

Narcissistic admiration and rivalry in the context of personality metatraits



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ABSTRACT

Narcissism is a puzzling construct containing many apparent paradoxes. The Narcissistic Admiration and Rivalry Concept represents an attempt to deconstruct some of these paradoxes. In this paper, we relate admiration and rivalry to the personality metatraits, i.e., Plasticity and Stability, in an attempt to demonstrate that the metatrait concept offers an interesting way of framing why admiration seems to be profitable for individuals, whilst rivalry appears to have a net cost. Based on previous studies, we examined how admiration and rivalry were related to self-esteem, impulsivity and personality traits in two prospective studies involving a total of 719 adults. Our results are consistent with those of Back et al. (2013). Additionally, we demonstrated that admiration is composed of extraversion and openness to experience, thus representing the Plasticity (Beta) metatrait, and rivalry is composed of agreeableness, emotional stability and conscientiousness and thus corresponds to the Stability (Alpha) metatrait. In the terminology of the circumplex model of personality metatraits, rivalry can be conceived as the opposite of Stability: Alpha-minus. We suggest that rather than being disagreeable extraverts, narcissists are Unstable Plastics.

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1. General controversies around narcissism

Narcissism is typically described as a pervasive pattern of grandiosity, a need for admiration and a lack of empathy (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Raskin and Hall (1979) introduced the Narcissistic Personality Inventory to measure individual differences in narcissism as a personality trait that is present in the general population. There is also general agreement on the differentiation of vulnerable narcissism (pathological narcissism) from grandiose narcissism (the form of narcissism found in the general population) (Miller et al., 2011). In this paper, “narcissism” refers to grandiose narcissism, conceived as a personality trait.

Research on narcissism frequently reports paradoxical results regarding the correlates of narcissism. Narcissism can be described as at least partially adaptive because the exaggerated, grandiose view of the narcissistic self is positively associated with self-esteem, social boldness, charm and a craving for attention; however, it is also maladaptive because it is associated with impulsiveness, aggression, or a strong sense of entitlement (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001; Vazire & Funder, 2006).

The dual nature of narcissism is reflected in the inconsistencies of the empirical research. For instance, most studies indicate that narcissism is positively associated with self-esteem (see Brummelman, Thomaes, & Sedikides, 2016 for review), and some studies have reported a positive relationship between narcissism and aggression (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998). Donnellan, Trzesniewski, Robins, Moffitt, and Caspi (2005) argued that aggressive behaviour is related to low self-esteem and that hence, narcissism represents a contradiction as it is correlated with both positive self-esteem and aggression. However, narcissism is not equal to inflated and explicit self-esteem (Brummelman et al., 2016). For example, narcissism correlates negatively with implicit self-esteem and positively with explicit self-esteem (Gregg & Sedikides, 2010).

Another inconsistency concerns impulsivity. In a meta-analysis of research on narcissism and impulsivity, Vazire and Funder (2006) concluded that impulsivity was almost always positively correlated with narcissism and should therefore be recognised as an important component of narcissism. In contrast, Miller et al. (2009) reported that narcissism is related only to extraversion-based impulsivity (i.e., sensation-seeking) and not to a narrower, conscientiousness-based definition of impulsivity (i.e., lack of perseverance).

Various patterns of relationship between narcissism and the Five Factor Model (FFM; McCrae & Costa, 2003) of personality traits have been reported. Narcissism is most frequently associated with high

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extraversion and low agreeableness (Paulhus, 2001). Extraversion is defined as a combination of friendliness, honesty and gregariousness, which are associated with sociability, while disagreeableness is indicative of distrust, selfishness and reluctance to cooperate, which are associated with poor socialisation (McCrae & Costa, 2003). Even taking into account the assertive aspect of extraversion, extraversion is still a far more adaptive characteristic than disagreeableness. A definition of narcissism that encompasses both extraversion and disagreeableness impedes, rather than facilitates, attempts to distinguish between adaptive and maladaptive narcissism.

To summarise, the pattern of relationship between narcissism and self-esteem, impulsivity and personality traits is inconsistent. The most important ambiguity concerns the extent to which narcissism is pathological or adaptive in a given individual; this led Paulhus (1998) to describe narcissism as a “mixed blessing”.

1.1. Explaining role of narcissistic admiration and rivalry

Recently, Back et al. (2013) proposed the Narcissistic Admiration and Rivalry Concept (NARC), which could account for these ambiguities. The main goal of the narcissist is to maintain a grandiose self, and there are two different social strategies for doing so: self-enhancing admiration and self-defensive rivalry. The admiration strategy is associated with grandiose fantasies, striving for uniqueness and charming behaviour. In terms of social interaction outcomes, this strategy results in social potential that boosts the ego of the narcissist, which makes narcissists appealing as short-term acquaintances (Paulhus, 1998). The rivalry strategy is characterised by devaluing and diminishing other people, by striving for uniqueness and by aggressive behaviour. In terms of social interaction, this strategy results in social conflict, which threatens the ego.

Back et al. (2013) provided evidence that separating narcissism into admiration and rivalry shed new light on the relationships between narcissism and its correlates. They showed that admiration was positively related to self-esteem, while rivalry was negatively correlated. The distinction between admiration and rivalry can also be used to explain why narcissism is positively associated with both high self-esteem and aggression. Bushman and Baumeister (1998) concluded that narcissists respond to perceived threats with aggression, whereas Donnellan et al. (2005) reported a negative relationship with self-esteem and aggression. This is, in effect, a recapitulation of the rivalry strategy, which is associated with low self-esteem and in which ego-threatening situations elicit aggressive behaviour. Thus, one can conclude that both Donnellan et al. (2005) and Bushman and Baumeister (1998) were referring to narcissistic rivalry.

Back et al. (2013) resolved the controversy over the relationship between narcissism and impulsivity (Miller et al., 2009; Vazire & Funder, 2006) by arguing that although admiration was not associated with impulsivity, rivalry was. Thus, Vazire and Funder (2006) were right to claim that impulsivity is part of narcissism (as it is a component of narcissistic rivalry), and Miller et al. (2009) were also correct in claiming that impulsivity is not always associated with narcissism.

1.2. Narcissism in the context of personality metatraits

Back et al. (2013) provided evidence that narcissists' functioning as disagreeable extraverts is related to two narcissistic dimensions, in which only admiration was related to extraversion, and only rivalry was related to disagreeableness. Rogoza, Wyszyńska, Maćkiewicz, and Ciecuch (2016) analysed the relationship between NARC dimensions and FFM traits using structural equation modelling and found that extraversion was the strongest predictor of admiration and disagreeableness was the strongest predictor of rivalry (which replicated the results that Back et al. (2013) found using a different method); however, admiration was also predicted by intellect, and rivalry was also predicted by low conscientiousness and emotional stability. The FFM

personality traits explained 39% and 30% of the shared variance in admiration and rivalry, respectively, which suggests that narcissism is a complex construct involving more than extraversion and disagreeableness (Rogoza et al., 2016).

The relationships between narcissism and personality traits can also be interpreted in the context of FFM metatraits. Digman (1997) noticed that although FFM traits are supposed to be orthogonal, there is considerable covariance among them. This covariance has been attributed to two higher-order metatraits: the first comprises agreeableness, conscientiousness and neuroticism, and the second comprises extraversion and openness. These two metatraits have been labelled Stability (Alpha: low neuroticism, high agreeableness and high conscientiousness) and Plasticity (Beta: high extraversion and high openness to experience; DeYoung, Peterson, & Higgins, 2002). Additionally, some researchers have interpreted the observed correlation between Stability and Plasticity as the expression of the General Factor of Personality (GFP), which is localised at the top of the personality hierarchy and could be described as a socially desirable mix of basic traits associated with self-esteem and a prosocial attitude (Musek, 2007; Strus, Ciecuch, & Rowiński, 2014); however, there is no agreement within the literature regarding whether the GFP is the crown of the hierarchy or a method artefact (Muncer, 2011; Musek, 2007). The association between the GFP and narcissism (measured using the total score obtained from the Narcissistic Personality Inventory) was investigated by Kowalski, Vernon, and Schermer (2016), but no significant correlation was found.

Because admiration is associated primarily with extraversion, but also with intellect, one might assume that it is linked to Plasticity. Rivalry is negatively associated with conscientiousness and low emotional stability as well as agreeableness; therefore, it may represent a counterpart to the Stability metatrait. Agreeableness, which is a component of Stability, is associated with stable functioning in social interactions, cooperativeness and honesty (Goldberg, 1999). Individuals with a strong sense of rivalry who aggressively seek to diminish others are on the opposite pole of Stability. One can conclude that the admiration strategy is the product of a general pattern that relates exploration and adaptation to novelty and change, whereas the rivalry strategy is the product of antagonistic tendencies aimed at controlling one's environment by devaluing others. Because the GFP is associated with positive outcomes (Musek, 2007), its lack of an observed correlation with narcissism (Kowalski et al., 2016) may be related to the lack of differentiation between two faces of narcissism; i.e., admiration, which can have positive outcomes and may be positively related to the GFP, and rivalry, which can have negative outcomes and may be negatively related to the GFP.

The recently proposed circumplex model of personality metatraits (Strus et al., 2014) may offer a novel perspective on narcissistic admiration and rivalry. This model synthesises previous work on the FFM of personality and resolves the associated problems (Strus et al., 2014). The model posits Alpha (Stability) and Beta (Plasticity) metatraits supplemented by a Gamma metatrait representing a global personality factor and a Delta metatrait that was introduced to address the circular character of the model and solve some theoretical problems. The model has a circular character in that all of the metatraits are bipolar. However, the negative pole of a dimension (e.g., Alpha-minus) does not simply represent the absence of that dimension (e.g., Alpha-plus); it also encompasses new qualities. According to the circumplex model, admiration could be interpreted in terms of Beta-plus (which is equivalent to the classical understanding of Plasticity), and rivalry could be interpreted in terms of Alpha-minus (which is a novel interpretation of narcissism). In the circumplex model of personality, the Alpha-minus metatrait is defined as a “high level of antisocial tendencies underpinned by unrestraint and a low frustration tolerance, as well as aggression and antagonism toward people, social norms, and obligations” (Strus et al., 2014, p. 280), which is closely related to the definition of narcissistic rivalry (Back et al., 2013).

2. Current study

The aim of this study was to investigate how the NARC dimensions relate to personality metraits and other personality characteristics: self-esteem and impulsivity. We investigated the pattern of relationships between NARC components and self-esteem and impulsivity because the literature contains many inconsistencies with respect to the associations between narcissism and these two traits, and the NARC model may be able to account for these inconsistencies. We expected that admiration contrary to rivalry would be positively related to self-esteem and negatively related to impulsivity. Regarding personality metraits, we hypothesised that admiration resembles Plasticity, whilst rivalry represents the opposite of the Stability metrait. Additionally, we hypothesised that whereas the total narcissism score (the sum of admiration and rivalry) would not be related to the GFP, the differentiation of two narcissistic faces would shed new light on the pattern of relationship between narcissism and the GFP, i.e., admiration would be positively related and rivalry would be negatively related to the GFP.

3. Material and methods

3.1. Participants and procedure

Research was conducted using an online platform. The study population was divided into two samples. Respondents from the first sample completed questionnaires concerning FFM traits and impulsivity, and those from the second sample completed the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (1965). All of the respondents also completed a questionnaire measuring narcissistic admiration and rivalry. In first sample, $N = 342$ respondents participated ($M_{age} = 25.00$; $SD = 7.39$); $N = 377$ participated in the second sample ($M_{age} = 22.52$; $SD = 3.33$). Both samples had a majority of women (73.3% in the first sample and 89.9% in the second sample), as in Back et al. (2013). The study was anonymous. The link to the study was distributed via student Facebook groups. The respondents could choose to provide an email address to be entered into a lottery for small prizes (e.g., a book) for participating in the study.

3.2. Measures

The Narcissistic Admiration and Rivalry Questionnaire (NARQ; Back et al., 2013) is an operationalisation of the NARC model that is designed to measure admiration and rivalry. The NARQ consists of 18 items, with responses given on a six-point Likert-type scale.

The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965) is the most popular measure of self-esteem, which is defined as positive evaluation of oneself. Responses to 10 items (five items are reverse-scored) are given on a four-point Likert-type scale.

The Brief Self-Control Scale (Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004) measures conscientiousness-based self-control. We used a modification of the scale proposed by Maloney, Grawitch, and Barber (2011), who proposed a two-factor model based on restraint and impulsivity. Responses to the eight items are given using a five-point Likert-type scale.

The International Personality Item Pool-50 (Goldberg, 1999) measures personality traits from the FFM of personality: extraversion, intellect (re-named openness to experience), agreeableness, conscientiousness, and emotional stability (reversed neuroticism). Responses to the 50 items are given using a five-point Likert-type scale.

The factor structure of the measures used was verified with confirmatory factor analyses and exploratory structural equation modelling (for the International Personality Item Pool). Only the model of the Brief Self-Control Scale was not well fitted to the data. The results of those analyses are available from the first author.

The descriptive statistics and reliability estimates are presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Descriptive statistics and reliability estimates of used measures.

Measure	Scale	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Skewness</i>	<i>Kurtosis</i>	α
NARQ (Sample 1)	Admiration	3.38	0.90	0.04	-0.40	0.83
	Rivalry	2.70	0.88	0.29	-0.23	0.82
NARQ (Sample 2)	Admiration	3.35	0.87	0.12	-0.31	0.83
	Rivalry	2.62	0.96	0.55	0.35	0.86
RSES	Global self-esteem	2.84	0.68	-0.21	-0.58	0.89
BSCS	Impulsivity	3.09	0.85	-0.20	-0.32	0.73
	Restraint	2.69	0.75	0.16	-0.33	0.63
IPIP	Extraversion	3.26	0.88	-0.26	-0.58	0.92
	Intellect	3.76	0.59	-0.42	-0.16	0.80
	Agreeableness	3.88	0.64	-0.47	-0.17	0.85
	Conscientiousness	3.45	0.69	-0.02	-0.57	0.83
	Emotional Stability	2.77	0.84	0.11	-0.38	0.90

Note. NARQ = Narcissistic Admiration and Rivalry Questionnaire; RSES = Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale; BSCS = Brief Self-Control Scale; IPIP = International Personality Item Pool.

The reliability of the measures used was either good or excellent (with the exception of the restraint scale, which showed acceptable reliability) and the distribution of the data was relatively normal.

4. Results

4.1. Assessment of the cross-cultural replicability of NARC dimensions in Polish context

We compared our results with those of Back et al. (2013) using a two-tailed Pearson's r correlation coefficient, and we regressed each criterion variable on narcissistic admiration and rivalry. The results are presented in Table 2.

The significance of the correlation strength between admiration and rivalry and the criterion variables was assessed using Fisher's Z transformation. The greatest differences were found for self-esteem ($Z = 11.53$) and extraversion ($Z = 10.19$), and the smallest differences were found for impulsivity ($Z = -3.66$) and restraint ($Z = 4.33$). Admiration was most strongly positively correlated with extraversion and intellect, whereas rivalry was most strongly negatively correlated with agreeableness and emotional stability and was positively correlated with impulsivity. The correlation between admiration and rivalry was low in both samples ($r = 0.23$; $p < 0.01$; $r = 0.33$; $p < 0.01$, respectively).

4.2. Narcissistic admiration and rivalry in the context of personality metraits

To investigate the personality meaning of the two narcissistic faces, we followed a procedure proposed by DeYoung, Quilty, and Peterson (2007). They analysed the Big Five facets originating from different models (i.e., hierarchical and circumplex) and conducted exploratory factor analysis with principal axis factoring; this ultimately led to the proposal of the Big Five Aspect Scales model. Because Plasticity and Stability are assumed to be orthogonal, we used Equamax rotation and

Table 2
Relationships between narcissistic admiration and rivalry, impulsivity and FFM personality traits.

Scale	Admiration ($r \beta$)	Rivalry ($r \beta$)	$R R^2$
Self-esteem	0.42** 0.56**	-0.24** -0.43**	0.58 0.34
Restraint	0.15** 0.19**	-0.14** -0.18**	0.23 0.05
Impulsivity	0.06 -0.01	0.30** 0.30**	0.30 0.09
Extraversion	0.56** 0.60**	-0.07 -0.21**	0.59 0.35
Intellect	0.39** 0.40**	0.03 -0.07	0.39 0.15
Agreeableness	0.12* 0.21**	-0.36** -0.40**	0.41 0.17
Conscientiousness	0.12* 0.17**	-0.19** -0.23**	0.25 0.06
Emotional stability	0.27** 0.35**	-0.30** -0.38**	0.45 0.21

* $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$.

forced a two-factor solution. However, we also ran three independent tests – Kaiser’s rule, the scree test, and parallel analysis – to determine the number of factors, and all of them suggested that the two-factor model should be extracted. The two factors accounted for 53.91% of total variance, and the factor loadings are presented in Fig. 1.

The first factor represents a constellation of extraversion, intellect and admiration and thus corresponds to Plasticity; the second factor represents a constellation of agreeableness, emotional stability, conscientiousness and negative rivalry and thus corresponds to Stability. We also tested the two-factor solution obtained using other rotation methods (orthogonal varimax and oblique promax). When using promax rotation, the correlation between latent factors was close to zero ($r = 0.05$), suggesting that they are indeed orthogonal. The factor loadings were very similar across all the rotation methods, indicating that the two-factor model is stable.

In assessing the relationship between narcissism and the GFP (as extracted by the first unrotated factor), we correlated admiration ($r = 0.48$; $p < 0.01$) and rivalry ($r = -0.27$; $p < 0.01$), and summed these scales to obtain a total narcissism score ($r = 0.15$; $p < 0.01$). The summed narcissism score was only weakly related to the GFP, whereas admiration was positively correlated with the GFP and rivalry was negatively correlated, thus confirming our hypothesis.

5. Discussion

The NARC (Back et al., 2013) seems to resolve some of the contradictions within the construct of narcissism; however, it is a relatively recent development, and few studies have investigated the model (Rogoza et al., 2016). In addition to obtaining consistency with previous studies that examined relationships between NARC dimensions and personality traits, impulsivity, and self-esteem (Back et al., 2013; Rogoza et al., 2016), we aimed to provide further support of the NARC model by embedding admiration and rivalry within personality metatraits.

Joint factor analysis demonstrated that admiration forms one group of Plasticity traits, whereas rivalry forms another group of Stability traits. When oblique rotation was applied, the correlation between the two latent factors was close to zero, confirming the orthogonality of Plasticity and Stability (DeYoung et al., 2002). Extraversion and intellect (which contribute to Plasticity) represent behavioural and cognitive exploration, respectively (DeYoung, 2014). In the context of narcissistic admiration, extraversion plays a stronger role than intellect (i.e., it has stronger correlation coefficients and factor loadings). Both extraversion and intellect are associated with expansive learning, in which new goals and strategies are developed (DeYoung, 2015); therefore, one can

conclude that narcissists tend to activate behavioural goals with ease but have difficulties with interpretation processes (DeYoung, 2015). These results are corroborated by social psychology research on narcissism that shows that narcissists are initially perceived as self-confident, agreeable and kind (Paulhus, 1998), perhaps because of their superior capacity for behavioural exploration; however, after a short period of time, these judgements are reversed, which could be the result of an inadequately chosen strategy that is only effective during the moment of zero acquaintance (Paulhus, 1998). Regarding the motives of the narcissist, Rogoza et al. (2016) investigated how admiration and rivalry predicted personal-focused values. They found that admiration was most strongly related to openness to change (which reflects Plastic exploration and adaptation to novelty and change), whereas rivalry was most strongly related to power values (which reflects Unstable social functioning in social interactions and low cooperativeness).

Both, Instability and narcissism are often associated with externalising behaviours such as impulsivity, aggression and antisocial behaviour (DeYoung, Peterson, Seguin, & Tremblay, 2008; Donnellan et al., 2005), but in analyses that control for variance in cognitive abilities, Plasticity also predicts externalising problems. We hypothesise that because narcissism represents the double-edged combination of Instability and Plasticity, in the end it will always be perceived as exploitative and will always produce externalising behavioural problems.

Although the GFP concept is often criticised (Muncer, 2011), we provided evidence that the differentiation of the admiration and rivalry facets sheds new light on the relationships between narcissism and the GFP. We reported a significant correlation between overall narcissism and GFP; the strength of this correlation was low and was comparable to the coefficient reported by Kowalski et al. (2016). However, after correlating admiration and rivalry with the GFP, we found that they were positively and negatively related to the GFP, respectively. Thus, we support the hypothesis that narcissism is adaptive on one hand and maladaptive on the other hand, with admiration as the benefit of narcissism and rivalry as the cost.

5.1. Limitations and suggestion for further works

Poland is culturally different from Germany, where the NARC model originated; therefore, there may be some doubt regarding whether our results are replicable. To address this issue, we compared our results with external variables consistent with those reported in the literature (Back et al., 2013; Rogoza et al., 2016). Our results supported a different pattern of relationships between narcissistic dimensions and self-esteem. We support the hypothesis formulated by both Bushman and

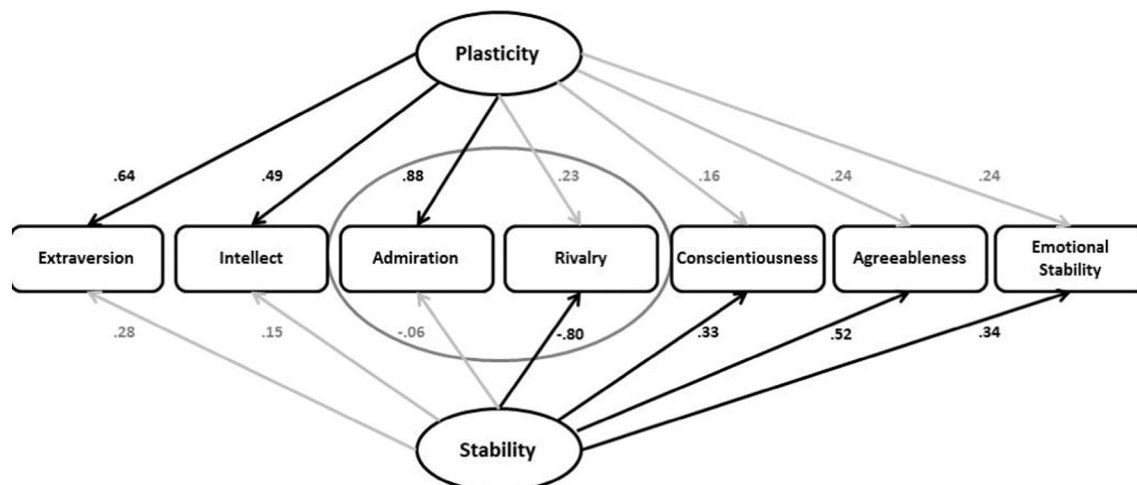


Fig. 1. Factor loadings of narcissistic admiration and rivalry and personality traits. Narcissistic admiration and rivalry are inscribed in a circle.

Baumeister (1998) and Donnellan et al. (2005) that either narcissism or low self-esteem are related with aggressive behaviours; however, this was supported only in the context of the rivalry dimension.

We also found a different pattern of associations between narcissism, restraint and impulsivity. Admiration and rivalry are able to account for both the controversial inclusion of impulsivity in models of narcissism (Vazire & Funder, 2006) and Miller et al.'s (2009) suggestion that conscientiousness-based impulsivity is not associated with narcissism. Our results suggest that conscientiousness-based impulsivity is associated only with the rivalry dimension of narcissism.

Our study was based solely on cross-sectional, self-reported data and should be supplemented by research using different types of data e.g., observational data. The studied sample may be unrepresentative because the data were gathered from Internet users; however, the sampling method was in accordance to Back et al. (2013), who also assessed Internet users. We considered only a very limited list of external variables, and our choices may seem arbitrary; however, the relationship between narcissism and self-esteem is basic to research on narcissism (see Brummelman et al., 2016). Although the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale is the most popular scale for measuring self-reported global positive self-evaluation (Brummelman et al., 2016), it is worth noting that differences between normal and pathological narcissism also reflect the stability of self-esteem (e.g., Kernis, 2003). Narcissism correlates positively only with explicit self-esteem; its correlation with implicit self-esteem is negative (Gregg & Sedikides, 2010). Therefore, further studies should include also other measures of self-esteem, such as authentic self-esteem (Mruk, 2013), that are based on peer ratings (Byrne & O'Brien, 2014) or that include both implicit and explicit measures of self-esteem (Gregg & Sedikides, 2010).

6. Conclusion

Admiration, which corresponds to the Beta-plus metatrait, is positively associated with self-esteem and restraint and may therefore be considered adaptive. In contrast, the rivalry dimension of narcissism, which is linked to the Alpha-minus metatrait, is negatively associated with self-esteem and positively associated with impulsivity and may therefore be considered the maladaptive aspect of narcissism. The pattern of correlations between personality traits and NARC dimensions found in our study was very similar to those reported previously (Back et al., 2013; Rogoza et al., 2016); however, our study showed that the personality metatraits can account for this pattern of associations. It seems that narcissists are not simply disagreeable extraverts (Paulhus, 2001) because only the admiration dimension of narcissism is related to extraversion and only the rivalry dimension is related to disagreeableness. Based on the broader metatraits perspective that encompasses both dimensions simultaneously, narcissists are in fact Unstable Plastics. Instability is the cost narcissists pay for their unstable relationships with other people (Jonason, Li, & Czarna, 2013), whereas Plasticity provides a beneficial aspect of narcissism by equipping the narcissist with a tool to deal with a fast life history (Buss, 2009; Jonason, Koenig, & Tost, 2010). Thus, to extract the most information about narcissism, narcissism should not be interpreted only in terms of whether a person is narcissistic; instead, it should be interpreted in terms of the two faces of narcissism, which supports the differentiation between admiration and rivalry.

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