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Narcissistic men and women think they are so hot – But they are not

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ABSTRACT

Narcissists think they are more knowledgeable, better leaders, and more attractive than others are. Higher narcissism scores in celebrities than in non-celebrities (Young & Pinsky, 2006) raise the question of whether narcissistic individuals actually are, to some degree, more knowledgeable or attractive than other individuals are. Because little research has investigated the degree to which narcissists' ratings of their attractiveness are inflated relative to others' ratings of their attractiveness, we asked men and women to evaluate their own attractiveness, and then we asked two separate panels of judges to view and rate facial shots of these men and women. More narcissistic men and women rated themselves as more attractive than less narcissistic individuals did, but outside judges did not rate more and less narcissistic individuals as any different in attractiveness.

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1. Narcissistic men and women think they are so hot – but they are not

In Greek mythology, Narcissus was a young man who fell in love with his own image reflected in water and became so caught up in gazing at himself that he eventually died for lack of food or drink. In keeping with the legend, narcissistic personality disorder is characterized by excessive self-love. According to its mental illness classification in the fourth edition of the diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders (American Psychological Association, 2000), narcissistic personality disorder involves an exaggerated sense of self-importance, dominance, beauty, and entitlement, as well as a willingness to exploit others and a need for admiration from others.

Since the validation of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Hall, 1979; Raskin & Terry, 1988), research has documented subclinical variation in narcissistic tendencies (Campbell, Foster, & Finkel, 2002; John & Robins, 1994; McCullough, Emmons, Kilpatrick, & Mooney, 2003; Rhodewalt & Morf, 1998; Wallace & Baumeister, 2002). In contrast to their less narcissistic counterparts, for example, people who score high in narcissism display behaviors not unlike those of the mythical character Narcissus: They seek out opportunities to watch themselves, enjoy looking at themselves in the mirror, and get a psychological “boost” out of viewing themselves in the mirror and on videotape (Robins & John, 1997).

A number of studies have documented bias in narcissists' self-perceptions and relationship perceptions. For example, individuals who score high in narcissism are resistant to doubts about their romantic partners' level of commitment (Foster & Campbell, 2005) in the face of their own lack of commitment (Campbell & Foster, 2002), are quick to perceive themselves as being treated poorly (McCullough et al., 2003), and are prone to offer inflated judgments of their performance on group tasks (John & Robins, 1994; Judge, LePine, & Rich, 2006).

Recently, researchers have linked celebrity status with narcissism. In a study comparing students to 200 male and female celebrities (reality television personalities, comedians, actors, and musicians) invited on to a nationally syndicated radio talk show to offer advice and promote themselves, Young and Pinsky (2006) documented that celebrities score higher on narcissism than do non-celebrities. Moreover, degree of narcissism among celebrities was not associated with number of years as a celebrity, a possible indication that celebrities might have narcissistic tendencies prior to entering the entertainment industry. And, female celebrities scored higher in narcissism than male celebrities did, a possible indication of the emphasis on physical appearance among women in the entertainment industry. These findings spurred us to wonder whether celebrities are, to some degree, more attractive than are individuals from the general population. If so, then being more attractive could have contributed to their acquisition of celebrity status. This logic would apply to a broader population than just celebrities: In general terms, it is possible that narcissistic individuals actually are more attractive than less narcissistic individuals are. In other words, perhaps narcissistic individuals' self-adorations are not entirely illusory.

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Only one previous study has explicitly investigated whether narcissistic individuals' perceptions of their own attractiveness are biased. In that study (Gabriel, Critelli, & Ee, 1994), a sample of male and female college students placed themselves in a percentile compared to their perception of the average college student; then, the researchers compared each target's self-given percentile with judges' placement of the target's picture within a distribution of fifty other individuals of varying attractiveness whose pictures had been preselected from a university yearbook. Gabriel and colleagues documented attractiveness illusions among narcissistic men but not among narcissistic women – that is, narcissistic men rated themselves as more attractive than judges rated them to be. But, Gabriel et al.'s findings leave open the possibility that narcissistic men (and women) hold unrealistically high opinions about themselves yet also are more attractive than average. Perhaps the judges rated more narcissistic men as more attractive than they rated the less narcissistic men, even if they did not rate the more narcissistic men as positively as these men rated themselves. A narcissistic male, in other words, might think of himself as the next Brad Pitt; and although he is not the next Brad Pitt, he might still be more attractive than average. The current study attempts to address this possibility.

In the current study, then, our first objective is to replicate the previous finding that narcissism is associated with positive evaluations of one's own attractiveness. Then, we attempt to determine whether narcissists' evaluations of themselves coincide with outsiders' perceptions of their attractiveness or whether, in fact, narcissistic evaluations are entirely illusory.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Our data come from a broader study of assortment and commitment among young adult dating couples (Bleske-Rechek, Remiker, & Baker, *in press*). During the 2005 fall semester, we recruited students who were currently involved in a committed romantic relationship from introductory psychology courses. In return for attending an initial 1 h session with their current romantic partner, students acquired partial credit toward their course research participation requirement. A total of 51 heterosexual couples participated. The large majority of participants were Caucasian, with a mean age of 20.18 years for men and 19.47 years for women. The average couple had been together for 18 months (range of 2 weeks to 4 years).

2.2. Instruments and procedure

Participants attended in small-group sessions of one to five couples at a time. Informed consent procedures were followed immediately by photographs. Fifty of the men and 49 of the women gave consent to be photographed for research purposes. All participants were photographed individually in color against the same white wall, from the shoulders up. After being photographed, couple members were led to separate rooms to complete identical questionnaires. Participants completed a variety of measures of personality, including the Big Five Inventory (John & Srivastava, 1999) and the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Terry, 1988), the most common measure of narcissism validated for use with nonclinical populations (John & Robins, 1994). The NPI includes 40 items to which participants respond with a true or false. Sample items include "I am a born leader," and "I like to display my body." Because narcissism tends to correlate moderately with self-esteem (Campbell et al., 2002; Robins & John, 1997), participants also completed the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES; Rosenberg, 1965).

Finally, they responded to two questions about their self-perceived desirability: "Compared with other men (women) your age, how physically attractive are you?" and "Compared with other men (women) your age, how sexy are you?" These items were scored on a 9-point Likert-type rating scale (*not at all to average to extremely*).

Male and female photos were assigned random identification numbers, shuffled, and then compiled into three different, complete sequences of 99 photos. Then, we asked a set of seven men and 17 women who were blind to the study design and hypotheses to rate one complete sequence of photos. These raters were all young-adult college students in a summer session course taught by the first author; they participated outside of class in return for extra credit. Raters responded to five items for each photo. First, they responded to two items about attractiveness: "Compared with other men (women) his (her) age, how physically attractive is this person?" and "Compared with other men (women) his (her) age, how sexy is this person?" These items were scored on a 9-point rating scale (*not at all to average to extremely*). Second, the judges rated three variables that we thought might moderate an association between narcissism and attractiveness judgments. We speculated that narcissistic individuals might be more likely to smile (given its links with extraversion), take care in their appearance, or display resources; if so, negative or positive judgments of narcissists' attractiveness could occur through higher ratings on those variables. Using 9-point scales, we asked judges to rate the degree to which each person was smiling (*not at all/no smile to average/some smile to a lot/wide smile*), the degree to which each person seemed to have taken care in their appearance (*not at all to some to a lot*), and the degree to which each person was displaying resources (*not at all to some to a lot*).

Upon reviewer recommendation, we created a second set of ratings to investigate other potential moderators of the association between narcissism and attractiveness ratings, including perceived arrogance and genuineness of smile. We speculated that narcissistic individuals may be perceived by judges as arrogant or as insincere in their smiles, which could negatively affect judges' perceptions of their attractiveness. Thus, we obtained a new sample of judges, 23 men and 34 women, to rate the photos. These judges were undergraduate psychology majors and minors who responded to a department-wide email invitation from the first author to participate in a study involving picture ratings. Again, all judges were young adults. None of the judges had rated the pictures previously. They responded to four items for each photo, all on 9-point scales: "How physically attractive is this person?" (*not at all to average to extremely*); "How arrogant is this person?" (*not at all to average to extremely*); "How cocky is this person?" (*not at all to average to extremely*); and "How would you describe this person's smile?" (*totally fake to totally genuine*).

3. Results

Table 1 provides descriptive statistics for relevant variables, by sex. Narcissism scores varied from 4 to 29 for men, and from 4 to 28 for women. Mean narcissism scores were comparable to those found in previous samples (e.g., Wallace & Baumeister, 2002; Young & Pinsky, 2006). As documented previously, narcissism scores did not differ by sex (Raskin & Hall, 1981), and narcissism and extraversion scores were significantly associated for both men ($r = .45$) and women ($r = .43$), $ps < .01$ (Raskin & Hall, 1981). Romantic partners' narcissism scores were not significantly correlated ($r = .14$). In keeping with previous research (Campbell et al., 2002), associations between narcissism and self-esteem were weak to moderate: For the men in our sample, narcissism and self-esteem were weakly, and not significantly, correlated ($r = .13$); for the women, narcissism and self-esteem were moderately correlated ($r = .30$), $p < .05$. After accounting

Table 1
Means and standard deviations for relevant variables by Sex

	Male M (SD)	Female M (SD)
Narcissism	15.60 (5.46)	15.61 (4.58)
Self-esteem	3.14 (.47)	3.07 (.51)
Self-rated attractiveness	5.42 (1.31)	5.65 (1.17)
Judge set 1: other-rated attractiveness*	3.43 (.92)	4.20 (1.17)
Judge set 2: other-rated attractiveness*	4.17 (.92)	4.82 (1.19)

* Sexes differ at $p < .01$ (all significance tests two-tailed). Ns for each sex range from 47 to 51. Self-esteem scores ranged from 1 to 5.

for self-esteem, narcissism continued to predict participants' ratings of their own attractiveness (male partial $r = .44$, $p < .01$; female partial $r = .55$, $p < .001$). As a precaution, however, we included self-esteem in our initial tests of the interactive effect of narcissism and rater in attractiveness ratings; the pattern of findings did not differ when self-esteem was controlled.¹

3.1. Self-rated attractiveness

Within each sex, participants' self-ratings of sexiness and physical attractiveness were highly correlated (female $r = .71$, male $r = .62$). Thus, these responses were averaged for each participant. Partners were moderately similar in self-rated attractiveness, $r(51) = .31$, $p < .05$.

3.2. Other-rated attractiveness

3.2.1. Judge set 1

The first set of judges showed strong consensus in their ratings of physical attractiveness ($\alpha = .96$), sexiness ($\alpha = .95$), smiling ($\alpha = .99$), care in appearance ($\alpha = .96$), and resource display ($\alpha = .97$). Mean physical attractiveness ratings were higher (female $M = 4.59$, male $M = 3.78$) than sexiness ratings (female $M = 3.81$, male $M = 3.07$), paired t $ps < .001$. However, ratings of physical attractiveness and sexiness were highly redundant (female and male $rs = .98$), so the two scores were averaged for all subsequent analyses. Judges perceived partners as moderately similar in attractiveness, $r(49) = .32$, $p < .05$.

3.2.2. Judge set 2

The second set of judges showed strong consensus in their ratings of physical attractiveness ($\alpha = .97$), arrogance ($\alpha = .94$), cockiness ($\alpha = .94$), and smile genuineness ($\alpha = .95$). Ratings of arrogance and cockiness were redundant ($r = .97$), so the two scores were averaged for each participant. Again, judges perceived partners as moderately similar in level of attractiveness, $r(49) = .32$, $p < .05$.

The first and second set of judges' ratings of participants' attractiveness were highly correlated (male participants $r = .92$, female participants $r = .94$, $ps < .001$).

¹ We included self-esteem in our initial tests of the interactive effect of narcissism and rater in attractiveness ratings. In each set of judges, self-esteem interacted with rater to predict attractiveness ratings ($ps < .05$), with the same pattern documented for narcissism. However, model fit did not improve appreciably despite the reduction in degrees of freedom (AIC from 592.34 to 581.42 for Judge set 1 and from 586.45 to 581.36 for Judge set 2). In addition, the narcissism by rater interaction continued to be highly significant despite inclusion of self-esteem effects in the model. We also regressed original narcissism scores on self-esteem and then ran the simplified model again (see Table 2) using narcissism residuals instead of narcissism scores. AICs were essentially unchanged (from 592.34 to 594.24 for Judge set 1 and from 586.45 to 593.32 for Judge set 2).

3.3. Narcissism and attractiveness

We predicted that narcissistic men and women would rate themselves positively. Our primary question was whether others' judgments of narcissistic individuals' attractiveness would concur. Because our design included multiple observations of each participant, and each participant was nested within couple, which was crossed with participant sex, we employed multilevel (mixed) modeling. We centered narcissism scores on the grand mean and treated narcissism as a covariate, couple as a random factor, and sex (male/female) and rater (self/other) as fixed factors. Initial models showed a main effect of participant sex (women received higher attractiveness ratings than did men), rater (participants gave higher ratings than did outside judges), and narcissism

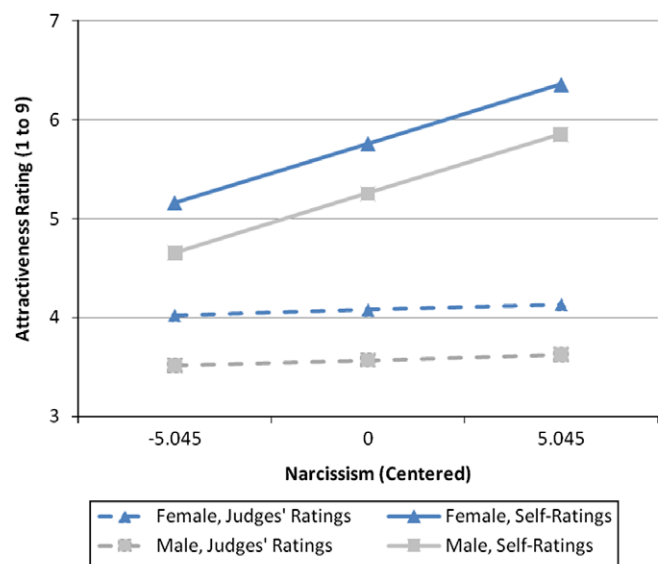


Fig. 1. Judge set 1: Interactive effect of narcissism and rater on attractiveness. Where $N =$ narcissism: judges' ratings of women $\hat{Y} = 4.0768 + .0108N$; judges' ratings of men $\hat{Y} = 3.5699 + .0108N$; self-ratings for women $\hat{Y} = 5.7603 + .1187N$; self-ratings for men $\hat{Y} = 5.2534 + .1187N$.

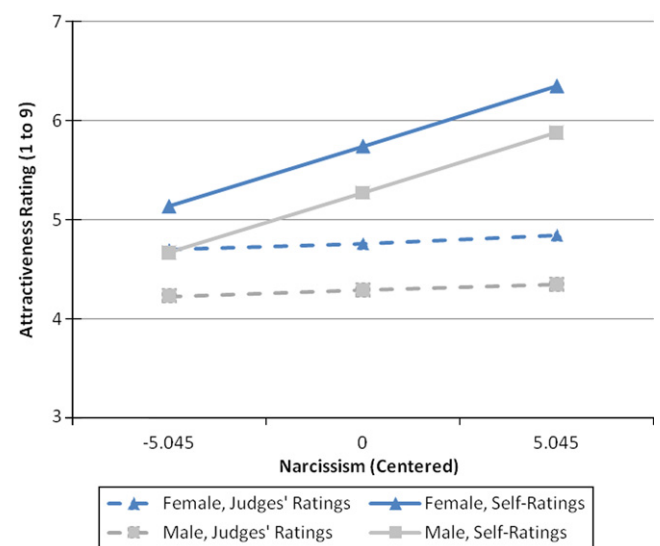


Fig. 2. Judge set 2: Interactive effect of narcissism and rater on attractiveness. Where $N =$ narcissism: judges' ratings of women $\hat{Y} = 4.7585 + .0118N$; judges' ratings of men $\hat{Y} = 4.2889 + .0118N$; self-ratings for women $\hat{Y} = 5.7452 + .1201N$; self-ratings for men $\hat{Y} = 5.2756 + .1201N$.

Table 2
Parameter estimates for factors in simplified models of attractiveness

Predictor	Judge set 1 estimate (S.E.)	<i>p</i>	Judge set 2 estimate (S.E.)	<i>p</i>
Intercept	5.25 (.14)	.000	5.28 (.14)	.000
Sex	.51 (.14)	.001	.47 (.15)	.002
Rater	−1.68 (.14)	.000	−.99 (.14)	.000
Narcissism (centered)	.12 (.02)	.000	.12 (.02)	.000
Rater × Narcissism	−.11 (.03)	.000	−.11 (.03)	.000

Note: All significance tests are two-tailed. Judge set 1 Akaike's information criterion (AIC) = 592.40; Judge set 2 AIC = 586.45.

(narcissism was positively associated with attractiveness ratings). As displayed in Figs. 1 and 2, however, the main effects of narcissism and rater were superseded by an interactive effect of rater and narcissism on attractiveness ratings. Although narcissism predicted participants' evaluations of their attractiveness, it did not predict judges' evaluations. No other interactive effects (sex by rater, sex by narcissism, or sex by rater by narcissism) were significant. This overall pattern of effects held for both the first and second set of judges. Table 2 displays the parameter estimates included in the simplified model (for each set of judges), which included the main effects of sex, rater, and narcissism, as well as the rater by narcissism interaction.

3.4. Potential moderators

The potential moderating variables (smiling, resource display, attention to appearance, arrogance, or smile genuineness) correlated with each other in expected directions: Both male and female targets perceived as smiling more widely by Judge set 1 were rated as less arrogant by Judge set 2, $ps < .01$; targets perceived as smiling widely by Judge set 1 were rated as offering more genuine smiles by Judge set 2, $ps < .001$; and targets perceived as having taken care in their appearance by Judge set 1 were rated as more attractive by both sets of judges, all $ps < .001$. For male participants, however, level of narcissism was not associated with ratings of any of these variables, all $ps > .55$. For female participants, narcissism was associated only with perceived display of resources, $r = .33$, $p < .05$. However, when we included terms in the model for perceived display of resources (including the main effect of this covariate and interactive effects of it with sex, rater and narcissism), they did not predict attractiveness ratings (all $ps > .16$).

4. Discussion

We conducted this study to determine whether narcissistic individuals actually are more attractive than others are, or whether their perceptions of their level of attractiveness are entirely illusory. Our data suggest illusion: In our sample, highly narcissistic men and women rated themselves as more attractive than less narcissistic men and women rated themselves, but outside judges did not differ in their ratings of more and less narcissistic individuals.

Only one other study has investigated narcissists' evaluations of their attractiveness. In that study, Gabriel and colleagues (1994) documented that narcissistic men (but not women) rated themselves as more attractive than outsiders rated them. In the current study, we documented a similar effect in both sexes; moreover, we documented an additional effect: Highly narcissistic men and women rated themselves as more attractive than less narcissistic men and women rated themselves, whereas outside judges' mean ratings of the two groups did not differ. Our findings are analogous to those of Judge et al. (2006) and John and Robins (1994), who compared self- and other-ratings of narcissists' task performance

in work-related contexts. In those studies, narcissistic individuals evaluated themselves more positively than others evaluated themselves, whereas outside judges did not evaluate narcissistic individuals more positively than they evaluated others.

4.1. Caveats

The generalizability of our findings is perhaps limited by our small sample of young adults, all of whom were recruited via their current involvement in a committed romantic relationship. Given the clear associations between narcissism and relationship functioning and commitment (e.g., Campbell & Foster, 2002; Campbell et al., 2002; Foster & Campbell, 2005), we would like to replicate our findings with a larger sample of young adults of varying relationship involvements. Notably, however, our sample showed a typical distribution of responses on the NPI and the full spread of scores on both self- and other-ratings of attractiveness. Thus, although all of our participants were young adults and romantically involved, they were typical of other samples in the narcissism literature.

A second limitation of our study involves the photographs. It is possible that our pattern of findings would have been different if the judges had been rating full-body shots of the participants rather than facial shots, particularly given that there are specific items on the NPI devoted to body adoration, such as "I like to display my body." Judgments of facial attractiveness, however, are the standard in studies of attractiveness (Weeden & Sabini, 2007), and are better independent predictors of overall attractiveness than are judgments of bodily attractiveness (Peters, Rhodes, & Simmons, 2007). Moreover, at least in women, face and body attractiveness ratings from the same target are positively correlated (Thornhill & Grammer, 1999). Regardless, future research could clarify whether narcissists' self-ratings are inflated compared to judges' ratings of both their faces and bodies.

4.2. Implications and conclusion

Taken with previous findings on narcissists' biased evaluations of their performance (John & Robins, 1994; Judge et al., 2006) and heightened evaluations of their intelligence and attractiveness (Gabriel et al., 1994), our findings paint a relatively negative portrait of narcissistic individuals as self-adoring with essentially no basis for being so. Furthermore, other research has shown that in comparison to their less narcissistic counterparts, narcissistic individuals are quick to perceive others as having transgressed against them (McCullough et al., 2003), are low in romantic relationship commitment (Campbell & Foster, 2002), tend to "play games" with their romantic partners (Campbell et al., 2002), are relatively willing to exploit others sexually (Reise & Wright, 1996), and perceive themselves as having more relationship alternatives (Campbell & Foster, 2002). This pattern of correlates is alarming, particularly in light of speculations since the late 1970s (Lasch, 1979; Twenge, Konrath, Foster, Campbell, & Bushman, in press) that Americans have become increasingly narcissistic.

It seems appropriate that future research investigate how narcissism impacts individuals' enduring personal relationships. Research suggests that men and women perceive associating with narcissistic individuals as fun, at least in the short-term, given narcissists' tendency to be perceived as confident and entertaining (Paulhus, 1998). However, enduring relationships with individuals high in narcissism are likely to be high in conflict. Narcissism is characterized by self-focus; we thus predict that romantic partners who score similarly high in narcissism experience more relationship conflict and higher rates of break-up than do those who score similarly low in narcissism. If Americans really are growing increasingly narcissistic as a whole, then another important direction for future research is

an understanding of how to modify environments to curtail narcissistic tendencies and, more generally, deal with narcissistic individuals effectively in mateships and work partnerships.

5. Conclusion

Our findings suggest that narcissistic individuals' positive evaluations of their attractiveness are not shared by others. We add these findings to other findings that suggest that narcissistic individuals have positive illusions about their performance on work-related tasks (Judge et al. 2006) and engage in self-promoting behaviors, like bragging (Paulhus, 1998), that presumably irritate others. The unavoidable conclusion seems to be that narcissists' positive thoughts about themselves are neither correct nor appropriately censored from others. These individuals pose a unique study of self – but not other – adoration.

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