

Narcissism as Addiction to Esteem

Roy F. Baumeister and Kathleen D. Vohs

*Department of Psychology
Case Western Reserve University*

Morf and Rhodewalt (this issue) provide a masterful summary of the research literature on narcissism. In their view, narcissists are highly motivated to gain the admiration of others, and their attempts to fulfill this motivation are ultimately costly and self-defeating because they ruin the relationships on which they seemingly rely for the admiration they seek.

Our comment is intended to carry this analysis one step further. Narcissism can be considered a pattern of addiction. That is, narcissism may not be a lifelong personality trait in the usual sense but rather a pattern of yielding to inner urges in a way that proves costly and self-destructive—not unlike other, more familiar addictions. As a result, a narcissist's life may be characterized not by a stable sense of inflated self-regard, but rather by periods of relative normality punctuated by phases of self-aggrandizing inflation, possibly leading to destructive consequences that may occasionally cause the person to revert to a more normal, balanced view of self.

To be sure, an addiction analogy may seem directly contrary to Morf and Rhodewalt's depiction of narcissistic self-regulation, because addiction is often understood precisely as a failure of self-regulation. Yet the contradiction may be more apparent than real. Addicts do indeed often fail because they indulge their appetites to destructive extremes, but along the way, they may exhibit considerable and effective self-regulation as they manage their activities and affairs toward the goal of satisfying their addictive cravings. Indeed, maintaining a certain level of heroin or alcohol in the bloodstream can be regarded as itself a form of self-regulation—and one that has much in parallel with maintaining a steady inflow of social admiration.

Narcissism as Addiction: Resemblances

We understand addiction in the following way (e.g., Peele, 1989). The person makes the acquaintance of something that offers intense satisfaction or pleasure. As a result, craving for such satisfactions becomes strong. Eventually it can come to dominate other motivations and reduce rational behavior. If the drug is not provided, severe distress ensues, known as withdrawal. Repeated administrations of the same dose however yield diminishing levels of satisfaction, a pattern known as tolerance, and so the person may seek ever-greater dosages.

Cravings, withdrawal, and tolerance are thus the hallmarks of addiction. To understand narcissism as an addiction to the admiration of others, it is therefore useful to consider those three hallmarks.

Cravings

Cravings for approval from the other people may be a relatively common psychological trait, and indeed the desire to be well regarded by others appears universal. Narcissists seem especially susceptible to these cravings, as Morf and Rhodewalt's (this issue) analysis emphasizes. In a sense, narcissists simply yield to the same cravings that other people have, just as alcohol or drug addicts yield to the desires for physical pleasure that most people have. The greater tendency to yield may well have to do with some predisposition, such as if these pleasures are more satisfying to potential addicts than to other people, or if alternative satisfactions are weaker.

Indeed, it seems likely that the widespread dislike of narcissists is tinged with disapproval, which is again similar to how people regard addicts. That is, the narcissists indulge themselves in ways that most people might like to do (such as in thinking themselves superior to others), and so the majority of people who resist such impulses disapprove of the narcissistic indulgence in them.

The focus on impulses and cravings brings up the question of to what, precisely, is the narcissist addicted? Morf and Rhodewalt present some evidence that the focus of the addiction is on the grand view of self, not on the receipt of approval from others. The admiration of others is simply a means to create the desired satisfaction, not the end in itself. Consistent with that emphasis, the cognitive distortions that narcissists use to inflate their views of self indicate that the input from other people can be bypassed to some extent. These cognitive distortions enable the narcissists to regard themselves as superior beings even without receiving explicit confirmation from others, and so they bring satisfaction in an intrapsychic rather than an interpersonal route. Then again, the distortions may also entail believing (somewhat falsely) that others accept the narcissist's superiority. Ultimately the belief in the superior self, and the perception of admiration by others, may be close to indistinguishable—even if both are based on distorted perceptions.

This independence of feedback suggests a fundamental difference between narcissism and high self-esteem. Self-esteem is a concept of oneself and is thus, ultimately, a cognition. Narcissism may at best be more of a motivation than a cognition: It reflects the desire to think well of oneself as much as, or more than, the thought itself. As we have said, the desire to think well of oneself seems rather universal, and so it alone cannot define narcissism. However, narcissists pursue and indulge that universal desire to an exceptional degree. Modesty, prudence, realism, and consideration for others hold most people back from indulging their wish to regard themselves as superior beings, but narcissists may be less restrained.

Thus cravings to feel superior, and the indulgence of those cravings, may be the defining feature of narcissism. This is consistent with the addiction analogy.

Tolerance

Tolerance is also evident in narcissism. Narcissists seem to be constantly on the lookout for new and greater triumphs that bring them greater glory. They do not seem long content with a given level of admiration. Ultimately this pattern is likely to be responsible for the instability of self-esteem among narcissists, as shown by Rhodewalt, Madrian, and Cheney (1998). Narcissists yield to the temptation to raise their self-appraisal at every opportunity, until perhaps it becomes untenably high, whereupon it may crash to earth and cause the narcissist to hold a more realistic, balanced self-appraisal for some time. Then the process gradually begins again. Whether this takes a period of days or months (or both, with differing degrees of fluctuation) is not clear.

Withdrawal

Last, withdrawal is readily apparent. Narcissists seem quite reluctant to give up their favorable views of self and the admiration from others that sustains those views. When narcissists receive something other than the admiration they crave—indifference, criticism, disrespect—they exhibit considerable distress. They turn hostile and aggressive (e.g., Bushman & Baumeister, 1998), not unlike other addicts who have been denied their fix.

Trait Narcissism—or Narcissistic Phases and Cycles?

The previous section alluded to the dynamic processes of tolerance and withdrawal. These concepts present an intriguing challenge to the view of narcissism as simply another personality trait. Traits are generally defined and understood as stable properties. If narcissism resembles an addiction, however, then it may wax and wane more than other traits, especially over long periods of time. Narcissism may come and go in phases and cycles, and indeed one might predict that retest reliability scores for narcissism across a meaningful interval (such as a year) may be lower than for other, more stable traits.

Why does a person's level of narcissism change? The craving to think well of oneself may be constant, but one's degree of indulging that craving may change substantially. A budding narcissist may be encouraged by success experiences to begin to think individually as superior to others. After all, most people experience periods in life in which they see themselves advancing rapidly in social status or flourishing in work and social life. Narcissists may be more inclined than nonnarcissists to see these periods of success as proof that they are indeed as wonderful as they had hoped. They may readily embrace the positive view of self-implied by these successes and incorporate it into their understanding of self and world.

The tolerance pattern of addiction comes into play at this point. The same level of success may lose its charm for the narcissist faster than for nonnarcissists, because the narcissist is so eager to accept the increase in self-esteem as being the proper status quo. As soon as one adapts to the status quo, it ceases to satisfy, and the narcissist may begin looking for further doses of admiration to boost the narcissist's self-appraisal that much more.

The steady raising of self-esteem cannot however continue indefinitely. At first, self-esteem may rise as social feedback encourages people to recognize good traits that they actually have. Once those valid claims on self-esteem are exhausted, however, the narcissist resorts to claims that are more dubious. Indeed, the very concept of tolerance implies that the narcissist is not satisfied by simply recognizing all the narcissist's legitimate virtues and talents—on the contrary, recognizing them simply whets the addictive appetite to discover and enjoy more facets of the self's ostensible wonderfulness. Then the narcissist begins to augment the realistically positive self-views with unrealistically positive ones.

At some point, however, reality is likely to intrude and quash the escalating fantasies of personal greatness. The crash is likely to be preceded by a period in which the narcissist's overall self-estimation is unrealistically inflated. These unrealistic views of self create a serious vulnerability, because objective feedback cannot (by definition) continue to confirm a false opinion. Narcissists may postpone the day of reckoning by manipulating their environment to dodge the truth and obtain only the feedback they like. Strategies such as self-handicapping, for example, may help them dis-

credit information that might otherwise reveal them less wonderful than they want to believe. Still, such strategies are unlikely to succeed forever, and at some point, the narcissist may be forced to revise the narcissist's self-concept in a downward direction.

The newly humbled narcissist may then go through a stage in which the narcissist's view of self is not very different from anyone else's. However, once that has settled, the craving for esteem makes the narcissist receptive to admiration and positive feedback, and the cycle may begin again.

Feeding the Addiction

Addictions drive behavior and, accordingly, our view of the narcissist being addicted to admiration and respect from others forms the framework within which to examine patterns of narcissistic behaviors. From an addictive perspective, narcissists see others as a source or supply of admiration. As with other addictions, there are good and bad sources. At first, narcissists may pursue the best sources—admiration from desirable others, such as people higher in social status who have highly valued characteristics (Campbell, 1999). Indeed, narcissists are especially attuned to social hierarchies in that they are most likely to behave poorly toward people they consider beneath them but can be quite ingratiating toward people they consider to be high in social status.

If a narcissist successfully gains admiration from a highstatus person, there is a shortlived relationship within which the narcissist extracts from the relationship partner as much admiration as possible. Eventually, however, the narcissist exhausts this relationship (for a more detailed explanation, see the following) and moves on to another source. If the narcissist's initial attempts to gain admiration from a highstatus person fail, the narcissist searches for respect and admiration elsewhere. Thus, regardless of whether the narcissist is able to satisfy the narcissist's craving for admiration from a highstatus other or whether such attempts fail, the narcissist may be forced to move down the (perceived) social hierarchy in the hopes of securing a new source of admiration.

Within a social network of people, narcissists' constant demand for admiration eventually leads to a downward spiral, such that narcissists is less able to gain admiration as they descend the (perceived) social hierarchy. Narcissists' ingratiating behaviors toward highstatus people, coupled with their rude, arrogant, and insulting behaviors toward others (e.g., Buss & Chiodo, 1991) eventuates in their destroying most opportunities for forming good relationships with people lower in social status. There is evidence that people readily perceive patterns of ingratiation and rudeness in accordance with social hierarchies and, furthermore,

those who engage in these behavioral patterns are judged quite negatively (see Vonk, 1998).

After having exhausted a given social network, the narcissist may come to see the error of the narcissist's ways. This state may be akin to the anecdotal stories of alcoholics who, late into their addiction, become so desperate for a drink that they succumb to gulping down the cooking sherry under the sink. For narcissists, being rebuffed by superiors, followed by unsuccessful attempts to secure admiration from lowerstatus others, may signal that the narcissist has reached "rock bottom," the time at which the narcissist recognizes the narcissist's deep investment in the addiction. Hence, this may be the time when narcissists see themselves in a (relatively) objective light and put a temporary end to their narcissistic patterns. However, we do not believe that coming to see themselves in a more realistic manner indicates the end of the narcissistic addiction. More likely, the cravings may lie dormant for some time, as the narcissist goes about pursuing success in a normal, seemingly humble manner. Once new successes are found, however, the cycle may begin again.

Relationship Dissolution from an Addiction Framework

When the narcissist is successful in gaining approval from another, the narcissist's behavior may often bring a quick end to these newly established interpersonal ties. Two reasons related to addictive processes may help explain the relationship's demise. The first reason for relationship dissolution is that the narcissist engages in what might be called *narcissistic myopia*, a state similar to alcohol myopia. *Alcohol myopia* (Steele & Josephs, 1990) refers to a state in which only the most salient cues are processed due to decreased cognitive capacity. Because of decreased cognitive processing, contextual cues are neglected and complex deliberations are severely impaired. Given that complex processing demands are present in most social situations, it is not surprising that alcohol myopia has been shown to impair appropriate interpersonal judgments (e.g., Herzog, 1999). However, alcohol myopia leaves automatic processes intact, indicating that available and accessible cognitions or goals are still operating.

By analogy, narcissistic myopia is a state in which any interpersonal skills possessed by the narcissist are disabled while concurrently creating heightened desire for admiration. This combination could be fatal to an evolving relationship. Because narcissists have shortlived relationships, they are likely to be constantly involved in various stages of relationship establishment. A state of narcissistic myopia supports research showing that narcissists are inept at perspective taking and instead engage in what Westen (1990)

called a *dyadic monologue*—in which the appearance of interaction conceals what is more properly described as a process centered on the narcissist, with the other person as a prop. Given that the self and the goal of satisfying admiration needs are ever present in the narcissist's mind, a state of myopia leads a narcissist to be more self-aggrandizing and self-involved than usual.

Indeed, the attitude of the narcissist toward the relationship partner is reminiscent of some attitudes that addicts have. The satisfaction of the high is the focus of the craving, and drug addicts may show a seemingly paradoxical disregard for their own bodies through which they ingest the substance they crave. This brings us to the second reason for narcissist's relationship dissolution, depleting the supply.

The second reason for relationship failure is that narcissists deplete the supply or source of admiration, which results in renewed attempts to gain a new source. Because that source is usually another person, this process quickly leads to relationship problems. Narcissists get what they need from others—admiration—and then they tire of their partners when self-esteem benefits are no longer forthcoming (as Morf & Rhodewalt explain). At this point, the narcissist is ready to move on to the next source. There is evidence that narcissists are actively searching for new sources even when involved in a relationship, as evidenced by narcissists' perceptions of numerous attractive alternatives and their flirtatious behavior toward attractive others even while they are currently involved in a romantic relationship (Campbell & Foster, 2000).

Many partners are likely to become increasingly irritated and fed up with narcissists for these same reasons, and such responses are hard on a relationship. If the partner's irritation causes an interruption in the partner's steady supply of admiration to the narcissist—a likely result—then the narcissist is that much more hungry for new sources of admiration. As a result, both the narcissist and the partner may act in ways that result in the narcissist moving on to a new admiring partner.

Concluding Remarks

Morf and Rhodewalt note that narcissism fascinates many readers, both laypersons and psychologists. Morf and Rhodewalt attribute the fascination to the simple fact that narcissists have infantile characteristics that other people leave behind in development, but simply being infantile is not by itself enough to produce such fascination. (Other infantile characteristics, such as wearing diapers or being unable to tell time, exert no such fascination.) More likely, the fascination may well be that narcissists indulge the cravings that most people have. We think people are generally fascinated by others who do things that the people themselves desire but do not indulge (either because of lack of opportunity or inner restraint). Sex, fame, money, power, and violence are perennial sources of fascination

because people are curious to watch someone indulge the impulses that they themselves feel but cannot fully satisfy. Egotism may be another case.

The fleeting nature of satisfaction for narcissists is probably a reflection of the tolerance pattern. They can get positive affirmations of their self-worth from others now and then, but they do not remain satisfied with them. Like addicts, they want ever new and preferably greater dosages. The narcissistic project becomes one of “potentially endless labor” as Morf and Rhodewalt describe it—a term that certainly invokes the Sisyphian cycle of addiction. No satisfaction is permanent.

The ephemerality of satisfaction is however not entirely consistent with a goal framework, as described by Morf and Rhodewalt. A goal presumes an end state that could be reached and leads to lasting satisfaction. If the narcissist could realize a certain level of attainment along with clear acknowledgement of that attainment by the social environment, that is enough and produce lasting satisfaction, according to a simple goal model. In contrast, the addiction model suggests that narcissists do not remain long satisfied there either, because tolerance quickly develops and the narcissist longs for new and greater glories. This may be more a difference of framing than a genuine difference between our analysis and what Morf and Rhodewalt said.

The addiction view may prove a useful extension of Morf and Rhodewalt's analysis. Like drug addicts, narcissists crave a pleasure that others may also recognize but regard with some disapproval (and probably with good reason, given the antisocial consequences). The craving for esteem may lead to a cycle of escalating tolerance and occasional, bitter withdrawal. The instability of narcissists' self-esteem and relationships could be understood as resulting from these cycles.

Note

Roy F. Baumeister, Department of Psychology, Case Western Reserve University, 10900 Euclid Avenue, Cleveland, OH 44106–7123. E-mail: rfb2@po.cwru.edu

References

- Bushman, B. J., & Baumeister, R. F. (1998). Threatened egotism, narcissism, self-esteem, and direct and displaced aggression: Does self-love or self-hate lead to violence? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 75*, 219–229.
- Buss, D. M., & Chiodo, L. M. (1991). Narcissistic acts in everyday life. *Journal of Personality, 59*, 179–215.
- Campbell, W. K. (1999). Narcissism and romantic attraction. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 77*, 1254–1270.
- Campbell, W. K., & Foster, C. A. (2000). *Narcissism and commitment in romantic relationships: An investment model analysis*. Unpublished manuscript, University of Georgia.
- Herzog, T. A. (1999). Effects of alcohol intoxication on social inferences. *Experimental and Clinical Psychopharmacology, 7*, 448–453.
- Peele, S. (1989). *The diseasing of America*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

- Rhodewalt, F., Madrian, J. C., & Cheney, S. (1998). Narcissism, self-knowledge organization, and emotional reactivity: The effects of daily experiences on self-esteem and affect. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *24*, 75–86.
- Steele, C. M. & Josephs, R. A. (1990). Alcohol myopia: Its prized and dangerous effects. *American Psychologist*, *45*, 921–933.

- Vonk, R. (1998). The slime effect: Suspicion and dislike of likeable behavior toward superiors. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *74*, 849–864.
- Westen, D. (1990). The relations among narcissism, egocentrism, self-concept, and self-esteem: Experimental, clinical, and theoretical considerations. *Psychoanalysis and Contemporary Thought*, *13*, 183–239.

Narcissus Meets Sisyphus: Self-Love, Self-Loathing, and the Never-Ending Pursuit of Self-Worth

Ryan P. Brown

*Department of Psychology
The University of Oklahoma*

Jennifer K. Bosson

*Department of Psychology
The University of Oklahoma*

They say that too many cooks spoil the broth, but when it comes to the empirical exploration of narcissism—one of psychology’s oldest and most enigmatic constructs—we disagree. For this reason, we are heartened by Morf and Rhodewalt’s (this issue) contributions to the narcissism literature, as well as by their proposed model of the self-regulatory mechanisms that underlie, promote, and maintain narcissism. Morf and Rhodewalt’s model provides an excellent, basic “recipe” for understanding narcissism. Being cooks ourselves, however, we believe that this recipe is in need of additional ingredients. In this commentary, we first address what we believe may be a promising extension of the intrapersonal side of Morf and Rhodewalt’s model as it relates to the nature of narcissistic self-love and self-loathing. Second, we describe some possible implications of this intrapersonal perspective for interpersonal interactions.

Intrapersonal Issues: Self-Love and Self-Loathing in Narcissists

One aspect of narcissism that we find especially interesting concerns the specific nature of narcissistic self-evaluations. Most accounts of narcissism agree that the narcissist’s self-concept contains two conflicting self-assessments: self-love and self-loathing. How can we account for this puzzling self-evaluative discrepancy? One solution—the one chosen by Morf and Rhodewalt—is to propose that narcissists experience “both high and low self-esteem in *alternation*” (italics added, this issue). In support of this contention, Morf and Rhodewalt cite several studies that demonstrate associations between narcissism and fluctuations in state self-esteem. For example, narcissists exhibit par-

ticularly dramatic increases and decreases in self-esteem in response to success and failure feedback, respectively (e.g., Rhodewalt, Madrian, & Cheney, 1998; Rhodewalt & Morf, 1998; Rhodewalt, Tragakis, & Hunh, 2001). Thus, preliminary evidence supports the alternating self-esteem explanation for the fragility of the narcissistic self.

One might argue, however, that this evidence is more of a restatement of the alternation hypothesis than an actual explanation of why self-esteem instability exists among narcissists. To this point, Morf and Rhodewalt discuss studies that have examined the structure and content of the narcissistic self-concept, with the view that perhaps such structural peculiarities might explain the instability of narcissistic self-esteem. Most studies to date, though, reveal little in terms of self-concept differences between narcissists and nonnarcissists, other than the obvious grandiosity factor. What, then, underlies the inflated ego of the narcissist that could explain the fragility and volatility that research has consistently described?

As a possible answer to this question, we propose that narcissists have both high and low self-esteem simultaneously, but in different forms. Specifically, we suggest that narcissists are high in *explicit* (i.e., self-reported, conscious) self-esteem, but low in *implicit* (i.e., automatic, nonconscious) self-esteem (e.g., Bosson & Swann, 1998). Recent data from our respective labs offer some support for this conceptualization of narcissism. Using people’s preference for their initials as a measure of implicit self-esteem (Bosson, Swann, & Pennebaker, 2000; Kitayama & Karasawa, 1997; Nuttin, 1985), we found that explicit and implicit self-esteem interacted to predict people’s responses to the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Terry, 1988). This interaction was driven, in part, by a