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Abstract

This study examined whether status of the source of a threat moderates the relationship between narcissism and responses to ego threat. We expected that high narcissistic individuals would respond differently after an ego threat depending on the status of the source. We conducted a laboratory study in which participants received negative feedback from either a high- or a low status alleged other person. Afterwards participants were given the chance to aggress against the source and to perform. We found that higher narcissism predicted overall greater aggression and reduced performance following an ego threat. Furthermore we found that status moderates the relationship between narcissism and aggression after an ego threat, though not as expected. High narcissistic individuals behaved as aggressively towards a low status source as they behaved towards a high status source of an ego threat. Conversely low narcissistic individuals behaved more aggressively towards a high than towards a low status source of an ego threat. Also higher narcissism predicted more aggression when the status of the source was high but not when the status of the source was low. Status did not moderate the relationship between narcissism and performance after an ego threat. This suggests that the relationship between narcissism and aggressive responses to ego threat is different when the source of the threat is high than when the source is low.
1. The Role of Source Status in Narcissistic Responses to Ego Threat.

Recent meta-analytic work has shown that narcissism, a relatively stable personality style characterized by grandiosity, self-love and inflated self-views (Morf, & Rhodewalt, 2001), has risen in the Western population over the past 25 years (Twenge, & Foster, 2010). This has important implications for organizations, because more narcissists among the population may lead to more narcissists in the workforce. Furthermore, because narcissistic individuals have an unwavering desire for glory and enjoy showing off their competencies, it has been suggested that narcissists are drawn to high power positions (Wallace, & Baumeister, 2002). Not only are narcissistic individuals attracted to high power positions, recent research indicates that they are also more likely to emerge as leaders in groups (Nevicka, De Hoogh, Van Vianen, Beersma, & McIlwain, 2011; Brunell, Gentry, Campbell, Hoffman, Kuhnert, & DeMarree, 2008). The past few decades much research and theorizing has been done on the subject of narcissism in organizations. One of the longest running issues regarding this subject has been whether narcissism has positive or negative outcomes for organizations. Because narcissism seems to be rising and because narcissists are likely to find themselves in high power positions, the impact of narcissistic individuals can be enormous. Therefore it is important to examine when narcissism has positive- and when narcissism has negative outcomes.

On the one hand narcissistic individuals have been celebrated because of their passion, vision, charisma and innovation (Campbell, Hoffman, Campbell, & Marchiosio, 2011; Deluga, 1997). On the other hand they have been criticized for their arrogance and lack of empathy, for being exploitive and for being overly sensitive to criticism (Campbell et al., 2011; Hogan, Raskin, & Fazzini, 1990; Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006). So far most evidence concerning both sides of narcissism can be found in studies on narcissistic leadership. The literature about narcissistic leaders describes both highly constructive- and extremely destructive individuals.
Examples of destructive narcissistic leaders are well known political tyrants as Adolf Hitler and Muammar Gaddafi, or, the less well known, former CEO of Lehman Brothers, Dick Fuld (Glad, 2002; Horrowitz, & Arthur, 1988; Stein, 2013). Examples of very constructive narcissistic leaders are Steve Jobs, Bill Gates and Franklin D. Roosevelt (Maccoby, 2007; Watts, et al., 2013).

One approach to solve the paradox is to examine the behavioral outcomes of narcissism and partition them into ‘bright side behaviors’ and ‘dark side behaviors’ (Judge, Piccolo & Kosalka, 2009; Back, Küfner, Dufner, Gerlach, Rauthmann & Denissen, 2013). Narcissistic individuals who are more destructive will mostly display the negative behaviors of narcissism and the individuals who are more constructive will mostly display the positive behaviors of narcissism. The problem with this approach is that it overlooks the issue that the same personality structures can contain both a bright and a dark side (Campbell et al, 2011). Therefore most researchers on this subject currently advocate a more balanced view on narcissism. They see narcissism as a ‘mixed blessing’, that is the same narcissistic behaviors can be linked to outcomes that can be positive as well as negative (Campbell, & Campbell, 2009; Rosenthal, & Pittinsky, 2006). Whether the behavior will have positive- or negative outcomes than depends on the circumstances under which it is displayed. Thus, identifying the specific contexts in which narcissistic behaviors are positive or negative is important.

A narcissistic behavior of which only the dark side has been studied is narcissistic responses to perceived ego threats. Studies have shown that unfavorable feedback can intensify narcissists’ tendencies towards hostility and antagonism (Rhodewalt, & Morf, 1995) and can provoke the so-called “narcissistic rage” (Raskin, Novacek & Hogan, 1991), which is typically directed at the source of the ego threat. Narcissistic individuals’ responses to ego threat ranges from derogation of the source to direct aggression toward the source (Smalley & Stake, 1996; Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Twenge & Campbell, 2003). However in most of
the studies researching narcissists’ responses to ego threats, displaying some form of aggression was the only response option for the participants to compensate the ego threat. Participants were not given the option to improve their performance to contradict the unfavorable feedback. Since narcissists are found to be opportunistic (Miller, Campbell, & Pilkonis, 2007), and are more likely to improve their performance when they see an opportunity to self-enhance (Wallace & Baumeister, 2002), it is likely that under some circumstances narcissists will improve their performance after a perceived ego threat.

Narcissistic reactions to ego threat can be advantageous or detrimental to performance depending on the situational context. In this study we examine such a contextual aspect, namely status of the person who engenders the ego threat (status of the source).

1.1 Narcissism

Narcissism comes from the Greek myth of a young man called Narcissus, who fell in love in with his own reflection and ultimately perished from his self-obsession (Wallace, & Baumeister, 2002). Nowadays such excessive and dysfunctional self-love is a characteristic of Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD). According to the American Psychiatric Association, people with NPD are generally grandiose, need much admiration and feel no empathy with others (APA, 2000). Even more recently the concept of narcissism has been extended from the restricted domain of mental illness to encompass many tendencies among ostensibly normal individuals (Wallace & Baumeister, 2002). The present research focuses on this personality variable of narcissism rather than on NPD. The term narcissism is used in reference to a nonclinical sample lying on a continuum based on the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Terry, 1988)

Most studies on narcissism as a personality style distinguish between two subdimensions: grandiose- and vulnerable narcissism. When studying narcissism in an organizational context, one is likely to be studying grandiose narcissism (Campbell et al.,
This type of narcissism is associated with (over) confidence, extraversion, high self-esteem, attention seeking and an interpersonally dominant style (Watts et al., 2013). These characteristics overlap with general prototypical leader traits (e.g. Judge, Ilies, Bono, & Gerhard, 2002), and are thus of special interest in an organizational context. In contrast, when studying narcissists in a clinical context, one is more likely to be studying vulnerable narcissism (Campbell et al., 2011). This type over narcissism is associated with low self-esteem, depression and an emotionally withdrawn style (Watts et al., 2013). Since grandiose narcissism is of particular concern to organizations, the focus of this research will be on grandiose narcissism and not vulnerable narcissism.

Although this research concentrates on narcissistic individuals in general, not narcissistic leaders per se, most of the research about the bright and dark sides of narcissism stems from the leadership literature. These findings, however, can be used to describe narcissistic individuals in general as well as narcissistic leaders. As stated earlier, narcissistic individuals are more likely to be viewed and emerge as leaders (Brunell et al., 2008; Nevicka et al. 2011). It is unclear however if narcissists lead effectively when they achieve these high power positions. Existing research paints a complex and inconsistent picture of the influence of narcissism on leader effectiveness. Some evidence points to null effect (Resick, Whitman, Weingarden, & Hiles, 2009). Some evidence reports a positive effect (Deluga, 1997) and other evidence points to either extreme positive or extreme negative effects (Chatterjee & Hambrick, 2007). These conflicting results might be explained by the view that narcissistic leadership behaviors are associated with both a bright and a dark side and are thus neither completely positive nor completely negative.

On the bright side, narcissistic leaders have high charisma (Khoo & Burch, 2008), have a tendency to articulate daring, change-oriented goals, facilitate group creativity (O’Connor, Mumford, Clifton, Gessner, & Connelly, 1995), and dare to take great risks in
order to achieve their goals (Chatterjee & Hambrick, 2007; Foster & Trimm, 2008). On the
dark side narcissistic leaders are likely to exploit others (Khoo & Burch, 2008), have lower
quality relationships (Blair, Hoffman, & Heiland, 2008), overvalue the potential gains of their
risky behavior (Foster & Trimm, 2008), and are prone to behave in an unethical manner (Blair
et al., 2008; Judge, LePine, & Rich, 2006).

Some researchers suggest that while narcissistic leaders can be very effective at first,
they will cause negative outcomes in the long run (Rostenthal & Pittinsky, 2006; Campbell,
Bush, Brunell, & Shelton, 2005). Since there are numerous examples of constructive
narcissistic leaders, who did not lead to an inevitable downfall, this view is not very feasible.
To understand whether narcissistic individuals will succeed or fail, it might be more important
to look at the circumstances under which they operate (Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006). Some
circumstances may facilitate the bright side of their behaviors and other might facilitate the
dark side of their behaviors. One of the research areas in which the dark side of narcissistic
behavior has been extensively examined, but the bright side has been mostly overlooked, is
narcissistic responses to ego threat.

1.2 Narcissistic responses to ego threat.

Ego threat can be defined as an event that calls into question one’s positive self-regard
(Campbell, Hoyle, & Bradfield, 2011). Potential sources of threat can be feedback about
one’s intelligence, personality or competence (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1993; Baumeister & Tice,
1985; Baumgardner, Kaufman, & Levy, 1989). Narcissistic individuals tend to react overly
emotionally and aggressively to ego threat (Stucke & Sporer, 2002). This has been shown in
research as well as in anecdotal evidence. Earlier mentioned narcissistic leader Dick Fuld for
example, whose leadership at Lehman brothers was at the eye of the 2008 credit crisis storm,
was famous for his extreme reactions toward dissent. “Fuld treated voices of opposition (..)
with disdain by stigmatizing, excluding, and finally getting rid of them” (Stein, 2013, p. 289).
Studies about narcissistic responses to ego threat have shown that high narcissism predicted participants’ aggression following ego-threat. Narcissists receiving failure feedback administered the highest and longest blasts of noise to the source of the negative feedback (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998). Also following ego-threat, narcissism was related to perceiving the evaluator as less competent and likable and perceiving the evaluation technique as less diagnostic than non-narcissistic individuals. Thus by derogating the source of negative feedback narcissists refused to blame themselves for failure. Interestingly narcissism was not related to perceiving negative feedback as less accurate (Kernis & Sun, 1994). Furthermore, narcissists reported feeling more anger and showed more aggression after social rejection. After a social rejection narcissists administered the highest and longest blast of noise toward the source of social rejection (Twenge & Campbell, 2003).

The reason why narcissists seem to be hyper vigilant to ego-threats can be attributed to their high but unstable self-esteem (Stucke & Sporer, 2002). Narcissistic individuals are especially sensitive to failure. After failure high narcissistic participants reveal more anger, anxiety, and self-esteem fluctuations than low narcissistic individuals, while high and low narcissists do not differ in their reactions to success (Rhodewalt & Morf, 1998). Narcissistic anger seems to be a response to perceived threats to their grandiose self-image. Additionally, ego-threat activates feeling of worthlessness more in high narcissistic individuals than in low narcissistic individuals (Horvath & Morf, 2009). Aggressing, either physically or verbally, towards the source of the ego threat seems to be a defense mechanism for narcissistic individuals to protect themselves against the ego threat.

The problem with the studies regarding narcissistic responses to ego threats, however, is that aggressing against the source was the only response option given to the participants to reduce the threat. In real life there are more (constructive) ways to achieve that same goal, for example by improving the motivation or performance and thereby contradicting the ego threat.
There are two reasons why narcissists would respond in a more constructive manner to perceived ego threats.

First, negative feedback creates more opportunities to self-enhance. Self-enhancement refers to people’s motive to enhance a positive or decrease a negative self-concept (Sedikides & Strube, 1995). High narcissists are more concerned with self-enhancement than low narcissists (Campbell, Reeder, Sedikides & Elliot, 2000; John & Robbins, 1994; Paulhus, 1998). Additionally, narcissists are more likely to improve their performance when there is an opportunity to self-enhance (Wallace & Baumeister, 2002). A performance situation has high self-enhancement opportunity to the extent that a successful performance will be interpreted as an indication that the performer has impressively high levels of skill, talents, or other desirable traits (Wallace & Baumeister, 2002). It follows that if a goal is difficult the self-enhancement opportunities will generally be greater. Narcissists’ motivation to achieve difficult goals should thus be especially strong because of the self-enhancement opportunities.

After receiving negative feedback, the goal will generally be perceived as more difficult to achieve than after receiving positive feedback. Consequently negative feedback gives more opportunity to self-enhance than positive feedback. The glory that can be gained by contradicting the feedback is greater than it would be with positive feedback. Moreover, with positive feedback there is essentially no need to improve performance because there is no more glory to be gained. Negative feedback inherently creates the need to perform better, because only by increasing the performance the feedback can be contradicted. Thus because negative feedback creates more opportunities to self-enhance this may lead narcissists to perform better on a task.

Second, when performing will fit a narcissist’s purpose better than aggression, narcissists will be more likely to increase their performance. It might for example matter if a narcissist will experience an ego-threat in a public or a private context. When others are
watching narcissists may perceive that it will be more beneficial to perform than to aggress. Narcissists are known to be very opportunistic and will generally pursue outcomes that are good for themselves. For example, studies found that narcissists playing common goods games provided a benefit to the self, but at a long-term cost to other individuals and to the commons (Cambell, Bush, Brunell & Shelton, 2005). To summarize, we propose that narcissistic individuals will increase their performance motivation when they see the opportunity to increase self-enhancement and when greater performance will benefit the narcissist more.

If narcissistic individuals would always respond aggressively towards the source of an ego threat, it would not be likely that they would rise to top positions in organizations. Surely employees who will never respond in a constructive manner toward dissent are not very likely to get promoted. Since many narcissists can be found in high power positions we think it is more likely that under some circumstances narcissists will show a constructive response to ego threats. The question then remains what those circumstances entail. In this study we examine a contextual aspect that might affect narcissists’ responses to ego threat: status of the source.

1.3 Status of the source.

As stated above high narcissists perform better when the opportunity for self-enhancement is high and salient than when no such opportunity is present (Wallace & Baumeister, 1998). Three factors determine whether a performance is self-enhancing for the performer: a. the quality of the performance, b. the diagnosticity of the performance task, and c. audience characteristics (Wallace & Baumeister, 1998). The first factor entails that the self-enhancement value of a performance increases with the quality of the performance. If someone performs very well, the self-enhancement value of the performance will generally be greater than when someone will perform poorly. The better the performance the greater the
self-enhancement value. The second factor entails that the self-enhancement value of a performance increase with the difficulty of a task. A more difficult task will have greater self-enhancement value than an easy task. More interesting though, in reference to this research, is the third factor.

In regard to the third factor, the self-enhancement potential of a performance is influenced by audience characteristics. A great public performance should be more self-enhancing than an equally great private one. Moreover, a great performance witnessed by people whose opinions are valued by the performer should be more self-enhancing than a great performance witnessed by people the performer does not respect. When the status of the source is high the self-enhancement opportunities will thus be greater than when the status of the source is low. Status is a function of an individual’s relative standing in economical, political and social hierarchies (Benoit-Smullyan, 1944). A person’s status is determined by their wealth, power, and prestige (Horton & Sedikides, 2009).

Narcissistic individuals are known to emphasize their own status more than non-narcissists do. For example narcissistic individuals emphasize status in self-report measures (Bradlee & Emmons, 1992) and feel that they are superior to others on status-related dimensions like intelligence and extraversion (Campbell, Rudich, & Sedikides, 2002). Furthermore, narcissistic individuals are driven to attain status. For example narcissistic individuals look for opportunities to self-enhance (Wallace & Baumeister, 2002) and seek opportunities to control others (Bradlee & Emmons, 1992). Moreover, narcissistic individuals seek out the company of high status others. For example narcissistic individuals select romantic partners who are likely to enhance their status (Campbell, 1999) and form friendships with high status others (Jonason & Schmitt, 2012). Status seems to be a core attribute for narcissists. Indeed prior research has shown that narcissistic individuals clearly distinguish between high-status and low-status evaluators and respond differentially to
negative feedback from sources of different status (Horton & Sedikides, 2009). Narcissists would derogate (comparative self-protection) both low status and high status evaluators after receiving negative feedback. However they would only self-protect by inflating their self-esteem (non-comparative self-protection) after receiving negative feedback when the evaluator was high, but not low in status. The fact that narcissists used more protective strategies (comparative as well as non-comparative strategies) when threatened by high status evaluators, implies that narcissists are more affected by negative feedback stemming from high status evaluators than low status evaluators. This further implies that narcissists value the opinion of high status evaluators more than low status evaluators.

When the source of the ego threat has high status the self-enhancement opportunities for disproving the feedback will be higher than when the source of the ego threat has low status. Because narcissistic individuals are very sensitive to status they will value the opinion of a high status individual more than the opinion of a low status individual. Therefore they are more likely to try to impress a high status individual with a good performance, but not a low status individual. Furthermore, because narcissistic individuals value the opinions of high status individuals more, the narcissist will probably gain more, in terms of feeling good about the self, by responding in a more constructive manner when the status of the source is high. When the status of the source is low, however, narcissists will value the opinion of the source less and are more likely to respond only in an aggressive manner after an ego threat. Narcissists mainly want to punish and defeat someone who has threatened their highly views of themselves (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998). If someone has low status, narcissists may be inclined to signal their dominance by aggressing and put the low status person in their place.

1.4 Overview & hypotheses

This research aims to examine whether status of the source moderates the relationship between narcissism and responses to ego threat. More specifically, we will examine if
narcissists will respond in a constructive manner (by improving their performance) when the status of the source is high. In contrast, we will examine if narcissists will respond in a non-constructive manner (by aggressing against the source), if the status of the source is low (see Figure 1).

We test this idea by measuring participants’ narcissism and giving them information about an alleged other person. This information will either depict the other person as having high status or as having low status. Afterwards participants will hear that the other person does not hold them in high regard. The participants will do a Lexical Decision Making Task with aggression and performance related words. Then participants will get the chance to aggress against the source and to do a performance task. We expect that participants who score high on narcissism will have easier access to the cognitive construct of aggression (H1a) and will show more aggressive behavior (H1b) than people who score low on narcissism after an ego-threat. Furthermore we expect that high narcissistic participants will have easier access to the cognitive construct of aggression (H2a) and will show more aggressive behavior (H2b) after an ego threat when the status of the source is low than when status of the source is high. On the comparative side, we expect that high narcissistic will have easier access to the cognitive construct of performance (H3a) and will show higher performance (H3b) after an ego threat when the status of the source is high than when the status of the source is low. Finally, in this research we ask participants to aggress and to perform after an ego threat. It would be interesting to examine which strategy narcissists prefer if they would have to choose between both strategies as well. This has never been examined in earlier research. Because we have asserted that status of the source might determine whether narcissists prefer to aggress or to perform after an ego threat, we will examine on an exploratory basis if there is a difference in the preferred strategy (performing vs. aggression) of high narcissists after an ego threat stemming from a high or a low status source.
A pilot study established the operational dimensions of status and validated the words that were related to performance, aggression, and neutral words. For our main study, we would manipulate the status of an alleged other participant among a student sample group. Earlier research suggests that three dimensions determine a person’s status: wealth, power, and prestige (Horton & Sedikides, 2009). Most students, however, don’t have much wealth, power, and prestige. Therefore, it is likely that these specific dimensions would not indicate status among our sample group. Consequently, we needed to establish other dimensions that would indicate status among students in a pilot study. Furthermore, we would use a Lexical Decision Making Task with performance related, aggression related, and neutral words during our main study. To make sure that the words we used in this task were indeed neutral or related to performance or aggression, we needed to validate the words in a pilot study.
2.1 Participants

Participants were twenty-nine undergraduate students ($M = 22.83$ years; 8 men) from the University of Amsterdam, participating for course credit.

2.2 Measures and procedure

For the first part of the study, to establish the status dimensions, we came up with forty different dimensions that could contribute to someone’s status. Subsequently participants filled in a questionnaire. The test consisted of 40 items with a 5-point scale (e.g., “someone who is attractive”; 1 = “low status”, 3 = “not related to status”, 5 = “high status”). Participants were asked to indicate the extent to which each item, in their opinion, was related to status.

The second part of the study, to validate the words that are related to aggression, performance and neutral words, we came up with 22 words related to aggression, 26 words related to performance and 30 neutral words. Some of the aggression and neutral words were derived from Denzler, Förster and Liberman (2009). During the engineering of the words we took word length and word class (noun, verb, adjective) into account, so this would be constant across the word categories. Subsequently participants filled in a questionnaire. The test consisted of 78 words which participants had to categorize into one of four categories: “performance”, “aggression”, “neutral” or “fits in no category”.

3. Study 2: Main experiment

The results of study 1 confirmed 14 items that indicate status among students. Furthermore the results validated words that are related to performance, aggression and neutral words. In study 2 we use these status dimensions to manipulate the status of an alleged other participant in the experiment. We used the validated words in a Lexical Decision Making task, which measured the reaction time in word recognition of the participants. To test our main prediction, that status moderates narcissistic reactions to ego threat, participants
in study 2 received negative feedback from an alleged other participant with either high or low status. We hypothesized that participants who score high on narcissism will have easier access to the cognitive construct of aggression (H1a) and will show more aggressive behavior (H1b) than people who score low on narcissism after an ego-threat. Furthermore we hypothesized that high narcissistic participants will have easier access to the cognitive construct of aggression (H2a) and will show more aggressive behavior (H2b) after an ego threat when the status of the source is low than when status of the source is high. On the comparative side, we hypothesized that high narcissistic participants will have easier access to the cognitive construct of performance (H3a) and will show higher performance (H3b) after an ego threat when the status of the source is high than when status of the source is low.

3.1 Participants

One hundred and ninety-one undergraduate Dutch students from the University of Amsterdam (\(M = 21.63\) years; 54 men) participated in this study for course credit or €10. Of the participants 36.5% studied Psychology, 57.1% studied something else and 6.3% were not students. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: high or low status source. All participants were in a high threat condition, receiving negative feedback. Our dependent variables were aggression and performance. Data are reported for 189 participants (\(M = 21.63\) years; 52 men)\(^1\).

3.2 Measures and procedure

3.2.1 Manipulations

3.2.1.1 Status of the source. Status of the source was manipulated by giving the participant a profile of an alleged other person participating in the experiment at the same

\(^1\) Two participants failed to understand the manipulation and were therefore excluded from further analysis. Twelve of the 191 participants indicated that they were not students so they might not be representative of an average student sample. They did not, however, affect our results so we did not exclude these participants from our sample.
time. Participants were randomly assigned to either a high status source condition or a low status source condition. In the high status conditions the profile stated that the other person had scored far above average on the following items: “talented, respected, charismatic, intelligent, prestigious job and humor”. Furthermore the profile stated that the other person had scored above average on: “attractive, original, many friends, stylish, humor, admired and persuasive”. The low status condition was counterbalanced. Here the profile stated that the other person had scored far below average on: “attractive, original, many friends, stylish, humor, admired and persuasive”. Furthermore the profile stated that the other person had scored below average on: “attractive, original, many friends, stylish, humor, admired and persuasive”.

3.2.1.2 Threat. Threat was manipulated by giving the participants negative feedback. All participants received the answers from the alleged other participant which indicated that the other participant thought that it was unlikely that the participant would be intelligent and that the participant would be very successful in the future (two on a scale from one to five), and that the alleged other participant had indicated that it was very unlikely that the participant would be a good leader (one on a scale from one to five).

3.2.2 Independent variable

3.2.2.1 Narcissism. Narcissism was measured using the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI). The NPI is used to measure narcissism in general populations (Raskin & Terry, 1988). The NPI consists of 40 true-or-false items. (e.g., “I think I am a special person”; 1 = “true”, 0 = “false”; scores are summed across all items; $\alpha = .85$; e.g., Brunell et al., 2008; Wallace & Baumeister, 2002).

3.2.3 Dependent variables

3.2.3.1 Activation of implicit cognitive constructs of performance and aggression. Activation of the constructs of aggression and performance after the ego threat were measured
by the Lexical Decision Making Task. Examples of aggression related words are “Malicious” and “To punish”, examples of performance related words are “Success” and “Effort”. Examples of neutral words are “Neutral” and “Grocery”. Examples of non-words are “Aangiep” and “Lokter”. Faster lexical decision making on words semantically associated with a construct indicate a higher accessibility of this construct (Neely, 1991). For the analyses we only included correct answers. If participants would show a faster reaction time on performance related words they would be more inclined to perform and if participants would show a faster reaction time to aggression related words they would be more inclined to aggress against the source of an ego threat.

3.2.3.2 Aggression. Aggression was measured by a computerized version of the Voodoo Doll task (DeWall et al., 2013), where participants could harm the other person by sticking pins into the doll. The minimum number of pins the participant could stab the doll with was 0. The maximum number of pins the participant could stab the doll with was 51. The average number of pins inserted into the doll was 9.21. Overall 47.6% of participants did not insert any pins, 30.7% inserted 1-10 pins, and 21.7% inserted more than 10 pins. Stabbing the doll with more pins indicates a higher level of aggression.

3.2.3.3 Performance. Performance was measured by the anagram task. We used the total number of correct words as a measure of participants’ performance. Higher number of correct words indicates better performance. It should be noted that these two tasks were counterbalanced.

3.2.3.4 Participants’ preference. Participants’ preference to perform or to aggress was measured in two manners. The first was a scale with items from the Influence Tactics Questionnaire (Kipnis, Schmidt & Wilkinson, 1980). Participants had to indicate which tactic they would prefer to use if they would encounter the other participant. We used four items measuring assertiveness, which is an aggressive influence tactic, on a 5-point scale (e.g., “I
Would prefer to express my anger verbally”; 1= “strongly disagree”, 5= “strongly agree”; α = .86) We used four items measuring rationality, which is a constructive influence tactic, on a 5-points scale (e.g., “I would prefer to demonstrate my competence to him or her”; 1 = “strongly disagree”, 5= “strongly agree”; α = .87).

The second manner we used to check participants’ preference was one item that asked the participants which task they preferred to do (1 = “anagram” and 2 = “Voodoo”).

3.2.4 Control Variables

3.2.4.1 Self-esteem. We controlled for self-esteem in our study because a moderate positive correlation between narcissism and self-esteem has consistently been found in past studies (e.g., Emmons, 1984; Heatherton & Vohs, 2000; Morf & Rhodewalt, 1993; Wallace & Baumeister, 2002). This way we could assure that the results we would find could be explained in differences in narcissism rather than in terms of self-esteem. To control for self-esteem we used a ten-item scale (Rosenberg, 1965) were participants had to indicate for each item how much they agreed with a proposition (e.g. “Sometimes I feel useless”; 1 = “strongly disagree” and 5 = “strongly agree”; α = .87).

3.2.4.1. Other control variables. Furthermore we included four other control variables in our study: gender, first language, dyslexia, and study. We included gender because it is a common control variable in research on narcissism, generally males have been found to more narcissistic than females (Tschanz, Morf, & Turner, 1998). First language and dyslexia were controlled for because these factors could influence performance on the anagram task. Our measure of first language was obtained with one item (“Dutch is my first language”; 1= “yes” and 2 = “no”)., for dyslexia we used one item as well (“I am dyslectic” 1 = “no” and 2 = “yes”). Study was controlled for because we conducted our pilot study on a student sample. The manipulation of status, therefore, was explicitly engineered for an average student sample.
Our measure of study was obtained with one item (“what do you study”). Participants could choose between several answering possibilities.

4. Discussion

In the past few decades much research and theorizing has been done on the subject of narcissism in organizations (e.g. Brunell et al., 2008; Campbell et al., 2011; Judge et al; 2006; Maccoby, 2000; Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006). One of the longest running issues regarding this subject has been whether narcissistic behaviors ultimately have positive or negative outcomes for organizations. Recently, narcissism has been regarded as a ‘mixed blessing’. The same behaviors can be linked to positive as well as negative outcomes, depending on the circumstances (e.g. Campbell, & Campbell, 2009; Rosenthal, & Pittinsky, 2006). For example, the tendency of narcissists to take great risk to achieve their goals may lead to great outcomes. Nevertheless, under different circumstances, this same behavior can lead to disaster because narcissists have the tendency to overvalue the potentials gains of their risky behavior (Foster & Trimm, 2008).

In this research we aimed to examine a narcissistic behavior in which the dark side has been extensively examined, but the possible bright side has been mostly overlooked; narcissistic responses to ego threat. We examined whether status of the source would moderate the relationship between narcissism and responses to ego threat. We expected that narcissism would predict more aggression towards the source of an ego threat. Furthermore we expected that high narcissistic individuals would be less aggressive towards a high status than towards a low status source of an ego threat. Lastly we expected that high narcissistic individuals would perform better when they were threatened by high status sources than when they were threatened by a low status source.

4.1 Activation of implicit cognitive constructs of performance and aggression.
With respect to the activation of the implicit cognitive constructs of performance and aggression we found that on average participants had easier access to the construct of aggression than to the construct of performance. This gives an indication that, overall, participants were more inclined to aggress than to perform after an ego threat. Strangely enough we also found that on average participants had easier access to the control (neutral) construct than to both the cognitive construct of performance and the cognitive construct of aggression. Regarding our hypotheses we found that hypothesis 1a, 2a and 3a can be refuted. Higher narcissism did not lead to easier access to the cognitive construct of aggression than lower narcissism after an ego threat. Furthermore status did not influence accessibility to a particular construct, also not in combination with narcissism.

The Lexical Decision Making task measures semantic priming effects. Semantic priming refers to the phenomenon that activating a concept (e.g. aggression) increases semantic accessibility to that concept (e.g. Förster & Liberman, 2007). Furthermore, according to the motivational priming model (Förster, Liberman & Higgins, 2005) motivational states (e.g. needs, intentions and goals) enhance the accessibility of concepts related to the motivational states. Consequently if an ego threat would activate the goal to aggress or to perform, these constructs should have been easier accessible to individuals than a control construct. Our results, however, suggest that the control construct was more accessible than either the aggressive or the performance construct, which seems to indicate that an ego threat does not automatically activate the goals to aggress or to perform.

Three factors might explain these unexpected results. First of all it is possible that individuals might initially employ a different strategy to compensate the threat. Common reactions to threats can be classified into three categories: breaking, compensating and resisting (VanDellen, Campbell, Hoyle & Bradfield, 2011). Breaking reactions are aimed at changing people’s feelings about themselves. Instead of denying the validity of the threat
people might lower their self-expectations. Compensating reactions are aimed at changing people’s feelings about the situation. Derogation of the source of the threat and inflating feelings of self-esteem are examples of compensating reactions. Resisting reactions can either be active or passive. Passive resisting, for example, happens when people fail to recognize the existence of the threat. Active resisting, for example, happens when people shift their attention to their positive characteristics. Performing and aggressing, therefore, might not be common initial reactions to threats, which could be the reason why we did not find automatic activation of these constructs.

A second explanation may lie in the construction of our experiment. In that case performance and aggression might get triggered by negative feedback but only under specific circumstances. Concerning the construct of aggression, earlier research about narcissistic responses to ego threat has shown that although narcissists react more aggressively than non-narcissists do (e.g. Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Horton & Sedikides, 2009), this is only the case when the aggression is directed to the source of the threat. Narcissists as well as non-narcissists are not more aggressive towards an innocent third party (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998). Narcissists therefore do not lash out indiscriminately but their reactions seem to be specific and strategically directed. Hence it is possible that we did not find an activation of the construct of aggression because the Lexical Decision Making task is a general measure, and not specifically directed towards the source of the feedback. Ego threats might only activate a directed aggressive response, not a general aggressive response.

Concerning the construct of performance, it could be the case that people only improve performance after specific types of negative feedback. Indeed, research indicates that whether people will increase performance after negative feedback depends, among other things, on the quality of the feedback (Carpentier & Mageau, 2013). Only when feedback is empathic, accompanied by solutions, based on clear and attainable objectives and delivered in
considerate tone of voice it can predict performance outcomes. Therefore it is possible that we did not find an automatic activation of the performance constructs because our type of threat did not include any of these characteristics. This possibility should be examined more directly in future research.

Alternatively there could be a problem with our measure of the cognitive constructs. This could be examined by validating the words on prior primes that are known to trigger greater access to the constructs of aggression and performance. However, we did validate the words in a pilot study. Furthermore, some of the words we used in our study were already validated in prior studies. Therefore it is not likely that the words we used during the task were not good indicators of the different constructs.

4.2 Aggression.

With respect to aggressive behavior we found that narcissism predicted aggression after an ego-threat, confirming hypothesis 1b. With this result we replicated earlier research demonstrating the same effect (e.g. Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Kernis & sun, 1994; Twenge & Campbell, 2003). Furthermore we found that in general participants were less aggressive, and thus more lenient, towards a low status source than towards a high status source after receiving an ego threat.

A possible explanation for this might be that information stemming from a high status source is more persuasive than information delivered by a low status source (Petty & Wegener, 1998; Pittam, 1990). Therefore, individuals might be more affected by ego threats stemming from a high status source. It has, for example, been shown that individuals use more comparative protection, by derogating the source of the feedback after a threat, when the status of the source is high than when the status of the source is low (Horton & Sedikides, 2009). Negative feedback stemming from a high status source, thus, seems to be more
threatening than feedback from a low status source, which may lead to more aggressive response towards a high status source.

Regarding hypothesis 2b we found that status moderates the relationship between narcissism and aggressive behavior after an ego threat, though not in the expected manner. Against expectations we found that high narcissistic individuals do not discriminate between a high and low status source insofar their directed aggression is concerned. Low narcissistic individuals, however, were more aggressive towards a high status source than towards a low status source after an ego threat. Furthermore, when status of the source was low, we found that higher narcissism predicted more aggression, which is a replication of the commonly found effect (e.g. Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Kernis & sun, 1994; Twenge & Campbell, 2003). When the status of the source was high, however, we found that there was no effect of narcissism on aggression.

We replicated the findings that higher narcissists are less lenient towards a low status source than lower narcissists (Horton & Sedikides, 2009). We found this effect in two different measures. First we found that concerning their assessment of the other person, high narcissistic individuals sent back a more negative assessment to a low status source than low narcissistic individuals, while high and low narcissists did not differ in their assessment of a high status source. Furthermore we found that high narcissistic individual behaved more aggressively towards a low status source than low narcissistic individuals. This however did not lead to the expected effect that high narcissistic individuals would be more aggressive towards a low status source than towards a high status source.

A possible explanation might be that high narcissists use more self-protection strategies when they are threatened by a high status source (Horton & Sedikides, 2009). When threatened by a high status source, high narcissists not only derogate the source of the feedback, but they also boost their own self-esteem. This further implies that high narcissists
not only use more self-protection strategies, but they also use specific strategies to ensure that they feel better than the person engendering the threat. Research has shown that narcissists in general are more inclined to make downward social comparisons (Krizan & Busman, 2011). By inflating their self-esteem after receiving an ego threat from a high status source, narcissists may enable themselves to make downward social comparisons to high as well as to low status sources of ego threats. Consequently because high narcissists already differentiate between high and low status sources of ego threats in the number and type of strategies they use, they do not need to aggress more against a high than against a low status source to alleviate the threat.

The research about self-protection strategies might also explain why low narcissists did differentiate between high and low status sources of ego threat. Low narcissists derogate the source of the threat more when the status of the source is high than when the status of the source is low (Horton & Sedikides, 2009), indicating that they are more affected by ego threats stemming from a high status source. However, they do not boost their self-esteem more when status of the source is high than when status of the source is low (Horton & Sedikides, 2009). A possible explanation for this is that low narcissistic people in general have lower self-esteem than high narcissistic individuals (e.g., Emmons, 1984; Heatherton & Vohs, 2000; Morf & Rhodewalt, 1993; Wallace & Baumeister, 2002), which might make it harder for them to increase their feelings of self worth after receiving negative feedback. Furthermore research has indicated that people with low self-esteem are in general less able to react to threat in esteem-protective ways (VanDellen et al., 2011). Because low narcissists use less protective strategies than high narcissists do and are less able to protect their self-esteem, especially when threatened by a high status source, they seem to be less resilient towards ego threats stemming from a high status source. This may lead them to act more aggressively to alleviate the threat.
Additionally, we found that controlling for self-esteem affected the effect of narcissism on aggression when the source of the threat was high. When self-esteem was not controlled for, higher narcissism actually predicted less aggression towards the source of the threat, which contradicts all earlier research. These results are very interesting considering prior research about the link between self-esteem and aggression. There are opposing views concerning this link. On the one hand it has been asserted that low self-esteem is a cause of violence (e.g. Kirschner, 1992; Long, 1990; Oates & Forrest, 1985; Schoenfeld, 1988; Wiehe, 1991). According to this view, inner self-doubts may prompt certain people to lash out against others as a possible way of gaining self esteem (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998). On the other hand it has been proposed that violence tends to result from very positive views of the self that are threatened by others (Baumeister, Smart & Boden, 1996). Recent research however has indicated that not self-esteem per se, but high and unstable self-esteem may result in more aggressive behavior after an ego threat (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998). The researchers found that higher narcissism predicted more aggression towards the source of an ego threat and ascribed this effect to the high narcissists’ high and unstable self-esteem.

Contrariwise, we found that narcissism only predicted more aggression when the status of the source was low not when status of the source was high. This seems to indicate that high but unstable self-esteem, or narcissism, only predicts aggression when the status of the source is low. Furthermore self-esteem seemed to function as a buffer for aggressive behavior. In line with other research, this might indicate that individuals with high stable self-esteem are indifferent towards ego-threats because others simply are no threat to their self-esteem (Kernis, Grannemann & Barclay, 1989). Our findings may therefore enhance the understanding of the relationship between self-esteem and violence. More specifically we found that prior research indicating that high but unstable self-esteem leads to more aggression is only true when status of the source is low. When status of the source is high
however, low self-esteem may actually lead to more aggression. Future research should explicitly examine this assertion.

Another possible explanation for our results concerning low narcissistic individuals may lie in our measure of aggression. While most research concerning the link between narcissism and aggression have used more overt measures of aggression (i.e. sound blasts), which were directly visible to the source of the threat, we used a more covert measure of aggression, (i.e. stabbing a voodoo doll) which was not visible to the source of the feedback. In overt aggression, anger is expressed openly for everyone to see, covert aggression is disguised and it is hard to tell whether harm is intended or not (Bjorkqvist, Osterman, & Lagerspetz, 1994).

It is possible that because we used a covert measure of aggression we were able to discover a specific characteristic of low narcissistic responses to ego threats. Namely, that low narcissists can react as aggressively as high narcissists do in response to an ego threat, but they do so in a more covert way and only when the status of the source is high. This is in line with prior research which has indicated that individuals with low self-esteem are more inclined to show covert aggression than people with high self-esteem especially when they have a negative view of the other (Bradshaw & Hazan, 2006). This might indicate that high and low narcissistic individuals do not differ in the tendency to aggress, but in type of aggressive behavior after an ego threats. Future research should test this assertion by, for example, letting participants choose between several types of aggressive responses after an ego threat.

4.3 Order effect of the tasks on aggression.

We counterbalanced order of the tasks to control for an order effect. Nonetheless we found that in general individuals were less aggressive towards the source of the ego threat when they had the chance to perform before they had the chance to aggress. The reason for
this reduced aggression might be that people react less aggressively when they have the
chance to contradict the threat by performing (e.g. VanDellen, et al., 2011). Alternatively it
could mean that people react less aggressively after an ego threat because they got distracted
by a different task before they get the chance to aggress. Further research should be conducted
to examine this more. This can be done, for example, by giving participants a performance or
a non-performance (filler) task and than measure whether aggression gets reduced.

Furthermore we found that that the interaction between status and narcissism on
aggression changes depending on the order of the task. Interestingly we found that only when
individuals got the chance to perform first, hypothesis 2b was confirmed; high narcissistic
individuals behaved more aggressively after an ego threat when the status of the source was
low than when status of the source was high. This effect should be interpreted with caution,
though, because it was only marginally significant. When individuals got the chance to
aggress first, we found that high narcissistic individuals did not discriminate between a high
and a low status source. For low narcissistic individuals it did not matter if they got the
chance to aggress or to perform first, in both cases they behaved more aggressively towards a
high status source than towards a low status source. Furthermore in both cases narcissism
predicted higher aggression when the status of the source was low. When the status of the
source was high however, narcissism only predicted aggression when the individuals got the
chance to aggress first. When the individuals got the chance to perform first narcissism
actually predicted less aggression.

These results seem to indicate that giving individuals the chance to perform after an
ego threat from a high status source might be especially beneficial for high narcissistic
individuals, because it reduces their aggression. The reduced aggression may be caused by the
fact that people with high self-esteem are more likely to demonstrate compensating behaviors
after ego threats, while people with low self-esteem are more likely to demonstrate breaking
or resisting behaviors (VanDellen, 2011). Therefore compensating a threat, by performing might be more beneficial for people with high self-esteem, because these strategies actually help them to protect their self-esteem. For people with low self-esteem compensating does not help to protect their self-esteem and does therefore not reduce their aggression. Since self-esteem and narcissism are not the same thing, however, this assertion should be explicitly tested in future research. Furthermore, because we examined the order effects on an exploratory basis our results warrant further replication.


With respect to performance we found that higher narcissistic individuals did not show higher performance after an ego threat when the status of the source was low than when status of the source is high, refuting hypothesis 3b. Interestingly, we found that higher narcissism in general predicted lower performance after an ego threat. Earlier research has indicated that there is no relation between narcissism and performance, high narcissists perform no better or worse than others (e.g. Gabriel, Critelli & Ee, 1994; John & Robbins, 1994; Robins & John, 1997). Therefore it is noteworthy that we did find a difference in performance in our study.

We expected high narcissistic participants to perform better when the task would be self-enhancing. A possible explanation why we did not find that status of the source moderates the relationship between narcissism and performance after an ego threat and why we found that narcissism actually predicted lower performance may be that our measure of performance was not self-enhancing enough. We asserted that audience characteristics could increase the self-enhancing potential of a task. A public performance would be more self-enhancing than a private one. Therefore we explicitly stated in our experiment that the alleged other person would get to see the results of the performance task. However, because the task was essentially anonymous and the participants did not actually meet the other person, the audience characteristics might not have been salient enough to increase the self-enhancement
value of the task. For the same reason, a high status other person did not make the task more self-enhancing than a low status other person. Future research should examine whether the results are different if the individuals are not anonymous participants, and performing well on the task gets specifically attributed to them.

Additionally it is possible that we did not find a moderating effect of status because high narcissists use more protective strategies against a high status source. Because they boost their self-esteem and derogate the source, they might not feel the need to self-enhance by performing well on a task.

4.5. Order effects of the tasks on performance.

We found that there was an effect of task order on performance. Our results indicate that individuals showed higher performance when they were given the chance to perform before they were given the chance to aggress against the source of the ego threat. This seems to indicate an effect of catharsis. The notion of catharsis of aggression refers to the possibility that when someone experiences an aggression-related negative state (e.g., anger after receiving negative feedback) and then performs an aggressive act this would reduce that negative state (Krahé, 2001). Once someone has aggressed, according to this theory, there is less need to increase performance, because the negative state is already reduced. Combining the performance- with the aggression results, indicates that in general people perform better and aggress less when the get the chance to perform first following an ego threat. Both performing and aggressing, therefore, seem to act as strategies for dealing with an ego threat. The implications for practice of this assertion will be discussed later on.

Furthermore we found that that the interaction between status and narcissism on performance changes depending on the order of the task. Interestingly we found that when individuals got the chance to aggress first, hypothesis 3b was confirmed; high narcissistic individuals show better performance after an ego threat when the status of the source is high
than when status of the source is low. When high narcissistic individuals got the chance to
perform first, however, the opposite effect was found; high narcissistic individuals show
worse performance after an ego threat when the status of the source is high than when status
of the source is low. For low narcissistic individuals it is exactly the other way around. When
low narcissistic individuals get the chance to perform first they show better performance
when the status of the source is high, but when they get the chance to aggress first they show
worse performance when the status of the source is high.

Additionally we found that when the status of the source was high, there was no
relation between narcissism and performance when individuals get the chance to aggress first.
Alternatively, higher narcissism predicted worse performance when the individuals got the
chance to perform first. When the status of the source was low we found the opposite effect,
when individuals get the chance to aggress first higher narcissism predicted worse
performance, but there was no relation between higher narcissism and performance when
individuals get the chance to perform first.

Overall these results seem to indicate a very complex three-way interaction between
order, status and narcissism. All effects of status and narcissism are different when
participants get the chance to aggress first compared to when to when they get the chance to
perform first. Explaining these complex results are beyond the scope of this study. Future
research should be conducted to examine why high and low narcissists react differently
compared to their own group and compared to the other group when the tasks have a different
order. It would be interesting to look for example at the effects of catharsis. Perhaps high
narcissists are more susceptible to catharsis and therefore perform less well after they have
aggressed especially with a low status source, while this is not the case for low narcissistic
individuals. Furthermore, because we examined the order effects on an exploratory basis our
results warrant further replication.
4.6 Participants preference.

Finally, we examined whether there was a difference in the preferred tactic (performing vs. aggressing) of high narcissists after an ego threat from a high or a low source. We found that most individuals preferred to perform than to aggress after an ego threat. There was no effect of status or narcissism on task preference. This might indicate that in general individuals would rather contradict an ego threat by performing than by aggressing. However other variables could have influenced these results, for example participants could just have liked the performance task better than the aggression task. Therefore these results should be interpreted with caution.

Furthermore we found than in general participants preferred to use a more constructive influence tactic than a more aggressive influence tactic. There was no relation between narcissism and preference for influence. The reason for this might be that there was a floor effect within the aggressive influence tactic measure, perhaps with a more sensitive measure we would have found an effect. Also it is possible that the combination of obvious aggressive and obvious constructive tactics right after each other, led to socially desired behavior. We however did find a small effect of status on the preference of individuals for an aggressive tactic. When the status of the source is high, individuals show a higher preference for an aggressive influence tactic than when the status of the source was low. This result further confirms that people in general behave more aggressively towards a high status source than towards a low status source after an ego threat.

4.7 Limitations.

Although the present study enhances our understanding of the role of status in narcissistic responses to ego threats, it has some potential limitations. First of all there is the issue of external validity that is the usual limitation of any experimental research. Because we used a student sample in a laboratory setting we do not know whether we can generalize the
findings onto a wider population. Therefore future studies should replicate our findings in a field setting with a different sample and different tasks. This could be done for example by measuring with questionnaires how employees react after feedback from someone they look up to (i.e. a supervisor) or from someone they don’t look up to (i.e. a peer). However, research indicates that the estimated correlation between effect sizes obtained in the field and in the lab generally exceeds .70 (Anderson, Lindzay & Bushman, 1999). This seems to indicate that experimental findings reflect those in the field (Nevicka, de Hoogh, van Vianen, Beersma & McIlwain, 2011). Furthermore, our experimental design has unique advantages over a field design, because it was randomized and controlled, which is almost impossible to do in a field setting.

A second limitation lies in our operationalization of ego threat. Our participants got negative feedback on the basis of a report made by a computer. There was no actual interaction between the participant and the source of the feedback. It is therefore possible that the participants would ascribe the negative feedback to an incorrect report of the computer instead of to the alleged other participant. Earlier research has indicated that narcissists protect their selves against negative feedback by perceiving the evaluation technique as less diagnostic (Kernis & Sun, 1994). This could have reduced the effect of the ego threat in our sample, especially for the participants who score higher on narcissism, and could therefore influence our results. However our aggression results indicate that the participants did attribute the ego threat at least partly to the alleged other participant. If the participants would attribute the threat only to the report and not to the alleged other participant, they would not have behaved as aggressively because research has indicated that narcissists as well as non-narcissists are not more aggressive towards an innocent third party after a threat (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998). It is possible however that our found effect would be stronger if the ego threat would stem directly from the source, without the interference of a report. In future
research our findings should be replicated in an experiment where participants would get the feedback directly from the source. For example, participants could do a task, which would be (negatively) evaluated by another participant that is in the same room.

A third limitation lies in our operationalization of performance. Our participants received negative feedback about their intelligence, their future success and their leadership skills. The anagram task, however, was not especially designed to contradict these three factors. Performing well on an anagram task does not explicitly show the alleged other person that the participant was intelligent, would be successful in the future and was a good leader. It is possible that our found effects on performance would have been stronger if the participants got the chance to explicitly contradict the ego threat. In future research it would be interesting to, for example, give participants negative feedback on their creativity, and then let them do a task that is specifically designed to measure creativity.

A last limitation is that we did not add a control condition in which our participants did not receive any feedback. We did not need this condition for our main hypotheses, though it would have been interesting to see whether some of our non-expected results and our exploratory results were caused by feedback or not. Future replications of this study should therefore add a control condition in which the participants do not receive any feedback.

4.8. Practical implications.

Since narcissism is rising under the Western population it is likely that in the coming years more and more narcissistic individuals will be found in the workforce. This research has several implications that might be helpful for organizations on how to deal with this trend. First of all, in general, it is useful for organizations to know, that giving individuals the chance to perform after an ego threat might help to reduce their aggressive responses. This could indicate that after criticizing an employee it is better to give them the chance to contradict the criticism with a task. Furthermore, in general, individuals actually perform
better after an ego threat if they haven’t aggressed against the source than when they did. This further indicates the importance of giving employees a chance to contradict the feedback right away.

Narcissistic individuals have been described as toxic for an organization (e.g. Jonason, Slomski, Partyka, 2012). However our results indicate that low narcissistic and especially low self-esteem individuals can be especially vindictive after an ego threat from a high status source. This can have important implications for leaders, as they might be the high status sources engendering the threat. Although high narcissists are in general more aggressive than low narcissistic individuals this is not the case when the status of the source is high. Furthermore, giving high narcissists the chance to contradict a threat by a high status source through means of a performance task reduces their aggression. This does not help with the low narcissistic individuals’ aggression. Therefore we found a possibility for organizations to reduce high narcissistic aggression, but not low narcissistic aggression.

4.9. Conclusion.

The aim of this research was to enhance the understanding of the ‘mixed blessing’ called narcissism. More specifically we sought to demonstrate the bright side of narcissistic responses to ego threat. Our results indicate that in general narcissistic responses to ego threat mostly display the dark sides of narcissism. We found that higher narcissism predicts more aggression and that higher narcissism predicts reduced performance after an ego threat. However, taking the specific context of status of the source into consideration, there seems to be a small silver lining to narcissistic responses to ego threats. When threatened by a high status source high narcissism does not predict aggression. Moreover when given the chance to perform after an ego threat from a high status source, higher narcissism actually predicted lower aggression. This indeed confirms that the same characteristics can be advantageous or detrimental, depending on the specific context.
References


