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Separating Narcissism From Self-Esteem

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Abstract

Narcissism is a personality trait characterized by a sense of superiority and a desire for respect and admiration from others. A common belief, both in psychology and in popular culture, is that narcissism represents a form of excessive self-esteem. Psychologists, including ourselves, have labeled narcissism as “an exaggerated form of high self-esteem,” “inflated self-esteem,” and “defensive high self-esteem.” We review research that challenges this belief by showing that narcissism differs markedly from self-esteem in its phenotype, its consequences, its development, and its origins. Drawing on emerging developmental-psychological evidence, we propose a distinction between narcissism and self-esteem that is based on the divergent socialization experiences that give rise to them. This proposal clarifies previous findings, stimulates theory development, and creates opportunities for intervention to concurrently raise self-esteem and curtail narcissism from an early age.

Keywords

narcissism, self-esteem, development, socialization, intervention

The mythological figure Narcissus was a handsome, self-aggrandizing, and vain young man who fell in love with his own reflection in a body of water. He was unable to take his eyes off of himself and slowly pined away at the waterside. Psychologists have come to know personalities like his as *narcissistic*. A common belief, both in psychology and in popular culture, is that narcissism represents a form of excessive self-esteem. Psychologists, including ourselves, have labeled narcissism as “an exaggerated form of high self-esteem,” “inflated self-esteem,” and “defensive high self-esteem.” The media have portrayed narcissists as individuals whose self-esteem is “too high” or “on steroids.” This belief presumably arose from early psychoanalytic work, which used the terms *narcissism* and *high self-esteem* interchangeably (Pulver, 1970/1986).

In this article, we challenge the belief that narcissism represents a form of excessive self-esteem. We review accumulating evidence showing that narcissism differs markedly from self-esteem in its phenotype, its consequences, its development, and its origins. What draws the line between narcissism and self-esteem, we argue, is the socialization experiences that give rise to them: Narcissism and self-esteem may be rooted in seemingly similar yet

actually distinct perceptions of regard from others. This proposal clarifies previous findings, stimulates theory development, and creates opportunities for intervention to concurrently raise self-esteem and curtail narcissism from an early age.

Narcissism Versus Self-Esteem

Phenotype

Although well publicized for its extreme form as Narcissistic Personality Disorder, narcissism is a subclinical personality trait on which individuals from the general population vary from one another. Narcissists (i.e., those scoring high on narcissism scales) feel superior to others, believe they are entitled to privileges, and crave respect and admiration from others. They are certain that the world would be a much better place if they ruled it. We focus on prototypical narcissists: the grandiose types

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who feel superior to others on agentic traits (e.g., competence, intelligence, uniqueness) rather than on communal traits (e.g., kindness, helpfulness, warmth; Campbell, Rudich, & Sedikides, 2002; for research on less prototypical, vulnerable narcissists, see Cain, Pincus, & Ansell, 2008). By contrast, high self-esteemers (i.e., those scoring high on self-esteem scales) feel satisfied with themselves as a person but do not necessarily feel superior to others. As Rosenberg (1965) noted, “When we deal with self-esteem, we are asking whether the individual considers himself adequate—a person of worth—not whether he considers himself superior to others” (p. 62).

Thus, narcissism and self-esteem both entail positive views of the self, but these views are qualitatively different. Consistent with their distinct phenotypes, narcissism and self-esteem are only weakly to moderately correlated (Campbell et al., 2002; Thomaes & Brummelman, 2016). Indeed, many narcissists do not have high self-esteem. They see themselves as decidedly better than their fellow humans, but they are not happy with themselves.¹ Conversely, many high self-esteemers are not narcissistic. They value themselves, but they shy away from seeing themselves as better than others.

Consequences

Disparities between narcissism and self-esteem often emerge in the social realm. Narcissists do not have a burning desire to establish deep, intimate bonds with others; rather, they strive to surpass others, to dominate others, and to use others to attain social status (Campbell et al., 2002). They aspire to get ahead rather than to get along. When they receive the respect and admiration they crave, narcissists feel on top of the world, but when they don't, they feel like sinking into the ground (Tracy, Cheng, Robins, & Trzesniewski, 2009). Narcissists often externalize these feelings of shame by lashing out aggressively (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Thomaes, Bushman, Stegge, & Olthof, 2008). The so-called narcissistic rage turns the feeling “I am bad” into “You are bad.” Narcissists also commit more delinquent acts than their non-narcissistic counterparts (Barry, Grafeman, Adler, & Pickard, 2007). In sharp contrast, high self-esteemers do not wish to surpass others, to dominate others, or to use others for their own good; rather, they desire to establish deep, intimate bonds with others (Campbell et al., 2002). They aspire to get along rather than to get ahead. They also do not typically explode in aggressive outbursts and are unlikely to commit delinquent acts (Donnellan, Trzesniewski, Robins, Moffitt, & Caspi, 2005).

Wouldn't it at least feel good to be a narcissist? Perhaps it would. Narcissism is associated with subjective well-being, such as happiness and low levels of depression, anxiety, and loneliness. However, these

associations are fully accounted for by self-esteem (Orth, Robins, Meier, & Conger, 2015; Sedikides, Rudich, Gregg, Kumashiro, & Rusbult, 2004). Thus, narcissism benefits subjective well-being only insofar as it is associated with high self-esteem.

Development

Narcissism and self-esteem first emerge in late childhood, from about age 7 (Thomaes, Stegge, Bushman, Olthof, & Denissen, 2008). At that age, children have fully acquired the cognitive capacities to form global self-evaluations (Harter, 2012), which underlie narcissism and self-esteem. Also, children this age readily use social comparisons to evaluate themselves (Harter, 2012), enabling narcissistic self-views such as “I am special” (“—and more special than everyone else!”). Although narcissism and self-esteem manifest at the same age, they diverge in their normative developmental trajectories. Narcissism peaks in adolescence and then gradually decreases throughout adulthood (Foster, Campbell, & Twenge, 2003). By contrast, self-esteem reaches its lowest point in adolescence and then gradually increases throughout adulthood (Robins, Trzesniewski, Tracy, Gosling, & Potter, 2002). Thus, over the life course, narcissism rises when self-esteem falls, and vice versa.

Origins

Narcissism and self-esteem are moderately heritable (Neiss, Sedikides, & Stevenson, 2002; Vernon, Villani, Vickers, & Harris, 2008). Yet they are shaped by markedly distinct socialization experiences. Although several studies have addressed this topic, most of them were cross-sectional and relied on adults' recollections of their childhood socialization experiences (for overviews, see Horton, 2011; Thomaes & Brummelman, 2016). People often misremember their experiences, especially childhood experiences. Overcoming these limitations, a recent study followed 565 children and their parents prospectively over four measurement waves (Brummelman, Thomaes, Nelemans, Orobio de Castro, Overbeek, & Bushman, 2015a). Narcissism was nurtured by *parental overvaluation*—how much parents saw their child as a special individual entitled to privileges. Overvaluing parents overclaim their child's knowledge, overestimate their child's IQ, and overpraise their child's performances, while directing their child to stand out from others by giving him or her an uncommon first name (Brummelman, Thomaes, Nelemans, Orobio de Castro, & Bushman, 2015). Over time, this socialization practice may lead children to internalize the view of themselves as superior individuals, which is at the core of narcissism. By contrast, self-esteem was nurtured by *parental warmth*—how

much parents treated their child with affection and appreciation. Warm parents express fondness for their child, share positive affect with their child, and foster in their child the feeling that he or she matters. Over time, this socialization practice may lead children to internalize the view of themselves as worthy individuals, which is at the core of self-esteem.

What Underlies Narcissism and Self-Esteem?

Knowledge of the origins of narcissism and self-esteem provides insight into their similarities and differences. Symbolic interactionism holds that children come to see themselves as they believe they are seen by significant others (Harter, 2012). Consistent with this view, narcissism and self-esteem are similar in that they arise, in part, from the internalization of regard from significant others. They are different, however, in that they arise from distinct forms of regard—parental overvaluation versus parental warmth. Experiences of overvaluation may lead to the core belief underlying narcissism: “I am superior to others.” Experiences of warmth may lead to the core belief underlying self-esteem: “I am worthy.”

Thus, narcissism and self-esteem may represent distinct perceptions of regard from others. Unlike previous theorizing, this view is based on empirical knowledge of the origins of narcissism and self-esteem. Some theorists have proposed that “self-esteem rests on qualities which a person actually possesses, while [narcissism] implies presenting to the self and to others qualities or achievements for which there is no adequate foundation” (Horney, 1939, p. 99). We argue that individuals largely derive narcissism and self-esteem not from their qualities, but rather from their perceptions of others’ regard for them. Other theorists have proposed that high self-esteem means thinking well of oneself, whereas narcissism means passionately wanting to think well of oneself (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998). We propose, instead, that narcissists and high self-esteemers both think well of themselves. But they do so in drastically different ways: Narcissists think of themselves as superior to others (reflecting a vertical, hierarchical view of themselves in relation to others), whereas high self-esteemers think of themselves as worthy (reflecting a horizontal, nonhierarchical view of themselves in relation to others).

Questions arise. Narcissists crave respect and admiration. If narcissists truly feel superior, why would they so desperately want others to validate their superiority? One popular view is that narcissists crave such validation because, deep down inside, they dislike themselves. However, there is no consistent evidence that narcissists harbor such implicit self-loathing (Bosson et al., 2008; Gregg & Sedikides, 2010). We suggest, instead, that narcissists crave

validation because their sense of superiority is precarious—much more precarious than high self-esteemers’ sense of worth. Although everyone can be worthy, not everyone can be superior. Indeed, the quest for superiority is a zero-sum game: For every winner there is a loser, and for every loser there is a winner (Back et al., 2013; Crocker & Canevello, 2008). Thus, narcissists may need continuous validation from others to believe that they are still the winner and not yet the loser.

Do narcissists succeed in attaining external validation? Because they are charming at first sight, they receive validation at the early stages of acquaintance. Yet unlike high self-esteemers, narcissists have an antagonistic orientation toward others: They are disagreeable, arrogant, and manipulative, and they also look down on others (Miller, Price, Gentile, Lynam, & Campbell, 2012; O’Boyle, Forsyth, Banks, Story, & White, 2014). As relationships grow closer, these traits come to the surface, and narcissists gradually lose the very validation they crave (Leckelt, Küfner, Nestler, & Back, 2015). This loss, in turn, may fuel narcissists’ initial craving for external validation, thus creating a self-sustaining spiral of validation seeking.

Over the past few decades, several scholarly debates have focused on the promises and perils of self-love, with narcissism and self-esteem often being conflated (Swann, Chang-Schneider, & McClarty, 2007). Thus, from a basic-research standpoint, we encourage researchers to demarcate clearly narcissism from self-esteem and to investigate their shared and unique phenotypes, consequences, development, and origins. We specifically encourage researchers to deepen their involvement in the origins of narcissism and self-esteem, as this topic can further clarify the fundamental differences between the two constructs. From an applied-research standpoint, we encourage psychologists to rethink their intervention efforts. Psychologists have feared that widespread efforts intended to raise self-esteem might inadvertently create a generation of narcissists (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003; Twenge & Campbell, 2009). However, a precise understanding of the distinct roots of narcissism and self-esteem might enable interventions to raise self-esteem while simultaneously curtailing narcissism.

Implications for Intervention

Since the early ’70s, Western society has become increasingly concerned about children’s self-esteem. In their well-intended efforts to boost self-esteem, parents, educators, and interventionists have heavily relied on praising children for being special and extraordinary. Rather than raising self-esteem, such “overvaluing” practices may breed narcissism (Brummelman, Thomaes, Nelemans, Orobio de Castro, Overbeek, & Bushman, 2015a). Thus, what seems like common sense may have led people

astray. Over the past few years, several proof-effective self-esteem interventions have been initiated (O'Mara, Marsh, Craven, & Debus, 2006), but their impact on narcissism remains unknown.

A priority for research is to develop interventions that concurrently raise self-esteem and curb narcissism by precisely targeting their roots. One promising approach is to address the socialization practices that give rise to narcissism and self-esteem (Brummelman, Thomaes, Nelemans, Orobio de Castro, Overbeek, & Bushman, 2015b). Interventions can teach parents and educators to express affection and appreciation to children without proclaiming them to be superior to others. By doing so, parents and educators may help children feel happy with themselves without seeing themselves as better than others. Such an approach would require existing parent-training and educational interventions to be refined, because many of them focus on providing children with regard (e.g., praise, encouragement) without carefully distinguishing between different types of regard.

Another promising approach is to address directly the core beliefs underlying narcissism and self-esteem: the belief that one is superior to others versus the belief that one is worthy. Psychologically precise interventions can effectively change individuals' core beliefs, which may feed into changes in more stable traits (Dweck, 2008). Experimental work has begun to explore this approach. For example, nudging individuals away from their superiority beliefs (e.g., by having them think about what makes them similar to others) reduces narcissism levels (Giacomin & Jordan, 2014). Helping people internalize others' appreciation (e.g., by having them describe the meaning and significance of others' kind words) raises self-esteem levels, especially among those who need it the most: low self-esteemers (Marigold, Holmes, & Ross, 2007).

These approaches may be most effective when timed in late childhood. At that age, children readily evaluate themselves from others' perspective (Harter, 2012), thus creating leverage for intervention. Also, their self-views are relatively unstable (Trzesniewski, Donnellan, & Robins, 2003), rendering them more susceptible to change. Indeed, from adolescence onward, children's self-views may be more resistant to socialization influences (Harris et al., 2015).

Conclusion

Ever since Narcissus wandered into the psychological literature, scholars have attempted to uncover his true personality. One of the most common beliefs—that narcissism is an extreme manifestation of high self-esteem—is as intuitive as it is incorrect. By demarcating narcissism from self-esteem, and by identifying their distinct roots, we

hope to provide researchers and practitioners with a framework to guide their further inquiries into the mysteries of self-love.

Recommended Reading

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- Campbell, W. K., & Miller, J. D. (Eds.). (2011). *The handbook of narcissism and narcissistic personality disorder: Theoretical approaches, empirical findings, and treatments*. New York, NY: Wiley. A handbook that covers recent advances in research on narcissism, including grandiose versus vulnerable narcissism.
- Morf, C. C., & Rhodewalt, F. (2001). Unraveling the paradoxes of narcissism: A dynamic self-regulatory processing model. *Psychological Inquiry, 12*, 177–196. An influential model that casts narcissism as a self-regulatory process that strives toward the overarching goal of creating and maintaining a grandiose self.
- Orth, U., & Robins, R. W. (2014). The development of self-esteem. *Current Directions in Psychological Science, 23*, 381–387. An accessible overview of research on the development and consequences of self-esteem across the life span.
- Thomaes, S., & Brummelman, E. (2016). (See References). A comprehensive review of theory and research on youth narcissism, including early research on the link between socialization experiences and narcissism.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared that they had no conflicts of interest with respect to their authorship or the publication of this article.

Note

1. Some scholars have argued that high self-esteemers can be non-narcissistic but that narcissists rarely have low self-esteem (Baumeister et al., 2003). However, recent person-centered analyses (which identify meaningful subgroups of individuals) have indicated that narcissists can have low self-esteem (Nelemans et al., 2015).

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