



Grandiose and vulnerable narcissists disagree about whether others' vulnerable narcissism is relatable and tolerable

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ABSTRACT

The narcissistic-tolerance hypothesis suggests that narcissists view other narcissists as more similar to the self and, hence, more likeable. Studies on this phenomenon have been limited to people's evaluations of narcissistic grandiosity devoid of narcissistic vulnerability. To expand the scope of testing and add to understanding narcissism and interpersonal evaluation, participants ($N = 535$) completed indices of grandiose and vulnerable narcissism and rated liking for and similarity to a fictional target who either presented as a vulnerable narcissist or a non-narcissist. The vulnerable-narcissist target was rated as less likeable and similar to the self, but these effects were reduced as a function of perceivers' vulnerable, but not grandiose, narcissism. When interactive effects of perceiver self-esteem and target condition were controlled, the narcissism forms largely converged on similarity and liking ratings as a function of testing for narcissistic tolerance, offers a boundary for narcissistic tolerance, corroborates the notion of distinct vulnerable and grandiose identities, and provides insight into narcissists' social perception.

1. Introduction

The narcissistic-tolerance hypothesis suggests that narcissists (vs. non-narcissists) view narcissistic others as more similar to the self and, in turn, more likeable (Burton et al., 2017; Hart & Adams, 2014).¹ This hypothesis is an application of the similarity-liking principle (Byrne, 1971) to a rather socially toxic trait, and it provides a novel perspective on narcissists' interpersonal functioning (Hart & Adams, 2014). Narcissistic tolerance arose as an alternative to the notion that narcissists are universally harsh (Lamkin, Clifton, Campbell, & Miller, 2014), an explanation for why narcissists tend to affiliate with narcissistic others (Lamkin et al., 2014), and a way to obtain a more dispassionate assessment of narcissists' own identity.

Studies on this phenomenon have demonstrated support for the narcissistic-tolerance hypothesis (Adams, Hart, & Burton, 2015; Burton et al., 2017; Hart & Adams, 2014; Hart, Richardson, & Tortoriello, 2018; Hart, Richardson, & Tortoriello, in press; Wallace, Grotzinger, Howard, & Parkhill, 2015), but these studies have been limited to portrayals of narcissistic grandiosity (entitlement, self-love, interpersonal dominance, fearlessness, and ostentatiousness) that were devoid of features of narcissistic vulnerability (neuroticism, self-loathing, and emptiness; Dickinson & Pincus, 2003; Pincus et al., 2009; Pincus &

Roche, 2011). To expand testing of the narcissistic-tolerance hypothesis and, more broadly, add to what little is known about narcissists' perception and evaluation of narcissistic identities, the current research addresses the possibility of narcissistic tolerance for a vulnerable-narcissistic identity.

Given that narcissistic tolerance is built on perceived similarity to a fellow narcissist, the present investigation accounted for different trait-level expressions of narcissism that predominate in people. For example, people who score high on dimensional measures of vulnerable narcissism (which tend to assess hypersensitivity, bitterness, interpersonal fears, entitlement, and contingent self-esteem; e.g., Hendin & Cheek, 1997; Pincus et al., 2009) explicitly acknowledge a vulnerable-narcissistic identity. These vulnerable narcissists tend to be egotistical (entitled, selfish, and arrogant), yet they are low in self-esteem and prone to internalized and externalized negative emotion (Krizan & Johar, 2012; Miller et al., 2011; Wink, 1991). By contrast, people who score high on the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Terry, 1988), a dimensional measure of grandiose narcissism that assesses leadership/authority, entitlement/exploitativeness, and grandiose exhibitionism (Ackerman et al., 2011), do not acknowledge possessing a vulnerable-narcissistic identity. These people are egotistical, but they indicate high self-esteem and reduced social anxiety,

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¹ We use the terms "narcissist" or "non-narcissist" as an abbreviation to refer to individuals that score relatively high or low on dimensional measures of trait narcissism. We are not suggesting a clinical diagnosis was proffered.

depression, neuroticism, and shame proneness (Hendin & Cheek, 1997; Rose, 2002). Although some theorists trust their reports of invulnerability (Hart, Adams, & Tortoriello, 2017; Krizan & Herlache, 2017; Krizan & Johar, 2012; Wallace, 2011), other theorists believe these grandiose narcissists are merely concealing their vulnerable-narcissistic identity (Bettencourt, Talley, Benjamin, & Valentine, 2006; Cascio, Konrath, & Falk, 2015).

1.1. Current study

Participants were led to believe they would evaluate another person based on this person's responses to personality questions. The ostensible person's responses depicted either high (vulnerable-narcissist condition) or low (non-narcissist condition) levels of vulnerable narcissism. Specifically, in the vulnerable-narcissist condition, the person was depicted as highly egotistical and psychologically vulnerable; in the non-narcissist condition, the person was depicted as non-egotistical and less psychologically vulnerable. Participants rated this target on similarity and two indices of liking. Next, participants completed measures of grandiose narcissism, vulnerable narcissism, and self-esteem.

We anticipated participants would perceive the vulnerable-narcissist target as less similar to the self and less likeable than a non-narcissist target, but in accord with the similarity-liking principle, we anticipated both of these effects would diminish as perceiver vulnerable narcissism increased. Indeed, vulnerable-narcissistic (vs. non-narcissistic) perceivers should be able to better relate to and tolerate a vulnerable-narcissist target's egotism and expression of psychological vulnerability (e.g., low self-esteem). Predictions concerning perceiver grandiose narcissism were less clear, but based in speculation that grandiose narcissists are *not* knowingly concealing psychological vulnerability (Krizan & Johar, 2012; Wallace, 2011), we hypothesized that grandiose-narcissistic perceivers might fail to perceive the vulnerable-narcissist (vs. non-narcissist) target as any more similar to the self or likeable. Indeed, grandiose-narcissistic (vs. non-narcissistic) perceivers might be able to better relate to and tolerate a vulnerable-narcissist target's egotism but be unable to relate to or tolerate this target's psychological vulnerability.

Lastly, we examined whether these non-convergent interactive patterns between perceiver narcissism forms and target condition on similarity and liking were altered by controlling for perceiver self-esteem. Specifically, whereas vulnerable-narcissistic perceivers presumably find a vulnerable-narcissist target relatively more relatable and likeable, in part, due to a shared experience of low self-esteem, grandiose-narcissistic perceivers are presumed to find this target less relatable and likeable due to an *unshared* experience of low self-esteem. In theory, after controlling for the interactive role of perceiver self-esteem on similarity and liking as a function of target condition, the interactive role of each perceiver narcissism form on similarity and liking ratings should reveal greater convergence as a function of target condition.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

A power analysis revealed that 528 participants would be required to detect a small interaction effect ($f^2 = 0.02$) at a power of 0.90 and an alpha of 0.05. Five-hundred and thirty-seven (396 female) undergraduates participated in an online survey for partial course credit; two participants failed to complete the study and were excluded from analyses ($N = 535$; $M_{\text{age}} = 18.65$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 0.85$; 82.4% White). Hence, in the present study, a null interaction effect is unlikely to be due to a small sample size.

2.2. Procedure

As part of a task assessing first impressions, participants were led to

believe they would be examining a participant's responses to personality questions and forming an impression of this person. Based on random assignment, each participant read either responses that profiled a vulnerable narcissist (*vulnerable-narcissist condition*) or a non-narcissist (*non-narcissist condition*); other than being given the gender-neutral name "Casey," no other information about the target was provided. The omission of other information on the target was intended to avoid diluting the vulnerable-narcissist manipulation with details irrelevant to the manipulation. Participants read this fictional person's responses to three prompts. In prompt #1, the target person described themselves in a few sentences. In the vulnerable-narcissist condition, the self-description expressed feeling unjustly disadvantaged, often ashamed, socially anxious and timid, angry and bitter, entitled and manipulative, low self-worth, and needing admiration. In the non-narcissist condition, the description expressed feeling grateful, high self-worth, secure, and happy with people and life. Prompt #2 comprised the fictional target's dichotomized responses to a modified 10-item Hypersensitive Narcissism Scale (HSNS; Hendin & Cheek, 1997). In the vulnerable-narcissist condition, the target always provided responses indicative of being high in vulnerable narcissism; in the non-narcissist condition, the target always provided responses indicative of being low in vulnerable narcissism. Prompt #3 comprised the fictional target's responses to five items, each representing a Big-Five personality trait. For each trait, one of three options was selected that indicated the target was low on the trait (e.g., for extraversion, "reserved, quiet" [vulnerable-narcissist condition]), high on the trait (e.g., for extraversion, "extraverted, enthusiastic" [non-narcissist condition]), or that no options described him/her ("neither pair best describes me"). For neuroticism, either "anxious, easily upset" (vulnerable-narcissist condition) or "calm, emotionally stable" (non-narcissist condition) was selected; for agreeableness, either "critical, quarrelsome" (vulnerable-narcissist condition) or "sympathetic, warm" (non-narcissist condition) was selected; and for conscientiousness and openness, both conditions showed "neither pair best describes me" selected since neither trait relates strongly to vulnerable narcissism. This Big-Five profile of vulnerable narcissism is consistent with data in Miller et al. (2011).

Next, participants completed an index of their liking of the target's traits and an index of similarity to the target. The presentation order of these two measures was randomized within participants. For the trait-liking task, participants generated five personality traits to describe the target and rated how they viewed each trait (1 = *very negatively*; 10 = *very positively*; ratings averaged to compute *trait liking*: $M = 6.20$, $SD = 2.36$; $\alpha = 0.89$). For the similarity task, participants rated how similar they were to the target via three items (e.g., "I think [this person] and I are similar in a lot of ways"; 1 = *strongly disagree*; 10 = *strongly agree*; items averaged to compute *similarity*: $M = 5.17$, $SD = 2.29$; $\alpha = 0.92$). Participants also indicated their interpersonal attraction to the target via six items (e.g., "How likely would you be to introduce [this person] to your friends?"; 1 = *extremely unlikely*; 10 = *extremely likely*; items averaged to compute *interpersonal attraction*: $M = 5.94$, $SD = 2.47$; $\alpha = 0.96$).²

Next, framed as a second task, participants completed a set of personality measures. The order of the personality measures was randomized within participants. They completed the nine-item narcissism subscale of the Short Dark Triad (Jones & Paulhus, 2014); we averaged responses to index grandiose narcissism ($M = 3.09$, $SD = 0.57$; $\alpha = 0.68$). This index shows exceptionally high overlap with the NPI ($r = 0.87$; Jones & Paulhus, 2014). The vulnerable narcissism subscale of the Pathological Narcissism Inventory (PNI-V; Pincus et al., 2009) indexed vulnerable narcissism via the average of 34 items (that are non-

² The interpersonal-attraction and trait-liking measures are indicative of positive evaluation (i.e., "liking"), but the measures might tap distinguishable dimensions of liking. For example, people's attraction toward others can be based in liking of others' traits (Ajzen, 1974); and, liking of others' traits can be a post-hoc explanation for felt attraction toward others (Zajonc, 1980).

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