

Narcissists and Feedback: Motivational Surfeits and Motivational Deficits

Constantine Sedikides and Aiden P. Gregg

*Department of Psychology
University of Southampton*

Despite keen interest in the construct of narcissism, the field of personality and social psychology has lacked a comprehensive framework under which to fit together the relevant empirical bits and pieces. Morf and Rhodewalt's target article takes an admirable first step toward remedying this deficiency.

Morf and Rhodewalt's (this issue) conceptualization of narcissism brings the construct to life. These authors have moved the empirical focus beyond the psychometric, trait-like properties of the construct and into its dynamic, regulatory utility. How do narcissists navigate the troubled waters of everyday life? How do narcissists regulate their psychological functioning at both the intrapersonal and interpersonal level?

In the spirit of Morf and Rhodewalt's thinking, we approach the narcissistic self from a motivational perspective. We wonder about the motives that guide the evaluation of the narcissistic self. What do narcissists want to know about themselves, and what do they make of this knowledge? To what extent do they accept or reject feedback about themselves? If they reject feedback, why do they do so and at what cost? We argue that narcissists, compared to nonnarcissists, have both motivational surfeits and motivational deficits.

Four motives have been identified and documented in the self-evaluation literature (Sedikides, 1993; Sedikides & Strube, 1997). These are self-enhancement (the motive to protect and elevate the positivity of the self), self-verification (the motive to validate cherished self-views), self-assessment (the motive to gain accurate knowledge about the self), and self-improvement (the motive to better aspects of the self).

For the purposes of this commentary, we draw attention to how two of the above-mentioned motives bifurcate. First, the self-enhancement motive divides into an enhancement motive (striving to increase the positivity of the self-concept—an approach orientation) and a protection motive (striving to decrease the negativity of the self-concept—an avoidance orientation). Enhancement and protection may have distinct correlates and consequences, as recent research on self-esteem (Rhodewalt, Morf, Hazlett, & Fairfield, 1991; Tice, 1991) and achievement motivation (Elliot & Church, 1997) suggests. Second, self-verification divides into positive verification (confirming positive self-views) and negative verification (confirming negative self-views; Pمبرتون & Sedikides, 2001). Given that the enhancement motive is difficult to distinguish empirically from the positive-verification motive (what Morf and Rhodewalt

call "self-affirmation"), we refer to them jointly as enhancement-positive verification.

As Morf and Rhodewalt amply document (see also Sedikides, Campbell, Reeder, Elliot, & Gregg, in press), narcissists have a seemingly unlimited supply of the enhancement-positive verification motive. It is perhaps not an exaggeration to state that this motive must subjectively feel like an internal geyser to the narcissist, welling up within them, to be released in practically all forms of intra- and interpersonal regulation. Narcissists make no apologies for their claims of superiority. They adore their self-image, are hopelessly self-centered in their craving for attention and admiration, and feel deserving of unlimited praise. They regard themselves as preeminent persons, brilliant supernovas in a dark social universe populated by inferior peers. Others simply cannot match their celestial brilliance. A surfeit of the enhancement-positive verification motive is one way in which the motivational system of narcissists differs from that of nonnarcissists.

Unfortunately for them, narcissists must also live in the real social world, a world that provides them with feedback that is not uniformly positive. Indeed, the feedback that narcissists receive follows a pattern of progressive disenchantment. In the initial interaction encounters, narcissists receive favorable feedback: They give off the impression of being confident, engaging, clever, and full of life. Alas, this impression evaporates rapidly. Before long (indeed, by the seventh weekly interaction; Paulhus, 1998), narcissists are perceived as shameless braggarts, conceited, uninteresting, and hostile. Such attributes do not boost anyone's bid for public office (Leary, Bednarski, Hammon, & Duncan, 1997). Perceivers smarten up, see through narcissists, and realize that narcissists are full of themselves rather than full of life. Initial attraction gives way to eventual repulsion. Narcissists start to reap the dire consequences of their own behavior: They receive increasingly unfavorable feedback.

Perceivers are likely to express their dislike for narcissists in both indirect and direct ways. They cease to pay attention to them, become frugal with their expressions of admiration, start to avoid and distance themselves from narcissists (e.g., gaze aversion at professional meetings, noninclusion at social gatherings), spread unflattering gossip about them, and (if push comes to shove) openly tell the narcissists what they think of them. Inevitably, the narcissists must come face-to-face with recalcitrant real-

ity: Others have the audacity not to share the glowing opinions that they have of themselves.

How do narcissists cope with unfavorable feedback? Clearly, narcissists have an extraordinary sensitivity to critical interpersonal feedback. They cannot tolerate it, as manifested by their extreme emotional reactions to it. They do not accept it and refuse to internalize it. They defend against it, rationalize it, attribute it to external sources, and blame others. Hence, we suggest that another fundamental difference between narcissistic and nonnarcissist self-evaluation rests in the potency of the underlying self-protection motive: Narcissists have a surfeit of it.

The surfeit of the self-protection motive may affect narcissistic information processing in ways that are worth tracking empirically. It is as if feedback-related experiences are not channeled from narcissistic working memory to long-term memory, or that the self-regulatory system breaks down likely due to motivational roadblocks (e.g., denial, rationalization, external justification). No substantial accumulation of feedback-related experiences occurs, at least not at the level in which such accumulation will discernibly curtail narcissistic behavior (e.g., shying away from self-centeredness and gearing their relationships toward equality or intimacy). Perhaps narcissists suffer from some kind of socioemotional retardation, which we term *socioemotional autism*. Narcissists seem to give off the impression of high-functioning autistics, as they march on and about their daily business, oblivious to what others think of them.

These motivational quirks may have a cognitive underpinning due to neuroanatomical factors. Specifically, it is likely that narcissists' overly creative armamentarium of defense mechanisms and their nonchalant attitude toward feedback has a neuroanatomical basis. Stroke patients who suffer an injury to the front of the right hemisphere (i.e., the ventromedial frontal lobe) engage in a massive, and, to normal observers, plainly preposterous form of self-protection. Ramachandran and Blakeslee (1998) describe such self-protection (i.e., denial) in two neurological patients. One patient was diagnosed with brain tumor and was told that he had less than a year to live. Yet, despite being a highly educated person, he seemed relaxed about his condition and argued that "doctors sometimes incorrectly diagnose things" (pp. 142-143). Another patient who suffered from a paralyzed limp kept toppling out of bed at night. When asked to explain his behavior, he blamed medical students for "putting a cadaver's arm in my bed" (Ramachandran & Blakeslee, 1998, pp. 142-143). Apparently, the patient denied ownership of his paralyzed limp and kept trying to get rid of it, thus falling out of bed. Undoubtedly, narcissistic denial is far from being so extreme. Nevertheless, these two examples invite researchers to consider studies in which the ventromedial frontal lobe of (pathological) narcissists is compared to that of nonnarcissists.

Excessive enhancement-positive verification and self-protection on the part of narcissists have implications for two other self-evaluation motives, namely self-assessment and self-improvement. We begin with the case of self-assessment. Narcissists are not exactly passionate truth seekers when it comes to pursuing self-relevant information. They do not opt to seek out accurate information about themselves, if such information entails even traces of threat potential. This deficit in self-assessment can have serious repercussions: Narcissists may not be able to form a valid view of their position in social and occupational hierarchies before it is too late, before they are excluded or fired.

Excessive enhancement-positive verification and self-protection accompanied by deficient self-assessment can have knock-on deleterious consequences for the self-improvement motive. If narcissists perceive others (e.g., acquaintances, coworkers, supervisors) as inferior, frame interactions with them as competitive, are unhelpful to them, are virulent toward them, and treat them badly (Sedikides et al., in press), how might narcissists appreciate the feedback that they receive from others? Indeed, we propose that narcissists do not benefit from constructive interpersonal feedback. They do not process such feedback carefully, do not fully comprehend its implications for the future, and fail to adjust their plans and behavior accordingly.

In summary, we posit that the narcissistic self-evaluation system is characterized by both motivational surfeits and deficits. The enhancement-positive verification and self-protection motives exist in overabundant levels, whereas the self-assessment and self-improvement motives exist in alarmingly low levels. Furthermore, we suggest that the interplay between the two classes of motives is not bidirectional. Instead, the surfeit in the enhancement-positive verification and self-protection motives is so overwhelming that it leads to deficits in the self-assessment and self-improvement motives. The former does not allow room for the latter. Narcissists are so intensely preoccupied with protecting the self and maintaining or elevating its positivity that they miss out on the opportunity to diagnose accurately their limitations and modify their behavior in ways that are socially desirable and personally beneficial in the long run.

Based on our analysis, what is the emerging portrait of the narcissistic self? We wish to evoke the metaphor of "iron tower" to portray the narcissistic self. First, this self is made from iron, because it appears to be solid and self-sufficient. Furthermore, everything that hits this iron self is deflected immediately: As mentioned earlier, narcissists are particularly skillful at deflecting threats to the self, and at being indifferent, if not oblivious, to feedback. Perhaps Greenwald's (1980) characterization of the self as a totalitarian system of beliefs applies best to the narcissistic self. Of course, whether the appearance of iron translates to fact (i.e., is the implicit narcissistic self-concept more stable than the normal one?) is a

question worth considering empirically. Second, the narcissistic self is tower-like, because it appears to stand tall—at least taller than its social milieu. In fact, the height of the narcissistic self stands in the way of equal and intimate relationships. Its height does not even allow the self to take the perspective of others and empathize with them.

Interestingly, the iron tower may not be completely dysfunctional. Supreme self-confidence and deflection of unwanted news may be correlated with resilience and single-minded goal pursuit. It is worth exploring empirically whether narcissists persist with the completion of self-initiated goals in the face of unfavorable feedback. Narcissists may outperform nonnarcissists in this important domain.

Can rehabilitative action be effective for narcissists? Is it possible to keep in check narcissists' self-enhancing and self-protective needs while intensifying their self-assessing and self-improving needs? We believe that interventions designed to teach narcissists how to behave modestly (e.g., "let some of your achievements go by unaccredited," "give credit where credit is due") are doomed to fail. On the other hand, interventions that capitalize on narcissistic enhancement—positive verification and build on it are promising. Narcissists relate better to prospects of forgiving others because narcissists are morally superior or of assuming increased responsibilities at work because it is their call to save the group. Such interventions (especially when they are not prescriptive) take the narcissistic internal geyser of egocentricity for granted and convert it artfully into socially oriented behavior.

Note

Constantine Sedikides, Department of Psychology, University of Southampton, Highfield Campus,

Southampton SO17 1BJ, England. E-mail: cs2@soton.ac.uk

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