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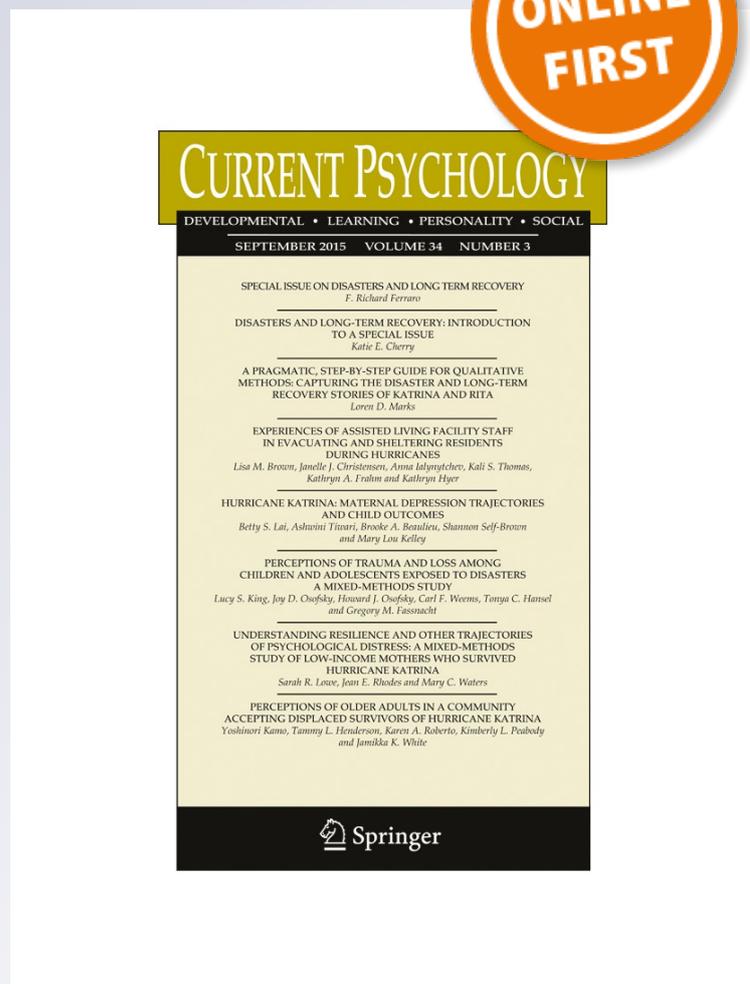
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# Interpersonal Transgressions and Interest in Spiritual Activities: The Role of Narcissism

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**Abstract** As levels of narcissism rise among Americans, it is important to understand how being narcissistic affects individuals' day-to-day lives. One domain in which narcissism may have particularly interesting effects is individuals' spirituality. When interpersonal expectations have been violated, individuals experience a variety of emotions. Chief among these emotions is guilt, which is linked both thematically and empirically to many aspects of Western religion. Given narcissism's complex relationship with guilt, it is important to investigate how narcissists may react to failings in the interpersonal domain, particularly in a spiritual context. The current study investigated the effects of a simulated interpersonal failing on narcissists' interest in a variety of spiritual behaviors, including prayer, seeking spiritual guidance, and participating in spiritual activities aimed at self-enhancement. After reading a scenario designed to induce feelings associated with interpersonal failings, participants reported their interest in a variety of religious activities, including prayer. Results indicated that the manipulation tended to decrease interest in a variety of spiritual activities across the sample, but that these effects were only robust among participants high in narcissism.

**Keywords** Narcissism · Prayer · Religion · Spirituality · Relationships

Over the past few decades, researchers have documented an increase in Americans' levels of narcissism.<sup>1</sup> Meta-analyses (e.g., Twenge and Foster 2008; Twenge et al. Bushman 2008) show the prevalence of narcissistic personality traits increasing among adolescent cohorts since the early 1980s. Though the increased frequency of narcissism among Americans has only come to the forefront of cultural attention recently, narcissism has been studied for over 100 years (e.g., Freud, 1914/1957; Kohut 1971; Lasch 1978; Murray 1938; Reich, 1933/1949). Current conceptualizations (cf. Campbell and Green 2008) have expanded on the early psychoanalytic characterizations of narcissism as pathologically intense self-directed adoration to describe the narcissist as an individual with a positive, inflated model of the self, a lack of interest in intimate interpersonal relationships, extreme feelings of entitlement, and an arsenal of self-regulatory strategies useful for maintaining and enhancing their positive self-concept. As individuals possessing these personality traits become more common, psychologists are tasked with understanding how narcissists understand the self and relate to the surrounding social world.

Increasing levels of narcissism are likely to affect many facets of contemporary culture. One domain in which narcissism may have especially interesting effects is religion. While the words religion and spirituality have historically been

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<sup>1</sup> The current study focuses on trait narcissism, a personality dimension that varies among normally functioning individuals. It does not address narcissistic personality disorder, a clinical diagnosis indicating pervasive problems in psychological functioning that occurs relatively rarely (American Psychiatric Association 2013). The current project also focuses on grandiose, rather than vulnerable, narcissism (cf. Miller et al. 2011). Grandiose narcissism is the more 'traditional' form related to grandiosity, entitlement, and dominance. Vulnerable narcissism is related to insecurity (i.e., feelings of inadequacy and fears of incompetence), which underlies self-absorption. For stylistic simplicity here, the terms "narcissists" and "narcissism" refer to non-clinical grandiose narcissism.

synonyms, recent usage associates religion with adherence to institutionally transmitted doctrines and ritual practices while associating spirituality with self-consciously eclectic and privately focused quests for communion with the sacred (Fuller 2001; Zinnbauer and Pargament 2005). Our principal interest is the effect of narcissism on individual motivation to engage in spiritual behaviors, and is thus equally germane to understanding private spiritual behaviors and changing patterns of religious participation in the larger culture.

Research into narcissists' expressions of spirituality is limited. Narcissism correlates positively with receptive religious coping, a form of coping in which the individual and God both take a passive role in dealing with troubles (Zondag and Van Uden 2010). Narcissism also positively correlates with interest in meditative and help-seeking prayer (Zondag and Van Uden 2011). Further, narcissism negatively correlates with intrinsic religiosity (Watson et al. 1990). Feelings of entitlement, which are strongly associated with narcissism, are positively related to expressions of anger towards God (Grubbs et al. 2013) and negatively related to willingness to forgive others (Exline et al. 2004), an important exercise in many religious traditions. In sum, these findings suggest that narcissists have an instrumental view of religion and may engage with their spirituality in relatively passive ways. The correlational nature of most of this research offers little information regarding the factors that prompt narcissists' day-to-day spiritual practices. In daily life, individuals frequently interact with others in ways that produce a variety of emotions that may motivate them to engage in spiritual behaviors. Of particular interest, due to narcissists' views of interpersonal relationships as means to an end rather than as intrinsically valuable (Campbell and Green 2008), are the emotions produced when an individual behaves in a way that could damage a relationship. A primary affective motivator that may result from this kind of behavior is guilt.

Guilt, an unpleasant moral emotion that stems from one's behavior violating interpersonal expectations, is thought to promote the social order because it prompts relationship repair efforts (cf. Baumeister et al. 1994; Haidt 2003; Tangney et al. 2007). As such, it is one of a number of affective states used as a motivator in Western religion (Hood 1992). Expressions of guilt-motivated thought and behavior abound in Western religion, as exemplified in such foundational literature as the Genesis account of Adam and Eve's transgression in the Garden of Eden and in ongoing ritual traditions like the Christian sacrament of confession, Jewish practices related to Yom Kippur, and Muslim traditions associated with the month-long observance of Ramadan. Further, there is empirical evidence that feelings of guilt are relevant to spiritual behavior. For example, Catholics and Protestants tend to be more guilt prone than those without a religious affiliation (Albertsen et al. 2006). Further, feelings of guilt are more common among those who adopt an extrinsic rather than

intrinsic religious orientation (Chau et al. 1990), and there is evidence suggesting that guilt relates to religious coping styles involving collaborations with or deferment to God when dealing with problems (Kaiser 1991). Although guilt and religion are meaningfully related among the general population, recent research is shedding light on how narcissism may impact the relationship between feelings of guilt and spiritual behavior.

Conventional wisdom suggests that narcissists may not be as susceptible to the feelings of guilt that can be engendered when violating interpersonal norms, because they are more preoccupied with their own affairs than those of others. They also tend to view interpersonal relations as a 'means to an end' rather than as intrinsically valuable (Brunell and Campbell 2011), likely leading to reduced efforts to repair damaged relationships. The empirical evidence regarding narcissism and guilt is, however, both limited and mixed. A number of correlational studies (i.e., Montebanocci et al. 2004; Roche et al. 2013) have shown narcissism to be negatively correlated with self-reported guilt-proneness. This negative correlation between guilt and narcissism has also been observed in non-Western samples (i.e., Iranian; Ghorbani et al. 2014). Further, Giammarco and Vernon (2015) found that, among the Dark Triad personalities (i.e., narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy), only narcissism was significantly negatively correlated with a composite of the Interpersonal Guilt Questionnaire (IGQ; O'Connor et al. 1997), which includes four types of guilt (survivor, separation, omnipotent responsibility, and self-hate). Complicating this picture, Brunell et al. (2011) found that only the exhibitionism facet of narcissism was negatively correlated with guilt about a particular transgression, academic dishonesty, and that feelings of guilt mediated the relationship between exhibitionism and the frequency of academic dishonesty. Another study (Wright et al. 1989), however, found a small but significant positive relationship between guilt and narcissism when participants were asked to indicate the degree to which a number of adjectives pertaining to guilt described them. On the other hand, Gramzow and Tangney (1992) found no relationship between narcissism and guilt-proneness when considering narcissism's maladaptive aspects. Taken together, the evidence suggests that the relationship between individual differences in guilt-proneness and narcissism is likely multifaceted and possibly context dependent. Recent experimental research on the motivational impact of guilt on narcissists adds to this complex picture.

In the first experimental investigation of guilt, narcissism, and the motivation to pray, Hermann, Simpson, Lehtman, and Fuller (in press) had participants complete individual difference measures of narcissism and then had half of them write about something they had done to damage an ongoing interpersonal relationship. The control group wrote an essay about an emotionally neutral topic. Participants then reported their current interest in praying and how writing the essay made

them feel. Across the continuum of narcissism, participants reported heightened guilt after writing the guilt-inducing essay, but only those low in narcissism reported more interest in prayer in the guilt condition than in the control condition. Thus, while narcissists in the guilt condition expressed feeling just as guilty, there was no corresponding motivational effect on interest in seeking God through prayer. Hermann et al. (in press) suggest that this disconnect between narcissists' feelings of guilt and motivation to seek God may reflect their instrumental view of interpersonal relationships or, perhaps, the features of narcissism that may make them less vulnerable to what they perceive as unnecessary social and religious obligations. It is also possible, however, that narcissists process and maintain memories of past transgressions differently than non-narcissists.

Although most people exhibit self-serving biases in their autobiographical memories (Conway and Pleydell-Pearce 2000; Conway, Singer, and Tagini 2004; Greenwald 1980), recent research suggests that narcissists may be particularly likely to distort negative self-relevant memories in ways that minimize their impact. Consistent with this reasoning, Djikic, Peterson, and Zelazo (2005) found that those high in self-deceptive enhancement, as measured by the Balanced Inventory of Desired Responding (BIDR; Paulhus 1991), are particularly likely to distort their memories of recent unflattering personality feedback in a self-serving manner. Of particular relevance, Ritchie et al. (2014) showed that, for memories of communal events (i.e., events involving interpersonal interactions), narcissists show a reversal of the *fading affect bias*, meaning that, unlike the general population, their memories of negative affect fade quicker than their memories of positive affect. These studies may help explain why Hermann et al. (in press) found that narcissists reported feelings of guilt similar to their non-narcissistic counterparts without exhibiting any behavioral changes. Narcissists may have been willing to admit feelings of guilt when writing about the past, not only because the situation demanded it, but also because they were more comfortable with those feelings since the event in question had already been rationalized, distorted, or reinterpreted in a self-serving way. If this is indeed the case, then narcissists may not have felt motivated to pray because, internally, these memories no longer reflected poorly on them. It is necessary, then, to investigate how narcissists react to interpersonal failures 'in-the-moment' and the impact of such failings on narcissists' expressions of spirituality.

Investigating how narcissists react to 'in-the-moment' interpersonal transgressions promises to shed light on not only their spiritual lives, but also important motivational dynamics of the narcissistic personality. Narcissists are inclined to blame others and lash out when their egos are threatened (Bushman and Thomaes 2011). As making a narcissist feel like a failure

will likely engender ego threat, this research is particularly relevant for the current study. For example, narcissists derogate and aggress against sources of negative feedback (e.g., Bushman and Baumeister 1998; Jones and Paulhus 2010; Kernis and Sun 1994; Stucke and Sporer 2002). Further, narcissism is positively related to displaced aggression following negative feedback (Martinez et al. 2008), meaning that narcissists are willing to aggress against "innocent" others when threatened, perhaps to reinstate their feelings of superiority. It is also important to note that no research, to our knowledge, has investigated the immediate effects of an interpersonal transgression on spiritual behaviors in the general population. While it is possible that the emotions induced from such a manipulation will lead participants to immediately turn towards religion to help them recover from their transgressions, it is also possible that participants will turn away from God and attempt to "seclude" themselves, as Adam and Eve did after eating the forbidden fruit. Further, individuals high in narcissism might respond to negative feedback by displacing their derogatory or aggressive feelings onto God, rendering them less interested in God-focused spiritual behaviors like prayer.

The current study seeks to investigate the effects of an 'in-the-moment' interpersonal transgression on narcissists' interest in prayer and other spiritual activities. In contrast to the findings of Hermann et al., we hypothesized that narcissists would be less interested in prayer following an interpersonal failing. In addition, we examined if the effects would generalize to seeking spiritual guidance from human religious/spiritual authorities. We further explored whether imagining the transgression would prompt interest in spiritual activities that might be particularly appealing to narcissists, such as those focused on self-enhancement (e.g., releasing "inner potential"), spiritual leadership (e.g., leading Bible studies), and socializing with fellow believers. In doing so, we also take a broader and more exploratory approach to the emotions that interpersonal transgressions might elicit than Hermann et al. (in press). Given that events that elicit guilt can also engender feelings of shame (Tangney 1992) and a number of other emotions, we included manipulation checks both to examine this possibility and to explore the degree to which any effects we observed were uniquely associated with feelings of guilt, shame, or other emotions.

## Method

The current online study measured trait narcissism and induced feelings associated with interpersonal transgressions to investigate their impact on participants' subsequent desires to pray and engage in other spiritually-oriented behavior. The study received IRB approval and informed consent was obtained from all participants.

## Participants

Two-hundred and twenty-one workers<sup>2</sup> on Amazon.com's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) service completed an experiment online in return for \$0.70. Consistent with recommendations for excluding highly inattentive respondents (Maniaci and Rogge 2014), 13 participants who completed the experiment extraordinarily fast (i.e., the fastest 5 %,  $M=5$  min, 8 s,  $SD=41$  s) were dropped from analysis.<sup>3</sup> This yielded a sample ( $N=208$ ) that, on average, completed the study in a realistic amount of time ( $M=16$  min, 27 s,  $SD=7$  min, 55 s). The sample was largely female (61.5 %,  $n=128$ ) and predominantly White (71.6 %,  $n=149$ ), with smaller samples of Blacks (9.6 %,  $n=20$ ), Asians/Pacific Islanders (8.2 %,  $n=17$ ), Hispanics/Latin Americans (4.8 %,  $n=10$ ), and Native Americans (1.4 %,  $n=3$ ). Four participants (1.9 %) reported as multiracial and five participants (2.4 %) failed to report their race. The sample largely identified as Protestant (41.3 %,  $n=86$ ) and Catholic (25.5 %,  $n=53$ ). Smaller portions of the sample identified as Buddhist (3.4 %,  $n=7$ ), Mormon (3.4 %,  $n=7$ ), Spiritual (1.9 %,  $n=4$ ), Muslim (1.4 %,  $n=3$ ), New Age (1.4 %,  $n=3$ ), Jewish (1.0 %,  $n=2$ ), or "other" (10.1 %,  $n=21$ ). The remaining participants reported as Agnostic (10.1 %,  $n=17$ )<sup>4</sup> or did not answer the question (2.4 %,  $n=5$ ). Mean participant age was 38.70 ( $SD=13.99$ ).

## Procedure and Materials

Participants elected to participate in a study regarding life experiences. Participants first completed the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin and Terry 1988), a widely

used and well-validated measure of trait-level grandiose narcissism. The NPI consists of 40 forced-choice dichotomous items. Participants endorsed the item from each pair that they believed best described 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 ( $M=12.60$ ), variability ( $SD=8.18$ ), and inter-item reliability ( $\alpha=.90$ ) as other recent samples (e.g., Miller et al. 2012).

Next, participants completed the Hypersensitive Narcissism Scale (HSNS; Hendin and Cheek 1997), a measure designed to tap into the more vulnerable, covert facets of narcissism. The HSNS was included to determine whether any effects observed were unique to grandiose narcissism, as they were in Hermann et al. (in press). The scale consisted of ten items, including, for example, "When I enter a room, I often become self-conscious and feel that the eyes of others are upon me" and "I dislike sharing the credit of an achievement with others," and participants indicated the degree to which each item was characteristic of their feelings or behaviors on a 1 (*very uncharacteristic*) to 7 (*very characteristic*) Likert scale. HSNS scores were obtained by summing participants' ratings of all items. Our sample yielded similar central tendency ( $M=29.62$ ), variability ( $SD=6.06$ ), and inter-item reliability ( $\alpha=.75$ ) as other recent samples (e.g., Lannin et al. 2014; Luchner et al. 2011).

Participants were next randomly assigned to one of two conditions in which they were asked to imagine hypothetical situations. This activity served as our experimental manipulation. Participants were instructed to read about and immerse themselves in a situation, paying close attention to their imagined actions and reactions of the other people described, as well as to the physical surroundings mentioned. To encourage participants' attention, they were informed that they would be asked specific questions about the scenario later.

Participants in the *interpersonal transgression* condition read a scenario specifically designed to elicit feelings of guilt. They were first reminded that "we have all done things that made us worry that another person would be angered in some way and that our behavior might harm an ongoing personal relationship" and were asked to vividly imagine they were part of a scenario.

In the first page of the *interpersonal transgression* scenario, participants read about a close friend confessing to stealing money from a communal "coffee fund" jar at work to pay an overdue bill. The friend says she plans to pay the money back soon and feels nervous that others will find out. The participant (i.e., the second-person character in the scenario) reassures the friend and promises to keep the secret. On the second page, the participant encounters a mutual friend at the grocery store, who asks the participant if they have seen their mutual

<sup>2</sup> Because our primary dependent measure was interest in praying, we excluded participants who identified as atheist and those that indicated that they never prayed. Participants indicated their religious identification and frequency of praying after completing individual difference measures. Approximately 40 % ( $n=149$ ) of participants who completed the initial measures were excluded based on these criteria, consistent with research indicating that MTurk samples are less religious than the general population (Berinsky et al. 2012). Excluded and included participants reported similar scores on the NPI [ $t(346)=-.05, p=.96$ ] and the HSNS [ $t(346)=.32, p=.75$ ].

<sup>3</sup> Although Maniaci and Rogge (2014) recommend dropping participants who complete surveys in less than half the average completion time, this approach would have excluded 22 participants, 9.5 % 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 reduced error variance. We also found that the predicted means of our dependent variables yielded highly similar patterns when including the fastest 5 %.

<sup>4</sup> Although they are not likely to be particularly prayerful, participants who identified as agnostics and reported praying "infrequently" were retained for analyses to be as conservative as possible in excluding participants and because reporting interest in prayer on our dependent measures was within the realm of possibility for them. Excluding them from analyses did not change the pattern of findings.

friend lately. Unable to resist the urge to show that their mutual friend is not the morally upstanding person she seems to be, the participant shares the secret. On the third page, the participant receives an angry phone call from the friend, who is shocked that the participant broke their promise. She states that she thought the participant was a better friend and that a co-worker found out because the participant, the only person who had known about her secret, divulged it. She reports that she might now lose her job, and, crying, says she can't believe it and hangs up the phone.

Participants in the *control* condition read a structurally similar scenario that involved a friend mentioning that she had tickets to a concert she was looking forward to. The scenario continued onwards, including a similar conversation with a mutual friend about her upcoming concert and the friend calling to express that she had enjoyed the show<sup>5</sup>.

Immediately after completing their reading of the story, participants responded to filler questions about their imagining of the story. Following this, participants indicated how frequently they attend religious services and how frequently they pray.

Next, participants rated the extent to which they were interested in various spiritual activities "right now" on a 1 (*not at all interested*) to 7 (*extremely interested*) scale.<sup>6</sup> Each set of items displayed strong inter-item reliability and indices were created by computing means. The first five items tapped their *current interest in prayer*, using a measure adapted by Hermann et al. (*in press*) from the Multidimensional Prayer Inventory (Laird et al. 2004). The items included "praying to thank God for things occurring in my life" (thanksgiving), "opening myself up to God for insight into my problems through prayer" (reception), "asking God for assistance with my daily problems" (supplication), "praising God through prayer" (adoration), and "praying to confess things that I have done wrong" (confession) ( $\alpha=.94$ ;  $M=3.94$ ;  $SD=1.96$ ).

Next, participants rated their interest in a variety of spiritual activities. Three items reflected interest in seeking *spiritual guidance* from religious authorities (e.g., "Seeking advice from a religious leader";  $\alpha=.88$ ;  $M=2.82$ ;  $SD=1.80$ ). Next, participants rated their interest in spiritual activities that reflect motivations commonly associated with grandiose narcissism: self-enhancement, extraversion, and leadership. Two items focused on *self-enhancing spiritual practices* (e.g., "attending a workshop for releasing my inner potentials";  $\alpha=.80$ ;  $M=3.31$ ;  $SD=1.94$ ). Two additional items reflected interest in *socializing* in spiritual or religious contexts (e.g., going to my place of worship to see friends;  $\alpha=.91$ ;  $M=2.58$ ;  $SD=1.84$ ). Four items tapped the degree to which participants were interested in expressing their religious views to others

and providing *spiritual leadership* (e.g., "sharing my personal views and life experiences in a Bible/spiritual study group";  $\alpha=.91$ ;  $M=2.61$ ;  $SD=1.69$ ).

Next, participants indicated the extent to which they felt eight different emotions (*enlightened, sad, ashamed, happy, frustrated, guilty, relieved, and agitated*) in response to imagining the scenario earlier in the study on a 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*) Likert scale. Although our manipulation was designed to induce guilt in particular, participants' ratings of the *guilty* and *ashamed* items were very highly correlated ( $r=.88$ ) and all analyses using each of these ratings individually yielded highly similar findings, so we averaged these ratings to create a guilt-shame index. Finally, participants completed a number of demographic items, including gender, race, age, and religious affiliation, and were debriefed and compensated.

## Results

To investigate our hypotheses regarding the effects of our experimental manipulation, trait narcissism, and the interaction between the two, we used PROCESS (Hayes 2013), specifying 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. We mean-centered the variables for all analyses to test for main effects. To probe interactions, we plotted predicted means at 1 *SD* above and below the means of the NPI, and we utilized the Johnson-Neyman technique (Bauer and Curran 2005; Johnson and Neyman 1936) to identify the points along the continuum of narcissism scores at which there were statistically significant differences between conditions.<sup>7</sup>

Analysis of participants' emotional reactions to the scenario indicated a main effect for experimental condition on the ratings of all eight emotions, such that participants in the transgression condition reported feeling more guilt/shame (e.g.,  $M_{\text{guilt-shame}}=2.77$ ,  $SD=1.5$ ) and less positive emotions (e.g.,  $M_{\text{happy}}=1.49$ ,  $SD=1.0$ ) than those in the control condition ( $M_{\text{guilt-shame}}=1.29$ ,  $SD=0.7$ ;  $M_{\text{happy}}=3.0$ ,  $SD=1.2$ ; all  $p$ 's < .01). We observed no main effect for trait narcissism ( $b=-.01$ ,  $se=.01$ ,  $t(204)=-1.53$ ,  $p=.12$ ), and no relationship to the other negative emotions ( $p$ 's = .19 to .70). Narcissism was, however, positively correlated with ratings on all of the positive emotions ( $p$ 's = < .0001 to .04). We

<sup>5</sup> Participants in each condition reported similar NPI scores,  $t(206)=-1.26$ ,  $p=.21$ .

<sup>6</sup> All of these items are presented in the [Appendix](#).

<sup>7</sup> We also performed analyses examining whether gender moderated the effects of experimental condition or the interaction between experimental condition and NPI scores and found no evidence of these effects on the manipulation check or any of the dependent variables. There was, however, a statistically significant interaction between NPI and gender on self-enhancing spiritual practices ( $b=.03$ ,  $se=.02$ ,  $p=.04$ ) such that the correlation between NPI and interest in such practices was stronger for women than men. Given the lack of gender effects, it will not be discussed further.

observed narcissism x condition interactions on the five negative emotion ratings ( $p$ 's= $<.0001$  to  $.003$ ), but on none of the positive emotion ratings ( $p$ 's= $.32$  to  $.93$ ). For the interaction observed on the guilt-shame index ( $b=-.09$ ,  $se=.02$ ,  $t(204)=-4.78$ ,  $p<.001$ ), inspection of the predicted means indicated that, although the manipulation affected both those high and low in trait narcissism, it had a bigger impact on those low in narcissism ( $M_{transgression}=3.32$ ,  $M_{control}=1.10$ ;  $t(204)=10.62$ ,  $p<.001$ ) than those high in narcissism ( $M_{transgression}=2.32$ ;  $M_{control}=1.51$ ;  $t=4.00$ ,  $p<.001$ ). The Johnson-Neyman test indicated the experimental condition had an impact at all points lower than  $+1.45$   $SD$  of the NPI. The patterns of predicted means on the other four negative emotions were highly similar.<sup>8</sup> Thus, our relationship transgression manipulation made participants feel worse on a wide range of negative and positive emotions, including guilt and shame. This was true for both those high and low in narcissism, but those high in narcissism showed a smaller increase in the negative emotions.

Analyses of our main dependent variable, the *prayer* index, yielded a marginal main effect for condition such that participants in the transgression condition reported less interest in prayer ( $M=3.64$ ,  $SD=2.04$ ) than those in the control condition ( $M=4.13$ ,  $SD=1.88$ ;  $b=-.51$ ,  $se=.27$ ,  $t(204)=-1.90$ ,  $p=.06$ ). We observed no main effect for trait narcissism ( $b=.02$ ,  $se=.02$ ,  $t(204)=1.43$ ,  $p=.15$ ), but we did find a narcissism x condition interaction ( $b=-.07$ ,  $se=.03$ ,  $t(204)=1.97$ ,  $p=.05$ ). Inspection of the predicted means indicated that the manipulation reduced interest in prayer among those high in trait narcissism ( $M_{transgression}=3.54$ ;  $M_{control}=4.61$ ;  $t(204)=-2.84$ ,  $p<.01$ ), but did not for those low in the trait ( $M_{transgression}=3.82$ ,  $M_{control}=3.77$ ;  $t(204)=.14$ ,  $p=.88$ ). The Johnson-Neyman test indicated experimental condition had an impact at all points higher than  $+0.03$   $SD$  on the NPI. See Fig. 1 for a scatterplot with fit lines for predicting interest in prayer with NPI scores for each condition. Parallel analyses on the prayer index using the HSNS yielded the same main effect for condition, no main effect for HSNS ( $p=.61$ ), and no interaction ( $p=.87$ ).<sup>9</sup>

Like Hermann et al. (in press), we also conducted follow up analyses to determine the degree to which the feelings elicited by the essay were associated with the interaction on the prayer index. To do so, we substituted emotion ratings for condition in the previous analysis. Analysis using the guilt-shame index yielded no main effect for ratings of feelings of guilt-shame ( $b=-.07$ ,  $se=.10$ ,  $t(204)=-.65$ ,  $p=.52$ ) and no main effect for trait narcissism ( $b=.02$ ,  $se=.02$ ,  $t(204)=1.20$ ,  $p=.23$ ), but did indicate a guilt-shame x narcissism interaction ( $b=-.03$ ,  $se=.01$ ,  $t(204)=-1.96$ ,  $p=.05$ ).

Inspection of the predicted means revealed a pattern similar to the analyses using experimental condition; feelings of guilt-shame were negatively related to interest in prayer among those high in trait narcissism ( $effect=-.27$ ,  $se=.16$ ,  $t(204)=-1.73$ ,  $p=.08$ ), but were unrelated to interest in prayer among those low in the trait ( $effect=.14$ ,  $se=.14$ ,  $t(204)=1.02$ ,  $p=.31$ ). The Johnson-Neyman test indicated the experimental condition had an impact at all points higher than  $+2.69$   $SD$  on the NPI. Parallel analyses using the other emotion ratings yielded similar patterns on *sad* ( $p=.004$ ), *happy* ( $p=.001$ ), and *relieved* ( $p=.06$ ), but not on *agitated*, *frustrated*, or *enlightened* ( $p$ 's= $.70$ ,  $.52$ , and  $.41$ , respectively). Thus, although similar effects were observed using the guilt-shame index, they were not uniquely associated with these emotions.

Analyses of the effects of condition on our *spiritual guidance* index yielded a similar pattern to that of the prayer index. We observed no main effect for experimental condition ( $b=-.37$ ,  $se=.24$ ,  $t(204)=-1.53$ ,  $p=.13$ ), but did find a main effect for trait narcissism ( $b=.05$ ,  $se=.003$ ,  $t(204)=3.05$ ,  $p<.01$ ) such that trait narcissism was positively related to interest in seeking guidance. We also observed a narcissism x condition interaction ( $b=-.07$ ,  $se=.03$ ,  $t(204)=-2.18$ ,  $p=.03$ ) indicating that the guilt manipulation reduced motivation for seeking spiritual guidance for those high in trait narcissism ( $M_{transgression}=2.71$ ,  $M_{control}=3.62$ ,  $t(204)=-2.66$ ,  $p<.01$ ), but did not for those low in the trait ( $M_{transgression}=2.56$ ,  $M_{control}=2.40$ ,  $t(204)=.46$ ,  $p=.64$ ). The Johnson-Neyman test indicated experimental condition had an impact at all points higher than  $+.21$   $SD$  on the NPI.

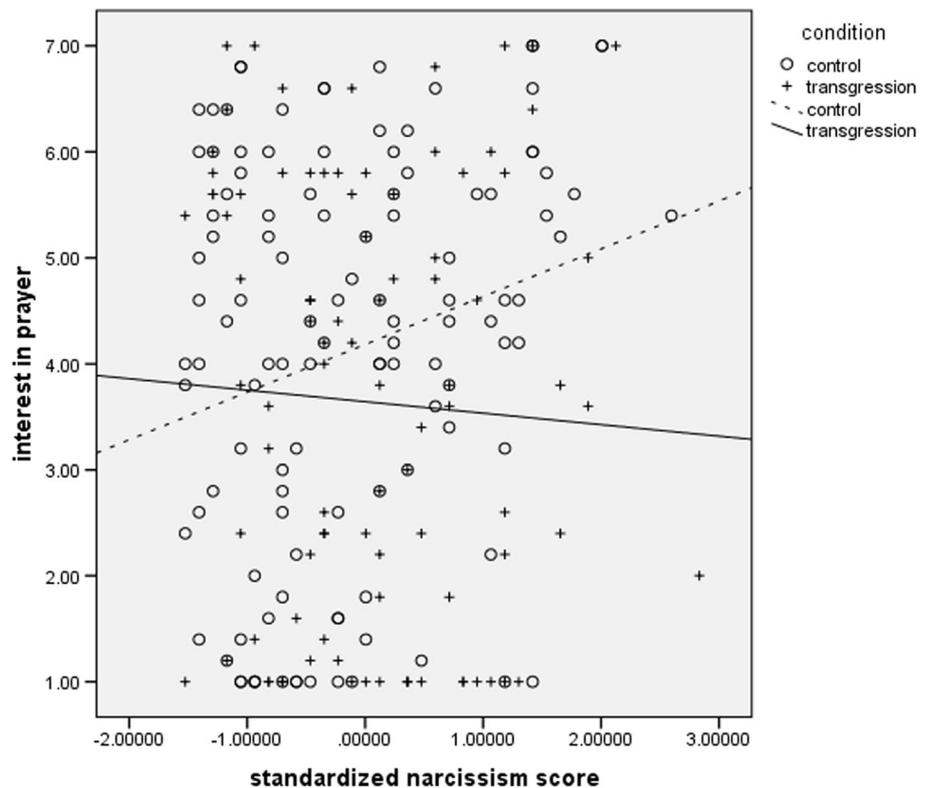
Analyses of our *self-enhancing spiritual practices* index also yielded a similar pattern. We observed no main effect for experimental condition ( $b=-.24$ ,  $se=.25$ ,  $t(204)=-.85$ ,  $p=.34$ ). We did, however, observe a main effect for trait narcissism ( $b=.09$ ,  $se=.02$ ,  $t(204)=5.59$ ,  $p<.001$ ) indicating a positive correlation between narcissism and interest in self-enhancing spiritual practices. We also observed a marginal narcissism x condition interaction ( $b=-.06$ ,  $se=.03$ ,  $t(204)=-1.89$ ,  $p=.07$ ) in which the manipulation reduced motivation for self-enhancing practices for those high in trait narcissism ( $M_{transgression}=3.66$ ;  $M_{control}=4.36$ ;  $t(204)=-1.98$ ,  $p=.048$ ), but did not for those low in the trait ( $M_{transgression}=2.76$ ,  $M_{control}=2.54$ ;  $t(204)=.60$ ,  $p=.55$ ). The Johnson-Neyman test indicated experimental condition had an impact at all points higher than  $+0.97$   $SD$  on the NPI.

In contrast, analyses of our *social activities* index yielded a different pattern. We observed a marginal main effect for experimental condition such that participants in the transgression condition reported less interest in socializing ( $M=2.36$   $SD=1.80$ ) than those in the control condition ( $M=2.74$ ,  $SD=1.85$ ;  $b=-.45$ ,  $se=.25$ ,  $t(204)=-1.81$ ,  $p=.07$ ). We also observed a main effect for trait narcissism ( $b=.05$ ,  $se=.02$ ,  $t(204)=3.21$ ,  $p<.01$ ) indicating a positive correlation between trait

<sup>8</sup> Parallel analyses using the HSNS on the emotion items yielded no interactions between narcissism and condition ( $p$ 's= $.45$  to  $.99$ ).

<sup>9</sup> Analyses of all other dependent measures also yielded no interactions between condition and HSNS (all  $p$ 's $>.24$ ).

**Fig. 1** Current interest in prayer as a function of level of narcissism and experimental condition



narcissism and interest in spiritual social activities. We, however, did not observe a narcissism  $\times$  condition interaction ( $b = -.03$ ,  $se = .03$ ,  $t(204) = -.92$ ,  $p = .34$ ) suggesting that the manipulation affected those low and high in narcissism similarly.

Analyses of our *spiritual leadership* index yielded a pattern highly similar to the *social activities* index. We observed a marginal main effect for experimental condition, such that participants in the transgression condition reported less interest in leading ( $M = 2.41$ ,  $SD = 1.68$ ) than those in the control condition ( $M = 2.75$ ,  $SD = 1.69$ ;  $b = -.43$ ,  $se = .23$ ,  $t(204) = -1.91$ ,  $p = .06$ ). We also observed a main effect for trait narcissism ( $b = .06$ ,  $se = .01$ ,  $t(204) = 4.68$ ,  $p < .001$ ), indicating a positive correlation between trait narcissism and interest in spiritual leadership. However, we did not observe a narcissism  $\times$  condition interaction ( $b = -.03$ ,  $se = .03$ ,  $t(204) = -.95$ ,  $p = .33$ ), suggesting that the manipulation affected those low and high in narcissism similarly.

### NPI subscale analyses

In order to investigate which facets of narcissism were most closely related to these effects we conducted a series of exploratory analyses on our five dependent measures using the subscales yielded from Emmons' (1987) four-factor solution for the NPI. Overall, analyses indicated that the observed effects were most closely related to the self-absorption/self-admiration (SS) and superiority/arrogance (SA) factors and not with the leadership/authority (LA) and exploitativeness/

entitlement (EE) factors. When analyzing the *prayer*, *spiritual guidance*, and *self-enhancing spiritual practices* indexes, we observed the same narcissism  $\times$  condition interactions using the SS subscale (interaction  $p$  values .05, .04, and .01, respectively) and the SA subscale (interaction  $p$  values .0003, .0002, and .02, respectively), but found it much less consistently with the LA subscale (interaction  $p$  values .58, .30, and .02, respectively) and the EE (interaction  $p$  values .46, .15, and .91, respectively) subscales. When analyzing the *socializing* and *spiritual guidance* indices, we observed the narcissism  $\times$  condition interaction when using the SA subscale (interaction  $p$  values .01, and .02, respectively), but none of the other subscales (all  $p$ 's  $> .28$ ). In sum, we found that experiencing a decrease in spiritual motivation after committing a relationship transgression was most closely associated with the facets of narcissism that encompass inflated self-evaluations and pre-occupation with the self, rather than the facets that have been more typically characterized as particularly adaptive (i.e., LA) or particularly maladaptive (i.e., EE; Emmons 1987).

### Discussion

The current findings support our hypotheses that those high in narcissism would be less interested in prayer and other solitary spiritual activities after imagining themselves violating a friend's trust. Further, while there was a general trend for this

manipulation to reduce interest in spiritual activities for the entire sample, the effect was most robust among those high in narcissism, and particularly so among those high in the forms of narcissism that emphasize self-focus and feelings of grandiosity. Moreover, the pattern was also observed on measures of interest in other spiritual activities, namely in learning via study or sermons, and on measures of interest in self-enhancing spiritual practices that one might expect to be particularly appealing to those high in narcissism. Those high and low in narcissism exhibited a similar tendency to be less interested in spiritual activities with a social or leadership focus after imagining violating a friend's trust. In sum, our manipulation tended to decrease interest in spiritual activities overall, but particularly for the narcissistic.

It is important to note that our manipulation not only affected participants' feelings of guilt, but also all other emotions we measured, including shame. Although our manipulation was specifically designed to simulate an interpersonal transgression, and, as such, should be expected to induce feelings of guilt (Haidt 2003; Tangney et al. 2007), it is not particularly surprising that participants would also respond with other emotions, particularly shame, when vividly imagining that they caused a rift in a close friendship. Although extensive research has demonstrated that shame and guilt are distinct emotions with distinct effects and correlates (cf. Cohen et al. 2011; Tangney and Dearing 2002), studies have also shown that the same events frequently elicit both emotions (Tangney 1992) and that measures of shame proneness and guilt proneness are often highly correlated (e.g., Cohen et al. 2011; Proyer et al. 2010). In our study, participants' ratings of shame and guilt were extremely highly correlated (i.e.,  $r = .88$ ) which is consistent with others' reports that lay people can have difficulty distinguishing the two emotions via self-report (Tangney and Dearing 2002).

The current findings and those of Hermann et al. (in press) are both consistent with the notion that feelings of guilt do not motivate those high in narcissism to seek God or engage in spiritual activities in general, although the current study suggests that other emotions including shame, do not either. While Hermann et al. (in press) observed no difference among those high in narcissism in their motivation to pray after writing either a neutral or a past interpersonal transgression essay, narcissists in the current study displayed a *decreased* interest in prayer in the interpersonal failing condition. Taken together, these studies suggest that, at best, narcissists are unresponsive to appeals designed to point out their failings, but, at worst, they may backfire in a spiritual context. This may be relevant to spiritual leaders who are trying to engage, attract, and serve new followers in an era of increasing narcissism. Not only has narcissism increased among young adults in the U.S. over the past few decades (Twenge et al. 2008), but so has the proportion of those who identify as non-religious (Pew Research Center 2015). Although the current data cannot speak directly

to whether these declines are related, it may reflect dissatisfaction with traditional approaches to engaging followers, guilt-based, shame-based, or otherwise.

It is important to note that, although those high in narcissism reported less feelings of guilt and shame in response to the manipulation than those low in narcissism, it had a stronger impact on their motivation for engaging in spiritual activities than it did for those low in narcissism. This is in contrast to the findings of Hermann et al. (in press), who found no differences between those high and low in narcissism in self-reported guilt in response to writing about a past interpersonal transgression but observed even more of an impact of guilt among those low in narcissism. Consistent with previous research on self-serving biases and narcissism (Djikic et al. 2005; Ritchie et al. 2014), it seems likely that narcissists are particularly adept at rationalizing their past transgressions, thus dampening their motivational impact. Further, narcissists' preoccupation with self-enhancement may lead them to avoid or attack sources that portray them in a negative light. As God represents an ultimate, all-knowing source of evaluative feedback, it seems possible that their lack of interest in God-focused spiritual activities represents their aversion to seeing themselves in a negative light. This pattern may also suggest that narcissists are more reluctant to admit or report guilt and shame but may still be greatly affected by it.

While it appears that guilt and shame do not motivate narcissists to engage in spiritual activities, they may cope with guilt and shame by engaging in other behaviors. Given their known aggressive responses to insult and negative feedback (e.g., Bushman and Baumeister 1998; Jones and Paulhus 2010; Stucke and Sporer 2002), those high in narcissism may typically feel motivated to lash out at real or perceived threats related to a guilt and shame experience (cf. Thomaes et al. 2010). The current study did not provide opportunities for participants to express hostility in any direct way. Thus, expressing very low interest in God, religious leaders, and spiritual activities in general may have been the only way to show anger in these circumstances. In other situations, narcissists may be more likely to blame the victim of their transgression, blame external factors for their behavior, or deny wrongdoing when plausible in order to preserve their extremely positive evaluations of themselves and sense of superiority to others. Future research should explore the degree to which such behavior successfully reduces feelings of guilt or rectifies the perceived affront from the perspective of the narcissistic.

Importantly, our findings suggest that, in these sorts of situations, those high in narcissism are likely responding to factors in addition to guilt and shame. Although our analyses using the emotion ratings as a predictor suggest that guilt and shame played a role in reducing motivation to pray, other emotions did so as well (i.e., happy, sad, and relieved), while others did not (e.g., agitated, frustrated, and enlightened). The lack of effects observed on the agitation and frustration items

imply that anger and hostility may not be particularly influential emotions for narcissists in this situation. Indeed, the findings are more consistent with the idea that the manipulation simply increased negative affect (and decreased positive affect). It may be that narcissists particularly dislike being trapped in a situation that portrays them in a negative light because it thwarts their chronic self-enhancement goals (cf. Campbell and Green 2008), but it also may be that guilt and shame are less central to the day-to-day functioning of narcissists than current theory and conventional wisdom suggest. At the minimum, the current findings contribute to the current literature in a modest way and raise questions about the degree to which other emotions may have also played a role in the effects of Hermann et al. (*in press*). More generally, they highlight the need for more experimental research examining the affective experiences of those high in narcissism.

Likewise, relatively little research has examined how the general population responds to feeling emotions like guilt and shame, either immediately or over time. The findings of the current study and those of Hermann et al. (*in press*) together suggest that individuals' immediate reactions to these emotions may tend to be avoidant, while reactions after some time has passed may be more approach-oriented. This is consistent with the idea that, for example, guilt is an unpleasant, self-conscious, and moral emotion that serves to promote social bonds (Haidt 2003). If guilt serves to alert the individual to a possible violation of others' expectations, it likely prompts many to conceal the transgression initially or to hide from those who might have been offended to avoid the prospect of damaging the relationship. After this initial reaction, many may move to repair and reach out to others when concealment is not possible or after more thoughtful consideration of one's options has occurred. Shame, on the other hand, because it has a stronger focus on negative evaluation of the core self, may retain its avoidant motivational properties over time. Future experimental research should examine these issues directly by manipulating factors that may promote or undermine approach and avoidance responses in the aftermath of a guilt or shame-inducing experience.

While the scenario was written specifically to induce feelings of guilt (i.e., to simulate an experience that is chiefly an interpersonal, rather than an intrapersonal, failing), it is understandable that it would also lead participants to report feelings of shame, as lay people often have trouble distinguishing between shame and guilt (Tangney 1992) and many might consider telling a friend's secret to be a failure by the self's standards in addition to being an interpersonal failure. Further, although the 'in-the-moment' nature of the manipulation allows us to standardize the interpersonal transgression that participants' emotions are primed with, something that Hermann et al.'s (*in press*) manipulation did not allow for, it is inherently messy. In attempting to simulate an interpersonal transgression, the manipulation influenced participants' responses to all

emotions measured. As an interpersonal failing is an emotionally intense happening, this comes as little surprise. Inducing these emotions in a realistic way without simultaneously inducing associated emotions is a serious challenge when conducting this sort of research. Future work should seek to isolate feelings of shame, guilt, and other motivational emotions and investigate their unique contributions to the relationship between narcissism and interest in spiritual activities.

Although psychological and psychoanalytic theory and research (e.g., Gramzow and Tangney 1992; Krizan and Johar 2015; Thomaes et al. 2011; Morrison 1992; Wright et al. 1989) typically emphasize the role of shame as a motivational force for narcissists, our findings suggest that guilt can operate similarly in some cases. Indeed, ratings of shame and guilt among participants in this study were almost perfectly correlated.

It also bears mentioning that there is a possibility that demand characteristics contributed to our findings. First, it's possible that participants were not fully experiencing the emotions they conveyed in their ratings, but were rather conveying the reactions they perceived were expected in such a situation. Moreover, narcissistic participants might be particularly attuned to the social expectation that they should feel guilt (and, perhaps, shame) because of how "they" treated the friend in the scenario. Thus, perhaps they reported the emotions for this reason without actually feeling them. While this might account for their reporting feelings of guilt and shame, it seems somewhat less likely that it could account for the difference in interest in spiritual activities, given that the socially desirable response to the situation among those who pray would likely be to turn to God in some way. On the other hand, it is also possible that narcissists' pointedly decreased interest in spiritual activities after an interpersonal transgression is a result of intrapsychic concerns. Specifically, narcissists value their sense of agency (Campbell and Green 2008) and may report less interest in engaging in spiritual activities for fear of appearing too dependent on God and others. That being said, it is important to investigate these findings further using alternative manipulations that are less susceptible to demand characteristics.

In sum, the current work suggests that, particularly among narcissists, 'in-the-moment' emotions, resulting from imagining committing an interpersonal transgression, can reduce interest in spiritual activities. As guilt, the primary emotion expected to result from this sort of behavior, has traditionally been used as a motivator in Western religion, this finding is very important for religious leaders seeking to connect with and shepherd congregations with increasing numbers of narcissistic members. Furthermore, although the current contribution is quite modest, the study does open the door for more research into how guilt, shame, and other emotions, both retrospective and 'in-the-moment,' affect interest in spiritual behaviors among narcissists and the population in general. The

continuing rise in levels of narcissism over the past several decades has profound implications for a variety of daily cultural activities, such as religion and spirituality. Studying the effects of common emotional events, such as feelings of guilt, thus warrants continued academic investigation.

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### Compliance with Ethical Standards

**Ethical Approval** All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

**Informed Consent** Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

**Conflict of Interest** AJS, ADH, ML, and RCF declare that they have no conflict of interest.

## Appendix

**Current Interest in Spiritual Activities** “Right now, I feel like...”

1. Praying to thank God for things occurring in my life. (*prayer*)
2. Opening myself up to God for insight into my problems through prayer. (*prayer*)
3. Asking God for assistance with my daily problems. (*prayer*)
4. Praising God through prayer. (*prayer*)
5. Praying to confess things I have done wrong. (*prayer*)
6. Listening to a sermon at a house of worship. (*spiritual guidance*)
7. Seeking advice from a religious leader. (*spiritual guidance*)
8. Reading spiritual or religious books or magazine articles. (*spiritual guidance*)
9. Exploring practices that might open my inner energies, such as meditation. (*self-enhancing spiritual practices*)
10. Attending a workshop for releasing my inner potentials. (*self-enhancing spiritual practices*)
11. Going to my place of worship to see friends. (*socializing*)
12. Going to a place of worship to meet people. (*socializing*)
13. Sharing my personal view and life experiences in a Bible/spiritual study group. (*spiritual leadership*)
14. Leading a Bible study/spiritual discussion group. (*spiritual leadership*)
15. Offering spiritual guidance to someone struggling. (*spiritual leadership*)
16. Evangelizing or witnessing to non-believers. (*spiritual leadership*)

Note: All items were rated on a 1 (*not at all interested*) to 7 (*extremely interested*) Likert scale.

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