To be grandiose or not to be worthless: Different routes to self-enhancement for narcissism and self-esteem

Stephan Horvath *, Carolyn C. Morf

Institute of Psychology, University of Bern, Unitobler/Muesmattstrasse 45, 3000 Bern 9, Switzerland

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ABSTRACT

Both narcissists and high self-esteem individuals engage in active self-enhancement to support their positive self-views. However, while narcissists want to assert their superiority, high self-esteem individuals desire to be valued by the social community. These different self-goals suggest that only narcissists can afford to engage in forceful and brazen self-enhancement strategies. Consistent with expectation, in two studies, narcissists exploited self-enhancement opportunities primarily by augmenting self-ratings on positive traits. Individuals with genuine high self-esteem in contrast, self-presented more moderately and also used the more socially accepted discounting of negative traits. Subsequent increased accessibility of positive self-information, only shown by narcissists, indicates that their desire for self-worth is hard to fulfill. These findings continue to illuminate the distinction between narcissism and self-esteem.

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1. Introduction

A highly positive self-view is by definition a central characteristic of narcissistic individuals, as well as those with high self-esteem. Narcissists have an inflated self-concept, they overestimate their intelligence and attractiveness (Gabriel, Critelli, & Ee, 1994), they fantasize about power (Raskin & Novacek, 1991), and attribute success internally (Farwell & Wohlwend-Lloyd, 1998). People with high self-esteem are generally self-confident, are often in leadership positions (Rosenberg, 1965), and like high narcissists, they too overestimate their intelligence (Gabriel et al., 1994), and how positively others see them (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 2000). Unsurprisingly then, the two concepts are usually moderately to highly correlated (Brown & Zeigler-Hill, 2004). However, there clearly are also important differences between narcissism and high self-esteem. In the definition of narcissism in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (4th ed. [DSM-IV]; American Psychiatric Association, 1994), narcissists are described as having not only excessively positive self-views, but in addition also a sense of entitlement – they exploit others and lack empathy for them. These components are not part of high self-esteem individuals.

Campbell, Rudich, and Sedikides (2002) also showed that narcissists and people with high self-esteem differ in the domains in which they have positive self-views. Narcissists were found to perceive themselves as better than others on agentic traits (intelli-

gence and extraversion) but not on more communal traits (morality or agreeableness), whereas high self-esteem individuals perceived themselves as superior in both domains. Moreover, studies which control for the influence of self-esteem when studying narcissism have shown that behaviors, such as, aggression in response to ego-threat (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998) or excessive risk-taking in a gambling task (Lakey, Rose, Campbell, & Goodie, 2008), are specific to narcissism, and are not attributable to its overlap with self-esteem (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001).

In the present studies, our aim was to examine differences in the strategies narcissists and high self-esteem individuals use to preserve the positivity of their self-view. Hence, in contrast to Campbell et al. (2002), our focus was not on domain or content differences in the positivity of self-view, but rather on the processes through which this positivity is upheld. In particular, we were interested in the question whether these positive self-views are arrived at primarily through augmenting one's positive aspects, or through the discounting of one's negative aspects. Based on the many studies documenting narcissists' assertive promotion of grandiosity (e.g., Farwell & Wohlwend-Lloyd, 1998; Morf, Horvath, & Torchetti, in press), our assumption was that narcissists' primary focus would be on augmenting positive self-aspects rather than discounting negative self-aspects. Preliminary evidence in this direction is provided by an unexpected (and auxiliary) finding in a study by Campbell and colleagues (2002) showing that narcissists self-enhanced on positive, but not on negative items. This was opposed to high self-esteem individuals, who rated the self more positively on both positive and negative traits. The authors speculated that these findings may be an artifact of the content composition of the wordlist. Our argument in contrast is that these

* Corresponding author. Fax: +41 31 631 41 55.
E-mail addresses: stephan.horvath@psy.unibe.ch (S. Horvath), carolyn.morf@psy.unibe.ch (C.C. Morf).

differences emerge, because narcissists and high self-esteem individuals find different strategies for self-enhancement acceptable and supportive of their self-goals.

1.1. The self-goals of narcissists and high self-esteem individuals

The assumption in our self-regulatory processing model is that individual differences are revealed in the self-regulation of one's most central self-goals (Morf, 2006; Morf & Horvath, 2010), and we expect that narcissists and high self-esteem individuals differ in their primary self-goals. According to some clinical theories, narcissists' demonstrations of grandiosity are masking secretly harbored self-doubts and feelings of worthlessness (Akhtar & Thomson, 1982). Consistent with this, research has shown that narcissists' main self-goal appears to be to establish their superiority over others (Campbell, Brunell, & Finkel, 2006; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). They are permanently looking for opportunities to demonstrate their grandiosity and dominance, for example, by self-promoting in front of important people (Morf, Davidov, & Ansara, submitted for publication). They are also attracted by competitive tasks (Morf, Weir, & Davidov, 2000), presumably because these afford them the opportunity to demonstrate their superior ability. In addition, narcissists have been shown to defend their self-goal against threats, for example by derogating others who provide negative feedback (Kernis & Sun, 1994). Narcissists' self-defensive strategies are often perceived as paradoxical because through their choice of strategies, narcissists risk losing the social audience they need to promote their grandiosity (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). However, when considering the fragility of their grandiose self-views, these behaviors are no longer paradoxical, but simply indicate that narcissists' aggressive self-promotion attempts are of primary importance and dominate any longer term social goals.

Self-esteem in contrast, reflects more communal concerns. According to sociometer theory, trait self-esteem is the result of an individual's lifetime experiences of social acceptances and rejections (Leary, 2004; Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995). Thus, the pursuit of being a valuable member of the social community is central to maintaining self-esteem. This means that any self-promotion attempts have to remain within socially accepted borders in order to decrease the risk of exclusion and to preserve one's status within the group. High self-esteem, in contrast to low self-esteem, individuals are apparently successful in employing such strategies. The problem for low self-esteem individuals seems to be that they are too focused on the avoidance of rejection and as a consequence they do not successfully promote themselves. For example, in a study by Park and Maner (2009), after having received negative feedback about their appearance, high self-esteem individuals expressed an increased desire to seek contact with close others to restore their self-esteem. Low self-esteem individuals on the other hand chose to avoid social contact and instead to engage in activities to improve their appearance (e.g., shopping for clothes), thereby avoiding the risk of further rejection.

The differential self-goals of narcissists and high self-esteem individuals are also reflected in some empirical studies that show differential effects of narcissism depending on whether or not self-esteem was controlled. For example, a positive correlation between narcissism and hubristic pride was only found, when the shared variance between narcissism and self-esteem was removed (Tracy, Cheng, Robins, & Trzesniewski, 2009). In other words self-esteem suppressed this relationship, presumably because genuine self-esteem is related to authentic pride. Comparably, controlling for self-esteem increased the positive relationship between narcissism and aggression, and the negative relation between self-esteem and aggression increased when controlling for narcissism (Paulhus, Robins, Trzesniewski, & Tracy, 2004; Webster, 2006).

On the other hand, self-esteem can also function as a mediator. For example, the positive association between narcissism and psychological health seems to be completely mediated by self-esteem (Sedikides, Rudich, Gregg, Kumashiro, & Rusbult, 2004), whereas genuine self-esteem remained a significant predictor of psychological health. Thus, narcissism without self-esteem is unrelated to psychological health, whereas high self-esteem helps maintain it. Perhaps, the successful pursuit of authentic self-esteem by high self-esteem individuals produces a social network that supports or even promotes health. In contrast, the narcissistic self-goal (i.e., to confirm one's grandiosity) primarily creates a kind of sham self-esteem, based more on illusions of competence, rather than being anchored in social reality, that is not health-promoting.

In short, both narcissists and high self-esteem individuals actively make attempts to embrace positive aspects of the self and to deflect negative ones. However, given their different orientations and concerns they are likely to achieve this via different channels with narcissists unrestrictedly exploiting self-enhancement opportunities, and individuals with genuinely high self-esteem engaging in more moderate self-promotion that takes into account the social desirability of the behavior within the given situation.

1.2. Different strategies to achieve one's self-goal

In general, there are two ways to evaluate or present oneself more favorably compared to others: one can either overestimate one's positive traits, or one can underestimate one's negative traits. Indeed, both of these strategies are used to demonstrate that one is better than the average (Alicke, 1985). At first glance perhaps, it seems logical that persons who overestimate their positive traits also underestimate their negative traits. However, as has been shown by Hepper, Gramzow, and Sedikides (2010) different self-enhancement strategies can be characteristic for specific personality types even when these strategies are highly correlated. For example, embracing the positive (e.g., internal attribution of success) and using defensive strategies (e.g., external attribution of failure) was moderately correlated ($r = .42$). But while the use of the former strategy was positively correlated with narcissism and self-esteem, the latter strategy was positively correlated with narcissism, but negatively correlated with self-esteem.

Similarly we assume that both promoting one's positive qualities and denying or down-playing one's negative qualities can be useful to regulate the positivity of one's self. We expect, however, that both selection of strategy and the size of the biases will depend on the individual's self-goals. Genuine high self-esteem individuals are expected to prefer more socially acceptable and rather moderate strategies in order to avoid the risk of social rebuff. Thus, in situations where both possibilities to preserve the positivity of one's self are available, they would be expected to engage primarily in discounting of negative self-aspects, as this is the most socially appropriate route. Narcissists (independent of self-esteem) on the other hand would be expected to aggressively exploit opportunities for self-enhancement on positive self-aspects, as this is the best strategy to demonstrate superiority (cf. Morf & Horvath, 2010; Morf et al., in press). Furthermore, we expect them to forgo the opportunity to discount negative self-aspects, so long as they can go for maximal self-promotion by taking advantage of demonstrating grandiosity. That would be in accordance with the finding that narcissists are strongly motivated to approach desirable outcomes but not particularly motivated to avoid negative outcomes (Foster & Trimm, 2008).

Additionally, the positivity of one's self-view can also be supported through differential accessibility of positive and negative information. For narcissists, we expect their attention to be especially attracted by positive stimuli that are connected with their