



## Covert narcissism as a predictor of internalizing symptoms after performance feedback in adolescents

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### ABSTRACT

The present study examined the association between covert narcissism and internalizing symptoms (i.e., shame, anxiety) in adolescents following an ego threat. Participants were 132 adolescents (101 males, 30 females, 1 not reported), ages 16–19 ( $M = 16.81$  years,  $SD = .81$ ), attending a residential program. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three feedback conditions (i.e., positive, negative, or neutral). Contrary to the main hypothesis, Time 2 internalizing symptoms tended to be highest for individuals in the positive feedback condition who had higher levels of narcissism. The implications of this study for understanding the role of narcissism in internalizing symptoms are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Narcissism

Narcissism is characterized by a grandiose self-image along with characteristics such as dominance, exhibitionism, manipulativeness, a sense of entitlement, and vanity (Atlas & Them, 2008; Raskin, Novacek, & Hogan, 1991; Washburn, McMahon, King, Reinecke, & Silver, 2004). Raskin and colleagues (1991) suggest that narcissism is essentially a form of self-esteem regulation and that the tactics employed by narcissists (e.g., aggression, a grandiose self-presentation, exploitation of others) are means of defending their tenuous feelings of self-worth against perceived threats. However, the manner in which someone with narcissism responds to negative events may be a function of his or her particular narcissistic tendencies. Research has indicated that there may be two relatively distinct types of narcissism: overt and covert (Atlas & Them, 2008), which may have implications for the particular responses that individuals display toward their environment.

Narcissism is a complex and multifaceted construct. Foster and Trimm (2008) describe covert narcissists as seemingly somewhat motivated by reward but as also highly sensitive to punishment. Individuals with covert narcissism are described as “hypersensitive, anxious, timid, and insecure, but on close contact surprise observers with their grandiose fantasies” (Wink, 1991, p. 591).

Individuals who are considered covert narcissists are assumed to have a greater likelihood of sensitivity to criticism and to be more likely to experience negative emotional reactivity (Atlas & Them, 2008), including anxiety and shame. The vast majority of narcissism research has utilized operational definitions consistent with overt narcissism, but the present study examines covert narcissism because of its theoretical ties to internalizing issues.

Covert narcissism is particularly tied to experiencing internalizing responses to ego threats. Insofar as covert narcissism is associated with insecurity, unhappiness, and low self-esteem (Rose, 2002), it is presumed that it would also translate to feelings of shame, particularly after criticism. Thomaes, Stegge, and Olthof (2007) note that shame commonly results from experiences that impress upon children an unsolicited identity and induces the idea that they are not necessarily who they believe themselves to be. They further state that when children do not live up to the behavioral standards they set for themselves, have inadequate control over their thoughts and actions, or are inept in any particular domain of life, they may feel shame. This notion is potentially relevant for understanding the link between narcissism and aggression in that emotional responses such as shame and anxiety are typically experienced on an implicit level and may be the driving force in subsequent aggression (Campbell, Foster, & Brunell, 2004).

In their previous study, Thomaes, Stegge, Bushman, and Olthof (2008) did not directly measure shame but presumed relations based on their findings from an experimental condition in which participants were told that they lost to an opponent who was not good at a task. In that study, children with high levels of narcissism were subsequently more aggressive than other children, especially if they were in this shame condition. The relevance of this model

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for adolescents was underscored by Thomaes and colleagues (2008) who suggested that, as an adolescent gets older, feelings of shame would pose a more serious threat to self-esteem and would have greater influence on subsequent actions. The present study attempted to extend Thomaes and colleagues' research by directly measuring shame in relation to ego threatening situations.

Narcissistic individuals corroborate and support their perceived self-image through the feedback and admiration that they seek and hope to receive from others (Atlas & Them, 2008; Raskin et al., 1991). If that feedback is negative, narcissism is predictive of negative affect (Rhodewalt & Morf, 1995) and a negative behavioral response (e.g., aggression; Bushman & Baumeister, 1998). Furthermore, individuals with narcissistic characteristics are thought to engage in "defensive self-enhancement" (Raskin et al., 1991, p. 21), which may translate to feelings of anxiety and shame after negative feedback.

Adolescence is an ideal time in which to assess the impact of narcissistic traits on emotional and behavioral responses to ego-threatening situations based on the malleability and emotional reactivity of self-perceptions during this developmental period (Lapsley & Aalsma, 2006). Harter (2006) proposed that adolescence is a period during which individuals become progressively more aware of their need to maintain their feelings of self-worth by gaining the approval of others which may serve as a catalyst for the establishment of self-protective motives. As a result, adolescents may be particularly likely to exhibit affective or behavioral responses to negative appraisals from others. In addition, part of adolescent identity formation capitalizes on the capability of adolescents to think introspectively and self-reflect (Lapsley, 1993). Lapsley (1993) notes that the increased ability of adolescents to self-reflect is related to the emergence of egocentrism. Certain patterns of egocentrism in adolescence elicit a multitude of emotional reactions, including concern with shame, embarrassment, and feelings of being constantly evaluated and judged (Lapsley, 1993). Egocentrism in adolescents seems to mirror some elements of narcissism. That is, presenting a confident, even grandiose, self-image, as well as maintaining an idealized self-image are not only central aspects of narcissism, but they are also often of increased importance during adolescence.

It has also been suggested that shame is a common, negative emotion in adolescence as a consequence of adolescents' increased self-consciousness and awareness (Ryan & Kuczowski, 1994; Simmons, Rosenberg, & Rosenberg, 1973). Furthermore, adolescents are believed to be more susceptible than children to shame because they have developed the ability to make global negative evaluations about their self-image (Ferguson, Stegge, & Damhuis, 1991). Such tendencies may be pronounced for adolescents with high levels of narcissism. Research on narcissism among children and adolescents is limited and even more so when considering the relation between narcissism and internalizing problems, but a connection between narcissism and shame and/or anxiety is apparent from the emerging work in this area (e.g., Barry & Malkin, 2010; Thomaes et al., 2008).

In summary, the primary aim of the present study was to explore the association between covert narcissism and internalizing responses following negative performance feedback. Negative performance feedback has been previously used in studies investigating reactions associated with narcissism (e.g., Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Thomaes et al., 2008). However, previous research focused primarily on reactions of adults. The present study will extend previous research by focusing on adolescents and by considering covert narcissism which has theoretical links to shame and anxiety.

## 1.2. Hypotheses

It was hypothesized that covert narcissism would be positively correlated with anxiety and shame following an ego threat

(Hypothesis 1). It was also predicted that negative feedback would be associated with higher levels of anxiety and shame relative to neutral or positive feedback (Hypothesis 2). In addition, feedback condition was expected to moderate the relation between narcissism and post-feedback levels of shame and anxiety, such that high levels of covert narcissism would predict the highest levels of anxiety and shame after negative feedback (Hypothesis 3).

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

Participants were 132 adolescents ranging in age from 16 to 19 ( $M = 16.8$ ,  $SD = .81$ ) who were attending a residential intervention program for youth who have dropped out of school. It was anticipated that such a sample would demonstrate suitable variability on the constructs of interest in this study (e.g., narcissism, anxiety, shame). The majority of participants were male ( $n = 101$ ), and their racial/ethnic background was comprised of Caucasian ( $n = 82$ ) and African American ( $n = 44$ ). Six participants did not provide ethnicity information or selected "other." Participants were randomly assigned to one of three feedback conditions: negative ( $n = 44$ ), positive ( $n = 47$ ), or neutral ( $n = 41$ ). Within the negative condition, there were 35 males and 9 females. The positive condition had 36 male and 10 female participants, and the neutral condition consisted of 30 male and 11 female participants. The three experimental conditions did not differ with regard to gender,  $X^2(2) = .54$ , *ns*.

Univariate Analyses of Variance (ANOVAs) were conducted to assess differences across experimental conditions prior to feedback on continuous variables. There was a significant difference on anxiety,  $F(2, 128) = 4.17$ ,  $p = .02$ , such that participants in the negative condition ( $M_{Negative} = 14.61$ ,  $SD_{Negative} = 7.51$ ) rated themselves higher on anxiety than participants in the neutral condition ( $M_{Neutral} = 10.48$ ,  $SD_{Neutral} = 5.73$ ),  $t(83) = 2.84$ ,  $p = .01$ , and participants in the positive condition ( $M_{Positive} = 13.30$ ,  $SD_{Positive} = 6.73$ ),  $t(85) = 2.10$ ,  $p = .04$ . The experimental conditions did not differ on age, shame, covert narcissism, or self-esteem.

### 2.2. Materials

#### 2.2.1. The Hypersensitive Narcissism Scale (HSNS; Wink & Cheek, 1998)

The HSNS assesses covert narcissism and was developed by Wink and Cheek (1998) using items from the Murray Narcissism Scale (Murray, 1938), with additional items added to further assess covert narcissism. The measure consists of 10 items (e.g., "I can become entirely absorbed in thinking about my personal affairs, my health, my cares or my relations to others;" "My feelings are easily hurt by ridicule or the slighting remarks of others") with responses made on scales ranging from 1 (*very uncharacteristic*) to 5 (*very characteristic*). Previous work has shown a near-zero correlation between the NPI and HSNS, demonstrating good discriminant validity in delineating between overt and covert narcissism (Hendin & Cheek, 1997). The present study yielded a moderate internal consistency coefficient for the HSNS,  $\alpha = .69$ .

#### 2.2.2. State Shame and Guilt Scale (SSGS; Marschall, Sanftner, & Tangney, 1994)

The SSGS is a 15-item measure designed to differentiate between state shame, state guilt, and state pride with three separate subscales. The present study utilized the shame subscale as a measure of shame, consistent with previous research (e.g., Gruenewald, Kemeny, Aziz, & Fahey, 2004). The present study yielded an internal consistency coefficient of  $\alpha = .76$  for the shame subscale at Time 1 (pre-feedback) and  $\alpha = .82$  for Time 2 (post-feedback). Time

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