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The happy and unhappy faces of narcissism

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Abstract

Several theorists have argued in favor of a distinction between overt and covert narcissism, and factor analytic studies have supported this distinction. In this paper I demonstrate that overt narcissists report higher self-esteem and higher satisfaction with life, whereas covert narcissists report lower self-esteem and lower satisfaction with life. I also present mediational models to explain why overt narcissists are relatively happy and covert narcissists are relatively unhappy. In analyses using both partial correlations and structural equation modeling, self-esteem consistently mediated the associations between both types of narcissism and happiness, whereas self-deception did not. These results further demonstrate some of the self-centered benefits associated with overt narcissism and some of the strong psychological costs associated with covert narcissism. © 2002 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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The study of narcissism has followed a rather confusing course. In many cases it has reached contradictory conclusions about the psychological costs and benefits associated with narcissism. Some theorists have emphasized that narcissism is associated with maladjustment and misery (e.g. Cooper & Ronningstam, 1992; Kernberg, 1975; Lasch, 1979; Reich, 1954), and others have emphasized that narcissism is associated with some indicators of psychological well-being (e.g. Kohut, 1977; Rhodewalt, Madrian, & Cheney, 1998; Rhodewalt & Morf, 1995; Watson, Hickman, & Morris, 1996; Watson, Little, Sawrie, & Biderman, 1992). These differing characterizations of narcissism are reflected in the fact that some narcissism measures tend to correlate positively with indicators of well-being, whereas other measures tend to correlate negatively with the very same indicators (e.g. Hickman, Watson, & Morris, 1996; Rathvon & Holmstrom, 1996; Wink, 1991).

One reasonable way to make sense of these apparent contradictions is to consider whether two different types of narcissism exist. Several psychiatrists have made this argument by drawing a

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distinction between *overt* and *covert* narcissists (Cooper & Ronningstam, 1992; Gabbard, 1989; see also Akhtar & Thompson, 1982). Overt narcissists experience a grandiose sense of self, tend to demand others' attention, and are socially charming even though they are relatively oblivious of others' needs. Covert narcissists, on the other hand, feel profoundly inferior to others, are hypersensitive to others' evaluations, and are generally dissatisfied (Cooper & Ronningstam, 1992; Gabbard, 1989). Both types of narcissists are extraordinarily self-absorbed and arrogant, but in other respects, overt and covert narcissists are distinguishable (Wink, 1991).

The overt–covert distinction has been empirically supported in at least two factor-analytic studies. Wink (1991) analyzed six narcissism scales and demonstrated that the items constituting these scales loaded on two readily interpretable factors: grandiosity/exhibitionism and hypersensitivity/vulnerability. Although Wink (1991) labeled the components differently, he concluded that the factors conformed to the overt-covert distinction that other theorists had proposed. Rathvon and Holmstrom (1996) replicated these results by factor-analyzing the Narcissistic Personality Inventory and five of the scales used in Wink's analysis. Their results also yielded an overt and a covert factor. Both Wink (1991) and Rathvon and Holmstrom (1996) demonstrated that the factors they obtained in their analyses were associated with other measures in a manner that supported the overt-covert distinction.

Other theorists have explained the distinction between overt and covert narcissism in a different way. Watson and his colleagues have developed a hypothesis that suggests that narcissistic personality features vary along a continuum of adjustment (Hickman et al., 1996; Watson et al., 1992, 1996; 1999–2000). From this perspective, features of covert narcissism may lie toward the maladjusted end of the continuum, whereas most features of overt narcissism may lie toward the more adjusted end of the continuum. Consistent with the continuum hypothesis, researchers have noted that some aspects of narcissism are more strongly related to psychological well-being than others (Hickman et al., 1996; Watson et al., 1992, 1996; see also Rhodewalt & Morf, 1995). Measures of overt narcissism tend to correlate positively with self-esteem (Watson et al., 1992, 1996) and optimism (Hickman et al., 1996), and tend to correlate negatively with depressive symptoms (Rathvon & Holmstrom, 1996). Measures of covert narcissism, on the other hand, tend to correlate positively with measures of depression and anxiety (Rathvon & Holmstrom, 1996). These results clearly support the hypothesis that narcissistic features vary along a continuum of adjustment, and suggest that overt narcissism has at least some adaptive properties whereas covert narcissism is primarily maladaptive.

Of course, this does not mean that overt narcissism is a purely adaptive trait—it is obviously maladaptive in several respects (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Kernis & Sun, 1994; Rhodewalt, Madrian, & Cheney, 1998; Rhodewalt & Morf, 1998). Nevertheless, the fact that overt narcissism is related to some indicators of well-being suggests that overt narcissists reap at least *some* personal benefits from their style of self-absorption that covert narcissists do not. For example, by examining the items of the scales that represent each type of narcissism, it is apparent that covert narcissists are anxious people who have very little confidence in themselves (Ashby, Lee, & Duke, 1979; Serkownek, 1975), whereas overt narcissists are chronic self-enhancers (Emmons, 1987; Paulhus, 1998). Theorists have noted that some degree of even illusory self-enhancement is associated with greater well-being (Baumeister, 1989; Taylor & Brown, 1988). Consequently, we might expect overt narcissists to reap some healthy benefits from their self-enhancing tendencies, whereas covert narcissists may forego these benefits because of their profound insecurities.

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