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Narcissistic Self-Enhancement and Willingness to Seek Feedback on Weaknesses

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Narcissistic Self-Enhancement and

Willingness to Seek Feedback on Weaknesses

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BY

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Abstract

In the current study, I investigated the relationship between narcissism level and feedback-seeking behavior. Using a dimensional approach to personality classification, I considered narcissism to be a component of normal personality and measured this construct with the Narcissistic Personality Inventory. I also investigated the willingness of narcissistic individuals to view feedback regarding their weaknesses, as well as the relationships between narcissism and different cognitive reactions to favorable and unfavorable feedback. Results indicated that, when given the opportunity, narcissistic people seek favorable feedback that pertains to their strengths, while passing on opportunities to receive feedback regarding their weaknesses. They also react to unfavorable feedback by perceiving that feedback as being inaccurate. I used self-enhancement and self-verification theories of self-concept formulation as applied to narcissism to explain the current findings.

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Narcissistic Self-Enhancement and Willingness to Seek Feedback on Weaknesses

The concept of narcissism originated from Greek mythology. According to the myth, Narcissus was a man who deeply admired himself; when he saw his reflection in a pond, he enjoyed looking at himself so much that he stopped eating and eventually starved to death. Thus, Narcissus' love for himself is what eventually killed him. In 1898, researchers introduced the concept of narcissism into the psychological literature (Raskin & Terry, 1988). Havelock Ellis used the term *Narcissus-like* to describe the "tendency for the sexual emotions to be lost and almost entirely absorbed in self admiration" (as cited in Raskin & Terry, 1988).

Freud also examined the concept of narcissism (1914/1957; see also Raskin & Terry, 1988). In his psychoanalytic model of personality development, Freud described narcissism as a mechanism for the establishment of the ego's values and also as a means of developing and maintaining self-esteem. Additionally, Freud conceptualized narcissism as a diagnostic category to describe certain clinical phenomena. In general, Freud described narcissism as consisting of a set of attitudes towards oneself, such as self-love, self-admiration, self-aggrandizement, and self-sufficiency.

Drawing on these early theories and conceptualizations, modern psychologists generally consider narcissism to be a dimension of personality. According to the dimensional classification of personality disorders, certain personality traits are evident in all people to varying degrees. However, only when the extreme, maladaptive variations of these personality traits are present in an individual, is there likelihood for a personality disorder (Livesley, Schroeder, Jackson, & Jang, 1994; Widiger & Costa, 1994).

According to the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*

of *Mental Disorders (DSM-IV-TR, 2000)*, narcissism in its most extreme (clinically diagnosable) form manifests itself in the following attributes: (a) grandiosity; (b) preoccupation with fantasies of unlimited success, power, and brilliance; (c) exhibitionism; (d) entitlement; (e) interpersonal exploitiveness; (f) lack of empathy; and (g) arrogance.

Although many individuals are not narcissistic in the clinical sense, they may possess narcissistic characteristics to some degree; that is, narcissism is considered to be a dimension of “normal” personality (Emmons, 1987; John & Robins, 1994; Knox, 2003; Raskin & Hall, 1979). In this form, narcissism is similar in many ways to clinical narcissism, except that in the normal variation, the aforementioned characteristics or “symptoms” (e.g., grandiosity, arrogance) are less numerous and/or less severe and distressing than the symptoms found in clinical cases. Thus, individuals with clinical variations and those with normal variations share many of the same emotional and behavioral characteristics.

Furthermore, recent research indicates that two types of narcissism exist—overt narcissism and covert narcissism (Rose, 2002; Wink, 1991). Overt narcissism is generally reflected in the *DSM-IV-TR* criteria (i.e., these individuals are grandiose, exhibitionistic, etc.). They report high levels of self-esteem and high levels of life satisfaction. On the other hand, covert narcissists tend to appear anxious, timid, and insecure. They report lower levels of self-esteem and less satisfaction with life. Similar to overt narcissists, covert narcissists also possess the aforementioned characteristics of narcissism. The main distinction is that overt narcissism leads to a direct expression of narcissistic tendencies, whereas covert narcissism does not (i.e., covert narcissists do not “appear” narcissistic to most people).

In trying to understand narcissism, clinical and social psychologists have relied on various theories of self-conceptualization. In short, the notion of self-concept suggests that because of life experiences, people develop certain beliefs about themselves, which in turn influence the way they perceive themselves, their abilities, and their environment (Beck, 1995; Pelham & Swann, 1989). The self-concept also influences the way that individuals react to certain events and types of feedback. Two of the most widely researched theories of self-concept formulation are self-enhancement theory and self-verification theory. Both theories have applications to the construct of the narcissistic self-concept.

Narcissism and Self-Enhancement Theory

Self-enhancement theory suggests that individuals are motivated to increase their feelings of personal worth and/or maintain high levels of self-esteem, and therefore, unrealistically overestimate and evaluate aspects of the self (Dauenheimer, Stahlberg, & Petersen, 1999; Jussim, Yen, & Aiello, 1995; Krueger, 1998; Swann, 1990; Swann, Griffin, Predmore, & Gaines, 1987). Researchers believe that most people self-enhance from time to time. Furthermore, self-enhancement is regarded as a natural aspect of self-esteem management (Gabriel, Critelli, & Ee, 1994; Swann, 1990; Taylor & Brown, 1988).

John and Robins (1994) suggested that individuals whose self-evaluations are the most unrealistically enhancing tend to be narcissistic. Moreover, self-enhancement has traditionally played a central role in diagnosing the narcissistic personality (Paulhus, 1998). Narcissistic individuals have been found to enhance many aspects of themselves and their ability. Self-enhancement bias has been found in perceptions of (a) performance in group tasks (John & Robins, 1994), (b) personality characteristics, (c)

intelligence and attractiveness (Gabriel et al., 1994), and (d) academic ability (Dhom, 2002; Farwell & Wohlwend-Lloyd, 1998).

Morf and Rhodewalt (2001) proposed a dynamic self-regulatory, self-enhancement model of narcissism in which the narcissistic self-concept is shaped by the interaction of cognitive and affective processes in social situations. Their model suggests that narcissistic people possess grandiose, yet vulnerable, self-concepts, and therefore continuously seek self-affirmation from others.

Paradoxically, it appears that narcissistic individuals act in these self-aggrandizing, self-enhancing ways as a means of protecting a fragile self-esteem (Freud, 1914/1957; Gabriel et al., 1994; Kernis, 2001; Morf & Rhodewalt, 1993; Raskin, Novacek, & Hogan, 1991). Thus, because of this extreme form of self-enhancement, narcissistic individuals are likely to reject any reference to potential faults or weaknesses because those weaknesses are likely to be viewed as threatening. Therefore, the extent to which narcissistic individuals are willing to seek feedback on weaknesses was one of the main focuses of the current study.

In contrast, researchers have found that while extremely narcissistic people self-enhance, individuals extremely low in narcissism often self-diminish, or underestimate aspects of themselves and their abilities (John & Robins, 1994). However, this finding seems counterintuitive to self-enhancement theory. If individuals are motivated to maintain self-esteem, then why would they self-diminish? The answer to this question can be found by examining self-enhancement's competing theory—self-verification theory.

Narcissism and Self-Verification Theory

Self-verification theory suggests that people are invested in preserving their firmly held self-conceptions and that they do so by soliciting self-verifying feedback (Dauenheimer et al., 1999; Giesler, Josephs, & Swann, 1996; Jussim et al., 1995; Swann, 1990; Swann, Pelham, & Krull, 1989). Self-verification theory originated from the theory of self-consistency. According to Lecky's (1945) self-consistency theory, people strive for order and symmetry in their perceptions of themselves and their world. They seek to predict and control the nature of their reality, and therefore, think and behave in certain ways in order to perpetuate and reinforce their existing views. Therefore, individuals with highly positive self-concepts are likely to seek favorable information regarding the self, whereas individuals with extremely negative self-concepts are likely to seek information that is unfavorable.

When examining self-verification theory in the context of narcissism, it is reasonable to assume that because narcissistic people hold self-aggrandizing views, they would be more likely to seek out positive feedback or information. The positive information would in essence verify their overly positive self-concept. On the other hand, individuals with extremely low levels of narcissism tend to have negative self-views (John & Robins, 1994), and would most likely seek negative feedback or information to verify their negative self-concept.

The Interaction of Self-Enhancement and Self-Verification

Thus, narcissistic people should seek positive feedback because it is both self-verifying and self-enhancing (Swann et al., 1987). Because of the need to improve their fragile self-esteem levels (self-enhancement), and because of the desire to verify their positive self-concepts (self-verification), narcissistic individuals are likely to seek

positive information from their environment. However, for individuals with negative self-concepts, theorists assume that because of self-verification, these individuals will seek negative feedback and believe it to be more accurate. Yet because of self-enhancement strivings, these individuals will feel worse after receiving the negative feedback (Swann et al., 1987). Research has indicated that in cognitive and affective reactions to feedback, self-verification strivings tend to govern cognitive reactions to feedback (i.e., perceived accuracy, attribution of performance), whereas self-enhancement strivings tend to govern affective reactions (i.e., mood states; Dauenheimer et al., 1999; Jussim et al., 1995; Swann et al., 1987).

Giesler et al. (1996) examined the feedback-seeking behavior of three groups of individuals: (a) those with high self-esteem; (b) those with low self-esteem, but not depressed; and (c) those with clinical depression. The researchers led the participants to believe that two independent evaluators were constructing personality profiles of them based on their responses to a personality test. The participants were able to view a short summary of each of the profiles and then chose one summary on which to receive further feedback. In actuality, there were no evaluators; each participant received the same two fictitious summaries. One summary contained only positive feedback about the individual's personality and adjustment level, whereas the other summary contained only negative feedback. Thus, the extent to which individuals would seek positive, self-enhancing (albeit non-verifying) feedback about themselves was the focus of the investigation. Findings indicated that given the choice between positive and negative feedback about the self, depressed individuals showed a significant preference for negative feedback because it was judged to be more accurate (self-verifying). Concomitantly, the low self-esteem group also chose the negative feedback, although to a

lesser extent than the depressed group, and judged both the positive and negative summaries to be equally accurate. Finally, the high self-esteem group chose the positive feedback, again, because it was judged to be more accurate (self-verifying). In conclusion, Giesler et al. demonstrated that due to self-verification strivings, individuals would choose feedback that was judged to verify the self-concept and would, in turn, view that feedback as more accurate.

However, Giesler et al. (1996) did not assess the feedback-seeking behavior of narcissistic individuals. According to Watson, Sawrie, Greene, and Arredondo (2002), depression and narcissism exist along a continuum; thus, individuals low in narcissism tend to be characteristically similar to depressed individuals, whereas individuals high in narcissism generally possess few depressive symptoms, and thus, are dissimilar to depressed individuals. Narcissistic individuals would thus be expected to behave in similar ways to the high self-esteem group in the Giesler et al. study. Therefore, a second focus of the present investigation was to assess the choice of feedback and the perceived accuracy of feedback for narcissistic individuals.

Another area of interest to researchers is cognitive and affective reactions to feedback. In general, narcissistic, self-enhancing individuals tend to react to favorable feedback by perceiving the feedback as more accurate, perceiving the evaluator as more competent, and attributing their performance to themselves. On the other hand, they respond to unfavorable feedback by regarding the feedback as less accurate, perceiving the evaluator as less competent, and attributing their performance to situational factors. With regard to affective reactions, narcissistic individuals feel depressed, anxious, and hostile after receiving unfavorable feedback, while feeling happy and content after

receiving favorable feedback (Dauenheimer et al., 1999; Farwell & Wohlwend-Lloyd, 1998; Rhodewalt & Morf, 1995; Swann et al., 1987).

To demonstrate narcissistic responses to feedback, Farwell and Wohlwend-Lloyd (1998) examined the cognitive reactions of narcissistic individuals to performance feedback. Prior to the performance task, the researchers asked the participants to predict their performance and their partner's performance. Findings indicated that narcissism was related to both predictions of individual performance and to predictions of partner performance. Specifically, the higher the level of narcissism, the more favorable (i.e., optimistic) the prediction of individual performance. However, the higher the level of narcissism, the less favorable the prediction of partner performance. Also, upon receiving feedback, high narcissists attributed their success more to their own ability and effort than did less narcissistic people.

In a similar study, Swann et al. (1987) examined the cognitive and affective reactions of individuals with either positive or negative self-concepts to either favorable or unfavorable feedback. In this study, the researchers used the Texas Social Behavior Inventory (TSBI), which is a self-report measure of social self-esteem, to assess the participants' self-concepts. Individuals who scored high on this scale believed that they were highly competent in social situations and thus were classified as having "positive self-concepts," or favorable views of themselves. On the other hand, individuals who scored low on this scale believed that they were incompetent in social situations and were classified as having "negative self-concepts," or unfavorable views of themselves. The researchers asked the participants to recite a speech and told them that their performance was being evaluated. After the speech, the participants received either favorable or unfavorable feedback with regard to their performance. The findings indicated that the

participants with positive self-concepts, or favorable self-views, viewed the favorable feedback as being more accurate, perceived the evaluator as more competent, and attributed their performance to their ability. Additionally, they viewed the unfavorable feedback as being inaccurate, perceived the evaluator as less competent, and attributed their performance to factors other than their ability. With regard to affective reactions, individuals with positive self-concepts who received unfavorable feedback reported higher levels of depression, hostility, and anxiety, compared to those who received favorable feedback.

These findings have been further supported by Dauenheimer et al. (1999). The authors sought to examine the variables that affect self-enhancement and self-consistency (i.e., self-verification) motives. Specifically, they examined the effects of (a) positive, consistent, and negative types of feedback; (b) degree of elaboration of a self-concept; and (c) discrepancy level of the actual self-concept to the desired self-concept. The participants in the study assessed themselves on 15 personality attributes and completed a personality test. The researchers classified individuals who rated themselves favorably on these attributes as having positive self-concepts, and classified those who rated themselves unfavorably on these attributes as having negative self-concepts. After completing the surveys, participants received fictitious feedback (either positive, consistent, or negative) on some of their attributes. Participants then rated their emotional and cognitive reactions to the feedback. The findings indicated that individuals with positive self-concepts reported more depression and anger and rated the feedback as less accurate when the feedback was negative than when the feedback was positive.

Likewise, Stucke and Sporer (2002) investigated the relationship among narcissism, negative emotions, and aggression in a sample of college students. Regression analyses indicated that narcissism was a significant predictor of negative emotions and aggression after receiving feedback that suggested failure on a task.

These findings were further supported by Stucke (2003). In the study, participants completed an intelligence test and received either positive or negative feedback on their performance. Findings indicated that narcissistic individuals showed more self-serving attributions for their performance—namely, they tended to attribute a successful performance to their own ability, while attributing a failed performance to increased difficulty of the test. Participants also reacted with more depression and anger following the negative feedback.

Narcissistic individuals have also been found to possess positive self-images (Rhodewalt & Morf, 1995); therefore, they should respond to positive and negative feedback in many of the same ways as the participants in the Dauenheimer et al. (1999), Swann et al. (1987), Stucke and Sporer (2002), and Stucke (2003) studies. Thus, a third focus of the present investigation was to examine the reactions of narcissistic individuals to favorable and unfavorable feedback. However, because it has been shown that all individuals react similarly on an emotional level to different types of feedback (Swann et al., 1987), only cognitive reactions to feedback were addressed.

Despite the wealth of research regarding narcissism and feedback-seeking behavior, one question remains—how willing are narcissistic people to view themselves in a more accurate light (see Jussim et al., 1995)? As previously discussed, the majority of studies regarding narcissism and feedback have focused on reactions to certain types of feedback; yet no studies have assessed the extent to which narcissistic people will seek

information regarding potential personal weaknesses. Therefore, in the present study, the following questions were addressed. First, will narcissistic individuals be likely to rate themselves as having weaknesses? If yes, will they desire feedback on those weaknesses? Second, which type of feedback will narcissistic individuals find to be more accurate—feedback in terms of strengths or feedback in terms of weaknesses? Third, how competent will the evaluators of favorable and unfavorable feedback be perceived? Finally, how willing are narcissistic individuals to consider feedback regarding suggested weaknesses (i.e., suggested by an evaluator)?

For the purposes of the study, the definition of narcissism is the degree to which people are grandiose or enhancing in their self-perception. It served as the predictor variable in the study, and was measured by self-report.

The present study included five criterion variables. The first was a measure of self-perceived strengths and weaknesses. This measure is a self-rating of personal attributes, such as academic ability and social skill. The second criterion variable was the desire for feedback on perceived strengths and weaknesses, which was measured by the participant's rank ordering of his or her personal attributes. The third variable was a self-report measure of feedback accuracy. The fourth variable was an assessment of willingness to seek feedback on suggested weaknesses, which was measured by the participant's indicated choice of feedback. The final variable was perceived evaluator competence, and was also measured by self-report.

Based on the literature regarding self-enhancement and self-verification theories, the current study included the following predictions. First, the level of narcissism will be positively correlated to self-views, in that the higher the narcissism level, the more the self-view will consist of strengths. Second, individuals high in narcissism will be more

likely to seek feedback on their self-perceived strengths rather than their weaknesses, whereas individuals low in narcissism will be more likely to seek feedback on their weaknesses rather than their strengths. Third, the accuracy ratings of the strength feedback will be positively correlated to the level of narcissism, whereas the accuracy ratings of the weakness feedback will be negatively correlated to the level of narcissism. Fourth, competency ratings of the strength evaluator will be positively correlated to the level of narcissism, and competency ratings of the weakness evaluator will be negatively correlated to the level of narcissism. Finally, when given the choice for further elaboration on suggested strengths or weaknesses, those individuals who choose strengths will be more narcissistic, whereas those who choose weaknesses will be less narcissistic.

Method

Participants

One hundred twenty undergraduate introductory psychology students (81 women and 39 men, mean age = 19.66 years) volunteered to participate. I recruited participants via the psychology subject pool. All participants received 1 hour of course credit for their participation, and were treated in accordance with the “Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct” (American Psychological Association, 2002).

Materials

In order to measure level of narcissism, I used the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Hall, 1979). The NPI is a 40-item, forced-choice questionnaire designed to measure individual differences in narcissism as a personality trait. Examples from the NPI include, “I really like to be the center of attention,” and “It makes me uncomfortable to be the center of attention.” Participants are asked to choose between the two options. Scores are obtained by totaling the number of “narcissistic” items chosen. Each

narcissistic item is worth one point, and scores may range from 0 to 40. Thus, higher scores represent greater levels of narcissism.

The NPI provides a general component score that reflects an overall measure of narcissism. In addition, the inventory also provides seven first-order component scores that reflect measures of authority, self-sufficiency, superiority, entitlement, exhibitionism, exploitativeness, and vanity. Moreover, a correlational analysis of these seven-factor components and the MMPI validity, clinical, and content scales suggested that these seven NPI components reflect different levels of psychological maladjustment (Raskin & Novacek, 1989). Raskin and Novacek concluded that entitlement and exploitativeness reflect the most maladjustment, whereas authority reflects the least maladjustment in narcissistic individuals.

In terms of reliability and validity, the psychometric properties of the NPI are very good. Split-half reliability was found to be .80 (Raskin & Hall, 1979). Internal consistency estimates range from .83 to .86, and good convergent and discriminant validity have been demonstrated as well (Emmons, 1984; Soyer, Rovenpor, Kopelman, Mullins, & Watson, 2001). Also, factor analyses have reliably identified four underlying factors: (a) leadership/authority, (b) self-absorption/self-admiration, (c) superiority/arrogance, and (d) exploitiveness/entitlement (Emmons, 1984, 1987; Raskin & Terry, 1988; see also Watson, Grisham, Trotter, & Biderman, 1984).

I used the Self-Attributes Questionnaire (SAQ; Pelham & Swann, 1989) to measure self-perceived strengths and weaknesses (see Appendix A). The SAQ is a self-report measure of personal attributes. Participants are asked to rate their standing on a specific attribute relative to other college students on a 10-point Likert scale (e.g., falling in the bottom 5% to falling in the top 5%). The 10 attributes assessed are academic ability,

social competence, artistic or musical ability, athletic ability, physical attractiveness, leadership ability, common sense, emotional stability, sense of humor, and discipline. Scores for the individual attribute responses range from 1 to 10, with higher scores denoting a strength (i.e., greater self-perceived standing on that attribute). Responses are then summed to form a composite measure of self-view. Thus, overall scores can range from 10 to 100, with higher scores representing endorsement of more strengths and fewer weaknesses.

Reliability estimates for the SAQ are good. Test-retest reliability for the short 5-item version was estimated to be .77 and internal consistency for the full version is .76 (Pelham & Swann, 1989).

I used a 5-item, self-report questionnaire developed by Swann et al. (1987) to measure the perceived accuracy of both the favorable and unfavorable feedback. The questionnaire items are scored on a 9-point Likert scale, ranging from extremely inaccurate to extremely accurate. One example is “How accurate do you think this impression of you was?” Responses are summed to form a composite score, ranging from 5 to 45; higher scores represent greater perceived accuracy of the feedback. Reliability is extremely high; internal consistency was demonstrated to be .93 (Swann et al., 1987).

I used a 4-item, self-report questionnaire also developed by Swann et al. (1987) to assess perceived evaluator competence. The questionnaire items are scored on a 9-point Likert scale, ranging from extremely unable to extremely able. For example, participants are asked to rate the ability of the evaluator to “judge other people’s personalities” and “understand what others are thinking and feeling.” Responses are summed to form a composite score, ranging from 4 to 36; higher scores represent greater perceived

competence. Reliability is extremely high; internal consistency was demonstrated to be .94 (Swann et al., 1987).

Additionally, participants received two feedback summaries. Because differences in true weaknesses among the participants are likely to affect the chances that they will seek feedback regarding those weaknesses, these feedback interpretations were held constant across all participants to control for the effect of true strengths or weaknesses. I constructed the summaries prior to the study. The summaries were typed and were approximately one-half a page in length. One summary, the “strength summary,” suggested that the person was well adjusted and showed many strengths. The other summary, the “weakness summary,” suggested that the person exhibited many functioning deficits (see Appendixes C and D). Participants also received a demographics sheet, informed consent information, and information regarding the purpose of the study and contact availability.

Procedure

I tested participants in pairs, and testing took approximately 1 hour per session. Upon arrival, each participant received an informed consent form and heard the same cover story. I adapted the cover story and method of the current study from Giesler et al. (1996).

I told the participants that this was a training exercise for clinical psychology graduate students designed to evaluate the graduate students’ ability to interpret personality tests. I instructed the participants to complete a series of “personality tests,” and told them that two separate evaluators would briefly score and summarize their interpretations. In actuality, the participants completed the NPI, SAQ, and filler personality items. I then told the participants that they would later be able to view both

summaries, evaluate the accuracy of each summary, and evaluate the competency of each evaluator. In order to make the cover story more believable, I also told the participants that, upon completion of the evaluations, they would then have the opportunity to participate in a brief follow-up interview with each evaluator to discuss the test results and to obtain more information.

Following the cover story presentation, the participants completed the “personality test,” consisting of the NPI, SAQ, and filler personality items. This provided the measures of narcissism and self-perceived strengths and weaknesses. Participants then ranked the 10 SAQ attributes in order, beginning with the attributes on which they would most like to receive feedback from the evaluators and ending with the attributes on which they would least like to receive feedback (refer to Appendix B). This rank ordering provided the measure of desire for feedback on self-perceived strengths or weaknesses. I then collected this information and administered another filler personality test (to take up time while the fictitious evaluators were interpreting the test). I then left the room for a few minutes (supposedly to bring the test materials to the evaluators).

After approximately 20 minutes and when the participants had completed the second test, I again left the room to collect the summaries from the fictitious evaluators. Upon returning to the room, I distributed the summaries to the participants and asked them to evaluate both the accuracy of the summaries and the competency of the evaluators for both summaries (which comprised two of the dependent measures in this study) using the evaluation sheets provided. Upon completion of the evaluations, I told the participants that “due to a time constraint,” they were able to receive further feedback on only one (rather than both) of the summaries. The participants then verbally indicated on which summary they wanted to receive more feedback. This provided the measure of

willingness to seek feedback on suggested weaknesses. I then fully debriefed the participants.

Results

Previous research has been rather inconsistent in identifying whether gender differences exist for narcissism (see Foster, Campbell, & Twenge, 2003; Gabriel et al., 1994; Morf, Weir, & Davidov, 2000; Watson, Taylor, & Morris, 1987). To rule out the potential influence of gender on narcissism levels in the current study, I conducted a *t* test for independent means on the narcissism scores for men and women. Results indicated that men ($M = 16.64$, $SD = 6.41$) and women ($M = 15.06$, $SD = 6.86$) did not significantly differ in narcissism levels, $t(118) = 1.21$, $p > .05$. Therefore, gender was not considered in the remaining analyses. Across the entire sample, however, participants scored in the moderate range on the NPI ($M = 15.58$, $SD = 6.73$), indicating that these individuals, in general, possessed some amount of narcissistic tendencies. However, the sample did vary in level of narcissism, ranging from very low (i.e., an NPI score of 2) to moderately high (i.e., and NPI score of 32).

To investigate the prediction that level of narcissism is positively correlated to self-views, I conducted a Pearson product-moment correlation on the self-perceived strengths and weaknesses scores (SAQ composites) and the NPI scores. Results indicated that narcissism level was significantly correlated to self-perception scores, $r(118) = .35$, $p < .001$, in that the higher the narcissism level, the more the self-perception consisted of strengths. Across the sample, SAQ scores fell in the above average range ($M = 66.34$, $SD = 10.20$), indicating that people, in general, possess positive self-concepts, although this may vary widely among individuals.

To analyze participants' desire for feedback on their self-perceived strengths or weaknesses, participants rank ordered the 10 SAQ attributes in order of which attributes they would most like to receive feedback from the evaluators (refer to Appendixes A and B). For the purpose of this study, I considered the attributes falling at the 80th percentile or above to be strengths. Likewise, I considered the attributes falling at the 20th percentile or below to be weaknesses. Finally, I considered attributes that were ranked in the middle (i.e., above 20% but below 80%) to be neutral traits—neither strengths nor weaknesses. These criteria are based on suggestions by Swann et al. (1987), who utilized this distinction when classifying participants into categories of self-esteem level.

To investigate the prediction that individuals who choose to receive feedback on their self-perceived strengths (i.e., who rank their strengths first) are more narcissistic than those who choose to receive feedback on their weaknesses (i.e., who rank their weaknesses first), I decided to examine the attributes ranked first and second in the rank ordering of SAQ attributes. The decision to examine attributes ranked first as well as second is based on suggestions from Giesler et al. (1996), who found that patterns of ranking preference may differ between attributes ranked first and those ranked second.

In considering the attribute ranked first, none of the participants ranked their weaknesses (i.e., attributes ranked in the lower 20%) first. Therefore, I conducted a *t* test for independent means on the narcissism scores for individuals who ranked their strengths first ($n = 53$) and those who ranked their neutral traits first ($n = 55$). Results indicated that those who ranked their strengths first ($M = 17.79$, $SD = 6.54$) were significantly more narcissistic than those who ranked their neutral traits first ($M = 13.13$, $SD = 6.50$), $t(106) = -3.72$, $p < .001$.

In considering the attribute ranked second, only four participants ranked their weaknesses ahead of their strengths and neutral traits. Therefore, I again eliminated this category from the analysis and considered only the participants that ranked their strengths and neutral traits second in the rank ordering. I conducted a *t* test for independent means on the narcissism scores. Results indicated that those individuals ($n = 54$) who ranked their strengths second ($M = 17.00$, $SD = 6.71$) were significantly more narcissistic than those ($n = 51$) who ranked their neutral traits second ($M = 14.14$, $SD = 6.67$), $t(103) = -2.19$, $p < .05$.

To test the predictions that accuracy ratings of the strength feedback are positively correlated to level of narcissism, whereas accuracy ratings of the weakness feedback are negatively correlated to level of narcissism, I conducted two Pearson product-moment correlation analyses on the summary accuracy scores and the NPI scores—one correlation for the strength summary and one for the weakness summary. Results indicated that narcissism level was significantly correlated to the accuracy evaluations of the strength summary, $r(119) = .24$, $p < .01$, in that the higher the narcissism level, the more accurate the strength summary was judged to be. Likewise, narcissism level was significantly correlated to the accuracy evaluations of the weakness summary, $r(119) = -.20$, $p < .05$, in that the higher the narcissism level, the less accurate the weakness summary was judged to be.

I conducted two Pearson product-moment correlation analyses on the evaluator competency ratings and the NPI scores—one correlation for the strength evaluator and one for the weakness evaluator—to assess the predictions that competency ratings of the strength evaluator are positively correlated to level of narcissism, whereas competency ratings of the weakness evaluator are negatively correlated to level of narcissism. Results

indicated that narcissism level was not significantly correlated to the evaluations of competency for the strength evaluator, $r(119) = .09, p > .05$. Likewise, narcissism level was not significantly correlated to the evaluations of competency for the weakness evaluator, $r(119) = -.11, p > .05$. The findings were, however, in the predicted direction.

In order to assess whether individuals who choose to seek further feedback on the strength summary differ in level of narcissism from those who choose to seek further feedback on the weakness summary, I conducted a *t* test for independent means on the narcissism scores. Results indicated that those individuals ($n = 72$) who chose the strength summary ($M = 16.99, SD = 6.14$) were significantly more narcissistic than those ($n = 46$) who chose the weakness summary ($M = 13.24, SD = 7.15$), $t(116) = 3.03, p < .01$.

Discussion

The present findings lend support to self-enhancement theory (Dauenheimer, Stahlberg, & Petersen, 1999; John & Robins, 1994; Jussim, Yen, & Aiello, 1995; Krueger, 1998; Swann, 1990; Swann, Griffin, Predmore, & Gaines, 1987) and self-verification theory (Giesler, Josephs, & Swann, 1996; Jussim et al., 1995; Swann, 1990; Swann, Pelham, & Krull, 1989) as they apply to self-concept formulation in narcissistic individuals. The data suggest that, in general, narcissistic people seek positive feedback (i.e., feedback pertaining to their strengths) because it is both self-verifying and self-enhancing (Swann et al., 1987). These individuals are less likely than individuals with lower levels of narcissism to view feedback regarding their potential weaknesses because this information is threatening to the narcissistic self-image (Morf & Rhodewalt, 1993; Raskin et al., 1991). However, individuals low in narcissism seek feedback pertaining to their weaknesses because it is perceived as more self-verifying, albeit not self-enhancing.

As hypothesized, a positive correlation existed between the self-perceived strengths and weaknesses scores (SAQ composites) and narcissism level. Findings indicated that individuals high in narcissism were more likely to possess self-concepts that consisted of strengths, rather than weaknesses, compared to those who had low levels of narcissism. Upon an examination of the means (see Table 1), individuals scoring at the 80th percentile and above on the NPI possessed an average of five self-perceived strengths, which was significantly greater than the three self-perceived strengths possessed by individuals scoring at the 20th percentile and below and those scoring in the middle of the continuum. Thus, these findings further support Rhodewalt and Morf's (1995) assertion that high levels of narcissism are associated with positive, or favorable, self-images (see also Gabriel et al., 1994; John & Robins, 1994).

Furthermore, because the SAQ is a measure of self-perceived standing on a variety of attributes (e.g., intelligence, athletic ability, etc.), narcissistic individuals, thus rating themselves as having a greater number of strengths, were more likely to believe that they possessed strengths in a greater number of areas. This assertion is consistent with previous research indicating that narcissistic individuals enhance many aspects of themselves and their abilities (Farwell & Wohlwend-Lloyd, 1998; Gabriel et al., 1994; John & Robins, 1994).

Self-Enhancement and Feedback-Seeking Behavior

The data support the notion that because of self-enhancement strivings, individuals high in narcissism are more likely to seek feedback on their strengths (John & Robins, 1994), whereas those low in narcissism tend to seek feedback on their weaknesses. Self-enhancement theory predicts that because of the need to bolster feelings of self-worth, narcissistic individuals will be more likely to attend to feedback from the environment

that enhances their self-concepts (Raskin et al., 1991). Furthermore, because they have fragile self-concepts and possess a greater need to self-enhance (Kernis, 2001; Morf & Rhodewalt, 1993, 2001), they will be more likely to capitalize on those opportunities to enhance their self-images.

As hypothesized, individuals who chose to receive feedback on their self-perceived strengths (i.e., the attributes that were ranked at the 80th percentile) were more narcissistic than those who chose to receive feedback on attributes that were rated as neutral. This pattern was true for the attributes ranked first for feedback, as well as those ranked second for feedback. Additionally, when given the choice for further elaboration on suggested strengths or weaknesses, those individuals who chose strengths were more narcissistic than those who chose weaknesses. It appears that narcissistic individuals will forgo opportunities to receive feedback on attributes that they do not perceive as personal strengths, whereas those possessing lower levels of narcissism will take advantage of those same opportunities.

One would be inclined to assume that, because of overly favorable self-concepts, individuals with higher levels of narcissism do not consider themselves to have weaknesses. However, individuals in the sample scoring at the 80th percentile and above on the NPI, although not admitting to weaknesses, did possess an average of five self-perceived neutral traits (see Table 1). Therefore, they did admit that they possessed attributes that were less than perfect, yet chose not to receive feedback on them. On the other hand, individuals in the sample scoring at the 20th percentile and below, as well as those scoring in the middle of the continuum, each possessed an average of three strengths and six neutral traits, and yet chose to use this opportunity to receive feedback on their neutral traits instead of their strengths.

Self-Verification and Cognitive Reactions to Feedback

Previous research has indicated that self-verification tendencies govern cognitive reactions (i.e., ratings of feedback accuracy and evaluator competency) to feedback about the self (Dauenheimer et al., 1999; Jussim et al., 1995). Self-verification theory suggests that when confronted with feedback about the self that is consistent with one's self-view, one will react by rating that feedback as being more accurate of the self and will perceive the source of the feedback as being more competent in his or her ability to give feedback (Swann et al., 1987).

As hypothesized, narcissism level was positively correlated to accuracy ratings of the strength summary, in that the more narcissistic a person was, the more likely he or she was to rate the strength summary as being more accurate, or characteristic, of him or herself. Likewise, narcissism level was negatively correlated to the accuracy ratings of the weakness summary, in that the more narcissistic a person was, the less likely he or she was to rate the weakness summary as being accurate. Because individuals high in narcissism possess more positive self-concepts, they will identify more often with positive feedback (i.e., feedback that pertains to strengths) and will view that feedback as being more accurate of them. Similarly, when confronted with negative feedback, they will be more likely to view that feedback as being less verifying and less accurate. On the other hand, individuals with low levels of narcissism possess negative self-concepts. Consequently, they will identify more with negative feedback (i.e., feedback that pertains to weaknesses), and will rate that feedback as being more accurate.

Despite lending support to the hypotheses regarding accuracy ratings of feedback, the findings did not support the predictions that (a) competency ratings of the strength evaluator will be positively correlated to level of narcissism and (b) competency ratings

of the weakness evaluator will be negatively correlated to level of narcissism. As previously stated, self-verification theory predicts that because of their tendency to possess overly favorable self-views, narcissistic individuals will respond to positive (i.e., verifying) feedback by viewing the evaluator of that feedback as being highly competent. On the other hand, they will view the evaluator of the negative (i.e., non-verifying) feedback as being less competent. The reverse will be true for individuals possessing lower levels of narcissism.

In the current investigation, however, participants did not react as expected for evaluations of competency. A possible explanation for these null findings is that the participants were led to believe that the personality assessments were being conducted by clinical psychology graduate students in training (i.e., they were told that this was a “training exercise”). This belief may have prompted many of the participants to be lenient on their evaluations. It is possible that they believed that their evaluations would reflect upon the graduate students’ grades in their program, and thus, did not want to be overly critical. On the other hand, participants may have altogether doubted the credibility of the student evaluators in interpreting personality tests. Nonetheless, future studies utilizing similar methods would need to be particularly cognizant of these concerns. Researchers implementing this design should emphasize that this is a training exercise, and that evaluations of accuracy and competency will not be counted as part of a course grade. However, researchers may also want to emphasize the fact that these evaluators have received prior training in personality assessment.

Another potential explanation for these null findings is that there was a slight restriction in range among the narcissism scores (see Figures 1 and 2). Narcissism scores ranged from 2 to 32, with a mean of 15.58. Actual scores on the NPI may range from 0

to 40. None of the participants included in this investigation scored above 32 on the NPI, thus restricting the data set. Therefore, a limitation of the current study is that the participant sample did not include individuals who may be highest in narcissism. It is likely that individuals scoring highest on the continuum, and thus exhibiting more maladaptive narcissistic patterns, would judge others more critically during an evaluation (see Farwell & Wohlwend-Lloyd, 1998).

Limitations and Future Considerations

In addition to restriction in range among narcissism scores, other potential limitations to the findings need to be considered. In considering the impact of feedback-seeking behavior on self-perceived strengths and weaknesses (SAQ attributes), none of the participants ranked their weaknesses (i.e., attributes ranked at the 20th percentile) first for feedback and only four participants ranked their weaknesses second for feedback. Self-verification theory predicts that those with negative self-concepts (i.e., those with the lowest levels of narcissism) should choose to receive feedback on their self-perceived weaknesses because that information would be verifying. Consequently, a greater number of participants in the study, namely those with the lowest levels of narcissism, should have chosen to view feedback on those weaknesses. Therefore, the fact that only a few participants in the study chose to receive feedback on their weaknesses is rather interesting. A possible explanation for this is that the attributes that were indicated as being weaknesses may not have been viewed as being particularly important traits or skills to those individuals. Thus, the participants did not desire feedback on those traits. Therefore, an interesting area of research to pursue would be to investigate the interaction of narcissism level and degree of perceived importance of or prior investment in a skill or trait on feedback-seeking behavior.

Another consideration of the current findings is that, despite significance, many of the correlations were relatively small. Because of this, much of the variability in the patterns of scores was left unaccounted. For example, in the relationship between narcissism level and favorability of self-concepts (SAQ composites), a significant correlation existed ($r = .35$). However, only about 12% of the variability in the self-concept scores was accounted for by narcissism level, leaving approximately 88% unaccounted for in this relationship. Likewise, 94% and 96% of the variability was left unaccounted for in the relationships between narcissism and accuracy ratings of the strength summary and of the weakness summary respectively. Thus, other factors (e.g., self-esteem) may also influence favorability ratings of self-concepts and accuracy ratings of feedback. Research has indicated that self-esteem plays a major role in attributions of self (Pelham & Swann, 1989) and in motivations to self-enhance (Baumgardner, Kaufman, & Levy, 1989; Brown, Collins, & Schmidt, 1988; Raskin et al., 1991). Future studies should include both factors of narcissism and self-esteem when examining motivations to self-enhance and self-verify.

Future considerations could include examining the narcissist's degree of acceptance of differing types of feedback. More specifically, researchers could investigate the willingness of narcissistic individuals to implement changes that are received from feedback of a performance task. That is, when given the opportunity to repeat a performance-based task after receiving feedback on a prior completion of that task, will narcissistic individuals utilize that feedback to improve their performance?

Another consideration may include examining the degree to which narcissistic people will utilize opportunities to undermine, or discredit, evidence that is contradictory to their self-beliefs. That is, if a narcissistic individual ascribes to the belief that she is a

highly intelligent person, will she be motivated to discredit the results of an intelligence test that indicates otherwise?

In general, the results of the current study may be useful for clinicians working with clientele that possess narcissistic qualities. In considering the therapist-client relationship, therapists should be aware that these individuals may exhibit resistance when discussing personal problems. Therefore, therapists may want to approach and address these sensitive issues with much empathy and understanding.

Summary and Conclusions

As predicted by self-enhancement and self-verification theories, narcissistic individuals will seek favorable feedback about their strengths over unfavorable feedback about their weaknesses. Additionally, when confronted with information about their weaknesses, they discount this information and perceive it as being inaccurate. These findings reflect much of what Robins and John (1997) meant when they suggested that narcissistic people see themselves and their world through “rose-colored glasses.” In an effort to self-enhance, narcissistic people actually miss valuable opportunities to learn ways to improve themselves. It appears that in order to fully satisfy their ongoing struggle for self-acceptance, narcissists will have to confront and accept their weaknesses in an effort to exchange their rose-colored view for one that is more clear and accurate.

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Appendix A

Self-Attributes Questionnaire

This questionnaire has to do with your attitudes about some of your activities and abilities. For the ten items below, you should rate yourself relative to *other college students* your own age by using the following scale:

A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J
Bottom	lower	lower	lower	lower	upper	upper	upper	upper	top
5%	10%	20%	30%	50%	50%	30%	20%	10%	5%

EXAMPLE: An example of the way the scale works is as follows: if one of the traits that follows were “height”, a woman who is just below average in height would choose “E” for this question, whereas a woman who is taller than 80% (but not taller than 90%) of her female classmates would mark “H”, indicating that she is in the top 20% on this dimension.

INSTRUCTIONS: Following the example, rate yourself on the following traits by writing in the corresponding letter next to each trait:

1. Intellectual/academic ability _____
2. Social skills/social competence _____
3. Artistic and/or musical ability _____
4. Athletic ability _____
5. Physical attractiveness _____
6. Leadership ability _____
7. Common sense _____
8. Emotional stability _____
9. Sense of humor _____
10. Discipline _____

Appendix B

Rank Ordering of SAQ Attributes

INSTRUCTIONS: Next, rank order these same attributes in the order on which you would most like to receive feedback from the evaluator, with “1” being “want feedback on the most” and “10” being “want feedback on the least.”

1. Intellectual/academic ability _____
2. Social skills/social competence _____
3. Artistic and/or musical ability _____
4. Athletic ability _____
5. Physical attractiveness _____
6. Leadership ability _____
7. Common sense _____
8. Emotional stability _____
9. Sense of humor _____
10. Discipline _____

Appendix C

Strength Summary

Gender:
Test Date:
Evaluator: A

The results of the test indicate that you are generally a well-adjusted individual and appear to function adequately in a variety of situations. You appear to be socially competent and possess good communication skills. You are motivated, self-governing, and tend to succeed in a variety of situations. The results also indicate that you are emotionally stable. You have the ability to adequately manage stress and resolve conflict. You have a high level of self-esteem and are able to acknowledge personal strengths as well as weaknesses. Others would consider you to be a trustworthy companion, and would perceive you as being assertive and self-confident.

Appendix D

Weakness Summary

Gender:
Test Date:
Evaluator: B

According to the results of the test, you possess a variety of adaptive functioning deficits. You tend to be uncomfortable in social situations, mainly due to deficits in interpersonal social skills. You have difficulty in becoming self-motivated, which causes you to struggle in many tasks and situations. You are emotionally unpredictable to others, and lack the ability to handle and resolve conflicts in an efficient manner. You also tend to be overwhelmed by stress, thus lacking appropriate stress management skills. You may also become defensive when discussing personal shortcomings. Your family and peers may perceive you as being withdrawn and lacking in self-confidence.

Table 1

Mean Number of Self-Perceived Strengths, Neutral Traits, and Weaknesses

NPI percentiles	Strengths	Neutral Traits	Weaknesses
80th percentile and above (<i>n</i> = 27)	5	5	0
21st to 79th percentile (<i>n</i> = 66)	3	6	1
20th percentile and below (<i>n</i> = 26)	3	6	1

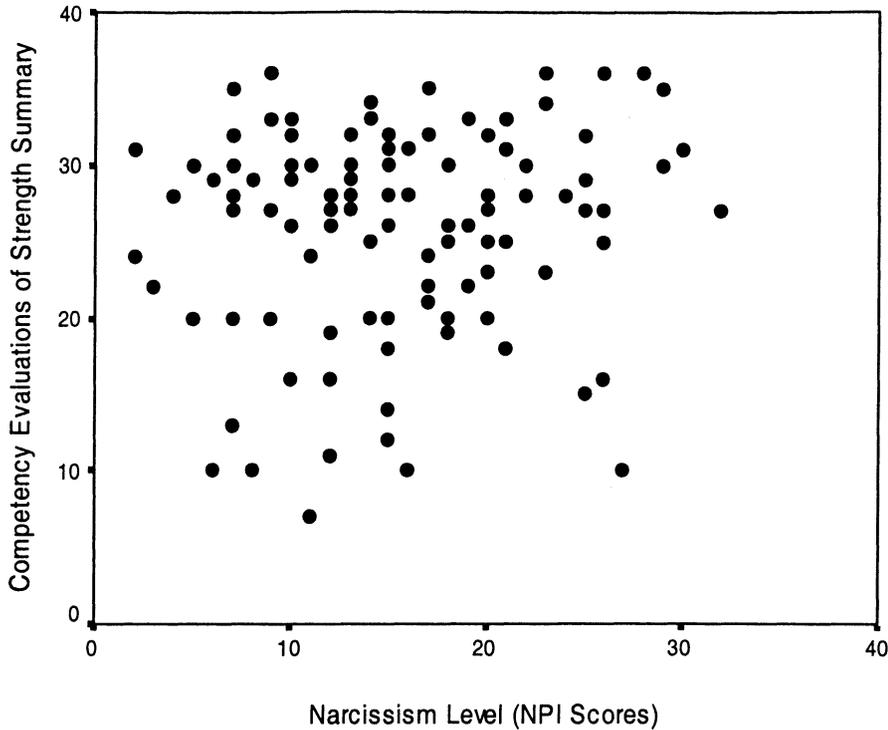


Figure 1. Correlation between narcissism level (NPI scores) and competency evaluations of the strength summary.

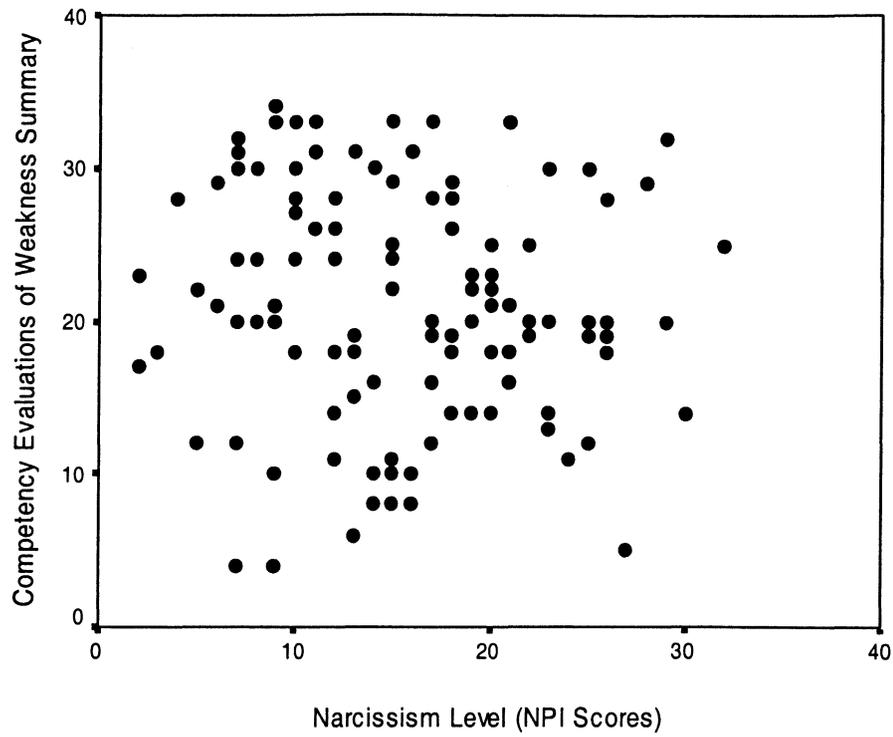


Figure 2. Correlation between narcissism level (NPI scores) and competency evaluations of the weakness summary.