

Narcissism and Sensitivity to Criticism: A Preliminary Investigation

Gordon D. Atlas · Melissa A. Them

Published online: 16 February 2008
© Springer Science + Business Media, LLC 2008

Abstract Two studies investigated the connection between narcissism and sensitivity to criticism. In study 1, participants completed the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI) and the Sensitivity to Criticism Scale (SCS) and were asked to construct and deliver speeches to be rated by performance judges. They were then asked whether they would like to receive evaluative feedback. Narcissism and sensitivity to criticism were mildly, but not significantly, negatively correlated and had contrasting relationships with choices regarding feedback. Highly narcissistic participants tended to seek (rather than avoid) feedback, whereas highly sensitive participants tended to reject feedback opportunities. Study 2 examined the relationship between sensitivity to criticism and both overt and covert narcissism. Those scoring high on the trait narcissism, as measured by the NPI, tended to be less sensitive to criticism, sought (rather than avoided) feedback opportunities, experienced little internalized negative emotions in response to “extreme” feedback conditions, and did not expect to ruminate over their performance. By contrast, participants scoring high on a measure of “covert narcissism” were high in sensitivity to criticism, tended to avoid feedback opportunities, experienced high levels of internalized negative emotions, and showed high levels of expected rumination. These findings suggest that the relationship between narcissism and sensitivity to criticism is highly dependent upon the definition or “form” of narcissism considered.

Keywords Narcissism · Criticism · Aggression

The connection between narcissism and responses to criticism has been discussed in two very different literatures within psychology—the psychoanalytic/object-relations literature and the personality trait literature. Narcissism has been described by

G. D. Atlas (✉)
Division of Psychology, Alfred University, Alfred, NY 14802, USA
e-mail: Atlas@alfred.edu

M. A. Them
Union College, Schenectady, NY, USA

 Springer

psychoanalytic thinkers (Freud 1914; Kernberg 1970, 1975; Kohut 1966; Kohut and Wolf 1978; Miller 1979; White 1980) as a kind of syndrome that develops in connection with poor ego development, lack of integration of the self, and an inability to empathize—largely as a result of inadequate parenting in early life. This approach paints a picture of the “vulnerable narcissist” who *presents* himself/herself as self-confident and self-secure, yet is actually quite fragile and insecure. The psychoanalyst’s narcissist is also described as being hypervigilant about others’ treatment of him/her, and very defensive about criticism. Kohut writes, “If the pressures from the narcissistic self are intense and the ego is unable to control them, the personality will respond with shame to failures of any kind...” (1966, p. 258).

A very different and separately developed literature, based more in empirical investigations and less in case studies, focuses on narcissism as a “personality trait” (Emmons 1987; Raskin and Hall 1979; Wink and Gough 1990). Those described as high in the *trait* are characterized by high levels of leadership, authority, self-absorption, self-admiration, sense of superiority/arrogance, and exploitiveness/entitlement. The high level of self-absorption, according to this literature, would lead the narcissist to have little concern for others and therefore, perhaps, disregard others’ judgments and perceptions. These narcissists, then, would not be expected to be especially “vulnerable” to criticism. To clarify this distinction more completely, the “psychoanalytic narcissist” would be expected to score *low* on a true measure of self-esteem whereas the “trait narcissist” should score *high* on self-esteem.

Another manifestation of both the interest in and yet controversy about the nature of this relationship between narcissism and sensitivity to criticism can be found in development of criteria employed by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (APA 1987, 1994) to assess Narcissistic Personality Disorder. In the DSM III and DSM III-R (APA 1987), an explicit criterion for those diagnosed with Narcissistic Personality Disorder was “reacts to criticism with feelings of rage, shame, or humiliation (even if not expressed)” (DSM III-R 1987, pg. 351). The inclusion of this criterion may be attributable to the strong psychoanalytic influence on the mental health field in the 1980s, since empirical work had not established a link between narcissistic personality disorder and sensitivity to criticism. This criterion was then removed in the most recent, DSM IV (1994), version of the manual, presumably due to the lack of an empirically demonstrated connection between the two variables.

Millon’s (1981) classification of personality disorders, moreover, describes the narcissist as one who *passively* seeks the positive rewards of approval and praise from others, but cares little about the opinions of others, “They exhibit a disdainful indifference to the standards of shared social behavior and feel themselves ‘above’ the conventions of the cultural group...It is assumed that others will submerge their desires in favor of the narcissists’ comfort and welfare” (p. 158). Indeed, some studies have established that narcissists seem to have a very strong need for approval (Ronningstam 1998), yet research findings attempting to establish a consistent pattern of narcissists’ “person perception” have been unsuccessful. Raskin and colleagues found narcissists to be conceited and condescending towards others (Raskin et al. 1991). Smalley and Stake’s (1996) research suggests that narcissism may be negatively connected with rating tests and evaluators. Farwell and Wohlwend-Lloyd’s (1998) work, however, suggests that narcissists exaggerate their own abilities and performance, but engage in little derogation of others. Other

research has failed to establish a consistent pattern of response to others for a narcissistic sample (Carroll et al. 1997).

But how would the narcissist deal with or respond to a negative response from others in the form of criticism? This has not yet been systematically examined. How would narcissists respond to opportunities to receive or avoid negative or positive feedback? Research has not previously examined the ways in which narcissism relates to systematic responses to criticism and evaluation from others.

The literatures described above might lead to distinctly different predicted relationships between narcissism and sensitivity to criticism, and between narcissism and seeking/avoiding feedback. If narcissism is characterized by a “vulnerable self” then the characteristic narcissistic response to criticism should be strong, including attempts to avoid critical feedback. If, on the other hand, narcissists are simply characterized by a great deal of self-confidence, self-absorption and a lack of empathy, they should be quite insensitive to criticism and not strongly motivated to avoid negative feedback. In fact, the self-absorbed, “exhibitionistic” aspect of narcissism might lead to seeking performance feedback in order to gain attention and approval.

Study 1

Previous research has demonstrated a link between sensitivity to criticism and responses to opportunities for feedback (Atlas 1994). Participants found to be high in sensitivity to criticism, as measured by the Sensitivity to Criticism Scale (SCS; Atlas 1994), showed a tendency to reject an opportunity to receive written feedback and to avoid discussing their performance with an evaluative judge.

The focus of the present study was to examine the connection between sensitivity to criticism (SC) and the trait, narcissism, and to investigate the ways in which sensitivity to criticism and narcissism influence seeking and/or avoiding performance feedback. Since narcissists (using the trait definition) are concerned with recognition and interested in exhibiting their talents to others, narcissism and sensitivity to criticism should be incompatible tendencies or traits within an individual, leading to contrasting predictions regarding seeking/avoiding feedback.

The hypotheses for this study were, therefore, the following:

1. Narcissism will be negatively related with SC.
2. SC will be related to avoidance of feedback.
3. Narcissism will be related to seeking performance feedback.
4. These tendencies will be heightened when feedback is extreme (positive or negative).

Method

Participants

One hundred and nine college students (45 males and 64 females) participated in the study. Participants were offered extra credit from their Introductory Psychology courses for their participation.

Instruments

Narcissistic Personality Inventory The Revised Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin and Hall 1979) consists of 40 items designed to measure narcissism as a personality trait in normal individuals, as well as its pathological manifestations in narcissistic personality disorder. The internal consistency estimate for the revised total scale is 0.83 (Raskin and Terry 1988). Reviews of validation data are available in Emmons (1984) and in Raskin and Terry (1988).

Sensitivity to Criticism Scale The Sensitivity to Criticism Scale (SCS) was developed by Atlas (1994) to measure individual differences in responses to everyday criticisms. Participants are presented with “critical situations,” as well as two questions for each situation: “To what extent would you consider this a criticism?” and “To what extent would this hurt you?” The 30 item version utilized here has a reliability estimate of at least 0.91 in several studies (Atlas et al. 1994). Sample items for the SCS can be found in Table 1.

Procedure

Each participant was escorted to a room behind a two-way mirror and asked to complete the SCS (Atlas 1994) and the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin and Hall 1979). Each participant was then asked to prepare and deliver a speech on a predetermined topic (adjustment to college life) and was told that it was being videotaped. After the speech was completed, participants were asked to choose or reject a written copy of the feedback from the judges concerning their speech (to be sent to them at a later point).

Table 1 Examples from the Sensitivity to Criticism Scale

Critical situations
<p>A friend says:</p> <p>“You look like you didn’t get any sleep last night.”</p> <p>“It’s really hard to keep one’s weight down, isn’t it?”</p> <p>“You sure made a fool of yourself last night.”</p> <p>“Is that the way you wanted your hair to look?”</p> <p>“You are a real jerk.”</p> <p>“Have you noticed that your friends tend to be losers?”</p> <p>“Have you considered seeing a counselor?”</p> <p>Consider the following situations:</p> <p>You are not invited to a party, given by a mutual friend, that all of your other friends have been invited to.</p> <p>Your boss tells you this may not be the right job for you.</p> <p>You have four tickets to a concert and none of your friends will go with you.</p> <p>You’re a pre-med, and your biology professor suggests you consider nursing.</p> <p>Your coach tells you to increase your practice time.</p>

Examples of “critical situations” on the Sensitivity to Criticism Scale, regarding which participants answer each of two questions: “To what extent would you consider this a criticism?” and “To what extent would this hurt you?”

Participants were then asked to construct and deliver a second speech and, for this speech, were told that it would be rated and videotaped by two judges who had just arrived. Each participant was randomly assigned to a condition in which they were informed that: (1) both judges rated the speech positively, (2) one rated it positively and the other negatively, or (3) both judges rated it negatively. After receiving their feedback, participants were asked if they would like to discuss their performance with the judges and/or watch the videotape of their speech. Participants were then debriefed and it was revealed that there were no actual judges and no videotaping had occurred.

Results

The correlation between SC and narcissism was mild (non-significant) and negative ($r=-0.16$, $p<0.11$), suggesting that highly narcissistic people might tend to be less sensitive to criticism, providing some support for hypothesis 1. Correlations were then computed between predictor variables (sensitivity to criticism, narcissism) and criterion variables (asking for written feedback, choosing to discuss feedback with the judges, choosing to watch the video). Table 2 provides a summary of these correlations. SC was negatively related to all three dependent variables, significantly related to “avoiding watching the videotape of their performance” ($r=-0.31$, $p<0.001$), and somewhat related to avoiding talking to the judges about their performance ($r=-0.19$, $p=0.052$), supporting hypothesis 2. Narcissism was positively related to all three dependent variables and significantly correlated with choosing to talk to the judges about their performance ($r=0.27$, $p<0.01$), partially supporting hypothesis 3.

Further analysis using subscales of the NPI revealed some interesting findings. SC was significantly related with the “superiority” factor ($r=-0.28$, $p<0.005$) and with the “self-sufficiency” factor ($r=-0.25$, $p<0.05$). In examining the relationship between these subscales and seeking/avoiding feedback, a positive correlation was observed between “exhibitionism” and seeking feedback from the judges ($r=0.28$, $p<0.005$) and between “vanity” and seeking feedback from the judges ($r=0.26$, $p<0.005$).

The relationship between sensitivity to criticism and narcissism could be further clarified by examining the tendency to seek or avoid feedback within each condition (all positive, all negative, and mixed feedback). Table 3 summarizes the findings. The pattern of correlations for sensitivity to criticism suggests that being

Table 2 Study 1: Correlations between sensitivity to criticism, narcissism, and seeking/avoiding feedback

	Sensitivity to criticism	Narcissism
Requesting written feedback	-0.08	0.10
Choosing to discuss feedback with judges	-0.19	0.27**
Choosing to watch videotape of performance	-0.31***	0.15

Results from Study 1 indicating a negative relationship between sensitivity to criticism and all feedback options, as well as a positive relationship between narcissism and all feedback options.

** $p<0.01$ *** $p<0.001$

Table 3 Study 1: Correlations between sensitivity to criticism, narcissism, and seeking/avoiding feedback within each experimental condition

Condition ^a	Sensitivity to criticism			Narcissism		
	I	II	III	I	II	III
Choosing written feedback	-0.05	-0.19	0.05	0.21	0.08	0.03
Choosing to discuss feedback with judges	0.06	-0.20	-0.46**	0.32	0.29	0.17
Choosing to watch video tape of performance	-0.29	-0.19	-0.44**	0.21	0.28	-0.10

Results from Study 1 indicating that negative feedback increases the effect of sensitivity to criticism on feedback avoidance

** $p < 0.01$

^a Condition I—positive feedback; Condition II—mixed feedback; Condition III—negative feedback

presented with all negative feedback increases the effect of sensitivity to criticism on avoidance; sensitivity to criticism was negatively correlated with choosing to talk with the judges about one's performance in this condition ($r = -0.46$, $p < 0.005$) and with choosing to watch the video tape ($r = -0.44$, $p < 0.01$). Hypothesis 4 was partially supported. For narcissism, when feedback was mixed, the correlation with choosing to watch the video was mildly positive ($r = 0.28$, $p < 0.11$); when feedback was all negative, however, the correlation was slightly negative ($r = -0.10$, $p < 0.59$).

Discussion

This study provides some beginning evidence regarding the relationship between sensitivity to criticism and narcissism. Narcissism, as measured by the NPI, tended to be negatively correlated with sensitivity to criticism. Furthermore, its correlates in the domain of seeking/avoiding feedback were opposite to those of SC, with narcissists tending to *seek* feedback whereas highly sensitive participants tending to *avoid* feedback opportunities.

Some clues are also provided regarding the *structure* of the relationship between the two variables. Sensitivity to criticism seems to be related (negatively correlated) to the superiority and self-sufficiency dimensions of narcissism. The data also suggest possible reasons why narcissists seek feedback; exhibitionism and vanity were most strongly related to wanting to talk to the judges. Perhaps narcissists' interest in demonstrating their perfection drives them to seek performance feedback from others.

The analysis of responses within the different conditions (type of feedback expected) suggested that the condition in which participants were given two negative responses had a particularly strong effect on their interest in receiving performance feedback. This condition seemed to increase the effect of sensitivity to criticism on avoidance, with highly sensitive participants expressing little interest in discussing their performance with the judges and in watching the videotape. Being presented with the prospect that two judges both viewed one's performance negatively also served to dampen the effect of narcissism on seeking feedback. Perhaps a kind of helplessness emerges within highly narcissistic individuals when a negative consensus emerges; they no longer seek feedback.

Study 2

Recently, some have argued that the two views on narcissism that we described as “psychoanalytic” and “trait” narcissistic theories could be reconciled by considering each of the “narcissisms” described by these views as valid *forms of narcissism* (Gabbard 1989; Wink 1991). In this view, the NPI measures only one form of narcissism, called overt narcissism whereas the “psychoanalytic form” of narcissism, now called covert narcissism, is most accurately assessed by a host of other measures. In this respect, researchers have recently been developing measures of covert narcissism, utilizing items from classic personality scales, as well as creating their own items. MMPI-based measures (Chatham et al. 1993; Rathvon and Holmstrom 1996), CPI-based measures (Wink and Gough 1990), and even the Murray Narcissism Scale (Hendin and Cheek 1997) have been used to examine covert narcissism in an empirical context.

In this conceptualization, overt narcissism would be characterized by a sense of superiority, an interest in recognition, and a preoccupation with success/grandiosity. Covert narcissism, on the other hand, would involve self-centeredness, but with a distinctly *negative* focus. The covert narcissist would be hypersensitive regarding others’ perceptions and complain about being “slighted” by a lack of consideration/recognition. Overt narcissism is considered a better measure of the trait of narcissism, whereas covert narcissism is theorized to be more highly related to narcissistic personality disorder.

Given this conceptualization of narcissism, the importance of exploring the role of sensitivity to criticism in narcissism seems even greater. If overt narcissists are focused on potential positive rewards and not concerned with others’ perceptions, whereas covert narcissists are preoccupied with ways in which they are not obtaining the attention, respect, and admiration of others, then levels of sensitivity to criticism may be precisely the variable which distinguishes between overt and covert narcissism. Overt narcissists should, therefore, be less sensitive to criticism and seek performance feedback since they would covet personal attention; covert narcissists should be more sensitive to criticism and display a tendency to avoid performance feedback.

Previous research indicates that measures of “narcissistic personality disorder” relate with greater intensity of emotions and with wider mood swings (Emmons 1987). Study 2 also investigated the connection between the two hypothesized forms of narcissism and emotional states after receiving performance feedback, looking more specifically at “internalized negative emotions,” negative emotions which are associated with internal attributions (e.g., guilt). Overt narcissism may be related with less susceptibility to internalized negative emotions (after receiving feedback), whereas covert narcissism might be related with increased susceptibility to such emotional states.

Another aspect of responses to feedback is the degree to which an individual will continue to think about the performance and subsequent feedback after the event has occurred. Several studies have demonstrated the harmful effects of rumination and its role in the development and maintenance of affective disorders (Lyubormirsky and Nolen-Hoeksema 1995; Nolen-Hoeksema 1998). In study 2, this is referred to as “expected rumination” and measured by the extent to which participants expect

to think about their performance after the experiment has concluded. Overt narcissists should not express “concern” about their performance such that they would report a low degree of expected rumination; covert narcissists should be quite concerned about their performance and, thus, may report a great deal of expected rumination.

Also included in study 2 is an analysis of the connection between narcissism and self-ratings of one’s performance. Generally, we would expect that narcissists would rate themselves highly (and exhibit high self-esteem) in a skill-based performance; covert narcissists might exhibit low self-esteem, however, and rate themselves less positively.

The hypotheses for the current study were, then, the following:

1. Overt narcissism and covert narcissism should be independent measures, with sensitivity to criticism being positively correlated with covert narcissism and negatively correlated with overt narcissism.
2. Overt narcissism should be positively related to seeking performance feedback, whereas covert narcissism should be negatively related to seeking feedback.
3. Covert narcissism should relate with greater intensity of internalized negative emotions, especially when negative feedback has been received; overt narcissism should relate with lower intensity of internalized negative moods, especially when negative feedback was given.
4. Overt narcissism should be negatively related to expected rumination; covert narcissism should be positively related to expected rumination about one’s performance.
5. Overt narcissism should be positively related to self-ratings of one’s own performance, whereas covert narcissism should be negatively related to such ratings of one’s own performance on the speech.

Method

Participants

One hundred and six college students (50 males and 56 females) were recruited for this study. The study was billed as a “study of personality” for simplicity. Participants were, again, offered extra credit from their Introductory Psychology classes for their participation.

New Instruments Employed

Hypersensitive Narcissism Scale The Hypersensitive Narcissism Scale (HSNS-R2) was developed by Wink and Cheek (1998), using items from the Murray Narcissism Scale (Murray 1938), as well as items created to assess covert narcissism. The 35-item scale had an internal reliability alpha of 0.87 in the present study.

Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg 1965) is a ten-item self-report measure of global self-esteem that has been widely validated

over several decades of research on self-esteem. The scale asks participants to respond on a degree of agreement scale for ten self-statements.

Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire The Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire (RSQ; Downey and Feldman 1996) is an 18-item self-report measure that assesses rejection sensitivity in terms of general expectations and anxiety regarding others' tendency to meet one's needs or to be rejecting. The scale has demonstrated high internal reliability, with an alpha of 0.83 (Downey and Feldman 1996).

Affects Balance Scale The Affects Balance Scale (ABS; Derogatis 1975) asks participants to describe their immediate emotional experience by responding, on a four-point scale from "not at all" to "very much," to straightforward emotionally laden adjectives such as "pleased," "nervous," and "angry."

Participants were also asked to complete the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI; Beck et al. 1961), a widely adopted self-report measure of depressive symptoms.

Procedure

Each participant was escorted to a room behind a two-way mirror and asked to complete the Sensitivity to Criticism Scale (SCS), the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI), the Hypersensitive Narcissism Scale (HSNS-R2) measure of covert narcissism, the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, the Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire (RSQ), the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI), and the Affects Balance Scale (ABS). Each participant then gave a speech on the topic of "adjustment to college life." They were told that the speech would be observed, videotaped, and evaluated. After the speech was completed, participants were asked to rate their own speech before being given feedback regarding their performance. The type of feedback given was randomly designated: one third of the participants were told that both of two judges rated their speech negatively; one third were told that the ratings were mixed, with one judge positive and another negative; and one third were told that both judges rated their speech positively.

Participants were then asked (1) to rate the quality of their speech again, (2) whether they would like to meet with the judges to discuss their performance, (3) if they would like to watch a video clip of their performance, (4) the extent to which they expected to continue to think about their performance on this speech, and (5) to complete the Affects Balance Scale once again. Finally, participants were informed that there were, in fact, no judges and that no videotaping or evaluation of their speeches had occurred.

Results

Relationships between Independent Variables

Table 4 presents the correlations between personality variables (sensitivity to criticism, rejection-sensitivity, and self-esteem), two measures of narcissism (overt and covert forms), and the dependent measures of avoiding/seeking feedback and

Table 4 Study 2: Relationships between personality variables, overt and covert narcissism, and their correlates

	Overt narcissism	Covert narcissism	Sensitivity to criticism	Self-esteem
Overt narcissism	–	–0.30**	–0.36**	0.53**
Covert narcissism	–0.30**	–	0.49***	–0.56***
Choosing to discuss with judges	0.12	0.09	–0.12	0.10
Choosing to watch videotape of performance	0.20*	0.00	–0.06	0.09
Expected rumination	–0.18	0.22*	0.25**	–0.15
Self-rating (before judges' feedback)	0.30**	–0.24**	–0.11	1.18
Self-rating (after judges' feedback)	0.28**	–0.27**	–0.14	0.21*

Results from Study 2 indicating that sensitivity to criticism is negatively correlated with overt narcissism and positively correlated with covert narcissism, yet overt and covert narcissism may not be orthogonal measures.

* $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$ *** $p < 0.001$

expected rumination. The expected pattern of relationship between sensitivity to criticism and the two forms of narcissism emerged, yet overt and covert narcissism were not found to be independent measures. Hypothesis 1 was partially supported. Overt and covert narcissism were significantly, negatively correlated ($r = -0.30$, $p < 0.01$). Sensitivity to criticism was negatively correlated with overt narcissism ($r = -0.36$, $p < 0.001$) and positively correlated with covert narcissism ($r = 0.49$, $p < 0.001$). The other measured personality variables (depression, rejection-sensitivity, and self-esteem) exhibited a similar pattern of relation to overt and covert narcissism.

Prediction of Seeking/Avoiding Performance Feedback

Overt narcissism was positively correlated with an interest in watching a videotape of one's performance ($r = 0.20$, $p < 0.05$), but neither form of narcissism significantly predicted seeking/avoiding a meeting with the judges. Hypothesis 2 was, largely, unsupported. None of the other personality variables significantly influenced avoiding/seeking performance feedback (seeking a discussion with a judge or watching a videotape).

Internalized Negative Emotions

A composite variable made up of responses on the Affect Balance Scale comprised our measure of "internalized negative mood (INM)." Items included "angry at self," "guilty," "self-critical," and "worthless." Partial correlations were used to examine the relationship between overt narcissism, covert narcissism, and sensitivity to criticism with "internalized negative mood" after receiving performance feedback, controlling for this same measure of INM assessed at the beginning of the experiment. Table 5 provides the resulting partial correlations. Covert narcissism was significantly related to internalized negative mood following the receipt of feedback ($r = 0.25$, $p < 0.01$). Scores on the SCS were also related to INM ($r = 0.23$, $p < 0.01$) after having received performance feedback. Overt narcissism is not significantly

Table 5 Study 2: Partial correlations with internalized negative emotions

	Overt narcissism with internalized emotions	Covert narcissism with internalized emotions	Sensitivity to criticism with internalized emotions
All conditions	−0.06	0.25**	0.23**
Condition I: positive feedback	−0.51**	0.33*	0.16
Condition II: mixed feedback	0.29*	0.11	0.16
Condition III: negative feedback	−0.31**	0.26	0.27

* $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$

Controlling for internalized emotions at the beginning of the study.

Results of partial correlations in Study 2 indicating that overt narcissists may not experience internalized negative emotions when responding to “extreme” feedback, but that the ambiguity of “mixed” feedback may lead to internalized negative emotions.

related to internalized negative mood when all conditions of feedback are considered together.

When these correlations are examined separately by condition, we find that overt narcissism is negatively related with INM in both the “all negative” and “all positive” feedback conditions ($r = -0.31$, $p < 0.05$ and $r = -0.51$, $p < 0.01$, respectively). This would indicate that overt narcissists tend not to experience internalized negative emotions when responding to “extreme” feedback. An inverse correlation emerges, however, between overt narcissism and INM for the “mixed feedback” condition. The ambiguity of the mixed condition appears to lead to greater negative emotion levels for those who are high in overt narcissism. Only the “all positive” condition produced a significant relationship between covert narcissism and INM ($r = 0.33$, $p < 0.05$), although the correlations between covert narcissism and internalized negative emotions in all three conditions are in the same direction (positive) and the overall correlation (across all three conditions) was significantly positive, at least partially due to the increased sample size for this analysis. Hypothesis 3 was partially supported.

Prediction of Expected Rumination

The expected pattern of correlations between overt and covert narcissism and expected rumination did emerge. Overt narcissism scores were mildly negatively correlated with expected rumination ($r = -0.18$, $p = 0.07$), whereas covert narcissism scores were significantly positively correlated with expected rumination ($r = 0.22$, $p < 0.05$). Hypothesis 4 was, largely, confirmed. Also, sensitivity to criticism and rejection sensitivity were each significant predictors of expected rumination (for SC, $r = 0.25$, $p < 0.01$; for RS, $r = 0.25$, $p < 0.02$).

Self-Ratings of One's Own Performance

Participants rated their own performance prior to receiving feedback and after “judges’ feedback” was given regarding the speeches they constructed and delivered. Overt narcissism was positively related with these self-ratings ($r = 0.30$, $p < 0.01$ prior to feedback, and $r = 0.28$, $p < 0.01$ after feedback), suggesting a tendency for overtly

narcissistic people to rate themselves higher. Conversely, covert narcissism was negatively related with self-ratings prior to and after feedback ($r=-0.24$, $p<0.001$ and $r=-0.27$, $p<0.001$, respectively). Hypothesis 5 was supported.

General Discussion

The findings from study 2 serve to both clarify and raise questions about the nature of narcissism as a construct and its connection with sensitivity to criticism. Overt narcissism, in this study, was related to: low sensitivity to criticism, requesting to see a videotape of their performance, low expected rumination about their performance, high self-evaluation of performance, low levels of internalized negative mood in “extreme” feedback conditions but high levels of internalized negative moods in “mixed” feedback conditions.

These results appear to be compatible with the “common” view of narcissism as a personality trait—self-assured, self-interested, and unconcerned with others’ evaluations. Narcissists, here, appear to exhibit a high degree of self-confidence (strong correlation with self-esteem), low sensitivity to criticism, and low levels of “neurotic concern.” In the mixed feedback condition (one positive evaluation and one negative evaluation), however, perhaps the overt narcissist’s concern about the other’s evaluation is peaked; mixed feedback may, in fact, inspire self-reflection or at least some hypervigilance regarding the “eye” of the other. We suggest further research to examine the nature of this response under mixed feedback conditions.

Many of the same (dependent) variables examined were also significantly related to covert narcissism but correlated in the *opposite direction*. Covert narcissism correlated positively with: high sensitivity to criticism, expected rumination, and internalized negative moods. A tendency for covert narcissists to rate themselves as less competent also emerged (low self-evaluation of their performance). These findings regarding the “covert narcissist” would seem to contradict the “common” view of narcissism while, perhaps, being consistent with the psychoanalytic view of narcissism as having an underlying neurotic core.

Conceptual questions regarding the defining features of narcissism become more complex, though, when we consider that our measures of overt and covert narcissism were, in fact, negatively correlated. This significant correlation between two measures of, presumably, the same construct, does cast some doubt upon the orthogonality of the two forms of narcissism and raises questions about the nature of the construct. If the two measures share a common variance (although, of course, negatively correlated) then one obvious question pertains to the content of the shared variance. One way of addressing this question is to utilize factor analytic techniques.

Given the sample size in this study, the results of a factor analysis cannot be considered definitive. Some clarity, however, is gained by considering all of the items from both the overt and covert narcissism measures in a factor analysis, conducted in an exploratory way. The results of this analysis suggest that two factors emerge as most prominent in this, now combined, measure of “narcissism.” The most prominent factor, in fact, involved items that tapped “responses to criticism or rejection or evaluation;” the NPI items that loaded heavily on this factor correlated positively, whereas the items from the HSNS-R2 scale correlated negatively with

this factor. Items that load heavily on the second factor appear to be focused on the traditional, or what we have referred to as the “common view,” of narcissism, namely, grandiosity, sense of superiority, and authority. Here again, however, the HSNS-R2 items that load on this second factor do so *negatively*.

Perhaps the question at this point becomes, at least partly, a semantic one. If narcissism is conceived of in the traditional, trait-like manner, then some of the questions addressed here have been answered. Narcissism, in this view, is negatively correlated with sensitivity to criticism and appears to be connected with seeking or, at least, not avoiding performance feedback. Does narcissism, however, have two distinct, orthogonal forms? Our data suggest not. What, then, *is* the variable measured by the HSNS-R2 scale, which was intended to assess “covert narcissism?” Empirically, this measure seems to resemble “neuroticism” in many ways. Is neuroticism connected with narcissism, conceptually and empirically? Perhaps, but it is also distinct from narcissism.

Perhaps we are searching for a “pure” form of narcissism, in which the primary aspect is “self-centeredness.” At that point, one can meaningfully discuss the consequences of “neurotic” or “healthy” narcissism. The core would, however, be constant; empirically, this should mean that at least a mild *positive* correlation should exist between any two forms of narcissism. Of course, the current work utilized only one measure of “covert narcissism” and these results are limited in that regard.

The findings dealing with internalized negative emotions and expected rumination lead to further clarity and, yet, more questions for future research. Are the cognitive and emotional aspects of narcissism tied together or distinct? This may have some bearing on the question of two types of narcissism as well; perhaps the overt narcissist is one whose cognitive and emotional features are linked, whereas the “covert narcissist” or “neurotic narcissist” may harbor emotional feelings that are not reflected in their cognition. The study of the origins, nature, and effects of rumination is a particularly important aspect given its connection with affective disorders, and considering that ruminative thinking has also been linked to immune system function (Roger and Najanian 1998). What is the connection between expected rumination and actual rumination? Can we detect the likelihood of rumination prior to the appearance of ruminative thoughts? If so, we may be better equipped to help those “neurotic narcissists” and those who are highly sensitive to criticism find more effective cognitive and emotional strategies for dealing with negative experiences.

These studies have served to clarify the connection between narcissism and sensitivity to criticism. Are narcissists more or less sensitive to criticism? The answer, it seems, depends largely on the definition and measure of narcissism. The study and development of the construct of narcissism has not been without its trials, but perhaps we have progressed a bit beyond the point where the psychoanalyst, Sydney Pulver (1966) wrote three decades ago, “In the voluminous literature on narcissism, there are probably only two facts upon which everyone agrees: first, that the concept of narcissism is one of the most important contributions of psychoanalysis; second, that it is one of the most confusing” (pg. 319).

Acknowledgment The authors would like to thank the following people for their help in conducting this research: Jason Jiandani, Chelsea Heinz, Sara Mansfield, Sarah Canfield, Amy Leach, Catie Camille, Sarah Schuldt, Mary Serafin, Tera Hamilton, Sara Andrews, and Nancy Furlong.

References

- American Psychiatric Association (1987). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (3rd ed.). Washington, DC: Author.
- American Psychiatric Association, (1994). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (4th ed.). Washington, DC: Author.
- Atlas, G. D. (1994). Sensitivity to criticism: A new measure of responses to everyday criticisms. *Journal of Psychoeducational Assessment, 12*, 241–253.
- Atlas, G. D., Fassett, B., & Peterson, C. (1994). Sensitivity to criticism and depressive symptoms. *Journal of Social Behavior and Personality, 9*, 301–316.
- Beck, A. T., Ward, C., Mendelson, M., Mock, J., & Erbaugh, J. (1961). An inventory for measuring depression. *Archives of General Psychiatry, 4*, 561–571.
- Carroll, L., Hoenigmann-Stovall, N., & Whitehead III, G. I. (1997). Self-narcissism and interpersonal attraction to narcissistic others. *Psychological Reports, 81*, 547–550.
- Chatham, P. M., Tibbals, C. J., & Harrington, M. E. (1993). The MMPI and MCMI in the evaluation of narcissism in a clinical sample. *Journal of Personality Assessment, 60*, 239–251.
- Derogatis, L. (1975). *Affects balance scale*. Towson, MD: Clinical Psychometrics Research Unit.
- Downey, G., & Feldman, S. I. (1996). Implications of rejection sensitivity for intimate relationships. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 70*, 1327–1343.
- Emmons, R. A. (1984). Factor analysis and construct validity of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory. *Journal of Personality Assessment, 48*, 291–300.
- Emmons, R. A. (1987). Narcissism: Theory and measurement. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 52*, 11–17.
- Farwell, L., & Wohlwend-Lloyd, R. (1998). Narcissistic processes: Optimistic expectations, favorable self-evaluations, and self-enhancing attributions. *Journal of Personality, 66*, 65–83.
- Freud, S. (1914). On narcissism: An introduction. *Standard Edition, 12*, 213–226.
- Gabbard, G. O. (1989). Two subtypes of narcissistic personality disorder. *Bulletin of the Menninger Clinic, 53*, 527–532.
- Hendin, H. M., & Cheek, J. M. (1997). Assessing hypersensitive narcissism: A reexamination of Murray's Narcissism Scale. *Journal of Research in Personality, 31*, 588–599.
- Kernberg, O. (1970). Factors in the psychoanalytic treatment of narcissistic personalities. *Journal of American Psychoanalytic Assessment, 18*, 51–85.
- Kernberg, O. (1975). *Borderline conditions and pathological narcissism*. New York: Jason Aronson.
- Kohut, H. (1966). Forms and transformations of narcissism. *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association, 14*, 243–272.
- Kohut, H., & Wolf, E. S. (1978). The disorders of the self and their treatment: An outline. *International Journal of Psycho Analysis, 59*, 413–425.
- Lyubormirsky, S., & Nolen-Hoeksema, S. (1995). Effects of self-focused rumination on negative thinking and interpersonal problem solving. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 69*, 176–190.
- Miller, A. (1979). Depression and grandiosity as related forms of narcissistic disturbances. *International Review of Psycho Analysis, 6*, 61–76.
- Millon, T. (1981). *Disorders of personality, DSM III, Axis II*. New York: Wiley-Interscience.
- Murray, H. (1938). *Explorations in personality: A clinical and experimental study of fifty men of college age, by the workers at the Harvard Psychological Clinic*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Nolen-Hoeksema, S. (1998). The other end of the continuum: The costs of rumination. *Psychological Inquiry, 9*, 216–219.
- Pulver, S. (1966). Narcissism: The term and the concept. *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association, 14*, 319–341.
- Raskin, R., & Hall, C. S. (1979). A narcissistic personality inventory. *Psychological Reports, 45*, 590.
- Raskin, R., Novacek, J., & Hogan, R. (1991). Narcissism, self-esteem, and defensive self-enhancement. *Journal of Personality, 59*, 19–38.
- Raskin, R., & Terry, H. (1988). A principal-components analysis of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory and further evidence of its construct validity. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 54*, 890–902.
- Rathvon, N., & Holmstrom, (1996). An MMPI-2 portrait of narcissism. *Journal of Personality Assessment, 66*, 1–19.
- Roger, D., & Najarian, B. (1998). The relationship between emotional rumination and cortisol secretion under stress. *Personality and Individual Differences, 24*, 531–538.

- Ronningstam, E. (1998). Narcissistic personality disorder and pathological narcissism: Long-term stability and presence in Axis I disorders. In E. Ronningstam (Ed.) *Disorders of narcissism: Diagnostic clinical, and empirical implications*. Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Press.
- Rosenberg, M. (1965). *The measurement of self-esteem*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Smalley, R. L., & Stake, J. E. (1996). Evaluating sources of ego-threatening feedback: Self-esteem and narcissism effects. *Journal of Research in Personality, 30*, 483–495.
- White, M. T. (1980). Self relations, object relations, and pathological narcissism. *Psychoanalytic Review, 67*, 3–23.
- Wink, P. (1991). Two faces of narcissism. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 61*, 590–597.
- Wink, P., & Cheek, J. M. (1998). *Measurement of covert narcissism*. Unpublished manuscript.
- Wink, P., & Gough, H. G. (1990). New narcissism scales for the California Psychological Inventory and MMPI. *Journal of Personality Assessment, 54*, 446–462.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.