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I'm OK, I'm OK: Praise makes narcissists with low implicit self-esteem indifferent to the suffering of others



# I'm OK, I'm OK: Praise makes narcissists with low implicit self-esteem indifferent to the suffering of others

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## ABSTRACT

In two experiments ( $N_s = 105$  and  $49$ ) the most grandiose individuals with the lowest implicit self-esteem became particularly callous toward their suffering peers after receiving praise about their own personality attributes. Self-reported grandiosity belied by low implicit self-esteem reflects the classic view of narcissism as defensive pride that masks less conscious shame or self-doubt (cf., [Jordan, Spencer, Zanna, Hoshino-Browne, & Correll, 2003](#)). Results support the classic view of narcissism and reveal that narcissistic disregard for others can be precipitated by praise.

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## 1. Introduction

Powerful leaders' disregard for human suffering is often attributed to their narcissistic tendencies (e.g., [Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006](#)). Mao Zedong, for example, blithely starved 30 million people during his "Great Leap Forward" in China, and was cavalier about the possibility of nuclear war because of his consoling estimate that only half the world's population would die ([Chang & Halliday, 2005](#)). Despite much psychodynamic conjecture about the shaming childhoods and unconscious inner conflicts of grandiose and callous leaders like Mao, Stalin, and Hitler, little empirical research has investigated the psychodynamics of narcissistic disregard for others.

## 2. Classic psychodynamic view of narcissism

From a classic psychodynamic perspective, "grandiosity... and feelings of inferiority may co-exist in narcissistic personalities without affecting each other" because compartmentalization is accomplished by a "splitting off" of negative self-views ([Kernberg, 1975, p. 331](#)). Grandiosity masks self-doubt and the associated negative affect but also blunts respect for others' perspectives ([Horney, 1950](#); Adler, in [Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956](#)). Contemporary views characterize narcissistic grandiosity and disregard for others as part of the same syndrome, but the role of inner

self-doubt remains controversial ([Campbell & Miller, 2011](#)). This controversy may arise from contemporary reliance on self-report scales that provide little access to the psychodynamic assumptions of classic narcissism.

## 3. Contemporary research

Self-report scales of narcissism reveal that grandiose narcissism is associated with high scores on traits related to approach motivation, low scores on traits and states related to neuroticism, and low scores on the tender-mindedness aspect of agreeableness ([Foster & Trimm, 2008](#); [Miller et al., 2010](#); we agree with Miller et al. that vulnerable narcissism, characterized by high self-reported distress is more akin to borderline personality disorder, than narcissism). A limitation with self-report scales of grandiose narcissism, however, is that they cannot address the premise that narcissistic grandiosity serves to mask unconscious self-doubts. Accordingly, it remains unclear whether grandiose narcissism may be a relatively secure and "healthy narcissism" without defensive motivation ([Foster & Trimm, 2008](#); [Sedikides, Rudich, Gregg, Kumashiro, & Rusbult, 2004](#)), or a defensive pride akin to what was proposed by psychodynamic theorists ([Horney, 1950](#)).

Recent research with non-consciously assessed measures of self-worth have begun to find that the classic combination of high explicit self-esteem and low implicit self-esteem predicts grandiosity and prejudice ([Jordan, Spencer, & Zanna, 2005](#); [Jordan, Spencer, Zanna, Hoshino-Browne, & Correll, 2003](#)) and defensively extreme reactions to experimentally manipulated self-threats ([McGregor & Marigold, 2003](#); [McGregor, Nail, Marigold, & Kang,](#)

2005). This provides preliminary evidence that grandiosity combined with positive vs. negative implicit self-views may reflect healthy vs. defensive narcissism, respectively. A limitation of this past research, however, is that the explicit grandiosity was operationalized as high scores on the Rosenberg (1965) self-esteem scale. Its items, such as, “I take a positive attitude toward myself” and “I am satisfied with myself,” could reflect deluded grandiosity but could also reflect clear-eyed self-acceptance.

#### 4. Operational definition and test of classic narcissism dynamics

We operationalize classic narcissism as the combination of: (a) self-reported grandiosity on an explicit narcissism scale (e.g., “The world would be a better place if I ruled it”); and (b) low implicit self-esteem as assessed by two different measures that tap experiential self-views that are not readily accessible to awareness (with a word-fragment-completion test in Study 1 and an implicit associations test in Study 2). We probe the psychodynamics of narcissistic disregard for others by observing the social judgments of classic narcissists under circumstances that should be expected to powerfully engage their self-focused disregard for others—praise of their personality.

According to psychodynamic theories of narcissism, personality praise about idealized personal greatness is what narcissists crave (Stolorow, 1976). Accordingly, praise might be especially likely to engage narcissists’ agentic fantasies, and powerfully activate their approach-motivation tendencies (Foster & Trimm, 2008). Approach motivated states are rewarding because they narrow perceptual focus to goal-relevant stimuli (Harmon-Jones & Gable, 2009), mute anxiety and maintain positive affect (McGregor, Nash, Mann, & Phills, 2010; Nash, Inzlicht, & McGregor, 2012; Nash, McGregor, & Prentice, 2011). Classic narcissists with anxious conflict built into the structure of their self-systems may thus be particularly motivated to engage such sanguine, approach-motivated states. Doing so, however, might promote over-focus on personal perspectives and disregard for others’ (Galinsky, Magee, Inesi, & Gruenfeld, 2006; Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003; McGregor, Nash, & Prentice, 2010; Nash et al., 2011). The present research accordingly assesses whether personality praise will cause classic narcissists to become callous toward suffering others.

### 5. Study 1

#### 5.1. Method

One hundred and five American undergraduates (age,  $M = 22.64$ ; 75 female) participated for credit toward their course grade. Materials were completed over two sessions presented as unrelated studies assessing “personality structure” and “reactions to students with problems,” respectively. In Session 1 participants completed the narcissism and self-esteem measures along with other personality questionnaires that helped legitimize the “personality structure” cover story. Participants were told that they would be receiving “personality profile” feedback when they returned four weeks later to complete the other study. In Session 2, participants returned to rate their concern for suffering peers depicted in vignettes.

##### 5.1.1. Narcissism and explicit self-esteem

Narcissism was assessed with a 37-item adaptation of the original narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Hall, 1979). The adapted version (Morf & Rhodewalt, 1993) consists only of non-redundant items with factor loadings higher than .35 on the original 54-item scale (Emmons, 1987). The NPI reflects pathological criteria and less extreme personality tendencies toward

narcissism, and is a valid and reliable measure of a normally distributed, non-clinical trait (Emmons, 1987; Raskin & Terry, 1988). Following Jordan et al. (2003), we modified the original forced choice format to a continuous score format. It included items such as: “I am an extraordinary person;” and “I am going to be a great person” (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*;  $\alpha = .90$ , item  $M = 4.28$ ). We also assessed explicit self-esteem with a standard ten-item measure with items such as, “On the whole, I am satisfied with myself” (Rosenberg, 1965; 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*;  $\alpha = .87$ , item  $M = 4.19$ ) to differentiate narcissism from less grandiose positive self-evaluation.

##### 5.1.2. Implicit self-esteem

Implicitly assessed self-esteem taps experiential associations of self with positive versus negative categories (Greenwald & Farnham, 2000). It is defined as an automatic and experiential evaluation of the self that is not always introspectively identifiable (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995).

We adapted a measure of implicit racism (Son Hing, Li, & Zanna, 2002) to simply assess implicit self-esteem. Participants completed five word fragments (K \_\_\_\_, D \_\_\_\_, W \_\_\_\_, G R \_\_\_\_, and S \_\_\_\_) and then had their self-concept primed by responding to the first five items from the explicit self-esteem scale (Rosenberg, 1965). They then completed five additional word fragments (G \_\_\_\_, S M \_\_\_\_, B \_\_\_\_, N \_\_\_\_, and F \_\_\_\_), followed by the last five items from Rosenberg scale. Participants then rated their feelings with respect to each of the words they had created on the fragment tasks on a 7-point scale (−3 = extremely negative to +3 = extremely positive). We operationalized implicit self-esteem as the difference between self-rated positivity of word-fragment-completions made after versus before the self was primed by the Rosenberg items. Based on the Son Hing et al. (2002) findings, we assumed that participants with the highest implicit self-esteem would think of more subjectively positive word completions after the self-concept prime than before it.

##### 5.1.3. Praise

At the beginning of the second session, participants received a sealed envelope containing bogus feedback ostensibly based on the personality tests they had completed in Session 1 four weeks earlier. The true purpose of the feedback was to manipulate personality praise. Participants were randomly assigned to high praise ( $n = 55$ , 39 female) and low praise ( $n = 50$ , 36 female) conditions. The high praise feedback included vaguely positive comments to lend believability to the personality profile. Most importantly, it concluded by stating that participants had scored outstandingly on “two of the most functional and desirable personality traits, creativity and originality.” The low praise feedback began with the same vaguely positive comments but lacked the concluding statement regarding outstanding creativity and originality. After reading the feedback, participants responded to two manipulation check questions about how accurate and positive the feedback was (1 = very negative/inaccurate to 11 = very positive/accurate). At the end of Session 2, participants were carefully debriefed and retained until they clearly acknowledged that the personality feedback was random and bogus.

##### 5.1.4. Concern

To assess the main dependent variable, Session 2 continued by presenting participants with counterbalanced vignettes about two college students with personal problems. Sherry had academic problems related to her Chronic Fatigue Syndrome. Tanya had emotional problems related to her abusive boyfriend. Following each vignette, participants rated their concern for each suffering student (0 = not at all to 5 = extremely) on the following nine items: “How likely is it that Sherry/Tanya will have a fulfilling

life?” “How intelligent do you think Sherry/Tanya is?” “How competent do you think Sherry/Tanya is?” “How deserving of future success is Sherry/Tanya?” “If I had the chance I would definitely like to help Sherry/Tanya.” “It is easy for me to sympathize with Sherry/Tanya.” “Sherry/Tanya sounds like a real loser” (reverse scored). “It’s Sherry’s/Tanya’s own fault that things have turned out so badly” (reverse scored). “I feel sorry for Sherry/Tanya.” The overall 18-item scale (with the nine items each for Tanya and Sherry) yielded  $\alpha = .85$ .

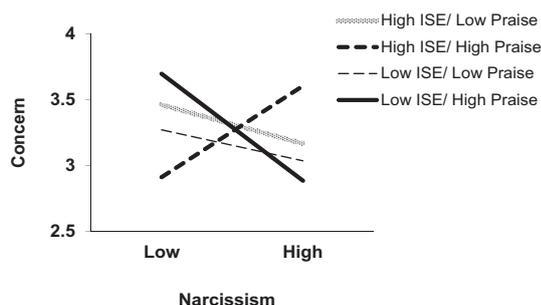
## 5.2. Results

The bogus feedback was rated as equally accurate in the high praise ( $M = 9.31$ ) and low praise ( $M = 8.92$ ) conditions,  $t(103) = 1.17, p > .24$ , indicating that participants believed the bogus summaries of their personalities. Their willingness to believe the feedback was significantly correlated with their ratings of feedback positivity,  $r(105) = .53, p < .001$ . Unexpectedly, there was only a non-significant trend for participants to rate the high praise feedback more positively ( $M = 9.25$ ) than the low praise feedback ( $M = 8.80$ ),  $t(103) = 1.52, p < .13$ . (The comparable manipulation check in Study 2 was statistically significant.)

Consistent with past research (e.g., [Bosson, Swann, & Pennebaker, 2000](#); [Jordan et al., 2003](#)), implicit self-esteem was not significantly associated with Explicit Self-Esteem,  $r(105) = .12, p > .23$ , or with narcissism,  $r(105) = -.08, p > .44$ . As is typical, however, narcissism was significantly correlated with Explicit Self-Esteem  $r(105) = .24, p < .05$ .

For the main analysis, we regressed concern on centered narcissism scores, centered implicit self-esteem scores, effect-coded praise, and all second and third order interaction terms (see [Aiken & West, 1991](#)). Despite the weak praise manipulation, there was a significant three-way interaction between narcissism, implicit self-esteem, and praise,  $\beta = .82, t(97) = 2.96, p < .005$ . Importantly, when the same regression analysis was conducted with the narcissism variable (and its interactions) replaced by Explicit Self-Esteem (and its interactions), the three-way interaction was non-significant ( $|t| < 1$ ). This indicates that the effects were specific to narcissism and did not derive merely from positive explicit self-evaluation.

As shown in [Fig. 1](#), the lowest predicted value for concern was at high narcissism and low implicit self-esteem in the high praise condition. Simple slope analyses revealed that: (a) at low implicit self-esteem in the praise condition, concern was significantly lower at high narcissism ( $y' = 2.88$ ) than at low narcissism ( $y' = 3.70$ ),  $\beta = .66, t(97) = 3.17, p < .005$ ; (b) at high narcissism in the praise condition concern was significantly lower at low implicit self-esteem ( $y' = 2.88$ ) than at high implicit self-esteem ( $y' = 3.60$ ),  $\beta = .57, t(97) = 2.58, p = .01$ . The third expected simple effect, of the praise manipulation at high narcissism and low implicit self-esteem was not significant, however. Concern was only non-signif-



**Fig. 1.** Concern for suffering peers as a function of narcissism, implicit self-esteem (ISE), and praise in Study 1.

icantly lower in the high praise condition ( $y' = 2.88$ ) than in the low praise condition ( $y' = 3.04$ ). This simple effect may not have reached significance because participants unexpectedly rated the low and high praise feedback as non-significantly different in positivity.

## 6. Study 2

Study 2 was a conceptual replication of Study 1 with a Canadian sample, a more common measure of implicit self-esteem, an improved praise manipulation, a mood manipulation check, and a different dependent measure of concern for suffering others.

### 6.1. Method

Fifty-five Canadian undergraduates (age,  $M = 20.48$ ; 43 female) participated for credit toward their introductory psychology grade, or for \$5. They were recruited with a poster advertising a study on “personality, unconscious perception, and social attitudes.” Participants were tested alone or in small groups of two or three by a male experimenter. One participant was excluded for not following instructions and five for not completing the measure of implicit self-esteem correctly. Participants sat at individual computer cubicles and completed several personality scales before receiving computerized feedback, ostensibly about their unique personalities.

#### 6.1.1. Narcissism and explicit self-esteem

Among the personality scales completed at the beginning of the session, all participants completed the same explicit self-esteem measure as in Study 1 ([Rosenberg, 1965](#);  $\alpha = .92$ , item  $M = 3.27$ ). They also completed a 15-item version of the NPI (D. Armor, personal communication, February, 2001,  $\alpha = .77$ , item  $M = 1.45$ ) that included only items with loadings greater than .50 on the first unrotated component from a principal components analysis of items from the original 54-item version. The original forced choice format of the NPI was retained. Accordingly, for each scale item, participants selected the one statement from a pair that they agreed with most (e.g., “I am going to be a great person” vs. “I hope I am going to be successful”). For each item, if participants selected the more self-serving statement they were given a score of two whereas if they selected the less self-serving statement they were given a score of one.

#### 6.1.2. Implicit self-esteem

Participants next completed a reaction-time based measure of implicit self-esteem with a version of the Implicit Associations Test (IAT: [Greenwald & Farnham, 2000](#); [Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998](#)). According to [Bosson et al. \(2000\)](#), the IAT is a reliable ISE measurement technique ( $\alpha = .88$ ). We used a shortened version from [Jordan et al. \(2003\)](#) that consists of five blocks of trials that require participants to categorize a set of stimulus words (e.g., me, garbage, myself, sunshine) as quickly and accurately as possible. As suggested by [Greenwald and Farnham \(2000\)](#), the first two trials in each block were excluded from the calculations of mean RTs due to their typically lengthened latencies. Further, latencies greater than 3000 ms were recoded as 3000 ms, and latencies less than 300 ms were recoded as 300 ms. Finally, the five participants who were excluded were chosen for removal because they incorrectly categorized more than 20% of the stimulus words in the two critical blocks of trials used to compute to implicit self-esteem scores ([Greenwald & Farnham, 2000](#)).

In the two critical blocks (the other three are practice blocks), participants categorized stimulus words in terms of the compound categories “self/unpleasant” vs. “not self/pleasant” or “self/pleasant” vs. “not self/unpleasant. Participants with positive implicit

self-associations find it difficult to make “self/unpleasant” categorizations, presumably because those two categories are mutually inhibitory for them. As a result, people with highest implicit self-esteem have relatively fast reaction times on trials in which ‘self’ is paired with ‘pleasant’ and ‘not self’ is paired with ‘unpleasant’ (i.e., ‘consistent’ trials), and relatively slow reaction times on trials in which ‘self’ is paired with ‘unpleasant’ and ‘not-self’ is paired with ‘pleasant’ (i.e., ‘inconsistent’ trials). We computed implicit self-esteem by subtracting the mean reaction time in the block of consistent trials from the mean reaction time in the block of inconsistent trials.

### 6.1.3. Praise

Before receiving their promised personality feedback, participants in both conditions read that “people with strong integrative orientation skills tend to be most likely to succeed in graduate school, professional careers, and even tend to have more successful long-term relationships.” They were then randomly assigned to receive high praise ( $n = 25$ ; 20 female) or no praise ( $n = 24$ ; 17 female) with the following statement: “Based on your responses to the questionnaire items you completed earlier, your integrative orientation score is at the 93rd [23rd in the no praise condition] percentile. This means that your score is higher than 93% [23%] of university students.”

### 6.1.4. Mood

Participants completed the short version of the positive and negative affect schedule (PANAS; [Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988](#)), which assesses 10 positive mood items and 10 negative mood items. They then completed five other items that were included to target uncertainty/dissonance discomfort: bothered, uneasy, uncomfortable, aroused, anxious ( $1 = \text{slightly or not at all to } 5 = \text{very much}$ ). These mood measures were included to allow us to statistically assess the possibility that the expected effects might be driven by mood.

### 6.1.5. Concern

Participants read two essays, ostensibly written by university students, on the topic of “life after high school.” One of the essays described a student’s struggle to cope with social health problems and depression. The other described a student’s struggle to cope with financial problems and loneliness. Participants rated each author on 10 items that assessed aspects of concern using a scale ranging from 0 to 10. Concern was computed as the mean of all 20 concern items across the two essays ( $\alpha = .85$ ). Items (and anchors) were: “It is sad that this person is in such an unfortunate state (not at all/ extremely),” “I think I would like this person (not at all/very much),” “If I had the chance I would definitely like to help this person (not at all/most definitely),” “I think that this person deserves to have better circumstances in life (not at all/very much),” “It is easy for me to sympathize with this person (not at all/extremely),” “This person sounds like a real loser (not a loser at all/extreme loser; reverse scored),” “If I had the chance I might like to befriend this person (not at all/very much),” “This person is responsible for his/her own unhappiness (not at all/ completely; reverse scored),” “If I had the chance I might like to hang out or have dinner with this person (not at all/very much),” “It is this person’s own fault that things have turned out so badly (not at all/very much; reverse scored).”

### 6.1.6. Manipulation check

At the end of the session, six items assessed participants’ feelings about the personality feedback they had received. Participants used a 5-point scale to rate the extent to which they felt strange, unhappy, bad, confused, uncertain, and alone after the personality feedback, from highly to not at all ( $\alpha = .89$ ); participant responses

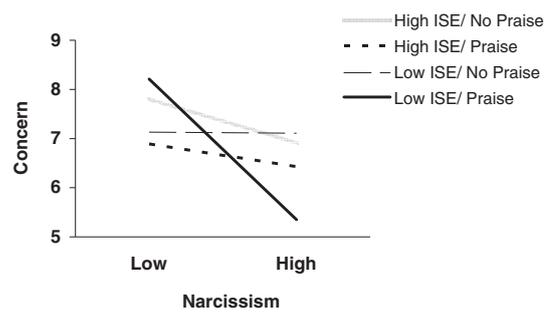


Fig. 2. Concern for suffering peers as a function of narcissism, implicit self-esteem (ISE), and praise in Study 2.

were averaged with low scores indicating relatively unpleasant feelings and high scores indicating more pleasant feelings.<sup>2</sup> As in Study 1, participants were carefully debriefed and retained until they clearly acknowledged that the personality feedback was random and bogus.

## 7. Results

On the manipulation check participants reported feeling significantly better about the feedback in the praise condition ( $M = 4.26$ ) than in the no-praise condition ( $M = 3.06$ ),  $t(47) = 4.59$ ,  $p < .0001$ .

For the main analysis, as in Study 1, we regressed concern on centered narcissism scores, centered implicit self-esteem scores, effect-coded praise, and their second and third order interaction terms. As in Study 1, there was a significant three-way interaction between narcissism, implicit self-esteem, and praise,  $\beta = .31$ ,  $t(41) = 2.25$ ,  $p = .03$ . As shown in Fig. 2 and replicating Study 1, the predicted value for concern was lowest at high narcissism and low implicit self-esteem in the praise condition ( $y' = 5.35$ ). A simple slope analysis revealed that at low implicit self-esteem in the praise condition, there was significantly less concern at high narcissism ( $y' = 5.35$ ) than at low narcissism ( $y' = 8.21$ ),  $\beta = 1.09$ ,  $t(41) = 4.12$ ,  $p < .001$ . Also, at high narcissism in the praise condition, there was marginally less concern at low implicit self-esteem ( $y' = 5.35$ ) than at high implicit self-esteem ( $y' = 6.43$ ),  $\beta = .42$ ,  $t(41) = 1.67$ ,  $p = .10$ . Finally, the third, relevant simple effect, which failed to reach significance in Study 1, was significant in Study 2. At high narcissism and low implicit self-esteem, there was significantly less concern after praise ( $y' = 5.35$ ) than no praise ( $y' = 7.11$ ),  $\beta = .69$ ,  $t(41) = 2.75$ ,  $p < .01$ .

As in Study 1, the effects were specific to narcissistic grandiosity. When the main analysis was tested with explicit self-esteem variables in place of narcissism variables, the three-way interaction was not significant ( $|t| < 1$ ). Additional analyses also revealed that the obtained results could not be accounted for by mood. Neither the mood indices nor the manipulation check were predicted by the Narcissism  $\times$  Implicit Self-esteem  $\times$  Praise interaction (all  $ps > .28$ ).

## 8. General discussion

In two studies, concern for suffering peers was lowest after personality praise among the most grandiose participants who also had the lowest implicit self-esteem. The praise-induced emergence of this cardinal narcissistic symptom provides empirical support for the classic view of narcissism as an explicitly grandiose veneer that masks implicit self-doubts. Future research is needed to probe

<sup>2</sup> Between the praise manipulation and empathy assessment participants spent an average of 4 min completing other materials that are not the focus of the present investigation.

our speculation that the praise-induced disregard for others may arise from activation of approach motivated states that lock people in their own perspectives and blunt sensitivity to others'.

One limitation of the present research is its reliance on predominantly female participants, with sample sizes not large enough to meaningfully test gender differences in the observed effects. There were no significant gender differences in narcissism or implicit or explicit self-esteem in either study but in Study 1 men were marginally more narcissistic,  $r(104) = .17$ ,  $p = .09$ . Future research should compare the strength of the observed effects for men and women. Future research could also benefit from exploring effects of different forms of praise. There is some evidence that narcissistic people are invested in agentic but not communal self-views (Bradlee & Emmons, 1992; Campbell, Rudich, & Sedikides, 2002). If so, highly agentic praise like the kind we administered in the present research should be particularly absorbing for narcissistic individuals. In contrast, communal praise (e.g., about likeability or inclusion) might help alleviate narcissistic symptoms.

There is some evidence suggesting that narcissistic individuals can benefit from social support (Finkel, Campbell, Buffardi, Kumashiro, & Rusbult, 2009; Rhodewalt & Morf, 1995) and that they use exaggerated agency to mask or disidentify with doubts about their communal worthiness (Campbell, Bosson, Goheen, Lakey, & Kernis, 2007). If so, communal praise might ameliorate the communal root cause of narcissistic symptoms without exacerbating explicit arrogance about personal agency (but cf. Bartz & Lydon, 2006, for hostile reactions of defensively agentic individuals to communal overtures). Further, it has been suggested that the implicit measure we used in Study 2 assesses relatively communal shades of implicit self-esteem (Campbell et al., 2007). Future research could benefit from comparing agentic and communal forms of implicit self-esteem (following Campbell et al., 2007).

The present research provides a glimpse into the dynamics of narcissistic social cognition (cf., Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001) and highlights a difficulty regarding how to respond to the tendencies of people with narcissistic tendencies. Threats can exacerbate their antisocial defenses, but at least some forms of praise can also make them more callous.

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