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Better than my loved ones: Social comparison tendencies among narcissists

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ABSTRACT

Narcissists pursue superiority and status at frequent costs to their relationships, and social comparisons seem central to these pursuits. Critically, these comparison tendencies should distinguish narcissism from healthy self-esteem. We tested this hypothesis in a study examining individual differences in everyday comparison activity. Narcissists, relative to those with high self-esteem, (1) made more frequent social comparisons, particularly downward ones, (2) were more likely to think they were better-off than other important individuals in their lives, and (3) perceived themselves superior to these important individuals on agentic traits. However, narcissists’ positive emotional reactions to these self-flattering comparisons were based on their high self-esteem. These results suggest that comparison processes play an important role in narcissists’ endless pursuit of status and admiration.

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1. Introduction

“There is nothing noble in being superior to some other person. The true nobility is in being superior to your previous self.”

— Indian Proverb

This Indian proverb was probably not written by a narcissist. Narcissists think that being superior to others is what makes a person noble and special. Narcissists have inflated, grandiose self-views and care little about others. However, narcissists’ self-views are not grounded in reality (e.g., Gabriel, Critelli, & Ee, 1994; John & Robins, 1994). When reality “bites” and narcissists suffer a blow to their ego, they become defensive, hostile, and aggressive (e.g., Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001).

Although narcissists think they are great, other people may not share this view. How then are narcissists able to maintain their inflated self-views in the real world? We hypothesize that narcissists do so by orchestrating comparisons with people who they perceive as worse-off than they are, even when these individuals are friends and family members. We predict that narcissists will show a general interest in social comparisons, particularly with those individuals they view as inferior, even if they are significant others. By making frequent downward social comparisons, narcissists can maintain their sense of superiority during the “ups” and “downs” of everyday life.

1.1. Superiority is critical to narcissism but not self-esteem

Narcissism is not the same as high self-esteem, although both involve a positive sense of self. Narcissism has been repeatedly characterized as the “dark side” of high self-esteem because it also encompasses a preoccupation with interpersonal dominance and superiority and a prickly sensitivity to negative feedback. Grandiosity and superiority have been central to the construct of narcissism since its inception, reflected both in how it has been conceptualized and how it has been measured (Raskin & Hall, 1981). Superiority, by definition, requires flattering social comparisons. We propose that perceived superiority, pursued via frequent social comparisons against downward targets, serves as an important tool in maintaining narcissists’ grandiose self-views. Furthermore, we propose that individuals with healthy self-esteem do not engage in downward comparisons to the same extent (cf. Gibbons & Buunk, 1999).

As mentioned earlier, narcissists are notorious for their assertive self-enhancement tendencies. They overestimate their physical attractiveness and general intelligence (Gabriel et al., 1994), rate their performance in a realistic management task higher than other participants or relevant experts (John & Robins, 1994), and generally view themselves as better than others.
on agentic but not communal personality attributes (Campbell, Rudich, & Sedikides, 2002). There is a general consensus that narcissists self-enhance mostly on status-relevant attributes involving ability and social rank, with much less interest in being superior on communal attributes such as being responsible or supportive to others (e.g., Campbell et al., 2002). Note that this narcissistic interest in “getting ahead” over “getting along” implies a strong orientation toward social comparisons; high intelligence implies intellectual superiority over others, while being successful implies that one has attained a higher social rank than others. We suspect that narcissists’ interest in status-related (over communal) characteristics forms the best means to promote their sense of superiority.

Narcissistic brand of self-protection can also be understood as oriented around maintaining perceived superiority. Narcissists are especially likely to take credit from another for success (Campbell, Reeder, Sedikides, & Elliot, 2000) or to negatively evaluate others who give them negative feedback (Morf & Rhodewalt, 1993; Smalley & Stake, 1996). In sum, narcissists are threatened interested in protecting their exaggerated sense of self-worth by directly asserting their superiority over others, and are apt to engage in non-comparative self-protection strategies only when the threatening individual has very high status that is difficult to impeach (see Horton & Sedikides, 2010).

Based on this evidence, we contend that narcissistic interest in superiority, best achieved by zealous and downward-focused social comparisons, helps explain why narcissists are myopically focused on enhancing status in agentic domains (because these offer the clearest sense of superiority), and why they are apt to take advantage of comparative forms of self-protection when threatened (because these are the best means to restore a threatened sense of superiority). Critically, these tendencies should distinguish narcissism from healthy self-esteem. Furthermore, we contend that narcissists’ interest in superiority is so potent that it typifies everyday social comparisons, even when these involve comparisons with close others (partners, friends, and family).

Although previous evidence indicates that narcissists may perceive themselves more positively than they perceive their romantic partners (e.g., Campbell et al., 2002), we sought a broader and more direct support for this contention.

1.2. Overview of present research

We predict that narcissists should have a zealous interest in social comparison more broadly, in perceived superiority more specifically, and do so even at the expense of close others. Additionally, these tendencies should distinguish narcissism from healthy self-esteem. We tested this hypothesis by examining individual differences in general social comparison frequency and reactions to naturally-occurring social comparisons. We examined to what extent narcissism predicted interest in social comparisons generally and frequency of upward or downward comparisons specifically. Furthermore, we examined how narcissists reacted to actual social comparisons they experienced during their lives by soliciting recall of several recent comparisons they made. Finally, we examined how narcissism predicted more focused comparisons with the recalled targets across attributes that vary in agency. Such a naturalistic approach is critical for understanding the role of social comparisons in narcissists’ lives as it examines the comparisons actually experienced on a regular basis, rather than those orchestrated by researchers. Below, we describe each of our research goals in turn.

Our first goal was to examine the relation between narcissism, self-esteem and general social comparison orientation, namely individual differences in social comparison frequency (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999). We anticipated that narcissism (but not self-esteem) will predict higher general interest in social comparison information, and specific interest in downward, but not upward, social comparisons. This would be the first evidence to confirm comparison tendencies as an important factor distinguishing the two constructs.

Our second goal was to examine the nature of social comparisons narcissists experience during their everyday lives and to probe the cognitive and emotional reactions to these social comparisons. Although one previous study examined such comparisons (Bogart, Benotsch, & Pavlovic, 2004), the nature of analysis did not permit insights into how often narcissists experienced superiority or inferiority. By examining the reactions to individual comparisons that “loomed large” in participants’ minds, we were able to examine the cognitive impressions of similarity and difference as well as emotional reactions to naturalistic comparison targets with more focus. Critically, we tested to what extent narcissism predicted these reactions independently of self-esteem.

Finally, we tested whether narcissism was a unique predictor of flattering comparisons with recalled comparisons targets. Furthermore, we did so in a way that neutralized factors that confound comparative perceptions with general self-views. Whereas Campbell and colleagues (2002) showed that narcissism predicted above-average perceptions on status-relevant personality attributes, the comparison scale they employed allowed for factors such as focalism (i.e., inordinate focusing on the question target) to confound comparative perceptions with general self-views (see Chambers & Windschitl, 2004). We instead employed a very explicit comparison measure that neutralized these factors, allowing us to make direct inferences about perceived comparative standing (rather than general self-evaluation).

2. Method

Participants were 190 college students (39% male) who received course credit in exchange for their voluntary participation. Participants first read the following:

Over the past 7 days, you probably noticed yourself thinking about someone in regard to how similar and/or different they are relative to you. In other words, you compared with them in some way. Please take a minute or two and think back about the last four individuals that you thought about in relation to yourself, that is, you compared with in some way. These could be individuals that you interacted with or only thought about, and they could be family members, close friends, or strangers.

For each of the four comparison targets, participants were told to “write about anything that you thought about at the time you compared….” After describing all the four targets, for each one they characterized the target’s relation to themselves, the target’s gender and age, and how long ago the comparison occurred. They also rated how well and how long they had known each target, how close they felt to each target, how many times they had seen each target during the past week, how much time they spent interacting with each target, and the domains of comparison for each target. Next, they indicated their reactions to each comparison, specifically whether they were (a) better-off, worse-off, or neither, and felt (b) similar or not. Next, using 7-point scales, they rated their feeling toward the person (friendly-hostile), and how they felt themselves (happy-sad and anxious-relaxed). Finally, they compared themselves with the individual across the 10 items from the Self-Attributes Questionnaire (Pelham & Swann, 1989) by marking a 7-point scale that ranged from “I am much lower”, through “We are about the same”, to “I am much higher”. This format ensured that ratings reflected the actual perception of difference between the self and the comparison target, as both the self and the comparison person
were equally salient. The questionnaire included both purely agentic (e.g., intelligence, leadership ability) and more mixed (e.g., emotional stability) characteristics.

Next, the participants reported demographic information, completed the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Hall, 1981), the Rosenberg’s Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965), and the Upward and Downward comparison scales of the Iowa-Netherlands Comparison Orientation Measure (see Gibbons & Buunk, 1999). All reliabilities exceeded .79.

3. Results

3.1. Individual differences in comparison orientation

Correlations between narcissism, self-esteem, and comparison orientation are presented in Table 1. Consistent with our expectations, narcissism, but not self-esteem, predicted higher comparison frequency generally and downward comparisons specifically.

3.2. Nature of recalled comparisons

Across the entire sample there were a total of 746 comparisons, and the vast majority of these were with close others; 65% were friends, 11% romantic partners, 7% parents or siblings, and 5% casual acquaintances (leaving 12%, e.g., strangers). On average, comparisons took place 3 days prior to the study, and the participants reported interacting with the target more than 6 times for a total of more than 6 h during the week the comparisons occurred. The most common length of acquaintanceship was “more than 2 years” (37–41%), followed by “between 6 months and 1 year” (15–22%). In sum, participants compared with significant others whom they knew very well and had had substantial recent contact. There was more variety in terms of comparison dimensions: 17% indicated comparing on personality characteristics, 13% on lifestyle, relationships, or opinions, 10% on academic skills/status, and 7% on abilities or feelings (leaving 20% for possessions and physical appearance). On 13 occasions (1.7%), multiple dimensions of comparisons were indicated.

Narcissism predicted comparisons regarding physical appearance, r = .15, p < .05. Narcissism did not predict the type of comparison target, length of acquaintanceship, the time since comparison took place, or the frequency of contact over the past week (all r’s < .10).

3.3. Reactions to recalled comparisons

Did narcissists generally feel better-off across reported comparisons, and did they feel more or less similarity toward the comparison target? To answer these questions we summed the number of times participants reported each of these impressions across the four targets. Inspection of Table 2 reveals that both narcissism and self-esteem predicted feeling better-off, whereas only self-esteem significantly predicted feeling less worse-off (consistent with trait data in Table 1). A multiple regression with both traits in the model revealed that narcissism showed only a slightly higher unique relation (β = .14, p = .06) than did self-esteem (β = .11, ns). There was also a trend for self-esteem (β = .13, p = .09), but not narcissism (β = .01, ns), to predict more impressions of similarity. Taken together, these results suggest that those high in narcissism may be only slightly more likely than those high in self-esteem to experience superiority, while only the latter individuals perceived higher similarity toward close others.

How did individuals react emotionally? Because the reactions were fairly consistent across the four targets (Cronbach’s α’s > .56), we aggregated them. As seen in Table 3, both narcissism and self-esteem predicted positive emotions, which is not surprising, given both traits were predictive of feeling better-off following these comparisons. Importantly, whether comparisons were experienced as upward rather than downward1 mediated whether those high in narcissism felt happier and less anxious. Once experienced comparison direction was entered as a predictor of feeling happier (β = .24, p < .01) or less anxious (β = .23, p < .01), narcissism did not predict happiness (β = .09, ns, Sobel t = 1.96, p = .05) or anxiety (β = .11, ns, Sobel t = 1.91, p = .06), respectively (cf. Baron & Kenny, 1986).

Self-esteem mediated the link between narcissism and positive emotional reactions. Once self-esteem was entered as a predictor of feeling happier (β = .19, p < .05) or less anxious (β = .17, p < .05), narcissism did not predict happiness (β = .09, ns, Sobel t = 2.10, p < .05) or anxiety (β = .10, ns, Sobel t = 1.94, p < .05), respectively.

3.4. Solicited comparisons

How did individuals perceive themselves relative to close others on agentic attributes? To examine this question, we averaged comparisons for each domain from the Self-Attributes Questionnaire across the four targets. Flattering comparisons with targets were predicted both by self-esteem (rs = -.11–.37) and narcissism (rs = .04–.41). The critical question was whether narcissism was a more relevant predictor of comparisons on more

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1 In order to maximize the sensitivity of this mediational analysis, we scored each impression of ‘worse-off’ and ‘better-off’ as -1 and +1, respectively, and then aggregated them in a single comparison direction index. As described in text, the remaining analyses used a simple frequency count of each impression in order to separate impressions of upward and downward comparisons which become conflated in this aggregate index.

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**Table 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>-.30</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>-.31</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-.50</td>
<td>.34</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>-.22</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

1 p < .05.
2 p < .01.

**Table 2**

Impressions of similarity and difference as a function of narcissism and self-esteem (N = 190).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>“Better-off”</th>
<th>“Worse-off”</th>
<th>“Similar”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Narcissism</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>-.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-esteem</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>-.31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 p < .01.
2 p < .05.
3 p < .001.

**Table 3**

Emotional reactions to comparisons as a function of narcissism and self-esteem (N = 190).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Friendly–hostile</th>
<th>Happy–sad</th>
<th>Relaxed–anxious</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Narcissism</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>-.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-esteem</td>
<td>-.15</td>
<td>-.21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 p < .05.
2 p < .01.
status-relevant attributes. Results from a regression model where both traits served as predictors of comparisons across the various dimensions are presented in Table 4, with more purely agentic traits appearing toward the top and traits with more mixed content toward the bottom (W.R. Swann, personal communication, 2/26/2010). Of note, narcissism was a unique predictor of perceived superiority on intelligence and was a sole unique predictor of status-relevant attributes such as leadership ability and attractiveness. In turn, only self-esteem predicted perceived superiority on artistic ability and emotional stability, attributes more mixed in content.

In order to provide a more stringent test of the hypothesis that narcissists (but not those high in self-esteem) perceived themselves as superior on agentic traits, we examined patterns of comparisons within each individual. First, five raters drawn from a similar population as study participants (i.e., undergraduate psychology students) ranked each of the 10 attributes on the extent they exemplify competence, status, and influence (i.e., agency), their aggregate rankings yielding an agency index for each attribute. Second, we averaged the participants' comparisons across the four targets. Then, a correlation between the agency index and participants' averaged comparative ratings across the attributes was calculated for each individual ($M = -.03, SD = .32$). This correlation served as an idiographic measure of the extent to which individuals' perceived superiority varied as a function of attribute agency. As we expected, those high in narcissism claimed more superiority for agentic attributes ($r = .23, p < .01$), whereas those high in self-esteem did not ($r = .08, ns$).

### Table 4
Narcissism and self-esteem as unique predictors of attribute comparisons (N = 190).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attribute</th>
<th>Narcissism (β)</th>
<th>Self-esteem (β)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>.31**</td>
<td>.28**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intelligence</td>
<td>.20**</td>
<td>.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership ability</td>
<td>.31**</td>
<td>.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athletic ability</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social competence</td>
<td>.37*</td>
<td>.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attractiveness</td>
<td>.27</td>
<td>.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Common sense</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of humor</td>
<td>.28</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discipline</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional stability</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artistic/musical ability</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Attributes that are purely agentic appear toward the top, whereas those with more mixed agentic and communal content appear toward the bottom.

* $p < .05$.
** $p < .01$.

Only self-esteem predicted feelings of friendliness toward these individuals, indicating that narcissism might engender mixed feelings along this dimension. Although narcissists are very interested in associating with powerful and popular others (e.g., Campbell & Foster, 2002; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001) they can react with hostility when experiencing upward comparisons in their daily life (Bogart et al., 2004). This ambiguity toward upward targets may help explain the lack of consistent relations between narcissism, interest in upward targets, and friendliness toward those targets observed in the current data. Similarly, it may aid in understanding why narcissists were not less likely to see themselves as “worse-off” than the comparison individuals. Narcissists’ ambitions to associate and become like superior others may clash with their need to assert superiority, resulting in less stable reactions to superior others. The complex dynamics between narcissism and upward comparisons surely deserve more research attention.

When asked to make direct comparisons with the targets across a variety of attributes, only narcissists consistently perceived themselves as superior on status-relevant attributes such as leadership and social competence, consistent with our proposition that it is precisely these dimensions that afford the clearest avenue for “one-upmanship” central to narcissistic egos. Narcissists (but not those with high self-esteem) also perceived themselves as more attractive than their significant others and were generally more likely to compare on attractiveness, confirming that being perceived as more attractive than others is a central component of narcissists’ self-views (cf. Vazire, Naumann, Rentfrow, & Gosling, 2008). Taken together, these findings substantially add to previous research in this domain (Bogart et al., 2004; Campbell et al., 2002) as they isolate assertive downward comparisons as a characteristic distinguishing narcissism from self-esteem, and also demonstrate that narcissists’ interest in superior agency extends even to comparisons with numerous close others.

It is important to note that we examined recalled rather than strictly on-line social comparisons. Thus, it is possible that participants recalled more flattering comparisons than they actually experienced, and that their direct comparisons with target individuals were momentary constructions rather than stable impressions of difference or similarity. Nevertheless, narcissists were more likely to exhibit these patterns, and even social comparisons that are reconstructed have important consequences for psychological lives of individuals, such as aiding in the maintenance of high self-esteem (see Goethals, Messick, & Allison, 1991). Future studies should employ diary methods to assess both on-line and recollected comparisons in order to examine the extent to which distortions such as memory biases may have shaped these results.

Our findings have important implications for how narcissism is conceptualized. They suggest that downward social comparisons may be an important tool for narcissistic self-enhancement in daily life. Consistent with previous research (e.g., Campbell et al., 2002), narcissists were far more concerned with “getting ahead” (as indicated by the significant positive correlations between narcissism and comparisons on agentic attributes) than with “getting along”. We suggest it is these agentic attributes that afford the clearest sense of superiority and high status. Indeed, research has identified attributes like social dominance and attractiveness as the most potent predictors of status conferral in social groups (Anderson, John, Keltner, & Kring, 2001), attributes that narcissists clearly see themselves as embodying the most. Thus, narcissists’ interest in superiority generally, and superiority on agentic qualities more specifically, may be reflective of their need to achieve status and recognition (see Brunell et al., 2008). A more careful examination of status-seeking processes is likely to shed light on important aspects of narcissists’ self-regulation.

An alternative view would be to consider narcissists’ comparison tendencies as a result of their “eager and uninhibited”

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*We thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this analysis.*
temperament (Foster & Trimm, 2008). Specifically, given their sensitivity to rewards and insensitivity to punishments, narcissists may have focused on flattering and rewarding aspects of social comparisons. However, we do not believe that narcissists’ social comparison tendencies can be fully explained by appealing to their approach and avoidance orientations. Our findings isolated narcissists’ reports of downward comparisons, particularly agentic ones, as a distinctive feature relative to self-esteem. In their examination of approach and avoidance tendencies among narcissists, however, Foster and Trimm (2008) found that these tendencies completely accounted for the link between narcissism and self-esteem. Thus, these tendencies explain commonalities, rather than differences, between narcissism and self-esteem. Our goal was to examine unique characteristics of narcissism, and we have identified several features of social comparison that help distinguish it from self-esteem. Whereas approach and avoidance tendencies are certainly relevant for reactions to social comparisons (see Suls & Wheeler, 2009 for discussion), our findings suggest that narcissists’ interest in social comparisons extends beyond the influence of their basic temperamental features.

Although it is clear that narcissists are zealous pursuers of esteem, it is less clear when and why they are like this (see Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001 and associated commentaries). Our analysis suggests that narcissistic focus on superiority may be critical to their self-enhancement efforts and may lead to persistent attempts to restore these views of superiority when feeling inferior. Given that everyone fails and that threatening comparisons lurk around every corner (e.g., Gilbert, Giesler, & Morris, 1995), narcissists might make downward comparisons as chief means to support their grandiose egos. On a more speculative note, it might be narcissists’ confident grandiosity, rather than hidden fragility, that is responsible for hostility and aggression they show when they do not get what they think they deserve.

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References


