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When the Self Feels Threatened: Devaluation Responses in Vulnerable Narcissism, A Case Study

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Abstract

This case study attempts to examine vulnerable narcissism through an in depth analysis of one adult male participant showing narcissistic traits without a formal clinical diagnosis. Using a blind assessment approach, the participant completed the Self Concept Questionnaire, the Adjustment Inventory, and the Maudsley Personality Inventory, alongside semi structured interviews and behavioral observation, allowing indirect assessment of self concept, adjustment, and neuroticism without revealing the study's focus on narcissism. Psychodynamic and behaviorist frameworks were used to trace the participant's developmental history, including sibling comparison, high parental criticism, restrictive gender norms modeled within the family, and unmet academic aspirations within a competitive Indian secondary education system. Findings revealed a consistent pattern of reflexive devaluation in response to even minor perceived threats, frequently triggered by unprompted comparisons to others' achievements, alongside marked deficits in empathy and pronounced beliefs about entitlement to power and control. Gender based devaluation emerged as a distinct pattern, linked to the participant's family history. These findings are discussed in relation to the broader literature on vulnerable narcissism, which has been comparatively understudied relative to grandiose narcissism, particularly regarding its expression in everyday, low stakes social interactions rather than major relational threats.

INTRODUCTION

Narcissism is commonly described as having two faces. Grandiose narcissism involves overt self-enhancement, entitlement, and dominance, while vulnerable narcissism involves hypersensitivity, insecurity, defensiveness, and a fragile sense of self (Pincus et al., 2009; Miller et al., 2011).

Vulnerable narcissism has been linked to neuroticism, negative temperament, shame, and depressive reactions, which is why it is often interpreted as the more clinically distressed form (Miller et al., 2011; Krizan & Johar, 2012). Despite this, much of the literature on narcissistic reactions to threat has centered on grandiose presentations, where devaluation of others is more openly observable.

Devaluation is well documented as a self-protective response. Dickinson and Pincus (2003) found that grandiose individuals may belittle or devalue others when their self-esteem is threatened, whereas only those high in vulnerability reported significant interpersonal distress. Ogrodniczuk et al. (2009) found that people with more narcissistic features were rated as more domineering and vindictive. Krizan and Johar (2012) further showed that vulnerable narcissism predicts stronger shame responses, whereas grandiose narcissism predicts less shame. Together, these findings suggest that devaluation in vulnerable narcissism may work differently: as a rapid reaction to shame rather than as an expression of confident superiority. This fits with the Pathological Narcissism Inventory, which treats devaluing, contingent self-esteem, and hiding the self as core dimensions of pathological narcissism (Pincus et al., 2009). It also fits with models proposing that vulnerable narcissism involves both a withdrawal strategy that conceals the fragile self and a reactive, antagonistic strategy that reduces shame and inadequacy (Krizan & Herlache, 2018).

However, most of this evidence comes from large, trait-based, self-report samples. Less is known about how devaluation unfolds moment to moment in ordinary social interaction, particularly when the threat is minimal, such as the mere mention of someone else's achievement.

Idiographic, case-level accounts of this process are also scarce, even though such accounts can show how developmental history, self-concept, and everyday triggers combine in one person.

Developmental theory offers a way to interpret such patterns. Adler's concept of the inferiority complex proposes that feelings of inferiority, which can be intensified by sibling comparison and parental criticism, drive compensatory striving for superiority. Psychodynamic perspectives similarly emphasize early caregiving relationships in shaping self-worth, and behaviorist perspectives emphasize how devaluation may be maintained through reinforcement when it produces temporary relief from shame.

The present case study examines one adult male participant who shows pronounced traits consistent with vulnerable narcissism, without a formal clinical diagnosis. Using interviews, behavioral observation, and indirect measures of self-concept, adjustment, and neuroticism, administered blind so that the participant was not aware the study concerned narcissism, it traces his developmental history and documents his responses to social comparison. The primary hypothesis is that perceived status threat increases devaluation of others. A secondary hypothesis is that, in this case, devaluation is stronger toward women than toward men. As a single-case study, it aims to offer a detailed account of the devaluation cycle rather than results that generalize to a wider population.

Method

Participant

The participant was one adult male, recruited through the researcher's personal network. He had no formal diagnosis of narcissistic personality disorder but was selected for study based on informally observed traits consistent with vulnerable narcissism. Written informed consent was obtained, and the participant actively volunteered to take part. To preserve confidentiality, identifying details such as his name, institution, and specific location have been withheld or altered.

Design

This study used a single-case, within-subjects design with a blind procedure, meaning the participant was not informed that the study concerned narcissism specifically. The independent variables were comparison type, with a control condition involving neutral, non-threatening comparisons and a status-threat condition involving mentions of another person's superior achievement, and gender of the comparison target, allowing responses toward male and female targets to be compared. The dependent variables were perceived competence, intelligence, likability, desirability, arrogance, respectability, social distance, devaluation, emotional response, and response latency.

Measures.

Three standardized instruments were administered: the Self Concept Questionnaire, assessing self-perception across physical, social, temperamental, educational, moral, and intellectual domains; an adjustment inventory assessing emotional, social, and educational adjustment; and the Maudsley Personality Inventory, measuring introversion-extraversion and neuroticism. These indirect measures were selected specifically to allow inference about narcissistic vulnerability without administering a narcissism-specific instrument that could reveal the study's purpose.

Semi-structured interviews covering family background, childhood, academic history, and relationships were also conducted, alongside naturalistic observation of spontaneous responses during conversation.

Procedure

Status-threat and control comparisons were introduced naturalistically within conversation across both male and female targets. The participant's responses across all dependent measures were recorded, and developmental history gathered through interview was interpreted using psychodynamic and behaviorist frameworks to contextualize the observed patterns.

RESULTS

Scores on the Self Concept Questionnaire revealed an uneven profile. Academic self-concept was markedly high, while self-concept related to physical appearance was markedly low. Social self-concept was above average, whereas moral and temperamental self-concept were both notably low. This unevenness, rather than uniform inflation or deflation, is consistent with the fragile and contingent self-esteem associated with vulnerable narcissism. Scores on the Maudsley Personality Inventory indicated pronounced neuroticism.

Across all status-threat comparisons introduced during conversation, devaluation of the comparison target occurred consistently, with no observed exceptions. Responses were immediate, occurring within seconds of the threatening mention, and showed no evidence of subsequent regret or reappraisal. A representative example occurred when the participant was told about an acquaintance who had been accepted to study economics at a prestigious university. His initial reaction was disbelief and hostility, followed by an active search for disconfirming information about the acquaintance's credentials. When this search instead revealed further achievements, including international academic representation, the participant dismissed the accomplishments as fraudulent and pivoted to asserting his own comparable or superior achievements in a different domain.

Devaluation directed at female comparison targets was notably more intense than that directed at male targets, frequently accompanied by visible anger rather than dismissiveness alone. This pattern extended to a close personal relationship, in which the participant repeatedly devalued a female partner's academic ability and intelligence despite her demonstrated competence, characterizing her and similarly accomplished individuals as pretentious or undeserving of their achievements. No control-condition comparisons, that is, mentions of others that did not involve a status-relevant achievement, elicited comparable devaluation responses.

DISCUSSION

This case study examined how perceived status threat affects devaluation in a participant showing traits of vulnerable narcissism. Consistent with the primary hypothesis, every status-threatening comparison produced immediate devaluation of the comparison target. Consistent with the secondary hypothesis, devaluation was more intense, and accompanied by visible anger, when the target was a woman.

Devaluation as defense against shame. The pattern fits research showing that vulnerable narcissism is tied to strong shame reactions, whereas grandiose narcissism is not (Krizan & Johar, 2012). The participant's reactions were reflexive and often triggered by a comparison nobody had directed at him. This suggests devaluation served as a rapid way to escape shame, in line with models describing reactive antagonism as a way to reduce feelings of inadequacy (Krizan & Herlache, 2018). His uneven self-concept profile, with very high academic self-concept but low appearance, moral and temperamental self-concept, and high neuroticism, is consistent with a self-worth that depends heavily on one domain (Pincus et al., 2009; Miller et al., 2011). Any threat to that domain would therefore be felt as a threat to the whole self.

Adlerian perspective. Adler (1956) proposed that feelings of inferiority drive compensatory strivings for superiority, and that these are intensified when a child is repeatedly compared unfavorably with others. The participant is the younger sibling of an elder sister who is academically accomplished, and his parents were reportedly critical of him. This is a plausible route to a persistent inferiority complex, with devaluing others working as a compensatory move to restore a sense of superiority. His fantasies of power and control could be read the same way, as an overcompensation for felt weakness. Adler's birth-order claims are not strongly supported by empirical research, so sibling position is best treated here as context for the family comparison rather than a cause.

Comparison processes. Tesser's (1988) self-evaluation maintenance model adds a useful angle. It predicts that people feel most threatened by high performers in domains central to their own identity, especially when those people are close to them. His sister's achievements and his own unmet academic goals make achievement exactly such a domain, which may explain why even a stranger's success triggered a strong reaction.

Psychodynamic perspectives. Freud (1914/1957) saw narcissism as involving a withdrawal of love from others and an inflated investment in the self, and later theorists linked its vulnerable form to early relationships. Kohut (1971) argued that narcissistic vulnerability arises when a child's need for empathic mirroring from caregivers goes unmet. Harsh, comparative criticism from both parents is the kind of environment in which this would occur, leaving him dependent on outside validation. This dependence appears in his constant need for reassurance in relationships and the temporary security he gained from devaluing others. Kernberg (1975) described idealization and devaluation as splitting defenses, and the participant's quick shifts between seeing others as threatening and as worthless are consistent with this.

The maternal and gender dimension. It is a hypothesis, not a finding, that the participant seeks a nurturing, maternal figure in his relationships. Freudian object relations theory would suggest that unmet needs for maternal care can lead a person to look for it in partners while resenting women who cannot or will not provide it. That would give a possible account of the anger directed at accomplished women. The family context may also matter: his mother gave up her career to become a homemaker, and this may have shaped his views of women's roles. From a social learning perspective (Bandura, 1977), he may have absorbed attitudes about gender and achievement through observation, and his devaluation of competent women may have been reinforced whenever it relieved his distress (Skinner, 1953). A Jungian reading would see his intense reactions to successful others as projection of disowned insecurities, the "shadow" (Jung, 1959). These are interpretive readings from a single case, and other explanations are possible.

Limitations

This is a single-case study, so the findings cannot be generalised. Diagnostic status was not established with a narcissism-specific instrument, and the indirect measures used (self-concept, adjustment, neuroticism) do not measure narcissism directly. Observations and interviews were conducted by one researcher, which raises the possibility of observer bias, and claims about guilt and empathy rest on the participant's self-report. The developmental and

psychodynamic interpretations are inferences and were not tested. Future research should include validated narcissism measures such as the Pathological Narcissism Inventory, multiple raters, and larger samples to test whether status threat reliably increases devaluation in vulnerable narcissism, and whether this differs by target gender.

CONCLUSION

We cannot draw any definitive conclusions from this case study, as it is based on a single individual. This study is limited to one person, and I have conducted it by observing their specific traits as it is important to note that this is not intended to generalize about anyone every individual is unique, and this study does not aim to portray anyone in a particular light.

Furthermore, this is my first case study, and as such, it cannot offer broad insights or conclusive findings because the study was entirely observation-based, there is a limit to what can be concluded from it. The patterns identified were already established based on these established patterns specifically regarding the individual's threat responses, childhood experiences, and relationships with others I have drawn certain conclusions. I hold my participant in high regard, and it is important to note that they are not at fault for these behaviors. Every individual's feelings are valid often, we find ourselves unable to control our own responses because these behaviors have been learned over the course of many years. No person is inherently "bad." In psychology, we frequently explore the concept of "dialecticism" the idea that things are not simply "right" or "wrong." This case study was merely a modest attempt to gain insight into the mind of a "vulnerable narcissist." I do not intend to apply a formal clinical diagnosis, as these patterns are quite broad, and my perspective was strictly that of a researcher. I did not have a comprehensive view of this individual's life or their other relationships. All the information gathered was either self-reported or observed therefore, we cannot draw definitive or sweeping conclusions from this study. But yes, the individual in question was a very decent person we established a good rapport, and they were highly cooperative. Furthermore, this case study is in no way intended to belittle the person we obtained proper consent from them to conduct this study. It was a half-blind study,

meaning the participant was not aware of exactly what was being tested, but they did provide their consent for it.

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