



Narcissists are approach-oriented toward their money and their friends

Joshua D. Foster*, Tiffany A. Misra, Dennis E. Reidy

University of South Alabama, Psychology Department, Mobile, AL 36688, United States

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ABSTRACT

According to the unmitigated approach model (UAM) of narcissism, narcissists possess strong approach motivation coupled with weak avoidance motivation. The present research tests the UAM in two independent contexts: social and financial. In Study 1, narcissists report having social goals that emphasize the promotion of positive outcomes (e.g., having fun). This predilection is mediated by strong approach motivation. In Study 2, narcissists report a preference for aggressive financial investment strategies (e.g., investing in volatile stocks rather than stable bonds). This preference is mediated by both strong approach and weak avoidance motivation. Discussion focuses on how these results support the UAM and more broadly on how the UAM provides a theoretical framework for understanding the costs and benefits of narcissistic personality.

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1. Introduction

A central feature of narcissism, according to Campbell's agency model, is approach orientation (Campbell, Brunell, & Finkel, 2006; Campbell & Foster, 2007). That is, narcissists¹ are strongly motivated by reward (approach motivation) and weakly motivated by punishment (avoidance motivation). We term this subcomponent of the agency model the unmitigated approach model (UAM) of narcissism (Foster & Trimm, 2008; Foster et al., 2008).

The UAM has to date been subjected to very little direct empirical testing. From a theoretical perspective, however, it makes sense that narcissists would be more strongly motivated by reward than punishment. Narcissism likely develops in part from parenting that is overindulgent, overvaluing, and overprotective (Horton, Bleau, & Drwecki, 2006; Kohut, 1977; Millon, Grossman, Millon, Meagher, & Ramnath, 2004; Otway & Vignoles, 2006). Similarly, exposure to similar societal messages may be partly to blame for the recent increase in narcissism observed in young adults (Twenge, 2006; Twenge & Foster, 2008; Twenge, Konrath, Foster, Campbell, & Bushman, 2008a, 2008b). To the extent that narcissism develops because individuals receive messages suggesting that everything they do is positive and failure is impossible, then it should be expected that narcissists will be more strongly motivated by reward than punishment. In the words of Foster and

Trimm (2008), "[I]f one learns through years of experiences that the most likely outcome of one's behavior is reward... then reward should provide the primary motivation to behave" (p. 1005).

Empirically speaking, there is also some indirect evidence supporting the UAM. For example, narcissism is linked to psychopathic personality (Paulhus & Williams, 2002; Reidy, Zeichner, Hunnicutt-Ferguson, & Lilienfeld, 2008), and psychopathy often correlates positively with approach motivation and negatively with avoidance motivation (Newman, MacCoon, Vaughn, & Sadeh, 2005; Ross et al., 2007; Uzieblo, Verschuere, & Crombez, 2007). Likewise, from a behavioral perspective, narcissists engage in elevated rates of aggression (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Reidy, Zeichner, Foster, & Martinez, 2008), and aggression is associated with high approach motivation and low avoidance motivation (Harmon-Jones, 2003).

Direct support for the UAM is thus far limited to a single published study. Foster and Trimm (2008) recently showed that scores on the most widely used measure of narcissism in social psychology, the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (Emmons, 1984; Raskin & Hall, 1979, 1981; Raskin & Terry, 1988), correlate positively with scores from measures of approach motivation and negatively with scores from measures of avoidance motivation. They further showed that high approach motivation and/or low avoidance motivation account for some of the behavioral and intrapsychic correlates of narcissism (i.e., impulsivity, high self-esteem).

These findings provide initial support for the UAM and suggest a strong potential utility of applying the constructs of approach-avoidance motivation to the study of narcissism. The purpose of the present studies was to expand upon this research by further testing the validity and utility of the UAM across different contexts. To test the generalizability of the UAM, we purposefully selected two seemingly unrelated contexts for investigation: friends and money. The guiding hypothesis, based on the UAM, was that

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: foster@usouthal.edu (J.D. Foster).

¹ We use the term "narcissists" throughout this paper to refer to individuals who score above the sample mean of measures of narcissistic personality. The term is used as a matter of convenience. We are aware that commonly used measures of narcissism in social psychology do not capture a qualitatively distinct group of "narcissists" (Foster & Campbell, 2007).

narcissists would exhibit approach orientation toward their friends and money.

1.1. Narcissism and friends

Individuals have various motives and goals for their social relationships. Social goals can be separated into two distinct classes: approach goals and avoidance goals (Elliot, Gable, & Mapes, 2006; Gable, 2006; Gable & Strachman, 2008; Strachman & Gable, 2006a, 2006b). Approach goals are those that promote positive social outcomes whereas avoidance goals are those that prevent negative social outcomes. Examples of approach goals would be to have fun with or make a good impression on someone else. Avoiding conflict with someone else would be an example of an avoidance goal.

Social goals that are specific to friendships are called friendship goals (Elliot et al., 2006). Again, approach friendship goals are those that promote positive outcomes whereas avoidance friendship goals are those that prevent negative outcomes. Complementing a friend would be an example of an approach friendship goal whereas not criticizing a friend would be an example of an avoidance friendship goal.² Fittingly, individuals who are strongly approach motivated tend to have strong approach friendship goals, whereas individuals who are strongly avoidant motivated tend to have strong avoidance friendship goals (Gable, 2006). To the extent that narcissists possess strong approach motivation and weak avoidance motivation, as proposed by the UAM, we would expect narcissism to be linked to high approach friendship goals and low avoidance friendship goals. In other words, narcissists should focus more on promoting positive outcomes than preventing negative outcomes in their friendships because of their motivational disposition.

1.2. Narcissism and money

Similar to friendships, individuals have different motives and goals with regard to their finances. In the present study, we focused on financial investment strategies; for example, whether to invest in volatile stocks versus stable bonds. Broadly, investment strategies fall along a continuum that range from risk intolerant to risk tolerant, with risk tolerance defined as the “maximum amount of uncertainty that someone is willing to accept when making a financial decision” (Gable, 2000, p. 625). In the present article, we use the term aggressive investment strategy to refer to investment strategies that are motivated by high risk tolerance. We use the term cautious investment strategy to refer to investment strategies that are motivated by low risk tolerance. We use these terms because we think that the term risk tolerance places too much emphasis on risk and not enough emphasis on reward (e.g., high profit) stemming from investment decisions.

A cautious investment strategy is one in which finances are invested into relatively stable securities, such as Treasury bonds. This investment strategy minimizes risk, but at the cost of reduced profit potential. An aggressive investment strategy is one in which finances are invested into relatively unstable securities, such as individual stocks. This investment strategy maximizes profit potential, but comes with increased risk. In short, aggressive investment strategies result in wider ranges of profit/loss potential than do cautious investment strategies.

Most of the research in this area tends to focus more broadly on financial decision-making rather than specific investment strate-

gies. In terms of individual differences, the research shows that men tend to make more aggressive financial decisions (Eckel & Grossman, 2002; Keller & Siegrist, 2006; Powell & Ansic, 1997), as do older, married, highly educated, and highly paid individuals (Gable, 2000; Keller & Siegrist, 2006). In terms of personality traits, Carducci and Wong (1998) found that individuals with Type-A personality are more aggressive with their finances.

Most relevant to the present study were several studies that linked financial decision-making to approach–avoidance motivation. Noussair and Wu (2006) showed that temporally distant financial outcomes promoted more aggressive financial decision-making. This is relevant because additional research suggests that temporal distance is positively associated with approach motivation (Mogilner, Aaker, & Pennington, 2008; Pennington & Roese, 2003).³ Most critical, however, are studies that directly link financial decision-making to approach–avoidance motivation (Hamilton & Biehal, 2005; Zhou, Pham, Mick, Iacobucci, & Huber, 2004). In each of these studies, participants who were more concerned with promoting gains than preventing losses tended to make more aggressive financial decisions.

Based on these findings, it seems reasonable to link aggressive financial decision-making, and consequently, aggressive investment strategizing, to high approach motivation. Likewise, it seems reasonable to link cautious investment strategizing, to high avoidance motivation. Therefore, the UAM predictions are evident: narcissists should adopt a more aggressive investment strategy because of their high approach/low avoidance motivational disposition.

2. Study 1: friendship goals

The purpose of this study was to test the UAM by determining whether narcissists focus more on promoting positive outcomes in their friendships (i.e., approach friendship goals) than preventing negative outcomes (i.e., avoidance friendship goals), and whether approach–avoidance motivation mediates these goal pursuits.

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Participants, materials, and procedure

A sample of 109 participants (M age = 21, 59% female) was recruited from the University of South Alabama undergraduate participant pool. Participants completed measures of narcissism, approach–avoidance motivation, and friendship goals. Each measure is summarized below.

2.1.1.1. Narcissism. Participants completed the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Terry, 1988). The NPI consists of 40 pairs of self-descriptive statements. Participants received one point for each narcissistic statement selected (e.g., “I am an extraordinary person.”). Higher scores indicated higher narcissism ($M = 18.37$, $SD = 7.58$, $\alpha = .87$).

2.1.1.2. Approach–avoidance motivation. Participants completed the 20-item Behavioral Approach System (BAS)/Behavioral Inhibition System (BIS) Scales (Carver & White, 1994). Thirteen BAS items measure approach motivation (e.g., “When I want something, I usually go all-out and get it.”) and seven BIS items measure avoidance motivation (e.g., “If I think something unpleasant is going to happen I usually get pretty worked up.”). Participants responded to items from very false (1) to very true (4). Higher scores indicated stronger approach motivation ($M = 41.76$, $SD = 5.78$, $\alpha = .86$) and stronger avoidance motivation ($M = 19.92$, $SD = 3.97$, $\alpha = .77$).

² As noted by a reviewer, not all avoidance friendship goals will prevent negative outcomes, especially long-term negative outcomes. For example, failing to deliver criticism might prevent immediate negative outcomes (e.g., a yelling match), but might also promote more severe long-term negative outcomes (e.g., the underlying problem growing worse).

³ Technically, these studies examined promotion focus (Higgins, 1997, 1998), which is a strategic focus that is triggered by appetitive (i.e., approach) motivation.

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