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Dillon Jones

*Trevecca Nazarene University*

Kerri Carden

*Trevecca Nazarene University*

Randy Carden

*Trevecca Nazarene University*

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# Narcissism and Altruism among Undergraduate Business and Religion Majors

Dillon Jones, Kerri Carden, & Randy Carden

Trevecca Nazarene University

## Abstract

*Research has suggested links between narcissism, unethical behavior, and undergraduate business majors. It has been theorized that altruism has a negative relationship with narcissism and research has suggested that religiosity is linked to disapproval of the unethical. Based on this information, the current study hypothesized that business majors would score higher on narcissism than religion majors, measured as selfism using the Phares and Erskine Selfism Test. The current study also hypothesized that religion majors would score higher on altruism than business majors, measured by Johnson's Self-Report Altruism Scale. Forty-one male and 27 female undergraduates majoring in either business or religion participated in the study. Results revealed that business majors did score higher on narcissism measured as selfism, though religion majors did not score higher on altruism.*

## Introduction

Narcissism has been theoretically linked to the characteristics of individualism and self-gratification found in Western cultures (Phares & Erskine, 1984; Zondag, 2004; Watson, Little, Sawrie, & Biderman, 1992; Traiser & Eighmy, 2011). Research has shown that narcissism is not in and of itself a negative trait, and can in fact contribute to healthy self-functioning (Watson et. al, 1992). However, some studies have suggested that aspects of narcissism are responsible for impairment of individuals' moral reasoning and ethics (Traisner & Eighmy, 2011; Cooper & Pullig, 2013). How does narcissism relate to ethics, and are there other traits involved in ethical behavior?

Zondag (2004) contends that narcissism is a universal personality trait that appears in all people to varying degrees. His study focused on narcissism as it appears in pastors, and his study revealed that "healthy" narcissism is a common trait in clergy. This was also found in a study conducted by Hill and Yousey (1998), which revealed that out of four occupations under study, clergy possessed the lowest measures of "unhealthy" narcissistic traits. Other studies suggest that narcissism is having a negative impact in the world of

ethical business and that business students are among the most unethical undergraduates (Brown, Sautter, Littvay, Sautter, & Bearnes, 2010; Traiser & Eighmy, 2011; Conroy & Emerson, 2004).

In their measure, Phares and Erskine substituted narcissism with the term selfism. They stated, "Selfism will be viewed as an orientation, belief, or set as to how one should construe a whole range of problem situations that deal with the satisfaction of a variety of needs" (Phares & Erskine, 1984, p. 600). By this definition, selfism was measured in regard to approaches to behavior, activity that could later be considered ethical or unethical. For this reason, this study conceptualized selfism as the self-centric pole on a continuum of ethics, the other pole being altruism.

The Self-Report Altruism Scale was developed from a definition of altruism encompassing both the sociobiological definition of the term, regarding sacrifice in life or death situations, and the psychological definition regarding helping behaviors minimally or non-related to survival (Johnson, Danko, Darvill, Bochner, Bowers, Huang, Park, Pecjak, Rahim, & Pennington, 1989). "Altruistic behavior may be defined as performing an act helpful to someone else without expectation of

reward or repayment” (Johnson et. al, 1989, p. 855). Items on the scale directly measured frequency of behaviors considered altruistic, allowing this study to conceptualize altruism as the others-centric pole of the ethical continuum. Additionally, research has linked religiosity to an opposition to unethical behavior (Cooper & Pullig, 2013; Rawwas, Swaidan, & Al-Khatib, 2006), allowing this study to further conceptualize altruistic behavior as characteristic of the religious and those studying religion.

Given these operational definitions of altruism and selfism, then, altruism can be said to be others-centric in terms of behavior and problem solving, whereas selfism is self-centric in these areas. Based on these conceptualizations, this study has loosely considered altruism and selfism as poles on the ethical continuum. This dichotomy has been theoretically supported (Phares & Erskine, 1984; Hill & Yousey, 1998; Cooper & Pullig, 2013). Prior research led to the hypotheses that religion majors would be more likely than business majors to lean toward the altruism pole, while business majors would associate more strongly with selfism than would religion majors.

While there has been much research conducted on narcissism in specific career tracks as well as within and between business programs, there have been few studies comparing different undergraduate majors on narcissism. Similarly, few studies have been conducted on altruism as it relates to undergraduate major. This study explores narcissism (selfism) and altruism among students at a private Christian-affiliated university majoring in either religion or business. Thus, the current study specifically hypothesized that business majors would score higher on narcissism than religion majors, and that religion

majors would score higher on altruism than business majors.

## Method

### Participants

Data were collected at a small Christian-affiliated private university in the Southeast. Survey packets were distributed during class to students in five upper-level religion courses and two upper-level business courses. Sixty-eight usable surveys were collected. Forty-one men and 27 women completed these surveys. Their mean age was 21.54 years ( $SD = 2.88$ ). Thirty-seven participants were religion majors and 31 participants were business majors.

### Measures

Narcissism was measured using the Phares and Erskine Selfism Test (Phares & Erskine, 1984). The term selfism was substituted for narcissism by the measure’s creators to avoid association with the pathological connotations of the latter. The creators defined narcissism via selfism in terms of a problem solving generalized expectancy rather than in terms of pathology (Phares & Erskine, 1984). This measure featured 28 items measuring selfism and 12 filler items. Each of the 40 items were scored on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Items included, “I believe people have the right to live any damn way they please,” and, “Having children keeps you from engaging in a lot of self-fulfilling activities.” Test-retest correlation was .91 ( $p < .001$ ) and split-half reliability, determined by Spearman-Brown correction formula, was .84 ( $p < .001$ ), demonstrating reliability. The Phares and Erskine Selfism Test demonstrated construct validity by correlating with the Narcissistic Personality



Inventory (Raskin, 1980) and discriminant validity by being unrelated to the Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale (1964). The point totals of the 28 items measuring selfism were summed up and recorded as an individual's selfism score.

Altruism was measured using Johnson's 56-item Self-Report Altruism Scale (Johnson et. al, 1989) in which various altruistic behaviors were identified, each followed by a response field. Responses were given via a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (very often) indicating how often the participant involved themselves in the altruistic activities. Items included, "I have loaned my car to friends or neighbors," and, "I have given directions to a stranger." Test-retest reliability was .94, demonstrating reliability. The Self-Report Altruism Scale demonstrated construct validity by correlating with the Rushton et. al altruism scale (1981), the Dimensions of Conscience Questionnaire (Johnson et. al, 1987), and the Intrinsic-Extrinsic Religiosity scale (Feagin, 1964). The Self-Report Altruism Scale also demonstrated discriminant validity by being unrelated to the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire (Eysenck and Barrett, 1985) and the Defining Issues Test (Rest, 1976). The point totals of the 56 items measuring altruism were summed up and recorded as an individual's altruism score.

## Procedure

A survey packet was created including a detachable informed consent form, the Phares and Erskine Selfism Test, the Self-Report Altruism Scale, and a demographic information form. The informed consent form was immediately detached from the rest of the packet after being signed in order to keep all information confidential. Ninety-seven survey packets were distributed and

collected. All surveys completed by students not majoring in either religion or business were removed, as were all incomplete surveys. Of the original 97 surveys collected, the data of 68 surveys were usable. Data were recorded in SPSS 19 and analyzed by one-tailed t-tests.

## Results

This study hypothesized that business majors would score higher on selfism than religion majors. It was found that there was a significant difference between business majors ( $M = 70.16$ ,  $SD = 10.05$ ) and religion majors ( $M = 64.92$ ,  $SD = 11.43$ ) on selfism scores,  $t(66) = -1.99$ ,  $p = .025$  one-tailed. This supported the hypothesis that business majors would score higher on selfism than religion majors.

This study also hypothesized that religion majors would score higher on altruism than business majors. It was found that there was no significant difference between religion majors ( $M = 145.84$ ,  $SD = 28.81$ ) and business majors ( $M = 135.55$ ,  $SD = 27.68$ ) on altruism scores,  $t(66) = 1.49$ ,  $p = .07$  one-tailed. This did not support the hypothesis that religion majors would score higher on altruism than business majors.

In sum, business majors did score higher on selfism than religion majors, but religion majors did not score higher on altruism than business majors.

## Discussion

The current study supported the hypothesis that business majors would score higher on selfism than religion majors. The statistical support for this hypothesis is not surprising. Business majors have been demonstrated to be relatively narcissistic and often unethical (Brown et. al, 2010;



Traiser & Eighmy, 2011). Clergy have been found to be narcissistic (Zondag, 2004), though they have scored relatively low on measures of “negative” narcissistic qualities (Hill & Yousey, 1998). It follows then that business majors should score higher on narcissism than religion majors. However, these results may be interpreted in a positive manner. The Phares and Erskine Selfism Test was designed specifically to avoid affiliation with a pathological definition of narcissism, which is indeed why it uses the term “selfism” (Phares & Erskine, 1984). It should be reemphasized that narcissism is a complex personality trait that does not necessarily connote negative or dysfunctional self-centeredness, especially when measured as selfism. In fact, many studies have indicated that narcissism can be beneficial in certain circumstances, especially in occupational environments (Zondag, 2004; Hill & Yousey, 1998).

The current study also hypothesized that religion majors would score higher on altruism than business majors. That this hypothesis was not statistically supported is surprising. Considering the aforementioned reputation of businesspeople and business majors as being relatively unethical, it follows that students training for ministry would hypothetically be significantly more altruistic and others-centric than students studying business.

One limitation of this study was its sample size. The university at which data were collected had a relatively small undergraduate student body, and collection techniques did not allow for all religion and business majors to complete surveys. However, a large enough sample was collected to allow for significant findings for the first hypothesis. Replication with a larger sample may help detect a difference in the second hypothesis if one exists.

Ideally, this study would be replicated at a larger Christian-affiliated university such that more surveys could be collected and analyzed, perhaps revealing stronger support for each hypothesis. Christian affiliation would be important for replication, as such universities are typically focusing on the training of future clergy in specific doctrinal traditions rather than providing students with a global perspective on religion. A related limitation of this study is the possibility that students of all majors who chose to attend a Christian-affiliated university had similar levels of altruism, which could have created a selection bias and restriction of range of altruism scores. Another limitation of this study was its focus on only two majors. Future research comparing several majors both including and excluding religion and business majors would be beneficial for the studies of narcissism and altruism in undergraduate programs and beyond.

Future research should also focus on those various aspects of narcissism and altruism and how they relate to undergraduate major. A study similar to the current one could implement different measures with subtypes, such as the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (Raskin & Terry, 1988), allowing for a comparison of majors on these subtypes or these subtypes on any number of variables. In terms of narcissism specifically, and in light of research questioning the efficacy of ethics courses in business curricula, it would be interesting to see research conducted on whether business programs attract those with narcissistic traits or whether these traits result from business curricula. Similarly, it would be interesting to see research conducted on whether Christian-affiliated universities attract those with altruistic traits more so than non-Christian universities.

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