

Narcissistic Responding to Ego Threat: When the Status of the Evaluator Matters

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ABSTRACT Narcissists and nonnarcissists were insulted by high-status and low-status evaluators and were given an opportunity to self-protect with a comparative (evaluator derogation; Experiment 1) and noncomparative (inflated state self-esteem; Experiments 1 and 2) strategy. Narcissists engaged in comparative self-protection indiscriminately (i.e., derogating both low-status and high-status evaluators), whereas nonnarcissists showed some mercy to low-status evaluators. With regard to noncomparative protection, the findings were consistent across studies: Evaluator status interacted with narcissism such that narcissists engaged in noncomparative self-protection more than nonnarcissists when the evaluator was high, but not low, in status. Evaluator status and, more generally, source of feedback are worth serious consideration when untangling the intricacies and flexibility of narcissistic self-protection.

Subclinical narcissism is conceptualized by personality and social psychologists as a self-centered, self-aggrandizing, manipulative, and dominant interpersonal orientation (Emmons, 1987; Paulhus, 1998). Recent forays into narcissistic functioning include narcissistic relationships (Campbell & Foster, 2002; Foster & Campbell, 2005), narcissistic self-esteem (R. P. Brown & Zeigler-Hill, 2004; Sedikides, Rudich, Gregg, Kumashiro, & Rusbult, 2004), and narcissistic responding to ego threat (Konrath, Bushman, & Campbell, 2006; Rhodewalt & Morf, 2005; Stucke, 2003). This last line of investigation has operationalized ego threat in a variety of ways (e.g., negative

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information about one's performance, one's personality, or the quality of one's social interactions), has measured various types of responses (e.g., emotional reactions, evaluations of feedback source, attributions) and has manipulated the order of valenced feedback (i.e., success followed by failure vs. failure followed by success). The present article breaks new ground by focusing on how characteristics of the source of ego threat influence narcissistic responding. In particular, the article is concerned with the social status of the source of feedback.

Narcissism and Ego Threat

Individuals who score high in narcissism (hereafter referred to as "narcissists") report higher self-esteem than those who score low in narcissism (hereafter referred to as "nonnarcissists") (Emmons, 1987; Rhodewalt & Morf, 1995; Sedikides et al., 2004), a pattern that led Baumeister and Vohs (2001) to characterize narcissists as addicted to self-esteem. It is not surprising, then, that narcissists' self-views are also unduly positive (Sedikides & Gregg, 2003, 2008). Compared to nonnarcissists, narcissists overreport their positive behaviors (Gosling, John, Craik, & Robins, 1998), inflate self-ratings of performance (John & Robins, 1994), overestimate their intelligence and physical attractiveness (Gabriel, Critelli, & Ee, 1994), make overly optimistic predictions for final course grades (Farwell & Wohlwend-Lloyd, 1998), and feel unique and special (Emmons, 1984). Such unrealistic positivity sets the stage for contrasts between self-views and objective reality. Narcissists' interpersonal behavior is characterized by ongoing attempts to avoid such contrasts or to deflect their impact when they arise (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001; Rhodewalt & Morf, 2005). Narcissists' overly high self-esteem and positive self-views demand a particularly potent and sensitive system of self-protection (Sedikides, Campbell, Reeder, Elliot, & Gregg, 2002; Sedikides & Gregg, 2001).

Indeed, self-protective efforts feature prominently in narcissists' emotional, cognitive, and behavioral functioning. Unfavorable feedback intensifies narcissists' tendencies toward hostility and antagonism (Rhodewalt & Morf, 1995) and can provoke "narcissistic rage" (Raskin, Novacek, & Hogan, 1991), which is typically directed at the source of ego threat. Behaviorally, narcissistic responding to ego threat ranges from simple source derogation (i.e., evaluating negatively an individual or assessment instrument responsible for

unfavorable feedback; Smalley & Stake, 1996) to direct aggression toward an insulting evaluator (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998) or the source of social rejection (Twenge & Campbell, 2003). In general, narcissists engage in self-protective responses to a greater extent than nonnarcissists. However, recent findings qualify this assertion.

Comparative and Noncomparative Responding to Ego Threat

Recent research has examined two types of self-protective strategies: comparative and noncomparative. The former involves a direct and favorable comparison to another person (e.g., derogating an evaluator or a partner). The latter does not involve comparison to others (e.g., degrading the test on which one has failed, affirming the self by boosting self-esteem).

Narcissists engage in comparative self-protection to a greater degree than nonnarcissists. For example, narcissists rate evaluators more negatively than nonnarcissists in the face of unfavorable performance (Morf & Rhodewalt, 1993; Smalley & Stake, 1996) or interpersonal (Kernis & Sun, 1994) feedback. Also, narcissists are more likely than nonnarcissists to display the self-serving bias (SSB; appropriating credit for success, deflecting blame for failure) when attributional options include blaming another person for failure or usurping credit from this person for success. In contrast, when attributional choices include external factors such as luck or chance, narcissists and nonnarcissists do not differ significantly in their manifestations of the SSB (Campbell, Reeder, Sedikides, & Elliot, 2000). In summary, narcissists are particularly apt to take advantage of comparative situations in which they can protect themselves by asserting directly their superiority over others.

The findings regarding noncomparative self-protection, however, are rather equivocal. Some lines of research have shown that narcissists self-protect more than nonnarcissists. For example, in a study by Kernis and Sun (1994; see also Rhodewalt & Morf, 1995), participants evaluated the diagnosticity of false success or failure feedback. Compared to nonnarcissists, narcissists regarded the feedback as more diagnostic when it was positive and as less diagnostic when it was negative. On the contrary, other lines of research have shown that narcissists and nonnarcissists do not self-protect differentially. For example, in a study by Campbell and colleagues (2000; see also Smalley & Stake, 1996), participants rated the importance of cre-

ativity after having received success or failure feedback on a creativity task. The importance rating constituted a noncomparative self-protection measure. Both narcissists and nonnarcissists assigned more importance to creativity after receiving success than failure feedback.

In summary, narcissists self-protect more than nonnarcissists through direct expressions of superiority over another person (i.e., on comparative measures). Comparative protection is narcissists' preferred and readiest method of self-protection, a finding that dovetails with characterizations of narcissists as hyperdependent upon external validation of their inflated self-concept (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). However, on noncomparative measures narcissists sometimes self-protect more than nonnarcissists; other times they do not. Narcissists are more strategic, seemingly, in their use of such noncomparative protection. The current project focused on noncomparative self-protection in an effort to resolve the current empirical ambiguity. We postulated that narcissists' relative use of noncomparative protection would vary as a function of the intensity of the ego threat to which the narcissist was subjected. Only in the face of an intense threat to the self (e.g., threat from a particularly valued source, threat to a particularly important aspect of the narcissistic self) would narcissists go beyond the preferred comparative method and martial noncomparative protective resources for self-defense. We tested this notion in two studies in which we provided narcissists and nonnarcissists with the opportunity to self-protect noncomparatively. Further, and more important, we examined evaluator status as a critical influence on the intensity with which one experiences an ego threat and, thus, a moderator of narcissistic noncomparative self-protection.

The Role of Source Characteristics in Responses to Ego Threat

Social psychological interpretations of narcissistic reactivity to ego threat have focused either on aspects of the narcissistic self (e.g., unrealistic positive self-views) or the type of self-protective responses that narcissists manifest (e.g., aggression, source derogation). However, the persuasion literature highlights the relevance of the source in understanding responses to a message (Johnson, Maio, & Smith-McLallen, 2005; Visser & Cooper, 2003). We followed this lead and directed empirical attention to the source of ego threat (i.e., the evaluator).

Narcissists may be influenced differently than nonnarcissists by source characteristics. Narcissists are dependent upon external sources of self-relevant information (Campbell & Foster, 2007; Rhodewalt & Morf, 2005; Wallace & Baumeister, 2002). This dependence may translate into a chronic awareness of social stimuli and, in particular, of specific characteristics of the source of self-relevant information. One such characteristic is social status. In our research, we gauged the influence of evaluator social status on narcissistic, relative to nonnarcissistic, responses to feedback.

Social Status

Social status is a function of an individual's relative standing in economic, political, and social hierarchies (Benoit-Smullyan, 1944). That is, a person's social status (hereafter referred to as "status") is determined by wealth, power (i.e., ability to influence others), and prestige.

The influence of status on the social, psychological, and physiological facets of human functioning is remarkable. High-status individuals are more likely to be chosen as mating partners (Ross, 1997), are evaluated more positively for similar behavior (Morrill, Snyderman, & Dawson, 1997), and display fewer depressive symptoms (Zhang et al., 1997) than low-status individuals. Also, high-status children make friends more easily (Shin, 1997), display fewer conduct problems (Tani & Schneider, 1997), and are more successful academically (O'Neil, Welsh, Parke, Wang, & Strand, 1997) than their counterparts. Further, status (i.e., power) increases the experience of positive affect, the sensitivity to rewards, the tendency to regard others as a means to one's end, the tendency for automatic social information processing, and approach-related behavior (Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003). Finally, and important for the current research, information delivered by high-status persons is likely to be particularly persuasive (Petty & Wegener, 1998; Pittam, 1990).

Status and Narcissism

Narcissists value and emphasize social status more than nonnarcissists do. For example, narcissists emphasize status themes in self-reports (Bradlee & Emmons, 1992) and projective tests (such as the

Thematic Apperception Test; Carroll, 1987), fantasize about status and power (Raskin & Novacek, 1991), describe sex in terms of power and dominance (Foster, Shrira, & Campbell, 2006), feel entitled (Campbell, Bonacci, Shelton, Exline, & Bushman, 2004), and believe that they are superior to others on status-related dimensions (i.e., agency; Campbell, Rudich, & Sedikides, 2002).

In addition, narcissists manipulate their social environment in order to increase their relative status. For example, they exhibit the SSB even when working on interdependent-outcome tasks with close others (Campbell et al., 2000), boast and seek public glory (Wallace & Baumeister, 2002), pursue acquisitive (Campbell, Bush, Brunell, & Shelton, 2005) and materialistic (Sedikides, Gregg, Cisek, & Hart, 2007) goals, and look for opportunities to dominate others (Bradlee & Emmons, 1992). Furthermore, narcissists select dating partners who are likely to enhance their status. These partners play their part in this narcissistic plot by showering the narcissist with attention and admiration (Campbell, 1999). Further examples of narcissistic orientation toward status in relationships is that narcissists mate poach (i.e., lure dating partners away from their relationships; Foster et al., 2006), adopt a game-playing (i.e., ludic) rather than commitment approach to love (Campbell, Foster, & Finkel, 2002), and predict their own infidelity in their marriage (Buss & Shackelford, 1997).

In summary, narcissists value status, see themselves as high-status persons, are driven toward the attainment of high status, and seek out the company of high-status others. A sizable body of research has documented that (a) individuals rely, in part, on their self-views when they perceive and process information about others and (b) the more important an attribute is to the self, the more likely individuals will be to seek information about a target on that attribute or will differentiate among targets on that attribute (Balcetis & Dunning, 2005; Sedikides, 2003; Sedikides & Skowronski, 1993). Status is a core self-attribute for narcissists. Thus, it follows that narcissists will differentiate clearly between high-status and low-status persons, will lend particular weight to feedback (particularly insult) from high-status sources, and, thus, will respond differently to feedback from sources of different status. Stated otherwise, narcissistic responding to ego threat will manifest a strategic consideration of source status.

How will such strategy be manifested? We expect for source status to moderate the link between narcissism and comparative self-protection. As noted previously, narcissists favor comparative self-pro-

tection and use such protection indiscriminately in the face of threat (Campbell et al., 2000). Nonnarcissists, on the other hand, are likely to be more strategic in their use of comparative self-protection. Thus, we hypothesize that narcissists will implement this strategy when under threat, regardless of whether the evaluator is high or low in status. Narcissists are highly self-focused and self-centered (Emmons, 1987); for them, self-protection is all that matters, and it will be pursued at any cost and at anyone's expense. However, nonnarcissists will likely show contextual sensitivity, self-protecting comparatively against high-status evaluators but sparing low-status evaluators. Nonnarcissists are other-focused and other-centered; for them, self-protection is a concern, but not one that would be pursued even at the expense of a low-status evaluator.

More important, we expect for source status to moderate the link between narcissism and noncomparative self-protection. Narcissists and nonnarcissists will differ in their responses when confronted by threat from a high-status but not low-status evaluator. Narcissists value status greatly. As such, threat from a high-status evaluator will be particularly impactful and unsettling on them. They will respond by trying to regain self-equanimity or to reestablish their battered self-esteem using all protective methods available. In short, narcissists, more than nonnarcissists, will use noncomparative protection as an additional (to comparative protection) means of self-esteem maintenance when insulted by a high-status but not a low-status evaluator.

Overview

Our research examined (a) the strategies that narcissists (relative to nonnarcissists) use in responding to unfavorable interpersonal feedback, (b) the (sole and interactive) role of evaluator status in this strategic responding, and (c) the specific status dimensions that influence narcissistic responding to feedback.

We conducted two pilot studies and two experiments. Pilot Study 1 identified two groups (married and single persons) who differed in perceived status. Experiment 1 examined comparative (i.e., evaluator ratings) and noncomparative (i.e., state self-esteem) responses to favorable and unfavorable feedback as a function of narcissism and evaluator status. Pilot Study 2 tested the relative contribution of four dimensions (i.e., wealth, power, prestige, and social knowledge) to

perceptions of status. Finally, Experiment 2 focused on noncomparative responses to unfavorable feedback as a function of narcissism and status dimensions. In all pilot studies and experiments, participants were University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill students fulfilling an introductory psychology course option. Thorough debriefing concluded each experimental session.

Hypotheses

As noted previously, we expected source status to moderate the difference between narcissists' and nonnarcissists' protective responses. Specifically, we expected that narcissists would engage in indiscriminate comparative protection, derogating both high- and low-status evaluators who insulted them, whereas nonnarcissists would show mercy on low-status evaluators. On the noncomparative side, we expected narcissists to be source sensitive, engaging in more noncomparative protection than nonnarcissists when insulted by a high-status evaluator but not when insulted by a low-status evaluator.

EXPERIMENT 1

A pilot study established an operational dimension of status. Subsequently, an experiment examined the manner in which narcissists (relative to nonnarcissists) respond to feedback from evaluators of different status. Participants completed a standard measure of narcissism and received unfavorable or favorable feedback from partners whom they believed to be either high or low in status. Next, participants completed measures of comparative and noncomparative self-protection.

Pilot Study 1

The purpose of Pilot Study 1 was to identify a status dimension for subsequent use in Experiment 1. Our starting point was a suggestion by Bossard (1944) that married persons have higher status than single persons. Given recent developments that would appear to cast doubt on Bossard's assertion (e.g., DePaulo & Morris, 2005), we conducted an empirical test by asking 43 participants (27 female, 39 unmarried, $M_{\text{age}} = 20.72$ years) three questions: (a) "Who has more social status, married people or single people?" (b) "Who are more

respected, married people or single people?” and (c) “Who are regarded more highly, married people or single people?” Responses were binary.

The results confirmed Bossard’s (1944) insight. Participants perceived married person, relative to single persons, as (a) higher in social status, $X^2(1, N = 43) = 22.35, p < .001$, (b) more respected, $X^2(1, N = 43) = 35.37, p < .001$, and (c) more highly regarded, $X^2(1, N = 43) = 25.33, p < .001$. Results did not vary by participant gender. Consequently, we included relationship type (married vs. single) as an operationalization of evaluator status.

Method

Participants and Experimental Design

One hundred twenty individuals participated in a three-factor design.¹ One variable, narcissism, was continuous. The other two variables, feedback type (favorable vs. unfavorable) and evaluator status (high vs. low), were dichotomous ($n = 30$ in each of the four cells).

Measures

Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI). The NPI, a 40-item measure of subclinical narcissism (Raskin & Hall, 1979, 1981; Raskin & Terry, 1988), exhibits good internal consistency (in validation sample, $\alpha = .81$; in current sample, $\alpha = .83$). For each item, respondents choose with which of two options they most agree. As an example, for Item 5 respondents must choose between option A (“If I ruled the world, it would be a better place”), indicating high levels of narcissism, and option B (“The idea of ruling the world scares the hell out of me”), indicating low levels of narcissism.

State Self-Esteem Scale (SSES). The 20-item SSES (Heatherton & Polivy, 1991) exhibits high internal consistency (in validation sample, $\alpha = .92$; in current sample, $\alpha = .87$). The scale includes items pertaining to performance, social, and appearance esteem. Respondents use a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*) to express the extent to

1. Demographic information for these participants and for those who completed Pilot Study 2 (below) is unavailable. We sampled participants in these studies from the same undergraduate population from which we sampled participants for the other studies reported in this article. That population is 65% female, 90% Caucasian, and >90% unmarried.

which each item characterizes how they feel about themselves “at that moment.”

Evaluator ratings. Participants rated the evaluator on two 11-point items: (a) “How attractive is your partner?” (1 = *very unattractive*; 11 = *very attractive*) and (b) “How much do you want to work on a task with your partner” (1 = *not at all*; 11 = *very much*). We formed a composite score by averaging responses to the two items ($\alpha = .73$).

Interpersonal Judgment Scale (IJS). We used a modified version of the IJS (Byrne & Nelson, 1965) that assessed, on 7-point scales, participants’ views of (a) their partner’s intelligence (1 = *my partner is extremely below average in intelligence*, 7 = *my partner is extremely above average in intelligence*), (b) their partner’s likeability (1 = *I will dislike my partner very much*, 7 = *I will like my partner very much*), (c) their partner’s appeal as a coworker (1 = *I will dislike working on a task with my partner very much*, 7 = *I will like working on a task with my partner very much*), and (d) their partner’s physical attractiveness (1 = *my partner is extremely below average in physical attractiveness*, 7 = *my partner is extremely above average in physical attractiveness*). We averaged responses to these items to form a composite index of prefeedback evaluator ratings ($\alpha = .74$) and included this index as a covariate in the statistical analysis of evaluator ratings.

Procedure

Participants agreed to take part in a study that examined “the effects of communication on partner interaction.” There was no real partner with whom the participants were to interact; however, the experimenter behaved as if the partner were in a separate room. A manipulation check established that all participants accepted the cover story as valid. (Note that we will use the terms “evaluator” and “partner” interchangeably.)

First, participants completed the NPI. Next, the experimenter explained that each participant, after working on individual tasks, would complete a joint task with the research participant (i.e., partner) who was waiting in an adjacent room. The participant and the partner would be videotaped, and each would have access to the other’s videotape. Indeed, all participants were videotaped giving information about themselves. Specifically, participants stated their name, hometown, academic year, and academic major (if applicable). Also, they reported in a brief interview the number of hours per week they studied, extracurricular activities in which they were involved, hobbies or interests they had, and whether or not they were in a dating relationship.

Following this interview, the experimenter carried the videotape out of the room as if to give it to the partner and also to fetch the partner's videotape. After a brief delay, the experimenter returned with the partner's videotape. The person on the videotape, whom participants believed to be their partner, was actually a confederate. Half of the participants viewed a confederate who said that she or he was recently married (*high-status condition*). The other half of participants viewed a confederate who stated that she or he was not in a relationship (*low-status condition*). Female participants viewed male participants and vice versa.

After viewing the videotape, participants completed the IJS about their partner. Subsequently, the experimenter stated that each participant would have access to the IJS that their partner completed about them. Indeed, the experimenter left the room with the IJS that the participant had just completed about their partner under the pretext to give the IJS to the partner and to retrieve the partner's IJS about the participant. After a brief delay, the experimenter returned with an IJS ostensibly completed by the partner.

Half of the participants received an IJS that included positive ratings. This evaluation consisted of an "above average" rating on intelligence, an indication that the partner would like the participant "very much," an indication that the partner would "enjoy working on a task" with the participant, and an "above average" rating on attractiveness. The other half of participants received an IJS that included negative ratings. This evaluation consisted of a "slightly below average" rating on intelligence, an indication that the partner would "dislike very much" the participant, an indication that the partner would "dislike working on a task" with the participant, and a "slightly below average" rating on attractiveness. Following feedback, participants completed evaluator ratings and the SSES.

Results

Noncomparative Self-Protection

We operationalized noncomparative self-protection in terms of participants' level of state self-esteem following feedback. We subjected SSES to a statistical model that included (a) the main effects of evaluator status, feedback type, and NPI ($M = 15.64$, $SD = 6.81$) and (b) interactions among these variables. We standardized NPI and SSES. Higher state self-esteem following unfavorable, as opposed to favorable, feedback would be evidence of self-protection (J. D. Brown, Collins, & Schmidt, 1988; Campbell et al., 2000). Our hypothesis anticipated a three-way interaction such that narcissists (hypothetical individuals 1 SD above the NPI mean), but not non-

narcissists (hypothetical individuals 1 *SD* below the NPI mean), would report higher SSES after unfavorable than favorable feedback, especially when the feedback came from a high-status evaluator. We also conducted, for narcissists and nonnarcissists, planned simple slope comparisons between favorable and unfavorable feedback conditions at each level of evaluator status. These planned comparisons assess directly the extent to which narcissists and nonnarcissists in each experimental condition engaged in self-protection. We conducted these analyses independently of the significance of higher order interactions.

The overall model predicting SSES from feedback type, evaluator status, standardized NPI (narcissism), and interactions among variables was significant, $F(7, 112) = 2.91, p = .008, \eta^2 = .15$. Participants reported more positive state self-esteem after unfavorable ($M = 104.93, SD = 16.23$) than favorable ($M = 95.80, SD = 17.32$) feedback, $F(1, 112) = 9.11, p = .003, \eta^2 = .08$. Narcissism was also positively associated with state self-esteem, $F(1, 112) = 5.90, p = .017, r(118) = .23, p = .01$. More important, these main effects were qualified by the predicted triple interaction among narcissism, feedback type, and evaluator status, $F(1, 112) = 3.62, p = .06, \eta^2 = .03$. We decomposed this three-way interaction by examining the Narcissism \times Feedback Type interaction separately for each level of evaluator status.

In the low-status evaluator condition, the Narcissism \times Feedback Type interaction was not significant, $F(1, 56) = 0.46, p = .50$. In this condition, only the main effects of narcissism, $F(1, 56) = 5.43, r(58) = .29, p = .02, \eta^2 = .09$, and feedback type, $F(1, 56) = 4.84, p = .03, \eta^2 = .08$, reached significance. High narcissism and unfavorable feedback were associated with higher state self-esteem. Planned simple slope comparisons revealed that neither narcissists' self-protection, $F(1, 56) = 1.19, p = .28$, nor nonnarcissists' self-protection, $F(1, 56) = 3.64, p = .06$, reached statistical significance (see Table 1 for predicted values).

In contrast, in the high-status evaluator condition, the interaction between narcissism and feedback type was significant, $F(1, 56) = 4.01, p = .05, \eta^2 = .07$. Simple slope analysis revealed that narcissists reported higher state self-esteem after unfavorable, rather than favorable, feedback, $F(1, 56) = 7.53, p = .008, \eta^2 = .12$ (see Table 1 for predicted values). The state self-esteem of nonnarcissists in the high-status evaluator condition did not fluctuate significantly

Table 1
Experiment 1: Predicted Values for State Self-Esteem and Evaluator Ratings as a Function of Narcissism, Feedback Valence, and Evaluator Status

| | High Status | | Low Status | |
|-------------------|-------------|-------------|------------|-------------|
| | Favorable | Unfavorable | Favorable | Unfavorable |
| State self-esteem | | | | |
| Narcissists | 93.02 | 111.22 | 102.18 | 108.21 |
| Nonnarcissists | 96.80 | 97.46 | 89.42 | 101.20 |
| Evaluator ratings | | | | |
| Narcissists | 7.88 | 5.19 | 8.14 | 4.95 |
| Nonnarcissists | 8.22 | 4.58 | 7.69 | 6.21 |

Note. “Narcissists” refers to hypothetical individuals scoring 1 *SD* above the mean of the NPI, and “nonnarcissists” refers to hypothetical individuals 1 *SD* below the mean of the NPI. Predicted values for evaluator ratings control for prefeedback ratings.

as a function of feedback type, $F(1, 56) = .01, p = .91$. In summary, narcissists engaged in noncomparative self-protection as a response to an insult from a high-status evaluator, whereas nonnarcissists did not do so.

Comparative Self-Protection

Comparative self-protection referred to participants' ratings of the evaluator. We subjected postfeedback ratings to the statistical model described previously (Evaluator Status \times Feedback Type \times NPI). We added the IJS composite as a covariate to control for prefeedback evaluator ratings. Relatively low postfeedback ratings following unfavorable, as opposed to favorable, feedback would be taken as evidence of comparative self-protection (Smalley & Stake, 1996). We also conducted, for both narcissists and nonnarcissists, preplanned simple slope comparisons of the difference between favorable and unfavorable feedback conditions at each level of status (Table 1). We predicted that narcissists would provide particularly low postfeedback ratings in the face of an insult by both low-status and high-status evaluators. We expected nonnarcissists to be more strategic in their comparative protection. These hypotheses translate into a three-way interaction.

The overall model predicting postfeedback ratings was marginal, $F(1, 111) = 3.61, p = .06$. Participants gave lower postfeedback ratings after insult ($M = 5.18, SD = 1.83$) than after praise ($M = 8.00, SD = .92$), $F(1, 111) = 13.73, p < .001, \eta^2 = .11$, displaying comparative self-protection overall. This comparative protection was particularly pronounced after feedback from the high-status, rather than low-status, evaluator resulting in a significant Evaluator Status \times Feedback Type interaction, $F(1, 111) = 10.61, p < .001, \eta^2 = .09$. Most importantly, however, both of these effects were qualified by the predicted three-way interaction among narcissism, evaluator status, and feedback type, $F(1, 111) = 7.74, p = .006, \eta^2 = .07$. We explored this finding by examining the Narcissism \times Feedback Type interaction at each level of evaluator status.

In the high-status evaluator condition, the Narcissism \times Feedback Type interaction was not significant, $F(1, 55) = 2.12, p = .15$. The feedback type main effect reached significance, $F(1, 55) = 27.25, p < .001, \eta^2 = .33$, and simple slope analyses revealed that both narcissists and nonnarcissists used comparative protection when insulted by a high-status evaluator, simple slope $ps < .001, \eta^2s = .33$ and $.53$, respectively.

In the low-status evaluator condition, the Narcissism \times Feedback Type interaction was significant, $F(1, 55) = 5.59, p = .02, \eta^2 = .09$. Interestingly, both narcissists and nonnarcissists gave lower postfeedback ratings to the insulting, as compared to the flattering, low-status evaluator (simple slope $ps < .001$ and $.007, \eta^2s = .45$ and $.12$ for narcissists and nonnarcissists, respectively); however, the effect was particularly pronounced for narcissists. Overall then, both narcissists and nonnarcissists engaged in comparative self-protection, but nonnarcissists displayed more protective flexibility.

Discussion

Experiment 1 examined the extent to which narcissists, as compared to nonnarcissists, use noncomparative (i.e., state self-esteem) and comparative (i.e., evaluator ratings) self-protection strategies when confronted by feedback from either a low-status or high-status evaluator. As expected, narcissists' relative use of self-protection strategies was a function of evaluator status. Narcissists were indiscriminate in their use of comparative protection, derogating both high- and low-status evaluators who insulted them. Nonnar-

cissists also derogated both high- and low-status insulting evaluators but were relatively merciful to insulting low-status evaluators. These findings are consistent with narcissists' rigid and nonnarcissists' flexible use of comparative protection, a pattern that has been identified in previous research (Campbell et al., 2000). On the noncomparative side, narcissists, but not nonnarcissists, engaged in noncomparative protection by boosting state self-esteem when insulted by a high-status evaluator. Narcissists' and nonnarcissists' noncomparative protection did not differ in the face of feedback from a low-status evaluator. These findings are in general agreement with predictions and suggest that the variable of evaluator/source status can reconcile previous findings regarding narcissistic noncomparative self-protection. In the face of a moderate threat to the self (e.g., an insult from a low-status source), narcissists rely on their preferred comparative self-protection method to parry the assault; however, when confronted by a potent threat to the self (e.g., an insult from a valued, high-status source), narcissists defend their grandiose self-concept by any and all means available. We carried out Experiment 2 to explore this finding further.

EXPERIMENT 2

The goal of Experiment 2 was to refine and extend the findings of Experiment 1. We focused on noncomparative self-protective responses to unfavorable feedback and investigated the particular component of status that accounts most effectively for Experiment 1 results. We also assessed trait self-esteem and manipulated psychological reactance.

Trait and State Self-Esteem

We assessed trait self-esteem for two primary reasons. First, narcissism is correlated with trait self-esteem (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Campbell et al., 2000; Sedikides et al., 2004). Hence, a portion of Experiment 1's findings may be attributable to the characteristically high trait self-esteem of narcissists. This possibility is a particularly important one to consider, given that trait and state self-esteem are also correlated (Heatherton & Polivy, 1991). We partialled from narcissism variability associated with trait self-esteem.

There was another reason for assessing trait self-esteem. Although unlikely, it is at least possible that the interactive effects of narcissism, evaluator status, and feedback on state self-esteem are attributable to prefeedback differences in self-esteem. Thus, controlling for prefeedback trait self-esteem will increase confidence that differences in postfeedback esteem reflect different protective responses to that feedback rather than preexisting dispositional differences. In Experiment 2, we performed our principal analysis on state self-esteem scores and also partialled from state self-esteem scores variability that was associated with trait self-esteem. Thus, we could determine whether state self-esteem scores after unfavorable feedback were higher (i.e., self-protection), lower, or unchanged relative to prefeedback and dispositional self-esteem.

Psychological Reactance

The results obtained in Experiment 1, especially those involving state self-esteem, resemble the consequences of psychological reactance. Reactance is a state in which an individual works actively to reestablish control or freedom that he or she perceives is under threat (Brehm, 1966). Reactance can result in attitudes that are evaluatively opposed to a persuasive message (Worchel, Insko, Andreoli, & Drachman, 1974; Wright, Wadley, Danner, & Phillips, 1992). Thus, an individual who is told that she or he is regarded negatively may boost self-esteem in a rebellious effort to reassert freedom rather than to protect cherished aspects of the self. Interestingly, narcissists experience reactance more readily than nonnarcissists (Joubert, 1992, 1995), making reactance a particularly important alternative explanation to test. Experiment 2 did so by inducing reactance experimentally. If the findings we label as “self-protective” are actually due to psychological reactance, the reactance manipulation should interact with narcissism (solely or in tandem with a status variable) such that narcissists whose control is challenged by a high status source will display particularly high state self-esteem. Narcissists whose control is not challenged should not respond as such.

Status

Another crucial objective of Experiment 2 was to clarify the variable of social status. Status is a multidimensional construct, one whose

components may contribute uniquely to the observed results. Guided by relevant theorizing, we broke down the components of social status and manipulated them orthogonally. As we elaborate upon below, we focused on four presumed components of social status: power, wealth, prestige, and social knowledge. We wanted to know not only how these status components contribute to feedback responding but also (and mostly) whether narcissists respond differently than nonnarcissists to these components.

Pilot Study 2

Status may reflect high social standing within different domains. Sociological writings (Benoit-Smullyan, 1944; Davis & Moore, 1945; Leik & Nagasawa, 1970) suggest three primary status dimensions: power, wealth, and prestige. The unique contribution of each dimension is, however, unclear (Berger, Cohen, Zelditch, 1972; Davis & Moore, 1945), with power and wealth regarded by some authors as overlapping constructs (Marx & Engels, 1967). Pilot Study 2 assessed the role of power, wealth, and prestige in perceptions of status. It also assessed the role of social knowledge in perceptions of status, an issue that has been debated in the literature (Eagly, Wood, & Chaiken, 1978; Marjoribanks, 1997; Ratty & Snellman, 1997).

Thirty-four participants completed a one-page questionnaire, which included 20 items (6 of which were fillers) assessing perceptions of high-status and low-status persons. Three items assessed power ($\alpha = .80$; e.g., “High status people have more influence on others than do low status people”), three items assessed wealth ($\alpha = .56$; e.g., “High status people are more financially successful than are low status people”), three items assessed prestige ($\alpha = .85$; “High status people are admired more by others than are low status people”), and five items assessed social knowledge ($\alpha = .87$; “High status people are better judges of character than are low status people”). Participants responded to each item on a 9-point scale (1 = *totally disagree*, 9 = *totally agree*).

First, we conducted 14 individual *t* tests, 1 on each of the 14 items, using the scale midpoint (i.e., 5) as the comparison and a Bonferroni-adjusted alpha level of .0036. Next, we created composite scores for the power, wealth, prestige, and social knowledge items and subsequently conducted *t* tests on the composite scores, once again using

the scale midpoint as the comparison. Finally, we subjected the 14 items to principal components analysis with direct oblimin rotation.

Participants reported significant *agreement* with the nine individual items that assessed power, wealth, and prestige (all $ps < .002$) and significant *disagreement* with four of the five items that assessed social knowledge (all $ps < .001$; one item did not reach significance). Tests of the four composite scores were consistent with the individual item tests (all $ps < .001$). Participants agreed that high-status (compared to low-status) persons are higher in power, wealth, and prestige, but not in social knowledge. Finally, the principal components analysis revealed that items assessing power, wealth, and prestige intermixed in two factors, whereas social knowledge items loaded onto a third factor. Participants regarded power, wealth, and prestige as overlapping status components, whereas they did not regard social knowledge as a status component.

Based on these findings and the theoretical overlap between perceptions of power and wealth, we manipulated orthogonally in Experiment 2 the dimensions of power/wealth (hereafter referred to as wealth), social knowledge, and prestige in order to isolate experimentally their relative contribution to the self-protective strategies of narcissists and nonnarcissists.²

Main Experiment

The principal objective of Experiment 2 was to provide narcissists and nonnarcissists with a noncomparative self-protection opportunity when insulted by high-status or low-status evaluators. We manipulated the wealth, prestige, and social knowledge of the evaluator as well as the psychological reactance that participants experienced when receiving feedback. For theoretical purposes, the experiment focused exclusively on noncomparative responses to unfavorable feedback.

2. An additional pilot study revealed that (a) perceptions of power and wealth overlapped highly with one another but were distinct from perceptions of prestige and (b) married and single persons, the levels of Evaluator Status in Experiment 1, were perceived differently on items related to power/wealth, prestige, and social knowledge. These findings contributed to our decision to manipulate the three status dimensions in Experiment 2. Full results of this additional pilot study are available upon request.

Method

Participants and Experimental Design

One hundred sixty individuals (111 women) participated. The experiment used a five-factor design. Narcissism was a continuous variable; wealth (high vs. low), prestige (high vs. low), social knowledge (high vs. low), and reactance (high vs. low) were dichotomous variables ($n = 10$ in each of the 16 cells).

Measures

Narcissistic Personality Inventory. As in Experiment 1, Participants completed the NPI ($\alpha = .84$).

Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES). The 10-items of the RSES (Rosenberg, 1965) assess global feelings of self-worth. Respondents indicate their agreement with each item (e.g., “I feel that I am a person of worth, at least on an equal basis with others”) on a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*). Items were summed ($\alpha = .81$) to create a total self-esteem score.

State Self-Esteem Scale. Participants completed the SSES, as in Experiment 1. Internal consistency for the current sample was high ($\alpha = .91$), so we formed a composite state self-esteem score by summing responses to the 20 items. SSES was correlated with RSES, $r(158) = .42$, $p < .001$.

Interpersonal Judgment Scale. To legitimize the cover story of partner feedback, participants completed the IJS, the same one used in Experiment 1. Additionally, participants responded to an open-ended question expressing their confidence in their ratings of the evaluator: They wrote “a sentence or two indicating how confident you are in the evaluation of your partner.” This task was intended to legitimize the psychological reactance manipulation.

Procedure

Participants were tested individually. The procedure was similar to that of Experiment 1. However, the experimenter told participants that the partner with whom they would complete interdependent tasks later in the session was a graduate student who had been recruited in exchange for a monetary reward. Similar to Experiment 1, there was no partner. The partner was actually a confederate who had been prerecorded responding to questions according to a script. Informal probing by the experimenter

following the session suggested that participants accepted the cover story as valid.

First, all participants completed the NPI and the RSES. Next, participants were videotaped giving general information about themselves and their interests. This interview was identical to that of Experiment 1. Subsequently, the experimenter took the videotape out of the room as if to give it to the partner and also to fetch the partner's videotape. After a brief delay, the experimenter returned with the partner's videotape. Next, the experimenter manipulated the prestige of the partner with a verbal expression of how other people perceived the partner.

Subsequently, the participant viewed the partner on videotape. Female participants viewed male confederates and vice versa. Manipulations of wealth and social knowledge were embedded in the confederates' scripted statements. After viewing a confederate who was either high or low in social knowledge and either high or low in wealth, participants completed the IJS and manipulation checks assessing perceptions of partner wealth, social knowledge, prestige, and status. Next, participants received an IJS ostensibly completed about them by the partner. This IJS included ratings that were identical to the unfavorable feedback in Experiment 1. However, there was an additional statement written at the bottom of each evaluation in order to induce reactance. Finally, participants completed the SSES, which assessed noncomparative self-protection.

Experimental Manipulations

We manipulated perceived evaluator wealth by statements made by the confederate in the videotaped interview. Half of the participants saw a confederate who, when asked about her or his financial status, stated that "I actually do very well financially. I have made some money from investments and other jobs that I've had." This confederate went on to emphasize that she or he uses the extra money to "influence people and their political ideas" (*high wealth*). The remaining half of participants saw a confederate that lamented, "I don't do very well financially. They pay us almost nothing for teaching, and I don't have any other sources of income." This *low wealth* confederate went on to say "not having any extra money keeps me from influencing people and their political ideas."

We manipulated evaluator social knowledge via the confederate's scripted responses on videotape. Half of the participants saw a confederate who claimed to be a clinical psychology graduate student (*high social knowledge*). This confederate emphasized her or his special training in understanding and evaluating people, because "that's what it takes

to be a good therapist.” The remaining half of participants saw a confederate who claimed to be an experimental psychologist (*low social knowledge*). This confederate described the complicated research she or he did on animals including specific procedures used. The confederate made no mention of special training in understanding people.

The experimenter manipulated perceived evaluator prestige by telling the participants how other people regarded the partner. The experimenter told half of the participants that the partner “did not seem to be very well-respected by the people in her/his Department” (*low prestige*). The experimenter told the remaining half of the participants that the partner “seemed to be very well-respected by the people in her/his Department” (*high prestige*).

Finally, we manipulated reactance by a written statement at the bottom of the IJS ostensibly completed by the partner about the participant. Half of the participants read the statement “I’m very confident in my evaluation. I don’t think anyone could disagree with me” (*high reactance*). The other half of participants read the statement, “I’m very confident in my evaluation. But this is just my opinion, others may disagree” (*low reactance*). This reactance manipulation is similar to those used successfully in past research (Brehm, Stires, Sensenig, & Shaban, 1966; Brockner & Elkind, 1985).

Results

First, we assessed the effectiveness of experimental manipulations by subjecting participants’ ratings of (a) their partner’s wealth, (b) their partner’s knowledge of others, (c) other people’s opinions of the partner, and (d) their partner’s social status to a 2 (wealth) \times 2 (prestige) \times 2 (social knowledge) analysis of variance. Next, we formed composite indices of narcissism, trait self-esteem, and state self-esteem. We wanted to investigate the predictive influence of that part of narcissism that was not associated with trait self-esteem, so we regressed narcissism onto trait self-esteem and saved the residuals from that analysis. The residual became the narcissism predictor in the critical analyses (and is, hereafter, referred to as “narcissism”), resulting in five predictors: wealth (coded: $.5 = high$, $-.5 = low$), prestige ($.5 = high$, $-.5 = low$), social knowledge ($.5 = high$, $-.5 = low$), reactance ($.5 = high$, $-.5 = low$), and narcissism. Finally, we tested participants’ use of noncomparative self-protection (i.e., state self-esteem) by subjecting SSES to a Wealth \times Prestige \times Social Knowledge \times Reactance \times Narcissism

model that included sole and interactive effects of each predictor and combination of predictors.³

Manipulation Checks

Wealth. The wealth manipulation was effective. Participants in the high wealth condition rated their partner as more financially successful ($M = 6.15$, $SD = 1.35$) than participants in the low wealth condition ($M = 3.49$, $SD = 1.57$), $F(1, 152) = 139.01$, $p < .001$. This manipulation did not have an effect on any other partner perceptions.

Prestige. The prestige manipulation was effective. Participants in the high prestige condition thought that other people regarded their partner more highly ($M = 6.98$, $SD = 1.29$) than did participants in the low prestige condition ($M = 5.78$, $SD = 1.20$), $F(1, 152) = 36.06$, $p < .001$. This manipulation influenced ratings of the partner's financial success, $F(1, 152) = 9.96$, $p = .002$, and social knowledge, $F(1, 152) = 11.36$, $p = .001$. Participants in the high prestige condition rated their partner as more financially successful and more socially knowledgeable than did participants in the low prestige condition.

Social knowledge. The social knowledge manipulation was also effective. Participants in the high social knowledge condition rated their partner as more knowledgeable of people ($M = 7.08$, $SD = 1.45$) than did participants in the low social knowledge condition ($M = 5.39$, $SD = 1.76$), $F(1, 152) = 46.13$, $p < .001$. The social knowledge manipulation did not affect any other partner perceptions.

Status. As expected, the wealth and prestige manipulations influenced perceptions of status, but the social knowledge manipulation did not. Participants in the high wealth condition ($M = 5.89$, $SD = 1.60$) rated their partners as higher in status than did those in the low wealth condition ($M = 5.38$, $SD = 1.52$), $F(1, 152) = 4.62$, $p = .03$. Participants in the high prestige condition ($M = 6.06$,

3. We also included participant gender as a factor in a separate set of analyses. Participant gender did not exert significant sole or interactive influences on any of the dependent measures, so it is not discussed further. The analyses involving participant gender and the gender distribution within each experimental cell are available from the first author.

$SD = 1.53$) rated their partners higher in status than did those in the low prestige condition ($M = 5.20$, $SD = 1.51$), $F(1, 152) = 13.07$, $p < .001$.⁴

Narcissism

Central tendency and variability indices of NPI were similar to those in Experiment 1 ($M = 14.19$, $SD = 6.65$). In replication of past research, trait self-esteem ($M = 34.03$, $SD = 3.77$) and narcissism were correlated, $r(158) = .29$, $p < .01$.

Noncomparative Self-Protection

We examined SSES as a function of evaluator wealth, prestige, social knowledge, and participant narcissism (i.e., residual from the narcissism on trait self-esteem regression). We expected to replicate Experiment 1 such that a status variable, either wealth or prestige, would interact with narcissism: Narcissists would display particularly high state self-esteem after being insulted by a high-status evaluator.

Narcissism indeed predicted state self-esteem, $B = 18.75$, $\eta^2 = .05$, $p = .01$. The higher the narcissism score, the higher one's state self-esteem. More important, narcissism interacted with evaluator wealth to predict SSES, $F(1, 128) = 4.12$, $p = .045$, $\eta^2 = .03$.⁵ No other

4. In addition to the main effects mentioned, the Wealth \times Knowledge \times Control interaction reached significance for the assessment of (a) how others feel about the target, (b) how knowledgeable of people the person was, and (c) how high in status the person was. The theoretical implications of this three-way interaction are beyond the scope of this article, and the interaction did not affect the critical self-protection measure. Thus, it is not discussed further. A full description of this interaction is available from the first author.

5. The Heatherton and Polivy state-self-esteem scale includes as many as six items that can be considered comparative (e.g., "I feel as smart as others."). To ensure that our results were not unduly affected by such comparative responses, we reran our analyses on a composite state self-esteem score that did not include these items. Though the internal consistency of this reduced state self-esteem measure was questionable (Cronbach's $\alpha < .70$), the pattern of findings was identical to the reported one. Thus, we report only findings for the full, internally consistent and empirically validated scale.

We also carried out analyses using total NPI score (without removing trait self-esteem variance) as a predictor. This analysis revealed a marginal interaction between wealth and narcissism, $F(1, 128) = 2.80$, $p = .096$, that took the same form as the interaction described in the text.

Table 2
Experiment 2: Predicted Values for State Self-Esteem and Residuals
(in Parentheses) as a Function of Participant Narcissism and
Evaluator Wealth

| | Wealth | |
|----------------|---------------|----------------|
| | High | Low |
| Narcissists | 112.77 (8.91) | 105.94 (2.05) |
| Nonnarcissists | 95.20 (-7.75) | 102.05 (-1.76) |

Note. Residuals refer to SSES scores after partialing variability associated with trait self-esteem. Positive values indicate a SSES score that was higher than expected. Negative values indicate a score that was lower than expected.

effects involving narcissism reached significance, and reactance did not predict state self-esteem scores either solely or in interaction with other factors.

To interpret the significant Narcissism \times Wealth interaction, we computed predicted state self-esteem values for hypothetical individuals 1 *SD* above and below the narcissism mean at each level of evaluator wealth. We also partialled from state self-esteem scores variability associated with trait self-esteem (RSES) and computed predicted residual values for narcissists and nonnarcissists at each level of evaluator wealth (Table 2). These residuals indicate whether postfeedback state self-esteem was higher (positive residual) or lower (negative residual) than what prefeedback trait self-esteem would have predicted. Not surprisingly, the analysis of these residuals revealed a significant Narcissism \times Wealth interaction, $F(1,128) = 4.33$, $p = .039$, $\eta^2 = .03$.

More generally, these analyses suggest that insults from high-wealth evaluators had markedly different effects on narcissists and nonnarcissists. Narcissists who were insulted by high-wealth evaluators reported state self-esteem that was (a) higher than what their trait self-esteem scores would have predicted and (b) higher than that reported by narcissists who were insulted by low-wealth evaluators ($p = .15$). On the other hand, nonnarcissists who were insulted by high-wealth evaluators reported state self-esteem that was (a) lower than what their trait self-esteem scores would have predicted and (b) lower than that reported by nonnarcissists who were insulted by low-wealth evaluators ($p = .14$).

Replicating Experiment 1, narcissism was associated with noncomparative self-protection (i.e., inflated state self-esteem). However, this effect was qualified by evaluator status. Narcissists engaged in noncomparative self-protection when insulted by a high-status (i.e., high wealth), but not a low-status, evaluator. Further, and from a slightly different perspective, narcissists engaged in more noncomparative self-protection than nonnarcissists only when insulted by a high-status (i.e., high-wealth) evaluator. Narcissists and nonnarcissists were similar when insulted by low-status evaluators; in this case, neither group engaged in noncomparative protection.

Discussion

Experiment 2 provided additional insight into the ways in which narcissists respond to threatening feedback as a function of evaluator status. Narcissists and nonnarcissists did not differ in their use of noncomparative self-protection in response to insult from a low-wealth evaluator. However, narcissists self-protected more than nonnarcissists when the insulting feedback came from a high-wealth evaluator. That is, narcissists reported higher state self-esteem after being insulted by a high-wealth, rather than low-wealth, evaluator; nonnarcissists, on the other hand, reported lower state self-esteem after insult from a high-wealth, rather than low-wealth, evaluator. Narcissists responded to the high-status evaluator's insult by elevating state self-esteem; nonnarcissists responded by deflating their level of state self-esteem. It is important to note that these results are independent of differences between narcissists and nonnarcissists on chronic self-esteem. Also, the results are consistent with the relevant Experiment 1 findings, namely, that narcissists engage in noncomparative self-protection to a greater extent than nonnarcissists when insulted by a high-status evaluator but do not differ from nonnarcissists when insulted by a low-status evaluator. It is also important to note that level of state self-esteem was not influenced by the degree of reactance that the evaluator evoked. This pattern increases our confidence that the results of Experiment 2 (and likely Experiment 1) are due to efforts to protect the self rather than personal freedom or choice.

The influence of perceptions of wealth for predicting noncomparative responses is intriguing. Such a result is consistent with narcissists' relative awareness of external stimuli, tendency toward

exhibitionism, and emphasis on external status criteria when making interpersonal choices (Campbell, 1999; Sedikides et al., 2002, 2007). As discussed by sociologists, perceptions of wealth and prestige are distinct in that wealth is evidenced by observable possessions (i.e., cars, land, expensive clothes). Wealth is salient to others, and this salience may have important implications for the extent to which identification with an individual can reap self-enhancement benefits. After all, the self-enhancing power of identification depends upon observers' perceptions of the partner's status. Thus, identification with a high-wealth individual can benefit the self to a greater extent than identification with a high-prestige individual. For narcissists, whose interpersonal behavior is motivated by attention seeking, this difference may be critical in determining the value (e.g., opinions, threat potential) of an individual for the self.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

In two experiments, narcissists and nonnarcissists were insulted by high-status and low-status evaluators and were given opportunities to self-protect via a comparative (Experiment 1: evaluator derogation) and a noncomparative (Experiments 1 and 2: inflated state self-esteem) strategy. The comparative self-protection findings were consistent with predictions and with previous research: Narcissists embraced the opportunity to claim superiority over an individual who belittled them and implemented this strategy more actively than nonnarcissists. The noncomparative self-protection findings were consistent across the two experiments, and they point to the importance of source status for understanding narcissists' use of this strategy.

Indeed, narcissists' use of noncomparative self-protection depended on the status of the source who insulted them. When insulted by a high-status source, narcissists were vigorous in their noncomparative self-protection. This was not the case when the insult originated from a low-status source. Narcissists and nonnarcissists were similar in their use (or nonuse, as the case may be) of noncomparative protection.

Overall, then, narcissists are strategic in their noncomparative protective efforts. Insult from the highly valued, respected, high-status source likely necessitated from narcissists, but not from nonnarcissists, an internal rebellion, which manifested itself as inflated

state self-esteem. Somewhat more generally, threat from a high-status source is too intense for narcissists to be able to deflect through the exclusive use of their preferred comparative self-protection strategy. In such cases of intense ego threat, additional and noncomparative self-protective resources must be mobilized.

These findings regarding evaluator social status and our accompanying theoretical interpretation provide a parsimonious reconciliation to past research that documents inconsistency in narcissists' and nonnarcissists' enactment of noncomparative self-protection. For example, Kernis and Sun (1994) operationalized ego threat as negative feedback about social acuity and observed relatively intense noncomparative protection from narcissists. On the other hand, Campbell et al. (2000) operationalized ego threat as negative feedback about one's creativity and found narcissists and nonnarcissists to be similar in their noncomparative protection. By our reasoning, these different findings resulted from the relative intensity of the threat posed by questioning one's social acuity and creativity. Given narcissists' hyperdependence on social validation of their inflated self-concept (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001) and the link between narcissism and self-ratings of extraversion (Campbell et al., 2000), it seems reasonable to expect that negative feedback about social acuity would be experienced as particularly intense and troublesome (as was insult from a high-status source in the current project), whereas negative feedback about creativity would not (in a way that is similar to insult from a low-status source). Such differential threat explains narcissists' relative use of noncomparative protection in each study.

Generalizing a bit more broadly, the current findings also resonate with research reported by (a) Foster and Campbell (2005), in which narcissists resisted doubts about the commitment of romantic partners, and (b) Rhodewalt and Eddings (2002), in which narcissists manifested the "sour grapes" effects by distorting their memories of romantic rejection (e.g., "I never liked her anyway"). Although these researchers did not manipulate status, it is conceivable that romantic partners (especially those who rejected the narcissist) were viewed as particularly high in status, which could account for the noncomparative self-protection manifest in each case.

Future research would do well to investigate the potential benefits of the self-protective mechanisms identified here. It seems that some aspects of narcissistic responding to unfavorable feedback (i.e., the relative neglect of such feedback) afford narcissists a measure of

resiliency when difficult times come (Sedikides & Gregg, 2001). Perhaps a moderate degree of narcissism is not always counterproductive, at least not for the narcissist. Recent investigations of narcissists' relative psychological health certainly hint at this notion: Narcissists are healthier (e.g., less depressed, less anxious, happier) than nonnarcissists, due to their high levels of self-esteem (Sedikides et al., 2004). Relatedly, in the above mentioned study by Foster and Campbell (2005), narcissists who resisted doubts about their partner's commitment were buffered against relationship dysfunction (e.g., reduced commitment, willingness to accept the invitation of a dating alternative, desire to adopt a game-playing love style) that accompanies such doubts. Perhaps a more balanced approach to the functional and dysfunctional components of narcissism would prove profitable in future empirical efforts (Campbell & Foster, 2007).

The specific mechanisms that account for narcissists' differential responses to high- and low-wealth evaluators also warrant further empirical attention. We suggest that these responses are a function of the potency of the threat posed by individuals whom narcissists value (i.e., high-status evaluators) or do not value (i.e., low-status evaluators) as self-enhancement opportunities. As such, direct assessment of threat potency and perception of self-enhancement value would expand on the current work. Of course, direct assessment of narcissists' perception of ego threat has proven to be difficult. As noted by Kernis and Sun (1994), narcissists take great pains to seem indifferent to ego threat, an effort that undercuts the validity of self-report measures of the perception of threat. As such, future work would do well to consider implicit or physiological indices of ego threat, which are less vulnerable to self-presentational manipulation.

Whereas classic characterizations of narcissism have focused primarily on narcissists' grandiose self-views, the interpersonal nature of the narcissistic self-concept is becoming readily apparent via insightful theorizing and informed reconciliation of existing empirical inconsistencies (Campbell, Brunell, & Finkel, 2006; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001; Rhodewalt & Morf, 2005). Narcissism may be driven by a core of superiority, yet that superiority is maintained interpersonally via two processes, identification and derogation. Narcissists use other people to bolster their self-image, either by latching on in an attempt at parasitic enhancement or by emphasizing their relative superiority (and other's inferiority). The current investigation hints

that these processes translate into unique self-protective consequences in the face of ego threat.

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