



The influence of pathological narcissism on emotional and motivational responses to negative events: The roles of visibility and concern about humiliation

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ABSTRACT

The present study examined the associations between pathological forms of narcissism and responses to scenarios describing private or public negative events. This was accomplished using a randomized two-wave experimental design with 600 community participants. The grandiose form of pathological narcissism was associated with increased negative affect and less forgiveness for public offenses, whereas the vulnerable form of pathological narcissism was associated with increased negative affect following private negative events. Concerns about humiliation mediated the association of pathological narcissism with increased negative affect but not the association between grandiose narcissism and lack of forgiveness for public offenses. These findings suggest that pathological narcissism may promote maladaptive responses to negative events that occur in private (vulnerable narcissism) or public (grandiose narcissism).

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1. Introduction

Narcissism is characterized by grandiosity and inflated views of the self. These qualities can be observed, for example, in the tendency for narcissistic individuals to overestimate their attractiveness and intelligence (Gabriel, Critelli, & Ee, 1994). Both clinical and social-personality psychologists have shown considerable interest in narcissism in recent years but attempts to integrate these bodies of literature have been impeded by differences in the definitions and measurement of narcissism (Cain, Pincus, & Ansell, 2008; Miller & Campbell, 2008; Pincus et al., 2009). Clinical psychologists generally think of narcissism as a personality disorder characterized by arrogant or haughty behaviors, feelings of entitlement, a lack of empathy, and a willingness to exploit other individuals (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). This form of narcissism is often associated with emotional instability and the tendency to experience negative emotional states. In contrast, social-personality psychologists usually consider narcissism to be a normally distributed personality feature. The subclinical form of narcissism studied by social-personality psychologists tends to be at least somewhat emotionally resilient and extraverted (Miller & Campbell, 2008). These differences in conceptualization lead

clinical psychologists to think of narcissism as a relatively pathological construct and social-personality psychologists to think of narcissism as at least somewhat “normal” because of its blend of relatively adaptive (e.g., leadership and authority) and maladaptive properties (e.g., exploitation and entitlement; see Miller & Campbell (2008) or Pincus et al. (2009), for extended discussions). In an effort to be consistent with previous research (e.g., Pincus et al., 2009), we will refer to these types of narcissism as *pathological narcissism* and *normal narcissism*, respectively.

One of the costs that narcissistic individuals face for holding such potentially inflated self-views is that they may experience extreme reactions to events that challenge these views. This sort of narcissistic reactivity has been observed for individuals with high levels of normal narcissism who confronted threatening achievement events or social events that occurred within the confines of the laboratory (e.g., Barry, Chaplin, & Grafeman, 2006; Besser & Priel, in press a; Besser & Priel, 2009; Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Kernis & Sun, 1994; Rhodewalt & Morf, 1998; Twenge & Campbell, 2003) or that took place in everyday life (e.g., Bogart, Benotsch, & Pavlovic, 2004; Rhodewalt, 2005; Rhodewalt, Madrian, & Cheney, 1998; Zeigler-Hill, Myers, & Clark, 2010). The observed reactions of individuals with high levels of normal narcissism to these sorts of experiences have included anger (Besser & Priel, 2009; Besser & Priel, in press a), aggressive behavior (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998), decreased self-esteem (Rhodewalt et al., 1998; Zeigler-Hill et al., 2010), and negative emotions (Besser & Priel, 2009; Besser & Priel, in press a; Rhodewalt & Morf, 1998). Additionally, studies have demonstrated that individuals with high

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levels of normal narcissism are prone to derogate or attack those who provide ego-threatening feedback in the form of failure or social rejection (e.g., Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Bushman, Bonacci, Van Dijk, & Baumeister, 2003; Campbell, Bonacci, Shelton, Exline, & Bushman, 2004; Kernis & Sun, 1994; Twenge & Campbell, 2003) and often refuse to forgive the past transgressions of others (Eaton, Struthers, & Santelli, 2006; Exline, Baumeister, Bushman, Campbell, & Finkel, 2004).

Many of the current theories concerning the reactivity of narcissists are derived, to varying extents, from the *psychodynamic mask model* of narcissism which is based on the influential perspectives offered by Kohut (1966, 1977), Kohut and Wolf (1986) and Kernberg (1975, 1986). Despite important differences in their views of narcissism, Kohut and Kernberg both posit that narcissistic grandiosity serves as a façade that conceals underlying feelings of inferiority and low self-esteem which stem from early experiences of inadequate or insensitive parenting (see Bosson et al., 2008, for a review). The inconsistencies in the self-views of narcissists are believed to be responsible for their heightened reactivity because negative events undermine their tenuously held feelings of self-worth and increase the salience of their negative self-attitudes. That is, threats to self-esteem or other negative events may lead to the emergence of underlying negative self-views which trigger reactions that either reflect these negative self-views (e.g., low self-esteem, anxiety) or serve as attempts to bolster their tenuous feelings of self-worth (e.g., anger, aggressive tendencies).

Explanations for narcissistic reactivity that are based on the psychodynamic mask model generally concern challenges to the grandiose façade of narcissists. It has been suggested, however, that pathological narcissism may be a heterogeneous construct consisting of both a grandiose and a vulnerable form which may be experienced independently of each other, simultaneously, or in an alternating fashion (e.g., Akhtar & Thomson, 1982; Cooper, 1998; Dickinson & Pincus, 2003; Gabbard, 1989; Gabbard, 1998; Gersten, 1991; Hendin & Cheek, 1997; Kohut, 1971; Pincus & Lukowsky, 2010; Pincus et al., 2009; Rathvon & Holmstrom, 1996; Rose, 2002; Røvik, 2001; Wink, 1991; Wink, 1996). Grandiose narcissism is the most easily recognized form of pathological narcissism because it is characterized by exhibitionism, feelings of entitlement, and a willingness to exploit others. This grandiose form of pathological narcissism is clearly represented by the diagnostic criteria for Narcissistic Personality Disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). In contrast to grandiose narcissism which is characterized by arrogance and self-absorption, the vulnerable form of pathological narcissism is characterized by self-reported feelings of inferiority, low self-esteem, shame, helplessness, and a relatively submissive interpersonal style (Cooper & Ronningstam, 1992; Dickinson & Pincus, 2003; Gabbard, 1989; Gramzow & Tangney, 1992; Pincus et al., 2009; Rose, 2002). Individuals reporting high levels of grandiose and vulnerable narcissism appear to differ in the approaches they use to regulate their self-esteem. Individuals with high levels of grandiose narcissism tend to use overt strategies in order to gain admiration and respect, whereas those with high levels of vulnerable narcissism may not seek approval from others directly because they may not be confident in their ability to employ overt strategies (Cooper, 1988; Cooper, 1998; Cooper & Maxwell, 1995; Dickinson & Pincus, 2003; Pincus et al., 2009). As a result of their insecurity, those who possess this vulnerable form of narcissism may be forced to rely on less direct means for regulating their self-esteem such as avoiding confrontation and shamefully withdrawing from situations that fail to provide them with the approval and acceptance they crave so desperately (e.g., Akhtar, 2003).

An important distinction between grandiose and vulnerable forms of pathological narcissism concerns responses to negative events that may threaten their feelings of self-worth. Although less

is known about the reactivity associated with pathological forms of narcissism compared to normal narcissism, a recent study by Besser and Priel (in press a) found that grandiose and vulnerable forms of pathological narcissism differed in terms of their associations with the reported emotional reactions of individuals to threats in the achievement and interpersonal domains. More specifically, participants with high levels of grandiose narcissism were highly responsive to threats concerning achievement failure (i.e., learning that an important promotion had been given to a coworker), whereas those with high levels of vulnerable narcissism were particularly responsive to threats concerning romantic betrayal (i.e., learning that one's lover had been unfaithful). The fact that these events elicited different levels of reactivity for specific forms of pathological narcissism provides initial evidence that individuals with these forms of pathological narcissism may differ with regard to the sorts of experiences that threaten their feelings of self-worth (e.g., Kernberg, 1986; Ronningstam, 2005).

Concern about humiliation may play a vital role in the responses of individuals with pathological forms of narcissism to negative events. The fact that grandiose narcissism is characterized by such a strong desire for respect and admiration coupled with a reliance on others for self-esteem regulation may explain the importance of humiliation in narcissistic reactivity. Given the importance that individuals with high levels of grandiose narcissism place on being viewed positively by others in their social environments, negative experiences such as rejection and failure may be particularly aversive when they take place in public settings because these experiences disrupt their attempts to gain prestige and respect. That is, negative experiences may always be difficult for individuals with high levels of grandiose narcissism to manage, but experiences that occur in public settings may be especially problematic because they elicit feelings of humiliation (Rothstein, 1984; Steiner, 1999). These humiliating experiences may lead to a range of negative emotions for individuals with high levels of grandiose narcissism and may elicit a desire among these individuals to strike back at the transgressor who is responsible for the humiliation in an attempt to protect their feelings of self-worth.

2. Overview and predictions

The purpose of the present study was to examine whether individuals with high levels of grandiose and vulnerable narcissism differed in their responses to negative events. The negative events used in this study included interpersonal rejection or achievement failure, with both types of events occurring in private or public settings. In order to assess the responses to these negative experiences, we asked participants to read a scenario describing one of these events and to report their feelings and motivations in response to the situation immediately after reading the scenario. We focused exclusively on negative events because previous studies that have examined the reactivity of narcissistic individuals have generally observed an asymmetry in their responses such that individuals with high levels of normal narcissism tend to be more sensitive to negative events than they are to positive events (e.g., Rhodewalt & Morf, 1998). For example, individuals with high levels of normal narcissism were recently found to report greater decreases in their state self-esteem than those with low levels of normal narcissism on days when they experienced mundane failures (e.g., falling behind on tasks) even though there was no difference in the reactivity of those with high or low levels of normal narcissism to everyday successes (e.g., getting ahead on tasks; Zeigler-Hill et al., 2010). That is, success in everyday situations may not be terribly important for narcissists but failures in mundane activities may be especially meaningful for them because these experiences suggest that their grandiose self-views may be inaccurate.

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