



# Narcissism and authentic self: An unfeasible marriage?

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## ABSTRACT

Previous studies have shown that both grandiose and vulnerable narcissists tend to project an image of perfection in order to gain admiration from others. The intrapersonal costs of this tendency have never been explored. The present study hypothesized that a systematic attempt on behalf of narcissists to both actively promote an image of perfection and hide imperfections (i.e. perfectionistic self-presentation) might be responsible for low authenticity levels in terms of self-alienation, non-authentic living, and acceptance of external influence. Structural equation modeling with a sample of 274 undergraduates (50.4% F; mean age  $22.26 \pm 2.51$ ) supported the hypothesized mediating effect of perfectionistic self-presentation in the association between vulnerable narcissism and low authenticity. The variables in the model accounted for 43%, 58%, and 68% of the variance in self-alienation, authentic living, and accepting external influence levels. A non-mediated effect of vulnerable narcissism on authenticity dimensions was also detected. Grandiose narcissism was not found to be associated with low levels of authenticity. Our research suggests that clinicians should address the intrapersonal costs of self-presentational concerns among vulnerable narcissists. Developing a more coherent and realistic sense of self (i.e. accepting imperfections) could go a long way towards helping vulnerable narcissists become more authentic individuals.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Narcissism and its association with trait perfectionism

In recent years, there has been growing interest in two specific orthogonal constructs of narcissism: grandiose and vulnerable narcissism. The existence of two forms of narcissism was first conceptualized and examined by Wink (1991), and a portion of the psychology literature (Hendin & Cheek, 1997) has confirmed the existence of these two subtypes. Grandiose narcissism reflects traits related to grandiosity, aggression, and dominance, while vulnerable narcissism is largely marked by hypersensitivity to the opinions of others, an intense desire for approval, and defensiveness (Dickinson & Pincus, 2003). Despite these differences, grandiose and vulnerable narcissism share some core traits, such as a sense of entitlement, grandiose fantasies, and the tendency to exploit other individuals for their own gain (Dickinson & Pincus, 2003; Pincus et al., 2009). Although these two forms have long been acknowledged in the clinical literature, the majority of this work has been descriptive and theoretical rather than empirical. Much research is needed in order to clarify if two forms of narcissism can be distinguished, or if narcissistic persons fluctuate between grandiose and

vulnerable narcissism (Miller et al., 2018).

Traditionally, theoretical accounts have considered perfectionism as a significant part of narcissistic personality functioning (Ronningstad, 2010) because it protects one's self-esteem and helps narcissists gain admiration. In their model on narcissistic regulatory processes, Morf and Rhodewalt (2001) claim that perfectionism is one interpersonal strategy that could protect and enhance one's self-esteem. Similarly, Millon and Davis (2000) argue that perfection is an all or nothing concept among narcissists: "if you are not perfect, you are imperfect, and if you are imperfect, you are nothing ... Narcissists cannot tolerate any flaw, however small, in the perfection of the self" (p. 284). Empirical research has confirmed the hypothesized link between narcissism and perfectionism. A recent meta-analysis of 30 empirical studies (Smith et al., 2016) reported that self-oriented perfectionism (i.e. demanding perfection from oneself) and other-oriented perfectionism (i.e. demanding perfection from others) are associated with grandiose narcissism, while socially-prescribed perfectionism (i.e. perceiving that others are demanding perfection from oneself) is linked to vulnerable narcissism.

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### 1.2. Narcissism and its association with perfectionistic self-presentation

Various studies (Casale, Fioravanti, Rugai, Flett, & Hewitt, 2016; Flett, Sherry, Hewitt, & Nepon, 2014) have suggested that grandiose and vulnerable narcissists differ from non-narcissists not only in terms of their level of trait perfectionism, but also in terms of their need to appear perfect to other people because of a desire to gain recognition of their grandiosity. Whereas trait perfectionism reflects a dispositional need to be perfect, perfectionistic self-presentation reflects the strategies that are employed to appear perfect. Perfectionistic self-presentation is a form of impression management that involves self-presentational attempts to create an image of perfection in public situations (Hewitt et al., 2003). Smith et al. (2016) have confirmed that both grandiose and vulnerable narcissists adopt an interpersonal style that focuses on presenting a public image of flawlessness, even though the strategies to accomplish this are often quite different. In fact, grandiose narcissists were found to promote themselves as perfect to others, while vulnerable narcissist also seek to avoid behavioural demonstrations and verbal disclosure of imperfections. Studies emphasizing the differences between perfectionistic self-presentation styles among grandiose and vulnerable narcissists reinforce theoretical accounts and empirical evidence on the strategies employed by narcissists to gain recognition of their grandiosity. It has been proposed that both grandiose and vulnerable narcissists engage in strategic self-regulatory behaviours and processes that are driven by an intense need for external validation and admiration. However, it has also been suggested that vulnerable and grandiose narcissists might employ different self-monitoring and presentation tactics. Vulnerable narcissists have a fragile self which needs constant social feedback, while grandiose narcissists are less prone to be influenced by social information (Miller et al., 2011). Empirical evidence has also confirmed this argument. For example, Hart, Adams, Burton, and Tortoriello (2017) found that grandiose narcissism is associated with heightened use of assertive tactics (e.g. bragging about one's success) rather than defensive self-presentation tactics (e.g. making excuses for failure), which is in keeping with earlier findings (Casale et al., 2016; Flett et al., 2014) that grandiose narcissists present themselves to others as being perfect and are not concerned about behavioural displays of imperfections. This is also consistent with the weak correlations that have been reported between grandiose narcissism and social desirability (Kowalski, Rogoza, Vernon, & Schermer, 2018), thereby suggesting that grandiose narcissists are not as prone to modify their own behaviours or ways of thinking in order to gain social approval. Vulnerable narcissism, on the contrary, was found to be more strongly related to heightened use of defensive tactics (e.g. excuse and justification) than assertive tactics (Hart et al., 2017). Again, this supports earlier research on perfectionistic self-presentation (Casale et al., 2016; Flett et al., 2014) that highlights efforts to hide behavioural and verbal disclosures of imperfections among vulnerable narcissists.

**H1.** grandiose narcissism will be positively associated with perfectionistic self-promotion whereas no significant associations will be found with nondisclosure and nondisplay of imperfections.

**H2.** vulnerable narcissism will be positively associated with perfectionistic self-promotion, nondisclosure and nondisplay of imperfections.

### 1.3. The intrapersonal cost of the attempts to appear perfect: low levels of authenticity?

Previous research has found that narcissists are concerned with using conscious or unconscious behaviours to control how self-relevant images are conveyed to an audience. Vulnerable narcissists, in particular, have been shown to hide their shortcomings because they do not perceive themselves as being as perfect as they would like. According to Flett et al. (2014), these types of efforts by narcissists “promote a false

sense of self with distress” (p. 47). However, the hypothesis that the tendency among vulnerable narcissists to hide the self is associated with a false sense of self has never been investigated. This hypothesis is plausible because individuals who hide parts of themselves are not, by definition, being true to themselves in most situations. Moreover, the evidence also suggests that perfectionistic self-presentation is associated with self-silencing—the tendency to conceal one's own true feelings out of a desire to maintain relationships and obtain the approval of others (Flett, Besser, Hewitt, & Davis, 2007). By building on Flett et al.'s (2014) intuition, we speculate that efforts to be seen as perfect might lead individuals to ignore or reject their true selves. That is, we hypothesize that a systematic attempt on behalf of vulnerable narcissists to hide imperfections might be responsible for low levels of authenticity. With regard to grandiose narcissists, one shouldn't necessarily assume that they experience low levels of authenticity, if only because they actively promote themselves as being perfect without feeling the need to hide something.

Investigating authenticity levels among narcissist might be of some importance from both a theoretical and a clinical point of view because (a) authenticity is a central indicator of well-being in several theoretical models (e.g. Rogers, 1961), and (b) empirical research has confirmed a strong association between authenticity levels and psychological well-being (Wood, Linley, Maltby, Baliousis, & Joseph, 2008). Moreover, this approach might help further the study of narcissism, particularly research that tries to delineate the empirical profiles associated with different narcissism dimensions.

**H3.** No significant associations will be found between grandiose narcissism and authenticity levels.

**H4.** Negative associations will be found between vulnerable narcissism and authenticity levels.

**H5.** Perfectionistic self-presentation will mediate the association between vulnerable narcissism and authenticity levels.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

Three-hundred undergraduates from several different disciplines (Psychology, Economics, Law, and Architecture) at an Italian university were approached by a female research assistant at the end of class. They were then asked if they were willing to participate in a study on the association between personality traits and public image. The students were told that participation was voluntary and anonymous. No formative credits or remunerative rewards were given. Two-hundred and eighty-six students accepted. When fewer than five values were missing, the item mean was used while performing missing data imputation. After removing cases with five or more missing values ( $n = 12$ ), the final sample size was 274 (50.4% F; mean age:  $22.26 \pm 2.51$  years; age ranged from 18 to 27 years). All participants were Caucasian and 31.39% of the undergraduates claimed to have a part-time job. Study procedures were designed in accordance with European research ethical guidelines.

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. Antecedents

**Grandiose Narcissism** was assessed through the Italian adaptation (Fossati, Borroni, & Maffei, 2008) of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI-16; Ames, Rose, & Anderson, 2006). The NPI-16 is a shorter, unidimensional measure of the NPI-40 that is designed to measure grandiose narcissism in the non-clinical population. It contains 16 pairs of items, each consisting of two conflicting proposals (narcissistic response versus non-narcissistic response); participants must choose between the two, according to their own beliefs and feelings

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