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## Narcissus Meets Sisyphus: Self-Love, Self-Loathing, and the Never-Ending Pursuit of Self-Worth

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They say that too many cooks spoil the broth, but when it comes to the empirical exploration of narcissism—one of psychology’s oldest and most enigmatic constructs—we disagree. For this reason, we are heartened by Morf and Rhodewalt’s (this issue) contributions to the narcissism literature, as well as by their proposed model of the self-regulatory mechanisms that underlie, promote, and maintain narcissism. Morf and Rhodewalt’s model provides an excellent, basic “recipe” for understanding narcissism. Being cooks ourselves, however, we believe that this recipe is in need of additional ingredients. In this commentary, we first address what we believe may be a promising extension of the intrapersonal side of Morf and Rhodewalt’s model as it relates to the nature of narcissistic self-love and self-loathing. Second, we describe some possible implications of this intrapersonal perspective for interpersonal interactions.

### **Intrapersonal Issues: Self-Love and Self-Loathing in Narcissists**

One aspect of narcissism that we find especially interesting concerns the specific nature of narcissistic self-evaluations. Most accounts of narcissism agree that the narcissist’s self-concept contains two conflicting self-assessments: self-love and self-loathing. How can we account for this puzzling self-evaluative discrepancy? One solution—the one chosen by Morf and Rhodewalt—is to propose that narcissists experience “both high and low self-esteem in *alternation*” (italics added, this issue). In support of this contention, Morf and Rhodewalt cite several studies that demonstrate associations between narcissism and fluctuations in state self-esteem. For example, narcissists exhibit par-

ticularly dramatic increases and decreases in self-esteem in response to success and failure feedback, respectively (e.g., Rhodewalt, Madrian, & Cheney, 1998; Rhodewalt & Morf, 1998; Rhodewalt, Tragakis, & Hunh, 2001). Thus, preliminary evidence supports the alternating self-esteem explanation for the fragility of the narcissistic self.

One might argue, however, that this evidence is more of a restatement of the alternation hypothesis than an actual explanation of why self-esteem instability exists among narcissists. To this point, Morf and Rhodewalt discuss studies that have examined the structure and content of the narcissistic self-concept, with the view that perhaps such structural peculiarities might explain the instability of narcissistic self-esteem. Most studies to date, though, reveal little in terms of self-concept differences between narcissists and nonnarcissists, other than the obvious grandiosity factor. What, then, underlies the inflated ego of the narcissist that could explain the fragility and volatility that research has consistently described?

As a possible answer to this question, we propose that narcissists have both high and low self-esteem simultaneously, but in different forms. Specifically, we suggest that narcissists are high in *explicit* (i.e., self-reported, conscious) self-esteem, but low in *implicit* (i.e., automatic, nonconscious) self-esteem (e.g., Bosson & Swann, 1998). Recent data from our respective labs offer some support for this conceptualization of narcissism. Using people’s preference for their initials as a measure of implicit self-esteem (Bosson, Swann, & Pennebaker, 2000; Kitayama & Karasawa, 1997; Nuttin, 1985), we found that explicit and implicit self-esteem interacted to predict people’s responses to the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Terry, 1988). This interaction was driven, in part, by a

tendency for people with *high explicit* and *low implicit* self-esteem to score higher on the NPI than people high in both types of self-esteem. Moreover, people with high explicit and low implicit self-esteem perceived an excessively favorable personality evaluation as more accurate, and a moderately negative evaluation as less accurate, than did people who were high in both explicit and implicit self-esteem. Thus, our findings have allowed us to make an empirical distinction between “genuine” high self-esteem—positive self-regard on both conscious and nonconscious levels—and narcissistic self-esteem—positive self-regard that exists only on a conscious level and is contradicted by negative, nonconscious self-regard (Brown, Bosson, & Swann, 2001).

Although we have contrasted Morf and Rhodewalt’s alternating self-esteem perspective with our implicit–explicit discrepancy perspective, it remains to be seen how much these perspectives might actually overlap. Both perspectives suggest an ultimate instability and incoherence of self-evaluations among people high in narcissism. But our approach suggests that if a discrepancy between explicit and implicit self-regard is what drives the fragility of the narcissistic self, then examining only the conscious self-system (e.g., the self-reported confidence of the narcissist’s explicit self-views, or the organization of explicit self-concept content) might not reveal differences between individuals who are high versus low in narcissism.

The importance of distinguishing between genuine high self-esteem and narcissistic self-esteem is apparent in Morf and Rhodewalt’s model, because many of the intra- and interpersonal behaviors that they cite as evidence of narcissists’ maladaptive self-regulatory processes are virtually indistinguishable from the behaviors of people with “normal” high self-esteem. For example, people with high self-esteem—similar to narcissists—attribute successes to the self and failures to external factors (Blaine & Crocker, 1993; Miller & Ross, 1975); see themselves as superior to others and overestimate the positivity of their traits and abilities (Taylor & Brown, 1988); derogate sources of negative feedback (Swann, Griffin, Predmore, & Gaines, 1987); exhibit self-enhancing memory biases (Crary, 1966; Kuiper, Olinger, MacDonald, & Shaw, 1985; Silverman, 1964); present themselves in a confident and self-assured manner to interaction partners (Baumeister, Tice, & Hutton, 1989); and self-handicap prior to performance (Harris, Snyder, Higgins, & Schrag, 1986; but see also Tice, 1991). Moreover, correlations between self-esteem and narcissism scores typically fall in the 0.40–0.60 range, indicating a significant amount of overlap between the two constructs.

Unfortunately, research on narcissism that uses the NPI or other self-report measures rarely controls for “normal” self-esteem, a fact that raises some bewildering issues: If high self-esteem and narcissism yield

such similar behaviors, what is the real difference between them? Are the apparent similarities between people with high self-esteem and those with narcissism merely due to researchers’ failures to control for one construct when studying the other? Given the theoretical dangers of confusing genuine for narcissistic high self-esteem, we propose that researchers must make a concerted effort to locate and identify empirically the low implicit self-esteem that characterizes narcissists. Unless this ingredient is included in the narcissism recipe, theoretical and empirical development of the construct remains incomplete—and narcissism remains as elusive and slippery a construct as ever.

A related ingredient that we believe deserves further empirical attention in Morf and Rhodewalt’s model is the development of narcissism—or in our words, the development of discrepancies between explicit and implicit self-esteem. Morf and Rhodewalt cite clinical accounts of the deficient child–parent relationship that is thought to produce narcissism in adulthood, but their model falls short of fully clarifying how early childhood interactions might yield paradoxical feelings of self-love and self-loathing. One possibility is this: Explicit self-views are based on conscious appraisal of the self, which involves the application of logical inferential rules to self-relevant experiences (e.g., Teglasi & Epstein, 1998). Explicit self-views, then, are influenced by facts, logic, and evidence—suggesting that they are formulated at a developmental stage characterized by relatively sophisticated cognitive abilities. Implicit self-views, in contrast, are learned through more automatic and affective processes such as classical and operant conditioning and implicit learning (Berry & Dienes, 1993; Seger, 1994; Staats, 1996). In these types of learning, abstract knowledge is acquired nonconsciously and in the absence of rational hypothesis testing; thus, implicit self-views may be acquired preverbally (e.g., Polyani, 1966, 1968) and may be based largely on the quality of an infant’s relationship(s) to its caregiver(s). Because explicit knowledge and implicit knowledge are derived from separate sources, discrepancies can ensue when different messages concerning the individual’s self-worth are communicated through these different processes. Teglasi and Epstein (1998), for example, wrote that “the convictions derived through actual experience can be at odds with what is taught by socializing others. If so, individuals may develop two sets of knowledge structures that essentially contradict each other” (p. 544). That is, a person whose emotional needs were not met in childhood, but who later developed high explicit self-esteem based on positive, verbal assessments of that person’s abilities, may be a prime candidate for narcissism in adulthood.

If preverbal, affect-based experiences with the caregiver are an important predictor of a person’s implicit self-esteem, just as they are thought to be an important predictor of narcissism, then relations should exist

among narcissism, implicit self-esteem, and attachment styles. Indeed, we have some preliminary evidence that adult attachment styles relate to explicit and implicit self-esteem, as well as to scores on the NPI (e.g., people with more “avoidant” attachment styles score higher on the NPI than do people with other attachment styles, and avoidance is also associated with low implicit self-esteem). Although a possible convergence between the etiologies of narcissism and insecure attachment seems promising, this investigation is preliminary and in need of replication with non-self-report measures and longitudinal studies.

### Interpersonal Issues: Looking for Worth in All the Wrong Places

Having described our findings that explicit and implicit self-esteem interact to predict narcissism scores on the NPI, we must add an important qualification: This predicted pattern was only obtained when we assessed explicit self-esteem with a measure of *self-liking* (Tafarodi & Swann, 1995). People’s self-reported *self-competence* did not significantly interact with their implicit self-esteem. Paradoxically, however, narcissism scores were more highly correlated with self-competence than they were with self-liking. If narcissism is more closely related to feelings of self-competence than to feelings of self-liking, why would narcissism not be related to a combination of high self-competence and low implicit self-esteem?

We believe that some of the research described by Morf and Rhodewalt may shed light on this apparent contradiction. Previous studies suggest that narcissists seek affirmations of their competence above all else, even at the expense of being well liked. This pattern appears in the types of self-aggrandizing statements that narcissists make (Morf, 1994), as well as in the correlations between narcissism and interpersonal motives for power versus intimacy (Carroll, 1987; Emmons, 1989). Such tendencies seem well suited to the documented, narcissistic characteristics of low empathy and forgiveness, and high hostility, self-aggrandizement, and aggressiveness (e.g., Brown, 2001; Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Raskin, Novacek, & Hogan, 1991; Rhodewalt & Morf, 1995; Watson, Grisham, Trotter, & Biderman, 1984)—characteristics that appear to coincide more with a competitive desire for status and power than with a desire for affiliation and acceptance. Morf and Rhodewalt (this issue) aptly summarized this overall pattern of interpersonal motives: “Thus, it appears that when narcissists have to choose between being liked or admired, they go for admiration.”

If social admiration and respect are more highly valued by narcissists than social approval and love, this might suggest that the higher correlations between the NPI and self-competence, relative to self-liking, could reflect social posturing or self-aggrandizement more than

true feelings of self-worth. The narcissist wants to feel respected, and thus the narcissist claims to be competent. A similar but distinguishable view is that high self-competence scores among narcissists reflect the positivity of the competence feedback that they think they receive. To this point, John and Robbins (1994) showed that narcissists have inflated perceptions of their performances, as compared to evaluations made by observers that are more objective. However, beyond such biased perceptions, narcissists might also be more successful in obtaining positive competence feedback from others than in obtaining positive likeability feedback. As Morf and Rhodewalt argue, narcissists seem to structure their social interactions to produce just such an outcome. Thus, it might be fair to assume that narcissists are sometimes successful in garnering the respect and admiration of others, at least in the short run. If so, then their high self-competence scores could in part reflect this reality.

This possibility, however, begs an interesting question: If narcissists are successful at obtaining the admiration and respect that they so desire, then why does their desire for positivity never appear to be sated? Why, as Morf and Rhodewalt suggest, is the narcissistic self continually “under construction”? Part of the answer may be that narcissists are “looking for love in all the wrong places.” Although they feel driven to obtain respect from others, and might be successful at doing so, the sense of self-competence that such feedback engenders might be the wrong kind of positivity. In other words, self-competence might contribute less than self-liking does to an abiding feeling of self-worth and inner peace (as self-liking is based on social approval and acceptance; see, e.g., Bosson & Swann, 1999; Schimel, Arndt, Pyszczynski, & Greenberg, 2001; Tafarodi, 1998; Tafarodi & Swann, 1995). Thus, narcissists may be less like their mythical namesake, who eventually found the greatest love of all in his own reflection, than they are like Sisyphus, forever doomed by the gods to roll his boulder up the mountainside, only to be foiled by the pull of gravity before reaching the top. Further research on this self-liking–self-competence discrepancy, as well as the unique relations between each of these self-esteem components and other indices of security and well-being—including, but not limited to, implicit self-esteem—may yield some important insights that reach well beyond the construct of narcissism.

### Conclusion

Unlike cooking, the pursuit of psychological truths always benefits from having multiple chefs in the kitchen. For nearly a century, the narcissism construct was “owned” by psychoanalytic theorists and clinicians. Although they created a rich tapestry of theoretical speculation around narcissism, little real progress was made during this time in elucidating the nuances of the construct or documenting the intra- or interpersonal processes involved in narcissistic self-esteem management. It is our hope that an approach to narcis-

sism that is more empirically based will be more effective in this regard. We applaud Morf and Rhodewalt for their model's contribution to this endeavor, with hopes that more researchers will add their own favorite flavors to the recipe.

### Note

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