



## Narcissism and self-handicapping: Linking self-aggrandizement to behavior<sup>☆</sup>

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Available online 2 August 2005

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### Abstract

Two experiments tested the hypothesis that narcissistic men as defined by the NPI (Narcissistic Personality Inventory; Raskin & Hall, 1979) would self-handicap more than low-NPI individuals because it makes it easy to claim potentially undeserved credit for success. In both experiments, high and low narcissistic men received either response contingent or noncontingent success feedback on a test of intelligence and then provided an opportunity to self-handicap prior to a second evaluation. In both studies, high-NPI men self-handicapped significantly more than low-NPI men regardless of the contingency of the performance feedback. Narcissistic self-handicapping appeared to be motivated by a self-aggrandizing attributional style rather than by self-presentational concerns or the desire to self-enhance. Findings are discussed with regard to the role of self-esteem instability and the motive to self-protect in both narcissism and self-handicapping.

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*Keywords:* Narcissism; Self-handicapping; Self; Self-esteem

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<sup>☆</sup> The authors thank David Feick for his assistance in conducting the pilot research, and Kathleen Vohs and Deborah Sorrow for their comments on an earlier draft of this paper. Study 1 was the third author's undergraduate honors thesis conducted under the supervision of the first author.

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## 1. Introduction

In recent years there has been a growing interest in narcissism as a personality trait in sub-clinical populations (Emmons, 1987; see Rhodewalt & Sorrow, 2003, for a review). This interest has resulted in development of face valid self-report measures of narcissism (Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI); Raskin & Hall, 1979), and an extensive body of validation research (see Rhodewalt & Sorrow, 2003, for a review). Building upon contemporary clinical theory that casts narcissism as essentially a cognitive-affective preoccupation with the self (Akhtar & Thompson, 1982; Kernberg, 1975; Westen, 1990), Morf and Rhodewalt (2001), Rhodewalt (2001, 2005), Rhodewalt and Morf (2005) have attempted to organize the features of narcissism—egocentric self-absorption, self-aggrandizement and self-importance, attention and admiration seeking, emotional reactivity, entitlement, exploitiveness, and lack of empathy—within a model of dynamic self-regulation. The model depicts narcissistic self-regulation as being in the service of creating and maintaining desired self images. Narcissists use a set of interpersonal (i.e., strategic self-presentations) and intrapersonal (i.e., self-aggrandizing attributions) strategies to enable them to experience flattering social feedback and boost self-esteem.

A theme running through this work is that although narcissists' self-images are positive, they are also fragile and easily threatened. Their constant desire for positive self-evaluation leads them to view themselves and their accomplishments as superior to others or superior to objective indices of the attribute in question (Gabriel, Critelli, & Ee, 1994; John & Robins, 1994). Research indicates that narcissists' self-evaluations are likely to be inflated and fragile because they are gleaned from evidence that is not fully contingent on actual performance. However, this manufactured high self-esteem is fragile, unstable, and defensive (Rhodewalt & Morf, 1998; Rhodewalt, Madrian, & Cheney, 1998). For example, when high and low narcissistic men, as identified by the NPI (Raskin & Hall, 1979) experienced identical, staged social interactions with a potential dating partner, high-NPI men concluded from the interaction that the woman was more romantically attracted to them than did low-NPI men (Rhodewalt & Eddings, 2002). Kernis and Sun (1994) found that compared to low-NPI individuals, high NPIs rated positive feedback as more valid and positive evaluators as more competent, whereas negative feedback was viewed as less valid and the negative evaluator as less competent.

More central to the present research, narcissism has been linked directly to the tendency to make "self-aggrandizing" attributions (Rhodewalt & Morf, 1995, 1998). When asked to explain hypothetical positive events happening to them and to make attributions for those events, narcissists were found to make more extreme internal, global, and stable attributions for success than did less narcissistic respondents (Rhodewalt & Morf, 1995). In subsequent research (Rhodewalt & Morf, 1998), high-NPI participants made more extreme attributions to ability after receiving experimentally manipulated, response noncontingent success feedback than did low-NPI participants. Taken together, these findings suggest that narcissists seek to self-enhance by viewing all positive feedback as evidence for their competence, attractiveness, and superiority even when the feedback is not contingent on their actual

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