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

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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 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 (intelligence 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...
differences emerge, because narcissists and high self-esteem indi-
viduals 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 theo-
ries, narcissists' demonstrations of grandiosity are masking se-
cretly 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 opportuni-
ties 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 com-
petitive 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-defense strategies are often perceived as paradoxical be-
cause 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 at-
ttempts are of primary importance and dominate any longer term
social goals.

Self-esteem in contrast, reflects more communal concerns. Ac-
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 com-
unity 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 employ-
ing 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 them-
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 con-
tact with close others to restore their self-esteem. Low self-esteem
individuals on the other hand chose to avoid social contact and in-
stead 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 be-
tween 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-
estee suppressed this relationship, presumably because genuine
self-esteem is related to authentic pride. Comparably, controlling
for self-esteem increased the positive relationship between narciss-
sm and aggression, and the negative relationship between self-es-
tee 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 psy-
chological health seems to be completely mediated by self-esteem
(Sedikides, Rudich, Gregg, Kumashiro, & Rushult, 2004), whereas
genuine self-esteem remained a significant predictor of psycholog-
ical 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 ac-
tively make attempts to embrace positive aspects of the self and
to deflect negative ones. However, given their different orienta-
tions and concerns they are likely to achieve this via different
channels with narcissists unrestrictedly exploiting self-enhance-
ment opportunities, and individuals with genuinely high self-es-
tee 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
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enhancement strategies can be characteristic for specific personal-
ity types even when these strategies are highly correlated. For
example, embracing the positive (e.g., internal attribution of suc-
cess) 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 quali-
ties 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 de-
pend on the individual's self-goals. Genuine high self-esteem indi-
viduals 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 primar-
ily in discounting of negative self-aspects, as this is the most so-
cially 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 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 demon-
strating grandiosity. That would be in accordance with the finding
that narcissists are strongly motivated to approach desirable out-
comes but not particularly motivated to avoid negative outcomes
(Foster & Trimm, 2008).

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