



I'll get there because I'm great, or am I? Narcissistic vulnerability moderates the narcissistic grandiosity – goal persistence relationship



Harry Manley^{a,b,*}, Ross Roberts^a, Stuart Beattie^a, Tim Woodman^a

^a Institute for the Psychology of Elite Performance, Bangor University, UK

^b Faculty of Psychology, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, Thailand

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Narcissism
Grandiose
Vulnerable
Persistence

ABSTRACT

Across three studies, we examined the moderating effect of narcissistic vulnerability on the relationship between narcissistic grandiosity and persistence. In Study 1 ($n = 338$), narcissistic grandiosity predicted greater goal-drive persistence, but only when individuals also possessed a degree of narcissistic vulnerability. In Study 2 ($n = 199$), we replicated these effects and demonstrated that they were independent of socially desirable responding. In Study 3 ($n = 372$), narcissistic vulnerability moderated the grandiosity – persistence relationship to predict persistence for personally relevant goals and hypothetical goals. Notably, the moderating effect of vulnerability was independent of the effects of self-esteem. These results provide the first evidence that narcissistic grandiosity predicts persistence only in the presence of self-doubt regarding superiority. The results demonstrate the importance of considering the interplay between the two components of narcissism.

1. Introduction

Narcissists want to be admired by others. This need for admiration is so deep-seated (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001) that they will go to great lengths to satisfy it. Although admiration can be garnered in a multitude of ways, one strategy for achieving admiration is through the accomplishment of goals. For example, gaining a promotion at work or getting high grades on an assignment provides an opportunity for narcissistic individuals to gain the admiration from others, which they feel is naturally deserved. Although gaining success via goal accomplishment often depends on a willingness to persist at a task, it is unclear whether narcissism is beneficial or detrimental for persistence. In theory, if narcissists crave the adulation that comes with success, they should relentlessly pursue goals to obtain that adulation. Yet narcissism is also characterized by impulsive and self-defeating behaviours (e.g., Miller et al., 2009; Vazire & Funder, 2006), which suggests that any attempt at persistence may easily be derailed (Wallace, Ready, & Weitenhagen, 2009). This research on narcissism has almost exclusively focused on narcissistic grandiosity, at the exclusion of the vulnerable component of narcissism. In the present research, we examine the possible interplay between these two components of narcissism: grandiosity and vulnerability, to predict goal-drive persistence.

1.1. Dimensional nature of narcissism

There is considerable disagreement regarding the dimensional nature of

narcissism, with narcissism proposed to exist in forms that are covert and overt, adaptive and maladaptive, or normal and pathological (Cain, Pincus, & Ansell, 2008). However, in this paper we conceptualize narcissism with respect to the well-recognized components of narcissistic grandiosity and vulnerability (Miller et al., 2011, 2014; Miller & Campbell, 2008; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001; Pincus & Lukowitsky, 2010; Wink, 1991). Narcissistic grandiosity is characterized by feelings of entitlement, superiority, exploitativeness and exhibitionism, and is typically assessed using the self-report Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Hall, 1979). In contrast, narcissistic vulnerability reflects a more fragile expression of narcissism that is characterized by hostility (Clarke, Karlov, & Neale, 2015; Miller et al., 2011), hypersensitivity, social withdrawal (Dickinson & Pincus, 2003), and low explicit self-esteem (Miller et al., 2010).

Whilst grandiosity and vulnerability are well established constructs, it is less clear, however, whether they reflect distinct or interrelated personality processes, as evidence exists for both accounts. From one perspective, grandiosity and vulnerability are proposed to have markedly different manifestations and theoretical origins. For example, through factor analysis of popular narcissism measures, Miller et al. (2011) argue that narcissistic grandiosity and vulnerability are distinct constructs expressed by different personality traits, interpersonal behaviour, and psychopathology. However, other (largely) psychodynamic theorizing holds that narcissistic grandiosity and vulnerability are interrelated, with these components co-existing within individuals (e.g., Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001; Pincus, Cain, & Wright, 2014; Pincus & Lukowitsky, 2010). For example, in Morf and Rhodewalt's (2001)

* Corresponding author at: Faculty of Psychology, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, Thailand.
E-mail address: harry.m@chula.ac.th (H. Manley).

cognitive-affective model of narcissism, the arrogance and aggrandizing behaviours associated with narcissistic grandiosity are driven by the need to stem a fragile and vulnerable self-concept. In contrast, recent attempts have also been made to synthesise these rather disparate approaches by proposing that narcissism is better understood when considered as a spectrum of dispositions and characteristics reflecting grandiosity and vulnerability, each anchored around the core construct of entitlement (Krizan & Herlache, 2017).

Regardless of one's theoretical position, these two expressions of narcissism are separable; narcissistic grandiosity and vulnerability are not mutually exclusive and measures of grandiosity and vulnerability are either uncorrelated (Hendin & Cheek, 1997; Luchner, Houston, Walker, & Houston, 2011), or have a weak positive relationship (Ng, Tam, & Shu, 2011). Given that researchers have emphasized the importance of considering both aspects of narcissism (e.g., Miller & Campbell, 2008), it is surprising that there is a dearth of literature considering the effects of both components, either independently or as an interacting dyad (for an exception see: Roche, Pincus, Conroy, Hyde, & Ram, 2013). Indeed, one area where the consideration of the interactive effects of these two components might be particularly relevant is goal persistence.

1.2. Narcissism and persistence

The evidence for the relationship between narcissistic grandiosity and persistence is sparse and tentative, suggesting that narcissistic grandiosity may facilitate persistence in some circumstances but not in others (Wallace et al., 2009). For example, narcissistic grandiosity is positively associated with trait measures of persistence in clinical and non-clinical samples (Fossati et al., 2009), and individuals high in narcissistic grandiosity spend more time attempting unsolvable tasks in laboratory settings; however, this enhanced persistence only occurs when there are no alternative routes to self-enhancement (Wallace et al., 2009). Further, narcissistic grandiosity is associated with greater investment of effort in situations where successful performance affords personal glory (e.g., Wallace & Baumeister, 2002; Woodman, Roberts, Hardy, Callow, & Rogers, 2011). Under difficult circumstances, whereas others might perceive the situation as a threat, grandiose narcissists perceive these situations as an opportunity for glory and so persist to glorify their self-image (Wallace & Baumeister, 2002).

Pertinently, individuals who score highly on the NPI are typically characterized by traits that might support persistence. For example, narcissistic grandiosity is associated with heightened levels of optimism (Farwell & Wohlwend-Lloyd, 1998), a trait that may aid persistence through greater task engagement and more adaptive responses to setbacks (Carver, Scheier, & Segerstrom, 2010). Similarly, the high levels of confidence associated with narcissistic grandiosity (Campbell, Goodie, & Foster, 2004) may be adaptive for persistence because it endows individuals with greater expectation of their ability to maintain goal pursuit eventually succeed. Finally, narcissistic grandiosity is argued to be positively associated with explicit self-esteem (Sedikides, Rudich, Gregg, Kumashiro, & Rusbult, 2004), a dimension that is predictive of long-term goal persistence (e.g., Di Paula & Campbell, 2002).

However, possessing an unshakable confidence in one's capabilities may not always benefit persistence (e.g., Woodman, Akehurst, Hardy, & Beattie, 2010). For example, individuals may fail to appreciate the necessity of sustained effort on long-term goals and instead believe that success is achievable through their unique talents rather than via persistence. Similarly, the impulsive tendencies associated with narcissistic grandiosity (Vazire & Funder, 2006) may lead to the pursuit of short-term goals, to the detriment of long-term persistence. Alternatively, narcissistic grandiosity may discourage persistence because grandiose individuals perceive low self-control as an inherently desirable trait that illustrates their power and autonomy (Hart, Richardson, Tortoriello, & Tullett, 2017). Thus, grandiose narcissist's self-presentational use of self-control might lead them to be less willing to engage in persistence, especially if it involves publicly displaying constraint. Similarly, grandiose narcissist's may believe the ultimate expression of

superiority is to be able to achieve high levels of performance without trying very hard. Thus, one might argue that high levels of persistence might lessen the opportunity for glory one can gain in a task as it demonstrates that positive outcomes can only be achieved via engagement and hard work, as opposed to some exceptional ability that the narcissist possesses.

In summary, grandiosity alone may be insufficient for persistence. It is possible that narcissistic grandiosity only predicts the motivation to persist (i.e., pursue self-enhancement) when an individual's sense of superiority and self-worth is precarious. In this regard, the more fragile counterpart of narcissism may in fact be a key variable to aid persistence: narcissistic vulnerability. In other words, narcissistic grandiosity, in the complete absence of vulnerability, conveys a sense of being on a pedestal, and this illusion of grandeur might cause individuals to be weakly motivated to expend additional effort persisting on tasks to further boost their self-image (Roberts, Woodman, & Sedikides, 2017). Conversely, a degree of vulnerability, or sense of precariousness in the self, might be necessary to drive the strongest persistent. This is because only through the accomplishment of self-enhancing goals and achievements will individuals garner the approval of others and recognition of their superiority that is necessary to buffer their fragile ego. Furthermore, narcissistic vulnerability is associated with strong avoidance motivation, whereas narcissistic grandiosity is associated with strong approach and weak avoidance motivation (Foster & Trimm, 2008). Thus, individuals who possess a degree of narcissistic grandiosity and vulnerability may be both strongly motivated to approach desirable outcomes and strongly motivated to avoid negative outcomes. In other words, grandiosity and vulnerability may drive individuals to pursue their goals because of the potential for reward (i.e., admiration), and because they are highly worried about the possibility of failure and have strong motivations to avoid rejection. Empirically, this perspective is supported by evidence that (social) approach and avoidance motivations interact such that the highest levels of engagement and effort in social situations is displayed by individuals who possess both strong approach and strong avoidance motivations (Nikitin & Freund, 2010).

Notably, although the fragility associated with narcissistic vulnerability might drive greater persistence for individuals who also possess a belief in their inherent superiority, narcissistic vulnerability alone may likely lead to the very lowest levels of persistence. If individuals who are high in narcissistic vulnerability rely on the approval of others to validate their self-worth (at least in the absence of grandiosity), yet at the same time lack personal efficacy and confidence, they might be more likely to withdraw and avoid environments where their self-beliefs are likely to be challenged or confronted (Dickinson & Pincus, 2003; Foster & Trimm, 2008). In support of this view, Fossati et al. (2009) found that narcissistic vulnerability was negatively related to persistence, although this effect was only evident within a sample of clinical participants; vulnerability was unrelated to persistence in a non-clinical sample.

1.3. Present research

In three studies, we examined whether narcissistic vulnerability moderates the relationship between narcissistic grandiosity and goal-drive persistence. Based on the theorizing above, we predicted that narcissistic grandiosity would be positively related to persistence only when accompanied by moderate or high levels of narcissistic vulnerability. In the absence of vulnerability, we anticipated that narcissistic grandiosity would be unrelated to persistence. In Study 1 we examined the relationship between narcissistic vulnerability and grandiosity to predict trait persistence. In Study 2 we examined the relationship between narcissistic vulnerability and grandiosity to predict persistence whilst controlling for the possible effects of socially desirable responding. In Study 3 we assessed persistence whilst controlling for self-esteem. That is, persistence was assessed using alternative trait measures for personally relevant goals and in response to setbacks in achievement and interpersonal domains.

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