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Aggression following performance feedback: The influences of narcissism, feedback valence, and comparative standard

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Abstract

This study investigated the relation between narcissism and aggression after feedback with varied response options available. Extending previous research, the influence of the comparative standard on which feedback is based was included as a variable in the design. Participants were 120 undergraduates. Feedback valence and comparative standard were experimentally manipulated and randomly predetermined. Replicating previous research, narcissism was associated with increased aggressiveness after negative feedback. However, this effect was specific to males. Following negative feedback, self-referenced (i.e., ipsative) feedback was associated with significantly less increase in aggression than feedback based on an idealized standard. These findings suggest that the manner in which feedback is delivered may influence aggression. The implications of these findings for the prevention of aggression are discussed.

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1. Introduction

The present study sought to extend previous research suggesting that some aggression may stem from negative feedback (e.g., Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Twenge & Campbell, 2003). Specifically, this study investigated aggression in a context in which a variety of possible responses to performance feedback were available, considered the impact of both positive and negative feedback on aggression, and attempted to further elaborate the role of narcissism (Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996; Rhodewalt & Morf, 1998) in understanding aggression in such situations.

Research has indicated that social rejection or negative feedback about one's ability and characteristics may lead to negative affect (e.g., anger; Rhodewalt & Morf, 1998; Twenge & Campbell, 2003) or aggression (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Feshbach, 1970). To explain the link between negative feedback and subsequent reactions, researchers have noted that anger and aggression may serve important personal functions, including restoring damaged self-esteem (Feshbach, 1970) or one's public self-image (see review by Papps & O'Carroll, 1998). Therefore, an additional purpose of this study was to consider the role that the comparative standard used to provide feedback has in this process for some individuals, a role not previously investigated in experimental contexts.

Previous studies have found that individuals can employ different standards to evaluate their performance, and the standard used can influence a person's mood or response following a task or presentation of a stimulus (Goolsby & Chaplin, 1988; Wilson, Chaplin, & Thorn, 1995). The three standards most commonly discussed are a normative standard (i.e., comparison relative to others), an ipsative standard (i.e., comparison relative to one's past performance), and an idealized or expectation standard based on what one thinks could or should happen (i.e., comparison relative to one's ideal performance; Albert, 1977; Chaplin & Buckner, 1988; Festinger, 1954).

Studies in this area have typically presented feedback implying a normative standard (e.g., "That is one of the worst essays I have read;" Bushman & Baumeister, 1998, p. 222). When no standard was directly implied in previous experiments, it is likely that participants varied in the standards that they inferred (Chaplin & Buckner, 1988), making it difficult to determine what standard might have guided their interpretations of the feedback and subsequent behaviors. Therefore, the current study extended previous research by explicitly establishing an evaluative context through which feedback would be delivered—a potentially important consideration in investigating the link between personality, feedback, and behavior.

1.1. *Narcissism, feedback, and comparative standards*

Recent evidence regarding the link between social rejection and aggression (e.g., Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Twenge & Campbell, 2003) indicates that narcissism is important for predicting who will aggress following rejection. Specifically, Bushman and Baumeister (1998) found that individuals with high levels of narcissism were most aggressive following negative evaluations and were selective in terms of when and against whom they aggressed. Specifically, narcissism was not associated with aggression following positive feedback and was not predictive of aggression when the potential victim was not the source of the negative feedback.

It has been reasoned that narcissists may regularly engage in aggression in everyday life because they have a better chance of receiving feedback that is contradictory and threatening to their ele-

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