

Narcissism and Comparative Self-Enhancement Strategies

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Two experiments examined narcissism and comparative self-enhancement strategies. Participants either completed an interdependent (Experiment 1) or an independent (Experiment 2) achievement task and then received bogus success or failure feedback. Across experiments, narcissistic individuals self-enhanced. Nonnarcissists, however, showed more flexibility in self-enhancement. They did not self-enhance when doing so meant comparing themselves favorably to a partner (a comparative strategy). Otherwise, they did self-enhance, particularly when estimating the importance of the task (a noncomparative strategy). These findings are discussed from a narcissistic self-enhancement perspective and a strategic flexibility perspective. © 2000 Academic Press

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The study of narcissism has encountered a resurgence of theoretical and empirical attention. This has occurred both in personality and social psychology (Emmons, 1987; Raskin & Hall, 1979; Rhodewalt & Morf, 1995) and in clinical psychology and psychiatry (Akhtar & Thompson, 1982; Kernberg, 1975; Kohut, 1977; Masterson, 1988; Westen, 1990). Although the current conceptualization of narcissism has changed in several ways since Freud's (1914/1957) work on the topic, some agreement exists on the profile of the typical narcissist [see *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, IV*, American Psychiatric Association, 1994 (*DSM IV*); see also Akhtar & Thompson, 1982; Kernberg, 1975; Kohut, 1977].¹

The typical narcissist is characterized by distortions in several areas of psychological functioning. The self-concept of the narcissist is marked by positivity (i.e., thinking about oneself in a highly positive way), egocentrism (i.e., thinking about oneself without taking the perspective of others), and a sense of uniqueness or "specialness." Narcissists also regulate strategically self-concept positivity in several ways. These include outward displays of self-importance, fantasies of fame and power, and negative affective reactions to perceived self-threats. Finally, narcissists are described as having poor interpersonal relationships. Narcissistic relationships are characterized by a sense of personal entitlement, exploitation of the partner, indifference toward the partner's needs, and a dearth of genuine love.

TWO PERSPECTIVES ON NARCISSISTIC SELF-ENHANCEMENT

A central characteristic of narcissism is self-enhancement (Sedikides, 1993; Sedikides & Strube, 1997). Narcissists, relative to nonnarcissists, report inflated self-descriptions (Gabriel, Critelli, & Ee, 1994), performance ratings (John & Robins, 1994), and estimates of positive acts (Gosling, John, Craik, & Robins, 1998). Likewise, narcissists make self-serving ability attributions following performance feedback on achievement tasks (Farwell & Wohlwend-Lloyd, 1998; Rhodewalt & Morf, 1998).

Narcissists' predilection for self-enhancement may be part of a broader self- versus other-orientation. Narcissists will not only implicitly derogate others in the process of maintaining positive self-views (i.e., report inflated valuations of self versus other; Gabriel et al., 1994; John & Robins, 1994), but narcissists also explicitly derogate others (Kernis & Sun, 1994; Morf &

¹ The present research focuses on the continuous personality variable of narcissism rather than on the personality disorder (Emmons, 1987; Raskin & Hall, 1979; Raskin, Novacek, & Hogan, 1991; Rhodewalt & Morf, 1995). For the sake of convenience, we use the term "narcissists" to describe individuals lying at the upper end of the continuum of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Hall, 1979) and the term "nonnarcissists" to describe individuals lying on the lower end of the continuum of the NPI.

Rhodewalt, 1993), for example, by providing poor assessments of evaluators (Kernis & Sun, 1994).

In short, it seems clear that narcissists self-enhance to a greater extent than nonnarcissists and that this self-enhancement is part of a more general self- versus other-orientation. Narcissistic self-enhancement, however, may be more complex than this statement implies. We ask: "Will narcissists self-enhance to a greater extent than nonnarcissists across self-enhancement strategies, including even those strategies that do not involve comparing the self favorably to others?" Alternatively, are there strategies with which narcissists will self-enhance to a similar extent to nonnarcissists, particularly strategies that do not involve such comparisons? In the present manuscript, we focus on self-enhancement strategies evidenced by narcissists and nonnarcissists in response to feedback on achievement tasks. We identify two general types of these strategies. *Comparative strategies* entail the favorable comparison of the self with another person. For example, blaming a partner for an unsuccessful task outcome would be a comparative strategy. In contrast, *noncomparative strategies* do not entail a comparison with another person. This type of strategy is exemplified by stating, after the fact, that the outcome on the same unsuccessful task was not very important.

We approach these issues from two general perspectives, which we term the *narcissistic self-enhancement perspective* and the *strategic flexibility perspective*. The narcissistic self-enhancement perspective predicts that narcissists will self-enhance across both comparative and noncomparative strategies. According to this perspective, narcissists should self-enhance to a greater extent than nonnarcissists using both comparative and noncomparative strategies.

The strategic flexibility perspective shifts attention away from narcissists and toward nonnarcissists and interpersonal relatedness. Nonnarcissists, in comparison to narcissists, are more interpersonally oriented. Nonnarcissists do not report that they are better than others to the extent that narcissists do, and nonnarcissists, in comparison to narcissists, are agreeable, empathetic, and communally oriented. The relative interpersonal graciousness on the part of nonnarcissists may reduce their use of self-enhancement strategies that violate their communal orientation. Thus, nonnarcissists may be unlikely to self-enhance when doing so means taking credit away from a partner (i.e., comparative measures). However, when nonnarcissists are given opportunities to use self-enhancement strategies that do not involve derogating a partner (i.e., noncomparative strategies), they may be more likely to self-enhance, perhaps to the extent of narcissists. In sum, the strategic flexibility perspective predicts that nonnarcissists will self-enhance, but with a flexibility consistent with a more interpersonal orientation. In contrast, narcissists are predicted to be more rigidly self-enhancing across strategies.

THE PRESENT RESEARCH

We conducted two experiments to capture narcissistic self-enhancement strategies. We included two measures of self-enhancement: the self-serving bias (SSB) and ratings of task importance. The SSB is defined as taking credit for successful outcomes and blaming the situation or other persons for unsuccessful outcomes (Heider, 1958; Campbell & Sedikides, 1999; Weary-Bradley, 1978; Zuckerman, 1979). As suggested by Emmons (1987) and demonstrated by Rhodewalt and Morf (1995, 1998) and Farwell and Wohlwend-Lloyd (1998), the SSB is a fertile domain for examining narcissistic self-enhancement.

Measures of the SSB have been used with both interdependent tasks (Johnston, 1967; Larson, 1977; Wolosin, Sherman, & Till, 1973) and independent tasks (Luginbuhl, Crowe, & Kahan, 1975; Bar-Tal & Frieze, 1976). A typical interdependent task involves giving a pair of participants a bogus combined-ability task. This task is followed by randomly determined success or failure feedback at the dyadic level (i.e., participants are unaware of the magnitude of their individual contributions to the task outcome). Participants are then asked to divide responsibility for the task outcome between the self and the partner. The SSB is evident if individuals take responsibility for success and blame the partner for failure (i.e., a comparative self-enhancement strategy). A typical independent task follows a similar format, except that participants engage in the task individually and receive feedback at the individual level. Each participant is given the option to attribute the outcome to internal or external factors. The SSB is evident if individuals take responsibility for success and blame external factors for failure (i.e., a noncomparative self-enhancement strategy).

The second measure we used for studying self-enhancement involved asking participants to rate the importance of a task after either success or failure (Wyer & Frey, 1983). A self-enhancing pattern is observed when individuals rate tasks at which they succeeded as important and rate tasks at which they failed as unimportant. Calculus, for example, might be viewed as an important topic of inquiry by a student who receives a final grade of an "A" in the course, but might be viewed as a topic of minor importance by the same student if the final grade is a "D." This technique for examining self-enhancement is well-suited for our theoretical objectives because it is inherently noncomparative. That is, an individual can rate strategically the importance of the task without diminishing a partner's performance.

In *Experiment 1*, we used an interdependent task. We included a measure of the SSB that called for dividing responsibility between the self and the partner (i.e., a comparative strategy). We also included an importance measure of self-enhancement (i.e., a noncomparative strategy). *Experiment 2* used an independent task. After receiving feedback, participants responded

to a responsibility and an importance measure of self-enhancement (i.e., noncomparative strategies).

EXPERIMENT 1

In Experiment 1, we examined the self-enhancement strategies exhibited by narcissist and nonnarcissists in an interdependent achievement task. Both of the theoretical perspectives guiding our research predict that the moderating role of narcissism should emerge when comparative self-enhancement strategies are measured. Specifically, narcissists are expected to be more self-serving, on average, than nonnarcissists on the comparative SSB measure. The strategic flexibility perspective would predict further that narcissists and nonnarcissists should differ to a lesser extent on the importance measure. That is, both narcissists and nonnarcissists are expected to self-enhance on this measure. To investigate the generalizability of our findings, we varied two additional factors in our design. The first variable concerns relationship closeness. Half of the participants engaged in a self-disclosure task with the person who would become their partner on the interdependent achievement task; the other half worked with a stranger. The second variable was participant gender.

Method

Design

We used a four-factor, between-participants design. Three variables were dichotomous: feedback type (success/failure), relationship closeness (close/distant), and participant gender (male/female). The fourth variable, narcissism, was continuous.

Participants

Participants were 160 undergraduates (80 women, 80 men) enrolled in introductory psychology courses at Illinois State University. Participants volunteered for the experiment as a means of fulfilling partially a course option. We tested only same-gender dyads who were unacquainted at the start of the experiment. The procedure allowed four participants (two same-sex dyads) to provide data in each session. We used both male and female experimenters. We dropped from the study two participants who expressed suspicion about the veridicality of the feedback during debriefing.

Procedure and Materials

Overview. The two experiments reported in this manuscript followed a similar procedure. First, participants completed personality measures of self-esteem and narcissism. Second, each participant was paired with a partner and a relationship closeness induction was conducted (this was not done in Experiment 2). Third, participants took a bogus test of creativity. Fourth, participants received randomly determined success or failure feedback. Finally, participants made attributions for their successful or unsuccessful outcomes on the creativity test and rated the importance of their outcomes.

Pretest. Approximately 2 weeks prior to the start of the experiment, participants filled out a series of measures. Participants were also given the opportunity to write down their names and phone numbers if they wanted to be a part of another, unrelated experiment to be conducted in "a few weeks." The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Inventory (RSE; Rosenberg, 1965) was administered first. This 10-item measure of global self-esteem has adequate validity (Lorr & Wunderlich, 1986). The RSE was followed by the 40-item version (range: 0–40) of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Hall, 1979). The NPI is a forced-choice scale designed to measure the personality dimension of narcissism in normal populations (although the NPI has been validated on clinical samples; Prifitera & Ryan, 1981). The NPI has been used extensively and found to exhibit adequate reliability and validity (Raskin & Terry, 1988; Rhodewalt & Morf, 1995).

Relationship closeness induction task. A research assistant telephoned consenting participants and invited them to the laboratory in pairs. Only pairs of participants who were unfamiliar with each other were tested. Participants were informed that they would be participating in two short and unrelated studies, the first of which involved a communication task. Participants were then seated across from each other in a small room where the experimenter handed them the Relationship Closeness Induction Task (RCIT; Sedikides, Campbell, Reeder, & Elliot, 1998). The RCIT instructed participants to spend 9 min mutually disclosing personal information to their partners while engaging in as natural a conversation as possible. Specifically, participants were given three lists of questions to ask each other. These lists became progressively more personal. The experimenter then moved outside the room and closed the door.

At the end of the task, participants were given a relationship privacy measure. This was to ensure that the conversation was perceived to be private—it was for all but one participant—as well as to enhance the perception that the RCIT was a part of an independent study. Participants were then informed that it was time for "Study 2." Half of the participants remained with the same partner for "Study 1" and "Study 2"; half of the participants were placed with a stranger in "Study 2."

Manipulation check on the closeness induction. "Study 2" began with a second consent form in order to further reinforce the impression on the part of participants that this was a separate experiment. Next, participants filled out a manipulation check of relationship closeness. The manipulation check consisted of four single-item, 9-point scales. These scales measured how "close" and "similar" participants felt toward their partner, how much they "liked" their partner, and if they felt they could be "friends" with their partner. Anchors were *not at all* (1) and *very much* (9).

Interdependent outcomes task. Participants then took the "Lange–Elliot Creativity Test." Ostensibly, this test was part of a study on "brainstorming" and the creativity of dyads. Participants were told that reliable data had already been gathered on this test from 130 ISU students and that more data were needed to "add to our knowledge." Participants were instructed to list as many conceptually distinct uses as possible for a brick (part one) and a candle (part two) (Bartis, Szymanski, & Harkins, 1988). The total number of nonoverlapping uses generated by the dyad would ostensibly be summed to create an overall creativity test score for the dyad. All participants were told that they were in the "control condition" and thus would be seated alone in a different room from their partner during the test. Participants' perception of own actual performance on this measure was thus highly ambiguous because: (a) the task was novel, (b) only conceptually distinct "uses" counted toward the score, (c) "uses" that overlapped with the partner's only counted once toward final score, and (d) participants were not able to see their partner's actual performance.

Participants were allotted 5 min to complete each part of the test. Participants first generated uses for a brick. They wrote down each use on a separate slip of paper which they then placed in a box. The experimenter warned the participants when 4 min of time had passed. After the 5-min period ended, the experimenter emptied both participants' responses into a box and

presented participants with part two of the test (i.e., uses for a candle). The same procedure was repeated.

Feedback. After each participant completed the “creativity test,” he or she received randomly determined *dyad-level* (i.e., combined) success and failure feedback. A bogus z score representing the combined number of uses generated by both participants was shown in text and on a bell-shaped frequency distribution. Participants in the success condition were shown a mark at the 93rd percentile and were informed that they “did well.” Participants in the failure condition were shown a mark at the 31st percentile and informed that they “did poorly.”

Dependent measures. After receiving the feedback, participants filled out a booklet containing the dependent measures. On the front of the booklet, participants read that, “Because the Lange–Elliot Creativity Test was based on pooled scores . . . we were unable to determine which of you was most responsible for the overall positive or negative results obtained by the pair.” Participants were told that their answers would be confidential and that they would not see their partners again in this experiment. Afterward, participants were asked to answer the questions described below. Each question appeared on a separate page of the booklet.

We examined the effectiveness of the success and failure manipulations by asking how well the participants believed the dyad, the individual, and the partner performed on the “creativity test.” Participants responded to these questions on 10-point scales with anchors at *not at all well* (1) and *very well* (10).

Participants responded to a measure of the SSB that reflected a comparative self-enhancement strategy: “Who was most responsible for the outcome of this test?” by circling a number on a 10-point scale with end points *the other subject* (1) and *myself* (10).²

Participants also responded to the importance question that reflected a noncomparative self-enhancement strategy, “How important was the outcome of the test to you?” on a 10-point scale with end points at *not at all important* (1) and *very important* (10). This measure directed participants to focus on the “outcome of the test” rather than simply on the “test.” We structured the question in this manner because we believed that the former wording would lead to a focus on performance, whereas the latter wording might lead to a more general focus on participation in research experiments.

Results

Personality Measures

The average score on the NPI was 16.27 ($SD = 7.15$) with a median of 16.00 (range = 3–38). The average score on the RSE was 30.80 ($SD = 3.83$) with a median of 31.00 (range = 20–40). The RSE and NPI were correlated, $r(158) = .41, p < .0005$.

Manipulation Checks

Closeness. The four closeness manipulation check scales were summed to form one closeness scale (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .84; M = 5.06$). Participants in the close condition reported feeling closer to their partner ($M = 6.00$) than participants in the distant condition ($M = 4.13$), $t(157) = -7.86, p < .0005$. One participant did not complete this scale. The NPI did not correlate with closeness, $r(157) = -.02, p < .786$.

² An additional measure, “Who made the greatest positive contribution to this test?” with end points at “*the other subject*” (1) and “*myself*” (10) was included in Experiment 1. The results were largely consistent with those using the responsibility measure.

Feedback effectiveness. Participants who succeeded ($M = 7.29$) reported having performed better than participants who failed ($M = 5.79$), $t(158) = -5.18$, $p < .0005$. Participants who succeeded ($M = 7.24$) also reported that their partners performed better compared to those who failed ($M = 5.16$), $t(158) = -8.32$, $p < .0005$. Finally, participants who succeeded ($M = 8.86$) reported that both they and their partners performed better than participants who failed ($M = 4.21$), $t(158) = -16.75$, $p < .0005$. These findings indicate that the feedback manipulation was successful.

Dependent Measures

We analyzed our data separately for the responsibility and importance measures using hierarchical regression analyses. We found no gender effects, so we dropped this variable from the model. Predictor variables were feedback type (effects coded: *success* = 1, *failure* = -1), relationship closeness (effects coded: *close* = 1, *distant* = -1), and narcissism. Narcissism and the dependent measures were centered around the mean (Aiken & West, 1991). Following Morf and Rhodewalt (1993) and Rhodewalt and Morf (1995), we used self-esteem as a covariate in order to account for the overlap between the NPI and RSE (Raskin et al., 1991). The purpose behind this practice was to control for the aspects of narcissism that relate to self-esteem. We entered main effects and self-esteem in step 1, two-way interactions in step 2, and the three-way interaction in step 3. Main effects were interpreted in step 1, interactions in step 2, and the three-way interaction in step 3.

Crucial was the comparison between the success and failure conditions on each dependent measure. On both the responsibility and importance measures, a significantly greater value in the success than the failure condition would be evidence of self-enhancement. For example, if narcissists make greater responsibility attributions in the success condition than the failure condition, this would entail evidence of the SSB on the part of narcissists. Similarly, if nonnarcissists report greater perceived test importance following success than failure, it would entail evidence for self-enhancement on the part of nonnarcissists. In order to test the narcissistic self-enhancement perspective and the strategic flexibility perspective, we conducted separate planned comparisons between the success and failure conditions for narcissists (1 *SD* above the mean on the NPI) and nonnarcissists (1 *SD* below the mean on the NPI) (Aiken & West, 1991). We made these comparisons regardless of the statistical significance of the Feedback Type \times Narcissism interaction.

Repeated-measures analysis. The narcissistic self-enhancement perspective predicts greater self-enhancement from narcissists than from nonnarcissists, and this pattern should hold across both the responsibility and importance measures. The prediction, then, is for a Feedback Type \times Narcissism interaction, which generalizes across both types of dependent measures.

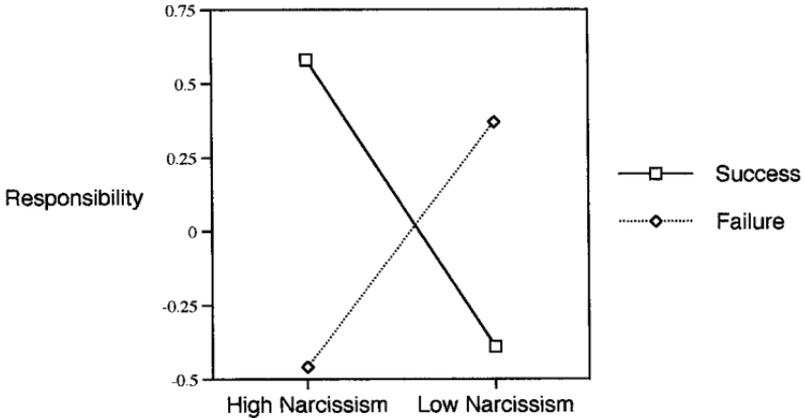


FIG. 1. The effect of narcissism and feedback type on the dependent measure of responsibility (centered around the mean) in Experiment 1. This plot is derived from the predicted values for narcissism 1 *SD* above and 1 *SD* below the mean.

In contrast, the strategic flexibility perspective suggests that the Feedback Type \times Narcissism interaction should be stronger on the responsibility measure than on the importance measure. This prediction, then, calls for a three-way interaction of feedback type, narcissism, and dependent measure. Indeed, a repeated-measures analysis indicated that the Feedback Type \times Narcissism \times dependent measure interaction was significant, $F(1, 152) = 8.42$, $p < .004$. The patterns on each dependent measure are discussed separately below.

Responsibility. If narcissism is related to self-enhancement as measured by responsibility (a comparative self-enhancement strategy), we should observe an interaction between narcissism and feedback type. Indeed, the Feedback Type \times Narcissism interaction was significant, $b = .27$, $t(152) = 3.42$, $p < .001$.³ In Fig. 1, we display this interaction by plotting the predicted values derived from examining a hypothetical individual 1 *SD* above the mean (high narcissism) and 1 *SD* below the mean (low narcissism) (Aiken & West, 1991). Based on these predicted values, narcissists (i.e., those with high narcissism scores) took more credit for success ($PV = .58$) than failure ($PV = -.46$), $b = .32$, $t(155) = 2.85$, $p < .005$, thus manifesting the SSB. In contrast, nonnarcissists (i.e., those with low narcissism scores) took less credit for success ($PV = -.39$) than failure ($PV = .37$), $b = -.23$, $t(155) = -2.09$, $p < .039$, thus manifesting an other-serving bias (OSB). The Feedback Type \times Narcissism interaction was not qualified by Relationship Closeness, $b = .01$, $t(151) = .09$, $p < .928$. We did not find a main effect of

³ We replicated this and the other crucial analyses without including self-esteem as a covariate. The effects of narcissism remained the same.

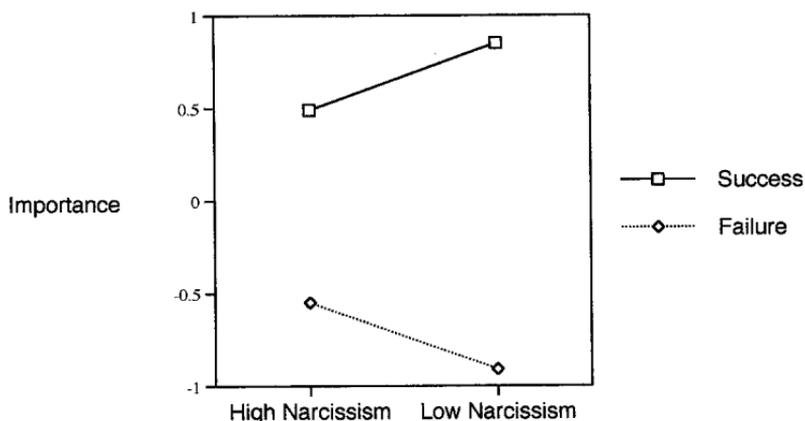


FIG. 2. The effect of narcissism and feedback type on the dependent measure of importance (centered around the mean) in Experiment 1. This plot is derived from the predicted values for narcissism 1 *SD* above and 1 *SD* below the mean.

feedback type on outcome responsibility, $b = .04$, $t(155) = .51$, $p < .611$. No other statistically significant effects emerged in the regression analyses.

Importance. The main effect of feedback type was significant, $b = .30$, $t(155) = 3.95$, $p < .0005$. As suggested by the sign of the regression coefficient, participants who succeeded deemed the test outcome as more important than participants who failed. The Feedback Type \times Narcissism interaction was not significant, $b = -.07$, $t(152) = -.90$, $p < .371$ (see Fig. 2 for predicted values). On this noncomparative strategy, self-enhancement was not moderated by narcissism. Narcissists assigned more importance to success ($PV = .49$) than failure ($PV = -.55$), $b = .22$, $t(155) = 2.06$, $p < .041$. Nonnarcissists also assigned more importance to success ($PV = .85$) than failure ($PV = -.91$), $b = .39$, $t(155) = 3.48$, $p < .001$. No other significant effects were observed.

DISCUSSION

We provided participants with the opportunity to self-enhance in a comparative way (i.e., the responsibility measure) and a noncomparative way (i.e., the importance measure). Consistent with the narcissistic self-enhancement perspective, narcissists were, on average, self-serving in their responses on the responsibility measure and nonnarcissists were not. Less consistent with the narcissistic self-enhancement perspective, narcissists were not more self-enhancing than nonnarcissists on the importance measure. On this measure, self-enhancement was present (in an absolute sense) among both narcissists and nonnarcissists, and the extent of that self-enhancement was similar in each case.

These results provide somewhat stronger support for the strategic flexibil-

ity perspective. Consistent with this perspective, nonnarcissists did not self-enhance on the responsibility measure (a comparative strategy), but did self-enhance on the importance measure (a noncomparative strategy). On the responsibility measure, in fact, nonnarcissists actually manifested an OSB. Finally, these patterns generalized across different levels of closeness and participant gender. Of greater interest, the stronger self-enhancement shown by narcissists than nonnarcissists on the responsibility measure did not depend on whether the members of the dyad were strangers as opposed to acquaintances. This null effect of relationship closeness is consistent with Farwell and Wohlwend-Lloyd's (1998) inability to find a moderating effect of partner similarity on narcissistic self-enhancement. It appears that the relationship between the members of the dyad is not a critical factor in determining whether narcissists will differ from nonnarcissists in self-enhancement. Rather, a more important issue concerns the type of self-enhancement strategy that is involved. Narcissists self-enhance on both comparative and noncomparative measures, whereas nonnarcissists self-enhance only on noncomparative measures.

EXPERIMENT 2

In Experiment 1, we examined narcissistic self-enhancement in an interdependent situation. In Experiment 2, we further extended our research by examining the link between narcissism and the SSB in an independent situation. Participants completed an independent outcome task and subsequently made attributions of responsibility and importance. The responsibility attributions available on this task are not explicitly comparative because of the independent (i.e., nondyadic) nature of the situation. Rather, they are noncomparative. The importance ratings are also noncomparative. According to the narcissistic self-enhancement perspective, the SSB should be more evident for narcissists than nonnarcissists on each of these measures. The strategic flexibility perspective, however, suggests that narcissists and nonnarcissists are equally likely to self-enhance on these two noncomparative measures.

Method

Design

We used a three-factor, between-participants design. Two variables were dichotomous: feedback type (success/failure) and participant gender (male/female). The third variable, narcissism, was continuous.

Participants

Participants were 64 undergraduate students (42 women and 22 men) enrolled in introductory psychology courses at UNC-CH. Participants volunteered for the experiment as a means of fulfilling partially a course option. A male research assistant tested from one to five partici-

pants in each session. We dropped one participant from the sample because she expressed suspicion about our procedures at the end of the experiment.

Procedure and Materials

Participants began Experiment 2 by completing the RSE and the NPI. The creativity task used in Experiment 2 mirrored that of Experiment 1, except that it was presented as an independent test. Participants worked alone on the test rather than with a partner, and, after completing the "creativity test," the participant received randomly determined *individual-level* success or failure feedback.

After receiving the feedback, participants filled out a booklet containing the dependent measures. On the front of the booklet, participants read that because several potential causes may have existed for their creativity score, "it is difficult for us to tell how much your overall positive or negative result reflects *you* as a test-taker and how much the result reflects other, *situational* factors." The questions appeared on separate pages of a booklet.

The effectiveness of the success and failure manipulations was checked by asking how well the participants believed they performed on the creativity task. Participants responded on 10-point scales with anchors at *not at all well* (1) and *very well* (10).

Our primary measure of the SSB was a measure of responsibility for the test outcome. Unlike the measure of responsibility used in the first experiment, this measure of the SSB is noncomparative. Participants rated "Overall, how responsible were YOU for the outcome of this test?" by circling a number on a 10-point scale with end points of *not at all* (1) and *very much* (10). The measure of test outcome importance was the same as that used in Experiment 1.⁴

Results and Discussion

Personality Measures

The average score on the NPI was 17.08 ($SD = 7.03$) with a median of 16.00 (range = 4–37). The average score on the RSE was 72.22 ($SD = 14.70$) with a median of 77.50 (range = 25–90). (The difference in RSE scores between the two experiments reflects the different scale end points.) The two measures were correlated, $r(62) = .39$, $p < .002$.

Manipulation Check

Participants who received success feedback ($M = 7.73$) reported having performed better on the creativity test than participants who received failure feedback ($M = 5.45$), $t(62) = 4.107$, $p < .0005$. The feedback manipulation was successful.

⁴ We included ancillary attribution measures of (ability and effort) minus (difficulty and luck). The main effect of feedback type was significant, $b = .42$, $t(60) = 3.65$, $p < .001$. Participants who succeeded made significantly more internal attributions for the test outcome than participants who failed. The Feedback Type \times Narcissism interaction was marginal, $b = .52$, $t(59) = 1.73$, $p < .089$. Narcissists made greater internal attributions for success ($PV = 8.42$) than failure ($PV = 1.64$), $b = .62$, $t(59) = 3.84$, $p < .0005$. Nonnarcissists took descriptively but not significantly more credit for success ($PV = 8.28$) than failure ($PV = 5.83$), $b = .22$, $t(59) = 1.38$, $p < .173$. The same pattern was noted when the ability item was examined separately.

Dependent Measures

We analyzed our data via hierarchical regression analyses. We found no gender effects, so we dropped this variable from the model. The predictor variables were feedback type (effects coded: *success* = 1; *failure* = -1) and narcissism. As in Experiment 1, narcissism and the dependent measures were centered around the mean (Aiken & West, 1991). In step 1, we entered the main effects and self-esteem; in step 2, we entered the Feedback Type \times Narcissism interaction.

Repeated-measures analysis. As in Experiment 1, we conducted a repeated measures analysis to determine the presence of a Feedback Type \times Narcissism \times dependent measure interaction. This three-way interaction was significant in Experiment 1, which featured an interdependent task. However, the Feedback Type \times Narcissism \times dependent measure interaction was not statistically significant in the present experiment, which featured an independent task, $F(1, 56) = .36, p < .548$. The patterns on both dependent measures are described separately below.

Responsibility. The main effect of feedback type was significant, $b = .46, t(60) = 3.99, p < .0005$. Participants who succeeded took more responsibility for the test outcome than participants who failed. The Feedback Type \times Narcissism interaction was not significant, $b = .11, t(59) = .96, p < .340$. Contrasts revealed that narcissists took more responsibility for success ($PV = .69$) than failure ($PV = -1.26$), $b = .57, t(59) = 3.50, p < .001$. Similarly, nonnarcissists took more responsibility for success ($PV = .82$) than failure ($PV = -.31$), $b = .35, t(59) = 2.12, p < .038$. Consistent with the strategic flexibility perspective, both narcissists and nonnarcissists self-enhanced on this noncomparative task.

Importance. The main effect of feedback type was significant, $b = .31, t(1, 60) = 2.57, p < .013$. Participants who succeeded regarded the test outcomes as more important than those who failed. The Feedback Type \times Narcissism interaction was not significant, $b = -.02, t(59) = -.12, p < .902$. Narcissists assigned marginally more importance to success ($PV = 1.26$) than failure ($PV = -.46$), $b = .30, t(59) = 1.72, p < .092$. Nonnarcissists also assigned marginally more importance to success ($PV = .53$) than failure ($PV = -1.36$), $b = .33, t(59) = 1.88, p < .065$. In short, both narcissists and nonnarcissists self-enhanced on this noncomparative task. This finding is consistent with the strategic flexibility perspective.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

We began the present article by asking: Do narcissists reliably self-enhance to a greater extent than nonnarcissists or are there self-enhancement strategies with which narcissists and nonnarcissists self-enhance to a similar extent? To answer this question, we examined narcissists' and nonnarcis-

sists' use of comparative and noncomparative self-enhancement strategies across interdependent and independent contexts. The research focused on two theoretical perspectives. The narcissistic self-enhancement perspective highlights narcissists' greater across-the-board self-enhancement relative to nonnarcissists. In contrast, the strategic flexibility perspective highlights the tendency of nonnarcissists to refrain from self-enhancement in situations that involve comparison with a related other, but otherwise self-enhance on par with narcissists.

Consistent with the narcissistic self-enhancement perspective, narcissists did self-enhance on all the measures we included. Yet we also observed significant evidence in favor of the strategic flexibility perspective: Narcissists tended to self-enhance in a relatively rigid way across all of the tasks. Nonnarcissists, in contrast, self-enhanced only when using noncomparative strategies. When nonnarcissists' ratings involved a comparison between themselves and their interaction partner, nonnarcissists refrained from self-enhancement and even engaged in other-enhancement.

SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR UNDERSTANDING NARCISSISM

The present research has important implications for research on the construct of narcissism. The present research highlights those self-enhancement strategies (i.e., comparative strategies) that are central to narcissists' functioning. More importantly, the present research identifies those self-enhancement strategies (i.e., noncomparative strategies) that do not distinguish as readily narcissists from nonnarcissists. Indeed, the results of the present investigation, coupled with those of previous researchers (e.g., Farwell & Wohlwend-Lloyd, 1998; Gabriel et al., 1994; John & Robins, 1994; Rhodewalt & Morf, 1998), suggest that identifying narcissism with self-enhancement is somewhat imprecise. Instead, narcissism is more accurately identified with a specific strategy of self-enhancement, one that involves expressing and maintaining an elevated view of self in relation to others.

At the same time, the present research also demonstrates the extent of narcissists' self-enhancement. Narcissists were willing to self-enhance by taking credit from a partner for a successful outcome (or blaming a partner for an unsuccessful outcome). Put in other terms, narcissists, but not nonnarcissists, are willing to enhance even at the expense of diminishing a close other. This finding is consistent with research examining narcissism and constructs relevant to relational functioning, such as empathy (Watson et al., 1984), agreeableness (Rhodewalt & Morf, 1995), and need for intimacy (Carroll, 1987).

Why are narcissists willing to augment the self at the expense of the partner? (Or, put another way, why are nonnarcissists willing to derogate the self for the benefit of another?). Past research suggests three explanations. First, narcissists are less interpersonally oriented (e.g., empathetic or agree-

able) than nonnarcissists. Second, the self-enhancement strategy evidenced by narcissists in the present research arguably reflects a chronic response to self threat. This being the case, narcissists' self-enhancement may, in part, be driven by negative affective states, such as anger, directed toward the partner (Rhodewalt & Morf, 1998). Third and finally, an inflated view of own abilities coupled with a lack of thought about the partner may underlie narcissists' responses. The former possibility is consistent with past research examining narcissists' self-perceptions in group tasks (John & Robins, 1994; Gosling et al., 1998). Future research, particularly research aimed at constraining or limiting narcissists' self-enhancement strivings, would be useful in addressing conclusively these issues.

The present research is also consistent with—although not direct evidence of—the assumption long-held in the clinical literature that narcissists have impaired interpersonal relationships as a result of their self-enhancement strivings. Arguably, taking credit repeatedly from another will impede the maintenance and formation of relational closeness and satisfaction (e.g., Fincham, Beach, & Baucom, 1987). The results of the present study, coupled with recent research showing that self-enhancement is associated with a host of potentially destructive interpersonal behaviors, including bragging, competitiveness, and hostility (Colvin et al., 1995; Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996), suggest that relationships can be impaired by self-enhancement efforts. Future research would be well-served by addressing this issue.

CAVEATS

The conclusions of the present research do have several potential limitations. Despite the evidence for the strategic flexibility perspective, it is important to note that we are not claiming that narcissists will self-enhance to a similar extent to nonnarcissists using all noncomparative strategies. Research has found that narcissists possess a greater willingness to self-enhance using ability attributions following feedback on achievement tasks (Farwell & Wohlwend-Lloyd, 1998; Rhodewalt & Morf, 1998). Indeed, such measures likely reflect, at least implicitly, narcissists' favorable views of their own ability versus the ability of others (Farwell & Wohlwend-Lloyd, 1998; Gabriel et al., 1994) and thus may be somewhat comparative.

Likewise, we do not claim that narcissists' response to feedback differs from that of nonnarcissists only in the use of comparative self-enhancement techniques. Although the use of strategic importance ratings following feedback is a highly reliable form of noncomparative self-enhancement, other forms of noncomparative self-enhancement also exist. For example, individuals may criticize the diagnosticity or validity of a task on which they have performed poorly. Kernis and Sun (1994) found that narcissists were more likely to self-enhance by strategically evaluating the diagnosticity of a test than were nonnarcissists; however, these researchers also found that nonnar-

cissists did self-enhance using this noncomparative strategy—just not to the extent of narcissists. Thus, even on a different noncomparative self-enhancement measure than the one used in the present research, both nonnarcissists and narcissists self-enhanced but with narcissists showing the greater self-enhancement. In addition, narcissists' affective response to feedback is different from that of nonnarcissists (Rhodewalt & Morf, 1998) and narcissists may use other self-enhancement strategies to a greater extent than nonnarcissists, including "showing-off" (Buss & Chiodo, 1991) and seeking "trophy" romantic partners (Campbell, 1999).

Finally, Experiment 2 could be criticized on the grounds that the nonsignificant Narcissism \times Feedback Type interaction effect on the responsibility dependent measure was simply a null result driven by the small sample size. Clearly, evidence for greater self-enhancement on the part of narcissists may have been uncovered with a larger sample size. However, although the interaction term was nonsignificant, planned contrasts demonstrated that the main effect of feedback type was significant for both nonnarcissists and narcissists—even with the small sample size. In other words, both nonnarcissists and narcissists did self-enhance on the noncomparative responsibility measure. The fact that nonnarcissists demonstrated a significant amount of self-enhancement on this noncomparative task is consistent with the strategic flexibility perspective.

CONCLUSION

In the present research, we examined self-enhancement strategies displayed by narcissists and nonnarcissists. Our results confirmed and extended the insights of past research. Narcissists do indeed self-enhance across contexts and with a range of strategies. This finding, however, does not tell the entire story of narcissistic self-enhancement. Nonnarcissists also tend to self-enhance, except when doing so involves giving credit to the self at the expense of another. In these situations, nonnarcissists refrain from self-enhancement. In fact, nonnarcissists and narcissists reported similar levels of self-enhancement on the importance dependent measure, which reflected a noncomparative self-enhancement strategy.

In closing, then, we address one final issue: Does it matter that narcissists maintain self-esteem by taking credit from close others? Does selfishness of this sort wreak havoc in interpersonal relationships, or is it simply evidence of healthy self-esteem? The answer to these questions is not provided directly in the present research. One may argue, however, that by using self-esteem as a covariate in the experiments, we partially controlled for the "healthy self-esteem" interpretation of narcissists' self-enhancement. A more far reaching (and speculative) answer to this question focuses on the importance of social support. Social support has several buffering qualities that help maintain psychological and physical health (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Narcis-

sists may gain short-term esteem benefits by inflating the self and diminishing related others, but may pay a heavy price in terms of social support, especially emotional social support. To cite Freud's (1914/1957, p. 85) monograph on narcissism: "A strong egoism is a protection against falling ill, but in the last resort we must begin to love in order not to fall ill."

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