I can see clearly now: Clarity of transgression-related motivations enhances narcissists' lack of forgiveness

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Ramzi Fatfouta *, Michela Schröder-Abé

University of Potsdam, Germany

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ABSTRACT

Past research has revealed that narcissists lack forgiveness. However, little is known about factors that might either buffer or, more critically, enhance the link between narcissism and lack of forgiveness. To address this gap in the literature, the present studies focused on the moderating role of clarity of transgression-related motivations. In an original and a replication study ($Ns = 509$ and 532, respectively), participants rated their levels of narcissistic admiration and rivalry and recalled a personal episode in which someone had hurt them. Subsequently, participants reported on their lack of forgiveness toward their transgressor. Response speed to these ratings served as an indirect clarity measure, with faster responses indicating greater clarity. In both studies, narcissistic rivalry (but not admiration) was positively related to lack of forgiveness and this relationship was stronger among individuals who were clear about their transgression-related motivations. Results inform our understanding of socio-emotional factors that contribute to narcissists' lack of forgiveness following interpersonal hurt.

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1. Introduction

One of the most fascinating, yet puzzling, personality constructs is narcissism.[1] Although by definition narcissism encompasses an inflated sense of self, lack of empathy for others, and feelings of entitlement (Rhodewalt & Peterson, 2009), individuals possessing these attributes seem to attract and repulse us at the same time. Indeed, narcissists can be charming, self-assured, and humorous in one moment (Back, Schmukle, & Egloff, 2010; Paulhus, 1998), then aggressive, arrogant, and selfish in the next (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Buss & Chiodo, 1991; Campbell & Foster, 2007). Accordingly, narcissists' interpersonal behaviors can have diverging social consequences that range from positive (e.g., status attainment; Brunell et al., 2008) to negative (e.g., relationship conflict; Peterson & DeHart, 2014).

The Narcissistic Admiration and Rivalry Concept (NARC; Back et al., 2013) allows to resolve these seemingly contradictory trait characteristics. As per this model, narcissists can pursue two social strategies to maintain their grandiose self-views: (1) gaining social admiration by means of self-promotion (e.g., dominant and expressive behaviors; *narcissistic admiration*) or (2) preventing social failure by means of self-defense (e.g., arrogant and other-derogating behaviors; *narcissistic*

rivalry). Narcissistic admiration and rivalry, albeit positively related, have distinct inter- and intrapersonal correlates (Back et al., 2013). Whereas admiration has been found to come with social benefits in the short term (e.g., perceptions of assertiveness and social potency), rivalry has been found to yield social costs in the long term (e.g., perceptions of untrustworthiness and social conflict; Dufner, Rauthmann, Czarna, & Denissen, 2013, Study 3; Leckelt, Küfner, Nestler, & Back, 2015). Consequently, admiration has been construed as the "bright" side of narcissism and rivalry as its "dark" side (Back et al., 2013).

Up to now, little attention has been paid to how both sides of narcissism relate to a critical interpersonal domain, namely forgiveness. Forgiveness can be conceptualized as "prosocial changes in one's motivations toward an offending relationship partner" (McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997, p. 322). That is, when individuals forgive, they become less motivated to hurt the transgressor and, instead, more motivated to respond benignly (McCullough et al., 1997; McCullough et al., 1998). This conceptualization accords with Enright and colleagues who view a forgiving individual as someone who is willing to abandon his/her right to resentment, while at the same time promoting a conciliatory stance toward the transgressor (Enright, Freedman, Rique, Enright, & North, 1998; Freedman & Enright, 1996). Moreover, and in contrast to a narcissist, a forgiving individual can see him- or herself as a fallible human being in the wake of conflict (Worthington, 1998). Unsurprisingly, then, forgiveness has been considered the positive antipode of narcissism (Emmons, 2000).

Scant research has documented that narcissists have difficulty in granting forgiveness (Eaton, Struthers, & Santelli, 2006; Exline, Baumeister, Bushman, Campbell, & Finkel, 2004). This lack of

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* Corresponding author at: Department of Psychology, University of Potsdam, Karl-Liebknecht Str. 24/25, 14476 OT Golm, Potsdam, Germany.
  E-mail address: r.fatfouta@gmail.com (R. Fatfouta).
  [1] For clarity, we use the term *narcissism* to refer to a continuous dimension of normal (i.e., subclinical) personality and the term *narcissist* (or *narcissistic*) to describe individuals who score high on measures of normal narcissism.

forgiveness is particularly potent among those narcissists characterized by an antagonistic (i.e., narcissistic rivalry) rather than agentic (i.e., narcissistic admiration) interpersonal style (Back et al., 2013). Specifically, only narcissistic rivalry (but not admiration) has been shown to relate to lack of forgiveness in response to real-life transgressions (Fatfouta, Gerlach, Schröder-Abé, & Merkl, 2015). What is missing from the knowledge base, however, is an investigation of factors that might modulate narcissists' lack of forgiveness. Stated differently, are there factors that attenuate or, more critically, enhance the relationship between narcissism and lack of forgiveness?

Some intriguing new research indicates that individual differences in the ability to use information about emotions effectively can moderate the link between personality and interpersonally relevant outcomes (Côté, DeCelles, McCarthy, Van Kleef, & Hideg, 2011). Specifically, Côté and colleagues showed that emotional information can either be used for benign purposes (e.g., helping others) or channeled with malicious intent (e.g., hurting others), depending on one's trait-motivated goals. For example, Konrath, Corneille, Bushman, and Luminet (2014), revealed that narcissists are good at identifying others' feelings, speculating that they are attuned to vulnerability in others so that they can prey on them. Transferring this mechanism to the context of forgiveness, we posit that being good at identifying one's *own* feelings (i.e., being clear about them) should help individuals to select the most effective response in dealing with the hurt. The reason is that clarity of one's inner experiences (particularly, toward the transgressor) allows individuals to evaluate it with regard to their current concerns (e.g., values, norms, and self-esteem) and to act upon them in a goal-conducive manner (cf. Scherer, 2013).

Clarity of feelings has been defined as the extent to which one can identify and label one's emotions (Salovey & Mayer, 1990) – and to do that swiftly (Lischetzke, Angelova, & Eid, 2011; Lischetzke, Cuccodoro, Gauger, Todeschini, & Eid, 2005). This capacity to have insight into how one feels – specifically toward what has hurt the self – may play a key role in moderating the relationship between narcissism and lack of forgiveness. On the one hand, identifying and clarifying one's transgression-related motivations may permit individuals to get in contact with their pain, explore the injustice they experienced, and ultimately motivate a need for change (Freedman, Enright, & Knutson, 2005). Hence, clarity of transgression-related motivations should aid people in turning their attention to reactions that enable them to restore a positive relationship with the transgressor. Accordingly, one may argue that clarity regarding one's motivational stance toward the transgressor should buffer against defensive reactions related to narcissistic rivalry, making forgiveness a viable response to dealing with the hurt.

On the other hand, identifying and clarifying one's thoughts and feelings toward the transgressor may permit individuals to realize, in the first place, that the transgressor has devalued the self (Scobie & Scobie, 1998). Such devaluation can have adverse effects on people's self-worth and calls for ways to reinstate a positive self-view (Sherman & Cohen, 2006; Tesser, 2000). As Holmgren (2002, p. 119) notes, individuals may realize that they have "certain rights that others must honor". Narcissists have been shown to react defensively (i.e., aggressively) when being transgressed against (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Twenge & Campbell, 2003). Hence, clarity regarding one's motivational stance toward the transgressor should allow them to focus on reactions that enable them to restore the integrity of the injured self. Accordingly, one may argue that being clear about one's transgression-related motivations should enhance defensive reactions related to narcissistic rivalry, making unforgiving responses more likely.

How can clarity regarding one's transgression-related motivations be assessed? One way would be to use self-report (i.e., direct) measures and ask the individual for such information (e.g., "I know how I am feeling toward him/her"). However, individuals can be unable to accurately introspect and describe their thoughts and feelings (Greenwald & Farnham, 2000), let alone to provide a meta-cognitive judgment of these inner experiences (Ames & Kammrath, 2004). Furthermore, self-

reports are often made without recalling relevant experience or behavior (Robinson & Neighbors, 2006). Consequently, individuals who view themselves as generally being clear about their transgression-related motivations would probably agree to the above item. Nevertheless, they might experience difficulty actually naming these thoughts and feelings. Indeed, it has been suggested that narcissists self-deceive (Campbell, Rudich, & Sedikides, 2002) and experience problems identifying and describing their internal states (Jonason & Krause, 2013)—particularly, in the interpersonal realm (Dimaggio et al., 2002). To curtail these limitations, the use of non-self-report (i.e., indirect) measures may be beneficial.

Our approach to measuring clarity of transgression-related motivations is based on the time individuals need to rate their current thoughts and feelings toward their transgressor. This method is derived from attitude theory, wherein response time (RT) to attitude items has been used as an indirect measure of attitude strength (Bassili, 1996; Fazio, 2001). Furthermore, in emotion research, RT to emotion items has been employed as an indirect measure of emotional clarity (Lischetzke et al., 2005; Lischetzke et al., 2011; Thompson et al., 2015): The faster someone is to respond to such an item, the greater the clarity about his/her affective state at that specific moment. Adopting this logic to the present research, we posit that faster responses to items pertaining to one's transgression-related motivations should index clarity of these motivations. Conversely, when individuals need more time to arrive at a response, this could be because they are not yet entirely sure how they should think and feel toward their transgressor. That is, these individuals need to construct their judgment on the spot (i.e., at the time of the rating).

2. Present research

The present research aimed to test how being clear about one's transgression-related motivations would moderate the relationship between facets of narcissism and lack of forgiveness. Based on the rationale presented above, two competing hypotheses were formulated: The *buffering hypothesis* would predict that at high levels of clarity of transgression-related motivations the positive relationship between narcissism (in particular, narcissistic rivalry) and lack of forgiveness should be weakened. The *enhancing hypothesis*, in contrast, would predict the reverse. That is, at high levels of clarity the positive relationship between narcissism (in particular, narcissistic rivalry) and lack of forgiveness should be strengthened. To test these hypotheses, we conducted two studies—a primary study (Study 1) and a replication study (Study 2).

3. Study 1

Study 1 was designed as a first test of our hypothesis that clarity of transgression-related motivations would moderate the association between narcissism facets and lack of forgiveness. Participants rated their levels of narcissistic admiration and rivalry, recalled a personal episode in which someone had hurt them, and evaluated their lack of forgiveness toward their transgressor. RT to these ratings, measured unobtrusively, served as an indirect clarity measure. Because we used RT as an individual-difference variable, we controlled for individual differences in general (i.e., baseline) response speed (Fazio, 1990; Meyer & Schoen, 2014).

3.1. Participants and procedure[2]

Typically, effect sizes for interactions in personality research are small (Chaplin, 1991). To detect a small effect (i.e., ΔR^2 increase due to

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[2] Data reported in this manuscript were subsamples of another project involving different research questions than those investigated here (Fatfouta et al., 2015). The present analyses, however, have not been reported previously.