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Shamed into Self-Love:

Dynamics, Roots, and Functions of Narcissism

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By the end of his life, Armand Hammer, the prominent industrialist, had alienated virtually all of his friends and family, driven his corporation into financial ruin, and tainted his public reputation. Nevertheless, he seemed quite pleased with himself: "There has never been anyone like me, and my likes will never be seen again"; "The brilliance of my mind can only be described as dazzling. Even I am impressed by it" (Blumay & Edwards, 1992, pp. 256 and 94, respectively). Similar profiles can be found in recent biographies of Nobel Prize-winning physicist Murray Gell-Mann (Johnson, 1999) and British analytic philosopher A. J. Ayer (Rogers, 1999). Their several wives and children never quite adjusted to these brilliant scholars' exceptional self-centeredness, nor did professional colleagues easily forgive or forget Gell-Mann's and Ayer's clever but cruel putdowns. Despite frequent self-congratulations, these men were far from happy or secure. Hammer was plagued by self-doubts about his fame; Gell-Mann suffered from severe writer's block and intense fear of being proven wrong; Ayer drank heavily and came close to suicide.

All three men fit Morf and Rhodewalt's characterization of the narcissistic personality. All were self-centered, competitive, and unempathic. All thrived for extended periods in environments in which competition and arrogance were common. Even in those environments, however, they stood out from their colleagues as lacking in the social graces that place at least a thin veneer of constraint on egotism and hostility. All three suffered periods of intense insecurity and disillusionment.

What explains this kind of personality? In a series of enlightening empirical studies, Morf and Rhodewalt have gone far toward delineating the dynamics of narcissism. They have been particularly successful in revealing techniques used by narcissists to broadcast their assets and successes to themselves and others. However, the overall model summarized in Figure 1 has a number of limitations. Most notably, there is no clear and testable causal 'story' in the model

because it does not specify a causal flow among the main variables. Moreover, nothing about the model ties it specifically or uniquely to narcissism. It is essentially a generic representation of the self-regulatory process, containing global concepts such as Self-Knowledge and Social Relationships. An additional problem is that the model is exclusively focused on the interpersonal domain and neglects achievement-related processes and outcomes. Throughout the target article Morf and Rhodewalt attempt to explain how the model applies to narcissists; ideally this would have led to a reformulated process model of narcissism that specifies when and why people like Armand Hammer act the way they do.

Despite our reservations, Morf and Rhodewalt's discussion of the model, and especially their review of their impressive research program, provides a useful foundation for future work. In subsequent sections we provide suggestions for further conceptualization and research, in many cases expanding on ideas presented in the target article.

Implicit Processes and Defensive Regulation

Paralleling a trend in psychology as a whole, social-personality research on the self has progressed from "cold" models of explicit processes to "hot" models of implicit processes (Westen & Gabbard, 1999). This shift has been accompanied by recognition that the self-regulatory system is largely affect-driven. Two issues from the literature on narcissism fit well with this evolution of the field: the dissociation between implicit and explicit self-representations and the centrality of self-conscious emotions.

Dissociation between implicit and explicit self-representations. Morf and Rhodewalt view narcissism as a form of self-esteem regulation: "The narcissists' self-system is in a chronically vigilant state to detect opportunities for self-enhancement or potential departures from self-affirmation, in response to which the system automatically mobilizes its strategies" (p. 36). Like most social-personality researchers interested in narcissism (including ourselves),

Morf and Rhodewalt focus on the explicit self-enhancement process, and only briefly discuss implicit thoughts and feelings. However, clinical accounts of narcissism emphasize that a central feature of the syndrome is a dissociation or split between an unconscious sense of inadequacy and conscious feelings of superiority. From this perspective, self-enhancement is not simply a mechanism to reinforce high explicit self-esteem; it is also an attempt to regulate an unconscious, or only partially conscious, sense of inadequacy and vulnerability by countering it with strong conscious feelings of superiority. This dissociation, and the associated "splitting" of positive and negative evaluations of the self (Kernberg, 1975), helps explain many of the supposed paradoxes of narcissism.

Interpersonally, the dissociation can be seen in the tendency of narcissists to fluctuate between idealizing and devaluing their relationship partners. Speaking psychodynamically, the narcissistic idealization of others involves a projection of conscious aspects of the self, whereas the devaluation of others involves a projection of unconscious aspects of the self. This perspective provides one way of interpreting the dysfunctional relationships associated with narcissism. Whereas Morf and Rhodewalt place the root of narcissists' dysfunctional relationships in their "willingness to self-enhance at the cost of others," the dissociation view places the root in their tendency to devalue others, especially if the others somehow apprise them or remind them of their own inadequacies. This process probably occurs primarily in intimate relationships, where partners' selves become intertwined (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992). These relationships, which have rarely been studied in social-personality research on narcissism, will be an important focus for future research.

Intrapsychically, the dissociation between explicit and implicit self-esteem manifests itself in affective lability and hyper-reactivity to failure and the threat of failure. In early clinical accounts, one salient feature of the narcissistic syndrome was a tendency to shift dramatically

between emotional highs and emotional lows, sometimes culminating in bouts of depression. These depressive episodes are assumed to occur when repeated assaults on self-worth break through the narcissist's shell of self-aggrandizement, allowing implicit feelings of vulnerability, isolation, and worthlessness to become conscious. In social-personality studies, a similar process can be seen in narcissists' reactions to self-esteem threatening contexts.

As Morf and Rhodewalt point out, the most interesting studies are those that "observe self-esteem under conditions that unsettle the narcissists' defended veneer" (p. 21). In ego-threatening contexts, narcissists display a host of responses indicative of a vulnerability to threats of failure not typically seen in individuals with genuinely high self-esteem (i.e., individuals who have high explicit and implicit self-esteem). These responses include contingent self-esteem (Rhodewalt & Morf, 1998), positively distorted recall following rejection (Rhodewalt & Eddings, 2000), private self-handicapping (Rhodewalt, Tragakis, & Finnerty, 2000), and aggression in response to criticism (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998). Many of these intrapsychic processes can be interpreted as defenses against partially unconscious feelings of inadequacy. In contrast, other intrapsychic processes discussed by Morf and Rhodewalt can be seen as 'offense' mechanisms that more directly affirm conscious feelings of superiority, including the narcissistic tendency to exaggerate one's own competence, attractiveness, and intelligence (e.g., John & Robins, 1994; Paulhus, 1998).

In most of these studies, it was assumed that the wish to feel good and avoid feeling bad about the self fueled narcissistic processes. In the next section we consider the possibility that more specific "self-conscious emotions," such as pride and shame, were at work.

The central role of self-conscious emotions. Morf and Rhodewalt give affect a central position in their model, calling it the "alarm system" that sets narcissistic regulatory strategies in motion. Affect is more than a mere starting gun, however; it permeates the entire self-regulatory

system. Specifying the precise nature of the relevant emotions would usefully extend Morf and Rhodewalt's model. Theoretically, the narcissist's emotional world revolves around a variety of specific self-conscious emotions, including pride, shame, and humiliation. Narcissists, more than other individuals, seek out situations in which they can feel pride and avoid situations in which they might experience shame or humiliation.

Clinical psychologists have long noted the central role of shame in narcissism, calling it the "keystone affect" of the disorder (Wright, O'Leary, & Balkin, 1989). According to this perspective, narcissism is a defense against excessive shame. But this shame is not necessarily experienced consciously: Individuals may regulate it through suppression, externalization, and explicit self-aggrandizement—producing the pattern of behaviors, thoughts, and feelings collectively known as narcissism (Kernberg, 1975; Kohut, 1971; Lewis, 1987). If narcissists simply felt bad, rather than feeling bad about themselves (i.e., shame), we presumably would not see many of the interpersonal and intrapsychic consequences that mark this personality process. For example, narcissistic hostility and rage might not be so common or virulent if the underlying pain were due to something other than shame following threats to self-worth.

Emotion researchers have defined shame as "self-conscious" negative affect that is generalized to the global self (Barrett & Campos, 1987; Tangney, 1990). Self-conscious emotions are those in which the self is both the evaluator and the evaluated; thus, they require the capacity for self-awareness. Self-awareness allows a person to appraise whether an emotion-eliciting event is relevant to an actual or desired self-image and whether the self is responsible for the outcome. For this process to result in shame, a person must appraise a negative event as relevant to their desired identity, internally caused ("I am responsible"), and fairly global, stable, and uncontrollable. In the case of narcissism, heightened self-focused attention causes many more events than usual to be appraised as identity-relevant and internally caused. In addition,

implicit feelings of low self-worth encourage stable, global attributions (e.g., “I am a bad person, I’m always a bad person”), making shame a likely emotion.

Does the literature support the link between shame and narcissism? The empirical evidence is mixed. Previous research using the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI) suggests that narcissists report an absence of shame (Gramzow & Tangney, 1992). However, the NPI assesses explicit narcissistic tendencies and possibly a relatively "healthy" variant of narcissism. A number of other narcissism measures load on an independent factor, one possibly linked more closely than the NPI with clinical narcissism (Wink, 1991a). In a study currently underway, we found that several of these other measures show strong, positive correlations with shame-proneness (see also, Cheek & Hendin, 1996). How can we reconcile this pattern of findings? One possibility is that high scorers on the NPI experience shame but choose not to report it when completing self-report measures. Another possibility is that "healthy" narcissists have successfully regulated any shame they might otherwise consciously experience, whereas "unhealthy" narcissists have failed in their regulation attempts.

At times, all emotions are accompanied by efforts to control their experience or expression. Self-conscious emotions are particularly vulnerable to regulation efforts because they have the greatest negative impact on the self-concept. We believe that narcissists differ from depressed, low self-esteem individuals because they actively attempt to regulate any shame they might begin to experience. Narcissists might re-appraise the internality of an event that is self-threatening by placing responsibility on someone or something else, thereby experiencing anger and hostility. Theoretically, this is the basis of narcissistic rage and the shame-rage cycle seen in their intimate relationships.

An important question for future research is how to study the dark core of narcissism empirically. Clearly this is a daunting task, but by neglecting it we risk failing to capture the

entire phenomenon (and perhaps the most interesting aspect of narcissism). One possibility would be to explore the conscious/unconscious dissociation using measures of implicit attitudes and feelings about the self (e.g., Bosson, Swann, & Pennebaker, 2000; Greenwald & Farnham, 2000). Another possibility would be to use a narrative or thought-listing procedure that could uncover how narcissists think about painful experiences. Are there moments when their feelings of inadequacy seep into consciousness? Are narcissists ever aware that their anger toward others might be related to underlying feelings of shame? Do they realize that others view them as self-centered and arrogant? A third possibility would be to follow narcissists over time to capture periods when conscious feelings of shame are triggered by real-world failures. Fourth, clinicians have long noted that personally meaningful memories can provide a window into unconscious thoughts and feelings, suggesting the usefulness of studying the self-defining memories of narcissists.

Many of the issues raised in this section hark back to earlier psychodynamic conceptions of narcissism (Freud, 1914; Kernberg, 1975; Kohut, 1971). It is unclear how much of this clinical "baggage" we should keep. In social-personality studies of narcissism, researchers often state that they are <u>not</u> adopting a psychoanalytic perspective or studying a clinical disorder. Nevertheless, much of the interest-value of narcissism research is attributable to the degree to which researchers like Morf and Rhodewalt have taken dynamic issues seriously. Here, we have emphasized two potentially valuable psychodynamic ideas: the dissociation between implicit and explicit self-evaluations and the centrality of affect-regulation, especially the regulation of shame. Other psychodynamic ideas, such as the supposed psychosexual origins of narcissism in seductive behavior on the part of parents (Lowen, 1983), probably need not be taken as seriously. In general, it would be helpful for narcissism researchers to state more explicitly which components of psychodynamic theory they are accepting and which they are not.

Functions of Narcissistic Tendencies

Although clinical and social-personality perspectives on narcissism diverge somewhat in their conceptualization of the underlying processes, they converge in their view of the functions. Both perspectives see narcissism as a form of affect-regulation, with clinicians characterizing it as a defense against an unconscious sense of inadequacy, and social-personality researchers emphasizing its role in self-esteem enhancement. Like Morf and Rhodewalt, we believe that narcissism serves a broader function as well. Morf and Rhodewalt present a variety of different motivational interpretations of narcissistic processes, but they do not explicitly propose a single, coherent functional account. Below we elaborate on their discussion of the goals and motives that drive narcissistic behaviors and beliefs, speculate about the developmental origins of narcissistic motives, and address the overall pattern of adaptive and maladaptive behaviors characterizing the syndrome.

Motives and functions of narcissistic tendencies. Although affect-regulation is often the proximal goal of narcissistic tendencies, we believe that the entire range of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors associated with narcissism reflects a more general adaptive strategy to gain social status by "getting ahead" rather than "getting along" (Hogan, 1983; Paulhus & John, 1998; Robins, Norem, & Cheek, 1999). This perspective helps explain why Armand Hammer, Murray Gell-Mann, and A. J. Ayer were much more successful in the professional realm than in their close relationships. There are two paths to "getting ahead" in the social arena -- through exerting influence over others and through accomplishments. Thus, the getting ahead orientation promotes power and achievement motives over the affiliation motive. The power and achievement motives, in turn, lead to more specific goals oriented toward the acquisition of social influence and the attainment of personal and professional achievements. Such "agentic" goals, when untethered by a concern for others, can create an egoistic bias. This bias can be seen

interpersonally in the paradoxical desire to be respected by others while at the same time devaluing them, and intrapsychically in self-aggrandizing beliefs about one's status, power, and talents. When the self is defined in terms of getting ahead, then every success brings a surge of pride and every failure feelings of shame and worthlessness.

Previous research provides some evidence for this line of reasoning. In one of the original empirical formulations of narcissism, Leary (1957) argued that the syndrome is best captured by a combination of traits associated with high agency (or power) and low communion (or love). Emmons (1989) found that narcissistic individuals tend to be high in power motivation and low in intimacy motivation, regardless of whether motivation was assessed implicitly (by TAT responses) or explicitly (by content coding of personal strivings). Wink (1991b) characterized the narcissistic personality as "self-directed" (as opposed to "other-directed") and argued that the life pursuits of self-directed individuals are oriented toward goals related to power, success, and pleasure rather than prosocial concerns. Similarly, Roberts and Robins (2000) found that narcissists prioritize life goals related to getting ahead (e.g., "Having an influential and prestigious occupation") over life goals related to getting along (e.g., "Working to promote the welfare of others").

Kernberg (1975) described the narcissistic paradox as a conflict between the desire to impress others and the need to devalue them, another manifestation of the “getting ahead” orientation. Moving up the social status hierarchy requires succeeding while others fail; that is, inflating the self and devaluing others. This explains why doing well is not enough for narcissists; they must do better than others. This also helps to explain why narcissists care more about being admired than being liked, and why they are willing "to self-enhance at the cost of others" (Morf & Rhodewalt, p. 30). The claim that "narcissists are not particularly concerned with social approval" (Morf & Rhodewalt, p. 19) may not be entirely accurate. Narcissists seek

social approval by being admirable (e.g., powerful, competent) rather than by being likable (friendly, warm, kind), but they do desire social recognition, approval, and applause. Although non-narcissistic individuals also seek and appreciate praise, success, and assurances that they are special, their efforts to gain such rewards are balanced by empathy, affection, politeness, realism, humility, and fair play.

Developmental origins of narcissistic motives. If there is a basic human need for love, inclusion, and acceptance (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), then why do narcissists give up on the usual means of meeting this need? This raises a broader question about the developmental origins of the narcissistic motivational orientation. Morf and Rhodewalt briefly summarize a few classic psychodynamic ideas, but they do not criticize or supplement them, and they reach no clear conclusion. They emphasize interactions with parents, especially the mother, but our own view suggests a wider range of social influences, all of which could be studied empirically. Certain kinds of social experience (rejection, lack of acceptance, high parental demands) might lead a person to view narcissistic strategies as the only rewarding ones available. For example, the young A. J. Ayer was made to feel like an outsider, weakling, and misfit (e.g., by virtue of being from a foreign country, being unusually short in stature, being a Jewish boarder in a Protestant preparatory school). If we focus more on feelings of being excluded, ridiculed, and having the rug of security pulled out from under oneself, it is perhaps easier to understand why narcissists seek recognition and admiration, having been badly injured in the search for social acceptance, affection, and shared intimacy. Presumably it is better to make some positive impression than to whither away anonymously in an isolated corner. Thus, at an intrapsychic level, strivings for power and achievement may be an attempt to compensate for underlying feelings of alienation, helplessness, vulnerability, and humiliation, which may be rooted in early

interpersonal rejections by parents or peers. As Lowen (1983) noted, "Narcissists need power to inflate their self-image, which would collapse like an empty balloon without it" (p. 101).

Another, not necessarily conflicting, possibility is that basic temperamental tendencies underlie the narcissistic motivational orientation. The cognitive and affective mechanisms that regulate and maintain narcissistic personality processes are unlikely to arise de novo. It is difficult to imagine a narcissistic personality style developing solely from social experiences, in the absence of dispositions to be aggressive, approach-oriented, and prone to intense negative affect (anxiety, irritability). Individuals with this personality structure seem unlikely to succeed in their attempts to form close and intimate social bonds, leaving getting ahead the more viable path to social recognition.

According to our reasoning, the search for love and affection would not have worked under the childhood conditions that fostered narcissism, particularly if the developing narcissist was temperamentally aggressive and irritable. Given these constraints, narcissists were, in a sense, correct to have pursued a more assertive, self-promoting strategy. In line with Morf and Rhodewalt's argument that narcissism can be viewed as adaptive in certain respects, we view narcissists as pursuing perhaps the most adaptive strategy they could have adopted under the conditions in which they grew up. The question remains whether those strategies continue to be adaptive in adulthood.

We see little value in characterizing adult narcissists as "socially intelligent" simply because their goals and intentions reflect some broader social motives. The local adaptiveness of otherwise pathological, self-injurious behavioral and mental strategies can be understood in terms of adaptive learning (e.g., classical or operant conditioning) rather than intelligence. Moreover, we believe that the adaptiveness of narcissism should be defined by the outcomes associated with it, not by the goals and intentions that initially led to its development.

Consequences of pursuing narcissistic motives. In the ancient Greek myth, Narcissus experienced a number of maladaptive outcomes from an evolutionary perspective. Not only did he die from his excessive pride, but he spent all of his time gazing at his own reflection instead of producing offspring with the nymph Echo. Contrary to the myth, the research literature suggests that narcissism has both costs and benefits, and a simple, global characterization of narcissistic tendencies as adaptive or maladaptive is unjustified. Instead, narcissism is better thought of as a "mixed blessing" (Paulhus, 1998; Robins & Paulhus, 2001), and researchers should turn to specifying the conditions under which it is beneficial or harmful.

One possibility is that narcissistic beliefs have short-term benefits but long-term costs. Robins and Beer (2001) found that self-enhancing individuals experienced a boost in positive affect following a group interaction task, but over four years of college they declined in self-esteem and increasingly disengaged from the academic context. Paulhus (1998) found that self-enhancers made positive first impressions but were eventually disliked after seven weeks of interaction. In intimate interpersonal contexts, the narcissist's tendency to idealize romantic partners may facilitate short-term attraction but ultimately contribute to problems in the relationship as reality makes idealized views difficult to sustain. Finally, both clinical accounts and empirical research suggest that by midlife some narcissists suffer failures in work (McCall & Lombardo, 1983; Wink, 1991b, 1996), as is tragically demonstrated by the case of Armand Hammer.

It is also possible that narcissism is adaptive in some contexts but maladaptive in others. There are certain environments in which a degree of self-absorption and a belief in the importance of one's own ideas are highly functional. For example, Feist (1994) found that extremely eminent scientists, epitomized by Murray Gell-Mann, tended to be characterized as arrogant, hostile, and exploitative--all characteristics of the narcissistic personality. However, as

Morf and Rhodewalt point out, the possible benefits of narcissism in the work domain may be offset by problems in interpersonal contexts, especially in the building of sustained relationships with others. It is here that the narcissist's manipulation, intimidation, and sense of entitlement generate resentment and lead to a breakdown in cooperation at work (Morf & Rhodewalt, 1993) and problems in personal relationships (Campbell, 1999). Wink (1991a) found that narcissists' spouses viewed them as disagreeable, intolerant, demanding, and moody. However, characterizing narcissism as beneficial in work but detrimental in love is an overgeneralization. Instead, we propose that the adaptiveness of narcissism depends on person-environment fit; that is, on whether narcissistic attitudes and behaviors fit well with the demands and affordances of a person's particular environment.

A third possibility is that the costs and benefits of narcissism depend on the strength of the narcissistic tendencies. Over a decade ago, Baumeister (1989) noted that there might be an "optimal margin of illusion," implying that a little self-deception may be beneficial but that substantial distortions are likely to be detrimental. This hypothesis has yet to receive the attention it merits.

Finally, narcissism may be adaptive in an evolutionary sense even when it is not adaptive from a societal perspective (Robins et al., 1999). For example, in terms of mate selection, evolutionary psychologists view the self-concept as a way of gauging one’s value to prospective sexual partners. Individuals with higher self-perceived mate-value may demand more in a partner and consequently pair up with partners who also have higher mate-value. Moreover, there is reason to believe that narcissists have more sexual partners. Narcissism is associated with unrestricted sociosexuality (Reise & Wright, 1996), which predicts frequency of engaging in sex. In an unpublished study, Rhodewalt and Eddings (2000) found that narcissistic men report having many relationships and often date more than one partner at a time. Indeed,

Armand Hammer and A. J. Ayer had frequent affairs, multiple marriages, and typically began relationships with younger women when they divorced.

How bad is the prognosis for narcissists? Clearly, they are not doomed to failure given the number of successful narcissists who come readily to mind. However, successful narcissists are often in the spotlight, while the unsuccessful ones are not. For every Hammer, Ayer, and Gell-Mann, we suspect there are numerous "failed" narcissists, wallowing in obscurity and complaining about how their exceptional talents remain undervalued or unrecognized.

Concluding Comments

Morf and Rhodewalt illuminate some of the central dynamics of narcissism and identify mechanisms linking these dynamics to interpersonal behaviors. Although we have noted ways in which their model fails to capture important aspects of narcissism, their thought-provoking review and analysis provides a solid foundation for future research. High on our research agenda are empirical tests of (a) the dissociation between implicit and explicit self-representations, (b) the centrality of shame and pride to narcissism, (c) the phenomenology of narcissists' reactions to failure, (d) the course of narcissists' close relationships, (e) the functional account of narcissism, (f) the developmental origins of narcissism, and (g) the costs and benefits of narcissistic attitudes and behaviors.

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