

The Lure of the Noisy Ego: Narcissism as a Social Trap

W. Keith Campbell and Laura E. Buffardi

For at least 2,500 years, a clear and compelling case has been made for the benefits to both self and society of quieting the ego. From the historical Buddha's sermon at the Deer Park and the Katha Upanishad to the Book of Ecclesiastes, individuals can find convincing support for a quiet approach to life. Nevertheless, egotism has continued to rise in our society, even reaching new heights in the past several decades (e.g., see Twenge, Konrath, Foster, Campbell, & Bushman, in press; see also Foster, Campbell, & Twenge, 2003; Twenge & Campbell, 2001). In this chapter, we address two questions: (a) Why do the demands of egotism—the “noisy ego,” so to speak—continue to be heard? and (b) What does the study of egotism's costs teach about the benefits of quieting the ego?

Our focus is on the individual-difference variable of narcissism. We use narcissism as a window for observing egotism or self-enhancement in action. To briefly presage our argument, we posit that narcissism is a trade-off between several benefits to the individual and several costs to the individual and to society. It is important to note that this type of trade-off is remarkably seductive and self-sustaining. Narcissism's benefits for the self often occur in the short term and are emotional and affective in nature. In contrast, the costs typically appear in the longer run and are experienced by both the narcissistic individual and others. Because of this pattern of benefits and costs, we argue that narcissism operates like a social trap. Before making our argument in detail, we define *narcissism* and describe a systemic model that can be used to represent it.

Narcissism: The Noisy Ego in Action

What makes the noisy ego demand attention? In the case of narcissism, we can identify both the structure of the ego and its function, where *structure* refers to both the self-concept and personality and *function* refers to self-regulation strategies. In regard to structure, narcissism is primarily associated with positive and inflated self-views and relatively little interest in warm or intimate relationships with others (Paulhus, 2001). Narcissistic individuals' self-views are positive in domains connected with agency, such as dominance, status, intelligence, and physical attractiveness (Brown & Zeigler-Hill, 2004; Gabriel,

Critelli, & Ee, 1994). There is also evidence that these views are inflated inasmuch as narcissism positively predicts self-perceived intelligence and attractiveness but not objectively assessed intelligence and attractiveness (Gabriel et al., 1994). In addition, narcissistic individuals see themselves as special and unique (Emmons, 1984) and entitled to special treatment (Campbell, Bonacci, Shelton, Exline, & Bushman, 2004). In contrast, they do not report the same level of self-enhancement on communal traits, such as warmth and agreeableness (Campbell, Rudich, & Sedikides, 2002). Indeed, narcissism negatively predicts self-reported agreeableness (Bradlee & Emmons, 1992) and even intimacy and affiliation as measured with the Thematic Apperception Test (Carroll, 1987).

In regard to function, people with narcissistic personalities must self-regulate to maintain their inflated self-views on agentic domains; that is, they engage in a range of behaviors that ensure they continue to feel positively about themselves. These self-regulation efforts are shaped by narcissistic individuals' relative lack of interest in communal relationships. This lack of concern for others allows for a greater degree of interpersonal exploitation and manipulation in the service of self-regulation. Narcissistic self-regulation is pervasive across all facets of life. It can be seen in private fantasies of power and fame (Raskin & Novacek, 1991), spontaneous monologues that tend to be about the self (Raskin & Shaw, 1988), interpersonal conversations that turn into opportunities to self-promote (Vangelisti, Knapp, & Daly, 1990), attention seeking and showing off (Buss & Chiodo, 1991), materialism (Vohs & Campbell, 2006), game playing in relationships (Campbell, Foster, & Finkel, 2002), and other social domains. In short, when there is an opportunity to look and feel good, narcissists are likely to jump at it (Wallace & Baumeister, 2002).

These clear efforts at self-regulation have led researchers to model narcissism as a *self-reinforcing system*. Such models typically involve the current self-concept (i.e., a positive view of the self), a social action that further enhances a positive view of the self (e.g., winning a public competition, a display of grandiosity), and some affective or esteem-laden consequence of this process. One of the earliest social-personality models was Raskin, Novacek, and Hogan's (1991) model of narcissistic self-esteem management, which focused on narcissistic individuals' displays of grandiosity in the interest of maintaining and bolstering self-esteem. Campbell's (1999) self-orientation model focused directly on romantic relationships, demonstrating that people with narcissistic tendencies seek out partners who are high in status and admire them as part of an effort to increase the narcissistic person's own social status and self-esteem. Morf and Rhodewalt (2001) presented a dynamic self-regulatory processing model that provided a more complete account of narcissistic self-enhancement that included affect regulation. Baumeister and Vohs (2001) focused directly on the affective qualities of narcissistic self-regulation by proposing what is essentially an addiction model of narcissism; that is, the narcissistic individual receives a "rush" when self-enhancement is experienced, which reinforces the desire to experience self-enhancement. It is important to note that this model also contains the habituation component common to all addictions: The situations that provide the rush to narcissistic individuals initially will not be potent enough to provide the same rush after repeated exposure. In their

work on self-conscious emotions, Tracy and Robins (2004) linked narcissism more specifically to the emotion of pride. More recently, Campbell, Brunell, and Finkel (2006) proposed an agency model of narcissism that represented an effort to incorporate the previous systemic models of narcissism while adding the basic emphasis on the agentic concerns that narcissistic individuals exhibit (e.g., Paulhus, 2001). This model used the term *narcissistic esteem* as a label to describe the affective rush, pride, and dominance-tinted self-esteem associated with narcissistic self-enhancement.

Although our focus is primarily on the noisy ego, it also is important that we briefly address the relationship between narcissism and the quiet ego; in other words, how are we conceptualizing a quiet ego? The simple answer to this is that low levels of narcissism are indicative of a quiet ego. There is a hidden complexity in this answer, however, because one can conceptualize low narcissism in at least two ways. First, low narcissism might be thought of as psychological dependence and weakness. Second, it might be thought of as a robust self-system but one lacking in grandiosity, self-centeredness, and a need to constantly maintain and defend status and esteem. We endorse a conceptualization of the quiet ego that is aligned with the second conceptualization; in other words, quieting the ego is not about weakness or passivity but about approaching life without grandiosity and puffery and with an interest in connecting with others and the world.

The Nature of Social Traps

Imagine that you want to catch a lobster. The standard way to do this is to place a special type of cage, which offers easy entry and a difficult exit, at the bottom of the sea. Inside the cage you would put something that a lobster would find tasty, such as the head of a cod. The trap works because the lobster, drawn by the easily obtainable tasty fish head, enters the cage. He enjoys his stay for awhile, eating the fish head in the comfort of the cage. The downside, of course, comes later, when he tries to escape, cannot, and is hauled into a boat.

The two basic mechanisms of a trap such as a lobster cage are (a) the lure of an immediate benefit to the self and (b) the longer term costs to the self that are ignored initially. There are some classic variations on this trap as well. For example, imagine that a psychologist is substituted for the lobster and the tasty fish head is replaced by equally tasty donuts. The psychologist might be lured to the donut by the rush of sugary goodness. Although there is no physical cage, the psychologist might sneak back, so to speak, the next day, for another donut. Day after day this happens, and as the psychologist grows more depressed by his increased girth and failing health, the donut runs become more frequent, and he graduates to oversized bear claws, because more pastry is needed to provide the same fleeting rush of positive affect and joy. Eventually, the psychologist develops diabetes and is hospitalized. In a sense, he has been trapped by his own craving for sugar and carbohydrates.

Another classic example of a trap involves a group or society instead of an individual. Imagine the lobster fisher rather than the lobster. The fisher gets his or her reward from hauling in the lobster: The more lobsters, the bigger the

reward. At the same time, there are 100 other lobster fishers facing the same “more lobsters equal more reward” equation. As long as the entire fleet of fishers can restrain from overharvesting, everyone can be moderately successful. What often happens, however, is that a significant number of fishers go for the bigger catch. Like the lobster in the trap with the tasty fish head, this strategy works well in the short term. In the longer term, however, the whole fleet suffers as the fishery is depleted and eventually destroyed.

In his seminal review on social traps, Platt (1973) described three forms of traps (along with several others). The first two examples are variants of individual traps, or *self-traps*. More specifically, the first represents a *time-delay trap*, in which the individual selects a short-term benefit and then suffers a longer term cost. Often, this entails a clear problem with delay of gratification (e.g., “I will buy this car now instead of waiting until I actually make enough money to safely afford it”). The second represents a *sliding-reinforcer trap*, in which the benefit of a particular course of action decreases slowly as the costs increase. Often, this entails a form of habituation (e.g., “I do not get the same mellow feeling from the same amount of alcohol, so I gradually increase my intake from a single tequila sunrise to several shots of mescal [tequila]”). The third example is an *individual goods and collective bads trap*. The “tragedy of the commons” (Hardin, 1968) fits this mold. In this type of trap, a behavior that leads to an individual good also leads to a collective bad. Because the individual is a member of the collective, of course, the bad might befall him or her to some extent as well.

Social traps often exist when individual actions that benefit the self in the short term lead to negative consequences to the self and to the collective. The negative consequences typically occur in the longer term, although the time frame that constitutes the longer term varies dramatically. The time interval from initial use of methamphetamine to serious negative consequences can be relatively short; in contrast, the depletion of the fish in the Grand Banks went on for hundreds of years and many generations before cod fishing was banned.

When the Noisy Ego Chases the Lure: Narcissism as a Social Trap

Overview

The function of a trap is relatively clear when the reward is as simple and biologically straightforward as a chocolate cookie or cocaine. What we argue is a little—but not much—more complex. In short, we argue that the experience of egotism and its concomitants (e.g., status, esteem, pride) can act in a similar way. Thus narcissism, as an individual-difference variable that operates as part of an ego-enhancing and -sustaining system, should make the individual susceptible to certain social traps.

Consider the following example. Hal, a narcissistic person, leases a new Mercedes. This has a small immediate cost (i.e., the lease payment), but this cost is easily outweighed in the short run by the self-enhancing benefits of the

car. Hal gets a rush of narcissistic pride every time he throws his Mercedes keychain on the counter at a bar or the gym, catches his reflection in the rear-view mirror, or walks to get his car in a lot full of the Hyundais and Fords that, according to Hal, “only losers drive.” For Hal, driving the Mercedes has other benefits as well. He manages to catch the attention of an attractive, albeit somewhat shallow woman, who seems to admire him greatly. This pumps up his ego further, and the added confidence enables him to be more successful at his sales job. Hal buys an expensive wardrobe and a bigger Mercedes. He marries his attractive girlfriend and joins an elite country club.

At this point in his journey, Hal is like the lobster happily munching away at the fish head without knowing he is trapped. His narcissism is working like a charm. Unfortunately, the trap starts to close at this point. He begins to neglect his wife in favor of a young colleague at his office, whom he convinces that his marriage is on the outs because of his wife’s self-absorption. His wife, sensing the neglect, compensates by buying lots and lots of expensive shoes and having the house remodeled. Stuck with the high credit card bills, Hal starts to cut a few corners at work. He exploits his clients and colleagues and hopes that his charm will keep him out of trouble. His stress starts to show in his short temper and increased interest in drinking mojitos at lunch. He puts on weight from the alcohol, and his girlfriend starts to avoid him. One day, after having too much to drink, he yells at her, and she retaliates by telling his wife (and the other employees at the office) about the affair. In short order, Hal loses his wife in an expensive divorce and is asked to leave his job.

This example has characteristics of each of the traps described earlier. There is a time-delay trap (e.g., leasing an ego-enhancing car with the cost of poor long-term financial stability), a sliding-reinforcer trap (e.g., no longer being satisfied with his attractive wife and finding a girlfriend on the side), and an individual goods and collective bads trap (e.g., Hal’s cutting corners with his clients harms the entire firm).

Although this example is somewhat fanciful, and we acknowledge that other personal qualities of Hal’s and situational forces beyond his control surely contributed to his downfall, we can search the research literature on narcissism to see whether support for its trap-like nature exists. If narcissism operates like a trap, we should find three things: (a) the benefits of narcissism to the self are largely immediate, (b) the costs of narcissism to the self are typically experienced in the long term, and (c) the outcome of narcissism for others is generally negative. In simple terms, the existence of (a) and (b) suggests a time-delay or sliding-reinforcer trap, and (a) and (c) suggest an individual goods and collective bads trap.

Some Benefits to the Self

There is a compelling case to make for the psychological benefits of narcissism. First, narcissism feels good in the short term (Rose, 2002; Sedikides, Rudich, Gregg, Kumashiro, & Rusbult, 2004). It is linked to greater positive affect and less anxiety and depression. It is also linked to pride (Tracy & Robins, 2004), self-esteem (Brown & Zeigler-Hill, 2004), and inflated views of one’s academic

and intellectual abilities (Campbell, Goodie, & Foster, 2004; Gabriel et al., 1994; Paulhus, Harms, Bruce, & Lysy, 2004). There is also a proposed (although at this stage only anecdotal) rush associated with narcissistic individuals' experience of self-enhancement (Baumeister & Vohs, 2001).

Narcissism also provides many tangible benefits to the individual. People with narcissistic tendencies are better performers in public competitive tasks (Wallace & Baumeister, 2002) and resilient in the face of the negative feedback they receive (Campbell, Reeder, Sedikides, & Elliot, 2000). They also are able to extract resources more rapidly from the commons in a classic commons-dilemma task (Campbell, Bush, Brunell, & Shelton, 2006).

Finally, narcissism predicts a wide range of advantages in the initiation of interpersonal relationships. In certain contexts, when compared with non-narcissistic individuals, narcissistic individuals find it is easier to be liked as friends or acquaintances (Oltmanns, Friedman, Fiedler, & Turkheimer, 2004; Paulhus, 1998), dating partners (Foster, Shrirra, & Campbell, 2003), potential leaders of a group (Brunell, Gentry, Campbell, & Kuhnert, 2006), and even as celebrities on reality television shows (Young & Pinsky, 2006).

Some Costs to the Self

Narcissism also has its costs. The confidence and inflated self-views that make narcissistic individuals feel good and perform well in public also, for example, lead to decreased academic performance over time (Robins & Beer, 2001), diminished performance on multiple laboratory-based betting tasks (Campbell, Goodie, & Foster, 2004; Lakey, Goodie, & Campbell, 2006), and even pathological gambling (Lakey et al., 2006). Narcissistic individuals also tend to underperform when performance is not public and there is no opportunity for glory (Wallace & Baumeister, 2002). The self-promoting, exciting personality and charm that lead narcissistic individuals to be so successful at initiating relationships are not enough to sustain relationships (which usually demand a level of concern or caring for the other). Thus, over time, people with narcissistic tendencies become less liked (Paulhus, 1998), and their romantic relationships are more likely to fall apart (Foster, Shrirra, & Campbell, 2003). Their violence is even likely to land them in jail (Bushman & Baumeister, 2002). On a similar note, although narcissistic individuals excel at becoming leaders, there is no evidence that they are more effective leaders (Brunell et al., 2006); neither is there evidence that they excel at maintaining celebrity status (Young & Pinsky, 2006). An additional cost of narcissism is a hypothesized addiction to the rush of self-enhancement (Baumeister & Vohs, 2001).

Consequences for Others

The costs of narcissism for others and for society have garnered some empirical verification. Coworkers of narcissistic individuals, for example, receive an undeservedly small portion of any group success and an overly large portion of the blame for failure (Campbell et al., 2000). Narcissistic individuals' self-enhancing attributional style is often linked with anger and aggression to-

ward anyone who criticizes them (Bushman & Baumeister, 2002; Rhodewalt & Morf, 1996). Indeed, this aggression can even extend to persons associated with the criticizer (Gaertner & Iuzzini, 2005). Other threats, such as social rejection and autonomy restriction, also lead to violence on the part of people with narcissistic tendencies (Bushman, Bonacci, Van Dijk, & Baumeister, 2003; Twenge & Campbell, 2003). Narcissistic individuals' ability to rapidly extract resources also has significant consequences for the common good, notably, rapid destruction (Campbell, Bush, et al., 2006). Finally, there is a range of negative consequences reported by people who enter relationships with narcissistic individuals. These consequences can range from mild annoyance with the narcissistic person to deeply troubled romantic relationships filled with infidelity, game playing, manipulation, and control (Campbell, Brunell, & Finkel, 2006). In organizational settings, there is evidence that narcissistic individuals are more likely to be corrupt leaders (Blickle, Schlegel, Fassbender, & Klein, 2006).

Summary

Consistent with the metaphor of a trap, the benefits of narcissism to the self are plentiful, affective–emotional, and generally immediate. The costs of narcissism are generally apparent in the longer term, not affective–emotional, and borne by others or society. This is consistent with narcissism as a social trap.

Conclusions: What Are the Benefits of a Quiet Ego?

In this chapter, we have answered the question of why the demands of egotism—the noisy ego, so to speak—continue to be heard. The answer, at least as it applies to narcissism, is that the benefits of a noisy ego are immediate and affective and the costs occur in the longer term and are often paid by others. Thus, egotism shares similar patterns of reinforcement with chocolate and nicotine (i.e., good and rush-producing in the short term, bad in the long term) and driving sport–utility vehicles (i.e., good for the individual, bad for the commons). A quieter ego, in comparison, has all the initial attraction of tofu and a Toyota Prius. Who wouldn't rather be driving down the highway, cigar clamped firmly in one's jaw, behind the wheel of a "competition yellow" Hummer?

Lost in the siren call of the noisy ego, however, are the fainter and perhaps more durable benefits of the quiet ego. Many of these payoffs are the flip side of the costs of narcissism. For the self, the quiet ego brings accurate self-perception, less irrational risk taking, and a willingness to take responsibility for mistakes and correct them. Although this might not feel as good in the short run, in the long run this approach leads to higher levels of functioning. The quiet ego has some very significant interpersonal benefits as well, including more stable and resilient interpersonal relationships. Finally, the quiet ego is clearly a boon for others. A quiet ego means less aggression, less manipulation, less dishonesty and infidelity, less resource destruction, and less destructive competitiveness. Beyond simply avoiding the traps of narcissism, quieting the

ego has three other potential benefits. First, quieting the ego might be a difficult task in the short run—one that demands both self-control and compassion. In the longer run, however, it is easier to operate one's life from the perspective of a quiet ego. Chasing attention, fame, and status takes a tremendous amount of resources, and it is a pursuit that never ends. Second, the noisy ego demands cognitive attention. An individual might be enraptured by him- or herself, but this self-absorption prevents that person from seeing others as more than actors in the individual's play. In contrast, the quiet ego might allow for a more direct experience of the world. Recent research on wisdom in older age, for example, has found that self-transcendence is negatively related to narcissism (Levenson, 2006). Third, at a societal level, quiet egos can exist as equals; in contrast, noisy egos perform best in the company of weaker others. In Prisoner's Dilemma (Axelrod, 1980) terminology, a community of quiet egos can more easily make the cooperative rather than the defect choice (e.g., compete). In contrast, the noisy ego will do better when making the defect choice within a community of submissive individuals. To some extent both approaches benefit the individuals who use them, but the former seems to us more human.

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