Fearing, not loving, the reflection: Narcissism, self-esteem, and self-discrepancy theory

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ABSTRACT

This study used self-discrepancy theory to explore self-esteem and narcissism. College students ($N = 450$) completed measures of self-discrepancy, affect, self-esteem, and narcissism. Hierarchical multiple regression analyses found that self-discrepancies explained variance in self-esteem and narcissism beyond that explained by affect. Results also indicated that the actual-ideal and actual-undesired self-discrepancies predicted self-esteem, while the actual-undesired self-discrepancy was the only significant predictor of narcissism. This study provides evidence of incremental validity for self-discrepancies in measuring self-esteem and narcissism. It also suggests that narcissism is associated with an undesired, not an ideal, self-concept.

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1. Narcissism

In Greek mythology, Narcissus falls in love with an unreal image of himself, and his excessive self-love and self-absorption ultimately destroy him (Grant, 1995). Contemporary theories suggest that narcissism is a self-regulatory process in which maladaptive strategies are used to modulate emotions and maintain a positive self-image (Campbell, Foster, & Brunell, 2004; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001; Uji, Nagata, & Kitamura, 2012). The purpose of this study was to explore self-esteem and narcissism through the lens of self-discrepancy theory (SDT; Higgins, 1987).

Narcissism may be seen as having normal and pathological aspects (Paulhus, 2001; Sedikides, Campbell, Reeder, Elliot, & Gregg, 2002). Normal narcissism elicits healthy self-enhancement behaviors such as experiencing positive illusions of the self and minimizing information inconsistent with one's self-image (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001) and correlates with good psychological health (Sedikides, Rudich, Gregg, Kumashiro, & Rusbult, 2004). In contrast, pathological narcissism elicits behavioral impairments caused by a brittle sense of self (Pincus et al., 2009). Pathological narcissism is a duality: deep insecurity shrouded by grandiosity (Kealy & Rasmussen, 2012; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001; Pincus & Lukowitsky, 2010). *Narcissistic vulnerability* involves feelings of low self-esteem, and shame, while enduring social avoidance to cope with threats to the self (Zeigler-Hill & Besser, 2013). Pathologically narcissistic

individuals appear to become distressed when encountering threats and disappointments to their positive self-image (Campbell, Rudich, & Sedikides, 2002; Kernis & Sun, 1994). *Narcissistic grandiosity* is the tendency to distort negative information to create fantasies of superiority and perfection and creating an inflated self-concept (Dickinson & Pincus, 2003; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001).

1.1. Self-discrepancy theory

SDT predicts links between cognitive self-state representations and specific emotional syndromes (Higgins, 1987; Higgins, Bond, Klein, & Strauman, 1986; Strauman & Higgins, 1987; Higgins, Klein, & Strauman, 1985; Strauman & Higgins, 1988). However, no extant research applies SDT to narcissism. Higgins (1984) proposed three *domains of self*: actual self, ideal self, and should self. Ogilvie (1987) introduced a fourth domain of self: the undesired or feared self. *Actual self* is the mental representation of the attributes that the person actually possesses; it is an individual's *self-concept*. *Ideal self* is the mental representation of the attributes the person desires or hopes to possess. *Should self* is the mental representation of attributes a person feels they ought to or should possess. *Undesired self* is a "set of qualities the person wants not to become but is concerned about possibly becoming" (Carver, Lawrence, & Scheier, 1999).

1.2. The current study

Previous research has found links between the actual-ideal discrepancy and self-esteem (Higgins et al., 1985; Moretti & Higgins,

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1990; Bosson, Brown, Zeigler-Hill, & Swann, 2010). The current study sought to expand on this by exploring self-esteem and pathological narcissism through the lens of SDT. Because there is no extant research on SDT and narcissism, yet many studies have found links between narcissism and emotion (Campbell et al., 2004; Rhodewalt, Madrian, & Cheney, 1998; Uji et al., 2012), the first goal of this study was to investigate whether self-discrepancies explain variance in self-esteem and narcissism beyond that which is accounted for by affect. SDT emphasizes conflicting self-state representations, which makes it a useful tool to explore the duality of narcissism. If pathological narcissism is understood as grandiosity masking vulnerability, then a key question is which discrepancies are associated with each of the subfacets of narcissism; thus, the second goal was to determine which self-discrepancies are associated with self-esteem, overall narcissism, narcissistic vulnerability, and narcissistic grandiosity.

It was hypothesized that, after controlling for the effects of positive and negative affect: (H_1) self-discrepancies would explain additional variance in self-esteem and that (H_2) the actual-ideal and (H_3) the actual-should self-discrepancies would predict self-esteem in a negative direction – that is, the further individuals are from their ideal self and should self, the lower their self-esteem will be; and (H_4) the actual-undesired discrepancy would predict self-esteem in a positive direction – that is, the further individuals are from their undesired self, the higher their self-esteem will be. It was also hypothesized that, after controlling for the effects of positive and negative affect: (H_5) the self-discrepancies would explain additional variance in overall narcissism and that (H_6) the actual-ideal and the (H_7) actual-should self-discrepancies would predict overall narcissism in a positive and (H_8) the actual-undesired discrepancy would predict overall narcissism in a negative direction. Finally, it was predicted that, after controlling for the effects of positive and negative affect, (H_9) the actual-undesired self-discrepancy would be the best predictor of narcissistic vulnerability and (H_{10}) the actual-ideal self-discrepancy would be the best predictor of narcissistic grandiosity.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants consisted of undergraduate students ($N = 469$) enrolled in a psychology course at a large public university in the south. Participants were recruited through the department research website. Close inspection of the data revealed 19 cases in which the participant did not follow directions. These cases were removed, leaving a final sample of 450, which was used in all analyses.

Participant characteristics are summarized on Table 1.

2.2. Procedure

This study received university IRB approval. Students took the survey online and received course credit for participation.

2.3. Measures

2.3.1. Integrated self-discrepancy index

The integrated self-discrepancy index (ISDI; Hardin & Lakin, 2009) is a measure of self-discrepancies that contains both an idiographic and a nomothetic component. In the idiographic portion, participants are asked to produce five adjectives for their *ideal self, should self*, and *undesired self*. After completing their initial trait list for each domain of self, participants are shown a list of 100 adjectives and given the opportunity to modify their existing trait

Table 1
Participant characteristics ($N = 450$).

Gender	Frequency	Percent
Female	312	66.7
Male	156	33.7
Ethnicity		
White/Caucasian	250	53.4
Black/African-American	74	15.8
Hispanic	76	16.2
Asian/Pacific Islander	43	9.2
Native American	5	1.1
Other	20	4.3
Marital status		
Single/never married	424	90.6
Cohabitating/civil union	30	6.4
Married/remarried	12	2.6
Separated	1	.2
Divorced	1	.2

list. In the nomothetic portion, participants then rate the extent to which they possess each of the traits that they listed. Self-discrepancy scores were calculated by averaging the ratings of the five attributes produced by the participants for each domain of self. Higher scores indicate larger self-discrepancies. In this study, actual-ideal ($\alpha = .747$), actual-should ($\alpha = .744$), and actual-undesired ($\alpha = .705$).

2.3.2. Pathological narcissism inventory

The pathological narcissism inventory (PNI; Pincus et al., 2009) is a 52-item self-report measure of pathological narcissism. The PNI utilizes a 6-point Likert scale ranging from *not at all like me* to *very much like me*. It yields two subscales: narcissistic vulnerability and narcissistic grandiosity. Higher overall scores reflect higher levels of pathological narcissism. In this study, overall narcissism ($\alpha = .950$), narcissistic vulnerability ($\alpha = .921$), and narcissistic grandiosity ($\alpha = .896$).

2.3.3. Rosenberg self-esteem scale

The Rosenberg self-esteem scale (RSES; Rosenberg, 1965) is a 10-item measure of self-esteem. The RSES uses a 4-point Likert scale, with responses ranging from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*. Higher scores indicate higher self-esteem. In this study, Cronbach's $\alpha = .905$.

2.3.4. The positive and negative affect schedule – expanded form

The positive and negative affect schedule – expanded form (PANAS-X; Watson & Clark, 1994) is a 60-item measure of affect. Each item lists an emotion. Participants rate on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from *very slightly* to *extremely*. In this study, participants were asked to rate how often they feel each emotion "during the past few weeks." The two PANAS-X higher order scales were used: positive affect and negative affect. Higher scores indicate more of that type of affect. In this study, internal consistency was: positive affect ($\alpha = 886.$) and negative affect ($\alpha = .901$).

3. Results

The assumptions for all analyses were evaluated in SPSS. One variable – the actual-undesired self-discrepancy – demonstrated high positive skew. As outlined in Tabachnick and Fidell (2006), this variable was transformed with a log10 function and re-reflected. The transformed variable was used in all analyses.

Correlations between all variables are displayed in Table 2.

In order to investigate the relationship between self-discrepancies and self-esteem while controlling for affect, a hierarchical multiple regression analysis was conducted. First, positive affect