

Overt Narcissism and Approach-Avoidance Motivation: Expanding the Lens to Examine Goal Orientation

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The current study investigated the mediating effect of self-esteem in the relationship between overt narcissism and approach-avoidance goal orientations. Utilizing a sample of 958 participants, analyses revealed a slight suppression effect between overt narcissism and performance approach goal orientation, and a full mediation effect between overt narcissism and performance avoidance goal orientation. Such results indicate a differential effect for the role of self-esteem in approach versus avoidance motivation.

“To love oneself is the beginning of a lifelong romance.”—Oscar Wilde

INTRODUCTION

It has taken decades to begin to unravel the mysterious nature of a narcissistic personality. Research exists that postulates narcissists are embedded with high levels of self-esteem and self-love (Rhodewalt, Madrian, & Cheney, 1998; Rhodewalt & Morf, 1995; Watson, Hickman, & Morris, 1996; Watson, Little, Sawrie, & Biederman, 1992), that narcissists are instead maladjusted, fragile shells suffering from debilitating low-self esteem that could crumble at any time (Cooper & Ronningstam, 1992; Kernberg, 1975), and still more research discussing that the self-esteem of narcissists depends primarily on the type of narcissism being displayed (Wink, 1991; Emmons, 1984; Kernis & Sun, 1994; Morf & Rhodewalt, 1993).

The current consensus in the literature is that narcissism has both adaptive and maladaptive properties. According to Foster and Trimm (2008), narcissists can be positive, confident, secure, and perform well under high levels of pressure (i.e. Bradlee & Emmons, 1992; Emmons, 1984; Foster & Campbell, 2005; Wallace & Baumeister, 2002), as well aggressive and failing to learn from mistakes (i.e. Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Campbell, Goodie, & Foster, 2004).

Research has further clarified that narcissism may occur along a type of continuum of adjustment, and can be classified as either *overt* or *covert*. Overt narcissism tends to be more adaptive (though not completely so), whereas covert narcissism is mostly maladaptive (Rose, 2002). This differentiation was noted after early research on narcissism was confounded with contradictory, puzzling results. It was determined that some measures of narcissism were correlating positively with desirable outcomes, such as well-being, whereas other measures of the construct were yielding negative relationships (Wink, 1991).

The Narcissism Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Terry, 1988), by far the most widely used measure to assess narcissism, is widely supported as a measure of overt, rather than covert narcissism (Kubarych, Deary, & Austin, 2004; Rose, 2002; Rathron & Holstrom, 1996). The current study focuses specifically on the presence and dynamics of overt narcissism as it relates to self-esteem and approach-avoidance motivation.

Narcissism and Self-Esteem

The relationship between narcissistic personality and self-esteem has also been difficult to untangle. While overt narcissism is positively correlated to self-esteem (Rose, 2002; Campbell, 2001; Watson et al., 1992, Watson et al., 1996), there is a crucial difference between the two: narcissism is detrimental to interpersonal relationships, whereas self-esteem is considered beneficial. Bushman and Baumeister (2002) examined both narcissism and self-esteem in samples of violent offenders as compared to controls, and found significantly higher levels of narcissism, but not self-esteem. Similarly, (Barry, Grafeman, Adler, and Pickard (2007) found significantly higher levels of narcissism, but not self-esteem, in a sample of delinquent juveniles as opposed to non-delinquents.

Campbell, Rudich, & Sedikides (2002) investigated the nature of the narcissism-self-esteem overlap, finding that while narcissism and self-esteem share several crucial elements (such as a perception that they are more intelligent and extraverted than others), individuals with high self-esteem also perceived themselves as being higher in traits such as agreeableness and morality. Campbell et al (2002) summarized these differences by stating that those high in narcissism perceived themselves as superior to others on *agentic* traits, whereas those high in self-esteem perceived themselves superior to others on both *agentic* and *communal* traits. Therefore, it appears there are both interesting overlaps as well as distinctions between narcissism and self-esteem.

Approach-Avoidance Motivation

Several intriguing studies have begun to delve into how narcissistic personality relates to approach-avoidance motivation (Foster & Trimm, 2008; Carver & White, 1994; Conner et al, 2004). Across measures, narcissism has been found to positively relate to approach motivation, whereas it has been consistently found to relate either in a negative or non-significant way to avoidance motivation. These studies suggest that narcissists are driven largely by reward—in this case, the reward of approaching situations where they can demonstrate superiority over others, and seem less driven or insensitive to the threat of punishment (Foster & Trimm, 2008). However, we are aware of little research to date that empirically investigates the relationship between narcissism and approach and avoidance *goal* orientations.

Based on the pattern of results that have been uncovered in these initial studies, Foster and Trimm (2008) suggested future research continue to explore how narcissistic personality may relate to other measures of approach and avoidance motivation. In the current study, we aim to answer this call by exploring the nature of the relationships between narcissism and performance-approach goal orientation as well as performance-avoidance goal orientation.

Approach-Avoidance and Goal Orientation

The ideas of approach and avoidance motivation are inherent in almost all conceptualizations of motivation since the beginning of modern psychology (Elliot, 1989). In the most basic terms, theories of human motivation from James (1890) through McClelland (1951) to Elliot (1989) have included some kind of representation of the inherent human tendency to direct behavior *toward* desirable outcomes and *away* from undesirable ones, also known as “appetitively” or “adversively” motivated behavior, respectively (Foster & Trimm, 2008).

As stated by Elliott (1989), “From the advent of psychology as a discipline, most, if not all, of the major theorists who proposed conceptualizations of motivation incorporated approach-avoidance concepts or principles” (p. 171). Approach motivated behavior is guided by the potential for obtaining a positive outcome, wherein avoidance motivation is guided by the possibility of a negative outcome. These

motivational systems appear to operate independently of one another, and are associated with distinct processes and outcomes.

The very earliest models of achievement goal orientation (Dweck, 1986; Nichols, 1984) integrated the distinctions of approach and avoidance motivations into their original descriptions of individual goal orientations. However, over time, the focus of these goal models shifted toward other aspects, and the role of approach and avoidance was largely ignored (Elliot, 1999).

However, as interest and research in goal orientations grew, the importance of the approach and avoidance distinction once again surfaced. While growing research on the outcomes of mastery goals yielded fairly consistent and positive results, the early research results on the outcomes of performance goal orientations were often contradictory and confusing, with performance goals sometimes being positively related to intrinsic motivation and positive work outcomes, and other times yielded null or equivocal results (Elliot, 1994).

The muddy nature of performance goal orientations led Elliot and colleagues to introduce a trichotomous framework of achievement goal orientations (Elliot, 1994; 1997; Elliot & Church, 1997; Elliot & Harackiewicz, 1996). While the concept of mastery goals remained largely the same as in previous models, performance goal orientations were separated into two types: performance-approach (focus on attaining levels of normative competence) and performance-avoidance (focus on avoiding normative incompetence), once again integrating the essential concepts of approach and avoidance motivation.

Narcissism and Achievement Goal Orientation

The complexities of narcissism and self-esteem create a potentially interesting dynamic in terms of understanding the processes that may underlie narcissists' choices of achievement situations. Elliot (1999) postulated that individual difference variable would be quite likely to affect achievement goal adoption, specifically mentioning self-esteem. He further stated, "...in general it may be stated that performance goals (both approach and avoidance) are more likely to be linked to self-based and relationally based variables, given that the pursuit of such goals often entails self-focused attention and the goals themselves are inherently interpersonally orientated" (p. 175). Indeed, any individual difference construct that represents a tendency to direct attention toward a positive or negative stimuli would most likely influence one's achievement goal motivation (Elliot & Sheldon, 1997).

Given the extensive prior research establishing the connection between narcissism and approach-avoidance tendencies, it seems likely that narcissism would have a significant impact on achievement goal orientations. Elliot and Sheldon (1997) stated that dispositional constructs that represent a predisposition toward either positive or negative stimuli would likely have important influence on the adoption of particular achievement goals.

Subsequently, several theoretical explanations and empirical investigations have been conducted to explore how narcissism may relate to achievement goals. Morf and Weir (2000) examined the role of narcissistic dynamics in motivation, finding that those high in narcissism tended to prefer achievement situations where they could demonstrate superiority over others, and that they were primarily concerned with their performance relative to others. The theoretical underpinnings of these findings can be traced back to Kohut (1971) and Kernberg (1975), who suggested that narcissists that the cognitive-affective processing dynamics of narcissists are driven by a "chronic need to obtain external validation for their overly positive self-views, because these rest on an essentially fragile and weak internalized self-structure" (Morf & Weir, 425).

Subsequently, narcissists tend to seek out goals that have ego-involvement, and that provide them opportunities to demonstrate their superiority over other people. Morf and Weir conclude that narcissists are more likely to pursue performance-approach goals, and previous research has found positive relationships between narcissism and approach motivation. Based on the patterns present in past research, we hypothesize:

H1: There will be a positive relationship between overt narcissism and performance-approach goal orientation.

Past research suggests that narcissists will be unlikely to avoid highly evaluative situations (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001), as they are motivated primarily by reward, rather than by punishment. Empirical results have shown a negative relationship between narcissism and avoidance motivation, as measured by several different assessments (Foster & Trimm, 2008). While previous work has not specifically examined performance-avoidance goal orientation, we anticipate a similar pattern of results using this measure.

H2: There will be a negative relationship between overt narcissism and performance-avoidance goal orientation.

Self Esteem as a Mediator

Self-esteem has previously been studied as a mediating variable between narcissism and a variety of outcomes. Rose (2002) explored the mediating effect of self-esteem in the relationships between narcissism and well-being, and found self-esteem to have a fully mediating effect.

Elliot (1999) suggested that antecedent variables of achievement goal orientations (in this case, narcissism and self esteem) would likely combine together to “jointly and interactively predict achievement goal adoption” (p. 176). Payne, Youngcourt, and Beaubien (2007) stated that while there “does not appear to be a strong theoretical rationale for a direct relationship and goal orientation” (131), several empirical pieces of research have investigated the mediating role that self esteem appears to play between dispositional variables and approach-avoidance motivations (e.g., Heimpel, Elliot, & Wood, 2006).

Heimpel et al. (2006) argued that self-esteem and achievement goals represent two critical functions of the self: the evaluative function and the executive function, respectively. They further point out that while these two functions are conceptually and intuitively linked, there is not much in the way of research evidence to link them empirically, as a majority of research on the mediating effects of self-esteem tends to focus more on motivation in general, rather than on specific goal constructs such as approach and avoidance goal orientation. They further state that there is strong conceptual rationale for self-esteem to serve as a link between personality dispositions and predictions of approach-avoidance goal adoption.

Self-esteem has previously been examined as a mediator of the relationship between several personality traits (such as neuroticism and extraversion) to approach and avoidance motivations. Spencer, Josephs, and Steele (1993) proposed self-esteem as a mediator of the relationship between approach and avoidance temperaments and avoidance goals, using the rationale that one’s temperament influences his or her self-esteem, and subsequently that self-esteem influences the goals they adopt. Further, they characterized self-esteem as a resource that individuals draw upon in self-regulation.

Baumeister and Tice (1985) support this assertion. Their research found that those with lower levels of self-esteem were focused on hiding their faults and simply preventing further losses of self-esteem, which is consistent with a performance-avoidance goal orientation (Arkin, 1981; Baumeister & Tice, 1985; Wood, Giordano-Beech, Taylor, Michela, & Gaus, 1994).

Performance-avoidance goals serve the role of providing the self with “something to move away from, but not anything to move toward” (Heimpel et al, 2006, Carver & Scheirer, 1998), keeping the individual’s focus on negative potential outcomes, rather than on positive possibilities (Elliot & McGregor, 1999). Those with low self-esteem, therefore, tend to define success as a lack of a negative outcome, rather than the presence of a positive one (Heimpel et al., 2006; Elliot, Sheldon, & Church, 1997).

In contrast, those with higher self-esteem focus on presenting themselves in a positive manner, in ways in which will serve to further enhance their self-esteem (Arkin, 1981; Baumeister & Tice, 1985; Wood, Giordano-Beech, Taylor, Michela, & Gaus, 1994). Such a focus orients them toward performance-approach goals, which provide an opportunity to prove themselves as successful as compared to others.

In short, avoidance-based goal orientations are representative of a self-protective mechanism typical of those with low self-esteem, whereas approach-based goal orientations are indicative of a self-enhancement mechanism found in those with high self-esteem (Heimpel et al., 2006).

Given the theoretical and empirical evidence that narcissism is predictive of self-esteem, and given the importance role that self-esteem plays in the choice of achievement goal adoption, it seems necessary to explore the potential mediating role self-esteem may play in the relationship between narcissism and achievement goal orientation. Therefore, we hypothesize the following relationships:

H3: Self-esteem will mediate the relationship between overt narcissism and performance-approach goal orientation.

H4: Self-esteem will mediate the relationship between overt narcissism and performance-avoidance goal orientation.

METHOD

Participants and Procedures

958 alumni from a mid-sized Midwestern university completed an online survey assessing their narcissism and three types of goal orientation. Approximately 16,975 email invitations were sent out. Of these emails, 5130 were recorded as being opened, and 958 responses were received. The sample was 41.8% male and 94.7% Caucasian.

Measures

Narcissism

Narcissism was assessed using Raskin and Terry's (1988) Narcissistic Personality Inventory. The NPI is the most widely used measure of overt narcissism. Each item requires the participant to choose between two statements based on which is more true for them. A sample item includes, Choose the statement you believe is more characteristic of you: "*I am essentially a modest person/ Modesty does not become me.*" The scale is then scored by adding up how many items were chosen that are representative of a narcissistic personality. Cronbach's alpha for this scale was .85 in the current study.

Goal Orientation

Performance-approach and performance-avoidance goal orientation were assessed using Vandewalle's (2001) measure and utilizing a 7-point Likert scale, with a 7 indicating "Strongly Agree". Performance-approach goal orientation was measured with 4 items. A sample item was "*I try to figure out what it takes to prove my ability to others at work.*" The PGO-AP scale had a Cronbach's alpha of .80 in this study. Performance-avoidance goal orientation was measured with 4 items, a sample item was "*I would avoid taking on a new task if there was a chance that I would appear rather incompetent to others.*" The PGO-AV scale had a Cronbach's alpha of .85 in the current study.

Self-Esteem

Self-esteem was assessed using Rosenberg's (1965) Self-Esteem Scale. This measure contains 10 items and utilized a 7-point Likert scale, with a 7 indicating "Strongly Agree". A sample item was "*I feel that I am a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others.*" The self-esteem scale had a Cronbach's alpha of .87 in the current study.

RESULTS

Table 1 shows the means, standard deviations, and inter-correlations between variables of interest in the current study. Narcissism yielded a significant positive relationship to performance-approach goal orientation ($r=.30$, $p<.001$), and a significant negative relationship to performance-avoidance goal orientation ($r=-.12$, $p<.001$).

Next, we examined the mediating effect of self-esteem on the relationship between narcissism and performance-approach goal orientation and on the relationship between narcissism and performance-avoidance goal orientation. As noted earlier, these analyses were conducted using the procedure introduced by Baron and Kenny (1986) to test mediation effects.

First, self-esteem was regressed on narcissism. This model (Model 1) yielded a significant positive relationships ($\beta = .21$, $p < .001$). The significant relationship between narcissism and self-esteem satisfied the first condition necessary for mediation.

Next, we sequentially examined the model with narcissism as the only predictor of performance-approach goal orientation (Model 2a), and then examined the model with self-esteem included (Model 2b). Analyses revealed the relationship between narcissism and performance-approach goal orientation was significantly positive when narcissism was included as the only predictor of performance-approach goal orientation ($\beta = .30$, $p < .001$). However, when self-esteem was then included in the analysis, the relationship between narcissism and performance-approach goal orientation increased ($\beta = .34$, $p < .001$). This pattern of results suggests that self-esteem is actually a suppressor of the relationship between narcissism and self-esteem, as opposed to a mediator. The results of these analyses are displayed in Table 2.

These analyses were then repeated by examining the model with narcissism as the only predictor of performance-avoidance goal orientation (Model 3a), and then examining the model with self-esteem included (Model 3b). Analyses revealed an initial statistically significant negative relationship between narcissism and performance-avoidance goal orientation ($\beta = -.12$, $p < .001$). When self-esteem was entered into the model, the relationship between narcissism and performance-avoidance goal orientation became non-significant ($B = -.05$, $p < .10$), while the effect of self-esteem was significant in the second model ($B = .33$, $p < .001$). The results of these analyses indicate that self-esteem fully mediates the effect of narcissism on performance-avoidance goal orientation.

DISCUSSION

Is self-esteem an important part of the process through which overt narcissism relates to approach and avoidance motivation? To date, we are aware of no research that empirically explored this specific question. Research abounds that confirms the positive relationship between narcissism and approach motivation, and the negative relationship between narcissism and avoidance motivation; there are no shortage of studies on the theoretical and empirical evidence that self-esteem is positively linked to approach motivation and negatively linked to avoidance motivation. Narcissism and self-esteem overlap in important ways, yet differ in others. The current study aimed to fill the missing piece of this puzzle by clarifying whether self-esteem was a significant mediator in the narcissism and approach-avoidance motivation relationship.

Interestingly, but perhaps not surprisingly, our research revealed a complex answer to this question. Contrary to Hypothesis 3, self-esteem did not have a significant mediating effect on the relationship between narcissistic personality and performance-approach goal orientation. Consistent with prior research, the relationship between narcissism and performance-approach goals was significantly positive. The addition of self-esteem to this relationship actually *increased* the direct relationship between narcissism and performance-approach goal orientation, creating a slight suppression effect. This finding suggests that for narcissists, the ego-enhancing benefits and rewards of performance-approach goal orientation are appealing, and the current study shows that this is a direct relationship that does not involve the process of self-esteem. This is consistent with past suggestions that narcissists are primarily reward-driven; but adds to this understanding by ruling out the importance of self-esteem in this process.

The puzzle becomes even more interesting when we consider the differential role of self-esteem on the relationship between narcissism and performance-avoidance goal orientation. Self-esteem had a fully mediating effect on this relationship, supporting Hypothesis 4. The relationship between narcissism and avoidance motivation has historically been negative (Foster & Trimm, 2008), little has been known about the underlying process creating such a result. The current study demonstrates the importance of including

self-esteem when considering this relationship. While narcissism is positively related to self-esteem, self-esteem yields a significant negative relationship to performance-avoidance goals. The complete mediation effect found in the current study shows that the negative relationship between narcissism and performance-avoidance goal orientations can be explained fully by the role of self-esteem.

How important is self-esteem in understanding the faces and outcomes of narcissism? The current study suggests that the answer to this question is: it depends. When considering the process through which narcissists adopt approach motivations, self-esteem does not appear to be a significant consideration. Yet in understanding why narcissists are less likely to possess an avoidance motivation, self-esteem plays a vital role in clarifying this question.

Limitations

The current study had several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the data for this study was from a single source. While we feel this is an appropriate method for measuring constructs that are tapping into such personal, internal thoughts and assessments, future research should explore whether assessing narcissism and goal orientation based on observations from close friends or significant others may yield different results.

Secondly, while the current study had a healthy sample size, all participants were alumni from a mid-sized Midwestern University, and were quite homogenous in terms of race, so it is possible these results may not generalize to a more diverse population. Also, the response rate for the survey was fairly low given the number of individuals that were sent the survey invitation, again suggesting there may be a response bias that would prevent us from easily generalizing the results to the population as a whole.

Finally, this study chose to focus specifically on overt narcissism, which could be viewed as both a strength and a limitation. Clarifying the type of narcissism being studied, and assessing the construct with a widely used and accepted measure of overt narcissism is important to clarify the dynamics associated with this complex trait. Yet narcissism is still a trait in flux, and there are many conflicting views on the way it is best conceptualized, dimensionalized, and measured. Narcissism was characterized by Kubarych et al (2004) as, “...an important human characteristic that has yet to reach an agreed psychometric structure” (p. 860). We believe capturing the dynamics between overt narcissism (arguably the most adaptive type), self-esteem, and goal orientation is an important piece of the narcissism puzzle.

Future Research

The current study revealed an interesting and complex role for self-esteem in understanding the relationship between narcissism and goal orientations. Future research should continue to investigate this role by exploring the mediating effect of self-esteem in the relationship between narcissism and mastery goal orientation, which was not investigated in this study. Would self-esteem play a critical role in whether narcissists adopt mastery learning goals? Future research should measure both covert and overt narcissism to see if self-esteem plays a differential role in how these narcissism types relate to approach and avoidance goals.

Given the rich literature on the complexity of narcissism, there is much more to explore. The current study confirmed that self-esteem has a mediating role in the overt narcissism-avoidance motivation relationship, and provided evidence that self-esteem does not mediate the relationship between overt narcissism and approach motivation.

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TABLE 1
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS AND INTER-CORRELATIONS OF STUDY VARIABLES

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3
1. Narcissism	0.35	0.17			
2. Self-Esteem	5.68	0.75	.20		
3. Performance-approach goal orientation	4.87	1.31	.30	-.11	
4. Performance-avoid goal orientation	3.09	1.31	-.12	-.34	.23

N=958. All correlations are statistically significant at $p < .01$

TABLE 2
**EXAMINING THE MEDIATING EFFECT OF SELF-ESTEEM ON THE NARCISSISM-
 PERFORMANCE APPROACH MOTIVATION RELATIONSHIP**

Predictor	Standardized Regression Coefficient (β)	Model <i>R</i> -square	<i>R</i> -square change (ΔR^2)
Model 2a		.092**	.092**
Narcissism	.30**		
Model 2b		.124**	.032**
Narcissism	.34**		
Self-Esteem	-.18**		

N=958. ** $p < .01$

TABLE 3
**EXAMINING THE MEDIATING EFFECT OF SELF-ESTEEM ON THE NARCISSISM-
 PERFORMANCE AVOIDANCE MOTIVATION RELATIONSHIP**

Predictor	Standardized Regression Coefficient (β)	Model <i>R</i> -square	<i>R</i> -square change (ΔR^2)
Model 3a		.014**	.014**
Narcissism	-.12**		
Model 3b		.117**	.102**
Narcissism	-.05		
Self-Esteem	-.33**		

N=958. ** $p < .01$