

## NARCISSISM VERSUS PRONENESS TO SHAME AND GUILT<sup>1</sup>

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*Summary.*—The aim of this study was to evaluate the correlations between the narcissistic personality trait, measured with the Narcissistic Personality Inventory, and proneness to shame and guilt, measured with the Shame-Guilt Proneness Scale. Participants were 165 students (83 men, 82 women), aged 19–30 years. Pearson product-moment correlations, with computations comparing NPI Total score with each of the Shame-Guilt Proneness Scale subscales, were negative for scores on narcissism and shame and for those on narcissism and guilt. These data are consistent with previous findings, which suggest that the “overt” type narcissist is immune to feelings of guilt and may be characterised by a negation of the experience of shame.

Wright, O’Leary, and Balkin (1989) differentiated between two types of narcissistic dysfunction: in one, individuals supposedly experience a consciously low self-esteem that is accompanied by greater shame; in the other, individuals experience a consciously high self-esteem while disavowing any experience of shame. Broucek (1991) identified an “unconflicted egoistical type” of narcissism which is “unabashedly self-aggrandizing and seemingly shameless” and a “dissociative type” that displays low self-esteem and a “vulnerability to frequent shame experiences.” Wink (1991) similarly contrasted an “overt” narcissism, which describes an individual who is exhibitionist, aggressive, and disrespectful of others’ needs, with a “covert” narcissism, which describes an individual who is inhibited, socially vulnerable, and sensitive to humiliating experiences.

Currently, one of the main self-report scales of the narcissistic disorder is the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (Raskin & Terry, 1988), which seems to measure the “unconflicted, egoistical” type or “overt” type of narcissism.

Previous research has shown the presence of a negative correlation between Narcissistic Personality Inventory scores and shame measures and an absence of correlation between Narcissistic Personality Inventory scores and guilt measures (Harder & Lewis, 1987; Hoblitzelle, 1987; Gramzow & Tangney, 1992), but the operational definitions of shame and guilt, two often overlapping constructs, still show many shortcomings.

The purpose of this research is to examine the relation between narcis-

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ism, measured with the Narcissistic Personality Inventory, and shame and guilt, measured with the Shame-Guilt Proneness Scale (Battacchi, Codispoti, & Marano, 1994), an inventory specifically designed for measuring and distinguishing between the experience of shame and the feeling of guilt. More specifically, since the Narcissistic Personality Inventory measures the “overt” type of narcissism, negative correlations between total score on the Narcissistic Personality Inventory and shame and guilt, measured by the Shame-Guilt Proneness Scale, are expected.

## METHOD

### *Participants*

Participants were 165 Italian students (83 men and 82 women), ages 19–30 years ( $M=23.4$ ,  $SD=1.9$ ) and recruited from the Universities of Bologna, Florence, and Pisa. Participants were invited to the clinical laboratory of the Psychology Department of Bologna wherein they completed the two self-report questionnaires individually. The subjects were volunteers and were given course credit for participation.

### *Materials*

Participants were administered the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (Raskin & Terry, 1988), translated and adapted in Italian by the back-translation procedure (Montebarocci, Codispoti, Baldaro, & Rossi, 2002), and the Shame-Guilt Proneness Scale (Battacchi, *et al.*, 1994).

The Narcissistic Personality Inventory, a self-report measure, has 40 items with a dichotomous response format. The scale provides a general index of narcissism and has shown considerable evidence of construct validity and internal consistency (Raskin & Terry, 1988; Montebarocci, *et al.*, 2002).

The Shame-Guilt Proneness Scale represents a self-report measure for the assessment of proneness to shame and proneness to guilt. It consists of 46 items, each answered on a 5-point Likert scale (anchors of 0 = not at all characteristic of me; 5 = extremely characteristic of me) and is divided into 14 subscales: Empathy–Reparation, Normative–Punitive Guilt, Empathetic–Punitive Guilt, Embarrassment, Shyness, Pusillanimity, Need for Approval, Need for Dominance, Generalized Social Shame Anxiety, Shame Anxiety in Front of Significant Others, Counter-delophilic Attitude, Self-blame (object: the Self), Self-blame (object: Actions), and Self-blame (object: Mental states). The scales Embarrassment and Shyness measure problems in establishing social interactions. The scale Pusillanimity refers to disavowing doing any actions to prevent humiliation. The scale Need for Approval assesses the need for approval and attention and the scale Need for Dominance refers to competitiveness. The scales Generalized Social Shame Anxiety and Shame Anxiety in Front of Significant Others assess fears of being ashamed, regardless

of any specific inadequacy, and fears of devaluation of the self by important others. The scale Counter-delophilic Attitude refers to fears of giving way to exhibitionistic tendencies or being the center of social attention. The scale Self-blame (object: self) measures the tendency to devalue one's own person, the self. The two scales Self-blame (object: Actions and Mental states) refer to self-criticism of one's own mental acts or states like thoughts, wishes, or fears. Four subscales assess mainly guilt-related traits: Self-blame (object: Actions), Empathy-Reparation, Normative-Punitive Guilt, and Empathetic-Punitive Guilt. Self-blame (Actions) refers to criticism of one's own actions or behaviour, the scale Empathy-Reparation measures a need for reparation and concern with others' sufferings, both when sufferings are caused by the subject and when they are not, and Normative-Punitive Guilt refers to moral perfectionism as a defensive attitude against guilt. Finally, the scale Empathetic-Punitive Guilt assesses fears of punishment and rejection. All the remaining scales, except the Need for Dominance and the Need for Approval, are shame-related subscales. The scale has shown considerable evidence of construct validity and internal consistency (Battacchi, Codispoti, Marano, & Codispoti, 2001).

## RESULTS

For each participant we have calculated the total score on the Narcissistic Personality Inventory and single scores for the 14 scales of the Shame-Guilt Proneness Scale. Pearson product-moment correlations were computed between Narcissistic Personality Inventory total score and scores on the Shame-Guilt Proneness Scale subscales.

TABLE 1  
CORRELATIONS BETWEEN TOTAL SCORE ON THE NARCISSISTIC PERSONALITY INVENTORY  
AND SCORES ON THE 14 SCALES OF THE SHAME-GUILT PRONESS SCALE ( $N = 165$ )

Shame-Guilt Proneness Scale	
Empathetic-Punitive Guilt	-.11
Normative-Punitive Guilt	-.10
Empathy-Reparation	-.31*
Embarrassment	-.22*
Shyness	-.23*
Pusillanimity	-.25*
Need for Approval	.30*
Need for Dominance	.21*
Generalized Social Shame Anxiety	-.36*
Shame Anxiety in Front of Significant Others	-.28*
Counter-delophilic Attitude	-.29*
Self-blame (object: the self)	-.18*
Self-blame (object: actions)	-.24*
Self-blame (object: mental states)	-.18*

\* $p < .05$ .

Total Narcissistic Personality Inventory score was positively correlated with the Shame-Guilt Proneness Scale subscales of Need for Dominance and Need for Approval and negatively correlated with the Shame-Guilt Proneness Scale subscales Empathy-Reparation, Embarrassment, Shyness, Pusillanimity, Generalized Social Shame Anxiety, Shame Anxiety in Front of Significant Others, Counter-delophobic Attitude, Self-blame (object: the Self), Self-blame (object: Action), and Self-blame (object: Mental States) (see Table 1). No significant correlations were found between total Narcissistic Personality Inventory score and scores on the Shame-Guilt Proneness Scale factors of Empathetic-Punitive Guilt and Normative-Punitive Guilt.

#### DISCUSSION

Analysis yielded a negative correlation between narcissism and shame and narcissism and guilt except for the two subscales of the Shame-Guilt Proneness Scale, Need for Approval and Need for Dominance. This result is consistent with previous findings (Harder & Lewis, 1987; Hoblitzelle, 1987; Gramzow & Tangney, 1992), which suggest how the "overt" narcissist (Wink, 1991) is immune to feelings of guilt due to personality structure and is characterised by a negation of the experience of shame as a defence against feelings of inadequacy and inferiority.

The Need for dominance is a prominent characteristic in "overt" narcissism, characterised by a manipulative relational style and tending towards interpersonal exploitation. Mullins and Kopelman (1988) discovered how narcissism, measured with the Narcissistic Personality Inventory, was also positively correlated with the Machiavellian personality trait, measured with the Mach IV (Christie & Geis, 1970) which is known to measure the capacity to establish interpersonal power via the skillful, knowing use of tactics and strategies to manipulate and exploit others for one's own aims.

Of particular interest is the positive correlation between "overt" narcissism and Need for dominance and "overt" narcissism and Need for Approval given the fact that the Narcissistic Personality Inventory was positively correlated with high ratings of self-esteem (Emmons, 1987; Raskin & Novacek, 1989). Rhodewalt and colleagues (Rhodewalt, Madrian, & Cheney, 1988), however, showed how narcissists, measured on this scale, are subject to wide day-to-day mood swings and greater emotional reactivity. Emotional inconstancy and intense emotive susceptibility are closely connected to a general instability in one's self-esteem. The Narcissistic Personality Inventory, therefore, positively correlates with high self-esteem but this self-esteem is unstable, fragile, and dependent on external feedback. In other words, the self-esteem in this type of narcissist has a prominent defensive component and, according to Wright, *et al.* (1989), the inverse correlation of scores on the Narcissistic Personality Inventory with shame reflects a protective manoeuvre designed to safeguard a fragile sense of psychological well-being.

It would be appropriate to investigate with further studies the relation between narcissism measured with inventories that detect the “covert” subtype, like the Narcissistic Personality Disorder Scale (Ashby, Lee, & Duke, 1979) and the Hypersensitive Narcissism Scale (Hendin & Cheek, 1997), and proneness to shame and guilt.

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