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Short Communication

## Narcissism and lack of interpersonal forgiveness: The mediating role of state anger, state rumination, and state empathy<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

The present study investigated the unique contributions of two distinct dimensions of narcissism – admiration and rivalry – to two facets of unforgiveness: revenge and avoidance. In addition, we examined whether state anger, state rumination, and state empathy mediate this relationship. Using a large sample ( $N = 1040$ ), we found that admiration was negatively related to revenge and avoidance via higher empathy for the transgressor. By contrast, rivalry was positively related to revenge and avoidance via greater anger and rumination and less empathy. Findings suggest that the mechanisms through which narcissism and lack of forgiveness are associated are better understood if we disentangle admiration and rivalry and consider both cognitive and affective antecedents of narcissists' unforgiving motivations.

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### 1. Introduction

A large body of research on forgiveness has demonstrated that individual difference variables affect one's response to transgressions (for an overview, see Fehr, Gelfand, & Nag, 2010). In particular, narcissism has been argued to have an "inhibitory effect on the forgiveness process" (Emmons, 2000, p. 164). Narcissism is characterized by feelings of entitlement, self-enhancement, exploitative interpersonal behavior, and lack of empathy for others (Rhodewalt & Peterson, 2009). Narcissists<sup>2</sup> tend to behave aggressively when faced with social rejection (Twenge & Campbell, 2003). Indeed, it has been demonstrated that narcissistic individuals have a lower tendency to react to interpersonal offenses with forgiveness (Eaton, Struthers, & Santelli, 2006). Specifically, narcissistic entitlement (i.e., a sense of deserving special treatment) has been

linked to reduced forgiveness (Exline, Baumeister, Bushman, Campbell, & Finkel, 2004).

Studies examining the narcissism–forgiveness link almost exclusively relied on one questionnaire, the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Hall, 1979). Although widely used, it has been criticized for conflating both adaptive and maladaptive dimensions of narcissism into one composite. Moreover, it has been suggested that narcissism will be better understood if we distinguish these dimensions (Ackerman et al., 2011). Specifically, as condensed in the Narcissistic Admiration and Rivalry Concept (NARC; Back et al., 2013), narcissism can be conceptualized as the interplay of two distinct social strategies: First, the propensity for assertive self-enhancement by means of self-promotion (*admiration*) and, second, the propensity for antagonistic self-protection by means of self-defense (*rivalry*). Empirically, admiration is related to adjustment indicators (e.g., self-assuredness, problem-focused reactions to transgressions), whereas rivalry is related to maladjustment (e.g., entitlement, more hostile reactions). Despite the well-established link between narcissism and reduced forgiveness, little is known about the facet-specific contributions of admiration and rivalry to lack of forgiveness. Consistent with the NARC, we reasoned that unforgiveness should be related to rivalry but less so to admiration.

Furthermore, the underlying mechanisms that mediate the association between narcissism and unforgiveness are largely

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<sup>2</sup> In the present study, narcissism is considered as a continuous dimension of normal (vs. pathological) personality. Consequently, the term *narcissists* is used for individuals who score high on measures of normal narcissism.

unexplored. Here, we argue that three socio-cognitive variables – state anger, state rumination, and state empathy – might prove promising. Anger, rumination, and reduced empathy have been prominent variables in predicting a lack of forgiveness (Fehr et al., 2010). Narcissists report higher anger in the face of transgressions, such as an interpersonal rejection (Twenge & Campbell, 2003). Further, Krizan and Johar (in press, Study 3) found that narcissistic entitlement is associated with rumination. Finally, narcissism has been shown to predict low empathy (Watson & Morris, 1991). Thus, we hypothesized a multiple mediator model in which these socio-cognitive variables (state anger, state rumination, and state empathy) are key factors accounting for lack of forgiveness in narcissistic rivalry and admiration.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants and procedure

A total of 1040 individuals ( $M_{\text{age}} = 22.8$ ,  $SD = 4.9$ , range: 18–50; 81.1% female) from Germany (74.6%), Austria (24.4%), and Switzerland (1.0%) were recruited via advertising on a social networking site to complete an online study. As an incentive, they were given the option to enter a lottery for one of four 25 € gift cards. All participants provided informed consent.

Participants completed a measure of narcissism (see below) and were then instructed to bring to mind a real-life situation in which someone had hurt them. Next, they were requested to “indicate your current thoughts and feelings about the person who hurt you; that is, we want to know how you feel about that person *right now*.” Participants then completed the measures described below. All measures were administered in German language.

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. Narcissism

The Narcissistic Admirations and Rivalry Questionnaire (NARQ; Back et al., 2013) was used to assess both facets of narcissism, admiration (9 Items; e.g., “I am great”) and rivalry (9 Items; e.g., “I want my rivals to fail”). Items were rated from 1 (*do not agree at all*) to 6 (*agree completely*).

#### 2.2.2. State anger

Participants were asked to rate their momentary anger toward the transgressor on a face-valid single item (“I am very angry about what he/she did to me”; 1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*).

#### 2.2.3. State rumination

Participants also provided information about how much they currently ruminated about the transgression (“I can’t stop thinking about what he/she did to me”; 1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*).

#### 2.2.4. State empathy

To measure empathic feelings for the transgressor, we used the empathy measure by Batson and Shaw (1991). Participants were instructed to rate the extent to which they currently experienced each feeling for their transgressor (8 items; e.g., “softhearted”; 1 = *not at all*, 5 = *very much*).

#### 2.2.5. Lack of forgiveness

Lack of forgiveness was measured with the Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations Inventory (TRIM; McCullough et al., 1998). It assesses individuals’ current motivations toward a real-life transgressor and is divided into two subscales: revenge (5 items; e.g., “I’ll make him/her pay”) and avoidance (7 items; e.g., “I withdraw from him/her”). Items were rated from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). High levels of revenge and avoidance indicate a lack of forgiveness.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations

Table 1 details descriptive statistics, reliabilities, and intercorrelations for all measures. Because we were interested in the facet-specific effects of admiration and rivalry on lack of forgiveness, we calculated uniqueness scores by regressing each of the two NARC facets on the other one. The resulting residual scores reflect the amount of variance of each facet that is not shared by the other one and, hence, provide a more accurate estimate of the unique contribution of each facet to the narcissism–forgiveness link (for a similar procedure, see Penke & Asendorpf, 2008).

The unique variance of the admiration facet showed no relations with revenge, avoidance, and anger, but it was negatively correlated with rumination and positively correlated with empathy. The unique variance of the rivalry facet, by contrast, was positively correlated with revenge, avoidance, anger, and rumination, but negatively correlated with empathy.

### 3.2. Mediation analyses

To test the possible mediating roles of state anger, state rumination, and state empathy, we performed bootstrapping analyses

**Table 1**  
Means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations among measures.

Measure	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	$\alpha$	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Admiration	3.08	.83	.84	–								
Rivalry	2.33	.83	.83	.39**/–.39**	–							
State anger <sup>a</sup>	3.80	1.00	–	.02/–.03	.11**/.12***	–						
State rumination <sup>a</sup>	3.30	1.12	–	–.04/–.07 <sup>†</sup>	–.06/.08**	.42***	–					
State empathy	2.24	.94	.93	.05/.09**	–.07/–.10***	–.25***	.01	–				
Revenge	2.12	.80	.84	.12**/–.02	.35**/.33***	.37***	.22***	–.38***	–			
Avoidance	3.43	.97	.90	–.01/–.04	.07/.08**	.27***	.09**	–.63***	.37***	–		
Gender	–	–	–	.20**/.13***	.21**/.15***	–.13***	–.13***	–.03	.12***	–.01	–	
Age	22.8	4.9	–	–.02/.02	–.09**/–.09**	–.02	–.04	.01	–.05	.03	.05	–

Note.  $N = 1040$ . For admiration and rivalry, uniqueness correlations (i.e., the amount of variance of each facet that is not shared by the other one) are shown next to the respective zero-order correlations with the other measures. Gender was coded as female = 0, male = 1.

<sup>a</sup> Single-item measures.

<sup>†</sup>  $p \leq .05$ .

\*\*  $p \leq .01$ .

\*\*\*  $p \leq .001$  (two-tailed).

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