



## Toward a better understanding of narcissistic perfectionism: Evidence of factorial validity, incremental validity, and mediating mechanisms



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### ABSTRACT

Narcissistic perfectionism is frequently described in theory, but there are no empirically tested models of this construct. Our study tested a model of narcissistic perfectionism, and differentiated this construct from self-critical perfectionism. Data from two samples of undergraduates, including a 28-day daily diary study, were used to test the factorial validity of narcissistic perfectionism and its unique indirect pathways to aversive social behavior. Results supported the factorial validity of narcissistic perfectionism as distinct from self-critical perfectionism, and each perfectionism construct predicted negative social behaviors through overlapping but distinct forms of perfectionistic discrepancies. Our study suggests narcissistic perfectionism is a distinct personality construct that predicts aversive social behavior, thereby supporting theoretical descriptions of this oft-discussed, but rarely studied, personality construct.

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### 1. Introduction

Perfectionism is a multidimensional trait with important implications for understanding adjustment (e.g., Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990; Hewitt & Flett, 1991). Sylvia Plath, a Pulitzer Prize winning author, vividly illustrates the destructiveness of perfectionism. In her diaries, Plath describes her perfectionism as a “demon” (Plath, 2000) whose torment contributed to her suicide at age 30 (Shulman, 1998). She was intensely self-critical, preoccupied with mistakes, doubted her performance abilities, and saw others as demanding perfection of her. This constellation of traits, known as self-critical perfectionism, robustly predicts various negative outcomes (Dunkley, Zuroff, & Blankstein, 2003; McGrath et al., 2012).

Not all perfectionists are the same, however. Imagine a different sort of perfectionist who directs his or her need for perfection outward onto others in a grandiose, hyper-critical way. An example is Steve Jobs, co-founder of Apple. Since his death in 2011, stories of his perfectionism abound (Gladwell, 2011). According to one biography (Isaacson, 2011), he expected perfection from others in an entitled, demanding, and hyper-critical manner. Employees

reported going from “hero to zero” in Jobs’ estimation after even minor mistakes; employees also noted Jobs routinely derogated them in front of co-workers (Isaacson, 2011). Despite Jobs’ perfectionism (e.g., rigidly demanding flawless performance from others) and his narcissism (e.g., entitlement and grandiose sense of superiority over others), his personality, and the personalities of those like him, are not well captured by any single model of perfectionism or narcissism to date.

Theory speculates about a constellation of narcissistic and perfectionistic features (e.g., Beck & Freeman, 1990), yet existing models do not bridge the gap between narcissism and perfectionism to adequately capture this personality style. We propose that a constellation of traits from perfectionism and narcissism capture the attributes described by theory (e.g., Millon & Davis, 1996). We call this constellation narcissistic perfectionism. Our aim is to articulate and to test a factorially valid model of narcissistic perfectionism that predicts outcomes beyond existing constructs (e.g., self-critical perfectionism), and to identify possible mechanisms through which narcissistic perfectionists engage in aversive social behaviors.

#### 1.1. Narcissistic perfectionism: existing descriptions and needed advances

Theorists from various traditions make passing reference to a harsh and an outwardly directed need for perfection in narcissism.

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Rothstein (1999) emphasized the role of perfectionism in narcissism, noting the core of narcissism rests in a “felt quality of perfection” (Rothstein, 1999, p. 17). Sorotzkin (1985) noted that perfectionistic tendencies in narcissistic individuals are exacerbated when others do not fulfill their narcissistic needs. Though narcissistic injury (and subsequent rage) may be triggered by any experienced loss of perfection, this may also occur when an idealized other disappoints the narcissistic individual who “feels entitled to the presence of an idealized object” (Rothstein, 1999, p. 22). In this way, idealized others are expected to maintain the aura of perfection, and the narcissistic individual may react with intense anger if those expectations go unmet (Kohut, 1972).

From a cognitive lens, Beck and Freeman (1990) viewed narcissism as a dysfunctional schema thought to involve entitled and grandiose expectations of others. Similarly, Ellis (1997) posited that, in the context of a disordered personality (e.g., narcissistic personality disorder), people treat their desires or preferences as grandiose and unrealistic demands. Such demands are often forced onto others resulting in intense anger when others do not satisfy these demands.

These perspectives are echoed in recent theoretical descriptions. Ronningstam (2011) notes narcissists are vocal in their own pursuit of perfection, and such people also express their “contempt for the perceived imperfections of other people” (p. 93). In a similar way, Millon and Davis (1996) describe how narcissists impose their standards onto other people. Once others fail to meet these expectations, the narcissistic individual will react with contempt (Millon, Davis, Millon, Escovar, & Meagher, 2000). Dimaggio and Attinà (2012) also describe how narcissists impose their perfectionistic expectations on others.

Despite perfectionism toward others being clearly discussed in theoretical literature, perfectionism is noticeably absent in empirical models of narcissism (e.g., pathological narcissism). Contemporary research divides pathological narcissism into two subtypes: grandiose narcissism (characterized by grandiosity, arrogance, entitlement, and exploitativeness), and vulnerable narcissism (characterized by entitlement and grandiose expectations of oneself and others with an overt presentation of hopelessness, constraint, and withdrawal; see Dickinson & Pincus, 2003; Pincus et al., 2009). This conceptual model of narcissism has gained prominence, with measurement tools such as the Pathological Narcissism Inventory (PNI; Pincus et al., 2009) developed to assess both subtypes with a single scale. In a well-cited paper describing the development and the validation of the PNI (Pincus et al., 2009), perfectionism is mentioned only twice: once regarding the desire for perfection in the context of “fantasies of unlimited power, superiority, perfection and adulation” (p. 367), and once regarding the “tendency to hide the self’s imperfections” (p. 376). Other prominent papers on pathological narcissism (e.g., Cain, Pincus, & Ansell, 2008; Dickinson & Pincus, 2003; Roche, Pincus, Lukowitsky, Ménard, & Conroy, 2013) omit perfectionism entirely. Furthermore, items in the PNI do not reference perfectionism pertaining to either the self or other people. Despite numerous references to harsh and to critical demands for the perfection of others described by theory, these ideas are not represented in current empirical models of pathological narcissism.

While demanding perfection of others is more clearly represented in the perfectionism literature, these conceptual and empirical models also have shortcomings. A notable formulation of the perfectionism–narcissism link is Hewitt and Flett’s (1990) original description of other-oriented perfectionism. These authors described other-oriented perfectionists as people who project their expectations for perfection onto others in a harsh, critical way. This construct was later modified to its current form, as reflected in the Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (MPS; Hewitt & Flett, 1991). Since then, similar constructs, such as Hill et al.’s (2004) notion of

high standards for others, have also emerged to represent outwardly directed perfectionistic demands.

Whereas research on self-critical perfectionism is burgeoning (e.g., Chang, Hirsch, Sanna, Jeglic, & Fabian, 2011; Rice, Choi, Zhang, Morero, & Anderson, 2012; Sherry, Gautreau, Mushquash, Sherry, & Allen, 2014), research on other-oriented perfectionism is comparatively neglected, perhaps because other-oriented perfectionism does not evidence strong predictive or incremental validity. For example, Haring, Hewitt, and Flett (2003) found other-oriented perfectionism was not a strong predictor of marital adjustment compared to socially prescribed perfectionism (i.e., perceiving that others demand perfection of oneself). In another study, other-oriented perfectionism did not uniquely predict conflict after other forms of perfectionism were accounted for (Mackinnon et al., 2012). Other-oriented perfectionism was even omitted from a measure of child and adolescent perfectionism (Hewitt et al., 2002). Though other-oriented perfectionism is an important construct, it may not be sufficiently broad to capture the attributes of those who express a demanding and hyper-critical style of perfectionism toward others.

In sum, an outwardly directed need for perfection marked by a grandiose self-image, interpersonal entitlement, hyper-criticism of others, and lofty expectations for others’ performance is frequently discussed in theory (e.g., Beck & Freeman, 1990; Hewitt & Flett, 1991; Kohut, 1972; Millon et al., 2000), but remains largely unrepresented in extant models and measures of narcissism and perfectionism. Consequently, there is no well-developed empirical model of narcissistic perfectionism available. Our study is an important first step in this direction.

## 2. Study 1

### 2.1. Background

#### 2.1.1. An empirical model of narcissistic perfectionism

The key to an empirical model of narcissistic perfectionism may rest in a constellation of narcissistic and perfectionistic traits, as existing models of grandiose narcissism and other-oriented perfectionism each neglect key features of this overall personality style. While other-oriented perfectionism maps onto the outwardly directed need for perfection, grandiose narcissism maps onto the sense of grandiosity and entitlement described in theoretical accounts of narcissistic perfectionism. In addition, one trait may only lead to interpersonal difficulties in the presence of other traits. For example, high standards for others may be innocuous when paired with a warm and nurturing interpersonal style. However, when combined with grandiosity and entitlement, it may result in a particularly negative form of other-directed perfectionism where people are rigidly held to unreasonably high standards, resulting in conflict and harsh criticism when those demands for perfection go unmet. Thus, we propose a constellation of key traits from grandiose narcissism and perfectionism form the foundation for narcissistic perfectionism.

Existing research shows links between perfectionism and narcissism, which provides support for the combination of these traits into an empirical model of narcissistic perfectionism. Other-oriented perfectionism shows correlations with grandiose narcissism as measured by the Narcissistic Personality Inventory and the narcissism scale of the Dirty Dozen, with specific links to features of authority, exploitativeness, and entitlement (Hewitt & Flett, 1991; Stoeber, 2014). While self-oriented perfectionism (i.e., demanding perfection of oneself) showed similar, albeit weaker, relations with these narcissistic features, socially prescribed perfectionism (i.e., believing that others are demanding perfection of oneself) did not (Hewitt & Flett, 1991). Similarly, other-oriented

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