



# Narcissism and mate value: Is beauty in the eye of the narcissistic beholder?



Virgil Zeigler-Hill\*, David R.C. Trombly

Oakland University, United States

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## ABSTRACT

Narcissism is characterized by highly positive self-views. The purpose of the present study was to examine the connection between narcissism and self-perceived mate value. More specifically, we were interested in the possibility that the associations that narcissistic admiration and narcissistic rivalry had with self-perceived mate value may be mediated by the perceived mate value of one's current romantic partner. That is, we believed that narcissistic individuals may perceive their romantic partner in a manner that serves their own self-views. The results showed that perceived partner mate value mediated the positive association that narcissistic admiration had with self-perceived mate value as well as the negative association that narcissistic rivalry had with self-perceived mate value. Discussion focuses on the implications of these results for understanding how narcissistic individuals view their romantic partners and themselves.

## 1. Introduction

Narcissism has its origins in a Greek myth concerning a young man named Narcissus who was renowned for his physical beauty (Ovid, 8 B.C.E./2004). The beauty of Narcissus was so great that he attracted the attention of many suitors but he did not reciprocate the affection shown by any of them. One particular nymph named Echo was so devastated by the rejection she received from Narcissus that she eventually died from her despair. Nemesis – the Goddess of Retribution – was so angry about the death of Echo that she cursed Narcissus to fall into an unrequited love with the only thing that he truly seemed to value: his own image. When Narcissus saw his reflection in a river, he was so captivated by his own beauty that he could not avert his gaze from the water and he eventually came to share Echo's fate by simply wasting away. Although other variations of this myth exist, the basic tale has continued to resonate across the years because it concerns vanity, the love of self over others, and a preference for appearance rather than substance.

Narcissistic individuals often behave in a manner that is similar – at least in some respects – to the mythical character of Narcissus. For example, narcissistic individuals tend to be quite vain (Raskin & Terry, 1988; Vazire, Naumann, Rentfrow, & Gosling, 2008) and exhibitionistic (Buss & Chiodo, 1991) as evidenced by the great pleasure they often find in looking at or watching themselves (Robins & John, 1997) as well as their tendency to publicly display provocative images of themselves (DeWall, Buffardi, Bonser, & Campbell, 2011). In addition, narcissistic individuals try to capture the attention of others through various

strategies such as enhancing their appearance (e.g., Holtzman & Strube, 2010; Vazire et al., 2008), pursuing fame (e.g., Southard & Zeigler-Hill, 2016; Young & Pinsky, 2006), and strategically using social media (e.g., Buffardi & Campbell, 2008). Narcissistic individuals are also interested in elevating their social positions by engaging in behaviors such as bragging (Buss & Chiodo, 1991), displaying wealth and material goods (Piff, 2014; Sedikides, Gregg, Cisek, & Hart, 2007), affiliating with high-status individuals (Campbell, 1999), and pursuing leadership positions (Brunell et al., 2008; Grijalva, Harms, Newman, Gaddis, & Fraley, 2015).

Narcissism is characterized by a unique set of internal processes and interpersonal behaviors that are intended to help them gain external self-affirmation (e.g., Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). For example, narcissistic individuals tend to use their relationship partners as a means for establishing, maintaining, and enhancing their own positive self-views. This can take a variety of forms such as narcissistic individuals seeking out a highly desirable romantic partner who possesses positive qualities (e.g., success, beauty, fame) to serve as something akin to a “trophy” (e.g., Campbell, 1999). These “trophy” partners may bolster the feelings of self-worth possessed by narcissistic individuals by highlighting their own value as a mating partner. It is important to note that although narcissistic individuals often have extremely high standards for their romantic partners, they do not tend to evaluate their partners in an overly positive manner. Rather, narcissistic individuals often evaluate themselves as being superior to their romantic partners on various positive attributes in order to maintain their own self-esteem and feelings of dominance (Campbell, Rudich, & Sedikides, 2002). In

\* Corresponding author at: Department of Psychology, Oakland University, 654 Pioneer Drive, Rochester, MI 48309, United States.  
E-mail address: [zeiglerh@oakland.edu](mailto:zeiglerh@oakland.edu) (V. Zeigler-Hill).

addition to devaluing their current romantic partners, narcissistic individuals tend to be very attentive to alternative romantic partners (Campbell & Foster, 2002) which may contribute to their tendency to adopt a game-playing romantic style (Campbell, Foster, & Finkel, 2002) and engage in infidelity (Buss & Shackelford, 1997).

Holtzman and Strube (2011) suggested an evolutionary explanation for narcissism based on the short-term mating advantages this trait has bestowed upon individuals throughout the course of human evolution. This model is consistent with the observation that narcissistic individuals tend to show a strong interest in short-term, opportunistic mating opportunities (e.g., casual sex; Foster, Shrira, & Campbell, 2006; Jonason, Li, Webster, & Schmitt, 2009; McDonald, Donnellan, & Navarrete, 2012) and are often relatively successful in terms of making themselves attractive for these sorts of encounters because they appear – at least initially – to be confident, entertaining, and exciting (e.g., Dufner, Rauthmann, Czarna, & Denissen, 2013; Foster et al., 2006; Jonason, Valentine, Li, & Harbeson, 2011; Oltmanns, Friedman, Fiedler, & Turkheimer, 2004). Although narcissistic individuals tend to have overly positive evaluations of their own physical attractiveness (Bleske-Rechek, Remiker, & Baker, 2008; Gabriel, Critelli, & Ee, 1994), there is only a small – but consistent – association between narcissism and physical attractiveness (Holtzman & Strube, 2010). However, narcissistic individuals tend to invest more effort in their physical appearance by spending more time grooming and wearing fashionable clothes (Back, Schmukle, & Egloff, 2010; Davis, Dionne, & Shuster, 2001; Holtzman & Strube, 2013; Vazire et al., 2008). Thus, the slight advantage that narcissistic individuals tend to have in terms of physical attractiveness coupled with their investment in their appearance may explain why physical attractiveness has been found to play a vital role in the appeal of narcissistic individuals as potential romantic partners (Dufner et al., 2013).

### 1.1. Overview and predictions

The purpose of the present study was to use the Narcissistic Admiration and Rivalry Concept (NARC) model (Back et al., 2013) as an organizing framework to gain a more nuanced understanding of the connections that grandiose narcissism has with how individuals view their own mate value (see Miller & Maples, 2011, for an extended discussion of the differences between *grandiose* narcissism and *vulnerable* narcissism). Much of the previous research concerning narcissism and mate value has treated narcissism as a unidimensional construct despite consistent evidence that it is almost certainly multidimensional (e.g., Ackerman et al., 2011; Brown, Budzek, & Tamborski, 2009). The NARC model is based on a two-dimensional conceptualization of grandiose narcissism that distinguishes between *narcissistic admiration* (an agentic form of narcissism that is characterized by assertive self-enhancement and self-promotion) and *narcissistic rivalry* (an antagonistic form of narcissism that is characterized by self-protection and self-defense). These two forms of narcissism represent quite different – but not mutually exclusive – strategies for maintaining grandiose self-views with narcissistic admiration being an agentic strategy (e.g., self-promotion, striving for uniqueness) and narcissistic rivalry being an antagonistic strategy (e.g., self-defense, derogation of rivals; Back et al., 2013).

Research concerning the NARC model is still in its nascent stages but the small body of existing research has often found narcissistic admiration and narcissistic rivalry to have opposing associations with the outcomes that have been examined so far. Narcissistic admiration tends to be linked with relatively positive outcomes (e.g., high self-esteem, the benign form of envy), whereas narcissistic rivalry is often associated with relatively negative outcomes (e.g., unstable self-esteem, the malicious form of envy; Back et al., 2013; Fatfouta, Zeigler-Hill, & Schröder-Abé, in press; Geukes et al., 2017; Lange, Crusius, & Hagemeyer, 2016). Wurst et al. (2017) recently conducted a series of studies showing that narcissistic admiration is primarily responsible for the short-term romantic appeal of narcissism, whereas narcissistic

rivalry is primarily responsible for the long-term romantic problems connected with narcissism. The results of Wurst et al. (2017) suggest that distinguishing between narcissistic admiration and narcissistic rivalry is important for gaining a more nuanced and complete understanding of the connections that narcissism has with romantic outcomes.

Based on the results of these previous studies concerning the NARC model, we expected narcissistic admiration to be positively associated with self-perceived mate value. This prediction is consistent with the tendency for individuals with high levels of narcissistic admiration to have positive self-views (e.g., Geukes et al., 2017). Further, we expected the positive association between narcissistic admiration and self-perceived mate value to be mediated by the perceived mate value of the romantic partner. That is, we believed that the self-perceived mate value of individuals with high levels of narcissistic admiration may be due, at least in part, to these individuals perceiving their partners as having relatively high levels of mate value. The rationale for this prediction was that individuals with high levels of narcissistic admiration may essentially use the mate value of their romantic partner as a way to bolster their perceptions of their own mate value (e.g., “my romantic partner is attractive so I must also be attractive”). This prediction is consistent with previous findings showing that narcissistic individuals often seek out highly desirable romantic partners (i.e., trophy partners) in order to enhance their own feelings of self-worth (e.g., Campbell, 1999).

Our predictions for narcissistic rivalry were less certain than our predictions for narcissistic admiration. Narcissistic rivalry has been shown to have a negative association with self-esteem (Geukes et al., 2017) which suggests that narcissistic rivalry may also have a negative association with self-perceived mate value. This prediction is consistent with the fact that individuals with high levels of narcissistic rivalry are likely to experience a great deal of negative interpersonal feedback from their social environments due to their adversarial approach to dealing with others (e.g., Back et al., 2013). Further, narcissistic rivalry is characterized by an antagonistic view of the world which suggests that individuals with high levels of narcissistic rivalry may actually devalue their own romantic partners in an effort to maintain their own dominance within the relationship. This led us to expect a negative association between narcissistic rivalry and the perceived mate value of the romantic partner. These predictions are consistent with the idea that narcissistic rivalry involves a blend of insecurity and antagonism that may lead individuals to devalue themselves and their romantic partners. We were uncertain about whether the perceived mate value of the partner would mediate the expected negative association between narcissistic rivalry and self-perceived mate value but we examined this possibility for exploratory purposes.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants and procedure

Participants were 1106 undergraduate students in the Midwestern region of the United States. Participants were enrolled in psychology courses and participated in return for partial fulfillment of a research participation requirement. All participants were involved in a committed heterosexual relationship for a minimum of at least three months. Participants completed measures of narcissism, self-perceived mate value, and perceived partner mate value – along with other instruments that are not relevant to the present study (e.g., self-esteem level) – via a secure website. Data were excluded for 44 participants due to careless or inattentive responding: 18 participants for being univariate outliers, 10 participants for being multivariate outliers as assessed by Mahalanobis distance (Maesschalck, Jouan-Rimbaud, & Massart, 2000), 7 participants for having invariant response patterns as assessed by long-string analysis (Huang, Curran, Keeney, Poposki, & DeShon, 2012; Meade & Craig, 2012), and 9

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