Untangling the Links between Narcissism and Self-esteem: A Theoretical and Empirical Review

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Abstract

The links among narcissism, explicit (deliberate, controllable) self-esteem, and implicit (automatic, uncontrollable) self-esteem are unclear despite numerous attempts to illuminate these links. Some investigations suggest that narcissism reflects high explicit self-esteem that masks low implicit self-esteem, but other investigations fail to replicate this pattern. Here, we place the 'mask' model of narcissism in historical context and review the existing empirical evidence for this model. We then discuss three possible issues that might shed light on the inconsistent findings that have emerged from tests of the mask model. These issues include the unreliability of implicit attitude measures, narcissism's different associations with agentic versus communal self-views, and distinctions between grandiose and vulnerable narcissism subtypes. We also summarize several alternatives to the mask model of narcissism. Throughout, we offer suggestions for improving the study of narcissism and self-esteem and point to directions for future research on this topic.

> Now he worships at an altar of a stagnant pool
> And when he sees his reflection, he's fulfilled.
> Oh, man is opposed to fair play,
> He wants it all and he wants it his way.
>
> – Bob Dylan, 1983, *License to Kill*

In Greek mythology, Narcissus was a tragically vain hero who rejected the love of others and instead fell in love with his own reflection in a pond. Today, in homage to the fabled Narcissus, we use the term 'narcissist' to describe individuals whose vanity, grandiosity, self-centeredness, and sense of entitlement are disproportionately inflated, often with debilitating consequences for their interpersonal functioning. After all, a relationship

partner who 'wants it all and ... wants it his way' will soon grow wearisome to those who prefer 'fair play'.

Despite – or perhaps because of – their infuriatingly grandiose sense of self-worth, narcissists continue to fascinate theorists, researchers, and laypersons alike. One question that elicits much debate is that of the narcissist's *real* self-esteem. Do narcissists truly hold the self in such dizzyingly high regard, or does their high self-esteem merely mask underlying – perhaps even non-conscious – feelings of inferiority?

In this paper, we summarize some of the recent empirical research that explores this question and identify possible causes for the inconsistent findings that have emerged from this work. Such possible causes include the unreliability of measurement instruments, differences in the ways that researchers define and measure self-esteem, and the possibility of distinct subtypes of narcissism that relate differently to self-esteem. We also consider the links between narcissism and other models of fragile self-esteem and discuss possible directions for future work. Our goal is to provide a broad overview of social and personality psychology research on narcissism and self-esteem and, within the limits of the available data, quantify the relationship between narcissism and self-esteem. We begin by summarizing classic psychodynamic and current social-personality accounts of narcissism.

Narcissism and the 'Mask' Model of Self-esteem

The starting points for discussing narcissism and its relation to 'real' self-esteem are the classic psychodynamic works of Freud (1914), Kohut (1966, 1977), and Kernberg (1975). According to popular interpretations of these works, narcissism can be explained via a 'mask' model in which the narcissist's surface-level grandiosity masks deep-seated feelings of inferiority. However, early psychodynamic accounts of narcissism are more complex and varied than implied by the mask model. Indeed, the mask model of narcissism is not readily apparent in all of Freud's writings, although it does become apparent in Kohut's work and is relatively clear in Kernberg's.

According to Freud (1914), narcissism results when the individual attaches too much libido (psychic energy) to the ego (self) and too little to his or her internalized representations of significant relationship partners. Thus, the individual develops high levels of self-regard and low levels of regard – or love – for others. When the disparity between regard for self versus others becomes extreme, psychological problems arise: 'A strong egoism is a protection against falling ill, but in the last resort we must begin to love in order not to fall ill, and we are bound to fall ill if ... we are unable to love' (Freud, 1986; p. 28). Freud's (1931) later work on libidinal types noted that, despite narcissists' insufficient regard for others, they often make good leaders because their grandiosity manifests in a dominant, agentic interpersonal style.

Kohut (1966, 1977) saw narcissism not as a result of misplaced psychic energy, but instead as a normal stage of development occurring in infancy and early childhood (Kohut & Wolf, 1986). Under normal circumstances, infants in the stage of narcissism receive admiration from their parents (a process called *mirroring*) and, in exchange, idealize their parents (a process called *idealization*). These processes diminish over time as the child matures and develops a stable and autonomous self. When the needs for admiration and idealization are not met, however, disorders of narcissism can arise. For example, when mirroring needs are not met, the individual develops a 'mirror–hungry' tendency to seek admiration from others; when idealization needs are not met, the individual develops an 'ideal hungry' tendency to associate with idealized others. In this model, narcissistic disorders reflect a weakened, understimulated, empty, and feeble underlying sense of self that emerges when the individual experiences self-esteem threats or similar stressors (Kohut & Wolf, 1986).

Finally, the mask model is relatively evident in Kernberg's (1986) analysis of narcissism. Kernberg viewed narcissistic grandiosity as an acquired defense against 'a hungry, enraged, empty self, full of impotent anger at being frustrated, and fearful of a world which seems as hateful and revengeful as the patient himself' (p. 219). The cause of this 'hungry, enraged, empty self' was inadequate parenting or, more specifically, parental figures who conveyed coldness and hostility toward the child.

Thus, what these psychodynamic accounts all share is an image of narcissism that includes a grandiose self-concept and its resulting difficulties in relational functioning. With regard to the deep-seated feelings of inferiority that are central to the mask model, they are either relatively absent (Freud), inconsistent and labile (Kohut), or decidedly negative (Kernberg). When traditional psychodynamic thought entered the social-personality realm, much of the meta-theoretical baggage and terminology were dropped. What remained was an updated version of the mask model: Narcissistic personality tendencies reflect the individual's continual efforts to maintain grandiose (but fragile) self-views that mask deep-seated feelings of inferiority rooted in early interpersonal experiences (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001; Tracy & Robins, 2003).

More specifically, much current social–personality psychological thinking converges on the following account of narcissism (or some close approximation thereof). As a result of inadequate and insensitive parenting early in life, some individuals develop painful feelings of shame and low self-esteem. To protect against these feelings, narcissists suppress them and, in their stead, construct highly positive self-views that they maintain through a variety of personal and interpersonal strategies. Such strategies include viewing the self as superior to others (John & Robins, 1994), overestimating and exaggerating their positive qualities (Gabriel, Critelli, & Ee, 1994; Paulhus, 1998), derogating others (Morf & Rhodewalt, 1993), and manipulating their romantic partners (Campbell, Foster, & Finkel, 2002), to name a few.

Importantly, the narcissist's 'disorder' stems from the conflict between two contradictory sets of beliefs about the self: deep-seated feelings of inferiority, and surface-level feelings of superiority that keep the narcissist unaware of her or his self-loathing, but that require continual reinforcement (see also Akhtar & Thomson, 1982).

Testing the Mask Model

To test the mask model, social-personality psychologists typically measure people's feelings of self-esteem in two different ways – overtly and covertly – and then look to see whether these differently measured views of self-esteem jointly predict people's scores on the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Hall, 1979, 1981). Before proceeding, we note that social and personality psychologists generally (though not always) define *self-esteem* as a global, affective evaluation of the self that can range anywhere from very negative to very positive (Rosenberg, 1965). Thus, testing the mask model involves measuring both deliberate, controllable feelings toward the self (often called *explicit self-esteem*), and automatic, uncontrollable feelings toward the self (often called *implicit self-esteem*). The mask model predicts that people who score high on the NPI should reveal very high levels of explicit self-esteem combined with relatively low levels of implicit self-esteem.

Measuring explicit self-esteem poses little problem, as standard questionnaire measures are generally sufficient for capturing people's explicit evaluations of their self-worth. Thus, researchers can simply ask people to indicate their agreement with statements that depict varying levels of self-regard (e.g., 'I feel that I am a person of worth, at least on an equal basis with others'; Rosenberg, 1965). Not surprisingly, correlations between explicit self-esteem and the NPI are consistently positive (Campbell, 1999a).

People's automatic feelings of self-esteem are a bit trickier to measure. According to some perspectives, these feelings defy verbal description (Epstein, 1994), making them difficult, if not impossible, to assess via self-reports. Other perspectives suggest that people lack insight into their automatic attitudes toward the self (Koole & Pelham, 2003) and thus cannot report accurately on these feelings. Still, others propose that people are aware of their implicit attitudes toward the self but may be reluctant to reveal these attitudes on self-report instruments (Olson, Fazio, & Hermann, 2007). Thus, researchers interested in implicit self-esteem typically utilize unobtrusive assessment tools that capture people's automatic responses and circumvent their efforts to control the impressions they make.

Although there are numerous possible unobtrusive measures of self-esteem (for summaries see Bosson, Swann, & Pennebaker, 2000; Fazio & Olson, 2003), we focus here on two popular ones: the Implicit Association Test (IAT; Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998) and the Name Letter Task (NLT; Kitayama & Karasawa, 1997; Koole, Dijksterhuis, & van Knippenberg, 2001). Below, we provide brief descriptions of how these instruments work.

The IAT uses a response–mapping procedure in which respondents categorize words presented on a computer screen as quickly and accurately as possible. Specifically, respondents distinguish between *pleasant* and *unpleasant* words (e.g., sunshine, love, agony, and evil) as well as between *self* and *not-self* words (e.g., I, me, they, and them). During the critical phases of the task, respondents make both discriminations (*pleasant* vs. *unpleasant*, *self* vs. *not-self*) on alternate trials using only a single pair of response keys. In one phase, *self* and *unpleasant* words share a response key, whereas *not-self* and *pleasant* words share another response key. During this phase, the categorization task should be relatively difficult for people with high implicit self-esteem because they do not automatically associate the self with negative stimuli. As such, people with high self-esteem should respond relatively slowly. In the other critical phase, *self* and *pleasant* words share a response key, whereas *not-self* and *unpleasant* words share the other response key. This task – associating the self with positive stimuli – should be relatively easy for people with high implicit self-esteem, and thus, their responses should be faster during this phase. Implicit self-esteem is calculated by subtracting average response times during the phase when *self* and *pleasant* words share a response key, from average response times during the phase when *self* and *unpleasant* words share a key. Because respondents do not necessarily know what is being measured or what their responses reveal when they complete the IAT, this instrument presumably bypasses most people's ability to present a falsely positive self (Do–Yeong, 2003; Steffens, 2004; but see Fiedler & Bluemke, 2005, for evidence that people can 'fake' the IAT).

The NLT is based on the idea that people's self-relevant feelings 'leak' onto objects and stimuli that are closely associated with the self, such as their name initials (Nuttin, 1985, 1987). Thus, by presenting people with the 26 letters of the alphabet and asking them to rate how much they like each letter, researchers can calculate how favorably people feel about their own initials relative to the average popularity of those letters. The resulting difference score presumably provides insight into people's affective reactions to the self (Koole et al., 2001). As with the IAT, people do not necessarily know what is being measured when they rate their name initials, and they are therefore unlikely to distort their responses so as to portray a favorable self-image.

As noted, the mask model suggests that narcissists' grandiosity will result in high scores on measures of explicit self-esteem, whereas their underlying feelings of inferiority will result in relatively low scores on unobtrusive self-esteem instruments such as the IAT and NLT. Consistent with the mask model, Jordan et al. found that the interaction between explicit self-esteem and implicit self-esteem – as measured by the IAT – indeed predicted narcissistic tendencies (Jordan, Spencer, Zanna, Hoshino-Browne, & Correll, 2003). Specifically, individuals with the combination of high explicit self-esteem and low implicit self-esteem reported the highest levels of narcissism (i.e., NPI scores) overall, higher than the narcissism levels
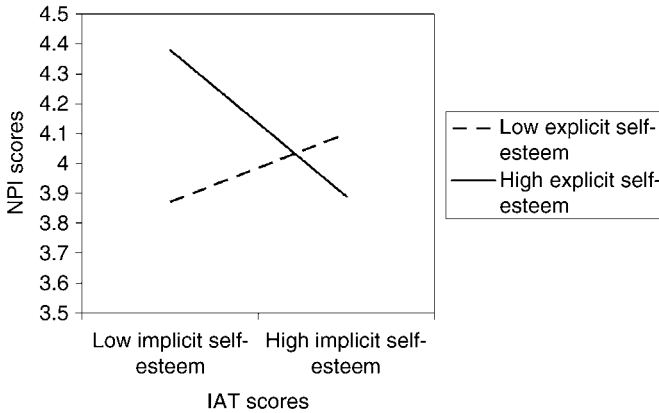
Figure 1 Narcissism (NPI scores) as a function of explicit self-esteem and implicit self-esteem (the IAT) in Jordan et al. (2003).
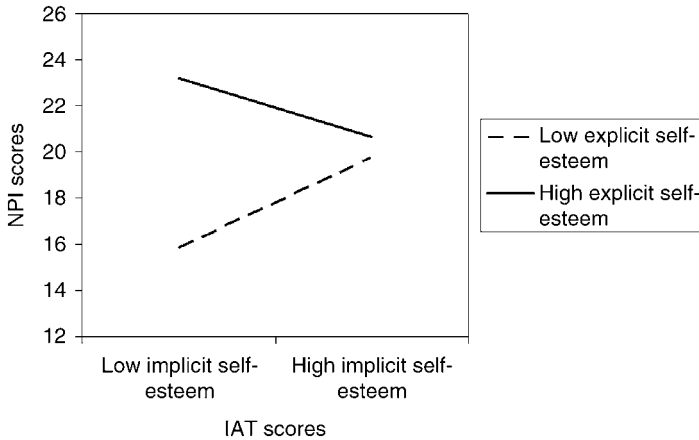

Figure 2 Narcissism (NPI scores) as a function of explicit self-esteem and implicit self-esteem (the IAT) in Zeigler-Hill (2006).

associated with any other combination of explicit and implicit self–esteem. In contrast, individuals who were high in both explicit and implicit self–esteem reported levels of narcissism no different from those reported by individuals low in explicit self-esteem. Similar findings were obtained by Zeigler–Hill (2006), who also used the IAT to assess implicit self–esteem. The patterns found by Jordan et al. and Zeigler–Hill, depicted here in Figures 1 and 2, respectively, provide straightforward support for the mask model of narcissism.

It is worth noting, though, that the mask model only specifies that narcissists have grandiose self–views that mask deeper insecurities. The model does not specify what *non*–narcissists' explicit and implicit self-esteem
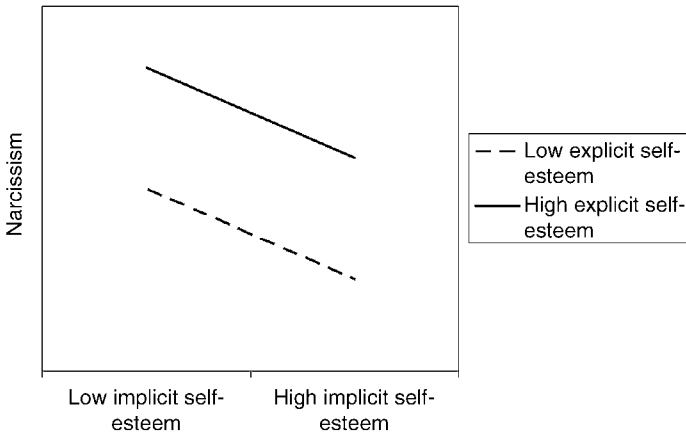
Figure 3 A schematic depiction of the links between explicit self-esteem and implicit self-esteem and narcissism, according to Gregg and Sedikides (2008).

should look like. On this basis, Gregg and Sedikides (2008) argued that there is no theoretical rationale for assuming that explicit and implicit self-esteem will *interact* to predict narcissism (the pattern depicted in Figures 1 and 2). Instead, these authors' interpretation of the psychodynamic literature suggests that explicit and implicit self-esteem should predict narcissism independently and in opposite directions. As shown in Figure 3, this position holds that explicit self-esteem should relate positively to narcissism at both high and low levels of implicit self–esteem, and implicit self-esteem should relate negatively to narcissism at both high and low levels of explicit self-esteem.

Whether researchers hypothesize an interaction pattern (as in Figures 1 and 2) or a main effects pattern (as in Figure 3), empirical tests of the mask model have yielded puzzlingly inconsistent findings. For example, Campbell, Bosson, Goheen, Lakey, and Kernis (2007) found no support for the mask model, despite using all of the same measures that Jordan et al. (2003) used. Similarly, the pattern predicted by the mask model did not emerge in an investigation by Bosson and Prewitt–Freilino (2007), which used the NLT to capture implicit self-esteem. Several unpublished data sets also failed to produce the patterns obtained by Jordan et al. (2003), Zeigler-Hill (2006), and Gregg and Sedikides (2008).

To get an estimate of the overall strength of the available empirical support for the mask model, we conducted several meta-analyses. One set of meta–analyses examined the relations between narcissism and IAT-measured implicit self-esteem, and another set examined the relations between narcissism and NLT-measured implicit self-esteem. Based on data collected from 1006 respondents, we found no simple relation between narcissism and IAT scores ($r = 0.06$, $p > 0.27$; see Table 1). Similarly, data

Table 1   Meta-analyses of relations of narcissism with the IAT and the IAT × explicit self-esteem interaction

Study	Status	n	$r_{\text{bivariate}}$	$r_{\text{interaction}}$
Boldero (2007)	Unpublished	104	0.28	0.27
Boucher (2007)	Unpublished	60	−0.25	−0.19
Bosson (2000)	Unpublished	80	0.11	−0.03
Campbell et al. (2007, Study 1)	Published	154	0.13	0.13
Campbell et al. (2007, Study 2)	Published	114	0.21	0.10
Gregg & Sedikides (2008)	Unpublished	188	0.01	−0.05
Jordan et al. (2003)	Published	57	–	−0.26
Rosenthal (2007)	Unpublished	91	−0.22	0.04
Zeigler-Hill (2006)	Published	120	0.03	−0.27
Zeigler-Hill (2007a)	Unpublished	95	0.17	−0.03
	Total	1006	0.06 (*ns*)	
	Total$_n$	1063		−0.02 (*ns*)

Note: Meta-analyses for all bivariate relations were calculated as the weighted average correlations between respective variables. In meta-analyses of relations between narcissism and interaction terms, we used the centered cross-product term where available, as regression values generally suffer from issues of interpretability and 'are usually not comparable across studies' (Hunter & Schmidt, 2004; p. 193). Total *r* equals the weighted average effect size. For more details about all of the meta-analyses reported in this paper, contact W. Keith Campbell at wkeithcampbell@gmail.com.

Table 2   Meta-analyses of relations of narcissism with the NLT and the NLT × explicit self-esteem interaction

Study	Status	n	$r_{\text{bivariate}}$	$r_{\text{interaction}}$
Bosson (1997)	Unpublished	113	0.01	−0.07
Bosson (1998)	Unpublished	79	0.16	−0.31
Bosson (2000)	Unpublished	79	0.15	−0.10
Bosson & Prewitt-Freilino (2007)	Published	148	0.17	−0.05
Goodie et al. (2007)	Unpublished	200	0.10	0.01
Gregg & Sedikides (2008)	Unpublished	115	0.05	0.03
Lakey et al. (2007)	Unpublished	136	0.16	−0.05
Kernis et al. (2004b)	Unpublished	101	0.10	−0.10
Zeigler-Hill (2006)	Published	120	0.03	−0.04
Zeigler-Hill (2007a)	Unpublished	95	−0.08	−0.03
	Total	1186	0.09**	−0.06*

Note: Total *r* equals the total weighted average effect size. *$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$.

from 1063 respondents yielded no evidence of an interaction between explicit self-esteem and IAT scores in predicting narcissism ($r = -0.02$, $p > 0.73$; see Table 1). In contrast, as shown in Table 2, data from 1186 respondents yielded a weak positive relation between narcissism and NLT
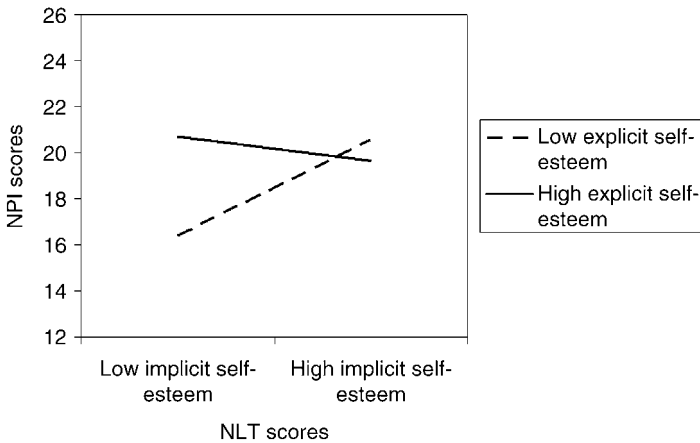
Figure 4   Narcissism (NPI scores) as a function of explicit self-esteem and implicit self-esteem (the NLT) in Bosson (1998).

scores ($r = 0.09$, $p < 0.01$), and a weak but significant interaction between explicit self-esteem and NLT scores in predicting narcissism ($r = -0.06$, $p < 0.04$). The nature of this interaction is illustrated in Figure 4 (based on Bosson, 1998, the dataset with the strongest interaction effect). Note that this pattern differs from those depicted in Figures 1 to 3, as it shows an interaction in which similarly high narcissism scores are associated with all combinations of high and low explicit and implicit self-esteem except the low explicit/low implicit combination. Thus, there does not seem to be consistent overall support for the mask model.

What might account for the inconsistent findings that have emerged across tests of the mask model? Is the model itself flawed or incomplete? Or, alternatively, are there inconsistencies in how different researchers test this model? In the following sections, we consider several possible explanations for the apparent 'moodiness' of the link between narcissism and self-esteem. These explanations include the relatively weak psychometric properties of implicit self-esteem measures, subtle differences in the ways that researchers conceptualize and measure self-esteem, and the possibility of multiple types of narcissism that relate differently to self-esteem.

(Un)reliability of Implicit Self-esteem Measures

One possible reason that tests of the mask model produce inconsistent findings is the unreliability of implicit, relative to explicit, measures of self-esteem. Whereas explicit self-esteem measures display strong psycho-metric properties – including excellent convergent validity, test-retest reliability, and predictive validity – implicit self-esteem measures make a relatively poor showing on these indices (see Bosson et al., 2000). For

Table 3   Meta-analyses of bivariate relations between the IAT and NLT

Study	Status	*N*	*r*~bivariate~
Bosson (2000)	Unpublished	78	−0.20
Gregg & Sedikides (2008)	Unpublished	118	−0.03
Zeigler-Hill (2006)	Published	120	−0.05
Zeigler-Hill (2007a)	Unpublished	95	0.20
	Total	411	−0.02 (*ns*)

Note: Total *r* equals the total weighted average effect size.

instance, although the IAT and NLT presumably measure the same underlying construct, they are often uncorrelated with each other. Indeed, when we examined the correlations between IAT and NLT scores from 411 respondents, we found no relation between these measures ($r = -0.02$, $p > 0.81$; see Table 3). Moreover, although these two implicit self-esteem measures exhibit decent (though far from excellent) test–retest reliabilities (hovering around 0.65), they fare much worse than explicit self-esteem measures when it comes to predicting theoretically relevant outcome variables (Bosson et al., 2000). Finally, some theorists argue that the standard scoring method for the IAT involves several untested statistical assumptions, and data that do not meet these assumptions may yield invalid IAT scores (for a detailed analysis of this issue, see Blanton, Jaccard, Gonzales, & Christie, 2006).

If implicit self–esteem measures are indeed unreliable and/or based on questionable statistical assumptions, then researchers cannot necessarily expect the data produced by these measures to conform consistently to any particular pattern. In fact, subtle differences in the contexts in which researchers administer implicit measures, or differences in respondents' moods, physical or cognitive states, or immediate prior experiences when they complete these measures, may alter respondents' implicit self-esteem scores from one administration to the next (see Blair, 2002, for a review of context effects in implicit attitude measures). Even changes in the wording of implicit measures can have profound effects on respondents' scores. As an example, changing the comparison category in the IAT from *not-self* to *best friend*, *boyfriend*, or *girlfriend* substantially reduced respondents' resulting implicit self-esteem scores (Karpinski, 2004). To be fair, the IAT's sensitivity to context may be viewed as a strength rather than a weakness of this measure. Nonetheless, to the extent that certain contextual features – such as respondents' affective states and immediate prior experiences – are difficult to manage and control, the IAT and other highly sensitive implicit self–esteem measures are likely to produce inconsistent findings from one administration to the next.

Note, though, that as interest in implicit attitudes grows, researchers develop new instruments and refine existing ones with the goal of improving their reliability and predictive validity (e.g., Greenwald, Nosek, & Banaji, 2003; Karpinski & Steinman, 2006; Nosek & Banaji, 2001). Directions for future research thus include testing the mask model with new implicit attitudes instruments and working to refine further the measurement of implicit self-esteem.

Narcissism and Agentic versus Communal Self-views

Another possible reason for the inconsistent findings from studies of narcissism and implicitly measured self-esteem is that, in using different implicit measures to test the mask model, researchers may unwittingly assess different aspects of the self. Indeed, given that they do not correlate with each other, it is reasonable to assume that the various implicit self-esteem instruments capture either different aspects of self-esteem, or self-views that are distinct from self-esteem. If so, it is possible that narcissists possess deep-seated feelings of inferiority along *specific dimensions* of the self, rather than possessing deep-seated, *global* feelings of inferiority. This possibility would suggest that the pattern predicted by the mask model will only emerge when researchers use implicit measures that assess these specific self-views.

If narcissists have specific negative implicit beliefs about the self, it is likely that these beliefs pertain to their communal qualities rather than their agentic ones. Generally speaking, *agency* reflects traits of surgency, extraversion, action, competence, and skill, whereas *communion* reflects traits of agreeableness, warmth, nurturance, kindness, and affection. According to Bakan (1966), who first coined these terms, agentic traits distinguish the individual from others, whereas communal traits connect the individual to the larger social structure. Given narcissists' tendencies toward self-aggrandizement and other-derogation, it is not surprising that they tend to exhibit high levels of agency and low levels of communion.

This general pattern, in which narcissism is linked to high levels of agency and relatively low levels of communion, can be traced back to some of Freud's (1931) writings. More recent models of narcissism – including Campbell's (1999b) self-orientation model, Paulhus's (2001) minimalist model, and Campbell et al.'s agency model (Campbell, Brunell, & Finkel, 2006; Campbell & Foster, 2007; Campbell & Green, 2007) – also distinguish between narcissists' self-views in agentic versus communal domains. A consistent finding in this literature is that narcissism is positively associated with high levels of agency, and either negatively associated, or uncorrelated, with communion.

Moreover, this pattern cuts through a wide range of personality and social functioning. For example, this pattern is evident in narcissism's link to broad personality traits including agency derived from Jackson's (1974)

Personality Research Form (Bradlee & Emmons, 1992), extraversion/ surgency on John and Srivastava's (1999) Big Five Inventory (Paulhus & Williams, 2002), and extraversion on Costa and McCrae's (1992) NEO Personality Inventory (Miller & Campbell, forthcoming). Each of these studies also found negative or no correlations with, respectively, communion, agreeableness, and NEO agreeableness. This pattern is also evident on projective personality tests where, for example, narcissism correlates positively with nPower as measured by the Thematic Apperception Test, but negatively with nIntimacy (Carroll, 1987). Finally, this personality pattern is found in clinical samples of individuals who are diagnosed with symptoms of Narcissistic Personality Disorder (Saulsman & Page, 2004).

The agency/communion pattern is also evident in narcissists' social behaviors. For example, narcissists are relatively more attracted to high status relationship partners, who elevate their own social status, than they are to warm and caring partners who offer affection (Campbell, 1999b). With regard to sex, narcissists' view of sexuality emphasizes themes of power, dominance, risk, and the gratification of physical needs as opposed to closeness, love, trust, and the gratification of emotional needs (Foster, Shrira, & Campbell, 2006). Also reflecting an agentic stance, narcissists exhibit relatively high levels of competitive behavior and low levels of cooperation in a commons dilemma (a social situation in which individual gains occur at a cost to the larger group; Campbell, Bush, Brunell, & Shelton, 2005).

In the domains of self-esteem and self-enhancement, narcissism is consistently associated with agency. Narcissism correlates more strongly with explicit measures of self-esteem to the extent that these measures assess social dominance (Brown & Zeigler-Hill, 2004), and narcissism predicts the 'better-than-average-effect' more strongly for agentic, as opposed to communal, traits (Campbell, Rudich, & Sedikides, 2002).

Given such consistent evidence that narcissists value agency and devalue communion, researchers who seek narcissists' underlying negativity may do well to measure their implicit communal self-views rather than their implicit global self-esteem. In fact, implicit measures that do *not* distinguish between self-views in agentic versus communal domains may produce inconsistent findings such as those that currently plague the literature. In an initial test of this idea, Campbell et al. (2007) created two new IATs, one of which measures people's implicit self-evaluations along agentic dimensions (e.g., assertive, active, dominant vs. reserved, submissive, inhibited) and the other of which measures implicit self-evaluations along communal dimensions (e.g., kind, cooperative, affectionate vs. mean, quarrelsome, grouchy). Using these IATs, Campbell et al. found that narcissism was positively related to implicit agency and unrelated to implicit communion. More recently, Lakey et al. replicated this pattern with NLTs that were modified to capture agentic versus communal implicit self-views (Lakey, Campbell, Bosson, Young, & Goodie, 2008).

Although Campbell et al. (2007) and Lakey et al. (2008) did not conduct direct tests of the mask model, their approach may illuminate some of the findings that have emerged from other tests of this model. For instance, Campbell et al. had people rate the set of pleasant and unpleasant IAT words used by Jordan et al. (2003) along the dimensions of agency and communion. Although many of Jordan et al.'s IAT words are irrelevant to themes of communion (e.g., holiday, sunshine, agony, and vomit), several of them reflect this dimension rather strongly (e.g., friend, love, smile, warmth, and evil). Indeed, raters perceived substantially more communal than agentic themes in these words, which suggests that Jordan et al.'s IAT may have measured people's implicit self-views related to communion rather than their implicit self-esteem *per se*. A similar case can be made for the IAT used by Zeigler-Hill (2006), which contained many of the same words as Jordan et al.'s. Thus, researchers who do not find evidence of the mask model may be using implicit measures that capture agentic communal self-views.

If this logic is correct, then a modified version of the mask model may be in order. Rather than narcissism reflecting high explicit self-esteem combined with low implicit self-esteem, perhaps narcissism reflects positive self-views in agentic domains, combined with relatively negative or neutral self-views in communal domains. That is, narcissists may not be haunted by deep-seated feelings of inferiority in general. Rather, they may possess deep-seated, negative (or relatively negative) beliefs about their kindness, warmth, and ability to form loving connections with others. This hypothesis presents an interesting avenue for future research.

Grandiose and Vulnerable Narcissism

A third potential reason for the inconsistent findings across tests of the mask model concerns the possibility of different types of narcissism. Thus far, most investigations of the mask model focus primarily on what is known as *grandiose narcissism*. Numerous theorists suggest, however, that there is a second narcissistic subtype referred to as *vulnerable narcissism* (Akhtar & Thomson, 1982; Cooper, 1998; Dickinson & Pincus, 2003; Gabbard, 1989; Gersten, 1991; Hendin & Cheek, 1997; Kohut, 1971; Rathvon & Holmstrom, 1996; Rose, 2002; Røvik, 2001; Wink, 1991). In contrast to the overt arrogance and self-absorption that characterize grandiose narcissism, the vulnerable subtype is characterized instead by self-reported feelings of inferiority, general dissatisfaction with the self, shame-proneness, and high levels of reactivity to evaluative events (Cooper & Ronningstam, 1992; Gabbard, 1989; Gramzow & Tangney, 1992; Rose, 2002).

At first glance, it may seem counterintuitive to propose a form of narcissism characterized by low self-esteem. However, the narcissistic features of the vulnerable subtype become clearer on further inspection.

First, although they are often too inhibited to act on their desires, vulnerable narcissists tend to have grandiose fantasies about themselves (Cooper & Ronningstam, 1992). Second, vulnerable narcissists – like their grandiose counterparts – often have feelings of entitlement and are willing to exploit others for their own gain. These core features of vulnerable narcissism suggest that despite their low self-esteem, vulnerable narcissists have much in common with grandiose narcissists. Note, however, that vulnerable narcissists conceal these grandiose feelings and behavioral tendencies beneath a façade of inhibition, modesty, and concern for others, whereas grandiose narcissists do not bother to do so. Thus, a fundamental difference between the narcissistic subtypes is that grandiose narcissists regulate their self-esteem via overt bids for admiration and respect, whereas vulnerable narcissists crave approval from others but are too insecure to demand it (Dickinson & Pincus, 2003; Pimentel, Ansell, Pincus, & Cain, 2008).

Note, of course, that the image of narcissism portrayed by the mask model is one of grandiose narcissism, as this model stipulates a self-aggrandizing explicit self. In testing the mask model, however, most researchers use a measure of narcissism (the NPI) that captures elements of both grandiose and vulnerable narcissism. Specifically, many researchers treat the NPI as a unidimensional measure of grandiose narcissism, despite the fact that the NPI's underlying factor structure indicates three factors that correlate positively with explicit self-esteem (Leadership/Authority or LA, Superiority/Arrogance or SA, Self-Absorption/Self-Admiration or SS) and one factor that correlates negatively with explicit self-esteem (Exploitativeness/Entitlement or EE; see Emmons, 1984, 1987). If the NPI captures distinct narcissistic subtypes that relate differently to self-esteem, then treating the NPI as a unidimensional index may obscure or distort the links between narcissism and self-esteem.

To address this possibility, researchers could measure grandiose and vulnerable narcissism separately in tests of the mask model. One way to do this is to treat the NPI factors that correlate positively with self-esteem (LA, SA, and SS) as indicators of grandiose narcissism and the factor that correlates negatively with self-esteem (EE) as an index of vulnerable narcissism (Bosson & Prewitt-Freilino, 2007; Gramzow & Tangney, 1992). This approach has the benefit of being straightforward, but it may fail to capture the complexity of the narcissistic subtypes because it relegates tendencies toward exploitation and entitlement to the vulnerable subtype, although both subtypes presumably possess these qualities (Pimentel et al., 2008). Another approach, proposed by Hibbard and Bunce (1995), involves defining grandiose narcissism as high scores on all of the NPI factors and defining vulnerable narcissism as high scores on EE and low scores on LA, SA, and SS. This method accounts for the common core of narcissism (i.e., exploitation and entitlement), but it requires a very large number of participants during the first stage of the selection process so as to ensure enough individuals with the requisite combinations of scores on the

different NPI factors. Finally, other methods of assessing vulnerable narcissism include Hendin and Cheek's (1997) Hypersensitive Narcissism Scale and Pimentel et al.'s (2008) Vulnerable Narcissism Scale.

In terms of testing the mask model, the benefits of distinguishing between grandiose and vulnerable narcissism are currently unknown. Nonetheless, we view this as a viable direction for future research. Differentiating grandiose from vulnerable narcissism would allow researchers to examine whether vulnerable narcissism moderates the links between explicit and implicit self-esteem and grandiose narcissism. For instance, the combination of high explicit and low implicit self-esteem might indeed underlie grandiose narcissism, but primarily among individuals who are low in vulnerable narcissism. At the very least, controlling for vulnerable narcissism would allow for the creation of a 'pure' measure of grandiose narcissism that may relate more consistently to high explicit and low implicit self-esteem. Finally, some theorists posit even more distinctions between narcissism subtypes, beyond the grandiose/vulnerable distinction (Miller & Campbell, forthcoming). Honing in on the various subtypes of narcissism represents yet another fruitful avenue for future research.

Narcissism vs. Other Models of Fragile Self-esteem

Thus far, we have focused our analysis on accounts of narcissism that posit discrepancies between explicit and implicit beliefs and feelings about the self. This focus reflects a conceptualization of narcissism that currently receives much attention from social and personality psychologists. However, several other theoretical approaches also shed light on the links between narcissism and self-esteem while avoiding the theoretical and empirical messiness of the mask model. Given their potential usefulness in explaining narcissistic self-regulation, we now turn our attention to a brief discussion of these approaches.

Several theoretical accounts of self-esteem propose a distinction between *fragile* and *secure* high self-esteem. Whereas fragile high self-esteem is easily threatened, requires constant validation, and is maintained through self-deception, secure high self-esteem reflects honest self-acceptance and feelings of self-worth that are robust in the face of challenge (for a review, see Kernis, 2003). According to some theorists, fragile high self-esteem results when people stake their self-worth on their ability to achieve specific outcomes or match specific standards (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001; Deci & Ryan, 1995). Two different approaches to understanding this type of *contingent* fragile self-esteem exist. One approach holds that everyone has contingent self-esteem, but that people differ in the particular domains on which they base their self-esteem (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001). The other approach holds that there are meaningful individual differences in the overall extent to which people possess contingent versus non-contingent self-esteem (Deci & Ryan, 1995; Kernis, 2003). Research supports both

approaches, revealing that while people do differ in the specific domains on which they base their self-esteem, there are also meaningful differences in the overall degree to which people's self-esteem is contingent (Kernis, Lakey, & Heppner, forthcoming).

High self-esteem that is contingent on one's accomplishments and outcomes is considered fragile because it cannot be maintained in the face of failure or weakness (Deci & Ryan, 1995; Kernis, 2003). As such, people with contingent high self-esteem experience dramatic drops in self-esteem when they perform poorly in valued domains (Crocker, Sommers, & Luhtanen, 2002). Note that contingent high self-esteem bears many likenesses to descriptions of the narcissistic personality. Indeed, some have suggested that narcissists' feelings of high self-esteem are contingent on their ability to garner attention and admiration from others (Crocker & Park, 2004; Morf & Rhodewalt, 1993, 2001; Rhodewalt & Sorrow, 2003). However, narcissism is not associated with *overall* increases in contingent self-esteem. A meta-analysis based on five unpublished datasets that included both the NPI and the Contingent Self-esteem Scale (Paradise & Kernis, 1999, as reported in Kernis & Goldman, 2006) showed no significant relation between narcissism and overall contingent self-esteem ($r = -0.06$, $p > 0.11$; see Table 4). Instead, narcissism is positively associated with contingent self-esteem in competitive domains and negatively associated with contingent self-esteem in affiliative domains (Crocker, Luhtanen, Cooper, & Bouvrette, 2003; Zeigler-Hill, Clark, & Pickard, forthcoming). Thus, although narcissism is unrelated to overall differences in contingent self-esteem, it does predict a tendency to stake one's worth on achievements in agentic domains that will (presumably) earn one admiration. Future research might explore more thoroughly the agentic domains upon which narcissists are likely to base their self-esteem (e.g., dominance, competition, and outperforming others).

The self-esteem instability model developed by Kernis et al. (for a review, see Kernis, 2005) is also relevant to the distinction between fragile and secure high self-esteem. According to this model, people vary in the extent

Table 4 Meta-analyses of bivariate relations between narcissism and contingent self-esteem

Study	Status	n	$r_{bivariate}$
Kernis et al. (2004a)	Unpublished	150	−0.10
Kernis et al. (2004b)	Unpublished	101	0.05
Kernis et al. (2005a)	Unpublished	62	−0.13
Kernis et al. (2005b)	Unpublished	113	−0.01
Piasecki & Kernis (2004)	Unpublished	128	−0.15
	Total	554	−0.06 (*ns*)

Note: Total r equals the total weighted average effect size.

to which their self-esteem is stable versus unstable across time. Although people with *unstable* high self-esteem exhibit a high baseline level of self-esteem, they experience more transient fluctuations in state self-esteem (more changes in moment-to-moment feelings of self-worth) than do those with stable high self-esteem (Kernis, Cornell, Sun, Berry, & Harlow, 1993). Unstable high self-esteem is therefore considered fragile because of its high reactivity to events that challenge the self.

Like individuals with unstable high self-esteem, narcissists also display heightened levels of emotional reactivity to events that have evaluative implications for the self (Westen, 1990). For example, the self-esteem of narcissists is highly reactive to interpersonal (Rhodewalt, Madrian, & Cheney, 1998) and achievement-related (Zeigler-Hill, Clark, & Myers, 2008) events in their daily lives. Note, however, that narcissism and unstable high self-esteem are not synonymous. For instance, narcissists possess self-esteem that is unrealistically inflated, whereas unstable high self-esteem is poorly anchored but not necessarily inflated (Kernis, 2001). This difference between narcissism and self-esteem instability may explain why the relationship between these constructs emerges in some studies (Rhodewalt et al., 1998) but not others (Webster, Kirkpatrick, Nezlek, Smith, & Paddock, 2007; Zeigler-Hill, 2006). To address this association more systematically, we conducted two meta-analyses based on data from 1349 respondents in nine unpublished samples and two published studies that included measures of narcissism and self-esteem instability. The results indicated no overall relationship between narcissism and self-esteem stability ($r = -0.01$, $p > 0.64$; see Table 5). Likewise, self-esteem level and stability did not interact in predicting narcissism ($r = -0.04$, $p > 0.18$; see

Table 5 Meta-analyses of relations of narcissism with self-esteem (in)stability and the self-esteem (in)stability × explicit self-esteem interaction

Study	Status	n	$r_{bivariate}$	$r_{interaction}$
Brown et al. (2004)	Unpublished	194	−0.03	−0.06
Kernis et al. (2004a)	Unpublished	143	−0.02	−0.12
Kernis et al. (2004b)	Unpublished	101	−0.03	0.15
Kernis et al. (2005a)	Unpublished	62	−0.01	0.17
Kernis et al. (2005b)	Unpublished	113	0.10	−0.14
Piasecki & Kernis (2004)	Unpublished	128	−0.15	0.02
Webster et al. (2007)	Published	105	−0.12	−0.12
Zeigler-Hill (2006)	Published	120	0.12	−0.05
Zeigler-Hill (2007a)	Unpublished	95	−0.03	−0.03
Zeigler-Hill (2007b)	Unpublished	124	0.12	−0.04
Zeigler-Hill et al. (2007)	Unpublished	164	−0.08	0.05
	Total	1349	−0.01 (*ns*)	−0.04 (*ns*)

Note: Total r equals the total weighted average effect size.

Table 5), indicating that people with unstable high self–esteem are not necessarily also high in narcissism. Future research might therefore explore more closely the specific domains of functioning in which narcissists exhibit reactive, unstable high self–esteem.

Summary, a Few Additional Points, and Conclusions

The mask model of narcissism offers an appealing answer to the question of why narcissists behave as they do: Narcissists self–aggrandize, manipu–late, derogate, and exploit because 'deep down inside' they actually dislike themselves. Not only does this answer make intuitive sense to many, it also fits nicely with current thinking about the limitations of people's introspective access to their own inner selves (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977). Unfortunately, as we have detailed here, the data do not support the mask model as cleanly as one would hope.

We suggested three issues that might interfere with researchers' ability to locate robust support for the mask model. These include the limitations of implicit attitudes measures, the possibility that narcissists' negative underlying self–views pertain primarily to their communal qualities, and the existence of distinct subtypes of narcissism that relate differently to self–esteem. At present, each of these issues suggests numerous avenues for future work, and we have highlighted several specific questions that we believe merit pursuit.

In addition, we discussed two alternative approaches to the study of narcissism that reflect different conceptualizations of the distinction between fragile and secure self–esteem. While sharing the mask model's basic assump–tion that narcissists' grandiosity is inherently fragile, these other approaches attribute such fragility to the contingent or unstable nature of narcissists' high self–esteem, respectively, rather than to narcissists' implicit negative self–views.

Note also that there exist some larger possibilities that we did not address here. One such possibility is that the NPI, despite its popularity, does not do a very good job of capturing the underlying fragility that theoretically characterizes narcissism. As noted earlier, theorists interested in vulnerable narcissism have recently developed new instruments for assessing this construct. Perhaps it is time to turn attention to refining the measurement of grandiose narcissism as well.

Another possibility is that the mask model is wrong, and narcissists are *not* plagued by underlying self–doubts. This idea is consistent with Millon's (1981) social learning theory of narcissism, which posits that narcissists' grandiosity arises from parental pampering and overindulgence, rather than coldness and neglect, early in life. Although we focused primarily on the mask model here, we recognize that the social learning model may very well explain some cases of narcissism. In fact, the incon–sistent findings we summarized here may reflect the fact that some narcissists have underlying self–doubts, whereas others simply do not.

Finally, it is possible that implicit self-esteem may be relevant to narcissistic behavior in a manner that is not predicted by the mask model. To illustrate, McGregor, Nail, Kocalar, and Haji (2007) explored how people who scored high on the NPI related to others differently depending on their levels of implicit self-esteem. Their findings revealed that, after receiving praise, narcissists with low implicit self-esteem showed less empathy toward suffering others. Narcissists with high implicit self-esteem, in contrast, were not any more or less empathic after receiving praise. Thus, whereas some narcissists have low implicit self-esteem, others have relatively high implicit self-esteem, a pattern that the mask model does not explain. Moreover, differences in narcissists' levels of implicit self-esteem may predict different patterns of interpersonal responsiveness. We suspect that additional investigations into the links between implicit self-esteem and narcissism will shed further light on the logic behind narcissistic self-regulation.

The advent of implicit measures of self-esteem offered great promise for testing the mask model of narcissism, and early published results seemed to confirm a straightforward interpretation of that model. As exciting as these findings are, our meta-analyses show that this pattern is neither robust nor easy to replicate. Thus, whereas the fable of Narcissus from which narcissists derive their name is fairly uncomplicated, the study of narcissism is not. Nonetheless, we remain optimistic that implicit measures of self-esteem can facilitate a more nuanced understanding of narcissism, and we hope that the questions and ideas presented here will help guide future research in this area. If recent research trends are any indication, social and personality psychologists are up to the challenge of uncovering the real links between narcissism and self-esteem.

Short Biography

Jennifer Bosson's research addresses the links among self, identity, and social functioning. Within this broad area, she studies topics such as the social construction of gender, the consequences of role violations, the effects of stereotypes on their targets, explicit and implicit measurement of self-esteem, and the role of social support in recovery from self-threats. Bosson has published her research in journals such as *Psychological Science*, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, and *Self and Identity*, and has contributed chapters to several handbooks and edited volumes. Before assuming her current position as Assistant Professor at the University of South Florida, she held positions at Vassar College and the University of Oklahoma. Bosson received her BA from Wesleyan University, and her MA and PhD in Social-Personality Psychology from the University of Texas at Austin.

W. Keith Campbell, Associate Professor of Psychology at the University of Georgia, has conducted research on a range of self-processes, including

narcissism, self-esteem, entitlement, and self-control. He has also written a book on narcissism and interpersonal relationships, *When You Love a Man Who Loves Himself: How to Deal with a One-way Relationship* (Sourcebooks Casablanca, 2005). His current research is on the construct of narcissism and its interpersonal consequences in a range of social settings. He holds a BA from U.C. Berkeley, an MA from San Diego State University, and a PhD from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Christian Jordan approaches the study of self-esteem and self-concept from a social cognitive perspective. Much of his research focuses on exploring the relations between implicit and explicit self-esteem and how they relate to self-relevant behavior and motivations. He has published articles in this area in leading journals, such as the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* and *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, and in influential book series such as the Ontario Symposium and the Ohio State University Series on attitudes (forthcoming). Christian is an Assistant Professor in the Psychology Department at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, Ontario, where he teaches social psychology and research methods. He holds a PhD in Social and Personality Psychology from the University of Waterloo.

Michael Kernis' research focuses on understanding the causes and consequences of fragile versus secure self-esteem, individual differences in authentic functioning, and mindfulness. The overarching goal of this research is to better understand optimal psychological and interpersonal functioning. His research has appeared in major journals such as *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*; *Psychological Inquiry*; *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*; *Journal of Personality*, *Psychological Science*, *Self and Identity*; and *Journal of Research in Personality* and he has written chapters for a variety of handbooks, encyclopedias, and edited volumes. Comprehensive reviews of his work appear in such outlets as *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* (Academic Press, 1995; Elsevier Press, 2006), *Psychological Inquiry* (2003), and a special issue of *Journal of Personality* (December 2005). His research has been funded by both the National Science Foundation and the National Institutes of Mental Health. He is editor or coauthor of three books, the most recent of which was published in 2006 by Psychology Press (*Self-esteem Issues and Answers: A Sourcebook of Current Perspectives*). He holds a PhD in Social Psychology from the University of Rochester and currently is Professor of Psychology and Research Fellow in the Institute for Behavioral Research at the University of Georgia.

Chad E. Lakey is a PhD candidate in Psychology at the University of Georgia. His research examines issues related to the self and identity, including narcissism and self-esteem, and their roles in judgment and decision-making biases, defensive social behaviors, and psychological functioning. He holds a BS from Western Carolina University and a MS from the University of Georgia.

Virgil Zeigler-Hill conducts research concerning self-esteem and the structure of the self-concept; he has authored or co-authored articles in

these areas for publications such as the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *Journal of Personality*, and *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*. His current research is focused primarily on the status–signaling properties of self-esteem. Before coming to the University of Southern Mississippi, where he is an Assistant Professor, Zeigler-Hill earned a PhD in Social–Personality Psychology from the University of Oklahoma.

Endnote

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