Primming the Word “Love” Has a Bigger Effect on Narcissists

Yasuto Okamura
Otemon Gakuin University, Osaka, Japan

The purpose of the study was to investigate whether the effect of priming depends on the personality of the individual. Participants performed a priming task involving the word “love” and then responded to the items in the Narcissistic Personality Inventory-35 (NPI-35), an inventory used to measure narcissism. As an indicator of their altruism, participants were then asked a question regarding their willingness to help another person. The result was that a significantly greater percentage of participants in the high narcissism group expressed a willingness to help. This result can be explained by the theory of self-presentation.

Keywords: priming, altruism, narcissism

Introduction

Several studies have reported that priming the concept of love changes people’s attitude and behavior. For example, activating the concept of love increased compliance with a request (Guéguen, Jacob, & Lamy, 2010), affected tipping behavior (Guéguen, 2013), and encouraged helping or altruistic behavior (Charles-Sire, Stefan, & Guéguen, 2016). One of the mechanisms to explain the effect of love priming is spreading activation, which posits that each semantic concept has a node in the neural network that is activated, at the same time as the nodes for meaningfully associated concepts. The concept of love is assumed to link to the concept of a mutually supportive relationships or cohesion. Therefore, it is assumed that activating the love concept leads to activating other positive concepts associated with the love concept through the network. In other words, the concept of love is a stimulus that makes us focus on the relationships between ourselves and others.

Researchers have found that narcissism and prosociality are negatively correlated. For example, narcissists are less likely to volunteer for nonprofit organizations (Brunell, Tumblin, & Buelow, 2014). Characteristically, narcissists seek positive evaluations from others, and they often excessively estimate their helping ability (Abe & Takagi, 2011). In fact, narcissists are concerned with how they are perceived by others and behave so as to be seen as a good person only when they focus on those others. Thus, given the concept of love as a stimulus for paying attention to the self and others, it is hypothesized that narcissists are more susceptible to the effect of priming the word “love” than non-narcissists. It is this possibility that the study described here has investigated.

Method

Participants

Participants were undergraduate university students (N = 55, there are 32 men and 23 women, and they are aged between 18 and 26 years old). They received a questionnaire and responded to it during a lecture. They...
were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could drop out of the study at any time during the survey.

**Stimuli**

The Narcissistic Personality Inventory-35 (NPI-35) Scale (Konishi, Okawa, & Hashimoto, 2006) was used to classify participants. NPI-35 is a new Japanese version of NPI, modeled after the inventory of Raskin and Terry (1988).

**Procedure**

Participants were asked to respond to all the item in NPI-35 and to write as many pairs of kanji that include the word “love” as possible. Each participant subsequently completed an ostensibly unrelated questionnaire that lasted approximately 30 seconds. The questionnaire stated that a graduate student was looking for participants willing to volunteer for his experiment. The exact date of the experiment was not yet decided, but it would be within two weeks. It was further stated that 15 minutes would be needed for the experiment. In the current study, participants were asked to indicate whether they would be willing to volunteer. It’s based on research conducted by Konishi et al. (2006) that showed a mean score of 111.75 for individuals taking the NPI-35, in the current study, participants who scored higher than 111.75 were classified as members of the high narcissism group; participants who scored lower than 111.75 were classified as members of the low narcissism group.

**Results and Discussion**

A 2 (high narcissism/low narcissism)×2 (yes/no) chi-square test was used to analyze the data. It was found that more participants (63.6%) were willing to volunteer (vs. not volunteer) for the proposed experiment ($\chi^2(1.55) = 4.09, p < 0.05, \phi = 0.27$). In all, 85.7% of the participants in the high narcissism group said that they were willing to volunteer for the experiment, while 56.1% of the participants in the low narcissism group expressed a similar willingness ($\chi^2(1.55) = 3.96, p < 0.05, \phi = 0.27$).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>High narcissism</th>
<th>Low narcissism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Willing to volunteer</td>
<td>12 (85.7%)</td>
<td>23 (56.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not willing to volunteer</td>
<td>2 (14.3%)</td>
<td>18 (43.9%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Study results provide evidence consistent with the hypothesis that priming the word “love” increases one’s altruistic attitude, and that narcissists are more susceptible to the effect of such priming than people who are not narcissistic. It is conceivable that the narcissists in the study expressed their willingness to volunteer as self-presentation; they paid close attention to themselves and others as a result of the priming and were motivated by a desire to be considered kind by others in the group.

However, the study has limitations that need to be addressed. The results are based on a relatively small sample ($N = 55$) and should be replicated using larger samples. In addition, it may be necessary to enhance the study’s ecological validity by pursuing research in which the influence of narcissism on altruistic behavior is measured in a field setting.
References


