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Narcissism, social anxiety and self-presentation in exercise

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ABSTRACT

In an exercise setting where impression motivation might be high but self-presentation efficacy low, social anxiety is likely to occur (Schlenker & Leary, 1982). Narcissism is, however, associated with low anxiety, high confidence, and a keenness for social evaluation (Wallace, Baumeister, & Vohs, 2005) and therefore may protect exercisers from social anxiety. One hundred and sixty undergraduates (88 males and 72 females; M_{age} = 20.45 years, SD = 2.49 years) completed measures of narcissism, social anxiety, and self-presentation in exercise. In females, narcissism moderated the impression motivation/construction–social anxiety relationships. Findings extend our understanding of the self-presentational processes involved in exercise and, specifically, how narcissism protects individuals from experiencing high social anxiety.

1. Introduction

Exercise participation can significantly enhance our physical and psychological health: thus, it is recommended that all individuals should aim to include exercise in their lifestyle (Department of Health, 2004). Interestingly, there is also a perception that exercise is a reputable behavior and being seen as an exerciser makes favorable impressions on others (Martin, Sinden, & Fleming, 2000). Being positively perceived by others and portraying favorable impressions can be particularly important to some individuals and in certain situations, resulting in high levels of impression motivation (Baumeister, 1982). Impression motivation is the desire to present a particular impression, and can be distinguished from impression construction, which is the way in which individuals alter their behavior to create the desired impression (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). Both impression motivation and construction are determined by contextual and individual differences. For example, perceived situation importance influences motivation to create a desired impression, and personality characteristics determine perceived ability to construct the desired impression.

Impression motivation and construction form the two-component model of impression management, also referred to as self-presentation, and represent the 'process by which individuals attempt to control the impressions others form of them' (Leary & Kowalski, 1990, p. 34). Self-awareness therefore is inherent within the process of self-presentation and can result in social anxiety (Schlenker & Leary, 1982). Social anxiety has been defined as the discomfort felt when in the presence of others (Fenigstein, Scheier, & Buss, 1975) which can be heightened by situational factors, such as mirrored environments (Katula, McAuley, Mihalko, & Bane, 1998) and can be influenced by individual differences, for instance, any factor that increases motivation to impress, e.g., chronic public self-consciousness (Schlenker & Leary, 1982). Schlenker and Leary conceptualize social anxiety as the negative cognitive and affective responses to social situations (imagined or real) in which personal evaluation is present or expected.

In relation to self-presentation, social anxiety arises when individuals doubt they can present the impression to others (actual or imagined) that they are motivated to achieve, and in turn, perceive or imagine negative evaluations from important others. Self-presentation efficacy is the confidence one has to present a desired impression (Leary, 1995): thus, social anxiety is the proposed by-product of high impression motivation and low self-presentation efficacy (Maddux, Norton, & Leary, 1988). Therefore, if someone is motivated to make a certain impression and they are efficacious in their ability to construct that impression, it is unlikely that social anxiety will be experienced. However, if motivation is high but efficacy is low, social anxiety is most probable.

Individual differences play a key role in determining individual perception, appraisal and self-evaluation (Schlenker & Leary, 1982). Therefore, consideration of how personality characteristics impact impression motivation, construction ability and perceived self-presentation efficacy will further our understanding of social anxiety determinants. This is important as these self-presentational processes can influence motivation to participate in exercise,

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choice of activity and setting, athletic performance, and affective responses (Hausenblas, Brewer, & Van Raalte, 2004). For instance, Kruisselbrink, Dodge, Swanburg, and MacLeod (2004) reported that when females were presented with contexts which varied in relation to gender composition their exercise intentions decreased and social physique anxiety increased with an all male scenario. Increased impression motivation and low self-presentation efficacy in the all male context might explain this heightened anxiety. Brewer, Diehl, Cornelius, Joshua, and Van Raalte (2004) identified that socially anxious individuals have a greater tendency to use protective self-presentation behaviors in exercise, such as reducing exercise intentions and choosing particular activity settings.

Social anxiety operates at both state and trait levels and state social anxiety can be influenced by contextual (e.g., exercise environment) and personality factors (e.g., gender), including trait social anxiety (Leary, 1995). Thus identification of personality variables that influence trait social anxiety may help to further understanding of why some individuals experience social anxiety and others do not, initially at a trait level, as in the current study, and subsequently at a state level. One personality characteristic which may be influential is narcissism.

The narcissistic personality has been described as self-absorbed and self-aggrandizing, displaying characteristics of condescending superiority, lack of empathy, and preoccupation with others' admiration (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). Narcissists enjoy exhibitionism, opportunities for self-enhancement and excel when others are evaluating them (Wallace & Baumeister, 2002). Furthermore, narcissists report low levels of trait anxiety and high levels of physical activity (Spano, 2001), and high levels of confidence even in situations of adversity (Campbell, Goodie, & Foster, 2004). Therefore, narcissists' resilient positive self-appraisal (Wallace, Baumeister, & Vohs, 2005), confidence, exhibitionism and focus on self-enhancement opportunities may act as mechanisms by which anxiety, threat and self-doubt are limited.

Recently, narcissists' chronic awareness of self-enhancement opportunities has been highlighted, particularly in external domains on which self-worth is contingent, such as, physical appearance and outdoing others (Collins & Stukas, 2008). Furthermore, Lee and Levine (2005) reported a positive association between narcissism and self-presentation influence tactics. Therefore, it would seem logical for narcissists to view exercise as a context in which self-enhancement is viable and a forum for outdoing others (e.g., in terms of an outwardly visible characteristic such as physical appearance or by presenting a favorable image of an exerciser). Consequently, it is proposed that narcissists are likely to exhibit high motivation to present desired impressions in exercise contexts and, based on their inflated self-perception, are likely to have high efficacy in their ability to construct these desired impressions. These self-presentational components suggest that narcissists are unlikely to exhibit social anxiety.

As discussed above, narcissists tend to report low levels of social anxiety (Watson & Biderman, 1993). This correlational evidence, however, does not identify the causal direction of this relationship. It could be therefore that social anxiety is predicted by narcissism, or, predicts narcissism. Given the nature of these constructs, the former is most likely. Although considered a personality trait, social anxiety is viewed as a response variable (cf. Schlenker & Leary, 1982) based partly on other personality characteristics, such as public self-consciousness (Fenigstein et al., 1975). As a result it is more likely that narcissism predicts social anxiety than social anxiety predicts narcissism.

Based on these arguments it is proposed that narcissism moderates the relationship between self-presentation in exercise (impression motivation and construction) and social anxiety, (hypotheses a and b, respectively). As narcissism is more prevalent in males than females (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001) and social anxiety more prevalent in females (Martin & Mack, 1996) the current study will analyze these hypotheses in relation to gender.

Relationships between self-presentation, narcissism and social anxiety are not yet established. Therefore, a cross-sectional design is appropriate to explore potential interactions. Understanding how these constructs relate at a trait level will contribute to the existing literature which demonstrates how each construct independently impacts individual differences in behavior (e.g., Brewer et al., 2004; Hausenblas et al., 2004; Kruisselbrink et al., 2004; Lee & Levine, 2005). Consequently, findings may inform future predictions with regard to situational responses. However, cross-sectional designs are sometimes limited by self-report bias, which might be particularly pertinent in terms of the constructs under investigation. Ironically, self-presentation centers on presenting desired impressions. Therefore, it seems prudent to incorporate a measure of social desirability that can be used to control for bias effects in analyses. The Marlowe–Crowne Social Desirability Scale (Crowne & Marlowe, 1964) used in this study is a common measure employed for this purpose (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Podsakoff, 2003).

2. Method

2.1. Participants

One hundred and sixty (88 males; 72 females) undergraduate Sport and Exercise Science students aged 18–40 years ($M = 20.45$, $SD = 2.49$) took part in this study. The sample ($n = 152$; 8 failed to provide full demographic details) had engaged in exercise from 10 to 22 years ($M = 5.8$, $SD = 4.55$) and exercised between 1 and 20 h per week ($M = 4.42$, $SD = 3.45$). Exercise participation included dance classes and gym attendance ($n = 52$); walking, jogging, running, cycling and general fitness ($n = 85$), and varied sports as exercise ($n = 23$). University ethical clearance was granted for the study to proceed and informed consent was obtained from all participants.

2.2. Measures

The Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Hall, 1979) was used as a sub-clinical measure of narcissistic tendency. The inventory consists of 40 items, each consisting of a narcissistic response and a non-narcissistic response. The narcissistic response is scored 1 and the non-narcissistic 0 (scale range 0–40). Raskin and Terry (1988) reported a mean scale value of 15.55 ($SD = 6.66$), a respectable alpha coefficient of .83 for a general factor of narcissism, and support for construct validity. As the most widely used measure of narcissism, the NPI provides a valid measure for a general construct indicative of the narcissistic personality, with consistent support for the overall construct of narcissism as measured by the NPI as a single-factor scale (Kubarych, Deary, & Austin, 2004).

The Self-Presentation in Exercise Questionnaire (SPEQ; Conroy, Motl, & Hall, 2000) was used to measure the two sub-components of impression motivation (IM) and impression construction (IC). Gammage et al.'s (2004) factor structure was used which supports two scales: one comprising four impression motivation items and the other four impression construction items, all rated on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). Example items from the IM and IC subscales are, respectively, 'I value the attention and praise of others when they regard me as being in good shape', and 'I wear exercise/athletic clothing so other people will see me as an exerciser'. Mean scores are calculated for each subscale with high values indicating high impression motivation and construction. Gammage et al. reported factor