



Narcissism and displaced aggression: Effects of positive, negative, and delayed feedback

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Abstract

Narcissism is related to direct aggression following negative evaluation or rejection and this link may be explained via the theory of threatened egotism. It is unclear whether narcissism is also related to displaced aggression (DA) – that is, aggression towards an innocent victim uninvolved in the initial provocation. In this study we examined the relation between narcissism and DA following positive, negative, or a delayed evaluation (i.e., evaluation following the completion of the reaction time task) of the participants' writing skills by an "objective" computer assessment instrument. Participants were undergraduates who competed in a reaction time task against an opponent (i.e., a confederate). Initial provocation in this study was conceptualized as the evaluation feedback the participants received prior to competing in the reaction time task. DA was defined as bogus electric shocks administered by participants to their opponents (who were uninvolved in the prior evaluation) during the reaction time task prior to receiving any shocks from the opponent. Narcissism was significantly positively related to DA and this effect was stronger in the delayed condition than in the negative or positive feedback condition. These findings suggest that narcissistic individuals are likely to act aggressively towards innocent others under conditions where there is uncertainty with regard to potential damage to their self-perceptions of superiority.

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1. Introduction

Empirical evidence suggests that narcissism is related to direct aggression (e.g., aggression directed at the individual/party deemed responsible) following negative evaluation or rejection (Barry, Chaplin, & Grafeman, 2006; Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Twenge & Campbell, 2003). The link between narcissism and direct aggression may be explained via the theory of threatened egotism, which proposes that aggression is “a means of defending a highly favorable view of self against someone who seeks to undermine or discredit that view” (Baumeister, Bushman, & Campbell, 2000, p. 26). It is argued that aggressive responses function to maintain one’s unrealistic favorable self-impression by actively rejecting negative personal information received from an external source (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998). In support of the threatened egotism theory, Bushman and Baumeister (1998) demonstrated that narcissism was related to aggression toward an opponent following an ego-threat. In their study, ego-threat was induced using an ostensible opponent who offered criticisms regarding a participant’s written essay. Narcissistic participants were significantly more aggressive toward their opponents in response to criticism of their essay relative to receipt of complimentary comments. Similar results were found by Twenge and Campbell (2003) in which narcissism was related to aggression following social rejection. It appears that narcissistic individuals may utilize aggression as a means to contest negative feedback to regain their self-image or to discourage the continuation of such threat (or future instances).

However, it is unclear whether narcissism is also related to displaced aggression (DA) following negative feedback/rejection (i.e., aggression directed at an individual uninvolved in the negative feedback) as the two existing studies have found divergent results. Twenge and Campbell (2003) found that socially rejected participants with high narcissism scores behaved aggressively against an opponent who was uninvolved with the prior social rejection. Conversely, Bushman and Baumeister (1998) found that narcissism was unrelated to aggression towards an individual uninvolved in the negative evaluation. More recently Denson, Pedersen, and Miller (2006) found a very strong negative correlation between the trait of agreeableness and a self-report measure of DA ($r = -.60$), and a positive correlation with impulsivity ($r = .43$). Given the negative relations between narcissism and agreeableness (e.g., Paulhus & Williams, 2002), as well as self-control (e.g., Vazire & Funder, 2006), one would suspect that narcissism should be related to DA as well. However, the motivation for displaced aggression for individuals with narcissistic traits is somewhat unclear. On the one hand, aggression in this situation would not allow an individual to re-establish his/her “tarnished” self-image with the person or party responsible for the “slight” nor would it serve as a useful warning to discourage continued threats from the perpetrator. On the other hand, it is possible that DA could serve these same purposes (e.g., restore image; warn against further attack) but the behavior would be oriented towards (1) the individual’s own self-image regarding their dominance, status, and self-worth or (2) others in the environment rather than the actual “perpetrator” of the previous slight. Given the paucity and divergence of the previous findings, the nature of the relation between narcissism and DA is rather unclear.

In the current study, we examined the relation between narcissism and DA following positive, negative, or delayed evaluation (i.e., participants were told they would not receive feedback until the end of the study session) of the participants’ writing skills by an “objective” assessment instrument. The use of a putatively objective source of evaluation removed the possibility that any subsequent aggression could be the result of attributing blame for the negative evaluation to the

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