



## Report

## Narcissistic defensiveness: Hypervigilance and avoidance of worthlessness

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## ABSTRACT

Clinical theories of narcissism postulate the paradoxical coexistence of explicit self-perceptions of grandiosity and covert fragility and worthlessness. To examine the operation and time course of the latter component at a very early stage of information processing, a sequential priming study was conducted. Consistent with predictions high narcissists appear to be hypervigilant for ego-threats; they initially activated worthlessness and then rapidly and automatically inhibited it. In contrast, low narcissists neither activated nor inhibited worthlessness after ego-threat. A second study showed that conscious suppression did not elicit parallel effects among narcissists, thus supporting the idea that the effects in the first study were the result of unconscious repression processes. Differences between intentional and automatic processes in self-regulation are discussed. The findings demonstrate the importance of worthlessness in narcissistic self-regulation and help clarify how narcissists protect and defend their grandiose self-views.

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## Introduction

Narcissists not only think they are (nearly) perfect, but they also seem to be protected against worthlessness. Over the past few decades many empirical studies have shown that narcissistic self-concepts are inflated. For example, they overestimate their general intelligence (Gabriel, Critelli, & Ee, 1994), they think they are more attractive than their peers (Gabriel et al., 1994; Rhodewalt & Edings, 2002), and they also overestimate their personal accomplishments relative to those of others (e.g., in group tasks; John & Robins, 1994). This overestimation of the self also is represented in the definition of narcissism in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (4th ed. [DSM-IV]; American Psychiatric Association., 1994), which includes a grandiose sense of self-importance, and beliefs about one's specialness and uniqueness. By contrast, not well captured in the DSM, but clearly represented in clinical descriptions is another side of narcissism: covert fragility and vulnerability. It is assumed that underlying all the surface grandiosity, narcissists secretly harbor fears of inferiority and worthlessness (e.g., Akhtar & Thomson, 1982).

## Narcissism and defensiveness

The empirical validation of worthlessness as a component of narcissism has represented a major challenge to scientific research (e.g., Zeigler-Hill, 2006). The problem for the assessment of worthlessness

is at least twofold: For one, we are anything but sure, that narcissists actually experience worthlessness after a failure event; and for another, if they do, they would not be expected to report feeling worthlessness. The latter may particularly be true when an evaluation takes place immediately after an ego-threatening event, in which case narcissists have been shown to employ an array of strategies to discount or undo the threatening feedback (e.g., Kernis & Sun, 1994; Morf & Rhodewalt, 1993). Through these mechanisms, narcissists may be self-presenting primarily to others in order to diffuse any potential negative self inferences from the social environment. In addition, they may be preventing worthlessness to surface within their own self-system and thus may successfully be deceiving even themselves. Whatever the case may be, it is obvious that explicit measures such as self-report questionnaires need to be complemented by implicit measures when assessing worthlessness. Recently, researchers have begun to explore the associations between narcissism and implicit self-esteem (as an indirect measure of worthlessness). So far the evidence for a relationship between implicit self-esteem and narcissism is scant and the findings are inconsistent. Narcissism sometimes has been found to be negatively correlated with implicit self-esteem, other times the two constructs were uncorrelated (for a review see Bosson et al., 2008).

Although inconclusive, these empirical findings indicate, that worthlessness—along with grandiosity—might be an important component of the narcissistic self. Moreover, the discrepancy between the assessment of worthlessness by means of self-report and implicit measures, as well as the inconsistent findings concerning implicit self-esteem, suggests that narcissists are likely defending against worthlessness. Perhaps typical narcissistic behaviors, such as derogating others (e.g., Kernis & Sun, 1994), or self-enhancing attribu-

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tions after failure (e.g., Rhodewalt & Morf, 1998) help deal with rising worthlessness. However, the most direct strategy to dampen the activated worthlessness would be to inhibit it immediately after the detection of a potential ego-threat before worthlessness even has a chance to surface. Accordingly, the main goal of the present research was to investigate whether narcissists use automatic avoidance as an efficient strategy to inhibit and thus protect themselves against worthlessness when confronted with an ego-threat.

In accord with clinical theories that emphasize the self-deceptive nature of narcissistic self-regulation (e.g., Kohut, 1977) we assume that the relevant mechanism is repression. That is, we think that the avoidance strategy is applied automatically and that the person is not aware he or she is defending against threatening stimuli by avoiding them. This is in contrast to explicit suppression where the strategy is implemented intentionally (for a historical overview see Erdelyi, 2006). To describe the consequence of repression (or suppression) processes on the level of associative networks we use the terms “activation” and “inhibition”. Our premise is that narcissists are in a chronically vigilant state to detect potential threats in order to protect their grandiose selves, while at the same time they are focusing on opportunities to confirm their positive self-views to satisfy their addiction to self-esteem (Baumeister & Vohs, 2001). In the current investigation our aim was to provide support for both the hypervigilance toward ego-threats and for automatically implemented repression of worthlessness. We hypothesized that after a threat to a narcissists' sense of self-worth, this chronically vigilant state leads to an initial activation of worthlessness, followed by an inhibition thereof.

#### *Assessment of vigilance and defensiveness in early information processing*

To obtain evidence for each of these two phases of processing, in essence requires a comparison between conditions that either do or do not restrict processing resources in order to manipulate the opportunity for influence by controlled processes. For example Mikulincer, Birnbaum, Woddis, & Nachmias (2000) demonstrated that persons characterized by an avoidant attachment style repress proximity worries in stressful situations. Although avoidants showed no faster lexical decisions of proximity worries after a stressful relative to a neutral prime—indicating repression, when adding a cognitive load, this group then showed an activation of proximity worries through the stressful prime. The latter, thus, disclose the defensiveness of their avoidant strategy, which became undone when processing resources were restricted.

Similarly, Koster, Verschuere, Crombez, and Van Damme (2005) demonstrated hypervigilance and subsequent avoidance of mildly threatening stimuli in high anxiety individuals. They employed a visual dot probe task, in which a threatening and a neutral stimulus were presented simultaneously, followed by a cue replacing one of the stimuli. By manipulating the time interval between stimulus and cue presentation Koster and colleagues could confirm the expected time course for anxious participants. When the time interval was short (i.e., restricted resources), they responded faster when a cue replaced the threatening stimuli, thus showing vigilance. When the time interval was long, they were faster when the cue replaced the neutral stimulus, thus showing avoidance. This typical response pattern has also been found for high defensive individuals when processing sexual stimuli in a classification task (Kline, Schwartz, Allen, & Dikman, 1998).

#### **The present research**

In the first study, we examined both the presumed connection between ego-threat and worthlessness, and the expected vigilance

and avoidance of worthlessness after ego-threats. We employed a sequential subliminal priming paradigm in combination with a lexical decision task (LDT). In this task, after subliminal presentation of an ego-threatening or neutral prime word, a string of letters was presented and participants had to decide whether it was a word or non-word. Faster recognition of worthlessness words that follow an ego-threatening prime relative to a neutral prime indicates a connection between threat and worthlessness. We predicted that high narcissists would show this connection more than low narcissists. Besides target words related to worthlessness, neutral targets were used to demonstrate that the priming effects were specific to worthlessness.

To investigate both the hypervigilant, as well as the avoidance stage of the self-regulation process, we manipulated the time interval between prime and target; i.e., two different stimulus-onset asynchronies (SOA) were used. We hypothesized that for the short SOA condition, narcissists would show an activation of worthlessness after an ego-threatening prime indicating vigilance. In the long SOA condition on the other hand, narcissists were expected to repress worthlessness and thus show inhibition of worthlessness after an ego-threat. No effects were expected for the neutral target category (ego-threat should not generally increase target identification), nor for low narcissists, because failure and worthlessness are not central components of their self-regulation. In other words, they are neither expected to be hypervigilant for, nor to avoid worthlessness. In the second study, we used instructed thought suppression to examine whether narcissists' defensive strategy could also result from conscious suppression, rather than unconscious repression.

#### **Study 1: Hypervigilance and avoidance of worthlessness**

##### *Method*

##### *Participants*

A total of 64 participants (33 women and 31 men ranging in age from 17 to 39 years, median = 22) were recruited for a two-session study. The sample consisted of psychology students, students from high schools in their last year and persons recruited from around the campus of the University of Bern. All psychology students received partial course credit for their participation; all other participants received a cinema voucher (approximate value: \$14).

##### *Instruments*

*Narcissism* was assessed through the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Hall, 1979; German version: Schütz, Marcus, & Sellin, 2004) which contains 40 forced-choice items and is the most frequently used measure of narcissism in normal populations. In the current sample the internal consistency was  $\alpha = .77$ .

*Self-esteem* was measured via the 10-item Rosenberg Scale (RSE, Rosenberg, 1965; German version: von Collani & Herzberg, 2003). Internal consistency in the current sample was  $\alpha = .79$ .

*Depression* was assessed through the 21-item Beck Depression Inventory (BDI; Beck, Ward, Mendelson, Mock, & Erbaugh, 1961; German version: Hautzinger, Bailer, Worall, & Keller, 1995). Internal consistency in the current sample was  $\alpha = .64$ .

##### *Procedure*

After participants had completed the three self-report questionnaires (NPI, RSE and BDI) online from home, they were contacted for the second part of the study. They were tested in our laboratory individually or in small groups (max. three persons), working in one of three cubicles, each containing a Computer with a 85 Hz Monitor. For the presentation of the stimuli in the lexical decision task (LDT), we used Media-Lab and DirectRT (Jarvis, 2004).

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