



Narcissistic responses to provocation: An examination of the rage and threatened-egotism accounts



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ABSTRACT

We tested predictions from rage and threatened egotism accounts of narcissistic aggression. In particular, we measured grandiose and vulnerable narcissists' emotional, cognitive, motivational, and behavioral responses to ego-threatening provocation. Grandiose narcissism was related to perceiving ego-threatening feedback as more truthful, but was nevertheless related to muted negative emotions and appraising such feedback as less devaluing of the self. Vulnerable narcissism was also associated with perceiving the feedback as more truthful, but, unlike grandiose narcissism, it was associated with enhanced negative emotions, self-loathing, and appraising the negative feedback as devaluing of the self and socially significant. Both grandiose and vulnerable narcissism were related to heightened aggression and setting hostile goals. Finally, high levels of both types of narcissism strengthened the relations between setting hostile goals and aggression behaviors. The rage account did a satisfactory job of anticipating effects of vulnerable narcissism but neither rage nor threatened egotism did a satisfactory job of anticipating effects of grandiose narcissism.

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1. Introduction

Narcissists are preoccupied with the self, and researchers typically distinguish between at least two types of narcissists (Dickinson & Pincus, 2003; Hendin & Cheek, 1997; Pincus & Roche, 2011): grandiose and vulnerable narcissists. Grandiose narcissists come across as self-assured, narcissistic, and socially competent (Miller et al., 2011). Vulnerable narcissists come across as shy, neurotic, and somewhat introverted in first encounters (Miller et al., 2011), but they can also come across as arrogant and conceited after longer encounters (Wink, 1991). Both types of narcissists are entitled and grandiose in their self-perceptions (Dickinson & Pincus, 2003).

Researchers have identified provoked aggression as a feature of narcissism (Rasmussen, 2016). Narcissistic rage and threatened egotism are two theories that predict heightened provoked aggression among narcissists. These theories suggest many intriguing but untested ideas about the cognitive, motivational, and affective responses that co-occur with narcissists' provoked aggression.

1.1. Narcissistic rage

According to a "narcissistic rage" account (Kernberg, 1975; Kohut, 1972), when narcissists' tenuous high self-regard is challenged, they accept the veracity of the negative feedback and feel exposed, which

causes them to experience rage in addition to shame, hurt feelings, and sadness. This rage is fueled by tendencies to exaggerate the social significance of the offense and perceive the offense as highly devaluing, and the rage co-occurs with a myopic focus on the pursuit of revenge goals, which are pursued with vigor. Table 1 shows predictions from this account.

Krizan and Johar (2015) examined narcissists' hostile affect and aggression following interpersonal slights and concluded that the rage account only provides a satisfactory explanation for the aggression of vulnerable narcissists. Nevertheless, because Krizan and Johar (2015) failed to enhance aggression in grandiose narcissists, it remains unclear whether rage-like responses might occur in this group if they are sufficiently provoked by ego threats (Baumeister, Bushman, & Campbell, 2000). Also, the narcissistic-rage account suggests additional predictions that remain untested.

1.2. Threatened egotism

According to the threatened-egotism account, narcissistic aggression is a "means of defending a highly favorable view of self against someone who seeks to undermine or discredit that view" (Baumeister et al., 2000, p. 26). Threatened egotism is triggered when people perceive a discrepancy between a tenuous, overly positive view of self and a negative evaluation from another person (Baumeister & Boden, 1998). The threatened egotist rejects the implications of the threatening message, which instigates anger, feelings of being under-valued (disrespected), and exaggerated perceptions of the offense. The egotist

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Table 1
Predicted effects of narcissism on responses, emotions, appraisals, and goals.

Construct	Rage	Threatened egotism
Responses		
Aggression	✓	✓
Friendly behavior	✓–	✓–
Emotions		
Anger	✓	✓
Sadness	✓	---
Hurt feelings	✓	✓
Appraisals of the situation		
Feedback is truthful	✓	✓–
Offense is devaluing	✓	✓
Offense is socially significant	✓	✓
Offense is immoral	✓	✓
Self-appraisal		
Self-loathing	✓	✓–
Goals		
Hostile goals (to hurt)	✓	✓
Self-related goals (to obtain or defend self-worth)	---	✓
Vigorous goal pursuit	✓	✓

Note: “✓” indicates positive relation; “✓–” indicates negative relation; “–” is used to designate times when we were not entirely sure what the theory might predict.

engages in aggression to self-defend, cultivate desired images, or get revenge. Table 1 shows predictions generated from this account. Although some support for this account exists (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998), to our knowledge, direct measures of ego threat (e.g., perceiving the self as “devalued”) have not been examined.

1.3. Present research

We examined grandiose and vulnerable narcissists' aggression and psychological reactions to ego-threatening provocation. For breadth, we manipulated provocation to be relatively low or high (between subjects). In addition to examining bivariate correlations, we tested a moderated-mediation model, suggested by rage and ego-threat accounts, wherein narcissistic aggression was predicted by heightened setting of aggression-inspiring goals and a more vigorous pursuit of such goals.

2. Method

Four-hundred-and-one participants were recruited from MTurk and randomly assigned to one of two conditions: low-provocation ($n = 203$) or high-provocation ($n = 198$). Participants were randomly assigned to read either three low- or three high-provocation vignettes that conveyed ego-threat. The same three situations were described in each condition, but the high (low) provocation vignettes included an unambiguously (ambiguously) insulting statement toward the participant (e.g., a teammate for a trivia contest looks disappointed when you join the team and says, either “We got stuck with ‘Stupid’” [high provocation] or “Just try your best” [low provocation]).¹ Following each vignette, participants used a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 10 (*strongly agree*) scale to rate their emotion, appraisals, goals, and behavioral responses. Participants indicated their emotional reaction on three items (*angry*, *hurt*, *sad*). They indicated appraisals of various aspects of the event, including: whether the feedback was *truthful*; whether the event implied under-valuing of the self (implied *disliking*, *disrespect*); whether the event was socially significant (*worth getting upset about*, *meant friendship was impossible*); and whether the event was *immoral* and *nasty*. Next, participants indicated their anticipated feelings of self-loathing brought on by the event (*pathetic*, *worthless*, *strong*, *powerful*), their goals in the situation (*demonstrate self-worth*, *gaining respect*, *acceptance*, *dominating*, *revenge*, *projecting toughness*, *defending the self*, *to remain calm*, *to forgive the person*, *to make light of the situation*, *and to get*

along with the person), and their anticipated responses to the event. For responses, we included three aggression items (verbal, physical, and symbolic aggression), one “flee” item (*get away*), and three non-aggressive items (e.g., *talk nicely to the person*; Lochman, Wayland, & White, 1993). Next, participants completed the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Terry, 1988) to index grandiose narcissism ($\alpha = 0.91$, $M = 12.5$, $SD = 8.4$) and the Hypersensitivity Narcissism Scale (HSNS; Hendin & Cheek, 1997; $\alpha = 0.79$, $M = 28.9$, $SD = 7.3$) to index vulnerable narcissism. Finally, participants completed demographics and debriefing.

3. Results

3.1. Data Reduction

We averaged identical items across the three vignettes. The subsequent data reduction was designed to maintain conceptual distinctions between responses, emotions, appraisals of the situation, self-appraisals, and goals.

3.1.1. Responses

The seven response items were collapsed into three categories. The three items tapping aggression (verbal, physical, symbolic) were collapsed into an *aggression* index ($\alpha = 0.78$); the three items tapping friendly/socially desirable responses were collapsed into a *friendly behavior* index ($\alpha = 0.68$); the single item measuring *fleeing* was analyzed separately.

3.1.2. Emotions

A *negative emotionality* index collapsed across anger, sadness, and hurt feelings ($\alpha = 0.82$). In addition, because discrete emotions are of particular relevance to the rage and threatened-egotism accounts, we analyzed each emotion separately.

3.1.3. Appraisals of the situation

The appraisal items were intended to measure four types of appraisals. The single item tapping perceived truthfulness of the negative feedback, *truthful*, was analyzed separately. Two items tapping devaluing (dislike, disrespect) were highly correlated ($r = 0.82$) and were collapsed into a single index of *devaluing*. Two items designed to tap tendencies to perceive the offense as socially significant (*...not worth getting upset [r]; ...we cannot be friends*) were moderately related ($r = 0.31$), so, in addition to combining them into a collapsed measure called *social significance*, we also analyzed these items separately. The two items that involved perceiving the provocateur's behavior as immoral (immoral and nasty) were highly related ($r = 0.48$) and were collapsed into an *immorality* index.

3.1.4. Self-appraisals

Because self-loathing and power are theoretically distinguishable, the four items tapping these two dimensions were designed to create two self-appraisal indices. The two items tapping *self-loathing* (pathetic and worthless) were highly related ($r = 0.94$) and collapsed into a single measure. The two items tapping *power* were highly related ($r = 0.90$) and collapsed into a single measure.

3.1.5. Goals

Because we were uncertain about how to collapse the 11 goals into meaningful categories, we performed a principal components analysis with oblique rotation (Direct Oblimin method). Factor solutions with eigenvalues above 1 were retained. It revealed a three-factor solution, corresponding to self-worth/self-defense goals (earn respect, earn acceptance, earn self-worth, self-defend, show toughness) or, more generally, “self-relevant goals”; hostile goals (get revenge, remain calm [r], and dominate); and affiliation goals (get along, forgive, make light of the situation). The three-factor solution accounted for 73% of the

¹ The sex of the provocateur was matched to the participant's sex.

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