



Narcissism and self-esteem reactivity: The role of negative achievement events

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ABSTRACT

To examine the reactivity of narcissists to achievement and social events in their daily lives, 161 participants completed the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (Raskin & Hall, 1979) and daily diary measures of state self-esteem and daily experiences (i.e., positive achievement events, negative achievement events, positive social events, and negative social events). Multilevel random coefficient models found that narcissists reported greater decreases in their state self-esteem on days with more negative achievement events than was observed for non-narcissists. Narcissism did not moderate the associations observed for state self-esteem and the other daily events. These results suggest that narcissists may be especially reactive to mundane achievement failure experiences. The discussion will focus on the asymmetry in the reactivity of narcissists to daily events.

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1. Introduction

Narcissism has been a popular construct in psychology since its introduction by Ellis (1898). Narcissism – as a personality disorder – is characterized by features such as grandiosity, the need for attention and admiration, a sense of entitlement, lack of empathy, extreme emotional reactivity, and fragile self-esteem (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). The interest of social-personality psychologists in narcissism has greatly intensified in recent years as there has been a general shift toward treating sub-clinical levels of narcissism as a continuum much like any other personality trait (see Miller & Campbell, 2008 for a comparison of clinical and social-personality conceptualizations of narcissism).² Narcissism is particularly interesting as a personality variable because it functions as a “bridge” to other facets of the self (e.g., Campbell, Brunell, & Finkel, 2006). For example, researchers have been interested in examining how narcissism manifests in areas such as self-regulatory strategies and interpersonal relationships.

The dynamic self-regulatory model of narcissism (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001) proposes that the very core of narcissism is a self-concept that is grandiose yet vulnerable. The vulnerable nature of the narcissistic self-concept is believed to be what drives these individuals to seek feedback from the social environment

that affirms their tenuous feelings of self-worth. This model also suggests that many of the attributes that characterize narcissists are the result of their attempts to regulate their self-esteem through both intrapersonal mechanisms (e.g., nurturing grandiose fantasies about themselves) and interpersonal processes (e.g., boasting to others about their accomplishments). Unfortunately for narcissists, many of the strategies they employ to regulate their self-esteem are thought to be unsuccessful because of their tendency to alienate others due to their self-absorption and insensitive behavior. Not surprisingly, these interpersonal problems often prevent narcissists from receiving the praise and admiration from others that they crave so desperately.

1.1. Narcissism and fragile high self-esteem

The reliance of narcissists on external sources to bolster their feelings of self-worth may help to explain why narcissism has been shown to have a complex and inconsistent association with fragile forms of self-esteem (see Bosson et al. (2008) or Zeigler-Hill and Myers (2008) for reviews). In contrast to secure high self-esteem which is characterized by well-anchored, positive attitudes about the self that are resistant to threat, fragile high self-esteem is characterized by positive attitudes about the self that require external validation and are vulnerable to challenge (Kernis, 2003). Our understanding of fragile self-esteem is still in its earliest stages, but the research that has been conducted to this point suggests that fragile high self-esteem is associated with maladaptive behaviors such as self-deception, defensiveness, aggression, and self-handicapping (see Kernis (2003) for a review). There are three commonly used markers of fragile high self-esteem: discrepancies between implicit and explicit self-esteem (Bosson, Brown,

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² The terms “narcissist” and “non-narcissist” are employed for ease of explanation. Conceptually and empirically, sub-clinical levels of narcissism refer to a continuous personality variable with narcissist and non-narcissist representing the ends of the continuum.

Zeigler-Hill, & Swann, 2003; Jordan, Spencer, Zanna, Hoshino-Browne, & Correll, 2003), contingent self-esteem (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001; Deci & Ryan, 1995), and self-esteem instability (Kernis, Grannemann, & Barclay, 1989). Although these markers are distinct, previous research has found associations between these markers which is consistent with the idea that they are indicators of the same underlying construct (e.g., Kernis, Lakey, & Heppner, 2008; Zeigler-Hill, 2006).

1.2. Discrepancy between explicit self-esteem and implicit self-esteem

Discrepant high self-esteem is the first marker of fragile high self-esteem. The “discrepancy” refers to differences between an individual’s explicit self-esteem (i.e., conscious feelings of self-liking, self-worth, and acceptance) and implicit self-esteem (i.e., self-evaluations that may be non-conscious, automatic, and over-learned; Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). The model of discrepant high self-esteem shares conceptual similarities with the *psychodynamic mask model* described by Kernberg (1970) and Kohut (1971). This classic view of narcissism suggests that narcissists display an outward façade of positive self-regard while harboring unconscious feelings of self-loathing (see Bosson et al. (2008) for a review). In other words, narcissists are believed to exhibit high levels of explicit self-esteem in order to “mask” their low levels of implicit self-esteem. This discrepancy between explicit and implicit feelings of self-worth is believed to be what leads narcissists to rely on various self-protective and self-enhancing strategies (Kernis, 2003). Recent studies have provided mixed empirical support for the psychodynamic mask model of narcissism such that some studies have found narcissists to possess discrepant high self-esteem (Jordan et al., 2003; Zeigler-Hill, 2006), but others have failed to replicate this pattern (e.g., Bosson et al., 2008). As noted by Bosson and her colleagues (2008), the lack of a consistent association between narcissism and discrepant high self-esteem may be due, at least in part, to the poor psychometric properties of the measures used to capture implicit self-esteem (e.g., Bosson, Swann, & Pennebaker, 2000), the multifaceted nature of implicit self-esteem (e.g., Campbell, Bosson, Goheen, Lakey, & Kernis, 2007), or the existence of multiple forms of narcissism (e.g., grandiose vs. vulnerable narcissistic subtypes; Pincus et al., 2009).

1.3. Contingent self-esteem

The second marker of fragile self-esteem is contingent self-esteem. Contingent self-esteem refers to the belief that one must do certain things or be a particular type of person in order to have worth as an individual (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001; Deci & Ryan, 1995). This is a form of fragile high self-esteem because feelings of self-worth are only experienced when these goals or standards are attained. It was initially believed that a simple association would emerge between narcissism and contingent self-esteem, but a recent meta-analysis found no significant association between narcissism and a global form of contingent self-esteem (Bosson et al., 2008). However, other research that has examined domain-specific aspects of contingent self-esteem has found that narcissists tend to base their self-esteem on competitive domains such as outperforming other individuals (Crocker, Luhtanen, Cooper, & Bouvrette, 2003; Zeigler-Hill, Clark, & Pickard, 2008).

1.4. Self-esteem instability

Self-esteem instability is the third marker of fragile high self-esteem and will be the focus of the present study. This marker of fragile high self-esteem refers to fluctuations in individuals’ moment-to-moment feelings of self-worth as measured over time (Kernis, 2003). Self-esteem instability is characterized by enhanced

sensitivity to evaluative events, increased concern with self-image, over-reliance on social sources of evaluation, and fluctuations in mood (see Kernis (2005) for a review). Previous research has found important similarities between narcissism and unstable high self-esteem such as the tendency to exhibit greater hostility and anger (Kernis et al., 1989) and the possession of impoverished self-concepts (Rhodewalt, Madrian, & Cheney, 1998; Zeigler-Hill & Showers, 2007).

In light of the similarities between narcissism and self-esteem instability, it is somewhat surprising that the association between these constructs has not been consistently observed. That is, some studies have found narcissism to be associated with unstable self-esteem (Rhodewalt et al., 1998; Zeigler-Hill, Chadha, & Osterman, 2008), but others have failed to do so (Bosson et al., 2008; Myers & Zeigler-Hill, 2008; Zeigler-Hill, 2006). One possible explanation for this lack of consistency is simply that the association does not always emerge because it may be difficult to detect due to its relative weakness. However, it is also possible that this inconsistency could be due to narcissists having self-esteem that is reactive to specific sorts of events rather than being generally unstable. For example, a hallmark of narcissism is emotional reactivity in response to evaluative feedback that is in conflict with their grandiose self-views (Rhodewalt & Morf, 1998). This reactivity has been demonstrated in a series of laboratory studies that assessed the responses of narcissists on dimensions such as anger or aggression following exposure to either negative performance feedback (Barry, Chaplin, & Grafeman, 2006; Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Kernis & Sun, 1994; Rhodewalt & Morf, 1998) or social rejection (Twenge & Campbell, 2003).

The reactions of narcissists to laboratory-based manipulations provide a clear indication that these experiences challenge their feelings of self-worth. What remains less clear, however, is the extent to which the self-esteem of narcissists is reactive to the sorts of ordinary events that may occur during the course of their daily lives. Past research on the effects of daily experiences on the self-esteem of narcissists has focused largely on social events and has shown that narcissists seem to be highly reactive to information from the social environment that threatens their grandiose self-views. For example, studies examining the daily experiences of narcissists have shown that narcissists report more hostility when they feel inferior to others (Bogart, Benotsch, & Pavlovic, 2004) and more changes in their self-esteem in response to situations in which things go poorly with friends and family (Rhodewalt et al., 1998) or that make them feel socially excluded (Rhodewalt, 2005). We sought to extend these previous findings concerning the self-esteem reactivity of narcissists by examining how their state self-esteem changed when they experienced daily achievement and social events.

1.5. Overview and predictions

In order to develop a better understanding of the link between daily events and the self-esteem of narcissists, we examined whether their level of state self-esteem would change in accordance with the social and achievement events they reported on any particular day. The underlying rationale was that narcissists are dependent on external sources to regulate their self-esteem which led us to expect that their state self-esteem would be associated with their daily experiences. Our prediction for everyday negative achievement events was straightforward, because we expected these events to be more closely associated with the state self-esteem of individuals with higher levels of narcissism than for those with lower levels of narcissism. This hypothesis was based on the idea that these mundane failures would challenge the grandiose but vulnerable feelings of self-worth that characterize narcissists and result in lower levels of state self-esteem. In

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