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Better than my loved ones: Social comparison tendencies among narcissists

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ABSTRACT

Narcissists pursue superiority and status at frequent costs to their relationships, and social comparisons seem central to these pursuits. Critically, these comparison tendencies should distinguish narcissism from healthy self-esteem. We tested this hypothesis in a study examining individual differences in everyday comparison activity. Narcissists, relative to those with high self-esteem, (1) made more frequent social comparisons, particularly downward ones, (2) were more likely to think they were better-off than other important individuals in their lives, and (3) perceived themselves superior to these important individuals on agentic traits. However, narcissists' positive emotional reactions to these self-flattering comparisons were based on their high self-esteem. These results suggest that comparison processes play an important role in narcissists' endless pursuit of status and admiration.

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1. Introduction

"There is nothing noble in being superior to some other person.
The true nobility is in being superior to your previous self."

— Indian Proverb

This Indian proverb was probably *not* written by a narcissist. Narcissists think that being superior to others is what makes a person noble and special. Narcissists have inflated, grandiose self-views and care little about others. However, narcissists' self-views are not grounded in reality (e.g., Gabriel, Critelli, & Ee, 1994; John & Robins, 1994). When reality "bites" and narcissists suffer a blow to their ego, they become defensive, hostile, and aggressive (e.g., Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001).

Although narcissists think they are great, other people may not share this view. How then are narcissists able to maintain their inflated self-views in the real world? We hypothesize that narcissists do so by orchestrating comparisons with people who they perceive as worse-off than they are, even when these individuals are friends and family members. We predict that narcissists will show a general interest in social comparisons, particularly with those individuals they view as inferior, even if they are significant

others. By making frequent downward social comparisons, narcissists can maintain their sense of superiority during the "ups" and "downs" of everyday life.

1.1. Superiority is critical to narcissism but not self-esteem

Narcissism is not the same as high self-esteem, although both involve a positive sense of self. Narcissism has been repeatedly characterized as the "dark side" of high self-esteem because it also encompasses a preoccupation with interpersonal dominance and superiority and a prickly sensitivity to negative feedback. Grandiosity and superiority have been central to the construct of narcissism since its inception, reflected both in how it has been conceptualized and how it has been measured (Raskin & Hall, 1981). Superiority, by definition, requires flattering social comparisons. We propose that perceived superiority, pursued via frequent social comparisons against downward targets, serves as an important tool in maintaining narcissists' grandiose self-views. Furthermore, we propose that individuals with healthy self-esteem do not engage in downward comparisons to the same extent (cf. Gibbons & Buunk, 1999).

As mentioned earlier, narcissists are notorious for their assertive self-enhancement tendencies. They overestimate their physical attractiveness and general intelligence (Gabriel et al., 1994), rate their performance in a realistic management task higher than other participants or relevant experts (John & Robins, 1994), and generally view themselves as better than others

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on agentic but not communal personality attributes (Campbell, Rudich, & Sedikides, 2002). There is a general consensus that narcissists self-enhance mostly on status-relevant attributes involving ability and social rank, with much less interest in being superior on communal attributes such as being responsible or supportive to others (e.g., Campbell et al., 2002). Note that this narcissistic interest in “getting ahead” over “getting along” implies a strong orientation toward social comparisons; high intelligence implies intellectual superiority over others, while being successful implies that one has attained a higher social rank than others. We suspect that narcissists’ interest in status-related (over communal) characteristics forms the best means to promote their sense of superiority.

Narcissistic brand of self-protection can also be understood as oriented around maintaining perceived superiority. Narcissists are especially likely to take credit from another for success (Campbell, Reeder, Sedikides, & Elliot, 2000) or to negatively evaluate others who give them negative feedback (Morf & Rhodewalt, 1993; Smalley & Stake, 1996). In sum, narcissists are especially interested in protecting their exaggerated sense of self-worth by directly asserting their superiority over others, and are apt to engage in non-comparative self-protection strategies only when the threatening individual has very high status that is difficult to impeach (see Horton & Sedikides, 2010).

Based on this evidence, we contend that narcissistic interest in superiority, best achieved by zealous and downward-focused social comparisons, helps explain why narcissists are myopically focused on enhancing status in agentic domains (because these offer the clearest sense of superiority), and why they are apt to take advantage of comparative forms of self-protection when threatened (because these are the best means to restore a threatened sense of superiority). Critically, these tendencies should distinguish narcissism from healthy self-esteem. Furthermore, we contend that narcissists’ interest in superiority is so potent that it typifies everyday social comparisons, even when these involve comparisons with close others (partners, friends, and family). Although previous evidence indicates that narcissists may perceive themselves more positively than they perceive their romantic partners (e.g., Campbell et al., 2002), we sought a broader and more direct support for this contention.

1.2. Overview of present research

We predict that narcissists should have a zealous interest in social comparison more broadly, in perceived superiority more specifically, and do so even at the expense of close others. Additionally, these tendencies should distinguish narcissism from healthy self-esteem. We tested this hypothesis by examining individual differences in general social comparison frequency and reactions to naturally-occurring social comparisons. We examined to what extent narcissism predicted interest in social comparisons generally and frequency of upward or downward comparisons specifically. Furthermore, we examined how narcissists reacted to actual social comparisons they experienced during their lives by soliciting recall of several recent comparisons they made. Finally, we examined how narcissism predicted more focused comparisons with the recalled targets across attributes that vary in agency. Such a naturalistic approach is critical for understanding the role of social comparisons in narcissists’ lives as it examines the comparisons actually experienced on a regular basis, rather than those orchestrated by researchers. Below, we describe each of our research goals in turn.

Our first goal was to examine the relation between narcissism, self-esteem and general social comparison orientation, namely individual differences in social comparison frequency (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999). We anticipated that narcissism (but not self-esteem)

will predict higher general interest in social comparison information, and specific interest in downward, but not upward, social comparisons. This would be the first evidence to confirm comparison tendencies as an important factor distinguishing the two constructs.

Our second goal was to examine the nature of social comparisons narcissists experience during their everyday lives and to probe the cognitive and emotional reactions to these social comparisons. Although one previous study examined such comparisons (Bogart, Benotsch, & Pavlovic, 2004), the nature of analysis did not permit insights into how often narcissists experienced superiority or inferiority. By examining the reactions to individual comparisons that “loomed large” in participants’ minds, we were able to examine the cognitive impressions of similarity and difference as well as emotional reactions to naturalistic comparison targets with more focus. Critically, we tested to what extent narcissism predicted these reactions independently of self-esteem.

Finally, we tested whether narcissism was a unique predictor of flattering comparisons with recalled comparisons targets. Furthermore, we did so in a way that neutralized factors that confound comparative perceptions with general self-views. Whereas Campbell and colleagues (2002) showed that narcissism predicted above-average perceptions on status-relevant personality attributes, the comparison scale they employed allowed for factors such as focalism (i.e., inordinate focusing on the question target) to confound comparative perceptions with general self-views (see Chambers & Windschitl, 2004). We instead employed a very explicit comparison measure that neutralized these factors, allowing us to make direct inferences about perceived comparative standing (rather than general self-evaluation).

2. Method

Participants were 190 college students (39% male) who received course credit in exchange for their voluntary participation. Participants first read the following:

Over the past 7 days, you probably noticed yourself thinking about someone in regard to how similar and/or different they are relative to you. In other words, you compared with them in some way. Please take a minute or two and think back about the last four individuals that you thought about in relation to yourself, that is, you compared with in some way. These could be individuals that you interacted with or only thought about, and they could be family members, close friends, or strangers.

For each of the four comparison targets, participants were told to “write about anything that you thought about *at the time* you compared. . .” After describing all the four targets, for each one they characterized the target’s relation to themselves, the target’s gender and age, and how long ago the comparison occurred. They also rated how well and how long they had known each target, how close they felt to each target, how many times they had seen each target during the past week, how much time they spent interacting with each target, and the domains of comparison for each target. Next, they indicated their reactions to each comparison, specifically whether they were (a) better-off, worse-off, or neither, and felt (b) similar or not. Next, using 7-point scales, they rated their feeling toward the person (friendly–hostile), and how they felt themselves (happy–sad and anxious–relaxed). Finally, they compared themselves with the individual across the 10 items from the Self-Attributes Questionnaire (Pelham & Swann, 1989) by marking a 7-point scale that ranged from “I am much lower”, through “We are about the same”, to “I am much higher”. This format ensured that ratings reflected the actual perception of difference between the self and the comparison target, as both the self and the comparison person

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