), LA ( $r = .17$ ,  $p < .001$ ), but not EE ( $r = .04$ ,  $p = .35$ ).

TABLE 2 Characteristics of the three religious categories

	TR		SBNR		NR		$\Delta R^2$	F	p
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD			
NPI	12.04	7.77	12.81	8.13	10.88	7.77	.01	2.9	0.06
LA subscale	2.93	2.40	2.96	2.32	2.71	2.52	.00	0.6	0.53
SS subscale	2.41	2.13	2.69	2.37	1.94	2.03	.02	6.0	<0.01
SA subscale	2.17	1.75	2.26	1.84	1.88	1.78	.01	2.4	0.09
EE subscale	.23	.25	.23	.24	.23	.24	.00	.01	0.99
spiritual beliefs	17.34	2.38	15.02	2.79	8.40	3.67	.62	520.4	<0.001
mystical beliefs	16.83	3.57	17.02	3.67	10.40	4.47	.38	189.0	<0.001
traditional religiosity	15.91	2.99	10.55	3.87	6.44	2.77	.60	475.3	<0.001
service attendance	3.27	1.47	1.08	1.33	0.38	0.93	.50	319.7	<0.001

Note. TR = traditionally religious group; SBNR = spiritual but not religious group; NR = neither spiritual or religious. NPI = Narcissistic Personality Inventory total score; LA = leadership/authority; SS = self-absorption/self-admiration; SA = superiority/arrogance; EE = exploitativeness/entitlement.

All analyses revealed the same pattern for main effects of narcissism and self-identified religious category observed in the analyses above. No narcissism x category interaction was observed for either mystical beliefs (*interaction*  $\Delta R^2 = .002, p = .39$ ) or general spiritual beliefs (*interaction*  $\Delta R^2 = .001, p = .65$ ). Narcissism x category interactions were observed, however, on traditional religiosity (*interaction*  $\Delta R^2 = .004, p = .07$ ) and service attendance (*interaction*  $\Delta R^2 = .01, p = .003$ ). Tests for the simple slopes for each of the self-identified religious categories revealed a highly similar pattern on both measures. In the SBNR group, the correlations between narcissism and traditional religiosity ( $b = 2.19, SE = 1.12; p = .05; 95\% CI [-.02, 4.39]$ ) as well as church attendance ( $b = 1.69, SE = .44; p = .0001; 95\% CI [.83, 2.55]$ ) were positive. In both the traditionally religious category and the nonreligious category the correlations between narcissism and religiosity ( $b_{TR} = -1.20, SE = 1.05; p = .25; 95\% CI [-3.25, .86]$ ;  $b_{NR} = -.75, SE = 1.21; p = .53; 95\% CI [-3.14, 1.63]$ ) and church attendance ( $b_{TR} = -.34, SE = .41; p = .40; 95\% CI [-1.14, .46]$ ;  $b_{NR} = .31, SE = .47; p = .51; 95\% CI [-.61, 1.24]$ ) were not statistically significant. Thus, the correlation observed between higher levels of narcissism and church attendance was observed only among those who identify as spiritual but not religious and does not appear to apply to those who are traditionally religious.

## Discussion

Our study revealed four relationships between religiosity and narcissism in U.S. respondents. We found that: 1) contrary to conventional wisdom, nonreligious Americans have lower overall levels of narcissism than religious and SBNR Americans, 2) nonreligious individuals were particularly lower than religious and SBNR Americans in the NPI subscales of self-absorption/self-admiration and superiority/arrogance, 3) those who identify as traditionally religious and those who identify as SBNR exhibit fairly similar levels of narcissism, and 4) narcissism was unrelated to church attendance among the traditionally religious, but again contrary to common belief, it was positively correlated among SBNR individuals.

We previously noted that scholars and the general public alike have speculated about the relationship between narcissism and observable trends in American religiosity, with many suggesting that narcissism is the cause and/or consequence of weakening levels of religious commitment (Bellah et al., 1985; Capps, 1993; Carrette & King, 2005; Dubendorff & Luchner, 2016; Lasch, 1979). Our findings are a cautionary corrective to this fairly widespread assumption. We found that nonreligious Americans are actually lower in narcissism than

religious Americans (i.e., traditionally religious and SBNR individuals considered together), and in particular, exhibited less grandiosity and exhibitionism (i.e., SA and SS subscales). While our findings may be counter-intuitive for some, they are consistent with studies that find those nonreligious individuals identifying as atheists to be more prone toward logical thinking, skepticism, and reality-based moral reasoning (for a review, see Caldwell-Harris, 2012). It may be that nonreligious individuals' evaluations of themselves are influenced by such reality-based thinking. Alternatively, it might be that individuals who are prone to such thinking gravitate toward nonreligious views. Regardless, we hope that our findings prompt new thinking and investigation of the relationship between narcissism and nonreligion/atheism.

Equally noteworthy, we found no differences between nonreligious individuals and either of the other religious groups on the exploitativeness and entitlement subscale (the subscale that reflects tendencies toward egocentric and manipulative interpersonal behavior and is therefore typically viewed as the most maladaptive of the NPI's subscales). This finding is all the more interesting given the fact that most people intuitively assume that nonreligious people are particularly immoral, untrustworthy, and self-interested (Cook, Cottrell, & Webster, 2015; Edgell, Gerteis, & Hartmann, 2006). Much of the conventional and theoretical wisdom regarding the notion that nonreligious people are particularly narcissistic may simply reflect a strong and widespread prejudice toward them stemming from genetically evolved cognitive mechanisms alert to "costly displays" of group loyalty (Norenzayan et al., 2016).

Also contrary to widespread assumptions about the salubrious effects of church attendance, we found that narcissism was, in fact, positively (albeit mildly) correlated with church attendance in our sample. Further analyses revealed that this connection between narcissism and church attendance was found only among those who identify as SBNR and not among those who identify as traditionally religious or nonreligious. Those SBNR individuals who are high in narcissism are both more likely to report that religion is important in their lives and to attend church. This unexpected finding may speak more to the motivations that SBNR individuals have for attending church than the effects of attending. For example, extrinsic motivations (e.g., connecting to a social network, keeping up appearances) may account for this connection since higher levels of narcissism are associated with higher levels of extrinsic religiosity (Lowicki & Zajenkowski, in press; Watson, Morris, Hood, & Biderman, 1990).

We need to underscore the fact that our study does not shed definitive light on causal relationships between religiosity and the various dimensions of narcissism. For example, it is possible that religious belief and practice effectively

idealize a cultural symbol (God) with whom people might merge and thereby acquire an innate sense of being prized or worthy as psychoanalytically-oriented scholars have long maintained when suggesting that religion contributes to “healthy” narcissism (Homans, 1981; Kohut, 1966). It is also possible that individuals with inflated notions of self seek out religion as a venue through which they can both reinforce and display their felt-superiority. Hopefully future research will investigate possible psychological mechanisms mediating this relationship.

Although we did not include a measure of socially desirable responding in our study, it seems unlikely that it represents a viable alternative explanation for our main findings. In our study, it would seem that a concern for social approval would have led self-identified religious individuals to report less rather than more traits (e.g., superiority, arrogance, self-absorption, and self-admiration) deemed incompatible with their religious commitments. Indeed, recent studies suggest that Christians answer questionnaires in ways that promote self-enhancement in domains central to their Christian self-concept (Gebauer, Sedikides, & Schrade, 2017) and this tendency may explain previous findings that Christians report more modesty than non-religious people (Rowatt et al., 2014). Given that the NPI often measures individuals’ tendency to make unrealistically positive (in terms of social approbation) claims regarding the self, it is interesting to note that the nonreligious individuals in our relatively large sample exhibited more modest self-appraisals. Future research should examine the degree to which situational factors (e.g., threat, social context) may prompt more or less narcissistic self-evaluations among religious and non-religious individuals.

Our choice to approach religious identification using the three-category model facilitated our efforts to measure individual differences in religiosity, but also limited our ability to examine the more nuanced ways in which individuals may approach their spirituality and institutional involvement. Our three-category approach situated our findings in terms of recent studies of contemporary American religious life conducted by the Gallup organization and the Pew Research Center (2015). Our three-category approach also aligns our findings with previous studies showing that traditionally religious, SBNR, and nonreligious individuals constitute empirically distinct clusters of personality/cognitive traits (Saucier & Skrzypinska, 2006). On the other hand, more sophisticated approaches that allow for heightened sensitivity to the complex ways that individuals negotiate religious identity and religious involvement (e.g., Murphy, 2017; Park et al., 2013; Pearce, Hardie, & Foster, 2013) might disclose greater insight into the differing ways that religion either amplifies or assuages the various dimensions of narcissism.

Our online sample also offered both strengths and limitations in our ability to draw conclusions about the generalizability of our findings. As stated earlier, MTurk participants are characteristically less religious than the nation as a whole, significantly over-representing seculars and underrepresenting traditional Catholics and evangelical Protestants (Lewis et al., 2015). Yet MTurk samples are typically more demographically diverse than most convenience samples used in social science research and typically exhibit a high level of internal validity (Berinsky et al., 2012; Buhrmester et al., 2011; Iyengar, 2011). Thus while our sample is probably not representative of the nation as a whole, given the ample sample of all three religious groups, our findings should reliably indicate differences or patterns between these three main categories in contemporary American religion. We might note that as would be expected from previous studies of American religion, African-American respondents were the least likely to report being nonreligious (13.2%, compared to 30.6% of white/Caucasian respondents, 36.4% of the small number of Asian-American respondents, and 23.8% of Hispanic respondents). Although the numbers are small, it is interesting to note that 30.3% of Caucasian respondents identified as SBNR, 37.7% of African-American respondents identified as SBNR, 36.4% of Asian-American respondents identified as SBNR, and 33.3% of Hispanic respondents identified as SBNR. Although MTurk users are not characteristic of the population as a whole, our study does provide some evidence that both the nonreligious and SBNR categories appear across all segments of the population. Future research should attempt to replicate our findings in a more representative sample of the US, but also across a number of international groups.

Our main findings that nonreligious individuals are less narcissistic than religious/spiritual individuals, that higher levels of church attendance are not associated with less narcissism, and that traditionally religious or SBNR individuals are similar in their levels of narcissism pave the way for further investigations of the relationship between religion and narcissism. We hope that scholars will continue to examine this relationship empirically and to assess whether any relationship between narcissism and observable trends in American religiosity is to be lauded or bemoaned. It is quite possible, for example, that some nontraditional forms of spirituality effectively meet our psychological needs and thereby engender the kinds of self-esteem and sense of personal agency that might be deemed normative in ways that traditional guilt-based forms of religion do not (Homans, 1981; Schmidt, 2012). It is also possible that some nontraditional forms of religiosity/spirituality are both symptom and source of declines in community affiliation (Bellah et al., 1985; Carrette & King, 2005). Meaningful progress in this debate will, among other things, require a more precise reconciliation of the notion of narcissism

arising from psychoanalytic psychology (which more often accentuate both the universality of narcissistic needs and the ability of religion to promote “healthy narcissism”) and those notions of narcissism arising from personality and social psychology (which more often accentuate the maladaptive manifestations of narcissism such as an inflated sense of entitlement and exploitation). We hope this research note helps provide a better foundation for these and other investigations.

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