



Self-regulatory and narcissistic grandiosity and vulnerability: Common and discriminant relations



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ABSTRACT

In three studies we examined the unique relations of narcissistic grandiosity and vulnerability with the self-regulatory factors of promotion, prevention, assessment, and locomotion. We found that grandiosity has unique positive relations with promotion, assessment, and locomotion but is unrelated to prevention (Study 1). We also found that vulnerability has a unique positive relation with assessment, a unique negative one with promotion, and is unrelated to locomotion and prevention (Study 2). Study 3 replicated these findings and demonstrated that they do not derive from the self-regulatory factors' or grandiosity and vulnerability's associations with self-esteem. The results indicate that grandiosity and vulnerability have self-regulatory underpinnings and provide evidence of their *specific* discriminant nature. Further, they indicate that the critical evaluations associated with strong assessment concerns are a significant vulnerability for both narcissism presentations.

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1. Introduction

Narcissism is of interest in both clinical and social-personality psychology (Luchner, Houston, Walker, & Houston, 2011). However, there are two presentations (e.g., Cain, Pincus, & Ansell, 2008); specifically, grandiosity or overt narcissism and vulnerability or covert narcissism (e.g., Luchner et al., 2011). Grandiosity, assessed using the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Terry, 1988), is associated with feeling entitled and superior to others (Maxwell, Donnellan, Hopwood, & Ackerman, 2011) whereas vulnerability, assessed using the Hypersensitive Narcissism Scale (HSNS; Hendin & Cheek, 1997), is associated with feeling inadequate and incompetent (Miller, Gentile, Wilson, & Campbell, 2013). Similarly, grandiosity is positively related to self-esteem while vulnerability is negatively related (e.g., Foster & Trimm, 2008).

Although assessed using trait measures, grandiosity and vulnerability are proposed to co-exist within individuals (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001) and people can fluctuate between the two presentations (Ronningstam, 2009). As a result, not surprisingly, grandiosity and vulnerability are weakly correlated (e.g., Luchner et al., 2011). Consequently, a central issue is which factors have

similar relations with both presentations (i.e., are core factors) and which factors have distinct relations and differentiate between them. As it has been suggested that self-regulation is core to narcissism (e.g., Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001), the present studies examine the relations of grandiosity and vulnerability with the extents to which individuals self-regulate using a promotion and prevention focus (Higgins, Friedman, Harlow, Idson, & Taylor, 2001) and have assessment and locomotion concerns (Kruglanski et al., 2000).

Psychoanalytic and clinical theories view adult narcissism as an outcome of parental neglect (Otway & Vignoles, 2006). For example, arguing that childhood narcissism is a normal adaptive part of development, Kohut (1971) proposed that grandiosity and vulnerability develop when children do not receive appropriate mirroring and idealization responses from caregivers. To cope with this unresponsive environment, horizontal or vertical 'splitting' occurs. Horizontal splitting allows individuals to maintain overt grandiosity while denying feelings of shame and low self-esteem whereas vertical splitting results in conscious experiences of vulnerability, shame, and helplessness.

Building on Kohut's (1971) and other theories (e.g., Kernberg, 1975; Millon, 1981), Morf and Rhodewalt's (2001) dynamic self-regulatory processing model argues that narcissism is a manifestation of processes that maintain extremely positive self-views. Thus, they argued that narcissistic self-regulation focuses on advancement, growth, and accomplishment rather than security, duties,

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and obligations; concerns associated with being promotion- and prevention-focused, respectively (Higgins, 1997).

Individuals differ in the extent to which they are chronically promotion or prevention focused (e.g., Higgins et al., 2001). Promotion-focused individuals represent desired and undesired end-states as the presence and absence of positive outcomes (i.e., gains and non-gains), respectively (Higgins, 1997). They are concerned with advancement and accomplishment and, as a result, work to fulfil hopes and aspirations (Grant & Higgins, 2003). In contrast, prevention-focused individuals represent desired and undesired end-states as the absence and presence of negative outcomes (i.e., non-losses and losses), respectively (Higgins, 1997). They are concerned with safety and security and, as a result, work to meet duties and obligations (Grant & Higgins, 2003).

If “narcissists self-regulate with a promotion rather than a prevention focus” (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001, p. 190), the extent to which individuals are promotion-focused (hereafter promotion) should be positively associated with grandiosity. Further, the extent to which they are prevention-focused (hereafter prevention) should be either unrelated or negatively related. However, Morf and Rhodewalt's (2001) proposition is silent about the relations of promotion and prevention with vulnerability. Moreover, factors beyond promotion and prevention need to be considered to understand the motivational nature of narcissistic self-regulation. One particular self-regulatory distinction that needs to be considered is that between assessment and locomotion concerns (e.g., Kruglanski et al., 2000). Successful self-regulation requires comparing and critically evaluating alternative goal options and alternative goal pursuit means so that the right or best goal to pursue and the right or best means to pursue it are selected (hereafter, assessment). Successful self-regulation also requires managing movement from state to state and to make things happen to effect change (hereafter, locomotion). Individuals differ in the extent to which they are concerned with assessment and locomotion (Kruglanski et al., 2000). Whereas promotion and prevention involve attaining or maintaining desired end-states, assessment involves establishing the right/best choice of what to do and locomotion involves managing to make things ‘happen’. Thus, promotion, prevention, assessment, and locomotion relate to different kinds of effective self-regulation (Higgins, 2012).

Grandiosity and vulnerability share positive relations with hypercompetitiveness which includes being critical of others (Luchner et al., 2011). Further, grandiosity is positively related to engaging in social comparisons (e.g., Krizan & Bushman, 2011). As critical evaluations and making social comparisons are both forms of assessment, these relations suggest that grandiosity and vulnerability are both positively related to assessment.

Grandiosity is associated with viewing ‘getting ahead’ (i.e., achieving one's goals) as more important than getting along with others (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). Thus, it is likely positively related to locomotion. Although research has not examined vulnerability's relations with goal achievement, the hypersensitivity associated with this presentation (Dickinson & Pincus, 2003) probably impedes the effective pursuit of goals. As a result, vulnerability is less likely to be related to locomotion.

One final consideration is the role of self-esteem. Scores on Rosenberg's (1965) Self-esteem Scale (RSES) are positively related to promotion and locomotion, unrelated to prevention, and negatively related to assessment (e.g., Higgins, 2008). Similarly, promotion-focused individuals are more likely than prevention-focused individuals to ‘inflate the self’ to maintain the eagerness that fits promotion (Scholer, Ozaki, & Higgins, 2014). Finally, grandiosity is positively associated with self-esteem (i.e., inflated self-views) whereas vulnerability is negatively associated. Because of such associations with self-esteem, it was important for us to determine whether the relations between narcissistic grandiosity

and vulnerability and the self-regulatory factors of promotion, prevention, assessment, and locomotion might be due to their associations with self-esteem.

Taken together, evidence suggests that assessment might be a ‘core’ factor in narcissism, being positively related to both grandiosity and vulnerability. In contrast, promotion and locomotion could motivationally differentiate them. Thus, the major purpose of our research was to examine the distinct relations of grandiosity and vulnerability with promotion, prevention, assessment, and locomotion. Further, as noted above, because these factors have differential associations with self-esteem, as do grandiosity and vulnerability, we examined whether any distinct relations that the self-regulatory factors have with grandiosity or vulnerability might be due simply to their differential associations with self-esteem.

2. Study 1

This study was designed to examine whether promotion, assessment, and locomotion have unique positive relations with grandiosity.

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Participants

Participants were 141 students (70% female, mean age 22 years, $SD = 5.41$, range = 18–44 years) who participated in partial fulfilment of a research participation course requirement. Of these, 78 were born in Australia whereas the remainder were born in a number of other countries, including those in South-East Asian ($N = 49$). Those born overseas had lived in Australia for, on average, 5.65 years ($SD = 5.81$, range = 1–25 years).

2.1.2. Measures and procedure

Participants completed the following measures presented on personal computers:

Grandiosity was assessed using the NPI. This presented the narcissistic statements of Raskin and Terry's (1988) 40 forced-choice items and participants indicated whether these were or were not self-descriptive. The number of self-descriptive items was counted.

Promotion and *prevention* were assessed using Higgins et al.'s (2000) 11-item Regulatory Focus Questionnaire (RFQ). Six items assess individuals' subjective experiences of being effective in promotion (promotion pride) and 5 assess individuals' subjective experiences of being effective in prevention (prevention pride). Participants rated how often each item was true for them on 6-point likert scales, from *never or seldom* (1) to *very often* (6). The mean across items was calculated. As the two subscales assess subjective experiences of self-regulatory effectiveness (i.e., promotion & prevention pride), these factors typically are modestly positively correlated (e.g., Grant & Higgins, 2003).

Assessment and *locomotion* were assessed using Kruglanski et al.'s (2000) 24-item Regulatory Mode Questionnaire (RMQ). Twelve items assess assessment and 12 assess locomotion. Participants indicated the extent to which they agreed or disagreed that each item described them on 6-point likert scales, from *disagree strongly* (1) to *agree strongly* (6). The mean across scale items was calculated.

2.2. Results and discussion

The measures were internally consistent (see Table 1). On average, participants reported moderately high promotion, prevention, assessment, and locomotion, and moderate grandiosity. Promotion was positively correlated with prevention and locomotion, and

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