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Narcissism and self-presentation: Profiling grandiose and vulnerable Narcissists' self-presentation tactic use

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ABSTRACT

This is the first study to investigate narcissism in relation to multiple self-presentation behaviors. In Study 1, we tested the relation between grandiose narcissism and 12 self-presentation tactics (as measured by the Self-Presentation Tactics Scale). In Study 2, we replicated Study 1 and included a measure of vulnerable narcissism. Our review of the literature implied that vulnerable narcissism and grandiose narcissism might relate differentially to self-presentation tactic categories. Results generally supported the idea that grandiose narcissism is associated with heightened use of assertive but not defensive self-presentation tactics. Vulnerable narcissism was associated with heightened use of *both* assertive and defensive self-presentation tactics. Overall, narcissists' utilization of self-presentation tactics seemed largely rational: grandiose narcissists assumed that assertive self-presentation tactics were more effective (Study 1), and both grandiose and vulnerable narcissists did not over-utilize tactics that convey identity images inconsistent with their narcissistic identity (Studies 1 and 2). Self-presentation is central to narcissism, and the present findings offer the first empirical evidence for a descriptive profile of self-presentation tactics that are most typical of grandiose and vulnerable narcissists.

Narcissism co-varies with a variety of self-presentation tactics (e.g., offering excuses; self-promoting; intimidation; showing off material goods; Campbell & Foster, 2007; Rhodewalt & Peterson, 2009; Wallace, 2011). Here, we wish to build on this prior work by profiling narcissists[1] in terms of their most commonly utilized self-presentation tactics (Lee, Quigley, Nesler, Corbett, & Tedeschi, 1999; Tedeschi & Melburg, 1984). Although it might be generally true that narcissism relates to the over-utilization of self-presentation tactics (Rhodewalt & Peterson, 2009), narcissism might relate to utilizing some tactics more frequently than others. Furthermore, it is possible that different types of narcissism (e.g., grandiose vs. vulnerable; e.g., Dickinson & Pincus, 2003; Hendin & Cheek, 1997) might relate to different patterns of self-presentation tactic use.

Self-presentation involves conscious or unconscious behaviors to control self-relevant images conveyed to an audience (Schlenker, 2003). Self-presentation is a two-component process of impression management (Leary & Kowalski, 1990) involving (1) impression motivation (i.e., the motivation to control how one is perceived) and (2) impression construction (i.e., the behaviors used to cultivate or defend a desired image). Impression motivation is enhanced when people believe that the impressions they make have implications for achieving subjectively important goals (e.g., landing a great job; raising self-esteem) or perceive large gaps between desired and current social identities. Impression-construction behaviors are complex and can be influenced by people's self-concepts, attitudes toward particular identities, current reputations, and social roles.

In this context, self-presentation tactics are a means for impression construction that are energized by impression motivation (e.g., Jones & Pittman, 1982; Leary, 1995; Schlenker, 1980, 2003). Self-presentation tactics can be distinguished in terms of whether they are used to *defend* against threats to one's self-image (e.g., making excuses for failure) or *assert* desired self-images (e.g., bragging about a success). Table 1 contains a list and description of five defensive and seven assertive tactics. These tactics are frequently referenced in self-presentation literature, and they are measured by the Self-Presentation Tactics Scale (SPTS; Lee, Quigley, Nesler, Corbett, & Tedeschi, 1999).

1. Narcissism and self-presentation

Narcissism refers to a heightened preoccupation with the self, and researchers typically distinguish between at least two varieties of narcissism (Dickinson & Pincus, 2003; Hendin & Cheek, 1997; Pincus & Roche, 2011): grandiose and vulnerable. Grandiose narcissists come across as self-assured, extraverted, narcissistic, and socially competent (Miller, Hoffman, Gaughan, Gentile, Maples, & Campbell, 2011). Vulnerable narcissists tend to come across as shy, neurotic, and somewhat introverted in first encounters (Miller, Hoffman, Gaughan, Gentile,

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[1] We sometimes will refer to individuals who score high on dimensional, sub-clinical trait measures of narcissism as "narcissists" and those scoring low as "non-narcissists." This labeling was chosen because it is conventional and concise. We are not referring to a categorical, clinical distinction.

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Maples, & Keith Campbell, 2011) but can also come across as rude, arrogant, and conceited after longer encounters (Wink, 1991). Despite differences, vulnerable and grandiose narcissism are presumed to share entitlement, exploitativeness, and grandiose fantasies as core elements (Dickinson & Pincus, 2003); furthermore, both forms of narcissism are related to enhanced concerns about self-esteem (whether it be protection or enhancement) and social power striving.

2. Grandiose narcissism and self-presentation

Grandiose narcissism – typically operationalized using the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Terry 1988) – has been presumed to relate to enhanced impression motivation and therefore enhanced use of self-presentation tactics (Kernis, 2001; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001; Raskin, Novacek, & Hogan, 1991; Rhodewalt & Peterson, 2008). Nevertheless, it is possible that grandiose narcissism might relate to impression motivation and self-presentation tactic use in a more nuanced way.

Notably, narcissists may not experience enhanced impression motivation under conditions of image threat. Indeed, grandiose narcissists do not seem to experience negative social emotions that signal image threat and motivate remediation to the same extent as non-narcissists. In fact, grandiose narcissism is inversely related to emotions that suggest heightened impression motivation under threat such as social anxiety, depression, neuroticism, shame proneness, and feelings of vulnerability (Hendin & Cheek, 1997; Rose, 2002). More broadly, grandiose narcissists may have a rather insensitive avoidance motivational system, which might suggest indifference rather than hypersensitivity to image threat (Foster & Trimm, 2008). This indifference to image threat suggests that grandiose narcissists might not be highly motivated to address image threats via defensive self-presentation tactics that minimize such threats.

By contrast, it seems likely that grandiose narcissists might experience enhanced impression motivation in contexts that offer opportunities for image cultivation. For example, goals for social power and enhanced self-esteem are thought to enhance impression motivation and assertive self-presentation (Leary & Kowalski, 1990), and narcissists seem to hold these goals more strongly than non-narcissists. Indeed, grandiose narcissists' approach to self-enhancement is often described as enthusiastic and bold (Wallace, 2011). Grandiose narcissists tend to be high in extraversion (Raskin & Hall, 1981) and sensation seeking (Emmons, 1981), and they have a highly sensitive approach motivational system, which promotes movement toward desired states (Foster & Trimm, 2008). As a result, we anticipated grandiose narcissism would be associated with heightened motivation for image cultivation and therefore heightened use of assertive self-presentation tactics.

Models of self-presentation share the assumption that individuals select self-presentation tactics that are consistent with the self-concept, current reputations, and desired identity images (Jones & Pittman, 1982; Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Schlenker, 1980). In the current context, this idea suggests that grandiose narcissism should relate to heightened use of particular assertive tactics that convey identity images that are typically desired by and can be reasonably claimed by grandiose narcissists (i.e., the tactics are rather consistent with current reputations and the self-concept): authoritative/self-sufficient, dominant, and glibly charming (Buss & Chiodo, 1991; Hart & Adams, 2014). Accordingly, grandiose narcissism should relate to heightened use of enhancement, entitlement, intimidation, blasting, and ingratiation. Grandiose narcissism should *not* relate to heightened use of exemplification (modeling "positive" behavior) or supplication (appearing needy for sympathy), as these two tactics convey images that are incongruous with grandiose narcissists' reputation and self-views (Hart & Adams, 2014). In the case of exemplification, grandiose narcissists openly admit to possessing negative social traits (arrogance; Carlson, 2013; Carlson, Vazire, & Oltmanns, 2011; Hart & Adams, 2014) and engaging in bad behavior (aggression and use of foul language; Adams, Florell, Burton, & Hart, 2014; Wallace, Scheiner, & Grotzinger, 2016), and narcissists are aware of their less than exemplary reputation in others eyes (Carlson, 2013; Carlson, Vazire, & Oltmanns, 2011). In the case of supplication, grandiose narcissists seem to think of themselves as strong (and *not* weak; Hart & Adams, 2014) and self-sufficient, which makes it unlikely that they would consider supplication.

Although we suspect that grandiose narcissism will be more weakly related to defensive tactics (than assertive tactics), it is possible that grandiose narcissism will relate to certain, specific defensive tactics. For example, grandiose narcissism might relate to heightened use of justifications (Campbell, Reeder, Sedikides, & Elliot, 2000; Kernis & Sun, 1994), which can involve putting a *positive* spin on negative events. Justifications are unique because, although they are used in cases of

Table 1
Descriptions of self-presentation tactics and sample items from an index of self-presentation tactic-use frequency (Self-Presentation Tactics Scale).

Category	Tactic	Description	Sample item (SPTS)
Assertive	*Enhancement*	Advertising or exaggerating the value of one's accomplishments or possessions.	"When I succeed at a task, I emphasize to others how important the task was."
	Intimidation	Provoking fear to gain respect or influence.	"I do things to make people afraid of me so that they will do what I want."
	Ingratiation	Flattering, helping, or agreeing with others to be liked.	"I express the same attitudes as others so they will accept me."
	Entitlement	Proactively taking credit (especially undue credit) for positive outcomes.	"I point out the positive things I do which other people fail to notice."
	Blasting	Saying negative things about others to look better by comparison.	"I make negative statements about people belonging to rival groups."
	Supplication	Self-presenting as weak to get help or sympathy from others.	"I tell others they are stronger or more competent than me in order to get others to do things for me."
	Exemplification	Trying to serve as a positive example for others to follow.	"I act in ways I think others should act."
Defensive	*Excuse-making*[a]	Denying responsibility for negative outcomes.	"I make up excuses for poor performance."
	Justification[a]	Denying the severity or undesirability of negative outcomes caused by the actor.	"I offer good reasons for my behavior no matter how bad it may seem to others."
	Disclaimer[b]	Making statements prior to a performance that attempt to lower expectations.	"When I believe I will not perform well, I offer excuses beforehand."
	Self-handicapping[b]	Placing identifiable obstacles in the way of success to prevent dispositional attributions for failure.	"I do not prepare well enough for exams because I get too involved in social activities."
	Apologies	Admitting guilt with the goal of convincing the audience that the negative outcome does not reflect the actor's true character.	"If I harm someone, I apologize and promise not to do it again."

[a] Accounting tactics.
[b] Tactics that reduce expectations.