I'm OK, I'm OK: Praise makes narcissists with low implicit self-esteem indifferent to the suffering of others

Ian McGregor [a,*], Paul R. Nail [b], Dinceralp Kocalar [a], Reeshma Haji [a,1]

[a] Dept. of Psychology, York University, 4700 Keele Street, Toronto, ON, Canada M3J 1P3
[b] Dept. of Psychology, University of Central Arkansas, 201 Donaghey Ave., Conway, AR 72035, United States

ABSTRACT

In two experiments (Ns = 105 and 49) the most grandiose individuals with the lowest implicit self-esteem became particularly callous toward their suffering peers after receiving praise about their own personality attributes. Self-reported grandiosity belied by low implicit self-esteem reflects the classic view of narcissism as defensive pride that masks less conscious shame or self-doubt (cf., Jordan, Spencer, Zanna, Hoshino-Browne, & Correll, 2003). Results support the classic view of narcissism and reveal that narcissistic disregard for others can be precipitated by praise.

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1. Introduction

Powerful leaders' disregard for human suffering is often attributed to their narcissistic tendencies (e.g., Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006). Mao Zedong, for example, blithely starved 30 million people during his "Great Leap Forward" in China, and was cavalier about the possibility of nuclear war because of his consoling estimate that only half the world's population would die (Chang & Halliday, 2005). Despite much psychodynamic conjecture about the shaming childhoods and unconscious inner conflicts of grandiose and callous leaders like Mao, Stalin, and Hitler, little empirical research has investigated the psychodynamics of narcissistic disregard for others.

2. Classic psychodynamic view of narcissism

From a classic psychodynamic perspective, "grandiosity…and feelings of inferiority may co-exist in narcissistic personalities without affecting each other" because compartmentalization is accomplished by a "splitting off" of negative self-views (Kernberg, 1975, p. 331). Grandiosity masks self-doubt and the associated negative affect but also blunts respect for others' perspectives (Horney, 1950; Adler, in Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956). Contemporary views characterize narcissistic grandiosity and disregard for others as part of the same syndrome, but the role of inner self-doubt remains controversial (Campbell & Miller, 2011). This controversy may arise from contemporary reliance on self-report scales that provide little access to the psychodynamic assumptions of classic narcissism.

3. Contemporary research

Self-report scales of narcissism reveal that grandiose narcissism is associated with high scores on traits related to approach motivation, low scores on traits and states related to neuroticism, and low scores on the tender-mindedness aspect of agreeableness (Foster & Trimm, 2008; Miller et al., 2010; we agree with Miller et al. that vulnerable narcissism, characterized by high self-reported distress is more akin to borderline personality disorder, than narcissism). A limitation with self-report scales of grandiose narcissism, however, is that they cannot address the premise that narcissistic grandiosity serves to mask unconscious self-doubts. Accordingly, it remains unclear whether grandiose narcissism may be a relatively secure and "healthy narcissism" without defensive motivation (Foster & Trimm, 2008; Sedikides, Rudich, Gregg, Kumashiro, & Rusbult, 2004), or a defensive pride akin to what was proposed by psychodynamic theorists (Horney, 1950).

Recent research with non-consciously assessed measures of self-worth have begun to find that the classic combination of high explicit self-esteem and low implicit self-esteem predicts grandiosity and prejudice (Jordan, Spencer, & Zanna, 2005; Jordan, Spencer, Zanna, Hoshino-Browne, & Correll, 2003) and defensively extreme reactions to experimentally manipulated self-threats (McGregor & Marigold, 2003; McGregor, Nail, Marigold, & Kang,

2005). This provides preliminary evidence that grandiosity combined with positive vs. negative implicit self-views may reflect healthy vs. defensive narcissism, respectively. A limitation of this past research, however, is that the explicit grandiosity was operationalized as high scores on the Rosenberg (1965) self-esteem scale. Its items, such as, "I take a positive attitude toward myself" and "I am satisfied with myself," could reflect deluded grandiosity but could also reflect clear-eyed self-acceptance.

4. Operational definition and test of classic narcissism dynamics

We operationalize classic narcissism as the combination of: (a) self-reported grandiosity on an explicit narcissism scale (e.g., "The world would be a better place if I ruled it"); and (b) low implicit self-esteem as assessed by two different measures that tap experiential self-views that are not readily accessible to awareness (with a word-fragment-completion test in Study 1 and an implicit associations test in Study 2). We probe the psychodynamics of narcissistic disregard for others by observing the social judgments of classic narcissists under circumstances that should be expected to powerfully engage their self-focused disregard for others—praise of their personality.

According to psychodynamic theories of narcissism, personality praise about idealized personal greatness is what narcissists crave (Stolorow, 1976). Accordingly, praise might be especially likely to engage narcissists' agentic fantasies, and powerfully activate their approach-motivation tendencies (Foster & Trimm, 2008). Approach motivated states are rewarding because they narrow perceptual focus to goal-relevant stimuli (Harmon-Jones & Gable, 2009), mute anxiety and maintain positive affect (McGregor, Nash, Mann, & Phills, 2010; Nash, Inzlicht, & McGregor, 2012; Nash, McGregor, & Prentice, 2011). Classic narcissists with anxious conflict built into the structure of their self-systems may thus be particularly motivated to engage such sanguine, approach-motivated states. Doing so, however, might promote over-focus on personal perspectives and disregard for others' (Galinsky, Magee, Inesi, & Gruenfeld, 2006; Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003; McGregor, Nash, & Prentice, 2010; Nash et al., 2011). The present research accordingly assesses whether personality praise will cause classic narcissists to become callous toward suffering others.

5. Study 1

5.1. Method

One hundred and five American undergraduates (age, M = 22.64; 75 female) participated for credit toward their course grade. Materials were completed over two sessions presented as unrelated studies assessing "personality structure" and "reactions to students with problems," respectively. In Session 1 participants completed the narcissism and self-esteem measures along with other personality questionnaires that helped legitimize the "personality structure" cover story. Participants were told that they would be receiving "personality profile" feedback when they returned four weeks later to complete the other study. In Session 2, participants returned to rate their concern for suffering peers depicted in vignettes.

5.1.1. Narcissism and explicit self-esteem

Narcissism was assessed with a 37-item adaptation of the original narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI: Raskin & Hall, 1979). The adapted version (Morf & Rhodewalt, 1993) consists only of non-redundant items with factor loadings higher than .35 on the original 54-item scale (Emmons, 1987). The NPI reflects pathological criteria and less extreme personality tendencies toward

narcissism, and is a valid and reliable measure of a normally distributed, non-clinical trait (Emmons, 1987; Raskin & Terry, 1988). Following Jordan et al. (2003), we modified the original forced choice format to a continuous score format. It included items such as: "I am an extraordinary person;" and "I am going to be a great person" (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree; α = .90, item M = 4.28). We also assessed explicit self-esteem with a standard ten-item measure with items such as, "On the whole, I am satisfied with myself" (Rosenberg, 1965; 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree; α = .87, item M = 4.19) to differentiate narcissism from less grandiose positive self-evaluation..

5.1.2. Implicit self-esteem

Implicitly assessed self-esteem taps experiential associations of self with positive versus negative categories (Greenwald & Farnham, 2000). It is defined as an automatic and experiential evaluation of the self that is not always introspectively identifiable (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995).

We adapted a measure of implicit racism (Son Hing, Li, & Zanna, 2002) to simply assess implicit self-esteem. Participants completed five word fragments (K _ _ _, D _ _ _, W _ _ _, G R _ _ _, and S _ _ _) and then had their self-concept primed by responding to the first five items from the explicit self-esteem scale (Rosenberg, 1965). They then completed five additional word fragments (G _ _ _, S M _ _ _, B _ _, N _ _ _, and F _ _ _), followed by the last five items from Rosenberg scale. Participants then rated their feelings with respect to each of the words they had created on the fragment tasks on a 7-point scale (−3 = extremely negative to +3 = extremely positive). We operationalized implicit self-esteem as the difference between self-rated positivity of word-fragment-completions made after versus before the self was primed by the Rosenberg items. Based on the Son Hing et al. (2002) findings, we assumed that participants with the highest implicit self-esteem would think of more subjectively positive word completions after the self-concept prime than before it.

5.1.3. Praise

At the beginning of the second session, participants received a sealed envelope containing bogus feedback ostensibly based on the personality tests they had completed in Session 1 four weeks earlier. The true purpose of the feedback was to manipulate personality praise. Participants were randomly assigned to high praise (n = 55, 39 female) and low praise (n = 50, 36 female) conditions. The high praise feedback included vaguely positive comments to lend believability to the personality profile. Most importantly, it concluded by stating that participants had scored outstandingly on "two of the most functional and desirable personality traits, creativity and originality." The low praise feedback began with the same vaguely positive comments but lacked the concluding statement regarding outstanding creativity and originality. After reading the feedback, participants responded to two manipulation check questions about how accurate and positive the feedback was (1 = very negative/inaccurate to 11 = very positive/accurate). At the end of Session 2, participants were carefully debriefed and retained until they clearly acknowledged that the personality feedback was random and bogus.

5.1.4. Concern

To assess the main dependent variable, Session 2 continued by presenting participants with counterbalanced vignettes about two college students with personal problems. Sherry had academic problems related to her Chronic Fatigue Syndrome. Tanya had emotional problems related to her abusive boyfriend. Following each vignette, participants rated their concern for each suffering student (0 = not at all to 5 = extremely) on the following nine items: "How likely is it that Sherry/Tanya will have a fulfilling