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Narcissistic Self-Enhancement

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### Abstract

Narcissists chronically overclaim agentic traits and sacrifice relationships to pursue the prestige and power they crave. This chapter compares conflicting explanations for narcissists' self-aggrandizing style of self-enhancement and considers whether narcissists' impatient self-promotional strategies ultimately restrict their long-term self-enhancement prospects.

Key words: narcissism, self-enhancement, self-esteem, Narcissistic Personality Inventory

### Narcissistic Self-Enhancement

Self-enhancement encompasses motives and self-directed effort to increase the positivity of one's self-concept or public image. Self-enhancement concerns are often distinguished from orientations toward self-assessment—seeking diagnostic self-related information (flattering or otherwise), and self-verification—seeking confirmation of existing self-views (e.g., Sedikides, 1993; Swann, 1990). Distinctions are also typically drawn between self-enhancement and self-improvement motives. Although identifying and addressing one's personal shortcomings could improve long-term self-enhancement prospects, the self-enhancement label is usually reserved for circumstances in which priority is placed on enhancing the status of one's present self rather than one's future self (e.g., Taylor, Neter, & Wayment, 1995). Self-enhancement striving is undeniably common (e.g., Sedikides, Gaertner, & Toguchi, 2003), but some individuals self-enhance more than others, and people have different self-enhancement goals and use different tactics to achieve them. Narcissism is arguably the personality construct (and pathological disorder) most fundamentally defined by chronic pursuit of self-enhancement.

This chapter includes three sections. The first outlines the particular dimensions of self that narcissists seek to enhance and reports evidence of their self-enhancing tendencies. The large majority of published papers offering empirical evidence relevant to the relationship between narcissism and self-enhancement measured narcissism with the self-report *Narcissistic Personality Inventory* (NPI; Raskin & Hall, 1979)—the instrument favored by social and personality psychologists who study correlates of narcissism in normal (e.g., college student) populations. Unless otherwise directed, readers should assume that data reported in this chapter derived from NPI-based research. The second section of this chapter reviews and compares competing explanations for why narcissists feel so compelled to self-enhance. The NPI portrait of narcissism differs in notable ways from views of pathological narcissism found in Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) literature (see Cain, Pincus, & Ansell, 2008; Miller & Campbell, 2008). NPI data regarding symptoms of narcissistic self-enhancement match NPD models of narcissism reasonably well, but this chapter considers how popular psychodynamic explanations for *why* narcissists self-enhance conflict with alternative interpretations supported by NPI research. The third and final

section of this chapter poses a question that prior narcissism research has not directly addressed: Do the behaviors that characterize narcissism ultimately benefit or undermine narcissists' self-enhancement goals?

### **Symptoms of Narcissistic Self-Enhancement**

Some scholars have emphasized that studying self-enhancement demands consideration of context, because the desirability of different personal attributes and the social appropriateness of strategies for claiming desirable attributes vary across individuals and cultures. For example, Sedikides et al. (2003) argued that self-effacing behavior could be construed as self-enhancing in cultures that place high value on modesty. Accounting for such contextual nuances presents a challenge for researchers who seek to identify self-enhancement tendencies in diverse populations. Thankfully, the goals of this chapter are simplified by the fact that narcissists maintain the same not-so-nuanced self-enhancement priorities across situations. Narcissists care about demonstrating personal status and superiority. Narcissists do not merely seek to establish competence; they strive for and fantasize about power and glory (Raskin & Novacek, 1991; Rose & Campbell, 2004). Narcissists want to be the star in domains where being the star offers prestige, and they would rather not share the spotlight (e.g., Bizumic & Duckitt, 2008). Narcissists selectively focus their self-enhancement efforts toward elevating their standing on agentic traits such as dominance, intelligence, and competitiveness while showing little interest in claiming communal traits like agreeableness, morality, and personal warmth (Campbell, Rudich & Sedikides, 2002; Paulhus & John, 1998; see review by Bosson et al., 2008). In short, narcissists care deeply about impressing others but show far less concern about being liked or approved (e.g., Paulhus, 2001; Raskin, Novacek, & Hogan, 1991).

Narcissistic self-enhancement reliably takes the form of self-aggrandizement. Narcissists' grandiose, unsubtle, look-at-me displays of self-enhancement are evident in multiple forms of behavior. Consider the flashy public image that narcissists choose to promote. Vazire, Naumann, Rentfrow, and Gosling (2008) demonstrated that people can diagnose narcissism in strangers with impressive accuracy on the basis of exterior cues such as expensive clothing and markers of excessive personal grooming.

Narcissism has been linked with the materialistic pursuit of wealth and symbols that convey high status (Kasser, 2002; Rose, 2007). This quest for status extends to relationship partners. Narcissists seek romantic partners who offer self-enhancement value either as sources of fawning admiration, or as human trophies, e.g., by possessing impressive wealth or exceptional physical beauty (Campbell, 1999; Tanchotsrinon, Maneesri, & Campbell, 2007).

One well-documented symptom of narcissists' quest for self-enhancement is their tendency to exaggerate the extent to which they possess the agentic traits they value. Narcissists display unreasonable self-confidence regarding their future performance prospects (e.g., Campbell, Goodie, & Foster, 2004; Farwell & Wohlwend-Lloyd, 1998; Gabriel, Critelli, & Ee, 1994; Watson, Sawrie, & Biderman, 1991) and overly optimistic views of their past achievements (Robins & Beer, 2001). Perhaps the most dramatic evidence of narcissists' excessive self-enhancement cravings comes from studies showing that narcissism predicts knowledge over-claiming. Experiments have demonstrated that narcissists jump at the opportunity to self-enhance by claiming knowledge of information framed as fact—even when the information was bogus content fabricated by researchers (e.g., Paulhus, Harms, Bruce, & Lysy, 2003; Tracy, Cheng, Robins, & Trzesniewski, 2009).

Narcissists' self-enhancement priorities are evident from their attitudes and behavior within performance contexts. People in general are more motivated to perform when the outcomes are important, but narcissists' performance motivation is particularly contingent upon the self-enhancement value of success. Wallace and Baumeister (2002) reported several studies in which narcissistic participants performed as well or better than others when task goal achievement was framed as an unusual or challenging accomplishment, but they underperformed when goal achievement offered no opportunity for personal glory (see also Roberts, Callow, Hardy, Woodman, & Thomas, 2010).

The nature of narcissists' self-enhancement orientation suggests that they have mixed feelings about performing as part of a team. They are clearly not motivated by the prospect of sharing rewards. For example, Wallace and Baumeister (2002) found that narcissists performed impressively on an effort-sensitive idea-generation task when they expected that their individual performance would be revealed to

their teammates, but their performance was unexceptional when the task obscured individual performance by pooling contributions of team members. Teammates of narcissists can expect to eventually be victimized by narcissists' tactic of self-promoting by denigrating and exploiting others (e.g., Campbell, Reeder, Sedikides, & Elliot, 2000; Kernis & Sun, 1994). Narcissists' unwillingness to sacrifice personal interests for team goals is also evident from their proneness to infidelity in romantic relationships (Buss & Shackelford, 1997) and their willingness to take more than their fair share of limited common resources (Campbell, Bush, Brunell, & Shelton, 2005). Moreover, narcissists relish opportunities to take leadership roles that provide platforms for grandstanding and asserting dominance over teammates (Brunell et al., 2008; Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006).

### **Competing Explanations for Narcissistic Self-Enhancement**

The fact that narcissists self-enhance to an exceptional degree is beyond dispute. Answers to the question of *why* narcissists self-enhance in the manner that they do are less obvious. One explanation emphasizes the entitlement narcissists feel as a result of their grandiose self-views. NPI research consistently indicates that narcissists have relatively high scores on self-report measures of self-esteem; indeed, narcissists' self-views are more positive than the views other people have of them (e.g., John & Robins, 1994; Paulhus, 1998; Robins & Beer, 2001). People who think highly of themselves should logically feel more entitled to prestigious rewards and high status than those who lack self-esteem, yet many individuals with high self-esteem conduct themselves with modesty and humility. Why are narcissists not content to bask in the glow of their own favorable self-views? Why are narcissists so compelled to shove their self-perceived greatness in other people's faces?

As noted previously, the study of narcissism is complicated by differences between the NPI-based portrait of narcissism and clinical models of pathological narcissism. Conflict between these perspectives is apparent when considering whether narcissists self-enhance to self-protect. Interpreting narcissistic grandiosity as a defense mechanism is common within both the clinical and social-personality narcissism literatures. This perspective embraces the hypothesis that narcissists' craving for self-enhancement represents a compensatory response to insecurity caused by a lack of love and attention received from

caretakers during crucial stages of childhood development (see Kernberg, 1975; Strauman, 2001). This view has been supported by clinical case studies and data from subscales of measures often used to assess psychopathology (see Watson and Bagby, Chapter 10, this volume, for examples of pathological narcissism measures) that suggest narcissists feel depression and shame when their self-enhancement efforts are thwarted.

Pockets of NPI research also support the notion that compensation for fragile self-esteem accounts for narcissists' drive to self-enhance. For example, some NPI studies have found that narcissists' self-reported self-esteem level fluctuates considerably over time (Rhodewalt, Madrian, & Cheney, 1998) and drops following failure experiences (e.g., Rhodewalt & Morf, 1998). Other studies have linked high NPI scores with low scores on covert, response latency-based measures of implicit self-esteem (e.g., Brown & Bosson, 2001; Jordan, Spencer, Zanna, Hoshino-Browne, & Correll, 2003). Papers in the social-personality literature have often adopted the assumption established previously in the clinical literature that narcissists are vulnerable, shame-prone individuals whose self-enhancement tendencies should be viewed as fundamentally defensive (e.g. Kernis, 2001; Raskin & Novacek, 1991). For example, Morf and Rhodewalt (2001b) concluded that "narcissists behave as if they live in a precarious environment, with threat lurking around every corner" (see also Rhodewalt, Tragakis, & Finnerty, 2006). However, the argument that NPI narcissists self-enhance to self-protect is difficult to reconcile with rapidly accumulating evidence that NPI narcissists are reasonably resilient and more motivated to grab appealing rewards than to defend against potential self-threats.

NPI research indicates that narcissists' style of self-enhancement seeking is more fearless than cautious. NPI narcissists tend to be extraverted (e.g., Raskin & Hall, 1981) and sensation-seeking (e.g., Emmons, 1981), and NPI scores are consistently positively correlated with measures of approach-focused motivational orientation and often negatively correlated with avoidance-focused motives (Foster & Trimm, 2008; Miller et al., 2009). As Campbell, Goodie, and Foster (2004) put it, NPI narcissists "swing for the fences" in their quest for self-enhancement. They seem to recognize the costs of failure when they take risks, but still choose to bet on their ability to succeed (Foster, Shenese, & Goff, 2009). NPI

narcissists' aggressive style of self-enhancement bears little resemblance to the self-protective caution typically displayed by people who lack self-esteem or confidence (see Baumeister, Tice, & Hutton, 1989; Tice & Baumeister, 1990 for evidence that self-enhancement is not inherently self-protective).

In recent years, the presumption of narcissists' fragile self-esteem has been directly challenged by NPI-based investigations. Aforementioned studies linking high NPI scores with low implicit self-esteem have not reliably been replicated (see review and meta-analysis by Bosson et al., 2008). Studies linking high NPI scores with parental *overindulgence* (Horton, Bleau, & Drwecki, 2006; Otway & Vignoles, 2006) further undermine claims that narcissists secretly harbor feelings of low self-worth. The inflated self-appraisals and approach-oriented self-enhancement style of NPI narcissists should predict frequent failure, yet NPI narcissists report stronger feelings of invulnerability than others (Aalsma, Lapsley, & Flannery, 2006; Barry, Pickard, & Ansel, 2009). If they do internalize failure experiences, the effects apparently are not long-lasting. NPI scores are negatively correlated with measures of shame (Campbell, Foster, & Brunell, 2004; Gramzow & Tangney, 1992) and positively correlated with self-forgiveness (Strelan, 2007) and subjective well-being (Rose, 2002; Rose & Campbell, 2004). Wallace, Ready, and Weitenhagen (2009) found that NPI narcissists were quick to admit failure on a creativity test and did not feel bad about doing so if accepting failure opened up alternative avenues for self-enhancing outcomes.

To be sure, NPI narcissists often show anger and aggression in response to failure (e.g., Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Kernis & Sun, 1994), but such behavior could parsimoniously be interpreted as frustration stemming from self-enhancement denial or as an effort to assert dominance, rather than as evidence of damaged self-esteem (see Arkin & Lakin, 2001). Moreover, correlations between narcissism and self-esteem fluctuation could mean that narcissists are just more willing than others to put their self-esteem on the line because they can recover quickly from setbacks. NPI narcissists' ability to maintain positive self views in the face of negative feedback can be explained by their talent for self-deception (see John & Robins, 1994; Paulhus, 1998): NPI narcissists are more likely than others to take responsibility for success and blame external factors for failure (e.g., Campbell et al., 2002; Farwell & Wohlwend-

Lloyd, 1998; Stucke, 2003). Their self-serving thought processes are even evident in their selective memory for self-flattering past events (Rhodewalt & Eddings, 2002).

Narcissists may self-enhance to an excessive degree because their desire to self-promote simply overrides their motivation to suppress it (see Miller et al., 2009; Rose, 2007; Vazire & Funder, 2006). Baumeister and Vohs (2001) proposed that the NPI taps a form of narcissism characterized by addiction to self-enhancement. Like the mythical Narcissus, NPI narcissists may have gotten hooked on the pleasure they experience from basking in the glory of self-perceived superiority—and they may suffer the equivalent of painful withdrawal symptoms when their self-enhancement efforts are blocked. The addiction analogy could be stretched to suggest that narcissists' somewhat reckless approach toward self-enhancement resembles the lack of caution exercised by addicts desperate to secure their fix.

The narcissism-as-addiction model emphasizes the magnitude of narcissists' drive to self-enhance, but attention should also be paid to the weakness of competing motives that could deter self-enhancing behavior. Narcissists think they are special, but not all people who feel special act like narcissists. People in general would probably behave more like narcissists if they cared less about how their celebrations of self-worth would affect others. Narcissists' bombastic displays of arrogance are more easily understood if their characteristic lack of empathy is taken into account. NPI research has repeatedly shown that narcissists are relatively unconcerned about being liked and apparently have high tolerance for other people's pain (e.g., Martinez, Zeichner, Reidy, & Miller, 2008). Narcissists' comfort with other people's distress and disinterest in following standard of social appropriateness frees them to indulge in the temptation to self-aggrandize at other people's expense. The "disagreeable extraverts" label Paulhus (2001) coined nicely captures both NPI narcissists' approach-oriented surgency and their complementary low need to please (or care about) others.

To summarize, the narcissism literature as a whole suggests that narcissists self-enhance either to fight feelings of low self-worth (i.e., to self-protect) or to revel in the experience of displaying their self-perceived special status (see Figure 1 to compare components of these competing models). It is conceivable that these conflicting explanations could describe different self-enhancement motives within

a single person, and some scholars have tried to reconcile NPI data with models that link narcissism with insecurity and shame (e.g., Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001a; Tracy & Robins, 2004; Zeigler-Hill, 2006). Other researchers have concluded that differences between NPI and NPD narcissism imply two related but still distinct constructs (e.g., Cain et al., 2008; Miller & Campbell, 2008; Rathvon & Holmstrom, 1996; Wink, 1991). Regardless of one's perspective regarding this debate, it would seem appropriate for future narcissism researchers to at least acknowledge the conflict and clarify whether their conclusions should apply to some or all narcissists.

### **Do Narcissists Undermine Their Self-Enhancement Goals?**

Researchers have highlighted how narcissists' orientation toward self-enhancement seeking causes many problems and some benefits for narcissists and the people they contact, but little attention has been paid to the fit between narcissists' self-enhancement goals and their strategies for achieving them. Narcissists want to be admired as exceptional people, but their actions ultimately may not help them attain the grandiose status they seek. Ample motivation is an important asset for goal achievement and narcissists are highly motivated to enjoy self-enhancing outcomes, but narcissists' behavior may ironically serve to restrict their self-enhancement potential.

Narcissists want to feel and be viewed as superior, but attaining positions of high status poses significant challenges for even the most talented individuals. Impressing others requires demonstrating a level of excellence that cannot easily be achieved. Narcissists' inflated self-confidence and low anxiety (at least for NPI narcissists) should benefit their self-enhancement quest to the extent that it inspires them to at least attempt to achieve lofty goals that less confident people might regard as impossible. Lakey, Rose, Campbell, and Goodie (2008) described narcissists' focus on self-enhancing rewards as myopic in the sense that they ignore potential drawbacks associated with seeking these rewards. This myopia should help narcissists avoid feelings of intimidation that prevent less confident people from initiating pursuit of challenging but attainable goals. Moreover, if narcissists were sufficiently motivated to persevere in striving to reach a self-enhancing goal, their talent for self-serving failure attributions could help them weather setbacks inevitably experienced by those striving for the highest possible achievement.

Unfortunately for narcissists, their high self-esteem and strong self-enhancement motivation can also hurt their odds of gaining the exalted status they desire. Narcissists' irrational self-views and the urgency of their self-enhancement cravings may sometimes compel short-sighted decisions that could be self-defeating in the long run.

The opening paragraph of this chapter drew a distinction between self-enhancement and self-improvement motives: Self-enhancers focus on polishing the shine of their present self, whereas those who pursue self-improvement acknowledge present self weaknesses. Perhaps it is possible for a person to simultaneously possess both self-enhancement and self-improvement motives, but narcissists appear strictly focused on self-enhancement—they want to enjoy receiving the respect to which they feel entitled sooner than later. Narcissists seem less able or at least less willing than other people to delay self-gratification (see Vazire & Funder, 2006), so they may not choose to endure the inevitable potholes in paths to highly self-enhancing outcomes. To the extent that narcissists consistently take a path-of-least-resistance approach to secure immediate self-enhancement as Wallace et al. (2009) proposed, they resign themselves to relatively mundane achievements of low-to-moderate self-enhancement value.

Narcissists can employ distorted reasoning to deflect self-threatening implications of failure and preserve the high self-confidence that high achievement often demands. Such reasoning accounts for narcissists' proneness to risk taking (e.g., Foster, Misra, & Reidy, 2009; Lakey et al., 2008), which could lead to unwise mistakes that could derail progress toward self-enhancing achievement. Yet the most significant impediment to narcissists' goal achievement may not be their willingness to take risks but rather their response to failed risks. The same biased reasoning that protects narcissists against esteem-threatening implications of failure can also cause long-term harm by not forcing narcissists to admit their problems and change their behavior accordingly. Narcissists are less likely to learn from mistakes because they blame everyone but themselves for negative outcomes (Campbell, Goodie, & Foster, 2004). Narcissists' skill at deflecting criticism contributes to their overconfidence and presumably diminishes their incentive to invest effort toward improving in advance of self-enhancement opportunities. Narcissists' unrealistically positive self-appraisals probably give them an advantage over less confident

individuals when performance preparation is not possible, but their performance in most achievement domains should suffer over time in comparison to less-arrogant others who take personal responsibility for disappointing outcomes and work hard to correct their shortcomings.

Narcissists' self-enhancement prospects are also limited by the inflexibility of their approach toward attaining self-enhancement. Behavior that elicits admiration in one context could induce the opposite response from observers in different situations, so admiration-seekers would be wise to calibrate their self-presentation to match their environment. Narcissists apparently lack this wisdom. They employ the same unsubtle, exhibitionistic style of self-promotion regardless of the situation (Campbell et al., 2000; Collins & Stukas, 2008). In effect, narcissists' primary technique for convincing others of their greatness involves bluntly proclaiming their greatness. Narcissists report Machiavellian willingness to manipulate others for personal gain (e.g., Paulhus & Williams, 2002), but their perpetual grandstanding regardless of context suggests that they lack the craftiness required to exploit others in ways that maximize self-benefits. For example, narcissists would likely have trouble resisting their impulse to claim superiority long enough to make allies and disarm opponents with tactics like ingratiation or feigning incompetence that require displays of modesty. Narcissists' tone-deaf approach toward self-enhancement can be traced in part to their characteristic low empathy, which allows them to pursue self-enhancement without having to worry about harming others in the process (Baumeister, Catanese, & Wallace, 2002; Wallace, Baumeister, & Vohs, 2005), but may also prevent them from recognizing how to effectively push other people's buttons for personal gain.

Narcissists may care more about being admired than liked, but their disagreeability could hinder their quest for admiration-worthy status. Narcissists can be charming at first contact, but they tend to become less popular over time as people get to know them (Back, Schmukle, & Egloff, 2010; Paulhus, 1998). Narcissists may not get the opportunity to lead and dominate others if they alienate peers and superiors who could block them from grabbing power. In contexts where teamwork is required to achieve a self-enhancing outcome, narcissists' me-first attitude could wreak havoc on their team's interpersonal dynamics and cause their team to implode before realizing its potential. In cases where narcissists do

manage to secure elite status positions, their unpopularity could prevent them from receiving the levels of admiration warranted by their stature. It is possible to simultaneously admire and dislike someone, but those who grudgingly admire someone they think is a jerk should be more vigilant for excuses to end their admiration than if the target of their admiration was a nice person (e.g., Ditto & Lopez, 1992; Munro, Weih, & Tsai, 2010). Narcissists' ability to obtain admiration is also threatened by the likelihood that others may not share narcissists' views about what traits, actions, and outcomes are self-enhancing. Narcissists are unlikely to elicit admiration from people more impressed with selfless displays of modesty and humility than self-aggrandizement. Narcissists may derive private satisfaction from claiming superiority, but their potential for public glory is diminished if their behavior annoys people to the point of ignoring or disrespecting them.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Self-enhancement striving is obviously a fundamental component of narcissism. Strong self-enhancement motives account for narcissists' exhibitionistic grandiosity, and their lack of empathy and agreeability frees narcissists to exploit others in pursuit of self-enhancement. It is also evident that narcissists' impatient tendency to unselectively self-promote at every opportunity can sometimes undermine their long-term self-enhancement prospects. But substantial documentation of the ways in which narcissists self-enhance and the consequences of such behavior has not resolved key questions about the roots of narcissists' self-enhancement efforts. Much work remains to establish boundaries and interconnections between conflicting models that attribute narcissistic self-enhancement to excessive or insufficient self-love.

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