



The “modest mask”? An investigation of vulnerable narcissists' implicit self-esteem

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ABSTRACT

Vulnerable narcissists are entitled and self-absorbed, yet report low explicit self-esteem. We proposed a “Modest Mask Hypothesis,” predicting that vulnerable narcissism would be associated with low explicit self-esteem and high implicit self-esteem. We also sought to replicate previous work assessing grandiose narcissism and self-esteem. Studies 1 and 2 utilized two different versions of the self-esteem Implicit Association Test (IAT). Vulnerable narcissism did not appear to be associated with implicit self-esteem, whereas grandiose narcissism was explained by a combination of high implicit and high explicit self-esteem in Study 2. Study 3, utilizing a bogus pipeline methodology, revealed that vulnerable and grandiose narcissists believe the level of explicit self-esteem they report. Study 3 also revealed that under pressure to be honest, both grandiose and vulnerable narcissists report higher entitlement and exploitativeness, but only grandiose narcissists report higher grandiosity. Thus, mask models do not appear to explain narcissism.

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1. Introduction

Though some people appear flagrantly and unapologetically narcissistic, others hide their narcissism below the surface. Some kinds of narcissists seem to genuinely adore themselves and expect others to do the same; in contrast, other kinds of narcissists seem to truly dislike themselves despite feeling they deserve more than they are getting. This disparity begs the question: does either type of narcissist present their true face to the world, or do they conceal it behind a mask?

Social and personality psychologists view narcissism as a trait that is distributed within the non-disordered population (e.g., Raskin & Hall, 1979). In contrast to Narcissistic Personality Disorder, which is categorically diagnosed (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), trait narcissism exists on a continuum; thus, everyone falls somewhere on the narcissism spectrum (Foster & Campbell, 2007; Miller & Campbell, 2010). Although it is a continuous construct, we refer to people high in trait narcissism as “narcissists” for brevity. Furthermore, recent research supports a distinction between two subtypes of trait narcissism, commonly referred to as grandiose and vulnerable narcissism (Hendin & Cheek, 1997; Wink, 1991). Though the two subtypes share some common characteristics such as self-absorption and entitlement, they differ in other characteristics (e.g., Dickinson & Pincus, 2003; Miller et al., 2011; Wink, 1991).

1.1. Grandiose narcissism

Grandiose narcissists most closely resemble the image of narcissism portrayed in popular media. These individuals are arrogant (Akhtar & Thomson, 1982), self-absorbed (Gabbard, 1989), superior (Krizan & Bushman, 2011), and aggressive (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998). Grandiose narcissists are vain and exhibitionistic (Raskin & Terry, 1988), but although they consistently seek admiration from others, they do not base their self-worth in externally-validated domains (Zeigler-Hill, Clark, & Pickard, 2008). Importantly, grandiose narcissists also report high self-esteem on explicit measures such as the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (e.g., Brunell & Fisher, 2014; Rose, 2002; Rosenberg, 1965).

Early narcissism theorists and researchers proposed that these individuals exhibited a mask of high explicit self-esteem in an effort to hide their truly low implicit self-esteem (e.g., Kernberg, 1975; Kohut, 1977; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001; Tracy & Robins, 2003). This theory, known as the Mask Model or Mask Hypothesis, asserts that grandiose narcissists feel bad about and dislike themselves deep down inside. To suppress this vulnerable core of inferiority, grandiose narcissists construct overly positive self-views, but this positivity is thought to be fragile; thus, key narcissistic qualities such as derogation of others and manipulation of others arise to help defend against shame and negative self-views (e.g., Campbell, Foster, & Finkel, 2002; Morf & Rhodewalt, 1993).

Some empirical evidence originally supported the Mask Hypothesis. According to the Mask Hypothesis, scores on a narcissism inventory should be predicted by the outward presentation of inflated self-esteem in conjunction with the presence of dampened “true” self-esteem, as measured by implicit tasks like the Implicit Association Test

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(IAT; Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998), which measures the strength of one's automatic associations in memory. Seminal work by Jordan and colleagues (Jordan, Spencer, Zanna, Hoshino-Browne, & Correll, 2003) supported this hypothesis, showing that the combination of high explicit and low implicit self-esteem predicted grandiose narcissistic tendencies. Another study by Zeigler-Hill (2006) also supported the Mask Hypothesis, finding again that individuals higher in narcissism tended to report high explicit self-esteem and low implicit self-esteem.

However, other evidence contradicts the Mask Hypothesis. Campbell and colleagues (Campbell, Bosson, Goheen, Lakey, & Kernis, 2007) showed that when trait words reflecting agency and communion were carefully controlled, grandiose narcissism was associated with high implicit self-views on agency and neutral implicit self-views on communion, concluding that narcissists do not use their explicit self-concepts to conceal a negative self-concept. Similarly, Bosson and Prewitt-Freilino (2007) did not support the Mask Hypothesis when using a different measure of implicit self-esteem. In fact, a meta-analysis conducted by Bosson and colleagues (Bosson et al., 2008) found no consistent overall support for the Mask Hypothesis. Bosson et al.'s (2008) meta-analyses of both published and unpublished studies revealed no simple relation between measures of implicit self-esteem and narcissism, and no interaction between explicit and implicit self-esteem predicting narcissism.

Thus, grandiose narcissists do not seem to possess a vulnerable core. Other evidence suggests instead that these narcissists are genuine in their overly positive self-views. For example, in a study utilizing the bogus pipeline methodology, Brunell and Fisher (2014) found that grandiose narcissists' reports of explicit self-esteem did not differ between study conditions when they believed their responses were anonymous or when they felt pressure to be honest. Thus, even when they believed they could be "caught in a lie" by a lie detector, grandiose narcissists still reported high self-esteem. In conjunction with the lack of consistent empirical support for the Mask Hypothesis, this suggests that grandiose narcissists' high self-esteem is no mask; instead, it appears to be genuine.

1.2. Vulnerable narcissism

The proposed vulnerability of narcissism seems to exist only in the second subtype of trait narcissism, appropriately called vulnerable narcissism. Vulnerable narcissists are insecure (Kernberg, 1986), defensive (Wink, 1991), shame-ridden (Malkin, Barry, & Zeigler-Hill, 2011), and prone to anxiety and depression (Rathvon & Holmstrom, 1996). These individuals are highly hypersensitive, relying heavily on the feedback of others in an attempt to regulate their own self-esteem (Besser & Priel, 2010; Gabbard, 1989; Hendin & Cheek, 1997). Notably, in contrast to grandiose narcissists, vulnerable narcissists report low self-esteem on explicit measures (e.g., Rose, 2002).

The combination of narcissistic characteristics such as entitlement and self-absorption in addition to low self-esteem in vulnerable narcissism seems counterintuitive. How can these narcissists feel entitled to good outcomes, while simultaneously disliking themselves? Further, if these individuals truly do have a relatively negative evaluation of themselves, can they still be categorized as narcissists? Perhaps the answer lies in the juxtaposition of entitlement and self-centeredness with vulnerable narcissists' other traits, namely, hypersensitivity and reliance on others' opinions. Vulnerable narcissists are known to base their self-worth on others' approval (Zeigler-Hill et al., 2008), and are highly sensitive to social evaluation (Hendin & Cheek, 1997). Perhaps vulnerable narcissists keep their grandiose fantasies and entitled expectations hidden from others because they are more sensitive to the social costs of appearing self-absorbed and entitled, unlike grandiose narcissists. Thus, their endorsement of low self-esteem on explicit measures may merely be a reflection of this tendency, rather than a true depiction of their self-views. Their low explicit self-esteem, then, may function as a modesty façade, where the vulnerable narcissist presents a

downtrodden and self-deprecating face to the world; in truth, however, they may inwardly harbor the same inflated positive self-views as their grandiose counterparts. Thus, a sort of reverse mask, or "Modest Mask", may exist for vulnerable narcissists.

In fact, many past researchers and theorists have described vulnerable narcissists as "covert" in the sense that they typically mask their inner grandiosity when interacting with others; for example, Wink (1991) stated that "covert narcissism... is marked by largely unconscious feelings of grandeur and openly displayed lack of self-confidence and initiative..." (p. 591), consistent with Kernberg's (1986) description of these narcissists as outwardly appearing insecure and modest but harboring grandiose fantasies. However, these assertions about the motives and inner lives of vulnerable narcissists have largely remained limited to speculation only. This work is the first to expand on these speculations and put them to the test.

1.3. The current research

In this paper, we propose and test this Modest Mask Hypothesis of vulnerable narcissism. We predicted that vulnerable narcissism would be associated with the combination of low explicit self-esteem and high implicit self-esteem. Past work has already established the connection between vulnerable narcissism and low explicit self-esteem, but to our knowledge, no literature has yet investigated the relationship between vulnerable narcissism and implicit self-esteem. We conducted three studies to test this novel hypothesis. Studies 1 and 2 utilized two versions of the self-esteem IAT to assess implicit self-esteem. Study 3 employed the bogus pipeline methodology to test for self-esteem as well as other potentially relevant facets of narcissism including entitlement, exploitativeness, and grandiosity. In addition to assessing vulnerable narcissism, we also measured grandiose narcissism in all three studies. Thus, we report these results to draw comparisons between the two forms of narcissism.

2. Study 1

Study 1 served as the first test of the Modest Mask Hypothesis, as well as a re-test of the original mask hypothesis. For this first test, we adopted the IAT methodology used by Jordan et al. (2003). The IAT measures the strength of associations between concepts (Greenwald et al., 1998), and is often used to measure implicit attitudes such as racism and sexism (e.g., Greenwald, Banaji, & Nosek, 2015). As self-esteem is conceptualized in social psychology as a person's positive or negative evaluation of the self (e.g., Rosenberg, 1965), this task can also be used to assess implicit self-esteem by measuring the strength of a person's associations between the self and positivity vs. negativity. Indeed, the IAT has been used as a measure of implicit self-esteem in several past studies (e.g., Greenwald & Farnham, 2000; Jordan et al., 2003; Zeigler-Hill, 2006). As the current study has no manipulation, we aimed to gather a sample size of at least 100 participants, consistent with past narcissism research.

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Participants

Participants were 110 undergraduate students (66 female, $M_{\text{age}} = 19.35$ years, $SD_{\text{age}} = 1.52$ years) at a large Midwestern university. All participants completed the study for partial course credit. No participants' data were excluded from analyses.

2.1.2. Procedure and materials

Participants came to the lab alone or in groups of up to 4, completing the study on computers in separate cubicles. After completing a consent form, participants completed the self-esteem IAT, followed by a filler task during which they wrote about their typical day. Participants then completed measures of explicit self-esteem and vulnerable and

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