Narcissism and Self-Presentation:
The Moderating Effects of Accountability and Contingencies of Self-Worth

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Abstract

Using e-mail, we investigated intra- and interpersonal variables that may influence self-presentational behaviour of those high in narcissism. Participants rated themselves in domains requiring either external validation (e.g., attractiveness) or internal validation (e.g., morality), when either accountable or non-accountable to an evaluative audience. When degree of external self-worth contingency (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001) was high, those high in narcissism presented themselves in a self-enhancing manner in external domains, even when accountable, whereas those low in narcissism were more modest when accountable. Those high in narcissism may be chronically vigilant for self-enhancement opportunities, especially in external domains where their self-worth is contingent, but may be insensitive to social constraints and norms in their efforts to construct grandiose identities.

KEYWORDS: Narcissism; Self-Presentation; Impression Management; Accountability; Self-Esteem; Self-Worth
Narcissism and Self-Presentation: The Moderating Effects of Accountability and Contingencies of Self-Worth

People seem fundamentally motivated to increase the positivity of their self-conceptions (Sedikides, 1993). Yet some individuals may be more motivated to see themselves (extremely) positively than others. As Morf and Rhodewalt (2001) summarized, those high in dispositional narcissism may be compelled to use a degree of self-enhancement that extends beyond normal boundaries in an effort to construct and to maintain a grandiose sense of self. For example, people high in narcissism overestimate their attractiveness (Rhodewalt & Eddings, 2002), and their academic ability (Farwell & Wohlwend-Lloyd, 1998), among other characteristics. The DSM-IV (APA, 1994) describes the essential features of narcissism as a grandiose self-image, a lack of empathy, and an excessive need for admiration. Narcissism can be assessed on a continuum in the normal population (Emmons, 1987), and in this paper we refer only to individuals high in dispositional narcissism and not to those with a clinical diagnosis.

For those high in narcissism, social interactions may be entered into with the goal of seeking corroboration of grandiose self-views (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). They may not seek social approval but instead admiration from others. Campbell (1999) found that people high in narcissism were more attracted to romantic partners who offered admiration than to partners who offered intimacy and caring, concluding that admiration boosts self-esteem. Those high in narcissism may present themselves in an excessively positive manner to others to gain such self-esteem benefits. However, norms of social appropriateness often require modesty in self-presentation (Schlenker, Weigold & Doherty, 1991). Yet those high in narcissism may pursue the adulation of their social audience, no matter what costs their self-presentation may have for interpersonal relationships (Sedikides, Campbell, Reeder, Elliot, & Gregg, 2002).
People generally take note of social constraints on self-enhancement. For example, they act more modestly when held accountable for justifying their self-presentations to others (Sedikides, Herbst, Hardin, & Dardis, 2002). Accountability refers to a person's expectation that he or she will be called upon to defend, justify, and explain his or her behavior to a social audience (Lerner & Tetlock, 1999). Schlenker et al. (1991) see accountability to audiences as a constraint on self-presentational strategies because individuals must consider how their actions will be perceived relevant to social norms and rules, and how they might explain those actions in the event of criticism. Sedikides, Herbst et al. (2002) found that participants who were accountable for grades they gave to their own essays were significantly less self-enhancing than those in a non-accountable condition. As people high in narcissism value admiration more than approval, they may be less sensitive to accountability constraints.

Within person factors may also exert an influence on self-presentation. Crocker and Wolfe (2001) suggested that people are motivated to pursue increases in self-esteem that come with achieving success in self-relevant domains and aim to evade losses in self-esteem that come with failing in those domains. The domains in which people stake their feelings of self-worth constitute “contingencies of self-worth.” We suspect that those high in narcissism may be particularly self-enhancing in “contingent” domains, given the self-esteem and self-constructive benefits this offers. If they elicit positive social appraisals to support their self-views in contingent domains, those high in narcissism can validate the most important aspects of their identities.

Crocker and Wolfe (2001) differentiated between internal and external contingencies of self-worth. Internal contingencies include the domains of moral virtue, family love and support, and God’s love, whereas external contingencies include physical appearance, outdoing others in
competition, academic competence, and winning the approval of others. Luhtanen and Crocker (2005) found that narcissism was positively associated with external contingencies of self-worth, notably physical appearance and outdoing others in competition and negatively associated with internal contingencies of self-worth, namely moral virtue. Similarly, Campbell, Rudich, and Sedikides (2002) found that those high in narcissism rated themselves as better than the average person on agentic traits (e.g., intellectual skills), but not on communal traits (e.g., morality). Thus, we expect that people high in narcissism may be more likely to ignore social constraints on their self-presentations in external/agentic domains rather than internal/communal domains, for these may be where the largest self-esteem benefits exist for them.

We provided participants the opportunity to rate themselves in the seven domains identified by Crocker and colleagues, under either accountable or non-accountable conditions. We predicted that reductions in self-ratings when accountable would be moderated by the importance of the domain, as indicated by contingency of self-worth scale scores, with greater modesty likely when participants with greater contingent self-worth face accountability constraints. We expected that those high in narcissism would be more self-enhancing than those low in narcissism and would not show reduced self-enhancement when accountable. We predicted that this effect would be larger for self-presentations in external domains and even when self worth was highly contingent in external domains, narcissists might not reduce their self-enhancement.

Method

Participants

Participants were 170 (38 male, 123 female; 9 undisclosed) Australian undergraduate students. Participants were between 18 and 48, with a mean age of 20.9 ($SD = 4.80$).
Materials

The Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI). The NPI (Emmons, 1987) is a 37-item (true/false) questionnaire. Total scores can range from 0 to 37, with higher scores indicating greater levels of narcissism. For the current study, scores ranged from 2 to 34 ($M = 14.95$, $SD = 6.03$, $\alpha = .82$).

The Contingencies of Self-Worth Scale (CSWS). The CSWS (Crocker, Luhtanen, Cooper, & Bouvrette, 2003) is a 35-item scale to assess the extent to which participants base their self-worth in seven domains, each assessed with five seven-point Likert-type items (ranging from 1 = “strongly disagree” to 7 = “strongly agree”). We created two new subscales, grouping the seven domains into external contingencies of self-worth (CSWS-E; $M = 4.74$, $SD = .80$, $\alpha = .88$) and internal contingencies of self-worth (CSWS-I $M = 5.14$, $SD = .84$, $\alpha = .85$).^1

Procedure

Undergraduate students who consented to be contacted by joining a Participant Registry were approached via email with a cover story about a new personality assessment centre. They were informed that if they agreed, they would complete several psychological tests that would be assessed by a staff member with whom they would meet face-to-face to discuss their results. Those who volunteered were emailed the NPI, the CSWS, and a self-rating scale. This self-rating scale asked participants to rate themselves on a scale of 1-20 (with 20 being the most positive), according to how positively they viewed themselves on the seven domains in the CSWS.

Manipulation of Accountability. Participants were randomly assigned to accountable or non-accountable conditions. Following Sedikides, Herbst et al. (2002), in the accountable condition, participants were told (immediately before rating themselves)
that they would be required to explain, defend, and justify their self-ratings to the staff member\(^2\). In the non-accountable condition, participants were told that their self-ratings were completely anonymous, and used for training purposes only.

Participants were asked to return the completed tests and self-ratings to the researchers via email. Consistent with the cover story, they were also told that they would be contacted within 48 hours to set up a meeting to discuss their results. Once the tests were received, participants were emailed a debriefing document detailing the broad aims and hypotheses of the study.

Results

*Manipulation Check*

Participants in both the accountability (100%) and non-accountability conditions (100%) selected the appropriate one of two statements describing the respective experimental conditions (a method used by Sedikides, Herbst et al., 2002).

*Descriptive Statistics*

Replicating Lutahnen and Crocker (2005), we found scores on the NPI to be positively correlated with CSWS-E \((r = .21, p = .005)\) but not CSWS-I \((r = .02, p = .80)\). CSWS-E and CSWS-I were significantly correlated \((r = .33, p < .001)\).

To create our principal dependent measures, the four external domain self-ratings [physical appearance \((M = 12.28, SD = 3.59)\), approval from others \((M = 13.61, SD = 3.38)\), outdoing others in competition \((M = 12.16, SD = 3.81)\), academic competence \((M = 14.57, SD = 3.37)\)] and the three internal domain self-ratings [family love and support \((M = 15.73, SD = 4.44)\), moral virtue \((M = 14.05, SD = 4.08)\), and God’s love \((M = 6.39, SD = 6.02)\)] were collapsed into external (alpha = .76) and internal (alpha = .54) self-rating composite variables. However, the God’s love self-rating was ultimately removed from the internal composite because 59% of
participants provided ratings of zero. Across the sample, participants rated themselves more positively in internal domains ($M = 14.88, SD = 4.44$) than in external domains ($M = 13.16, SD = 2.79$), $t(163) = 6.95, p < .001$.

**Main Analyses**

Two hierarchical regression analyses examined the main and interactive effects of our predictor variables on participants’ self-ratings in the external and internal CSWS domains. The three predictor variables used in the analyses were: narcissism (NPI; centered continuous variable), accountability (coded: accountable = 1, non-accountable = -1), and degree of self-worth contingency (CSWS; centered continuous variable). CSWS-E was entered in the analysis of external domain self-ratings and CSWS-I was entered for internal domain self-ratings. The first step of each analysis tested main effects, the second step added two-way interaction terms, and the third step added the three-way interaction term. Preliminary analyses revealed no significant effects for gender or age and these variables were removed from all analyses.

**External Domain Self-Ratings.** Step 1 of the analysis revealed a significant main effect for narcissism, $\beta = .56, t(161) = 8.47, p < .001$. As NPI scores increased, so did participants’ self-ratings on external domains. A main effect was also found for accountability, $\beta = -.13, t(161) = -2.06, p = .04$, such that participants in the accountable condition ($M = 12.78, SD = 3.23$) self-enhanced less than participants in the non-accountable condition ($M = 13.54, SD = 2.18$). Accountability reduced self-enhancement in external domains. There was no main effect for CSWS-E ($\beta = -.03$).

On Step 2, the only significant two-way interaction was the predicted interaction between narcissism and accountability, $\beta = .15, t(158) = 2.21, p = .03$ (NPI and CSWS-E $\beta = .09$; accountability and CSWS-E $\beta = -.04$), showing that whereas low NPI participants reduced their
self-ratings when accountable (as compared to when non-accountable), high NPI participants increased their self-ratings when accountable (see Figure 1).

This two-way interaction was qualified by a significant three-way interaction between NPI, accountability, and CSWS-E found on Step 3, $\beta = .19$, $t(157) = 2.69$, $p = .008$. Predicted values, representing hypothetical individuals 1 SD above and 1 SD below the means on NPI and CSWS-E were calculated to further understand this significant interaction. As shown in Figure 2, low NPI – high CSWS-E participants reduced their self-ratings under accountable ($PV = 9.83$) compared to non-accountable ($PV = 12.97$) conditions. In contrast, high NPI -- high CSWS-E participants increased their self-ratings under accountable ($PV = 14.91$) compared to non-accountable ($PV = 14.01$) conditions. Low NPI – low CSWS-E participants reduced their self-ratings when accountable ($PV = 11.47$) as compared to when non-accountable ($PV = 12.13$) and high NPI – low CSWS-E participants showed a similar pattern, reducing their self-ratings when accountable ($PV = 14.11$) as compared to when non-accountable ($PV = 15.29$).

*Internal Domain Self-Ratings.* Step 1 of the analysis revealed a main effect for CSWS-I, $\beta = .40$, $t(160) = 5.62$, $p < .001$, such that as CSWS-I increased, so too did internal domain self-ratings. Neither narcissism ($\beta = .11$) nor accountability ($\beta = -.06$) had main effects on internal domain self-ratings. Step 2 of the regression revealed a significant interaction between accountability and CSWS-I, $\beta = -.15$, $t(157) = -2.11$, $p = .04$. The relationship between CSWS-I and internal domain self-ratings was more strongly positive when participants were not accountable ($r = .53$) than when they were accountable ($r = .30$). The other two-way interactions (NPI and CSWS-I $\beta = .03$; NPI and accountability $\beta = .11$) and the three-way interaction ($\beta = .06$) were not significant.

**Discussion**
We expected participants high in narcissism would be more self-enhancing than those lower in narcissism, particularly in external domains (Lutahnen & Crocker, 2005). Consistent with this prediction, we found a significant effect of narcissism on self-ratings in areas that require external validation, but not in those areas that can be internally validated. As predicted, those high in narcissism did not reduce their self-enhancing tendencies when accountable but instead rated themselves even higher in external domains when accountable (rather than non-accountable); those lower in narcissism showed a modesty effect, replicating Sedikides, Herbst et al. (2002). However, as predicted, degree of external self-worth contingency moderated the interactive effects of narcissism and accountability on external domain self-ratings. When degree of external self-worth contingency was high, those lower in narcissism reduced their self-enhancement on external domains when accountable as compared to when non-accountable, whereas those higher actually increased their self-enhancement on external domains when accountable as compared to when non-accountable. When degree of external self-worth contingency was low, all participants showed a similar pattern of reducing their self-ratings when accountable as compared to non-accountable.

Narcissism was unrelated to self-ratings in internal domains. Instead, a high degree of internal self-worth contingency predicted higher internal domain self-ratings – the more important this domain was for self-worth, the higher the self-ratings. However, this effect was stronger when participants were not accountable than when they were accountable, suggesting that even self-ratings that may be difficult to challenge are modulated when open to scrutiny.

Our results provide support for Sedikides, Campbell et al.’s (2002) contention that people high in narcissism show a lack of contextual sensitivity and self-enhance in situations that lead others to become more modest. Yet this lack of contextual sensitivity was only apparent in
external domains. Those high in narcissism appeared to be highly invested in presenting themselves as positively as possible in external domains, but this was not apparent in internal domains. The possession of publicly observable or tangible qualities may be more valued and important than qualities that are more internally based (e.g., Lutahnen & Crocker, 2005).

Moreover, those high in narcissism with lower external contingencies of self-worth showed a similar reduction in their external self-ratings to those low in narcissism when faced with accountability pressures (despite much higher external self-ratings). By presenting themselves in highly positive ways to their social audience on important external domains, people high in narcissism may be attempting to elicit positive or identity confirming feedback to validate their grandiose yet uncertain identities. Contingencies of self-worth may represent a serious vulnerability because of the consequent pressure to initiate self-presentational strategies that, if performed insensitively (i.e., excessive self-promotion in inappropriate contexts), risk social rejection and identity disconfirmation.

Potential Limitations and Future Research

Traditional face-to-face methods, as opposed to our email method, may have resulted in more pronounced experimental effects. Additionally, our dependent measures, self-ratings of positivity in the seven contingent domains, may be rather artificial, allowing participants blatant opportunities to engage in self-enhancement. Such self-presentations may only represent but one aspect of the behavior that people (narcissistic or not) may engage in to boost their self-esteem in contingent areas. Future studies that examine our hypotheses using a range of self-presentational behaviours in a more naturalistic way are warranted. Additionally, future research could determine how inflexible self-enhancement behavior is perceived by others, observing how an
audience (or relationship partner) reacts when someone high in narcissism breaks the demands of normally constraining social contextual variables.

Conclusions

This research began with the idea that narcissism is characterised by a quest to build a highly positive or even grandiose identity, what Arkin and Lakin (2001) called the Taj Mahal of selves. While trekking their path on this quest, those high in narcissism may be ever vigilant for materials that will add further lustre to the grand self they are building. They may be pervasively motivated to seek out opportunities to construct, maintain, and perhaps above all, enhance their grandiose selves. Yet this pervasive motivation to self-enhance may mean that they walk around their social worlds wearing what are akin to narcissistic goggles, or as Baumeister and Vohs (2001) suggested, they suffer narcissistic myopia. As a result of their chronic efforts to garner social applause, people high in narcissism may become insensitive to the specific demands of the social context and the perspectives of others. Social norms for modesty appear a mere hindrance in their identity construction efforts. Contingencies of self-worth took center stage in these identity construction efforts. For those high in narcissism, certain material may be more valuable when building their Taj Mahal. External indicators of worth appeared more rewarding than internal indicators. It may be that what their building looks like on the outside, and not necessarily what occurs inside, is of paramount concern to those high in narcissism.
References


Notes

1Ultimately, we chose to remove the God’s Love scale from the CSWS-I composite because 62 participants (36.5%) rated the importance of this contingency as 1 (on a 5-point scale). No other scales showed this kind of distribution.

2Participants were also randomly assigned to be told that the person processing their questionnaires was either of high status (a university professor) or low status (a first year university student). In the end, there were no main or interactive effects of status on self-presentations. For clarity of presentation, we collapsed across status conditions (randomly assigned and orthogonal to accountability) for the final analyses.
Figure Captions

Figure 1. Mean external self-ratings as a function of narcissism and accountability.

Figure 2. External self-ratings as a function of narcissism, accountability, and CSWS-E. Predicted values represent hypothetical individuals 1 SD above and below the NPI and CSWS-E means.