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Editors

The Experience of Meaning in Life

Classical Perspectives, Emerging
Themes, and Controversies

 Springer

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Chapter 15 Finding Meaning in the Mirror: The Existential Pursuits of Narcissists

Constantine Sedikides, Claire M. Hart, Sylwia Z. Cisek, and Clay Routledge

Humans are meaning-seeking animals (Becker 1971; Frankl 1959). Unlike other organisms, they are able to gaze up at the stars and wonder what it all means, why they are here, and what happens to them when they shed their mortal coils. This pursuit of existential comfort has considerable psychological utility. A sense of personal meaning in life provides protection from distress (Debats 1996; Routledge et al. 2011) and promotes psychological and physical health (Ryff 1989; Steger and Frazier 2005; Updegraff et al. 2008; Zika and Chamberlain 1992). Not surprisingly then, there is growing empirical interest in elucidating the many ways in which people find and preserve perceptions of meaning in life. Interestingly, though, there has been little effort to examine distinct meaning-pursuits as a function of specific personality traits, especially given the powerful effects of traits on cognition and emotion (Corr and Matthews 2009). In the current chapter, we dive into this uncharted territory by offering a theoretical analysis of how the trait of narcissism may affect the pursuit of life meaning.

Narcissism is a complex and intriguing personality trait. It refers to a persona that has both child-like, seemingly innocent sides (i.e., self-centered, self-aggrandizing, vain) and adult, potentially problematic sides (i.e., dominant, entitled, manipulative). Narcissists are driven by success, power, and prestige rather than by relational harmony, interdependence, and organizational citizenship. They exude self-confidence, extraversion, and energy. They are liked by others initially, but, with repeated

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contact, they are found increasingly unappealing. In sum, narcissists have an overly positive perception of themselves and a negative perception of others: they are high on agency and low on communion (Back et al. 2010; Campbell and Foster 2007; Morf et al. 2011). These two proclivities can be negatively associated (Schwartz and Rubel 2005). For example, priming participants with achievement values increases success in task completion and decreased helpfulness to an experimenter, whereas priming them with benevolence values decreases success and increased helpfulness (Maio et al. 2009). In this chapter, we ask whether narcissists rely on agency to seek, attain, and sustain meaning in life. We speculate that narcissists derive meaning from at least three agentic domains: achievement, materialism, and reflections of glory.

Narcissists' Agentic Pursuit of Meaning in Life

Below, we will contemplate on how narcissists may pursue and acquire meaning through their achievements, materialistic orientation, and reflections on glory past. We also suggest future research to assess these theoretical assertions.

Narcissism and Achievement

One means by which people can attain a sense of meaning in life is through personal achievements. Achievements allow people to feel as if they are significant contributors to a meaningful universe (Solomon et al. 1991). Most people derive, no doubt, some meaning from achievements. After all, positive performance feedback increases self-esteem (Dutton and Brown 1997), and people find boosts to self-esteem more pleasurable than eating a favorite food, engaging in a favorite sexual activity, drinking alcohol, receiving a paycheck, or seeing a best friend (Bushman et al. 2011). Yet, for narcissists the path from achievement to meaning may be particularly potent. There are several indicators that narcissists over-value achievement (Hepper et al. 2010). We will discuss three classes of indicators.

First, narcissists thrive in competition and status-seeking. Narcissism is positively related to competitiveness, and narcissists relish competitive environments (Morf and Rhodewalt 2001). In fact, they compete ruthlessly to win it all, strive to ascend to leadership positions (Brunell et al. 2008), emphasize status-themes in self-reports (Bradlee and Emmons 1992), fantasize about status (Raskin and Novacek 1991), select dating partners who are likely to enhance their status (Campbell 1999), and affiliate with high-status others (Brunell et al. 2008). Furthermore, (male) narcissists persist longer and enjoy better tasks that are framed as competitive than tasks that are framed as learning (Morf et al. 2000). Finally, narcissists try harder and perform better at challenging tasks than at easy tasks (Wallace and Baumeister 2002).

Second, narcissists rely on their accomplishments to increase their self-esteem and gain a sense of haughtiness (Hepper et al. 2010). Narcissists regard themselves superior to others on agentic traits such as intelligence (Campbell et al. 2002), and they overestimate their agentic traits in relation to objective criteria such as standardized

IQ tests (Gabriel et al. 1994). They also overestimate their final university course grades (Farwell and Wohlwend-Lloyd 1998), and they rate their own contribution to a group discussion as more impactful than the contribution of other group members in spite of objective evidence (i.e., judgments of observers and peers) to the contrary (John and Robins 1994). Additionally, narcissists attribute a successful group performance on an agentic task (i.e., creativity) to themselves but blame other members for an unsuccessful group performance on the same task (Campbell et al. 2000); similarly, they perform better in commons-dilemmas tasks at the individual level by neglecting the communal interest (Campbell et al. 2005). Such is their zeal to overperform and outperform others on agentic (i.e., intelligence) tasks that they persist even when the tasks are unsolvable (Wallace et al. 2009).

Third, narcissists defend themselves fiercely against criticism of their talents (Hepper et al. 2010). To begin with, they are hypervigilant toward negative feedback: They show cognitive activation of worthlessness-related words following subliminal exposure to failure-related primes (compared to neutral primes; Horvath and Morf 2009). When they are concerned that their low competence will be detected, they react by bolstering the positivity of their self-presentations (Morf et al. 2010) and by self-handicapping (Rhodewalt et al. 2006). When outperformed, they treat their competitors with verbal venom (Rhodewalt and Eddings 2002). Finally, when criticized, narcissists respond with force. They derogate unfavorable evaluators, labeling them as incompetent and unlikable (Kernis and Sun 1994), and they aggress eagerly toward them (Stucke and Sporer 2002). In a similar vein, narcissists react with hostility when experiencing upward social comparisons in their daily lives, as such comparisons threaten their perceptions of superiority (Bogart et al. 2004).

In summary, narcissists thrive in competitive settings, regard their accomplishments as superior to those of others, and defend themselves vigorously when their competence is threatened. Given the centrality of achievement to the narcissistic self-concept, we speculate that the achievement domain is a source of meaning particularly for narcissists (Chap. 14 by Schlegel et al., this volume). Narcissists may seek meaning in life through achievement pursuits and may find purpose in life when they attain their achievement-related goals. Future research is needed to gauge this possibility. For example, studies could directly assess the extent to which achievement pursuits bolster meaning for narcissists. Also, findings have shown that existential threat motivates achievement striving (Pyszczynski et al. 2004); research has yet to consider the potential role of narcissism. Is it individuals high in trait narcissism that are most inclined to utilize achievement pursuits as a compensatory response to conditions that challenge a sense of meaning in life?

Narcissism and Materialism

Research has linked materialism to existential strivings (Arndt et al. 2004). For example, the existential threat of mortality salience increases desire for wealth and greedy behavior (Kasser and Sheldon 2000). This research did not consider, however, individual differences in narcissism. Materialism is likely a powerful

source of meaning for narcissists. There are several indicators that narcissists over-value materialism (Cisek et al. 2008; Sedikides et al. 2007, 2011). We will consider three classes of indicators.

First, narcissists may treat money (a sign of status and power; Belk 1985) as a feeder to their grandiose self-image and their exaggerated perceptions of competence and as a way to influence and control others. Narcissists may use the display of material possessions as an impression management tactic, in full awareness of cultural norms that affluent people are judged as capable (e.g., intelligent, self-disciplined) and sophisticated (e.g., cultured, successful; Christopher and Schlenker 2000). Narcissists indeed "divide the world into famous, rich, and great people on the one hand, and the despicable, worthless 'mediocrity' on the other" (Kernberg 1975, p. 234). As mentioned or implied in the opening paragraph, self-sufficiency, low levels of altruism, egocentricity, and poor relationships are typical narcissistic qualities. Thoughts of money activate self-sufficiency, which decreases altruism (Vohs et al. 2006). Also, material preoccupation is associated with egocentricity (Belk 1985) and poor relationship quality (Kasser 2002).

Second, narcissism is directly linked to materialism. Specifically, narcissism is positively related to desire for material possessions (Cohen and Cohen 1996) and compulsive buying (Rose 2007). In addition, narcissism is positively related to aspirations of economic success (Roberts and Robins 2000) and to aspirations of wealth or fame (Kasser and Ryan 1996).

Third, materialistic persons are particularly likely to engage in conspicuous consumption (i.e., acquisition of brand name or prestige products) in an effort to elevate their status (Richins 1994). For example, many owners of fast and expensive cars buy to improve their image on others (Kressman et al. 2006). Given that narcissists are prone to materialism, it is no surprise that they are also prone to choice of brand name products for image-management purposes. Indeed, narcissists manifest a preference for flashy, ostentatious, or expensive products (e.g., designer clothes, expensive jewelry, top-range cars, rare antiques) and a disdain for common, practical, or affordable products. Narcissists are motivated to prove that they are fashionistas, always aware of the latest label, always knowing what's "in" (Sedikides et al. 2011).

Conspicuous consumption has additional benefits for narcissists: hedonic value and novelty seeking. Brand name products entail hedonic value (Vigneron and Johnson 1999). Narcissists (relative to non-narcissists) are fun-seeking (Miller et al. 2009). They are also approach oriented: They report endorsing goals that promote desirable outcomes such as having fun (Foster and Trimm 2008) or maximizing profits (Foster et al. 2009). Narcissists, then, may find high hedonic value in the purchasing of brand name products (O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy 2002). In addition, novelty-seeking or excitement is a key feature of narcissism (Miller et al. 2009). Studies, for example, have linked narcissism with traits such as sensation-seeking (Emmons 1981) and impulsivity (Foster and Trimm 2008; Vazire and Funder 2006). The materialism domain, and in particular acquisition of brand name products, provides plenty of opportunities for narcissists to satisfy their novelty-seeking need.

In summary, narcissists regard money as the royal route to status, are wealth-oriented and fame-oriented, and engage in conspicuous consumption. Assuming the centrality of materialism to the narcissistic self-concept (Sedikides et al. 2007), we speculate that materialism, and in particular conspicuous consumption, is a source of meaning for narcissists. Narcissists may seek meaning in life partly through conspicuous consumption and may find purpose in life when they acquire their desired, high-prestige products. Future research should directly consider this assertion. For example, such research could examine the extent to which narcissists derive meaning in life from materialistic behavior such as conspicuous consumption. Similarly, this research could determine whether narcissists are particularly likely to respond to existential threat (e.g., philosophical claims about meaninglessness in life and the universe) with such behavior.

Narcissism and Reflections of Glory

Reflections of glory likely comprise another vital source of meaning in narcissism. Recent empirical research suggests that nostalgia increases a sense of meaning in life (Routledge et al. 2011). Such studies show that the link between nostalgia and meaning in life is mediated by social connectedness. However, in line with the basic personality structure of a narcissist (high in agency, low in communion), there are several indicators that narcissistic reflections on the past are self-centered and refer to accomplishments (Hart et al. 2011). We will focus on two classes of indicators.

First, nostalgic reflections of narcissists are agentic. Hart et al. (2011, Study 1) subjected narcissists' nostalgic recollections to linguistic text analysis (Pennebaker and King 1999) to find out if narcissists use more agentic words (e.g., competitive, competent, leader, dominant) than communal words (e.g., charitable, cooperate, listen, understanding). Narcissists indeed used a higher proportion of agentic words in their nostalgic narratives than non-narcissists did. The two groups did not differ in their use of communal words.

Second, when narcissists reflect nostalgically on their past, their agentic reflections make them feel better about the kind of person they are. Hart et al. (2011, Study 2) induced nostalgia in narcissists and non-narcissists by asking them to think and write about a nostalgic event in their lives. Then, these researchers assessed, through narrative analyses, whether participants reflected on agentic or communal objects and whether nostalgia increased self-positivity or a sense of social connectedness. In replication of Study 1, narcissists spontaneously waxed more nostalgic about agentic objects (e.g., past success/achievements, having dreams and aspirations, mastering something, overcoming challenges) than non-narcissists did. The two groups, once again, did not differ in their nostalgic reflections on communal objects (e.g., my family, my friends, being part of a group or community, reunions with family or friends). In addition, narcissists (compared to non-narcissists) experienced a greater boost in self-positivity (e.g., feeling good about myself, feeling I have many positive qualities) following nostalgic reflection. As previously, the two groups did not differ on social connectedness (e.g., feeling loved, feeling connected to loved ones).

The surge in self-positivity that narcissists experience when they evoke the past cannot be accounted for by other personality traits. Hart et al. (2011, Study 3) assessed their participants in terms of the Big Five (i.e., extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, openness to experience; Denissen et al. 2008). Then, these researchers induced nostalgia in narcissists and non-narcissists by instructing them to bring to mind a nostalgic song, report its name, and report the name of the performing artist. Finally, they assessed self-positivity and social connectedness. As in Study 2, narcissists (compared to non-narcissists) experienced a stronger boost in self-positivity (i.e., feeling good about myself) following nostalgic reflection. The two groups did not differ on social connectedness (i.e., feeling connected with the people I care about). Importantly, these results generalized above and beyond the Big Five and also gender and age.

In summary, narcissists engage in reflections of past glory. They engage in nostalgia about agentic objects and experiences, and this nostalgic engagement augments the positivity of their self-concept and self-regard. McAdams et al. (1996) claimed that thematic coherence provides life with meaning, unity, and purpose. We speculate that glory reflections constitute a source of meaning for narcissists. Though for non-narcissists, communal themes are important for deriving meaning from the past (Routledge et al. 2011), narcissists may pursue meaning and acquire a sense of purpose in life, to some extent, by resorting to past agentic themes (e.g., success, aspirations, challenges). Future research should examine more closely the agentic path as the means by which narcissists derive meaning from the past.

Why Do Narcissists Derive Meaning from Agency?

So far, we have proposed that narcissists derive meaning from agentic pursuits. Our proximal explanation was self-positivity or self-worth. Narcissists pursue achievements, conspicuous consumption, and glory reflection, because these pursuits inject their self-system with positivity by making them feel successful, special, and mighty. However, there is an alternative explanation. The agentic pursuit of meaning may compensate for inner fragility.

Narcissistic Fragility

There is evidence from explicit measures that narcissists (relative to non-narcissists) have a fragile inner self. Their affective states are unstable both in everyday life (Rhodewalt et al. 1998) and in response to experimental manipulations (Bogart et al. 2004). Also, their state self-esteem fluctuates widely as a function of negative life events (Zeigler-Hill et al. 2010). Evidence from implicit measures is rather mixed. Some studies have showed that narcissists (compared to non-narcissists) have low implicit self-esteem (Boldero et al. 2007; Gregg and Sedikides 2010;

Jordan et al. 2003; Rosenthal 2005; Zeigler-Hill 2006), whereas other studies have not replicated this pattern (Bosson and Prewitt-Freilino 2007; Campbell et al. 2007). Yet, on balance, the data seem to be friendlier to the narcissistic ego fragility argument.

Compensating for Ego Fragility

We posited that narcissists obtain meaning from three agentic domains: achievement, materialism, and reflections of glory. Of those three, materialism has been linked directly to inner fragility. As Tuan (1980) put it: "Our fragile sense of self needs support, and this we get by having and possessing things because, to a large degree, we are what we have and possess" (p. 472). Indeed, persons high on self-instability (i.e., disconnect between current and future selves) are more likely to be driven by immediate than long-term benefits and thus engage in impulsive consumption: They accept eagerly rewards that are smaller but arrive sooner, demand a relatively high premium to delay the reception of a gift card, and wait less to save money on a purchase (Bartels and Urminsky 2011). Persons who focus on their sadness (arguably, an index of insecurity or inner fragility) are eager to spend high amounts of money on product consumption (Cryder et al. 2008). Insecurity, as reported in dreams (Kasser and Kasser 2001) or as a result of death cognitions (Kasser and Sheldon 2000), is related to materialism. Also, when one experiences insecurity, the acquisition of products is compensatory in that it restores a sense of worth. Moreover, persons expressing inadequacy in a certain domain are particularly likely to own materialistic displays that reinforce the relevant identity (Braun and Wicklund 1989). For example, committed but novice tennis players who feel inadequate about their skills are more likely to wear branded clothing compared to expert tennis players who feel confident about their skills. Finally, persons high on dispositional self-doubt (e.g., "More often than not, I feel unsure of my abilities," "Sometimes I feel that I don't know why I have succeeded at something") or persons primed with self-doubt words (e.g., "insecure," "uncertain," "doubtful") express higher levels of materialism compared to their low self-doubt counterparts (Chang and Arkin 2002).

Summary

The literature suggests tenuously an association between inner fragility and materialism. Both chronically and momentarily insecure persons report strong materialistic tendencies. Arguably, materialism helps restore in those individuals a sense of self-worth. Future research would need to assess this proposition more rigorously and also to test the possibility that at least certain forms of excessive achievement and glory reflection stem from an underlying sense of inadequacy. Also, future research would need to address an implication of this reasoning: Does choice or purchase of

brand name products (as well as excessive achievement or glory reflection) solidify the inner world of narcissists? Preliminary evidence for this possibility comes from the work of Sivanathan and Pettit (2010). They showed that individuals consume brand names (i.e., status-enhancing products) for the reparative effects that such a consumption pattern has on self-worth.

In addition, future research would do well to examine whether the relation between inner fragility and materialism – and perhaps achievement or reflections on past glory – is a defining characteristic of grandiose narcissists (the type of narcissists that we have discussed so far) or of vulnerable narcissists. Although interpersonally antagonistic, vulnerable narcissists differ from their grandiose counterparts in that they are introverted, negative-affect laden, and emotionally turbulent (Miller et al. 2010).

Concluding Remarks

Narcissism manifests as a self-aggrandizing, entitled, dominant, and manipulative interpersonal orientation that is propelled by success, power, and prestige. Narcissists must have a need for meaning in life that is as strong as that of their non-narcissistic counterparts. But how do narcissists satiate this need? They certainly do not do so through harmonious relationships, cooperative interactions, or equitable group membership. Rather, we maintain, they satiate their need for meaning in life through agency.

We speculated that narcissists pursue and derive meaning in life from three agentic domains. The first domain is achievement. This involves competition or status-seeking, boasting about own accomplishments, and defending ferociously against criticism of own accomplishments. The second domain is materialism. This involves treating money as a way to increase one's sense of competence and subjugate others, aspiring to material possessions and wealth, and engaging in conspicuous consumerism. The third domain is reflections on past glory. This involves using a relatively high proportion of agentic words in nostalgic reflections, bringing to mind predominantly agentic objects when becoming nostalgic, and experiencing a strong boost in self-positivity after waxing nostalgic on agentic objects.

We also asked why narcissists rely so much on the agentic domain for finding meaning in life. Our answer was that this domain increases their self-worth and self-positivity, which itself is a source of meaning (Chap. 14 by Schlegel et al., this volume). An alternative explanation, though, is that narcissists use strategically the agentic domain as a way to compensate for their inner fragility. The evidence on materialism is generally consistent with this explanation. Nevertheless, more research is required to evaluate rigorously this alternative explanation. Also, research will need to zero in on whether inner fragility underlies the compensatory tactics of grandiose narcissists or of vulnerable narcissists.

Narcissists appear to “put all their eggs in the same basket” in their pursuit of life meaning: They capitalize on the agentic domain. Are they capable of diversifying

their strategies and pursuing meaning not only in the agentic domain but also in the communal domain? Preliminary evidence suggests that narcissists can indeed be “rehabilitated,” as the narcissistic interpersonal style shows signs of flexibility. For example, after being primed with communal concerns (e.g., sharing a birthday or a fingerprint type with another person; Konrath et al. 2006), narcissists report lower levels of aggression toward another person. Also, after being primed with communal attributes, narcissists report higher levels of relational commitment (Finkel et al. 2009). Finally, after being self-affirmed, narcissists show increased desire for common and practical products (Thomaes et al. 2009).

In this chapter, we submitted a speculative agenda on the relation between narcissism and meaning, and we suggested avenues for future research. Although some forays into this relation have been made and are laudable, many gaps in our knowledge remain. The narcissistic quest for meaning entails numerous twists and turns, and it is certainly worthy of ardent empirical attention.

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Chapter 16

“But Wait, It Gets Even Weirder...”: The Meaning of Stories

Kate C. McLean and Sarah Morrison-Cohen

Nobody can bend your ear like Peter Webster. You know this if you have ever been to a family dinner at the Webster's. You know this if you have ever been in line behind him at the post office. You know this if you have ever showered next to him at the gym. His story repertoire contains a long line of hilarious mishaps that start with, “You’ll never believe this,” continue with, “But wait, it gets even weirder,” and end with, “Can you believe that?” He’ll spin a yarn about his east coast boarding school days, such as the time he drew the short straw and got Bruno, the Farting Horse, to ride in the show for parent-visiting day. He’ll lay one on you about San Francisco in the 1960s – perhaps the time his wife was on an acid trip and almost jumped out the window naked. Or the best stories – his sailing exploits – such as the time he found himself inexplicably naked and blind (he had lost his glasses), swimming frantically after his sailboat as it drifted off towards Alcatraz; or the time he sailed to Hawaii with some buddies and the food spoiled on day three of a 2 week trip, leaving them with only Snickers bars, tequila, and whatever they could pull out of the ocean. Peter's stories are funny – they are absurd. Yet no matter how many times they have been trotted out around the dinner table, they never fail to draw a laugh (after some eye rolling), and they are always good to hear; one gets the impression that they are also always good to tell.

At this point, the reader might be asking, how does this relate to the topic at hand? How does a story about a flatulent horse relate to meaning in life? We want to make the case for our readers that Peter's storytelling not only brings him great joy but also brings him the sense that his life has meaning. This meaning comes from the connection to others inherent in much of storytelling, from feeling the significance of having a story to tell that others hear and enjoy, and from the art of constructing a coherent self with our stories.

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