Personality and Individual Differences 51 (2011) 623–628

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Personality and Individual Differences

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/paid

Covert narcissism as a predictor of internalizing symptoms after performance feedback in adolescents

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 1 April 2011
Received in revised form 25 May 2011
Accepted 27 May 2011
Available online 2 July 2011

Keywords:
Narcissism
Adolescence
Shame

ABSTRACT

The present study examined the association between covert narcissism and internalizing symptoms (i.e., shame, anxiety) in adolescents following an ego threat. Participants were 132 adolescents (101 males, 30 females, 1 not reported), ages 16–19 (M = 16.81 years, SD = .81), attending a residential program. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three feedback conditions (i.e., positive, negative, or neutral). Contrary to the main hypothesis, Time 2 internalizing symptoms tended to be highest for individuals in the positive feedback condition who had higher levels of narcissism. The implications of this study for understanding the role of narcissism in internalizing symptoms are discussed.

1. Introduction

1.1. Narcissism

Narcissism is characterized by a grandiose self-image along with characteristics such as dominance, exhibitionism, manipulativeness, a sense of entitlement, and vanity (Atlas & Them, 2008; Raskin, Novacek, & Hogan, 1991; Washburn, McMahon, King, Reinecke, & Silver, 2004). Raskin and colleagues (1991) suggest that narcissism is essentially a form of self-esteem regulation and that the tactics employed by narcissists (e.g., aggression, a grandiose self-presentation, exploitation of others) are means of defending their tenuous feelings of self-worth against perceived threats. However, the manner in which someone with narcissism responds to negative events may be a function of his or her particular narcissistic tendencies. Research has indicated that there may be two relatively distinct types of narcissism: overt and covert (Atlas & Them, 2008), which may have implications for the particular responses that individuals display toward their environment.

Narcissism is a complex and multifaceted construct. Foster and Trimm (2008) describe covert narcissists as seemingly somewhat motivated by reward but as also highly sensitive to punishment. Individuals with covert narcissism are described as "hypersensitive, anxious, timid, and insecure, but on close contact surprise observers with their grandiose fantasies" (Wink, 1991, p. 591). Individuals who are considered covert narcissists are assumed to have a greater likelihood of sensitivity to criticism and to be more likely to experience negative emotional reactivity (Atlas & Them, 2008), including anxiety and shame. The vast majority of narcissism research has utilized operational definitions consistent with overt narcissism, but the present study examines covert narcissism because of its theoretical ties to internalizing issues.

Covert narcissism is particularly tied to experiencing internalizing responses to ego threats. Insofar as covert narcissism is associated with insecurity, unhappiness, and low self-esteem (Rose, 2002), it is presumed that it would also translate to feelings of shame, particularly after criticism. Thomaes, Stegge, and Olthof (2007) note that shame commonly results from experiences that impress upon children an unsolicited identity and induces the idea that they are not necessarily who they believe themselves to be. They further state that when children do not live up to the behavioral standards they set for themselves, have inadequate control over their thoughts and actions, or are inept in any particular domain of life, they may feel shame. This notion is potentially relevant for understanding the link between narcissism and aggression in that emotional responses such as shame and anxiety are typically experienced on an implicit level and may be the driving force in subsequent aggression (Campbell, Foster, & Brunell, 2004).

In their previous study, Thomaes, Stegge, Bushman, and Olthof (2008) did not directly measure shame but presumed relations based on their findings from an experimental condition in which participants were told that they lost to an opponent who was not good at a task. In that study, children with high levels of narcissism were subsequently more aggressive than other children, especially if they were in this shame condition. The relevance of this model

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doi:10.1016/j.paid.2011.05.031

for adolescents was underscored by Thomaes and colleagues (2008) who suggested that, as an adolescent gets older, feelings of shame would pose a more serious threat to self-esteem and would have greater influence on subsequent actions. The present study attempted to extend Thomaes and colleagues' research by directly measuring shame in relation to ego threatening situations.

Narcissistic individuals corroborate and support their perceived self-image through the feedback and admiration that they seek and hope to receive from others (Atlas & Them, 2008; Raskin et al., 1991). If that feedback is negative, narcissism is predictive of negative affect (Rhodewalt & Morf, 1995) and a negative behavioral response (e.g., aggression; Bushman & Baumeister, 1998). Furthermore, individuals with narcissistic characteristics are thought to engage in "defensive self-enhancement" (Raskin et al., 1991, p. 21), which may translate to feelings of anxiety and shame after negative feedback.

Adolescence is an ideal time in which to assess the impact of narcissistic traits on emotional and behavioral responses to ego-threatening situations based on the malleability and emotional reactivity of self-perceptions during this developmental period (Lapsley & Aalsma, 2006). Harter (2006) proposed that adolescence is a period during which individuals become progressively more aware of their need to maintain their feelings of self-worth by gaining the approval of others which may serve as a catalyst for the establishment of self-protective motives. As a result, adolescents may be particularly likely to exhibit affective or behavioral responses to negative appraisals from others. In addition, part of adolescent identity formation capitalizes on the capability of adolescents to think introspectively and self-reflect (Lapsley, 1993). Lapsley (1993) notes that the increased ability of adolescents to self-reflect is related to the emergence of egocentrism. Certain patterns of egocentrism in adolescence elicit a multitude of emotional reactions, including concern with shame, embarrassment, and feelings of being constantly evaluated and judged (Lapsley, 1993). Egocentrism in adolescents seems to mirror some elements of narcissism. That is, presenting a confident, even grandiose, self-image, as well as maintaining an idealized self-image are not only central aspects of narcissism, but they are also often of increased importance during adolescence.

It has also been suggested that shame is a common, negative emotion in adolescence as a consequence of adolescents' increased self-consciousness and awareness (Ryan & Kuczkowski, 1994; Simmons, Rosenberg, & Rosenberg, 1973). Furthermore, adolescents are believed to be more susceptible than children to shame because they have developed the ability to make global negative evaluations about their self-image (Ferguson, Stegge, & Damhuis, 1991). Such tendencies may be pronounced for adolescents with high levels of narcissism. Research on narcissism among children and adolescents is limited and even more so when considering the relation between narcissism and internalizing problems, but a connection between narcissism and shame and/or anxiety is apparent from the emerging work in this area (e.g., Barry & Malkin, 2010; Thomaes et al., 2008).

In summary, the primary aim of the present study was to explore the association between covert narcissism and internalizing responses following negative performance feedback. Negative performance feedback has been previously used in studies investigating reactions associated with narcissism (e.g., Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Thomaes et al., 2008). However, previous research focused primarily on reactions of adults. The present study will extend previous research by focusing on adolescents and by considering covert narcissism which has theoretical links to shame and anxiety.

1.2. Hypotheses

It was hypothesized that covert narcissism would be positively correlated with anxiety and shame following an ego threat (Hypothesis 1). It was also predicted that negative feedback would be associated with higher levels of anxiety and shame relative to neutral or positive feedback (Hypothesis 2). In addition, feedback condition was expected to moderate the relation between narcissism and post-feedback levels of shame and anxiety, such that high levels of covert narcissism would predict the highest levels of anxiety and shame after negative feedback (Hypothesis 3).

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were 132 adolescents ranging in age from 16 to 19 ($M = 16.8$, $SD = .81$) who were attending a residential intervention program for youth who have dropped out of school. It was anticipated that such a sample would demonstrate suitable variability on the constructs of interest in this study (e.g., narcissism, anxiety, shame). The majority of participants were male ($n = 101$), and their racial/ethnic background was comprised of Caucasian ($n = 82$) and African American ($n = 44$). Six participants did not provide ethnicity information or selected "other." Participants were randomly assigned to one of three feedback conditions: negative ($n = 44$), positive ($n = 47$), or neutral ($n = 41$). Within the negative condition, there were 35 males and 9 females. The positive condition had 36 male and 10 female participants, and the neutral condition consisted of 30 male and 11 female participants. The three experimental conditions did not differ with regard to gender, $X^2(2) = .54$, *ns.*

Univariate Analyses of Variance (ANOVAs) were conducted to assess differences across experimental conditions prior to feedback on continuous variables. There was a significant difference on anxiety, $F(2, 128) = 4.17$, $p = .02$, such that participants in the negative condition ($M_{Negative} = 14.61$, $SD_{Negative} = 7.51$) rated themselves higher on anxiety than participants in the neutral condition ($M_{Neutral} = 10.48$, $SD_{Neutral} = 5.73$), $t(83) = 2.84$, $p = .01$, and participants in the positive condition ($M_{Positive} = 13.30$, $SD_{Positive} = 6.73$), $t(85) = 2.10$, $p = .04$. The experimental conditions did not differ on age, shame, covert narcissism, or self-esteem.

2.2. Materials

2.2.1. The Hypersensitive Narcissism Scale (HSNS; Wink & Cheek, 1998)

The HSNS assesses covert narcissism and was developed by Wink and Cheek (1998) using items from the Murray Narcissism Scale (Murray, 1938), with additional items added to further assess covert narcissism. The measure consists of 10 items (e.g., "I can become entirely absorbed in thinking about my personal affairs, my health, my cares or my relations to others;" "My feelings are easily hurt by ridicule or the slighting remarks of others") with responses made on scales ranging from 1 (*very uncharacteristic*) to 5 (*very characteristic*). Previous work has shown a near-zero correlation between the NPI and HSNS, demonstrating good discriminant validity in delineating between overt and covert narcissism (Hendin & Cheek, 1997). The present study yielded a moderate internal consistency coefficient for the HSNS, $\alpha = .69$.

2.2.2. State Shame and Guilt Scale (SSGS; Marschall, Sanftner, & Tangney, 1994)

The SSGS is a 15-item measure designed to differentiate between state shame, state guilt, and state pride with three separate subscales. The present study utilized the shame subscale as a measure of shame, consistent with previous research (e.g., Gruenewald, Kemeny, Aziz, & Fahey, 2004). The present study yielded an internal consistency coefficient of $\alpha = .76$ for the shame subscale at Time 1 (pre-feedback) and $\alpha = .82$ for Time 2 (post-feedback). Time

1 scores on the shame subscale were significantly correlated with Time 2 scores, $r = .59$, $p < .001$.

2.2.3. State-Trait Anxiety Inventory for Children (STAIC; Spielberger, 1973)

The STAIC is composed of two different sets of questions, assessing either state or trait anxiety. The 20-item State Anxiety Scale assesses the child's feelings of nervousness, tension, and worry at the present time on a 3-point rating scale [(e.g., "I feel" (1) *very worried*, (2) *worried*, or (3) *not worried*)]. Increases in state anxiety scores have been demonstrated in response to stress, whereas decreases have been noted in relaxing situations (Papay, Hedl, & Spielberger, 2005). In the present study, the internal consistency coefficient for the State Anxiety Scale was $\alpha = .85$ at Time 1 and $\alpha = .90$ for Time 2. Time 1 state anxiety was significantly associated with Time 2 state anxiety, $r = .49$, $p < .001$.

2.2.4. Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES; Rosenberg, 1965)

The RSES has been widely used in previous research and consists of 10 items that are rated on scales ranging from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 4 (*strongly disagree*). The present study yielded an internal consistency coefficient $\alpha = .86$. Self-esteem served as a control variable in this study.

2.3. Procedure

There were two data collection times (Time 1 and Time 2) for the present study. Parental consent was obtained at the time that participants enrolled in the residential program. After consent from parents, participants were given the opportunity to provide assent after being assured that refusal to participate in the study would not affect their status in the intervention program. The information collected during Time 1 included demographic information, HSNS, SSGS, and STAIC. The Time 2 session occurred approximately four weeks after the Time 1 administration. Participants were randomly assigned to the neutral, positive, or negative feedback condition during the Time 2 session. The researcher presented all participants with a general knowledge quiz. Upon participants' completion of the quiz, the researchers feigned scoring the quizzes. Participants in the neutral feedback condition did not receive an indication of how they performed. In contrast, participants in the positive feedback condition received the exact same flattering feedback via a handwritten note (i.e., "You did much better than other people your age, Great Job!"), whereas participants in the negative feedback condition received unflattering feedback (i.e., "You did worse than everyone else your age. We are very disappointed in you!"). After receiving their assigned feedback, all participants were asked to complete the STAIC and the SSGS to determine any change in state anxiety and shame following feedback. In addition, a five question manipulation check was administered to ensure proper implementation of the experimental conditions (e.g., "How would you rate your performance on the task just completed?"). Immediately following the completion of Time 2 measures, the researchers debriefed all participants regarding the actual intent of the study and specified that the quizzes were never actually graded.

2.4. Results

An ANOVA was conducted for the question "How would you rate your performance?" to estimate the influence of experimental condition on perceptions of quiz performance. Responses were made on a scale ranging from 1 (*poor*) to 5 (*excellent*). There was a significant effect for experimental condition, $F(2, 129) = 27.75$, $p < .001$, such that participants in the negative condition ($M_{Negative} = 2.02$, $SD_{Negative} = 1.11$) rated themselves as performing worse than participants in the neutral condition ($M_{Neutral} = 3.07$, $SD_{Neutral} = 3.07$), $t(83) = 4.51$, $p < .001$, and in the positive condition ($M_{Positive} = 3.66$, $SD_{Positive} = 1.03$), $t(89) = 7.31$, $p < .001$. Those in the positive condition rated themselves as performing better than those in the neutral condition, $t(86) = 2.66$, $p = .01$.

Descriptive statistics for the main variables and outcomes of interest are shown in Table 1. It should be noted that the distributions of shame scores were positively skewed for both Time 1 (1.51) and Time 2 (1.95), indicating that few individuals endorsed high levels of shame and that the majority of individuals endorsed relatively low levels of shame at both time points. The results of correlational analyses for the study variables are shown in Table 2. Covert narcissism was not correlated with state anxiety at Time 1 but it was positively associated with Time 1 shame, $r = .30$, $p = .001$. Therefore, Hypothesis 1 was not fully supported because covert narcissism was only positively related to shame. Gender was significantly related to anxiety and therefore was included as a control variable in subsequent analyses predicting anxiety. Self-esteem was significantly negatively correlated with shame at Time 1, $r = -27$, $p = .002$. As a result, self-esteem was entered as a control variable in subsequent analyses predicting shame.

Hypothesis 2 predicted that negative performance feedback would elicit an increase in both anxiety and shame relative to positive or neutral feedback. Among participants in the negative feedback condition, there was actually an overall decrease in shame, $M_{\text{Time 1}} = 4.89$, $SD = 4.79$, $M_{\text{Time 2}} = 3.23$, $SD = 4.43$, $t(43) = 3.32$, $p = .002$. No significant change in state anxiety was observed among participants in the negative feedback condition, $M_{\text{Time 1}} = 14.61$, $SD = 7.51$, $M_{\text{Time 2}} = 14.45$, $SD = 6.38$, $t(43) = .16$, *ns*. Moreover, despite significant differences prior to feedback in anxiety, there were no significant differences in anxiety across conditions after feedback, $F(2, 129) = 1.89$, $p > .10$. Thus, Hypothesis 2 was not supported.

2.5. Moderating effect of ego threat on relation between covert narcissism and internalizing symptoms

Multiple regression analyses were used to test for the expected interaction (Hypothesis 3) between covert narcissism and feedback condition in the prediction of state anxiety and shame separately. Each feedback condition was dummy coded into two variables (Positive = 1, 0; Negative = 0, 1, and Neutral = 0, 0). First, centered scores for the pertinent controls variables and the Time 1 internalizing symptom (state anxiety or shame) were entered to examine the change in the respective internalizing symptoms at Time 2. Then, centered scores for narcissism (covert) and the two dummy coded variables were entered as predictors in step two. In the third step, the narcissism by feedback condition interaction terms (i.e., narcissism × dummy 1; narcissism × dummy 2) were added.

2.5.1. Anxiety

Table 3 shows the results of the regression models predicting Time 2 anxiety.

There was a significant main effect for Time 1 anxiety, $\beta = .48$, $p < .001$, R^2 *for the model* = .29. However, there was no significant

Table 1
Descriptive statistics for all variables of interest.

Variable (possible range)	*M*	*SD*	Minimum	Maximum	Skew
Covert narcissism (0–40)	20.42	5.13	7.00	38.00	.22
State anxiety Time 1 (0–40)	12.86	6.88	0.00	31.00	.51
State anxiety Time 2 (0–40)	13.04	6.38	0.00	34.00	.79
Shame Time 1 (0–20)	4.39	4.40	0.00	20.00	1.51
Shame Time 2 (0–20)	2.86	4.10	0.00	20.00	1.95
Self-esteem (0–30)	19.81	5.47	4.00	30.00	−.56

Table 2
Correlations among the variables of interest ($n = 132$).

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1	Gender	–	.05	−.04	−.00	−.08	.19*	.07
2	Covert narcissism		–	.06	.30***	−.15	.00	.20*
3	State anxiety Time 1			–	.43***	−.03	.49***	.39***
4	Shame Time 1				–	−.27**	.31***	.59***
5	Self-esteem					–	−.12	−.16
6	State anxiety Time 2						–	.56***
7	Shame Time 2							–

* $p < .05$.
*** $p < .001$.

interaction between covert narcissism and feedback condition for predicting Time 2 anxiety (see Table 3).

2.5.2. Shame

Table 4 shows the results of the regression models predicting Time 2 shame. There was a significant main effect for Time 1 shame, $\beta = .61$, $p < .001$. In this model, there was also a significant interaction between covert narcissism and feedback condition (dummy 1), $\beta = .20$, $p = .02$, R^2 *change* for the model = .03. *Post hoc* probing indicated that individuals in the positive feedback condition experienced higher levels of shame, especially if they had relatively high levels of covert narcissism (see Fig. 1). In addition, those in the negative feedback condition experienced higher levels of Time 2 shame than those in the neutral feedback condition, $t(131) = -7.70$, $p < .001$, $M_{Negative} = 3.23$, $SD_{Negative} = 4.43$; $M_{Neutral} = 2.68$, $SD_{Neutral} = 3.39$. It is important to note that the significant interaction between covert narcissism and dummy 1 was also significant when self-esteem was included as a control, $\beta = .21$, $p = .02$.Overall, Hypothesis 3was not supported because greater increases in shame were experienced in the positive feedback condition, particularly for individuals with covert narcissistic tendencies than in the negative feedback condition.

2.6. Discussion

Based on the present findings and consistent with theory, it appears that adolescents with covert narcissistic tendencies present an outward veneer of grandiosity but may also suffer from personal uncertainty. However, contrary to the main hypothesis, positive feedback, rather than negative feedback, resulted in higher shame for individuals with higher levels of covert narcissism. This finding is a deviation from the majority of the literature on affective responses to feedback (see Nummenmaa & Niemi, 2004, for a meta-analysis). Nevertheless, some previous literature may help explain these findings. More specifically, praise for a strong performance may "convey an implicit demand for continued good performance," thereby increasing pressure to succeed or maintain the implicit and explicit self-image generated by the praise (Baumeister, Hutton, & Cairns, 1990, p. 133).

Interestingly, higher shame was evident across participants in the positive feedback condition relative to those in the other conditions. Participants with higher levels of covert narcissism, however, may have particularly felt an implicit need to maintain their grandiose and inflated self image after praise. Such pressure may have resulted in concern about being unable to live up to positive feedback and feelings of shame, as well as increased attention to their underlying negative self-views which did not match the feedback. Thus, individuals with narcissistic tendencies may experience shame in situations that would seem paradoxical to the typical associated features of narcissism (i.e., seeking praise and admiration; negative emotional reactions to negative feedback; Raskin et al., 1991; Rhodewalt & Morf, 1998).

The developmental stage of the participants may also have influenced the observed response to positive feedback. Previous literature suggests that adolescents have implicit concepts of their intelligence (Dweck, 2002) that influence how they view or integrate praise into their self-concept. Typically, praise is meant to boost confidence and motivation; however, depending on whether the adolescent views his or her intelligence as a fixed trait (i.e., intelligence cannot be developed or changed) versus a malleable trait (i.e., intelligence is subject to change; Dweck, 2002), praise may elicit feelings of negative self-worth. That is, adolescents, perhaps specifically those with the fragile self-worth thought to be tied to narcissism (Zeigler-Hill, 2006), may become concerned about either not being able to maintain the characteristics that resulted in the praise or that the aptitude that led to the praise is task-specific or unstable.

Robins, Tracy, and Shaver (2001) state that shame is a "keystone affect" of narcissism (p. 232). They also distinguish between "healthy" and "unhealthy" narcissists based on whether the individual has learned to control and regulate his or her self-conscious emotions (e.g., shame), with the latter demonstrating greater emotional instability and negative affect (Robins et al., 2001). From this perspective, covert narcissism may have been associated with shame after positive feedback because individuals with such tendencies may have experienced discomfort in reaction to the positive appraisal that was inconsistent with their implicit self-image (Robins et al., 2001; Thomaes et al., 2007).

Table 3
Multiple regression analyses with covert narcissism and feedback condition as predictors of change in state anxiety.

	Covert narcissism		
	Control model β	Main effect model β	Interaction model
State anxiety Time 1	.44***	.42***	.40**
Gender	.18*	.18*	.19*
Narcissism		−.07	−.09
Dummy 1		.01	.01
Dummy 2		.07	.07
Narcissism × dummy 1			.07
Narcissism × dummy 2			−.01
R^2	.29***	.30***	.30***
Change in R^2		.01	.01

* $p < .05$.
** $p < .01$.
*** $p < .001$.

Table 4
Multiple regression analyses with covert narcissism and feedback condition as predictors of change in state shame.

	Covert narcissism		
	Control model β	Main effects model β	Interaction model β
State shame Time 1	.60***	.62***	.63***
Self-esteem	−.01	−.01	.02
Narcissism		.01	−.02
Dummy 1		−.12	−.12
Dummy 2		−.06	−.08
Narcissism × dummy 1			.21*
Narcissism × dummy 2			.08
R^2	.35***	.37***	.40***
Change in R^2		.01	.03*

* $p < .05$.
*** $p < .001$.

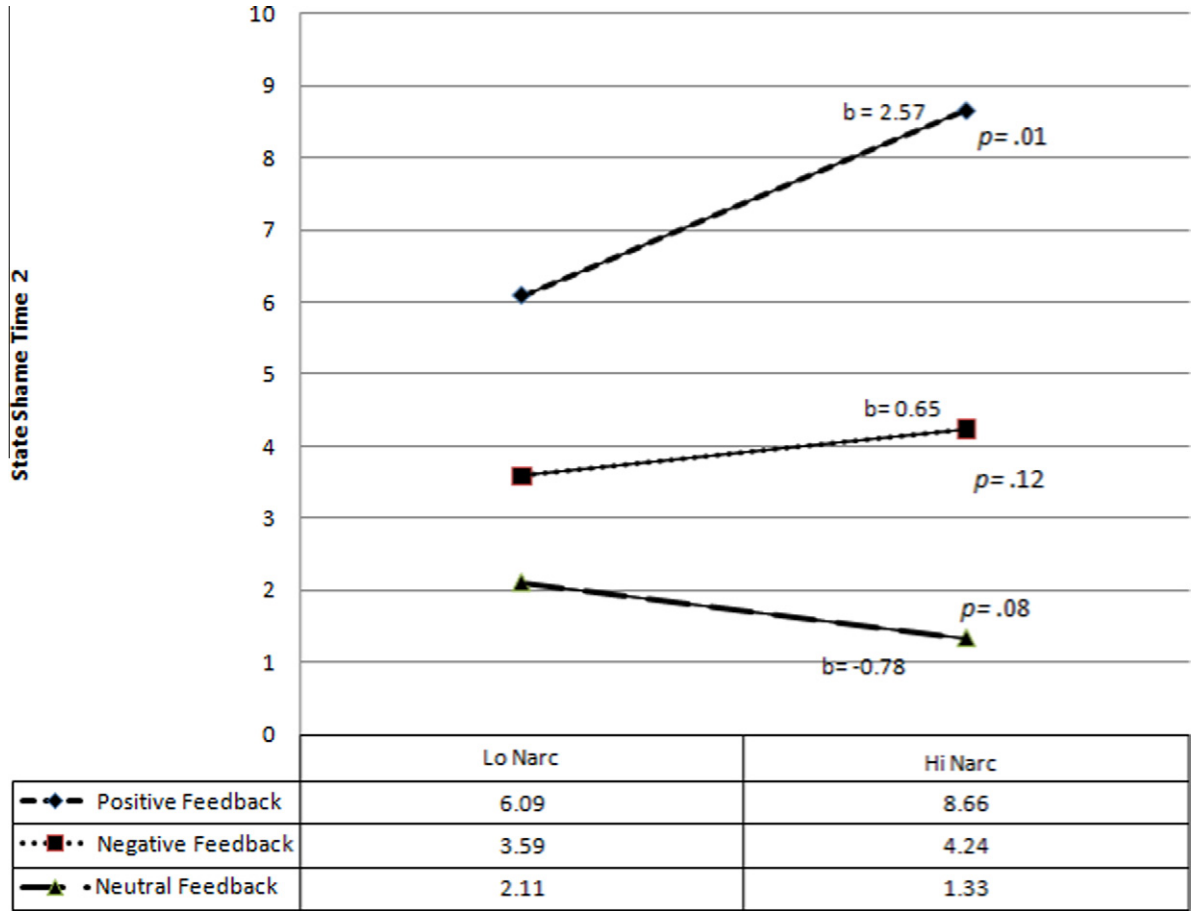

Fig. 1. Interaction between feedback condition and covert narcissism in the prediction of change in shame.

There are several important limitations of the present study. First, the sample was recruited from a residential youth program and was mainly composed of Caucasian males; therefore, the results may not be generalizable to the general adolescent population. In addition, the study relied heavily on self-report measures. However, self-report measures were integral for the self-perception and internalizing constructs that were the focus of this study. In addition, performance feedback was controlled and conveyed in a manner intended to elicit strong internalizing responses. In everyday life, feedback may be more salient to the individual because of the spontaneous, personally relevant, and unique content of the feedback. Therefore, the situation presented in this study may not have truly reflected feedback typically encountered by adolescents, and/or performance on the quiz may not have been important enough to elicit typical emotional responses from the participants.

Future studies should attempt to address some of these limitations by obtaining data from additional sources (e.g., parent report, peer report) and different samples (e.g., community).In addition, longitudinal research would help delineate the developmental relations between narcissism and negative affect including internalizing problems. For instance, narcissistic individuals may develop negative affect as a result of their difficulty with interpersonal relationships and feedback from their environment. However, those with negative affect may develop narcissistic-like tendencies as a means of protecting themselves from potential harm.

The present study may help begin to clarify the influence of performance feedback on the internalizing feelings of adolescents, including in ways that are paradoxical, especially for those adolescents with higher levels of narcissism. Adolescents have a tendency to alter their self-concepts across contexts, defining or viewing themselves differently, depending on their social environments (Harter, Waters, & Whitesell, 1998). That is, adolescents appear to utilize social information to shape their explicit self-image and their actions. Further understanding of adolescents' responses may better enable professionals who work with youth to assist them in coping appropriately with both positive and negative feedback. Covert narcissism may play a role in these coping responses. Therefore, it may be useful to continue to consider the presence of internalizing responses that would otherwise go unnoticed as a result of essentially being masked by narcissistic presentations.

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