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**An autobiographical gateway:
Narcissists avoid first-person visual perspective while retrieving self-threatening
memories**

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Abstract

This research examines the role of narcissistic versus genuine self-evaluation in the retrieval of self-threatening memories. Autobiographical memories can be retrieved either from a first-person or a third-person visual perspective. Because narcissism is linked to sensitivity to psychological threats, it should predict retrieval of self-threatening memories using the third-person perspective. Genuine self-esteem, on the other hand, is resilient to threats. Therefore, it should be associated with retrieving self-relevant, even if threatening, memories from the first-person perspective. In two experiments we measured narcissism and self-esteem. Experiment 1 manipulated valence of self-relevant memories by asking participants to recall self-threatening (shameful) or self-boosting (proud) situations. Experiment 2 manipulated self-relevance of negative memories by asking participants to recall self-threatening (shameful) or negative, yet not self-threatening (sad) situations. Visual perspective of memory retrieval served as the dependent variable. In Experiment 1, narcissism predicted avoiding the first-person perspective and employing the third-person perspective in self-threatening memories. Genuine self-esteem predicted employing the first-person perspective, regardless of the memories being self-threatening or self-boosting. In Experiment 2, narcissism predicted the third-person perspective, while genuine self-esteem predicted the first-person perspective when self-threatening memories were recalled. Neither narcissism, nor genuine self-esteem were associated with visual perspective when participants recalled negative memories irrelevant to the self. Results shed light on the role of self-evaluation in processing autobiographical memories.

Keywords: visual perspective, autobiographical memory, narcissism, self-esteem, emotion regulation

One remarkable feature of the human mind is a capability to travel back in time through one's life history. This process refers to autobiographical memory—a system consisting of semantic knowledge and personal experiences happening at specific places and times (Williams, Conway, & Cohen, 2008). Researchers have identified two major approaches of retrieving autobiographical memories: first-person and third-person visual perspectives (Nigro & Neisser, 1983). In the first-person perspective we picture situations “with our own eyes,” from the same viewpoint experienced at encoding. In the third-person perspective we can see ourselves in the memory, as if we were an observer visualizing past actions from an external vantage point.

Autobiographical memories which are in some way threatening are often retrieved from the third-person visual perspective (McIsaac & Eich, 2004). A frequently encountered explanation is that the third-person perspective serves as a distancing function that helps dampen the emotional impact of threatening events (Ayduk & Kross, 2010) or detach the past self from the present self (Sutin & Robins, 2008). The first-person visual perspective, on the other hand, has been presented as a mechanism of emotional amplification, automatically connecting the pictured event to the present self (Sutin & Robins, 2008). Thus, naturally evoked third-person perspective might serve as a response to psychological threat, especially when individuals have limited resources to deal with the threat otherwise. If this is the case, then the use of the third-person perspective should be related to one of the basic psychological determinants of responses to threats: self-evaluation.

In a study by Ross and Wilson (2002) participants with high (vs. low) self-esteem reported feeling greater distance from threatening experiences. Yet, Libby, Valenti, Pfent, & Eibach (2011; Study 1) found no significant association between self-esteem and the natural occurrence of visual perspective when recalling self-threatening memories. These authors, however, did not distinguish between self-evaluation that is narcissistic versus genuine. The

present studies take a closer look at the role of the two types of self-evaluation in retrieving self-threatening autobiographical memories.

Narcissism is an inflated self-evaluation associated with the need for external validation (Raskin & Terry, 1988). Narcissists are hypersensitive to criticism and defensive in response to ego threats (Horvath & Morf, 2009). Thus, we expect that when retrieving self-threatening memories narcissists would show a defensive need to avoid the first-person point of view and employ the third-person perspective. In contrast, genuine self-esteem without the narcissistic component is a well-anchored self-evaluation that can serve as a buffer against psychological threats (Paulhus, Robins, Trzesniewski, & Tracy, 2004). Thus, retrieving self-threatening memories among individuals with high genuine self-esteem might be associated with confronting negative emotions via the first-person perspective.

Narcissism and genuine self-esteem are both favorable forms of self-evaluation and are positively correlated. Following past research (Cichocka, Marchlewska, & Golec de Zavala, 2016; Paulhus et al., 2004), to distinguish their unique effects, we accounted for their shared variance. In this way, we were able to observe the effects of narcissism, minus its overlap with self-esteem, and vice-versa.

Experiment 1

Experiment 1 manipulated memory content by asking participants to recall events that were either self-threatening (i.e., shameful) or self-boosting (i.e., proud). Pride and shame differ in valence but are both relevant to the self (Tracy & Robins, 2004). We hypothesized that narcissism would predict adopting the third-person perspective when recalling self-threatening memories but the first-person perspective when recalling self-boosting memories. Genuine self-esteem, however, should predict adopting the first-person perspective regardless of the memory being self-boosting or self-threatening.

Method

Experiment 1 was conducted among 100 students (51 female), aged 18-35 years ($M=22.63$, $SD=3.20$) recruited in a university library. Sample size was predetermined as 50 participants per experimental condition (Simonsohn, Nelson, & Simmons, 2013).

Self-esteem and narcissism were measured first (counterbalanced)¹. We used Rosenberg's (1965) Self-Esteem Scale (Polish adaptation; Dzwonkowska, Lachowicz-Tabaczek, & Łaguna, 2008), with responses from 1=*completely disagree* to 5=*definitely agree* ($\alpha=.88$, $M=3.69$, $SD=0.77$), and the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (Raskin & Hall, 1979; 34-item Polish adaptation, Bazińska & Drat-Ruszczak, 2000), where participants rated statements representing narcissistic traits on a scale from 1=*Not at all like me* to 5=*Very much like me* ($\alpha=.91$, $M=3.10$, $SD=0.62$).

Then, participants were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions and were asked to describe memories associated with either self-threatening (shameful) or self-boosting (proud) social situation (Ross & Wilson, 2002; Study 3), that happened over the last year. Effectiveness of the manipulation was checked with one item measuring whether participants felt proud or ashamed while recalling the situation (1= *ashamed* to 11= *proud*). Four participants who failed to describe a memory or respond to the manipulation check were excluded (final $n=96$; 46 in the self-threat condition, 50 in the self-boost condition).

Finally, visual perspective was measured with one item: "When recalling the described event, did you see the event through your own eyes (first-person perspective) or as

¹ In both experiments results remained similar when we did not exclude any participants.

Presentation order did not moderate the effects.

an outside observer (third-person perspective)?” on a scale from -3=*own eyes (first-person) perspective* to +3=*outside observer (third-person) perspective* (Rice & Rubin, 2009; Study 1), recoded into a 1-7 scale with higher scores indicating stronger third-person perspective ($M=3.15, SD=2.24$)².

Results and discussion

Self-esteem and narcissism were positively correlated, $r(94)=.43, p<.001$. Third-person perspective was positively correlated with narcissism, $r(94)=.21, p=.046$, but not with self-esteem, $r(94)=-.07, p=.48$.

A check on the effectiveness of the manipulation revealed that participants in the self-boost condition felt more proud ($M=8.86, SD=1.74$) than participants in the self-threat condition ($M=3.61, SD=1.93$), $t(94)=14.04, p<.001, d=2.86$.

We performed a hierarchical multiple regression analysis to investigate the effects of recalling self-relevant threatening versus boosting memories on visual perspective in interaction with self-esteem and narcissism. Continuous variables were mean-centered. Experimental conditions were coded -1=self-boost and 1=self-threat. In Step 1, we investigated the main effects of the experimental condition, self-esteem and their interaction on visual perspective. In Step 2 we introduced narcissism and the two-way interaction of the experimental condition with narcissism (Table 1).

Table 1

Experiment 1 Predictors of Third-Person Visual Perspective

² For both Experiments we report all measures, manipulations, and exclusions (see Supplement for remaining measures and analyses).

Variables	Step 1			Step 2		
	<i>B(SE)</i>	<i>BCI</i> _{95%}	<i>p</i>	<i>B(SE)</i>	<i>BCI</i> _{95%}	<i>p</i>
Condition	-0.35(0.23)	-0.81,0.10	.13	-0.34(0.21)	-0.76,0.09	.12
Self-esteem	-0.21(0.30)	-0.80,0.39	.49	-0.64(0.31)	-1.26,-0.03	.04
Condition×Self-esteem	0.12(0.30)	-0.47,0.72	.68	-0.24(0.31)	-0.85,0.38	.45
Narcissism				1.33(0.40)	0.54,2.13	.001
Condition×Narcissism				1.11(0.40)	0.32,1.91	.01
<i>F</i>	1.01		.39	3.69		.004
<i>R</i> ²		0.03			0.17	

Only once we co-varied out narcissism, did genuine self-esteem predict the first-person perspective, regardless of the self-relevant memory being boosting or threatening. Narcissism predicted the third-person perspective, but this effect was moderated by the experimental condition. Narcissism significantly predicted the third-person perspective in the self-threat condition, but not in the self-boost condition (see Figure 1 for simple slopes). We also analyzed the effects of the experimental condition for different levels of narcissism using PROCESS (Hayes & Matthes, 2009; Johnson & Neyman, 1936). The self-threat condition significantly negatively predicted the third-person perspective for narcissism lower than 3.02. For higher values the relationship was not significant, but it became significantly positive for values higher than 4.43.

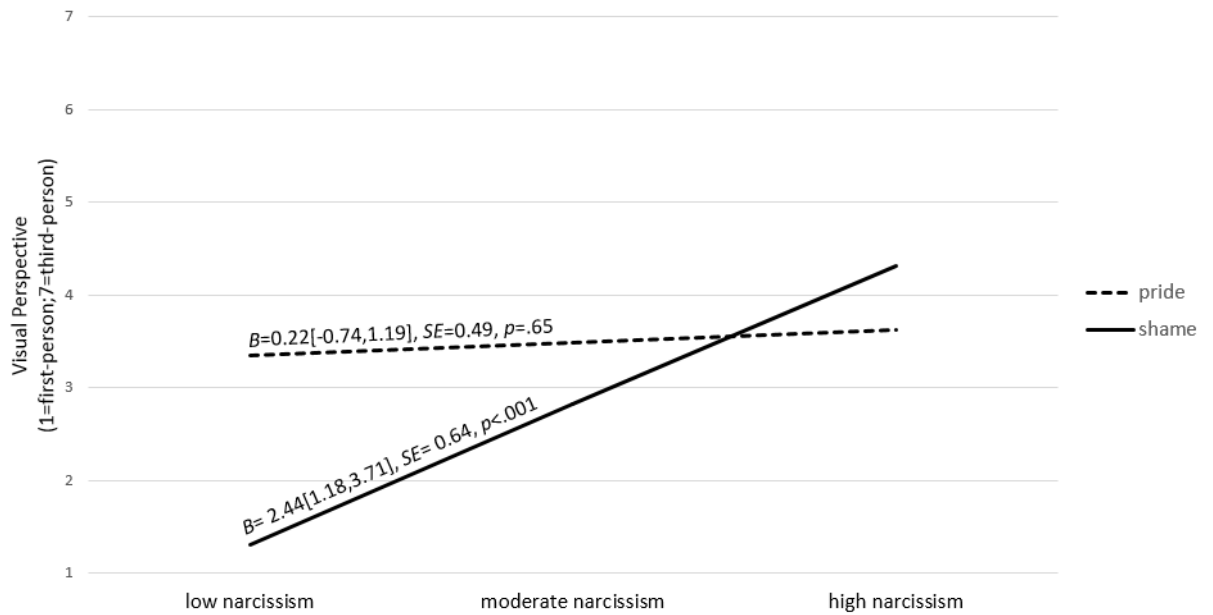


Figure 1. Interaction effect of experimental condition and narcissism on visual perspective.

Narcissism predicted avoiding the first-person perspective and adopting the third-person perspective when recalling self-threatening memories of shame. Narcissism also positively predicted the third-person perspective in proud memories, although this effect was not significant. This finding might reflect the fact that narcissists use the external perspective generally more often than non-narcissists (Robins & John, 1997), which could have counteracted the inclination to see proud memories from the first-person perspective. External perspective gives narcissists not only an opportunity to distort information about themselves when facing threats (reflecting self-protection motives), but also to ensure positive situations are seen favorably (reflecting self-enhancement motives; Robins & John, 1997).

Experiment 2

Experiment 2 examined whether the results of Experiment 1 are specific to self-relevant memories. Therefore, we focused on a different set of emotions: sadness and shame. These emotions do not differ in valence but shame is a self-relevant emotion and sadness is

not (Fischer & Tangney, 1995). We hypothesized that narcissism should predict the third-person perspective in the context of self-threatening (i.e., shameful) memories but not in the context of negative, yet not self-relevant (i.e., sad) memories. Genuine self-esteem should predict the first-person perspective in the context of self-relevant, threatening memories, but not necessarily in the context of negative yet not self-relevant ones. We additionally tested whether our hypotheses would be supported when considering memories that are not assumed to be social.

Method

Experiment 2 was conducted among 116 Mturk workers (58 female), aged 18-70 years ($M=30.74$, $SD=10.16$). Sample size was determined with GPower based on the R^2 from Experiment 1 for the significant interaction assuming power of .80.

First, we measured self-esteem as in Experiment 1, with Rosenberg's scale ($\alpha=.88$, $M=3.97$, $SD=0.64$) and narcissism as in Experiment 1, with 40 items of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (Ang & Yusof, 2006; Raskin & Hall, 1979; $\alpha=.93$, $M=2.96$, $SD=0.57$; counterbalanced).

Then, participants were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions and asked to describe memories of situations that happened over the last year. Participants in the self-threat condition recalled situations in which they felt ashamed. In the control condition they recalled situations in which they felt sad.

Effectiveness of the manipulation was checked with one item measuring whether participants felt sad or ashamed while recalling the situation. (1=*sad* to 11=*ashamed*). Three participants who failed to describe a memory or respond to the manipulation check were excluded (final $n=113$; 56 in the self-threat condition, 57 in the control condition). Finally,

participants completed the same measure of visual perspective as in Experiment 1 ($M=2.83$, $SD=2.02$).

Results and discussion

Self-esteem and narcissism were positively correlated, $r(111)=.32$, $p<.001$. Neither self-esteem, $r(111)=-.05$, $p=.59$, nor narcissism, $r(111)=-.001$, $p=.99$, were significantly associated with visual perspective.

We checked the effectiveness of the experimental manipulation. Participants reported being less ashamed in the control condition ($M=2.58$, $SD=2.09$) than in the self-threat condition ($M=7.93$, $SD=2.50$), $t(111)=12.36$, $p<.001$, $d=2.32$.

Like in Experiment 1, we conducted a regression analysis with mean-centered continuous variables. Experimental conditions were coded -1=control and 1=self-threat. In Step 1, we investigated the main effects of the experimental condition, self-esteem and their interaction on visual perspective. In Step 2 we introduced narcissism and the two-way interaction of the experimental condition with narcissism (Table 2).

Table 2

Experiment 2 Predictors of Third-Person Visual Perspective

Variables	Step 1			Step 2		
	<i>B(SE)</i>	<i>BCI</i> _{95%}	<i>p</i>	<i>B(SE)</i>	<i>BCI</i> _{95%}	<i>p</i>
Condition	0.20(0.19)	-0.18,0.57	.30	0.19(0.19)	-0.19,0.55	.32
Self-esteem	-0.18(0.30)	-0.77,0.41	.55	-0.34(0.31)	-0.95,0.28	.28
Condition×Self-esteem	-0.42(0.30)	-1.01,0.17	.16	-0.71(0.31)	-1.33,-0.09	.02
Narcissism				0.21(0.35)	-0.49,0.91	.55
Condition×Narcissism				0.92(0.35)	0.23,1.62	.01

<i>F</i>	1.14	.34	2.11	.07
<i>R</i> ²	0.03		0.09	

Both interaction effects were significant. Narcissism significantly predicted the third-person perspective in the self-threat condition, but not in the control condition (see Figure 2 for simple slopes). Furthermore, the self-threat condition significantly negatively predicted the third-person perspective for narcissism lower than 1.77. For higher values the relationship was not significant, but it became significantly positive for values higher than 3.20.

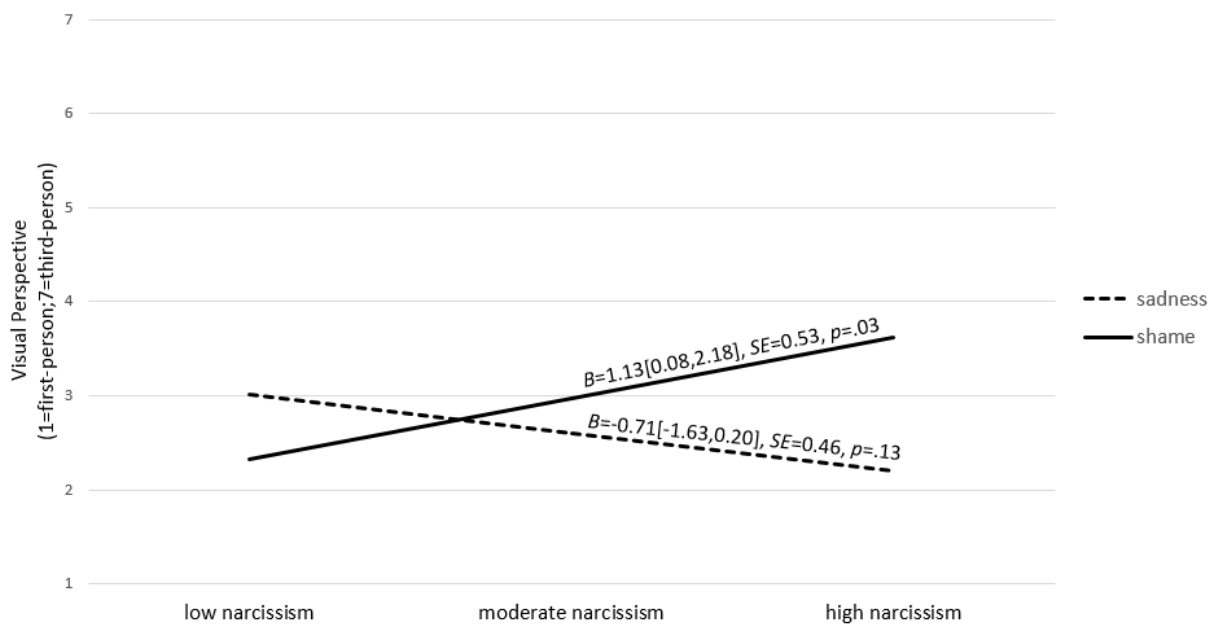


Figure 2. Interaction effect of experimental condition and narcissism on visual perspective.

Self-esteem significantly predicted the first-person perspective in the self-threat condition, but not in the control condition (see Figure 3 for simple slopes). Furthermore, the self-threat condition significantly positively predicted the third-person perspective for self-esteem lower than 3.64. For higher values the relationship was not significant.

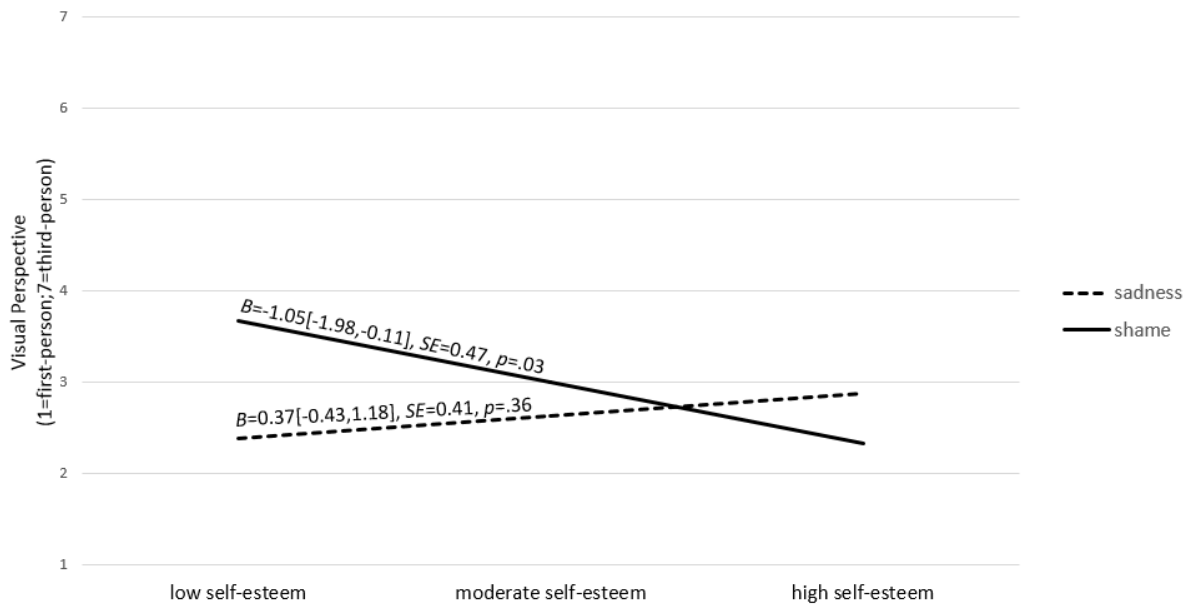


Figure 3. Interaction effect of experimental condition and self-esteem on visual perspective.

Experiment 2 confirmed that narcissism predicted adopting the third-person perspective in the context of self-threatening (shameful) memories but not in the context of negative memories which were not threatening to the self (sad). Genuine self-esteem predicted recalling self-relevant (even if threatening) memories from the first-person perspective but no such effect was found with respect to negative memories irrelevant to the self.

General Discussion

Two experiments examined visual perspectives adopted in recalling self-threatening memories by individuals with narcissistic versus genuine self-evaluation. In Experiment 1 narcissism predicted adopting the third-person perspective when recalling self-threatening memories of shame but not when recalling self-boosting memories of pride. In Experiment 2 narcissism predicted adopting the third-person perspective when recalling negative memories only if these memories were self-threatening (shameful), but not if they were irrelevant to the self (sad). In line with past research (Libby et al., 2011), self-esteem alone was not associated with visual perspective. However, after we co-varied out narcissism, genuine self-esteem

without the narcissistic component predicted greater likelihood of retrieving self-relevant memories from the first-person perspective, regardless of them being positive or negative.

These results are in line with the assertion that adopting the third-person perspective is an attempt to downplay the impact of past emotions and distance oneself from them (Ayduk & Kross, 2010; Williams & Moulds, 2007). If the first-person perspective assures emotional amplification or directs individuals to re-live past experience, then only people high in genuine self-esteem, who are generally less sensitive to psychological threats, should be able to face shameful events in this manner. In the case of narcissists, retrieving shameful memories via the first-person perspective might be simply too threatening to the self. Although Katzir and Eyal (2013) suggest that coping with shame via self-distanced perspective may not be generally beneficial, it might be natural for those individuals who are not equipped with any other buffer against psychological threats. Still, we cannot conclude that narcissistic third-person visualizations leads to effective coping with negative feelings in the long-term. Rather, it may be a form of a defensive mnemonic distortion that temporarily reduces discrepancies between narcissists' perceived versus ideal self (Robins & John, 1997).

In conclusion, the present research demonstrates different effects of narcissism and genuine self-esteem on adopting visual perspectives when facing autobiographical threats. It also highlights the importance of analyzing the underpinnings of natural tendency to recall memories via first-person versus third-person visual perspectives. Future studies should explore immediate and long-term consequences of both visual perspectives among people high in narcissism versus genuine self-esteem. Does recalling self-threatening memories via the third-person perspective help narcissists free themselves from a threatening past? Or does it backfire by increasing the impact of the threatening event? These questions await further empirical investigation.

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