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The Narcissus in All of Us

Reflections on the self, personality, and what makes you, "you."

by Joshua D. Foster and Ilan Shrira

Do narcissists really hate themselves deep down inside?

Evidence that narcissists really do think they're "all that."

Published on July 17, 2008 by Joshua D. Foster in The Narcissus in All of Us



You probably have a pretty good idea of what a narcissist is. They're arrogant, self-absorbed, and generally speaking they're not too pleasant to be around--at least not for long periods of time. If you're like most people, you probably also assume one additional thing. You probably think that narcissists dislike themselves deep down inside. In other words, narcissism is really just a mask that covers up deeply hidden insecurities and self-loathing.

If you think that this is true, then you're in good company. This has long been a standard conceptualization of narcissism within the psychological literature. A recent study by Keith Campbell, Jennifer Bosson, Thomas Goheen, Chad Lakey, and Michael Kernis (let's just call them Campbell et al. to keep things simple), however, challenges this assumption.

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Before we get to Campbell et al., let's first begin with a simple, but really important question. How can you determine what people think about themselves deep down inside? We call this type of thinking *implicit cognition*. More specifically, we're interested in *implicit attitudes*, since the cognition centers on the attitudes that people have about themselves. Positive and negative attitudes about the self make up our *self-esteem*, so what we're ultimately interested in is called *implicit self-esteem*.

Let's say that your brother, Donald, is a real narcissist and you want to know whether he really likes himself as much as it seems like he does. In other words, you want to know whether Donald has high self-esteem. You could simply ask him--his answer would tell you about his explicit self-esteem--but can you really trust what Donald tells you? Well, that's for you to decide, but most psychologists would be at least a bit skeptical. What we really need is a way to measure Donald's implicit self-esteem. Unfortunately, psychologists do not have any magical techniques to tap into implicit self-esteem. One particularly promising method, however, is called the Implicit Associations Test (IAT for short).

The inner workings of the IAT are far too complicated to get into here. There is a great website called Project Implicit (implicit.harvard.edu) that explains the IAT in greater depth and even lets you take the IAT yourself. Essentially, the IAT works by recording how fast you can categorize things. For example, let's say I show you the word "vomit" and ask you whether it is good or bad. Unless you're an emetophile (Google this at your own risk!), you would probably categorize vomit as being something that is bad--and you would likely do this really quickly and without much thought. Now what if I asked you to categorize vomit as being "like me" or "not like me" (this is meant to refer to you--is the vomit like you or not like you?) Although this is an odd question, you'd probably say very quickly that vomit is "not like me." OK, let's use a different, more pleasant word, like "smart." You could probably again answer both of these questions very quickly, but your



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answers would most likely be "good" and "like me."

Up to this point, we're assuming that you, like most people, think pretty positively about yourself. But what if you don't like yourself that much? Well, then we would expect you to take longer making these categorizations, or even categorize them differently (e.g., saying that "smart" is "not like me"). So the IAT essentially measures how quickly you categorize good words with "like me" and bad words with "not like me." People who categorize themselves with good words very quickly are said to have high implicit self-esteem. People who take longer or who actually categorize themselves with bad words are said to have low implicit self-esteem. (Note of caution: The IAT is actually much more complicated than this and researchers don't fully understand how it works. Please visit the Project Implicit website for further information.)

One of the great things about the IAT, from a researcher's perspective, is that test takers don't know what's being measured (trust us on this, rarely do test takers realize that the IAT is actually a measure of self-esteem). This is unlike explicit self-esteem, which is assessed by asking people how they feel about themselves. So theoretically, the IAT provides a purer measure of self-esteem that comes from deep down inside and is not filtered through all of our impression management tactics and defense mechanisms. (Have you ever said that you feel great even though you don't? This is the problem with measuring explicit self-esteem.)

OK, back to narcissism. Prior research has shown that narcissists report very high explicit self-esteem (what they tell you about themselves), but lower implicit self-esteem (how they perform on the IAT). This research is consistent with long-standing beliefs about narcissism (e.g., psychoanalytic theories of narcissism) and seems to support the idea that narcissists don't really like themselves that much deep down inside.

Here's where a detailed analysis of psychological methods pays off. Campbell et al. noticed that a lot of the words used in the IATs of past studies were pretty communal sounding. Communal words are those that imply a connection between people. For example, the word "smile" might be considered communal because smiling facilitates social bonding. One thing that we know about narcissists is that they are not communally oriented. They're all about themselves. Indeed, past research shows that narcissists don't think very positively of themselves in terms of their relationships with others (i.e., communally). Therefore, if your IAT words are communal, then it should not be surprising that narcissists fail to quickly categorize the positive words as being "like me" and the negative words as being "not like me." In other words, communal IATs may be biased toward producing evidence of low implicit self-esteem in narcissists.





What Campbell et al. did next was create an IAT that used less communal words. For example, their IAT contained the positive word "energetic," which does not imply any sort of connection between people (i.e., the word "energetic" implies something about the individual, rather than relationships with others). What they found was that, sure enough, narcissists reported high implicit self-esteem using this less communal IAT. Again, this contradicts prior research showing just the opposite.


So what does this tell us about narcissism? First, we should take a step back and think about the methods that psychologists use to conduct their studies. Psychologists must frequently deal with the unseen and the unknown. While this makes psychology particularly interesting in our opinion, it can also make psychological research a little messy. Can we really be certain that Campbell et al.'s or anyone else's IATs really measure implicit self-esteem? Of course not. Nevertheless, Campbell et al.'s findings suggest that we should be skeptical of the notion that narcissism is always connected to inner doubt and self-hatred.

Without question, there are narcissists out there who really do hate themselves. We've all met people like this. People who say outlandishly


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positive things about themselves (e.g., "I'm smarter than Einstein") when it's obvious that they're covering up for a perceived deficiency (e.g., they dropped out of high school). But frankly, people can also be arrogant and conceited without any sort of deep-seated anguish. This isn't particularly pleasant to think about. Most of us—psychological researchers included—like to think that we live in a just world where bad things happen to bad people. In a just world, mean and nasty narcissists would experience inner turmoil and suffering. Unfortunately, we live in nothing close to a just world. And we suspect that many—if not most—people who say that they're awesome really think that they're awesome, even deep down inside.

(This post was coauthored by Ilan Shrira.)

Further reading:

Campbell, W. K., Bosson, J. K., Goheen, T. W., Lakey, C. E., & Kernis, M. H. (2007). Do narcissists dislike themselves 'deep down inside?'. *Psychological Science, 18*, 227-229.

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