

## Teaching Current Directions in Psychological Science

C. Nathan DeWall and David G. Myers

Edited by C. Nathan DeWall and David G. Myers

*Aimed at integrating cutting-edge psychological science into the classroom, Teaching Current Directions in Psychological Science offers advice and how-to guidance about teaching a particular area of research or topic in psychological science that has been the focus of an article in the APS journal Current Directions in Psychological Science. Current Directions is a peer-reviewed bimonthly journal featuring reviews by leading experts covering all of scientific psychology and its applications and allowing readers to stay apprised of important developments across subfields beyond their areas of expertise. Its articles are written to be accessible to nonexperts, making them ideally suited for use in the classroom.*

### Is Narcissism Extreme Self-Esteem?

by David G. Myers

**Brummelman, E., Thomaes, S., & Sedikides, C. (2016). Separating narcissism from self-esteem. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 25, 8–13.**

Narcissism is exaggerated, inflated self-esteem. It's "self-esteem on steroids." Yes?

Actually, no, say psychological scientists Eddie Brummelman, Sander Thomaes, and APS Fellow Constantine Sedikides (2016). Narcissism and self-esteem have differing definitions, developmental trajectories, causes, and effects.

#### What Narcissism Is — and Isn't

Like the mythical Narcissus — a vain, self-aggrandizing young man who fell in love with his own reflection — narcissists do not simply feel good about themselves. They do not, like those with high self-esteem, merely view themselves as worthy. They do not solely see themselves as competent. Rather, they feel superior. They crave admiration and adulation. And they seem sure the world would benefit from their ruling it.

To help students grasp this difference, we might invite them to respond to Rosenberg's (1965) Self-Esteem Scale and to Raskin and Terry's (1988) Narcissistic Personality Inventory, both of which can be taken and scored at [personality-testing.info](http://personality-testing.info). Or, to illustrate the flavor of each, invite students first to respond to two prototypical self-esteem scale items:

On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.

\_\_Strongly Agree

Agree

Disagree

Strongly Disagree

At times I think I am no good at all.

Strongly Agree

Agree

Disagree

Strongly Disagree

And then to some narcissism items:

Which of each pair of statements best reflects your personality?

A: I insist upon getting the respect that is due me.

B: I usually get the respect that I deserve.

A:

It makes me uncomfortable to be the center of attention.

B: I really like to be the center of attention.

And some more narcissism items:

Agree or disagree:

1.

People love me. And you know what, I have been very successful.

2.

I'm intelligent. Some people would say I'm very, very, very intelligent.

3.

If I get my name in the paper, if people pay attention, that's what matters.

4.

My fingers are long and beautiful, as ... are various other parts of my body.

(Full disclosure: These last four are not narcissism items, but rather Donald Trump quotes.)

## The Development of Narcissism

By about age 7, children have developed a sense of their self-worth (self-esteem) and also are making the social comparisons that underlie narcissism (e.g., “I am special”). Thereafter, the two traits typically diverge, report Brummelman and colleagues, with self-esteem dipping in adolescence, when narcissism peaks. Then, in adulthood, narcissism usually subsides while self-esteem gradually increases. That narcissism rises when self-esteem falls, and vice versa, confirms that narcissism  $\neq$  strong self-esteem.

## The Nurture of Narcissism

Self-esteem and narcissism are heritable but differently socialized. Brummelman, Thomaes, Nelemans, Orobio de Castro, Overbeek, and Bushman (2015) followed 565 children and their parents across 1.5 years, studying parental behaviors that predicted self-esteem and narcissism. They found that parental overvaluation nurtured narcissism, and parental warmth nurtured self-esteem. Would your students anticipate this finding?

Overvaluing parents regard their child as special and entitled to privileges. They overestimate their child’s intelligence and overpraise his or her performance. Over time, the children of overvaluing parents get the message and regard themselves as superior.

Warm parents express fondness and foster their child’s feeling that he or she matters. These children also get the message, by viewing themselves as worthy but not entitled.

To engage students in rehearsing this distinction, ask them to categorize these four statements as either from a “parental overvaluation scale” (Brummelman, Thomaes, Nelemans, Orobio de Castro, & Bushman, 2015) or a “parental warmth scale”:

1. “My child is more special than other children.” [overvaluation]
2. “I let my child know I love him/her.” [warmth]
3. “I treat my child gently and with kindness.” [warmth]
4. “My child deserves special treatment.” [overvaluation]

Instructors might also ask why some parents are prone to overvaluation. Might it reflect their own narcissism, or perhaps their incorrect belief that overvaluation will support healthy self-esteem?

## The Consequences of Narcissism

Narcissists aim not to get along but to get ahead. They seek not intimate bonds but superiority and status. When given the adulation they crave, they feel good. Often they charm others at first and perform well in public — characteristics that can lead to political success (Watts et al., 2013). But criticize them and “narcissistic rage” may erupt. “I am bad” becomes “you are bad.”

Narcissism also correlates with materialism, inflated expectations, less relationship commitment and more hookups, diminished empathy, less persistence, more gambling, and more dishonesty — all of which have become more prevalent in an era of increasing narcissism, report APS Fellows Jean Twenge and Keith Campbell (2009).

The bottom line: Narcissism matters. And narcissism is not merely super self-esteem.

## References

- Bar-Tal, D., & Halperin, E. (2011). Socio-psychological barriers to conflict resolution. In D. Bar-Tal (Ed.), *Intergroup conflicts and their resolution: A social psychological perspective* (pp. 217–240). Hove, England: Psychology Press.
- Brummelman, E., Thomaes, S., Nelemans, S. A., Orobio de Castro, B., & Bushman, B. J. (2015). My child is God's gift to humanity: Development and validation of the Parental Overvaluation Scale (POS). *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 108*, 665–679.
- Brummelman, E., Thomaes, S., Nelemans, S. A., Orobio de Castro, B., Overbeek, G., & Bushman, B. J. (2015). Origins of narcissism in children. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America, 112*, 3659–3662.
- Gale, C. R., Booth, T., Möttus, R., Kuh, D., & Deary, I. J. (2013). Neuroticism and extraversion in youth predict mental well-being and life satisfaction 40 years later. *Journal of Research in Personality, 47*, 687–697.
- Hodgins, S., Larm, P., Ellenbogen, M., Vitaro, F., & Tremblay, R. E. (2013). Teachers' ratings of childhood behaviours predict adolescent and adult crime among 3016 males and females. *The Canadian Journal of Psychiatry, 58*, 143–150.
- Nadler, A., & Liviatan, I. (2006). Intergroup reconciliation: Effects of adversary's expressions of empathy, responsibility, and recipients' trust. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 32*, 459–470.
- Raskin, R., & Terry, H. (1988). A principal-components analysis of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory and further evidence of its construct validity. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 54*, 890–902.
- Rosenberg, M. (1965). *Society and the adolescent self-image*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Saguy, T., Tausch, N., Dovidio, J. F., & Pratto, F. (2009). The irony of harmony: Intergroup contact can produce false expectations for equality. *Psychological Science, 20*, 114–121.
- Schumann, K., Zaki, J., & Dweck, C. S. (2014). Addressing the empathy deficit: Beliefs about the malleability of empathy predict effortful responses when empathy is challenging. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 107*, 475–493.
- Twenge, J. M., & Campbell, W. K. (2009). *The narcissism epidemic: Living in the age of entitlement*. New York: Free Press.
- Watts, A. L., Lilienfeld, S. O., Smith, S. F., Miller, J. D., Campbell, W. K., Waldman, I. D., ... Faschingbauer, T. J. (2013). The double-edged sword of grandiose narcissism: Implications for successful and unsuccessful leadership among US presidents. *Psychological Science, 24*, 2379–2389.

February 29, 2016