Research Article

EFFECTS OF VISUAL PERSPECTIVE AND NARCISSISM ON SELF-PERCEPTION: Is Seeing Believing?

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Abstract—Would people still see themselves through rose-colored glasses if they had the same perspective as others do? We contrast predictions from narcissism theory with cognitive-informational accounts of self-perception bias. Study 1 showed that narcissists enjoy situations in which they can view themselves from an external perspective, and report that such situations boost their self-confidence. In Study 2, subjects evaluated their performance in a group task from the normal visual perspective of the self and from a “reversed” perspective (manipulated via videotape). Narcissists overestimated their performance, and reversing visual perspective did not reduce this self-enhancement bias. Instead, we found a person-situation interaction: Narcissists became even more positively biased in the reversed-perspective condition, whereas nonnarcissists showed even less bias. Thus, allowing narcissistic individuals to observe themselves on videotape further increased their self-admiration, just as the mythical Narcissus admired his reflection in the pond.

The eye cannot see its own lashes.

—Chinese adage

Other men's sins are before our eyes; our own are behind our back.

—Seneca

A classic distinction in psychology is that between the self as perceiver (the “I”) and the self as object of perception (the “Me”). According to Mead (1934), “the essential problem of self-hood or of self-consciousness” is for the individual to “get outside himself (experientially) in such a way as to become an object to himself” (p. 138). Yet, under normal circumstances, people cannot literally become objects of their own perception; that is, we cannot physically perceive ourselves from the same perspective as others do. But what if we could “see ourselves as others see us” (Robert Burns)? Would our self-perceptions become more accurate? Would seeing ourselves from the perspective of others clear up the rose-colored glasses through which many of us perceive ourselves?

Popular admonishments such as “take a look at yourself in the mirror” and “try to see yourself from their perspective” suggest that taking an external view of oneself will reveal more clearly one’s faults, flaws, and limitations.1 Consistent with this folk belief, researchers studying self-focused attention have argued that “it is clear that perceiving yourself as others perceive you is usually a blow to self-esteem” (Buss, 1995, p. 261). In contrast, the myth of Narcissus suggests a rather different possibility. According to Greek mythology, when Narcissus saw his reflection in a pond, he fell in love with his own image; he enjoyed looking at himself so much that he stopped eating and eventually died. Thus, the myth suggests that seeing oneself from the perspective of others increases self-admiration and self-love.

We tested these contrasting views in two studies. Study 1 examined whether narcissists seek out situations in which they can see themselves from an external perspective, and whether they do so because such situations boost their self-confidence. Study 2 experimentally manipulated visual perspective and examined the consequences for accuracy and bias in self-evaluation.

PERCEPTUAL-INFORMATIONAL INFLUENCES ON SELF-EVALUATION

The idea that self-perception becomes more accurate when people see themselves from an external perspective follows from cognitive-informational accounts of the self-perception process. The basic premise of Bem’s (1972) self-perception theory is that individuals acquire self-knowledge by observing their own behavior in much the same way as would an objective observer. However, compared with the normal self-perspective, the external perspective provides the individual with additional information that is usually available only to an observer (e.g., nonverbal cues such as facial expressions). Storms (1973) found that “reversing” the visual orientation of subjects via videotape produced a corresponding reversal in the typical actor-observer difference in causal attributions: Individuals who observed themselves on videotape (i.e., from the same perspective as an observer) were more likely to attribute their behavior to dispositional causes than individuals who had the normal self-perspective. Storms interpreted this effect as evidence that visual perspective influences the availability and salience of informational cues (cf. Nisbett & Ross, 1980). This observation raises an intriguing possibility: Do distorted self-perceptions result from the unique visual perspective of the self? Surprisingly, visual perspective has received little empirical attention in the literature on self-perception biases. However, Kolar, Funder, and Colvin (1996) have argued that the unique visual perspective of the self may be responsible for the limited accuracy of self-reports: “Individuals may be in a poor position to see their own consistent personality attributes... because of the literal angle from which... they view themselves” (p. 314). Similarly, Kenny (1991) predicted that self-other agreement will be lower when the self and observer judges have different information available (Robins & John, 1996). When the individual has the same visual perspective as an observer, the informational difference between self and other judges is reduced. Thus, if informational factors underlie the divergences be-
The myth of Narcissus provides a portrait of the self-focused individual that contrasts sharply with that provided by self-awareness theory. The myth suggests that rather than feeling acutely self-conscious and uncomfortable when confronted with their own image, some individuals enjoy focusing attention on themselves. Narcissism theories of the self provide a general account of the psychological dynamics of self-enhancement motivation and offer an individual differences framework for research on self-perception biases. Narcissistic individuals are assumed to hold unrealistically positive beliefs about their abilities and achievements (e.g., Freud, 1914/1953; Kohut, 1971; Millon, 1990). According to the fourth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (American Psychiatric Association, 1994), they have "a grandiose sense of self-importance" (p. 658) and tend to "exaggerate their achievements and talents, and expect to be recognized as superior without commensurate achievements" (p. 661); they are "preoccupied with fantasies of unlimited success, power, brilliance, and beauty" (p. 658).

Narcissists are particularly prone to positive distortions because their inflated sense of self-importance and superior competence is easily threatened (e.g., Westen, 1990). In other words, narcissism reflects individual differences in sensitivity and responsiveness to threats to self-worth. In ego-involving contexts, narcissistic individuals will be particularly motivated to bolster their self-image by positively distorting their self-perceptions. Recent research has provided empirical support for these accounts. Relatively narcissistic individuals respond to threats to their self-worth by perceiving themselves more positively than is justified (Gabriel, Critelli, & Ee, 1994; John & Robins, 1994) and by denigrating others (Morf & Rhodewalt, 1993). These studies have assessed the normal range of narcissistic tendencies and thus focused on narcissistic modes of self-evaluation in the general population, rather than on the clinical syndrome of narcissistic personality disorder.

Narcissism theories suggest several predictions about the effects of visual perspective that contrast with those generated by the perceptual-informational account. First, reversing visual perspective should not eliminate self-enhancement bias; presumably, individuals are motivated to enhance their self-worth regardless of the visual perspective from which they evaluate themselves. Second, individuals should vary in the degree to which they show self-enhancement bias, with narcissistic individuals showing the highest levels of bias. Third, the effect of visual perspective should depend on the individual's level of narcissism. Self-admiration and exhibitionism are central characteristics of the narcissistic personality. Thus, just as the mythical Narcissus enjoyed looking at his reflection in the water, narcissistic individuals should enjoy seeing themselves on videotape, which should activate their aggrandized self-views and further inflate their self-perceptions.

**STUDY 1**

Do narcissists indeed enjoy the self-focused state, and are they more inclined than other people to seek out situations that involve seeing themselves from an external perspective? We predicted that narcissists would prefer to look at themselves (rather than another person) on videotape and that they would look at themselves in the mirror more frequently than less narcissistic individuals. We also examined whether they do so in order to admire themselves and boost their confidence.

**Method**

One hundred thirty undergraduates (64% women) participated in an experimental session including several ostensibly unrelated parts. In the first part, subjects were told about another researcher seeking subjects who would be videotaped performing a group task and later watch the performance of one group member on videotape. Subjects were asked to choose one of two videotape conditions in this study: viewing their own performance or viewing the performance of another group member. In addition, subjects rated (on 7-point scales) the importance of five reasons for their choice; two of the reasons were designed to test whether subjects experience watching themselves as pleasurable or as aversive. To make the situation realistic, subjects were asked to provide telephone numbers and were told that a researcher would call to sign them up for the fictitious videotaping study.

In the second part, subjects rated how often they look at themselves in a mirror on a typical day. Subjects also rated (on 7-point scales) the importance of seven reasons for looking in a mirror; three of these reasons reflected self-admiration.

In the third part, subjects completed a 38-item version of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; \( \alpha = .86 \); Raskin & Terry, 1988)\(^2\) and the 10-item Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE; \( \alpha = .88 \); Rosenberg, 1979). The NPI is the best validated self-report measure of narcissism for nonclinical populations and predicts psychologists' ratings of narcissism (e.g., John & Robins, 1994). An example item is "If I ruled the world it would be a much better place," which was endorsed by 45% of the subjects. Level of narcissism (high vs. low) was defined by a median split.\(^3\) The RSE Scale was used as a control

2. This version of the NPI did not include two items that involve looking at oneself.

3. The average NPI item was endorsed by 41% of the sample, suggesting that almost half of the subjects showed narcissistic tendencies. Thus, a median split was used in Studies 1 and 2 to simplify presentation of the findings. All main effects and interactions from both studies were replicated when the NPI was used as a continuous variable.
variable to test whether the effects of narcissism were independent of self-esteem. The NPI correlated .37 with the RSE Scale.

In both Studies 1 and 2, there were no main or interactive effects of sex, and all results are reported for men and women combined.

Results

As predicted, individuals in the high-narcissism group were more than twice as likely to choose to participate in the “watch self” condition than in the “watch other” condition (69% vs. 31%); individuals in the low-narcissism group showed the opposite pattern (40% vs. 60%); \( \chi^2(1, N = 130) = 11.2, p < .01 \). When asked about the reasons for their choice, high-narcissism individuals were more likely than low-narcissism individuals to report that “it would be fun to watch myself” (\( M_s = 3.8 \) vs. 2.8), \( t(128) = 2.9, p < .01 \), and less likely to report that “I might feel uncomfortable seeing myself on videotape” (\( M_s = 3.2 \) vs. 4.2), \( t(128) = 2.9, p < .01 \).

Also as predicted, high-narcissism individuals reported looking at themselves in the mirror more frequently than did low-narcissism individuals (\( M_s = 5.7 \) vs. 4.8), \( t(128) = 1.9, p < .05 \). Moreover, high-narcissism individuals rated the three reasons reflecting self-admiration as more important than did low-narcissism individuals, all \( t(128) > 2.0, \) all \( p < .01 \): “I like looking at myself” (\( M_s = 4.0 \) vs. 3.3), “I am proud of the way I look” (4.1 vs. 3.0), and “To build my confidence” (3.6 vs. 2.6). Finally, a series of analyses of covariance showed that the effects of narcissism were independent of self-esteem for all dependent variables.

Discussion

When given the choice between watching themselves or another person on videotape, narcissistic individuals preferred to watch themselves. Moreover, the reasons they gave for their choice indicate that narcissists do not perceive the self-focused state as aversive, but rather think it is “fun.” Parallel findings emerged when subjects reported about looking at themselves in mirrors; the reasons narcissistic subjects gave for looking in the mirror suggest that they use self-focused attention to make themselves feel better and bolster their self-esteem. What do these findings suggest for the self-evaluation process? Seeing one’s reflection may fuel narcissistic self-admiration. Study 2 tested this hypothesis.

STUDY 2

We examined two potential influences on accuracy and bias in self-perception: individual differences in narcissism (measured via questionnaire) and visual perspective (manipulated via videotape). Specifically, we asked: Are the self-evaluations of individuals high and low in narcissism differentially influenced by the visual perspective from which they perceive themselves?

Cognitive-informational accounts of self-perception predict that reversing visual perspective will increase accuracy and produce more negative self-evaluations, which will, in turn, decrease self-enhancement bias. In contrast, narcissism theory predicts a main effect of narcissism on self-enhancement bias that is independent of visual perspective, and an interaction between narcissism and visual perspective. Specifically, relatively narcissistic individuals should show even higher levels of self-enhancement bias in the reversed-

perspective condition, whereas less narcissistic individuals (who are less defensive in response to negative information about themselves) should show the drop in self-evaluation predicted by self-awareness theory.

Method

Subjects

The experiment was conducted using two samples (total \( N = 124 \); 56% women): Sample 1 included 49 M.B.A. students (median age = 29), who on average had more than 3 years of postcollege work experience, and Sample 2 included 75 undergraduates (median age = 19). Sample (1 vs. 2) did not interact with visual perspective or narcissism in its effect on self-evaluation, indicating that the pattern of findings held in both samples. Thus, we report results for the two samples combined.

Group discussion task

Subjects participated in a simulation of a committee meeting in a large organization; six-person groups were used in Sample 1, and four-person groups were used in Sample 2. Subjects were told that the purpose of the meeting was to allocate a fixed amount of money to candidates for a merit bonus. Each subject was assigned the role of supervisor of one candidate and was instructed to present a case for that candidate at the meeting. Subjects received a realistic written summary of the employment backgrounds of all six (or four) candidates, including salary, biographical information, and appraisals of prior job performance, and were given 10 (or 5) min to review this information. At the beginning of the meeting, subjects gave 3- to 5-min presentations on the relative merits of their candidates. The groups then had 40 (or 30) min to reach a consensus on how to allocate the bonus money. Instructions emphasized that subjects should try to achieve two goals: obtain a large bonus for the candidate they represented and help the group achieve a fair overall allocation of the money. Thus, effective performance required behaviors that promoted the achievement of both goals.

Manipulation of visual perspective

Visual perspective was manipulated in a repeated measures design. In the normal-perspective condition, subjects evaluated their performance immediately after the group discussion; this condition provided a direct replication of our previous research (John & Robins, 1994). In the reversed-perspective condition, subjects returned to the lab at least 2 weeks later and evaluated themselves after privately viewing videotapes of themselves taken from the perspective of an external observer (i.e., each subject viewed a videotape taken with a camera focused on the subject’s face and upper body). This design allowed us to measure change in self-evaluation from the normal- to the reversed-perspective condition.

Narcissism and self-esteem

Several weeks prior to the experiment, subjects completed the 33-item version of the NPI (\( \alpha = .71 \)) and a 5-item version of the RSE Scale (\( \alpha = .80 \)), which was used as a control variable. The NPI
correlated .33 with the RSE Scale. Level of narcissism (high vs. low) was defined by a median split.

**Dependent variable: Self-evaluation of performance**

In both visual-perspective conditions, subjects privately ranked their own performance in the task and the performance of the other group members. The ranking procedure required subjects to compare their own performance directly with that of the other group members, rather than with some unspecified reference group or norm. Prior or privileged knowledge about the self (e.g., intentions, motives, past behavior) was irrelevant to the evaluations (see John & Robins, 1994, pp. 209–210). To calibrate the self-evaluation scales used in the two samples, the 4-point ranking scale used in Sample 2 was rescaled to a 6-point scale.4

**Performance criteria**

Because any one criterion can provide only an imperfect measure of a subject’s true level of performance (see Robins & John, in press, for a review), we used three criteria to assess accuracy and bias. The first was the average ranking of each subject’s performance by the other group members (peers). The alpha reliability of this peer criterion was .79 in Sample 1 (based on rankings by the five peers in each group of six) and .74 in Sample 2 (rankings by the three peers in each group of four). The second criterion (Sample 1 only) was the average ranking of each subject’s performance by a staff of 11 psychologists trained to evaluate performance in the task (α = .93). Because the peer and staff criteria correlated very highly (.77 in Sample 1 and .81 in John & Robins, 1994), the staff criterion was omitted for Sample 2.

The third criterion was based on an objective task outcome: the amount of bonus money each subject obtained for his or her candidate. This criterion allowed us to rule out an alternative explanation of our earlier narcissism effects. Specifically, when narcissists evaluated their performance, they may have emphasized the egocentric task goal (trying to get the most money for their candidate) and ignored the other task goal (working toward a fair overall allocation). If narcissists succeeded in getting more bonus money and weighed this factor heavily in their self-evaluations, they would have appeared to overestimate their performance relative to the peer and staff judgments, which reflected the attainment of both task goals. Thus, the bonus criterion provided a stringent test of whether narcissists overestimate their performance.

**Results and Discussion**

**Self-evaluation accuracy**

Accuracy was defined by the correlation between the self-rankings and the performance criteria. The results supported the overall accuracy of the self-evaluations: We found strong correlations with the peer and staff criteria in both conditions, and weak but significant correlations with the bonus criterion. More important, did the self-evaluations become more accurate in the reversed-perspective condition? Although the accuracy correlations were indeed higher in the reversed-perspective condition, the differences between the correlations were small, and none reached significance (.57 vs. .51 for the peer criterion, .61 vs. .52 for the staff criterion, and .22 vs. .20 for the bonus criterion). These results do not support either the argument that visual perspective is central to self-perception accuracy (Kolar et al., 1996) or the prediction that self-judgments should agree more with judgments by others when self and others have similar information available (Kenny, 1991).

**General self-enhancement bias**

Bias was defined by directional deviations (i.e., over- vs. underestimation) from the criteria. Subjects generally overestimated their performance. Subjects in the normal-perspective condition evaluated their performance about one-half rank more positively than they were evaluated by their peers, t(123) = 3.7, p < .01; by the staff, t(49) = 2.1, p < .05; or relative to the bonus criterion, t(123) = 2.5, p = .01. The magnitude of this self-enhancement bias is similar to that found in our previous research (John & Robins, 1994).

**Effects of visual perspective and narcissism on self-evaluation**

Figure 1 shows self-evaluation as a function of visual perspective and narcissism. Hypotheses were tested using a repeated measures analysis of variance, with visual perspective (normal vs. reversed) as a withinsubjects factor and narcissism (low vs. high) as a between-subjects factor. There was no main effect of the visual-perspective manipulation, F < 1. Contrary to self-awareness theory, subjects did not evaluate themselves less positively when they viewed themselves from the perspective of an external observer. Instead, the general self-enhancement bias was equally strong from the two perspectives.

Next we consider the findings separately for the high- and low-narcissism groups. As predicted, high-narcissism individuals evaluated themselves more positively than low-narcissism individuals in both conditions, F(1, 122) = 8.2, p < .01. Did narcissists evaluate

![Fig. 1. Self-evaluation of performance as a function of visual perspective and narcissism. Low ranks imply better self-perceived performance. The “no bias” line is based on the mean of the three performance criteria and indicates what the mean self-ranking would have been if subjects’ self-evaluations were unbiased. N = 124.](image-url)
themselves more positively simply because they performed better? No. Narcissistic individuals did not perform better than less narcissistic individuals on any of the three performance criteria, all ts < 1.3. The finding that narcissists did not receive more bonus money for their candidates is particularly important because it replicates our previous research using a criterion based on an objective task outcome. Thus, differences in the self-evaluations of individuals high and low in narcissism cannot be attributed to differences in actual performance but must reflect biased self-perception. Figure 1 shows that the self-evaluations of high-narcissism individuals were positively biased relative to the mean criterion ranking, whereas low-narcissism individuals were relatively unbiased.

Most important, the effect of the visual-perspective manipulation depended on the subject's level of narcissism, as indicated by a significant interaction. $F(1, 122) = 6.0, p = .01$. Specifically, reversing visual perspective accentuated the effect of individual differences in narcissism, producing an even wider gap between the self-evaluations of high and low narcissists. The self-evaluations of high-narcissism individuals became even more positively biased in the reversed-perspective condition, whereas the self-evaluations of low-narcissism individuals became less positively biased and moved closer to the no-bias line. In correlational terms, individuals differences in narcissism predicted change in self-evaluation across the two visual-perspective conditions: Higher narcissism scores (using the NPI as a continuous variable) predicted increases in self-evaluation, $r = .28$, $p < .01$. All effects in Study 2 were independent of self-esteem.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The present research examined two influences on accuracy and bias in self-perception: the visual perspective from which individuals perceive themselves (a situational variable manipulated via videotape) and individual differences in narcissism (a person variable measured via questionnaire). Thus, this research integrates a situational variable from social-psychological theory with an individual difference construct from personality and clinical psychology. In both studies, we found evidence of a person-situation interaction (Caspí & Bem, 1990; Snyder & Ickes, 1985). Study 1 shows a proactive interaction (or selection) effect: Individuals often select situations that fit their personality. We found that narcissistic individuals seek out and enjoy situations (e.g., looking in the mirror) in which they can focus their attention on themselves. As a result, compared with less narcissistic individuals, they more often find themselves in situations that reinforce their grandiose self-perceptions. This form of situation selection may be one mechanism through which individuals form and maintain positively distorted self-perceptions.

Study 2 demonstrated a reactive person-situation interaction: Individuals often experience and react to the same situation differently. When we required subjects to focus attention on themselves (thus overriding the selection effect), they reacted differently than in the normal-perspective condition: Narcissists evaluated themselves in an even more positive manner, whereas nonnarcissists tended to see themselves more negatively. This reactive interaction effect is illustrated in the free-response comments subjects wrote after watching themselves on videotape. One of the low-narcissism subjects wrote: "I don't think I performed as well as I thought I did. The only impression I got from watching myself on videotape were the bad ones. It was quite a sobering experience." In contrast, a high-narcissism subject wrote: "I came across more or less the way I would want to: stern and compassionate, matter of fact, business-like and effective. I liked watching myself very much. Not too many surprises." It is clear from the tone of these comments that the two individuals experienced the situation quite differently.

Why did these two individuals react so differently to the experimental situation? More generally, why do people self-enhance? Self-enhancement bias is often seen as an attempt to regulate self-esteem, and our findings are consistent with the growing body of evidence supporting this claim. The present findings extend this research by showing that individuals continue to enhance their self-worth even when they are provided with all the information that is usually available only to an external observer: Seeing oneself from an external perspective is not sufficient to eliminate self-enhancement bias. Thus, self-enhancement bias cannot result solely from limitations in the information available to the self. Overall, then, our findings do not support a purely cognitive-informational view of self-perception bias, and they are not fully consistent with theories that conceptualize the self-perceiver as a scientist seeking out information in a dispassionate search for truth about the self (e.g., Bem, 1972; see Robins & John, in press, for a review of the scientist metaphor).

Instead, the findings seem more consistent with theories that conceptualize the self-perceiver as an egoist distorting information to enhance self-worth (e.g., Greenwald, 1980; Robins & John, in press). However, the apparent contrast between the scientist and egoist conceptions can be reconciled through an individual difference account: The scientist metaphor may better capture the self-perception processes of relatively nonnarcissistic individuals, whereas the egoist metaphor may be more appropriate for narcissistic individuals. Specifically, the motive to enhance self-esteem is stronger and more easily activated in narcissistic individuals because of their heightened sensitivity to threats to their aggrandized self-views. Study 2 showed that the most powerful drive toward self-enhancement occurred when narcissistic individuals evaluated themselves from an external perspective. This finding implies that the reversed-perspective condition served to activate the self-enhancement motive in narcissists, leading to even more inflated self-evaluations.

This interpretation is consistent with self-concept theories in which attentional processes play a central role in the self-regulation of behavior. These theories argue that the self-focused state triggers self-evaluative processes, and heightens awareness of the discrepancy between reality and internal standards. According to Carver and Scheier (1981), self-focus activates mechanisms that reduce discrepancies between one's perceived self and one's ideal self; discrepancies can be reduced by changing internal standards, modifying behavior, or distorting self-perceptions. The inflated internal standards of narcissists are unlikely to change, and the behavior in Study 2 could not be changed to fit the standard because the group discussion had already occurred when the self-evaluations were made. Thus, the only remain-
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ing option for regulating self-esteem was to distort self-perceptions to bring reality in line with narcissistic ideals.

In conclusion, although our manipulation of visual perspective altered the physical perspective of the self, it did not eliminate the motives that drive self-perception. Thus, even when subjects viewed themselves from the visual perspective of others, they still saw themselves from the emotionally charged perspective of the self. It is said that “seeing is believing,” but, as Santayana pointed out, people often see what they believe, rather than believe what they see. The present research suggests that narcissistic individuals are unable to truly see themselves as others see them because they are blinded by their need for self-worth. Thus, rather than reducing self-enhancement bias, allowing narcissistic individuals to observe themselves on videotape further increased their self-admiration, just as the mythical Narcissus admired his reflection in the pond.

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