



To be alone or not to be alone? Facets of narcissism and preference for solitude



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ABSTRACT

Despite narcissists' use of social relationships for self-construction, no research to date has been devoted to understanding whether and to what extent narcissists desire social contact. To address this fundamental gap in the literature, the present study ($N = 537$) aimed to examine the relationships between facets of grandiose narcissism and individual differences in preference for solitude. It was hypothesized that agentic narcissism (i.e., narcissistic admiration) would be negatively related to the preference to be alone, whereas antagonistic narcissism (i.e., narcissistic rivalry) would be positively related to this preference. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) confirmed this prediction, further revealing that these results were independent of self-esteem. These findings confirm the utility of a two-dimensional approach to narcissism and suggest that specific types of narcissistic individuals (i.e., narcissistic rivalry) enjoy spending time by themselves instead of with others.

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“Whosoever is delighted in solitude, is either a wild beast or a god” – Aristotle

1. Introduction

Narcissism¹ has a long history, capturing the interest of both the general public and the scientific community. Narcissism is defined by grandiosity, interpersonal exploitativeness, empathic difficulties, and a sense of entitlement (Rhodewalt & Peterson, 2009). A brief look at narcissism's manifestations in everyday life makes clear why this construct fascinates laypersons and researchers alike: While narcissists tend to exhibit outgoing and sociable behaviors that are likely to garner them positive first impressions, they also tend to exhibit selfish and inconsiderate behaviors that are likely to get them into conflict (e.g., Holtzman, Vazire, & Mehl, 2010). In line with these disparate social consequences, narcissists have been labeled as “disagreeable extroverts” (Paulhus, 2001, p. 228).

To explain such contradictory trait characteristics, Back et al. (2013) developed the Narcissistic Admiration and Rivalry Concept (NARC). The NARC represents an up-to-date process model of narcissism and distinguishes two social strategies by which narcissists' grandiose self-views can be conserved: the tendency towards agentic self-enhancement via self-promotion (e.g., charming and confident behaviors; *narcissistic admiration*) and the tendency for antagonistic self-protection via self-defense (e.g., aggressive and arrogant behaviors; *narcissistic rivalry*). Consistent with this conceptualization, narcissistic admiration has

been found to relate to beneficial short-term outcomes (e.g., peer popularity; Leckelt, Küfner, Nestler, & Back, 2015; romantic appeal; Wurst et al., 2016). In contrast, narcissistic rivalry has been found to relate to adverse long-term outcomes (e.g., peer rejection; Leckelt et al., 2015; romantic difficulties; Wurst et al., 2016).

In light of the above, it becomes evident that narcissism is a genuinely social phenomenon (Clifton, 2011). As outlined in the self-regulatory model of narcissism (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001), narcissists seem to view social relationships as a vital element of self-construction. Furthermore, many of narcissists' trait characteristics (e.g., seeking validation, exploiting others) manifest in the “social arena” (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001, p. 178). Paradoxically, however, it is an open question whether (and to what extent) different types of narcissists differ in their preference for being with other people versus being away from other people (i.e., alone), briefly known as preference for solitude (Burger, 1995). To address this question, a facet-oriented approach to narcissism might be fruitful.

Narcissistic admiration is usually manifested in extroverted, assertive, and likable behaviors to which others typically react in a positive manner (Back et al., 2013; Leckelt et al., 2015). Thus, due to the self-promotional admiration aspect, agentic narcissists should prefer opportunities to partake in social activity where they might experience positive feedback and, hence, potential ego-boosts (see Foster & Trimm, 2008). Narcissistic rivalry, in contrast, is usually manifested in hostile, defensive, and combative behaviors to which others typically react in a negative manner (Back et al., 2013; Leckelt et al., 2015). Thus, due to the self-protective rivalry aspect, antagonistic narcissists should rather evade opportunities to spend time with others where they might encounter negative feedback and, hence, potential ego-threats (Rhodewalt, Madrian, & Cheney, 1998). Consistent with this,

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¹ In this paper, “narcissism” is used to describe a normal (i.e., subclinical) personality trait on which individuals in the general population may vary along a continuum.

narcissistic rivalry (but not narcissistic admiration) has been found to be related to motivated avoidance following negative interpersonal events (Fatfouta, Gerlach, Schröder-Abé, & Merkl, 2015). In line with the NARC, it was hypothesized that narcissistic admiration should be negatively related to preference for solitude, whereas narcissistic rivalry should be positively related to this preference. Because narcissistic admiration and rivalry are associated with self-esteem in opposing ways (positive vs. negative, respectively; Geukes et al., 2016) and because normal (i.e., healthy) self-views can sometimes cloud the relationship between narcissism and social outcomes (also see Czarna, Dufner, & Clifton, 2014), self-esteem was assessed to serve as a covariate in the analyses.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

A total of 537 individuals ($M_{\text{age}} = 24.39$, $SD = 5.58$, range = 18–63; 86.2% female) from Germany (79.9%), Austria (13.4%), and Switzerland (6.7%) were recruited via mailing lists, social network sites, and snowball sampling to complete an online survey. As an incentive, participants obtained an individualized personality feedback. After consenting to participate, participants completed the measures described below as well as some additional measures not relevant to the present research question.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Narcissistic Admiration and Rivalry Questionnaire (NARQ; Back et al., 2013)

The NARQ comprises 18 items that capture individual differences in narcissistic admiration (9 items; e.g., “I am great”) and rivalry (9 items; e.g., “I want my rivals to fail”); 1 = *do not agree at all*, 6 = *agree completely*. Means were computed with higher values reflecting higher narcissistic admiration and rivalry, respectively.

2.2.2. Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES; Rosenberg, 1965)

The RSES has 10 items that measure an individuals' global self-esteem (e.g., “On the whole, I am satisfied with myself”; 1 = *totally disagree*, 5 = *totally agree*). Means were computed with higher values reflecting higher self-esteem.

2.2.3. Preference for Solitude Scale (PFS; Burger, 1995)

The PFS contains 12 forced-choice items. For each pair of items, individuals are asked to choose between two options, one reflecting a preference for solitude (e.g., “I enjoy being by myself”) and the other reflecting a preference for being with others (e.g., “I enjoy being around people”). Choices indicating a preference for solitude were coded with “1” (0 otherwise) and sum scores were computed with higher values reflecting higher solitude preference.

2.3. Analytic plan

Data were analyzed using bivariate correlations and structural equation modeling (SEM) with maximum-likelihood estimation in *Omega* v. 1.0 (von Oertzen, Brandmaier, & Tsang, 2015). As recommended by Kline (2011), items were parceled into three manifest indicators using the item-to-construct balance approach (Little, Cunningham, Shahar, & Widaman, 2002). Note that the chi-square (χ^2) test is sensitive to large sample sizes and, hence, may compromise model fit evaluation (Kline, 2011). Consequently, model fit was evaluated using the Comparative Fit Index (CFI; acceptable fit ≥ 0.95) and the Root Mean Square of Approximation (RMSEA; acceptable fit ≤ 0.08 ; Schermelleh-Engel, Moosbrugger, & Müller, 2003).

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations

Table 1 shows descriptive statistics and reliabilities (i.e., Cronbach's α) for all measures as well as their zero-order correlations. As in previous research, narcissistic admiration and rivalry were significantly positively correlated (e.g., Back et al., 2013; Leckelt et al., 2015). In addition, narcissistic admiration was significantly related to high self-esteem, whereas narcissistic rivalry was significantly related to low self-esteem. Self-esteem was associated with a reduced preference for solitude. Finally, narcissistic rivalry (but not admiration) was significantly positively correlated with preference for solitude.

3.2. Structural equation model examining narcissism facets and preference for solitude

Given the moderate to strong correlation among the narcissistic admiration and rivalry facets, a SEM was fitted to the data to control for common variance and, thus, to more formally test the unique associations between narcissism facets and preference for solitude (beyond self-esteem). Fig. 1 illustrates a graphical presentation of the model. The SEM demonstrated a good fit, $\chi^2(48) = 121.52$, $p < 0.001$, CFI = 0.98, RMSEA = 0.053.

As hypothesized, narcissistic admiration was a significant negative predictor of preference for solitude, $\beta = -0.21$, $p = 0.006$. In contrast, and consistent with theorizing about the antagonistic aspect of narcissism, narcissistic rivalry was a significant positive predictor of preference for solitude, $\beta = 0.28$, $p < 0.001$. That is, whereas individuals high in narcissistic admiration reported a greater desire to spend time with other people, individuals high in narcissistic rivalry reported a greater desire to spend time by themselves.²

4. Discussion

Do all narcissists enjoy social contact? The current study aimed to provide a first response to this question by analyzing the relationship between facets of narcissism and individual differences in preference for solitude. Using a large sample, the present results underscore the importance of a facet-oriented approach to narcissism. Supporting the main hypothesis, it was found that the narcissism-solitude link differs according to the aspect of narcissistic personality being studied. Specifically, the relationship was negative for narcissistic admiration, but was positive for narcissistic rivalry. The study therefore provides evidence that only agentic – but not antagonistic narcissists – may enjoy being around people.

As expected, the distinction between agentic and antagonistic facets of narcissism helped to shed light on narcissists' preference for spending time away from (vs. with) others. Individuals standing on the “bright” side of the narcissism continuum (i.e., narcissistic admiration) described themselves as having a reduced desire to get away by themselves. This result lends support to Zhang, Zou, Wang, and Finy (2015), suggesting that narcissists' demand for validation and self-enhancement requires social interaction, which may motivate them to seek social contact. In contrast, and previously unnoticed, individuals standing on the “dark” side of the narcissism continuum (i.e., narcissistic rivalry) described themselves as having an increased need to be alone. By conventional terms, the size of the effects may be considered modest in size, but can be more accurately described as typical for individual-differences research (Gignac & Szodorai, 2016).

² An additional analysis revealed qualitatively similar results when self-esteem was omitted from the SEM (i.e., model fit: $\chi^2[24] = 82.27$, $p < 0.001$, CFI = 0.971, RMSEA = 0.067; $\beta_{\text{narcissistic admiration} \rightarrow \text{preference for solitude}} = -0.19$, $p = 0.002$, $\beta_{\text{narcissistic rivalry} \rightarrow \text{preference for solitude}} = 0.26$, $p < 0.001$). Furthermore, controlling for age and participant sex yielded the same pattern of results.

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