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Nothing compares to me: How narcissism shapes comparative thinking

Katharina Ohmann [a,*], Pascal Burgmer [b]

[a] Individual Differences and Psychological Diagnostics, University of Cologne, Germany
[b] Social Cognition Center Cologne, University of Cologne, Germany

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ABSTRACT

Feeling special feels good. This may be particularly true for individuals with narcissistic tendencies who put great emphasis on distinctiveness and uniqueness in relation to others. But how do people arrive at the conclusion that they are special? Psychological research has identified social comparisons as a powerful means to inform such judgments about the self. The present research investigates whether narcissism may be related to a particular strategy of comparative thinking. Specifically, we expected that narcissistic individuals—presumably to meet an elevated need for uniqueness—would predominantly focus on differences (as opposed to similarities) when engaging in comparisons. To test this prediction, four studies investigated how narcissism shapes comparative thinking in social and nonsocial judgment domains. The first two studies revealed that narcissistic personality tendencies were positively related to an informational focus on differences during habitual comparisons in both social and nonsocial contexts (Studies 1a and 1b). Two additional studies extended this relation between narcissism and difference focus to the domain of spontaneous social and nonsocial comparisons (Studies 2a and 2b). Such a content-free processing style during comparative thinking may assist narcissists to increase their feelings of distinctiveness, and may ultimately contribute to the rise and maintenance of narcissistic tendencies.

> *"Always remember that you are absolutely unique. Just like everyone else."*
>
> [— Anonymous]

1. Introduction

The abovementioned statement illustrates with a wink that we are all both different from as well as similar to other people. Indeed, research has shown that competing needs for belongingness and distinctiveness motivate individuals to strive for optimal distinctiveness (Brewer, 1991, 1993; Leonardelli, Pickett, & Brewer, 2010), while extreme similarity and extreme dissimilarity to others are typically experienced as being unpleasant (Snyder & Fromkin, 2012). However, being notably different from others appears to be of particular importance to narcissistic individuals.[1] In the social-psychological and personality literature, the narcissistic personality is characterized by inflated views of the self, feelings of grandiosity and entitlement, immoderate self-focus, egocentrism, vanity and self-importance (Campbell, Reeder, Sedikides, & Elliot, 2000; Twenge, Konrath, Foster, Campbell, & Bushman, 2008). Moreover, increasing evidence suggests that narcissism is on the rise in many Western cultures (Stewart & Bernhardt, 2010; Twenge & Foster, 2008; Twenge et al., 2008), that it is perceived to be particularly pronounced in the American culture (Miller et al., 2015), and that narcissism seems to entail important intra- and interpersonal consequences. For instance, research indicates that narcissists are high in need for achievement and low in need for affiliation (Elliot & Thrash, 2001; Luchner, Houston, Walker, & Houston, 2011; Morf & Rhodewalt, 1993, 2001). This combination may lead them to frequently distinguish themselves from others in a competitive manner and to seek the company of other people primarily to use them as a source of feedback and not because they value relational others in and of themselves (Elliot & Thrash, 2001; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). Such an instrumental behavior that is characterized by demarcation and exploitation may ultimately contribute to the fact that others judge narcissists more unfavorably than narcissists judge themselves (e.g., Park & Colvin, 2014). The narcissists' glaring motivation to constantly distinguish themselves from others was already captured by Ernest Jones (1913/1951) who wrote that: "[…] nothing offends such a man as the suggestion that he resembles someone else […]" (p. 252). In fact, research suggests that uniqueness has several beneficial effects, ranging from the attraction of attention (Taylor, Fiske, Etcoff, & Ruderman, 1978), to the

* Corresponding author at: University of Cologne, Pohligstraße 1, 50969 Cologne, Germany.
E-mail address: katharina.ohmann@uni-koeln.de (K. Ohmann).

[1] For brevity, we sometimes use the word narcissist as short form for "an individual scoring relatively higher in narcissism." We do not imply any categorical or clinical meaning.

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enhancement of an individual's self-esteem (Ditto & Griffin, 1993) and social status (Bellezza, Gino, & Keinan, 2014)—all aspects that are of particular importance to narcissists (e.g., Brunell et al., 2008). Early research on narcissism by Emmons (1984) has established a correlational relationship between narcissism and an individual's need for uniqueness. Consistently, elevated levels of narcissism have recently been linked to the inclination to buy exclusive, personalizable, and scarce products to promote such a sense of uniqueness (Lee, Gregg, & Park, 2013; Lee & Seidle, 2012), presumably as a mechanism to preserve feelings of self-importance, entitlement, and grandiosity. Moreover, investigating the origins of narcissism, a recent study by Brummelman et al. (2015) suggests that narcissistic feelings and behaviors may emerge—at least partly—from parental overvaluation, that is, parents impart feelings of specialness and superiority to their children. Here we argue that the perpetuation of such beliefs of specialness, superiority, and uniqueness should manifest in particular ways of cognitive processing in the narcissistic individual. But what are the cognitive processes that potentially promote such a sense of uniqueness and distinctiveness among narcissists?

1.1. Narcissism and social comparison

To determine their standing relative to others, people engage in social comparisons (Festinger, 1954). Research in this domain has suggested that an informational focus on similarities (vs. differences) shapes the outcome of such comparisons, that is, whether people assimilate their judgments about themselves towards the comparison standard, or whether they contrast away from it (Mussweiler, 2003; Mussweiler, Rüter, & Epstude, 2004). Thus, how we perceive ourselves in relation to others depends to a significant extent on whether we focus on similarities or on differences in a given comparison situation. An informational focus on differences during comparisons may allow people to feel distinct from others, thus contributing to feelings of uniqueness. Accordingly, we reasoned that such a relative focus on differences may be particularly appealing for narcissists.

Past findings in comparison research indicate that narcissistic individuals tend to make more social comparisons, particularly downward ones (Bogart, Benotsch, & Pavlovic, 2004). For instance, narcissists are more likely to view themselves as superior when comparing their athletic or academic performance to that of another person. Krizan and Bushman (2011)—who found that narcissists show the tendency to engage in downward comparisons even with regard to close others—have argued that such comparisons allow narcissists to preserve their elevated feelings of superiority and inflated self-views. Furthermore, Bogart et al. (2004) have revealed that the direction of comparison shapes narcissists' affective reactions: narcissistic individuals seem to experience more positive affect in downward and more hostility in upward comparison situations. As a consequence, they appear to distance themselves from someone who outperforms them in an ego-relevant task by rating that person more negatively (Morf & Rhodewalt, 1993; Nicholls & Stukas, 2011). In a similar vein, narcissism predicts envious reactions towards superior others (Krizan & Johar, 2012) such that narcissists tend to pull superior others down (malicious envy) instead of trying to level themselves up (benign envy; Lange, Crusius, & Hagemeyer, in press). Altogether, by examining the direction of comparison, these studies suggest that social comparisons play an important role in narcissistic self-enhancement (e.g. Campbell et al., 2000; John & Robins, 1994; Raskin, Novacek, & Hogan, 1991), with self-enhancement being a “trademark” of narcissism (Morf, Horvath, & Torchetti, 2011). However, as these studies have focused on the frequency, direction, and outcome of comparisons, we do not know yet whether narcissism also shapes how individuals process information when they engage in comparative thinking. Specifically, it remains unclear whether and how narcissism impacts the cognitive processes underlying such comparisons and whether these processes occur solely in situations that allow for self-enhancement.

1.2. The present research

Thus far, research on how basic social information processing such as comparative thinking may be shaped by narcissistic tendencies is scarce (for an exception, see Konrath, Bushman, & Grove, 2009). In the present research, we employed social-cognitive methods to illuminate how narcissists process comparative information. We hypothesized that individuals with higher levels of narcissism focus more strongly on differences than individuals with lower levels of narcissism when engaging in comparisons. We presumed that a pronounced focus on differences may allow these individuals to arrive at judgments that distinguish themselves from others, hence satisfying their need for uniqueness and distinctiveness. Moreover, we suspected that a predominant focus on differences would constitute a more generalized thinking style in narcissism that shapes the lens through which narcissists view the world. Such a mindset can likely serve self-enhancement purposes, but it may also carry over to comparison contexts that do not afford self-enhancement. Therefore, we predicted that narcissistic individuals would adopt a focus on differences in various kinds of situations ranging from comparing themselves to other people to comparing everyday objects. In addition, we explored whether a potential relation between narcissism and difference focus can be observed in both habitual as well as spontaneous comparison situations. Four studies investigated these predictions. Studies 1a and 1b were designed to examine whether narcissism would be positively related to a pronounced focus on differences in habitual social and nonsocial comparison situations while Studies 2a and 2b extended this question to spontaneous social and nonsocial comparisons.

2. Studies 1a and 1b: narcissism and habitual comparisons

In the first two studies, we set out to explore whether habitual comparisons may be shaped by narcissism. Specifically, in Study 1a, we tested whether narcissists generally focus predominantly on differences during comparisons in the social domain. Study 1b was dedicated to the question whether such a focus on differences among narcissists would also be evident in the nonsocial domain.

2.1. Study 1a: narcissism and habitual social comparisons

2.1.1. Method

2.1.1.1. Participants and design. Via Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk; Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011), we recruited 250 participants[2] (108 females, 142 males; $M_{age} = 35.32$, $SD = 11.18$). As in all of the following studies, participants were recruited for modest monetary compensation (i.e., approximately $ 0.50 per study). No participants were excluded from data analysis.

In a correlational design, all participants initially answered the 40-item *Narcissistic Personality Inventory* (NPI-40; Raskin & Terry, 1988), the most widely used trait measure of narcissism in personality and social psychology research (e.g., Cain, Pincus, & Ansell, 2008; Rhodewalt & Morf, 1995). We decided to use the NPI-40 in all of the current studies as

[2] We aimed for sample sizes of at least 150 participants per study (see Schönbrodt & Perugini, 2013). However, as we performed data collection over a longer period of time, Study 2a—the first data set collected for this project—has a considerably smaller sample size reflecting outdated standards of psychological research. All other studies were run following the recommendations of Schönbrodt and Perugini (2013), confirming the pattern obtained in the first study with more reliable estimates.