



Narcissistic admiration and rivalry in the context of personality metatraits



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ABSTRACT

Narcissism is a puzzling construct containing many apparent paradoxes. The Narcissistic Admiration and Rivalry Concept represents an attempt to deconstruct some of these paradoxes. In this paper, we relate admiration and rivalry to the personality metatraits, i.e., Plasticity and Stability, in an attempt to demonstrate that the metatrait concept offers an interesting way of framing why admiration seems to be profitable for individuals, whilst rivalry appears to have a net cost. Based on previous studies, we examined how admiration and rivalry were related to self-esteem, impulsivity and personality traits in two prospective studies involving a total of 719 adults. Our results are consistent with those of Back et al. (2013). Additionally, we demonstrated that admiration is composed of extraversion and openness to experience, thus representing the Plasticity (Beta) metatrait, and rivalry is composed of agreeableness, emotional stability and conscientiousness and thus corresponds to the Stability (Alpha) metatrait. In the terminology of the circumplex model of personality metatraits, rivalry can be conceived as the opposite of Stability: Alpha-minus. We suggest that rather than being disagreeable extraverts, narcissists are Unstable Plastics.

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1. General controversies around narcissism

Narcissism is typically described as a pervasive pattern of grandiosity, a need for admiration and a lack of empathy (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Raskin and Hall (1979) introduced the Narcissistic Personality Inventory to measure individual differences in narcissism as a personality trait that is present in the general population. There is also general agreement on the differentiation of vulnerable narcissism (pathological narcissism) from grandiose narcissism (the form of narcissism found in the general population) (Miller et al., 2011). In this paper, “narcissism” refers to grandiose narcissism, conceived as a personality trait.

Research on narcissism frequently reports paradoxical results regarding the correlates of narcissism. Narcissism can be described as at least partially adaptive because the exaggerated, grandiose view of the narcissistic self is positively associated with self-esteem, social boldness, charm and a craving for attention; however, it is also maladaptive because it is associated with impulsiveness, aggression, or a strong sense of entitlement (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001; Vazire & Funder, 2006).

The dual nature of narcissism is reflected in the inconsistencies of the empirical research. For instance, most studies indicate that narcissism is positively associated with self-esteem (see Brummelman, Thomaes, & Sedikides, 2016 for review), and some studies have reported a positive relationship between narcissism and aggression (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998). Donnellan, Trzesniewski, Robins, Moffitt, and Caspi (2005) argued that aggressive behaviour is related to low self-esteem and that hence, narcissism represents a contradiction as it is correlated with both positive self-esteem and aggression. However, narcissism is not equal to inflated and explicit self-esteem (Brummelman et al., 2016). For example, narcissism correlates negatively with implicit self-esteem and positively with explicit self-esteem (Gregg & Sedikides, 2010).

Another inconsistency concerns impulsivity. In a meta-analysis of research on narcissism and impulsivity, Vazire and Funder (2006) concluded that impulsivity was almost always positively correlated with narcissism and should therefore be recognised as an important component of narcissism. In contrast, Miller et al. (2009) reported that narcissism is related only to extraversion-based impulsivity (i.e., sensation-seeking) and not to a narrower, conscientiousness-based definition of impulsivity (i.e., lack of perseverance).

Various patterns of relationship between narcissism and the Five Factor Model (FFM; McCrae & Costa, 2003) of personality traits have been reported. Narcissism is most frequently associated with high

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extraversion and low agreeableness (Paulhus, 2001). Extraversion is defined as a combination of friendliness, honesty and gregariousness, which are associated with sociability, while disagreeableness is indicative of distrust, selfishness and reluctance to cooperate, which are associated with poor socialisation (McCrae & Costa, 2003). Even taking into account the assertive aspect of extraversion, extraversion is still a far more adaptive characteristic than disagreeableness. A definition of narcissism that encompasses both extraversion and disagreeableness impedes, rather than facilitates, attempts to distinguish between adaptive and maladaptive narcissism.

To summarise, the pattern of relationship between narcissism and self-esteem, impulsivity and personality traits is inconsistent. The most important ambiguity concerns the extent to which narcissism is pathological or adaptive in a given individual; this led Paulhus (1998) to describe narcissism as a “mixed blessing”.

1.1. Explaining role of narcissistic admiration and rivalry

Recently, Back et al. (2013) proposed the Narcissistic Admiration and Rivalry Concept (NARC), which could account for these ambiguities. The main goal of the narcissist is to maintain a grandiose self, and there are two different social strategies for doing so: self-enhancing admiration and self-defensive rivalry. The admiration strategy is associated with grandiose fantasies, striving for uniqueness and charming behaviour. In terms of social interaction outcomes, this strategy results in social potential that boosts the ego of the narcissist, which makes narcissists appealing as short-term acquaintances (Paulhus, 1998). The rivalry strategy is characterised by devaluing and diminishing other people, by striving for uniqueness and by aggressive behaviour. In terms of social interaction, this strategy results in social conflict, which threatens the ego.

Back et al. (2013) provided evidence that separating narcissism into admiration and rivalry shed new light on the relationships between narcissism and its correlates. They showed that admiration was positively related to self-esteem, while rivalry was negatively correlated. The distinction between admiration and rivalry can also be used to explain why narcissism is positively associated with both high self-esteem and aggression. Bushman and Baumeister (1998) concluded that narcissists respond to perceived threats with aggression, whereas Donnellan et al. (2005) reported a negative relationship with self-esteem and aggression. This is, in effect, a recapitulation of the rivalry strategy, which is associated with low self-esteem and in which ego-threatening situations elicit aggressive behaviour. Thus, one can conclude that both Donnellan et al. (2005) and Bushman and Baumeister (1998) were referring to narcissistic rivalry.

Back et al. (2013) resolved the controversy over the relationship between narcissism and impulsivity (Miller et al., 2009; Vazire & Funder, 2006) by arguing that although admiration was not associated with impulsivity, rivalry was. Thus, Vazire and Funder (2006) were right to claim that impulsivity is part of narcissism (as it is a component of narcissistic rivalry), and Miller et al. (2009) were also correct in claiming that impulsivity is not always associated with narcissism.

1.2. Narcissism in the context of personality metatraits

Back et al. (2013) provided evidence that narcissists' functioning as disagreeable extraverts is related to two narcissistic dimensions, in which only admiration was related to extraversion, and only rivalry was related to disagreeableness. Rogoza, Wyszyńska, Maćkiewicz, and Ciecuch (2016) analysed the relationship between NARC dimensions and FFM traits using structural equation modelling and found that extraversion was the strongest predictor of admiration and disagreeableness was the strongest predictor of rivalry (which replicated the results that Back et al. (2013) found using a different method); however, admiration was also predicted by intellect, and rivalry was also predicted by low conscientiousness and emotional stability. The FFM

personality traits explained 39% and 30% of the shared variance in admiration and rivalry, respectively, which suggests that narcissism is a complex construct involving more than extraversion and disagreeableness (Rogoza et al., 2016).

The relationships between narcissism and personality traits can also be interpreted in the context of FFM metatraits. Digman (1997) noticed that although FFM traits are supposed to be orthogonal, there is considerable covariance among them. This covariance has been attributed to two higher-order metatraits: the first comprises agreeableness, conscientiousness and neuroticism, and the second comprises extraversion and openness. These two metatraits have been labelled Stability (Alpha: low neuroticism, high agreeableness and high conscientiousness) and Plasticity (Beta: high extraversion and high openness to experience; DeYoung, Peterson, & Higgins, 2002). Additionally, some researchers have interpreted the observed correlation between Stability and Plasticity as the expression of the General Factor of Personality (GFP), which is localised at the top of the personality hierarchy and could be described as a socially desirable mix of basic traits associated with self-esteem and a prosocial attitude (Musek, 2007; Strus, Ciecuch, & Rowiński, 2014); however, there is no agreement within the literature regarding whether the GFP is the crown of the hierarchy or a method artefact (Muncer, 2011; Musek, 2007). The association between the GFP and narcissism (measured using the total score obtained from the Narcissistic Personality Inventory) was investigated by Kowalski, Vernon, and Schermer (2016), but no significant correlation was found.

Because admiration is associated primarily with extraversion, but also with intellect, one might assume that it is linked to Plasticity. Rivalry is negatively associated with conscientiousness and low emotional stability as well as agreeableness; therefore, it may represent a counterpart to the Stability metatrait. Agreeableness, which is a component of Stability, is associated with stable functioning in social interactions, cooperativeness and honesty (Goldberg, 1999). Individuals with a strong sense of rivalry who aggressively seek to diminish others are on the opposite pole of Stability. One can conclude that the admiration strategy is the product of a general pattern that relates exploration and adaptation to novelty and change, whereas the rivalry strategy is the product of antagonistic tendencies aimed at controlling one's environment by devaluing others. Because the GFP is associated with positive outcomes (Musek, 2007), its lack of an observed correlation with narcissism (Kowalski et al., 2016) may be related to the lack of differentiation between two faces of narcissism; i.e., admiration, which can have positive outcomes and may be positively related to the GFP, and rivalry, which can have negative outcomes and may be negatively related to the GFP.

The recently proposed circumplex model of personality metatraits (Strus et al., 2014) may offer a novel perspective on narcissistic admiration and rivalry. This model synthesises previous work on the FFM of personality and resolves the associated problems (Strus et al., 2014). The model posits Alpha (Stability) and Beta (Plasticity) metatraits supplemented by a Gamma metatrait representing a global personality factor and a Delta metatrait that was introduced to address the circular character of the model and solve some theoretical problems. The model has a circular character in that all of the metatraits are bipolar. However, the negative pole of a dimension (e.g., Alpha-minus) does not simply represent the absence of that dimension (e.g., Alpha-plus); it also encompasses new qualities. According to the circumplex model, admiration could be interpreted in terms of Beta-plus (which is equivalent to the classical understanding of Plasticity), and rivalry could be interpreted in terms of Alpha-minus (which is a novel interpretation of narcissism). In the circumplex model of personality, the Alpha-minus metatrait is defined as a “high level of antisocial tendencies underpinned by unrestraint and a low frustration tolerance, as well as aggression and antagonism toward people, social norms, and obligations” (Strus et al., 2014, p. 280), which is closely related to the definition of narcissistic rivalry (Back et al., 2013).

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