



# Narcissism, gender, and evolutionary theory: The role of private and public self-absorption



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## ABSTRACT

Narcissism manifests differently in men and women, and this may be due to a dysregulated status-seeking evolutionary mechanism. This article describes two studies of relationships between private self-absorption (thinking about oneself), public self-absorption (thinking about how others think about oneself), gender, and narcissism in large samples of U.S. college students. Results of both studies found that, among women, narcissism was associated with both private and public self-absorption, whereas among men, narcissism was associated only with public self-absorption. Additionally, results of both studies found that public self-absorption mediated the relationship between private self-absorption and narcissism and that this relationship was moderated by gender. These results suggest that self-absorption and narcissism share a component of pathological self-focused attention, and that a dysregulated status-seeking mechanism may be involved in narcissism.

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The concept of self-focused attention was introduced by Ingram (1990), but the construct has received relatively little attention from researchers. Ingram proposed that self-focused attention is a dysfunctional component that is present in several psychological disorders, including anxiety and depression, but did not extend this to personality disturbance. Ingram (1990) posited that self-absorption is “excessive, sustained, and rigid attention to information emanating from internal sources” (Ingram, 1990, p. 169). Narcissism may be conceptualized as a pathological form of self-focused attention (Raskin & Hall, 1979; Wink, 1991). The purpose of this study was, from the standpoint of evolutionary theory (see below), to examine relationships between self-absorption, gender, and narcissism in a sample of U.S. college students.

## Self-absorption

There have been a number of conceptualizations of pathological self-awareness (Raskin & Hall, 1979; Wink, 1991) and maladaptive self-focused attention (McKenzie & Hoyle, 2008; Pincus et al., 2009). In this study, we used the conceptualization of McKenzie and Hoyle (2008), who distinguished between private self-absorption and public self-absorption. Private self-absorption reflects excessive thoughts about oneself, which can interfere with an individual's ability to concentrate and perform daily tasks. Public self-absorption reflects excessive thoughts about what others are thinking about oneself, which often

leads to critical thoughts about oneself. Individuals high in public self-absorption are more likely to look to others for behavioral cues, but they are less likely to need others' approval for their behavior (McKenzie & Hoyle, 2008). Although self-absorption is related to rumination and self-consciousness, Ingram (1990) contends that self-consciousness is not suitable for measuring the self-focused attention component in maladaptive cognitions and affect. McKenzie and Hoyle (2008) posit that self-absorption captures the inflexible component of pathological self-awareness while rumination and self-consciousness only capture certain facets. This maladaptive self-focused attention is a characteristic that can be seen in both self-absorption and narcissism scales (McKenzie & Hoyle, 2008; Pincus et al., 2009). In this study, we sought to explore the links between the maladaptive self-focused attention found in self-absorption and narcissism.

## Rumination and self-construals

Given the paucity of research on self-absorption, we explored the literature on similar constructs: rumination and self-construal, with particular attention being paid to gender differences.

Rumination is a response to depression that consists of behaviors and thoughts that focus one's attention to one's depressive symptoms and the implications of these symptoms (Nolen-Hoeksema, 1991). Both rumination and self-absorption involve self-focused attention; however, rumination involves self-focused attention in distress (Nolen-Hoeksema, 1991). Rumination is typically associated with depressive symptoms, and women tend to engage in rumination more than men (Butler & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1994; Jose & Brown, 2008; Nolen-Hoeksema, Larson, & Grayson, 1999). This suggests that there

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are gender differences in cognitive processes that resemble self-focused attention, and that there may be gender differences in other self-related cognitions, like self-absorption, which could drive psychopathology.

Self-construals describe how an individual relates to the self. Markus and Kitayama (1991) suggested two different types of self-construal: independent and interdependent self-construal. Independent self-construal is focused on maintaining a sense of autonomy and individualistic goals. Interdependent self-construal is centered on being connected to and relating the self to others. Men have more independent self-construals, and women have more interdependent self-construals (Cross & Madson, 1997; Markus & Kitayama, 1994). Self-construals share the self-focused attention aspect of self-absorption, but differ in that self-construals pertain to how the individual relates to the self. Public self-absorption is centered on thinking about the self through how others view oneself, which shares similar features with interdependent self-construal (McKenzie & Hoyle, 2008). Consistent with the findings in the self-construal literature, we posit that women will exhibit higher levels of public self-absorption, and that men will exhibit higher levels of private self-absorption.

### Narcissism

Narcissism can be viewed as a category – e.g., the diagnosis of narcissistic personality disorder in the *DSM-5* (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) – or a trait. In this study, we conceptualized narcissism as a trait. Common characteristics of narcissism include high levels of arrogance, grandiosity, and aggression, as well as a need for validation from others (Pincus et al., 2009). Narcissism is often seen as having both normal and pathological dimensions (Raskin & Hall, 1979; Wink, 1991). Normal narcissism has been associated with adaptive effects, such as increased levels of self-esteem (Oldham & Morris, 1995; Sedikides, Rudich, Gregg, Kumashiro, & Rusbul, 2004), while pathological narcissism has been associated with more maladaptive outcomes (Dickinson & Pincus, 2003; Emmons, 1984; Pincus et al., 2009). Researchers have further conceptualized pathological narcissism into grandiose and vulnerability facets (Cain, Pincus, & Ansell, 2008; Pincus et al., 2009; Wink, 1991). Narcissistic grandiosity involves exploitative behavior and is more characteristic of traditionally masculine behavior, like increased levels of aggression. Narcissistic vulnerability reflects shame and helplessness that is experienced when an individual feels their needs for admiration are not met (Dickinson & Pincus, 2003; Pincus et al., 2009). Self-absorption has been hypothesized to be a component of narcissism (Emmons, 1987; Raskin & Hall, 1979); however, we contend that the distinction between private and public self-absorption is different from self-absorption in general. We posit that the need for admiration from others in the narcissistic vulnerability component will interact with the excessive thoughts about what others think about oneself in public self-absorption. The majority of narcissism research has focused on the narcissistic grandiose component due to the heavy use of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Hall, 1979); however, the psychometric properties of this measure have been criticized (del Rosario & White, 2005; Kubarych, Deary, & Austin, 2004). Therefore, the current study sought to examine relationships between self-absorption, narcissism, and gender using more recently derived measures of trait narcissism (Pincus et al., 2009).

Previous research has investigated gender differences in narcissism (for review see Grijalva et al., 2014). Men generally score higher on measures of narcissism compared to women (Foster, Campbell, & Twenge, 2003; Grijalva et al., 2014; Paulhus & Williams, 2002; Tschanz, Morf, & Turner, 1998). One explanation for this trend is that the scales that measure narcissism consist mainly of masculine stereotypic items (Corry, Merritt, Mrug, & Pamp, 2008). These gender differences occur for the grandiose component of narcissism that is measured using the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Hall, 1979), but not for the less studied vulnerability component (Grijalva et al., 2014; Pincus et al., 2009). In this study, we sought to

evaluate this relationship using a newer measure of narcissism from the standpoint of evolutionary theory (Pincus et al., 2009).

### Evolutionary theory

In contrast to social and cognitive theories of gender (Bem, 1981, 1983; Eagly, 1987; Eagly & Wood, 1999), adaptationist evolutionary theories (Campbell & Miller, 2011) contend that status plays an important role in group hierarchies and gender socialization (for review see Buss, 2005). Status has been conceptualized as a basic human motivator that is associated with one's ability to survive and reproduce (Buss, 2005). It has been posited that status is more influential for men because of the role it plays in their active competition for mates and resources (Buss, 2005). Women have also shown preference for high-status men as mates (Feingold, 1992; Pratto, 1996). Gender differences in status characteristics have shown that men are socialized to exhibit more aggression, self-reliance, and fortitude, while women showcase more obedience and restraint (Low, 1989). These male socialization characteristics are similar to masculine characteristics found in narcissism measures, and could help to account for the gender differences observed in narcissism (Corry et al., 2008; Low, 1989).

Although expression of narcissism varies by culture, men tend to exhibit higher levels of narcissism than women (Foster et al., 2003). Adaptationist evolutionary theory posits that narcissism emerged as a variation of trait dominance through changes in mating preferences towards short-term mating (Campbell & Miller, 2011). Men have showcased more interest in short-term mating relationships compared to women (Buss & Schmitt, 1993). This shift away from pair bonding and towards short-term mating is a pattern that Reise and Wright (1996) contend narcissistic individuals are more inclined to exhibit. If narcissism is a pathology of the self that manifests differently in men and women, it is possible that a status-seeking evolutionary mechanism is involved. We conceptualized narcissism as dysregulated status-seeking behavior. Due to the gender differences in status behavior, we predicted that women would have higher levels of public self-absorption, as this is consistent with research on rumination and self-construal and the notion from evolutionary theory that women often gauge their worth from others' evaluations of them. Yet, we expected men to show higher levels of narcissism and for the relationship between public self-absorption and narcissism to be stronger among men than among women, reflecting the notion that men's narcissism would predominantly focus on social status (i.e., public self-absorption), whereas women's narcissism would focus on both thoughts of themselves and social status (i.e., both private self-absorption and public self-absorption).

### Study 1

The purpose of this study was to explore an evolutionary theoretical model of gender and narcissism by investigating the role of private and public self-absorption among U.S. college students. Consistent with our conceptualization of narcissism as dysregulated status-seeking, we hypothesized that, ( $H_1$ ) among men, narcissism would be more closely associated with public self-absorption because it more closely mirrors this dysregulated status-seeking behavior, whereas ( $H_2$ ) among women, narcissism would be more closely associated with both public and private self-absorption. Furthermore, we proposed a model in which, ( $H_3$ ) among men, the relationship between private self-absorption – that is, thinking about oneself – and narcissism would be mediated by public self-absorption, which is thinking about how others view oneself. This reflects our view that, in relationship to their level of narcissism, men's thoughts about the self (private self-absorption) are subsumed by their thoughts about status (public self-absorption). In contrast, ( $H_4$ ) among women we expected private self-absorption to have a direct effect on narcissism as well as an indirect effect through public self-absorption. This reflects our view that women's narcissism

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