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Handbook of Trait Narcissism

Key Advances, Research Methods, and Controversies

Springer

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Preface

We are very pleased to present *The Handbook of Trait Narcissism: Key Advances, Research Methods, and Controversies*. This handbook is the first of its kind, an edited volume devoted to the latest theoretical and empirical developments on individual differences in narcissism in personality and social psychology. Ours, however, is not the first "handbook" dedicated to narcissism; Campbell and Miller (2011) paved the way with one which sought to bridge the clinical and personality-social "divide" providing a much-needed summary of recent work from both academic spheres. Our effort here is somewhat less ambitious but comes at a time in which narcissism research is exploding and theoretical development is happening at a rapid pace. According to PsychINFO, there have been over 1600 peer-reviewed journal articles published on the subject of narcissism since January of 2011, a more than 50% increase from all those published since the Narcissistic Personality Inventory was published in 1979! In order to accommodate as many topics as possible, we have adopted a "brief chapter" approach in which we have asked authors to summarize cutting-edge research and suggest future research directions in less than 3500 words. We believe this also serves the reader as well, as it makes it quicker and easier than ever before to keep abreast of the latest developments. We hope this handbook will serve the seasoned narcissism researcher trying to keep up with this rapidly advancing and fluid field, the novice researcher or student trying to gain a theoretical foothold, as well as the journalist or member of the public who desires an accurate yet accessible depiction of the science of narcissism.

Our editorial duties for this volume have given us a "bird's eye" view of our field and we have several observations to offer our readers. First, narcissism research has spread to a dramatically wider variety of domains since Campbell and Miller's (2011) volume. For example, our handbook includes chapters on topics like followership, memory, friendship, envy, religiosity, and bullying–topics that did not appear in the Campbell and Miller's (2011) handbook. Moreover, new and fascinating empirical perspectives on the development of narcissism have appeared in the intervening years, which include advances in our understanding of the impact of parenting, economic conditions, behavioral genetics, and other factors, all of which can be found in the current volume.

Our initial intention was to develop a book that focused exclusively on grandiose narcissism research. However, we quickly realized that the literature on vulnerable narcissism had exploded recently as well and was often so

intimately linked to research on grandiose narcissism that it was impractical, and even misleading, to avoid the topic altogether. As a result, a substantial portion of the handbook addresses developments in the literatures on both grandiose and vulnerable narcissism. For example, we have four chapters entirely devoted to making key empirical and theoretical distinctions between the two constructs, and a great many chapters address vulnerable narcissism as a substantial subtopic. Questions remain, however, regarding which core traits vulnerable and grandiose narcissism share and how to best conceptualize these distinct (i.e., weakly correlated) personality traits. Moreover, the conceptual and empirical relation between grandiose narcissism, vulnerable narcissism, and the more clinically oriented constructs of pathological narcissism and narcissistic personality disorder remain underdeveloped. Nevertheless, we think readers of this volume will come away with a more nuanced understanding of narcissism and its many varieties.

A good deal of recent research has also made it very clear that individual differences in grandiosity and self-inflation can take many forms. For example, recent work on communal and collective narcissism has made a compelling case that trait self-aggrandizement can be based on prosocial traits ("I am the most charitable person!") and also be held on behalf of one's social group ("We are the best country on Earth!"). These developments have clearly arisen, at least in part, because there is still ample room in the field for psychometric and theoretical innovation. On the other hand, we still lack consensus on how to best measure many of our core constructs and those that are relevant, albeit distinct, from narcissism. The good news is that new and theoretically driven measures are emerging, which serve as useful tools as we seek to advance our knowledge in a more concerted and cumulative fashion.

As we present this work to you, we are filled with gratitude for the excellent contributions of all our authors and to be a part of an intellectually exciting field that is more relevant than ever. The three of us approached this daunting project with a combined sense of excitement and more than a little anxiety. Our anxieties were quickly replaced with feelings of appreciation and indebtedness, however, when we began to receive drafts of the individual chapters. They were overwhelmingly punctual and well-written and required modest levels of editing on our parts. We are so thankful to the contributors, who so clearly put significant effort into their chapters, and did so almost entirely as an act of collegiality. Who knew that narcissism researchers could be so selfless? More specifically, we are thankful for collegial support and advice from W. Keith Campbell and the encouragement and assistance of Morgan Ryan at Springer, without which this book would have never made it off the ground.

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Contents

Part I Definitional and Theoretical Perspectives on Narcissism

1 **Distinguishing Between Grandiose Narcissism, Vulnerable Narcissism, and Narcissistic Personality Disorder** 3
Brandon Weiss and Joshua D. Miller

2 **The Narcissism Spectrum Model: A Spectrum Perspective on Narcissistic Personality** 15
Zlatan Krizan

3 **Perceived Control Theory of Narcissism** 27
Ashley A. Hansen-Brown

4 **The Distinctiveness Model of the Narcissistic Subtypes (DMNS): What Binds and Differentiates Grandiose and Vulnerable Narcissism** 37
Stephanie D. Freis

5 **What Separates Narcissism from Self-esteem? A Social-Cognitive Perspective** 47
Eddie Brummelman, Çisem Gürel, Sander Thomaes, and Constantine Sedikides

6 **The Narcissistic Admiration and Rivalry Concept** 57
Mitja D. Back

7 **Communal Narcissism: Theoretical and Empirical Support** 69
Jochen E. Gebauer and Constantine Sedikides

8 **Collective Narcissism: Antecedents and Consequences of Exaggeration of the In-Group Image** 79
Agnieszka Golec de Zavala

9 **The Psychodynamic Mask Model of Narcissism: Where Is It Now?** 89
Sophie L. Kuchynka and Jennifer K. Bosson

10 **Distinguishing Between Adaptive and Maladaptive Narcissism** 97
Huajian Cai and Yu L. L. Luo

11 **State Narcissism** 105
Miranda Giacomin and Christian H. Jordan

Part II Assessment of Narcissism

12 **The Many Measures of Grandiose Narcissism** 115
Joshua D. Foster, Jennifer A. Brantley, Melissa L. Kern, Jan-Louw Kotze, Brett A. Slagel, and Krisztina Szabo

13 **Psychometric Properties of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory** 125
Robert A. Ackerman, Conrad A. Corretti, and Kevin J. Carson

14 **Using Homogenous Scales to Understand Narcissism: Grandiosity, Entitlement, and Exploitativeness** 133
Amy B. Brunell and Melissa T. Buelow

Part III Causes and Development of Narcissism

15 **Parents' Socialization of Narcissism in Children** 143
Sander Thomaes and Eddie Brummelman

16 **The Etiology of Narcissism: A Review of Behavioral Genetic Studies** 149
Yu L. L. Luo and Huajian Cai

17 **Narcissism and the Economic Environment** 157
Emily C. Bianchi

18 **Narcissism as a Life Span Construct: Describing Fluctuations Using New Approaches** 165
Patrick L. Hill and Brent W. Roberts

19 **Did Narcissism Evolve?** 173
Nicholas S. Holtzman

20 **Generational Differences in Narcissism and Narcissistic Traits** 183
Joshua B. Grubbs and Allison C. Riley

Part IV Intrapersonal Processes and Narcissism

21 **Narcissism and Dark Personality Traits** 195
Imani N. Turner and Gregory D. Webster

22 **Narcissism and the Big Five/HEXACO Models of Personality** 205
Beth A. Visser

23 **Physiological Reactivity and Neural Correlates of Trait Narcissism** 213
Elizabeth A. Krusemark

24 **Narcissism and Memory** 225
Lara L. Jones

25 **Narcissism and Involvement in Risk-Taking Behaviors** 233
Melissa T. Buelow and Amy B. Brunell

26 **How Do Narcissists Really Feel About Themselves? The Complex Connections Between Narcissism and Self-Esteem** 243
Ashton C. Southard, Virgil Zeigler-Hill, Jennifer K. Vrabel, and Gillian A. McCabe

27 **How Does It Feel to Be a Narcissist? Narcissism and Emotions** 255
Anna Z. Czarna, Marcin Zajenkowski, and Michael Dufner

28 **Understanding the Narcissistic Need for Perfection: The Most Dazzling, Perfect, and Comprehensive Review Ever** 265
Martin M. Smith, Simon B. Sherry, and Donald H. Saklofske

29 **What Do Narcissists Know About Themselves? Exploring the Bright Spots and Blind Spots of Narcissists' Self-Knowledge** 275
Erika N. Carlson and Reem Khafagy

30 **Narcissists' Perceptions of Narcissistic Behavior** 283
William Hart, Gregory K. Tortoriello, and Kyle Richardson

31 **Narcissistic Consumption** 291
Constantine Sedikides, Claire M. Hart, and Sylwia Z. Cisek

32 **The Narcissistic Pursuit of Status** 299
Virgil Zeigler-Hill, Gillian A. McCabe, Jennifer K. Vrabel, Christopher M. Raby, and Sinead Cronin

Part V Interpersonal Processes and Narcissism

33 **Early Impressions of Grandiose Narcissists: A Dual-Pathway Perspective** 309
Mitja D. Back, Albrecht C. P. Küfner, and Marius Leckelt

34 **Narcissism and Romantic Relationships** 317
Joshua D. Foster and Amy B. Brunell

35 **Narcissistic Qualities and Infidelity** 327
James K. McNulty and Laura Widman

36 **Understanding and Mitigating Narcissists' Low Empathy** 335
Claire M. Hart, Erica G. Hepper, and Constantine Sedikides

37 **Narcissism and Friendships** 345
Ulrike Maass, Caroline Wehner, and Matthias Ziegler

38 **New Directions in Narcissistic Aggression: The Role of the Self-concept on Group-Based Aggression** 355
Daniel N. Jones and Adon L. Neria

39 **Narcissism's Relationship with Envy: It's Complicated** 363
Darren C. Neufeld and Edward A. Johnson

40 **Narcissism and Prosocial Behavior** 371
Sara Konrath and Yuan Tian

41 **Grandiose Narcissism and Religiosity** 379
Anthony D. Hermann and Robert C. Fuller

42 **Narcissism and Spirituality: Intersections of Self, Superiority, and the Search for the Sacred** 389
Joshua B. Grubbs, Nicholas Stauner, Joshua A. Wilt, and Julie J. Exline

43 **Narcissism and Leadership: A Perfect Match?** 399
Barbara Nevicka

44 **Narcissistic Followership** 409
Alex J. Benson and Christian H. Jordan

45 **Trait Narcissism and Social Networks** 415
Allan Clifton

Part VI Applied Issues in Narcissism Research

46 **Momentarily Quieting the Ego: Short-Term Strategies for Reducing Grandiose Narcissism** 425
Miranda Giacomin and Christian H. Jordan

47 **Social Media: Platform or Catalyst for Narcissism?** 435
Christopher T. Barry and Katrina H. McDougall

48 **Theoretical Perspectives on Narcissism and Social Media: The Big (and Beautiful) Picture** 443
W. Keith Campbell and Jessica McCain

49 **Narcissism and Bullying** 455
Kostas A. Fanti and Georgia Frangou

50 **Interpersonal Functioning of Narcissistic Individuals and Implications for Treatment Engagement** 463
Joanna Lamkin

51 **The Treatment of Trait and Narcissistic Personality Disturbances** 471
Jeffrey J. Magnavita

Index 481

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Amy B. Brunell is an Associate Professor at The Ohio State University, Mansfield. She received her M.A. in Psychology from the College of William and Mary and her Ph.D. from the University of Georgia in 2007. She teaches courses in social psychology, personality, the self, and interpersonal relationships. Her research concerns the role of narcissism in social contexts, such as emergent leadership, decision making, academic cheating, as well as romantic relationship behaviors. She has published papers in academic journals such as *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, and the *Journal of Research in Personality*. She serves on the editorial board of *Assessment*. She prides herself in conducting and evaluating research with her undergraduate students to help them prepare for graduate school and beyond.

Joshua D. Foster a Washington, D.C. native, earned his Ph.D. in Social Psychology from the University of Georgia in 2005. Since then, he has been a member of the Behavior and Brain Sciences faculty (Psychology Department) at the University of South Alabama where he was awarded tenure in 2011 and promoted to rank of Full Professor in 2017. Dr. Foster's principal areas of research are personality and individual differences, psychometrics, and latent variable modeling. He has published more than 50 papers that have been cited more than 6000 times in the literature. His work has also been featured in a variety of newspapers and magazines, including the *New York Times*, the *Boston Globe*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and the *Huffington Post*. Dr. Foster has mentored numerous students in his laboratory who have gone on to graduate programs, including University of Alabama at Tuscaloosa, University of Alabama at Birmingham, Columbia University, Colorado State

University, University of Florida, University of Georgia, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and Penn State University. When not working, he enjoys watching television, playing video games, thinking about exercising, and hanging out with his family. His wife, Dr. M. Hope Jackson, is a practicing clinical psychologist who specializes in treating anxiety, mood, and eating disorders. Together, they have two boys, Mathew and Colin, who specialize in being silly.

Part I

Definitional and Theoretical Perspectives on Narcissism

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What Separates Narcissism from Self-esteem? A Social-Cognitive Perspective

5

Eddie Brummelman, Çisem Gürel, Sander Thomaes, and Constantine Sedikides

Abstract

Psychologists claim that narcissists have inflated, exaggerated, or excessive self-esteem. Media reports state that narcissists suffer from self-esteem on steroids. The conclusion seems obvious: Narcissists have too much self-esteem. A growing body of research shows, however, that narcissism and self-esteem are only weakly related. What, then, separates narcissism from self-esteem? We argue that narcissism and self-esteem are rooted in distinct *core beliefs*—beliefs about the nature of the self, of others, and of the relationship between the self and others. These beliefs arise early in development, are cultivated by distinct socialization practices, and create unique behavioral patterns. Emerging experimental research shows that these beliefs can be changed through precise intervention, leading to changes at the level of narcissism and self-esteem. An important task for future research will be to develop interventions that simultaneously lower narcissism and raise self-esteem from an early age.

Keywords

Narcissism · Self-esteem · Core beliefs · Childhood · Stability · Socialization · Intervention

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> Around the time of grammar school I had this incredible desire to be recognized. […] I got the feeling that I was meant to be more than just an average guy running around, that I was chosen to do something special. At that point, I didn't think about money. I thought about the fame, about just being the greatest. I was dreaming about being some dictator of a country or some savior like Jesus. Just to be recognized.
> —Arnold Schwarzenegger, in an interview with *Rolling Stone* (Peck, 1976)[1]

As a young adolescent, Arnold Schwarzenegger was already thinking like a narcissist. He saw himself as a superior being, while seeing others as "average guy[s] running around." Yet, despite looking down on others, he still depended on them to achieve what he valued above all else: recognition. In fact, he used his social relationships as a means to achieve recognition. And it did not matter how he achieved it—whether by being a dictator or a savior. As we know now, he ended up as bodybuilder, actor, and politician, all professions that allowed him to wallow in the limelight.

But did Arnold Schwarzenegger have high self-esteem? Despite his clearly narcissistic self-views, nowhere did he mention that he was happy with the person he was or that he considered himself worthy or valuable. This is surprising, given that conventional wisdom tells us that narcissism is a form of high self-esteem. In this chapter, we argue that narcissism and self-esteem are two distinct dimensions of the self. We focus on prototypical, grandiose narcissism, rather than on its vulnerable counterpart (Cain, Pincus, & Ansell, 2008; Miller et al., 2011). We suggest that recognizing the line that runs through narcissism and self-esteem is key to scholarly efforts toward helping people develop healthy views of themselves.

Conventional Wisdom

People intuitively infer that narcissism and self-esteem are intimately linked. In his essay *On Narcissism*, Freud (1914/1957) wrote that "self-regard appears to us to be an expression of the size of the ego" (p. 98). Today, the *American Heritage Dictionary* defines narcissism as "excessive […] admiration of oneself," and self-esteem as "pride in oneself." This definition suggests that narcissism simply represents an excess of self-esteem—taking too much pride in oneself. This belief exists among experts and laypersons alike. Psychologists, including ourselves, have defined narcissism as a form of "excessive self-esteem," "inflated self-esteem," "exaggerated self-esteem," "unwarranted self-esteem," or "defensive high self-esteem." Similarly, media reports have labeled narcissism as "self-esteem on steroids" or "blown-up self-esteem." The conclusion seems obvious: Narcissists like themselves a little too much.

However, narcissism and self-esteem might be much more distinct than conventional wisdom has led people to believe (Brummelman, Thomaes, & Sedikides, 2016). If narcissism really is an inflated form of self-esteem, narcissism and self-esteem should correlate strongly, and there should be no narcissists with low self-esteem. However, the correlation between narcissism and self-esteem is only weak or modest (Campbell, Rudich, & Sedikides, 2002; Thomaes & Brummelman, 2016) and becomes even weaker when researchers use more valid measures of narcissism and self-esteem (Brown & Zeigler-Hill, 2004) and when they encourage narcissists to report their self-esteem truthfully (Myers & Zeigler-Hill, 2012). Moreover, latent class analysis shows that there are narcissists with low self-esteem; in fact, there are about as many narcissists with low self-esteem as there are narcissists with high self-esteem (Nelemans et al., 2017).

A Social-Cognitive Perspective

These findings beg the question: What separates narcissism from self-esteem? We approach this question from a social-cognitive perspective (Brummelman, 2017; Olson & Dweck, 2008). Rather than describing the stable patterns of behavior that characterize narcissism and self-esteem, we identify underlying core beliefs of

[1]Even when we describe individuals, we would not and could not diagnose them as "narcissists." Our chapter focuses on narcissism as an everyday, subclinical personality trait, not as a personality disorder.

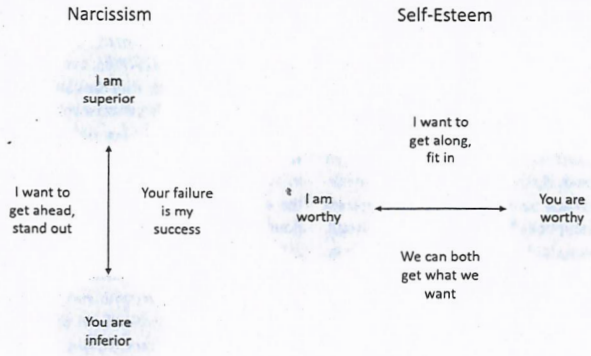

Fig. 5.1 The belief system underlying narcissism and self-esteem

narcissists and people with high self-esteem (hereafter: high self-esteemers). These beliefs concern the nature of the self, of others, and of the relationship between the self and others (Fig. 5.1). Such beliefs can create stable behavioral patterns by shaping what goals people pursue and by guiding how people perceive, select, modify, and respond to their environments.

Beliefs About the Self

Narcissists believe they are inherently superior to their fellow humans. When Ernest Jones (1913/1951) described narcissism as a personality trait, he labeled it the God Complex, echoing narcissists' belief in their own greatness. Narcissists see themselves as superior on agentic traits such as competence and intelligence, but not on communal traits such as warmth and kindness (Campbell et al., 2002). In addition, they hold exalted views of themselves even if such views conflict with reality (Grijalva & Zhang, 2016). For example, narcissists think they are superb leaders when they hinder group performance (Nevicka, Ten Velden, De Hoogh, & Van Vianen, 2011); they believe they are interpersonally attractive when others do not think so (Gabriel, Critelli, & Ee, 1994); and they see themselves as geniuses when their IQ scores are not on par (Paulhus, Harms, Bruce, & Lysy, 2003).

By contrast, high self-esteemers believe they are worthy, but do not consider themselves superior to others. As Morris Rosenberg (1965) wrote, "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). Whereas narcissists primarily value their agentic traits, high self-esteemers value both their agentic and their communal traits (Campbell et al., 2002). And while narcissists close their eyes to reality, high self-esteemers' views of themselves are more grounded in reality (Gabriel et al., 1994).

Beliefs About Others

Unsurprising given their sense of superiority, narcissists look down on others. Not only do they believe that others are subservient to them (Park & Colvin, 2015), they sometimes even dehumanize others (Locke, 2009). Yet, at the same time, narcissists covet others' admiration. Roseanne Barr expressed this sentiment in an interview with *Gear Magazine*: "I hate every human being on earth," she said, "I feel that everyone is beneath me, and I feel they should all worship

me" (Guccione, 2000). According to some researchers, narcissists are addicted to admiration: They crave admiration, are tolerant to its effects, and experience withdrawal symptoms when it is withheld (Baumeister & Vohs, 2001; Thomaes & Brummelman, 2016). To elicit admiration, narcissists strive to stand out and get ahead (Wallace & Baumeister, 2002), even in settings where such behavior is inappropriate (Sedikides, Campbell, Reeder, Elliot, & Gregg, 2002). For example, even in their close relationships, narcissists attempt to dominate others, surpass others, and ridicule others (Campbell, Foster, & Finkel, 2002; Keller et al., 2014).

To a great degree, narcissists base their sense of worth on others' admiration for them. When they are admired, they feel on top of the world; but when they are not, they feel like sinking into the ground (Brummelman, Nikolić, & Bögels, 2018; Tracy, Cheng, Robins, & Trzesniewski, 2009). Narcissists often externalize these feelings of shame by lashing out angrily or aggressively against others (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Thomaes, Bushman, Stegge, & Olthof, 2008; Thomaes, Stegge, Olthof, Bushman, & Nezlek, 2011). This process, known as *humiliated fury* or the *shame-rage cycle*, can escalate into acts of violence; for example, case studies suggest that narcissism puts youth at risk for school shootings (Verlinden, Hersen, & Thomas, 2000).

In contrast, high self-esteemers do not look down on others or dehumanize others (Locke, 2009; Park & Colvin, 2015); they believe that others have intrinsic worth and do not see others as a means to obtain admiration. Even if they are rejected by others, high self-esteemers are unlikely to feel ashamed or to lash out; rather, they tend to forgive others and seek reconciliation with them (Eaton, Ward Struthers, & Santelli, 2006; Murray, Rose, Bellavia, Holmes, & Kusche, 2002).

Beliefs About Relationships

Narcissists believe that their relationships follow a *zero-sum principle*: Only one of us can be the best, so your failure is my success, and my success is your failure (Brummelman et al., 2016). Narcissists desire to get ahead rather than get along (Thomaes, Stegge, Bushman, Olthof, & Denissen, 2008), even in interdependent settings. When they collaborate with others, narcissists praise themselves for successes, blame their partners for failures (Campbell, Reeder, Sedikides, & Elliot, 2000), and attempt to secure short-term benefits for themselves, at the expense of their partners and the common good (Campbell, Bush, Brunell, & Shelton, 2005). Unsurprisingly, this puts a strain on their relationships: Narcissists' charming first impressions crumble with the passage of time (Leckelt, Küfner, Nestler, & Back, 2015; Paulhus, 1998).

In sharp contrast, high self-esteemers believe that their relationships follow a *non-zero-sum principle*: We can both be worthy, so we can both get what we want (Crocker, Canevello, & Lewis, 2017). High self-esteemers desire to get along rather than get ahead (Thomaes et al., 2008). Thus, they are likely to care for others, share with others, and help others in their goal pursuits (Zuffianò et al., 2016). This benefits their relationships: High self-esteemers are well-liked by others, even in the long run (De Bruyn & Van Den Boom, 2005; Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 2000).

Research Priorities

Whereas much existing research describes the stable patterns of behavior that characterize narcissism and self-esteem, we attempted to uncover the core beliefs that give rise to those behavioral patterns. Our social-cognitive approach builds on classic theories of personality that feature beliefs, such as cognitive-affective encodings (Mischel & Shoda, 1995), basic beliefs (Epstein, 2003), implicit theories (Dweck & Leggett, 1988), working models (Bowlby, 1969), schemas (Young, 1994), personal myths (McAdams, 1993), and personal constructs (Kelly, 1955). Core beliefs can be defined precisely, measured directly, and changed effectively. Our approach thus enables researchers to peer under the surface of narcissism and self-esteem: to trace their origins, understand their stability, and explore their malleability.

Origins

One issue is where narcissism and self-esteem come from. Both emerge around the age of 7 (Thomaes & Brummelman, 2016), when children begin to make global self-evaluations (e.g., "I am great!") and to use social-comparison information for the purpose of self-evaluation (e.g., "I am better than others!").

Although partly genetic (Neiss, Sedikides, & Stevenson, 2002; Vernon, Villani, Vickers, & Harris, 2008), narcissism and self-esteem are shaped by the social environment. Longitudinal research has revealed that they arise from distinct socialization experiences in childhood (Brummelman et al., 2015; Brummelman, Nelemans, Thomaes, & Orobio de Castro, 2017; also see Harris et al., 2017). Narcissism is nurtured, at least in part, by *parental overvaluation*—how much parents see their own child as extraordinary and entitled. Overvaluing parents overestimate, overclaim, and overpraise their child's qualities, while helping the child stand out, for example, by giving him or her an uncommon first name (Brummelman, Thomaes, Nelemans, Orobio de Castro, & Bushman, 2015). From these experiences, children infer that they are superior, the core belief underlying narcissism. By contrast, self-esteem is nurtured, at least in part, by *parental warmth*—how much parents treat their child with affection and appreciation. Warm parents value their child's company, share joy with the child, and show interest in the child's activities (Davidov & Grusec, 2006; Rohner, 2004). From these experiences, children infer that they are worthy, the core belief underlying self-esteem.

The research agenda should deepen our understanding of these socialization processes. What are the precise behavioral manifestations of parental overvaluation and warmth? What inferences do children make based on those manifestations? And how do these inferences come to bear on new situations? Researchers should also study socialization influences outside of the family context. Especially when children transition into adolescence, peers begin to assume the role of socializing agents (Crone & Dahl, 2012; Harter, 2012). How are narcissism and self-esteem shaped by experiences within the peer group?

Stability

Another issue is how narcissism and self-esteem change over the course of life. Despite emerging at the same age, they have remarkably distinct developmental trajectories. While narcissism peaks in adolescence and then gradually falls throughout life (Carlson & Gjerde, 2009; Foster, Keith Campbell, & Twenge, 2003), self-esteem drops in adolescence and then gradually rises throughout life (Robins, Trzesniewski, Tracy, Gosling, & Potter, 2002). Still, individual differences in narcissism and self-esteem are remarkably stable (Carlson & Gjerde, 2009; Frick, Kimonis, Dandreaux, & Farell, 2003; Trzesniewski, Brent, & Robins, 2003).

Why are these individual differences so stable? There might be several reasons (Caspi & Roberts, 2001). One is that narcissists and high self-esteemers perceive, select, modify, and respond to situations in ways that maintain or even exacerbate their traits over time. For example, narcissists may select settings with a clear hierarchy, such as corporations that enable them to rise through the ranks (Zitek & Jordan, 2016). They may compete with others to reach the top (Roberts, Woodman, & Sedikides, 2017). As they move to increasingly responsible positions, they may come to perceive themselves as even more special and entitled, which fuels their narcissism levels (Piff, 2014). Unlike narcissists, high self-esteemers may select settings in which people are treated as equals. They may collaborate with others to advance the collective, while building relationships with them (Campbell et al., 2005; Crocker et al., 2017). As they work with others and feel socially valued, they may perceive themselves as even more useful and needed, which fuels their self-esteem levels (Leary & Baumeister, 2000). Thus, narcissism and self-esteem may not be set in stone (i.e., inborn, deeply ingrained, impossible to change) but rather be maintained through self-sustaining transactions between the person and the environment (also see Crocker & Brummelman, in

press). Studying these transactions will shed light on the processes that drive continuity and change in personality more broadly.

Malleability

Can narcissism and self-esteem be changed? Although scholars agree that self-esteem can be changed (O'Mara, Marsh, Craven, & Debus, 2006), they are more skeptical about changing narcissism, and with good reason. When left untouched, narcissism is remarkably stable (Frick et al., 2003). Narcissists might be unwilling to change, because they see their narcissistic traits as strengths rather than as weaknesses (Carlson, 2013) and they readily blame their problems on others rather than on themselves (Thomaes et al., 2011). Even if they try to change, they do so halfheartedly; for example, they quit therapy prematurely (Ellison, Levy, Cain, Ansell, & Pincus, 2013).

Nevertheless, our social-cognitive approach suggests that narcissism can be changed if interventions target pointedly its underlying core beliefs (Brummelman et al., 2016). A promising development in psychology is the emergence of brief, psychologically precise interventions that change people's core beliefs (Cohen & Sherman, 2014; Walton, 2014). Because these interventions are *stealthy* (i.e., consisting of brief exercises that do not convey to recipients that they are in need of help), they may circumvent narcissists' resistance against change (Brummelman & Walton, 2015). Emerging research illustrates this. For example, inviting people to think about what makes them similar to others or connected with others reduces their narcissism levels (Giacomin & Jordan, 2014; Piff, 2014), curtails their narcissistic aggression (Konrath, Bushman, & Campbell, 2006), and improves their relationship functioning (Finkel, Campbell, Buffardi, Kumashiro, & Rusbult, 2009). Similarly, helping low self-esteemers reconstrue their social relationships so that they feel more included and valued raises their self-esteem levels and improves their relationship functioning over time (Marigold, Holmes, & Ross, 2007, 2010). Thus, changes in core beliefs may lead to changes in personality (Dweck, 2008). Researchers should develop such interventions, test them through rigorous field experiments, and explore how their effects can be sustained over time.

Conclusion

As we have shown, narcissism and self-esteem are underpinned by distinct core beliefs: beliefs concerning the nature of the self, of others, and of the relationship between the self and others. Although these beliefs arise early in development and generate stable patterns of behavior, they can be changed effectively through precise intervention. Thus, recognizing the line that runs through narcissism and self-esteem can help researchers develop interventions that nurture healthy self-views from an early age onward.

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