Does personality "Trump" ideology? narcissism predicts support for Trump via ideological tendencies

Joshua Hart & Nathaniel Stekler

Published online: 27 Jul 2021.

Submit your article to this journal ↗

Article views: 77

View related articles ↗

View Crossmark data ↗

This article has been awarded the Centre for Open Science 'Open Data' badge.

This article has been awarded the Centre for Open Science 'Open Materials' badge.

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Check for updates

Does personality "Trump" ideology? narcissism predicts support for Trump via ideological tendencies

Joshua Hart[a] and Nathaniel Stekler[b]

[a]Union College, Schenectady, NY, USA; [b]University of Connecticut, Connecticut, USA

ABSTRACT

Former US President Donald Trump's 2016 election victory defied expectations. Trump was an unconventional candidate, and his presidency was true to form. What accounts for his popularity? Integrating work on narcissism with the dual-process motivational model of ideology, we propose that individuals higher in narcissism are more likely to adopt right-wing authoritarian and social-dominance oriented attitudes, which lead them to embrace socially and economically conservative policy positions, respectively. Thus, they are receptive to Trump's anti-immigration stance, a centerpiece of his political messaging from the campaign trail to the White House. The present study (N = 302) yielded results consistent with this analysis: Right-wing authoritarianism and social-dominance orientation mediated the association between narcissism and Trump support, via social and economic conservatism and immigration attitudes. The study represents an initial test of a potentially generative framework on which future research can elaborate.

Social scientists and pundits are still trying to understand Donald Trump's surprise 2016 victory and continued popularity among a large portion of the electorate, even after his 2020 electoral defeat. In 2016, Trump was a political neophyte, yet he prevailed against Hillary Clinton, the highly experienced political heir to popular outgoing incumbent Barack Obama, who was presiding over a good economy (Sides et al., 2017). On the campaign trail, Trump made what many considered to be offensive comments denigrating women and immigrants (White et al., 2016, November 5), and his behavior as president was largely true to form. In 2020, despite losing, he garnered millions more votes than four years prior (Lindsay, 2020). What accounts for his appeal?

The dominant political science narrative explaining Trump support centers on two facts. First, the political climate is historically polarized, and voters tend to vote overwhelmingly for their political party's nominee (Stone et al., 1992). Second, Trump appealed to less-educated, lower-income white voters who felt abandoned by a society moving toward increased diversity, religious pluralism, and economic globalism, all of which Trump seemed to stand against (Major et al., 2016). Even if correct, this analysis leaves much unexplained. For example, many white voters who fit the profile of a typical Trump supporter did not, in fact, support Trump; and many others who do not fit the profile did vote for him (e.g., 49% of college-educated White voters; Tyson & Maniam, 2016, November 9). Clearly, demographics are not the whole story.

The present research suggests a process model that might help understand the psychological antecedents of Trump support. We begin with the trait of narcissism. Why? Because narcissism reflects a blend of insecurity and grandiosity that predisposes right-wing authoritarianism (RWA; Altemeyer, 1981) and social dominance orientation (SDO; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999), which are ideologically consonant with political conservatism and especially Trump's specific version of it.

Some evidence for this analysis already exists. For example, one study found that *collective* narcissism (which is correlated with individual narcissism) predicted Trump support (Federico & de Zavala, 2018); in another, collective narcissism (along with RWA and SDO) predicted support for the British "Leave" movement, mediated by anti-immigrant sentiment (Golec de Zavala et al., 2017). Studies have also found a correlation between (individual) narcissism and political conservatism (e.g., Duspara & Greitemeyer, 2017). Finally, the combination of SDO and RWA has been associated with Trump support (Choma & Hanoch, 2017).

However, no study has combined all of these factors into a comprehensive path model. We propose and test such a model depicting the link between narcissism, political conservatism, and Trump support. Following the dual-process motivational model of ideology (Duckitt, 2001), we examined RWA and SDO as independent (i.e., parallel) mediators of the narcissism → conservatism → Trump support link.

According to the dual process model, personality factors lead some individuals to regard the world as a dangerous place and a "competitive jungle," leading them to adopt RW-authoritarian and SD-oriented attitudes, respectively. Dangerous-world beliefs draw people to RWA because it is a worldview that emphasizes law and order, respect for authority, and strict religious adherence, which combine to help people feel safer in a chaotic world. Competitive-jungle beliefs lead people in higher-status groups to adopt an SDO because it helps people feel that they will prevail in intergroup conflicts and maintain power and access to resources.

There are several reasons to think that narcissism is a likely antecedent to both RWA and SDO. Most theories of narcissism cast it as rooted in deep-seated feelings of inferiority and insecurity (Krizan & Herlache, 2018), which might make RWA an attractive ideology, with its emphasis on power and control (cf. compensatory control theory; Kay et al., 2009). Simultaneously, though, narcissists defend against their insecurities by inflating their *personal* sense of power and superiority, which might lead them to embrace an SDO (Zitek & Jordan, 2016). Indeed, recent research found links between narcissism and both RWA and SDO (Cichocka et al., 2017; Jonason et al., 2020; Mayer et al., 2020; Żemojtel-Piotrowska et al., 2020).[1]

In turn, RWA and SDO are related to the two main pillars of political conservatism: social and economic (Harnish et al., 2017). RWA's traditionalist and law-and-order emphasis aligns with social conservatism, including cracking down on "troublemakers," teaching children to respect authority, and preserving traditional religious values (Manganelli Rattazzi et al., 2007; these values seem germane to Trump support; Sherman, 2018). And SDO's embrace of hierarchy and competition fits with the free market capitalism that defines economic conservatism.

In sum, we suggest that (1) higher narcissism should predict higher RWA and SDO, which (2) consequently, should predict higher social and economic conservatism. Finally, (3) social and economic conservatism should directly predict Trump support, as people tend to support like-minded candidates and leaders. The present study tested this model, with one additional variable: immigration attitudes. We thought that these would be important because they are central to Trump's political messaging and success (Reny et al., 2019). They are also likely related to RWA, SDO, and social and economic conservatism. For example, RWA and SDO predict more negative immigration attitudes (Golec de Zavala et al., 2017), probably because immigrants can pose a threat to social order, ingroup identity and cohesion, and – for working class individuals – economic wellbeing. Thus, we included immigration attitudes as a proximate mediator of the narcissism → RWA/SDO → social/economic conservatism → Trump support pathways.

Method

Participants

A total of 302 United States residents (191 men and 111 women) aged 20–72 (*Mdn* = 33) participated via MTurk.com and were compensated 1.50. USD There were 157 Democrats, 93 Republicans, and 52 independents.

Materials and procedure

The questionnaires measured (in the order presented): (1) Economic views (e.g., limited government, welfare benefits, and fiscal responsibility; α = .73) and social views (e.g., abortion, gun ownership, and traditional marriage; α = .73), with 12 feeling-thermometer items (on a scale of 0–10, where 5 = "neutral"; Everett, 2013); (2) narcissism (α = .91), using the NPI-16 (with a binary agree/disagree response option, e.g., "I know that I am good because everybody keeps telling me so" vs. "When people compliment me I sometimes get embarrassed"; Ames et al., 2006); (3) political affiliation (Democrat, Republican, or neither); (4) RWA (α = .95), using the short version (e.g., "Our country desperately needs a mighty leader who will do what has to be done to destroy the radical new ways and sinfulness that are ruining us"; Manganelli Rattazzi et al., 2007); (5) SDO (α = .91), using the SDO₇ scale (e.g., "An ideal society requires some groups to be on top and others to be on the bottom"; Ho et al., 2015); (6) socio-economic status (α = .77), using a multiple-choice version of the MacArthur scale of subjective social status, which asks participants to compare whether they are better or worse off than various others (Ghaed & Gallo, 2007); (7) anti-immigration attitudes (α = .73), on a measure from Schneider (2008), adapted to make the questions relevant to the US context (e.g., "America shouldn't allow people of a different race or ethnic group to come and live here"; and (8) Trump support (α = .94), using 6 items from Marist Poll's (2020) poll rating President Trump's job performance (e.g., "I think that President Trump is an overall good president"; Marist Poll, 2020). Except where indicated, participants reported their agreement with questionnaire items on 7-point scales (1 = "strongly disagree" and 7 = "strongly agree"). Finally, we collected demographic information (excluding race and ethnicity, which our sample size would not permit analysis of). Table 1 displays descriptive statistics for the main study variables. The full survey can be obtained at https://osf.io/8s369/.

Results

All data are available at https://osf.io/5rbn3/. Zero-order correlations were consistent with our predictions, as all variables of interest were correlated with one another (see Table 1). To test our model, we created a custom, mixed parallel and sequential mediation model with 5,000 bootstrap samples and 95% confidence intervals, using Hayes's (2018) PROCESS macro. Because they were associated with Trump support in the zero-order correlations, we covaried SES, age, and gender.[2]

The results corroborated our model, with some modifications (see Figure 1 for path statistics). First, consistent with the model, narcissism predicted higher RWA and SDO. In turn, RWA predicted higher social conservatism, and SDO predicted higher economic conservatism. Next, economic conservatism predicted more negative immigration attitudes. (Contrary to expectations, social conservatism was associated with more *positive* immigration attitudes, $b = -.07$, $p = .04$, CI = $-.13$, $-.001$, likely due to a suppression effect from collinearity with economic conservatism.) There were also significant direct effects on immigration attitudes from narcissism, RWA, and SDO. Trump support

Table 1. Correlation matrix and descriptive statistics for the main variables.

	Narcissism	RWA	SDO	Social Cons.	Economic Cons.	Immigration	Trump	SES	Age	M(SD)
Narcissism	1									0.35(0.31)
RWA	.37**	1								3.16(1.34)
SDO	.43**	.64**	1							2.84(1.37)
Social Cons.	.25**	.75**	.45**	1						6.08(2.30)
Economic Cons.	.30**	.51**	.57**	.64**	1					5.93(1.85)
Immigration	.47**	.71**	.69**	.52**	.58**	1				3.12(1.21)
Trump	.44**	.69**	.61**	.67**	.61**	.76**	1			3.18(1.85)
SES	.20**	.18**	.16**	.19**	.16**	.14*	.18**	1		3.01(0.75)
Age	−.03	.03	.08	.22**	.10	.06	.12*	−.07	1	36.62(11.33)

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). *Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed). Cons = conservatism; RWA = right-wing authoritarianism; SES = Socioeconomic Status; SDO = social dominance orientation.
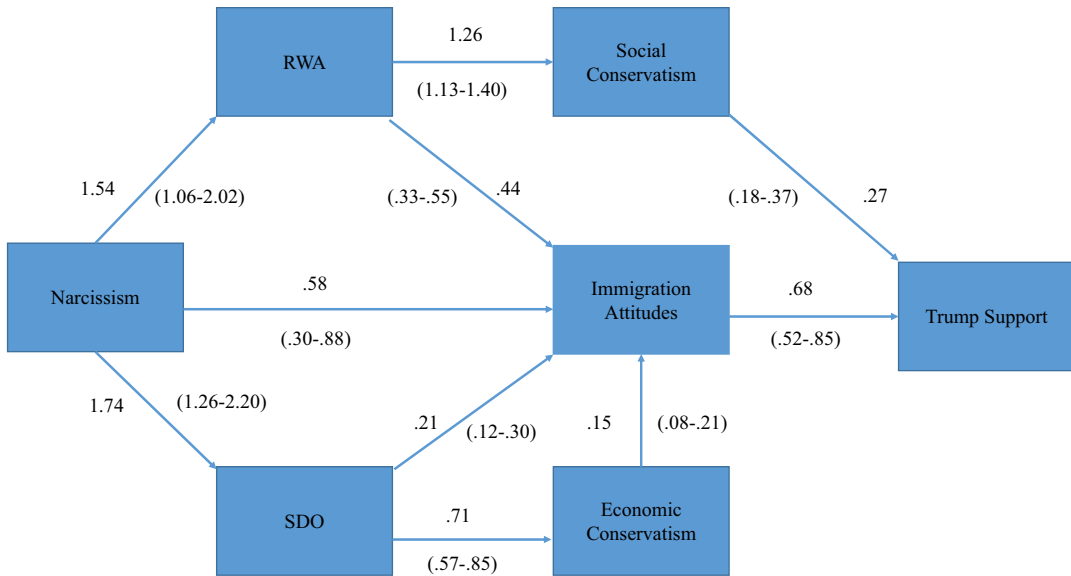
Figure 1. The final model. All path coefficients are statistically significant ($p < .001$). Confidence intervals are depicted in parentheses.

was also directly predicted by higher narcissism ($b = .48$, $p = .03$, $CI = .04-.91$), higher social conservatism, and more negative immigration attitudes.

Critically, there were several indirect effects, largely consistent with the model. Immigration attitudes mediated the effect of narcissism on Trump support, $b = .39$ (CI = .13-.68), as did both the RWA → social conservatism path, $b = .53$ (CI = .30-.80), the RWA → immigration path $b = .46$ (CI = .28-.70), the SDO → immigration attitudes path, $b = .24$ (CI = .10-.46), and the SDO → economic conservatism → immigration attitudes path, $b = .12$ (CI = .05-.22).

Discussion

These results are largely consistent with our proposed model. The effect of narcissism was carried in part by immigration attitudes, but also by sequential pathways through (a) RWA and social conservatism, (b) RWA and immigration attitudes, (c) SDO and immigration attitudes, and (d) SDO, economic conservatism, and immigration attitudes. The results are also consistent with research showing a relation between *collective* narcissism and ideologically conservative movements and causes internationally, including not just Trump support, but also support for "Brexit," as well as general populist attitudes (e.g., Marchlewska et al., 2018). Although collective narcissism is not the same as individual narcissism, the two tendencies have in common a strong orientation around the self and an adversarial stance toward "the other." Our study adds to a growing body of data suggesting that narcissistic tendencies contribute to ideological leanings.

Given that this is a cross-sectional study, we obviously cannot claim that our results represent a definitive causal model. However, the results are based on a sizable and politically diverse sample, and are consistent with extensive social psychological work (see, e.g., Pettigrew, 2017), and dominant political science models. Also, we think there is a strong theoretical case for the specific causal ordering of the variables. Personality develops before ideology, so it is more likely that narcissism is a distal causative factor instead of one caused (say, by ideology or Trump support). It is also consistent with the dual process motivational model and related empirical work treating RWA and SDO as caused by personality and causing, in turn, the development of particular political ideologies. Immigration

attitudes are probably best understood as a relatively specific downstream consequence of narcissism, RWA, SDO, and economic conservatism.

Future research should attempt to understand how various facets of narcissism relate differently to outcomes of interest. In the present research, we used a short version of the NPI, which focuses on narcissistic grandiosity. However, it may well be the case that, for example, narcissistic admiration and rivalry are uniquely associated with certain ideological outcomes (see Mayer et al., 2020). It would also be useful to know the extent to which feelings of vulnerability in narcissism – a feature of our theorizing but not something we measured explicitly – contribute to processes along the lines of the ones we have theorized.

Finally, we hope that our proposed model and provisionally supportive data will inspire additional work along the lines we have proposed. Even though it is not possible to randomly assign people to different levels of narcissism, a longitudinal study could provide additional support for the causal paths we have postulated. It might also be possible to simulate a narcissistic mind-set in the context of a laboratory experiment.

Conclusion

The present research integrates and extends prior work, providing a relatively deep and broad theory of political conservatism and Trump support. Our results are consistent with the proposal that narcissism predisposes a combination of insecurity and grandiosity that tilt people toward adopting consonant worldviews – the soothing power and control of RWA and ego-stoking flavor of SDO – which lead to an adversarial stance toward immigrants, both directly and via socially and economically conservative beliefs. Finally, negative immigration attitudes and social conservatism make Trump an appealing political figure to individuals thus disposed.

Notes

1. Cichocka et al. (2017) actually found a negative correlation between narcissism and RWA, in contrast to our findings. This might be due to the fact that they controlled for participants' self-esteem scores. Future research will be needed to understand the nature of the relationship between narcissism and RWA; it could be, for example, that different aspects of narcissism are oppositely related to endorsement of RWA.
2. The present sample is not large enough to test for gender moderation of the whole complex model. However, exploratory analyses showed no hint of an interaction between narcissism and gender on either the main outcome variable (Trump support) or on any of the mediators – the effects of narcissism hold for both men and women.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Joshua Hart is a Professor in the Department of Psychology at Union College in Schenectady, NY. He received his PhD from the University of California, Davis.

Nathaniel Stekler is a doctoral student at the University of Connecticut in the Department of Human Development & Family Sciences. He received his BS in Psychology from Union College in Schenectady, NY.

Data availability statement

The data described in this article are openly available in the Open Science Framework at https://osf.io/5rbn3/ and https://osf.io/8s369/..

Open scholarship

This article has earned the Center for Open Science badges for Open Data and Open Materials through Open Practices Disclosure. The data and materials are openly accessible at https://osf.io/5rbn3/ and https://osf.io/8s369/..

References

Altemeyer, B. (1981). *Right-wing authoritarianism*. University of Manitoba Press.

Ames, D. R., Rose, P., & Anderson, C. P. (2006). The NPI-16 as a short measure of narcissism. *Journal of Research in Personality*, *40*(4), 440–450. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrp.2005.03.002

Choma, B. L., & Hanoch, Y. (2017). Cognitive ability and authoritarianism: Understanding support for Trump and Clinton. *Personality and Individual Differences*, *106(1)*, 287–291. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2016.10.054

Cichocka, A., Dhont, K., Makwana, A. P., & Back, M. (2017). On self–love and outgroup hate: Opposite effects of narcissism on prejudice via social dominance orientation and right–wing authoritarianism. *European Journal of Personality*, *31*(4), 366–384. https://doi.org/10.1002/per.2114

Duckitt, J. (2001). A dual process cognitive-motivational theory of ideology and prejudice. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, *22*, 41–113. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601(01)80004-6

Duspara, B., & Greitemeyer, T. (2017). The impact of dark tetrad traits on political orientation and extremism: An analysis in the course of a presidential election. *Heliyon*, *3*(10), e00425. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2017.e00425

Everett, J. A. C. (2013). The 12 item social and economic conservatism scale (SECS). *PLoS ONE*, *8*(12), e82131. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0082131

Federico, C. M., & de Zavala, A. G. (2018). Collective narcissism and the 2016 US presidential vote. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, *82*(1), 110–121. https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfx048

Ghaed, S. G., & Gallo, L. C. (2007). Subjective social status, objective socioeconomic status, and cardiovascular risk in women. *Health Psychology*, *26*(6), 668–674. http://dx.doi.org.libproxy.union.edu/10.1037/0278-6133.26.6.668

Golec de Zavala, A., Guerra, R., & Simão, C. (2017). The relationship between the Brexit vote and individual predictors of prejudice: Collective narcissism, right wing authoritarianism, social dominance orientation. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *8*. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.02023

Harnish, R. J., Bridges, K. R., & Gump, J. T. (2017). Predicting economic, social, and foreign policy conservatism: The role of right-wing authoritarianism, social dominance orientation, moral foundations orientation, and religious fundamentalism. *Current Psychology*, *37*(3), 668–679. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-016-9552-x

Hayes, A. F. (2018). *Introduction to mediation, moderation, and conditional process analysis: a regression-based approach*. New York: The Guilford Press.

Ho, A. K., Sidanius, J., Kteily, N., Sheehy-Skeffington, J., Pratto, F., Henkel, K. E., Foels, R., & Stewart, A. L. (2015). The nature of social dominance orientation: Theorizing and measuring preferences for intergroup inequality using the new SDO_7 scale. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *109*(6), 1003–1028. https://doi.org/10.1037/pspi0000033

Jonason, P. K., Underhill, D., & Navaratte, C. D. (2020). Understanding prejudice in terms of approach tendencies: The dark triad traits, sex differences, and political personality traits. *Personality and Individual Differences*, *153*, 109617. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2019.109617

Kay, A. C., Whitson, J. A., Gaucher, D., & Galinsky, A. D. (2009). Compensatory control: Achieving order through the mind, our institutions, and the heavens. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, *18*(5), 264–268. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8721.2009.01649.x

Krizan, Z., & Herlache, A. D. (2018). The narcissism spectrum model: A synthetic view of narcissistic personality. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, *22*(1), 3–31. https://doi.org/10.1177/1088868316685018

Lindsay, J. M. (2020). *The 2020 election by the numbers*. Council on Foreign Relations. https://www.cfr.org/blog/2020-election-numbers .

Major, B., Blodorn, A., & Major Blascovich, G. (2016). The threat of increasing diversity: Why many white Americans support Trump in the 2016 presidential election. *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations*, *21*(6), 931–940. https://doi.org/10.1177/1368430216677304

Manganelli Rattazzi, A. M., Bobbio, A., & Canova, L. (2007). A short version of the right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) scale. *Personality and Individual Differences*, *43(5)*, 1223–1234. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2007.03.013

Marchlewska, M., Cichocka, A., Panayiotou, O., Castellanos, K., & Batayneh, J. (2018). Populism as identity politics. *Social Psychological and Personality Science,9*(2),151–162. https://doi.org/10.1177/1948550617732393.

Marist Poll. (2020). http://maristpoll.marist.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/WednesdayRelease_NPR_PBS-NewsHour_Marist-Poll_USA-NOS-and-Tables_2002171446.pdf

Mayer, S. J., Berning, C. C., & Johann, D. (2020). The two dimensions of narcissistic personality and support for the radical right: The role of right–wing authoritarianism, social dominance orientation and anti–immigrant sentiment. *European Journal of Personality*, *34*(1), 60–76. https://doi.org/10.1002/per.2228

Pettigrew, T. F. (2017). Social psychological perspectives on Trump supporters. *Journal of Social and Political Psychology*, *5*(1), 107–116. https://doi.org/doi:10.5964/jspp.v5i1.750

Reny, T. T., Collingwood, L., & Valenzuela, A. A. (2019). Vote switching in the 2016 election: How racial and immigration attitudes, not economics, explain shifts in white voting. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, *83*(1), 91–113. https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfz011

Schneider, S. L. (2008). Anti-immigrant attitudes in Europe: Outgroup size and perceived ethnic threat. *European Sociological Review*, *24*(1), 53–67. https://doi.org/10.1093/esr/jcm034

Sherman, R. A. (2018). Personal values and support for Donald Trump during the 2016 US presidential primary. *Personality and Individual Differences*, *128 (July)*, 33–38. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2018.02.020

Sidanius, J., & Pratto, F. (1999). *Social dominance: An intergroup theory of social hierarchy and oppression*. Cambridge University Press.

Sides, J., Tesler, M., & Vavreck, L. (2017). The 2016 U.S. election: How Trump lost and won. *Journal of Democracy*, *28*(2), 34–44. https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2017.0022

Stone, W., Atkeson, L., & Rapoport, R. (1992). Turning on or turning off? Mobilization and demobilization effects of participation in presidential nomination campaigns. *American Journal of Political Science*, *36*(3), 665–691. https://doi.org/doi:10.2307/2111586

Tyson, A., & Maniam, S. (2016, November 9). Behind Trump's victory: Divisions by race, gender, education. Pew Research Center. https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/11/09/behind-trumps-victory-divisions-by-race-gender-education/

Żemojtel-Piotrowska, M., Sawicki, A., & Jonason, P. K. (2020). Dark personality, political values, and prejudice: Testing a dual process model of prejudice towards refugees. *Personality and Individual Differences*, *166*, 110168. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2020.110168

White, J., Sitrin, S., & Gerstein, B. (2016, November 5). The 155 craziest things Trump said this election. POLITICO Magazine. https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/11/the-155-craziest-things-trump-said-this-cycle–214420

Zitek, E. M., & Jordan, A. H. (2016). Narcissism predicts support for hierarchy (at least when narcissists think they can rise to the top). *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, *7*(7), 707–716. https://doi.org/10.1177/194855061664924