



The interpersonal expression of perfectionism among grandiose and vulnerable narcissists: Perfectionistic self-presentation, effortless perfection, and the ability to seem perfect



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 5 April 2016

Received in revised form 10 May 2016

Accepted 11 May 2016

Available online 24 May 2016

Keywords:

Grandiose narcissism

Vulnerable narcissism

Perfectionistic self-presentation

Perfectionistic self-presentational capability

Effortless perfection

Hiding effort

ABSTRACT

The current research focused on perfectionistic self-presentation and its relevance in models of narcissism as a form of overcompensation designed to deflect attention away from self-inadequacies. We took an extended view of perfectionistic self-presentation that includes a defensive need to seem effortlessly perfect and self-presentation capability. A sample of 305 students completed measures of narcissistic grandiosity, narcissistic vulnerability, perfectionistic self-presentation, effortless perfection, and perfectionistic self-presentation capability. Significant positive associations were found between grandiose narcissism and perfectionistic self-promotion and effortless perfection. Vulnerable narcissism was found to be associated with all facets of perfectionistic self-presentation, effortless perfection, and lower perceived ability to seem perfect. The present study paints a picture of grandiose narcissists as involved in promoting a perfect image of the self, pressured to be perfect with apparent ease and perceiving a sense of being able to promote such an image of perfection. In contrast, vulnerable perfectionists have a strong need to seem perfect but they feel unable to project this image. Our results are in keeping with the notion that vulnerable narcissists attempt to hide behind a mask but they do not feel fully capable of projecting an image of perfection.

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1. Introduction

Historically, much of the perfectionism literature has been focused on people who have been characterized as “neurotic perfectionists” because they want to be perfect but see themselves as consistently falling short of this exceptionally high standard (see Hamachek, 1978). In contrast, there is growing interest in another type of perfectionist described as the narcissistic perfectionist – that is, people with grandiose ambitions and standards and associated attributes who feel like they are perfect or they could be perfect (see Sorotzkin, 1985, 1998). This growing emphasis on narcissistic perfectionists is part of a greater awareness that certain perfectionists can have a very dark side to their personalities and they are capable of doing whatever it takes to achieve their grand ambitions (for related discussions, see Flett, Hewitt & Sherry, 2016; Marcus & Ziegler-Hill, 2015). This emphasis on narcissistic perfectionism has culminated in a new perfectionism measure that has

incorporated subscales tapping narcissistic perfectionism (see Smith, Saklofske, Sherry, & Stoeber, in press).

Most studies in this area have focused on trait perfectionism dimensions and narcissism (for a review, see Flett, Sherry, Hewitt, & Nepon, 2014). The original scale development work by Hewitt and Flett (1991) on their Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale established that narcissism was associated with other-oriented perfectionism. Several subsequent studies (e.g., Stoeber, Sherry, & Nealis, 2015) have linked narcissism with trait perfectionism (for an overview see Flett et al., 2014). Our current work takes a different perspective by focusing on perfectionistic self-presentation in keeping with recent work that takes an extended approach by conceptualizing the perfectionism construct not only in terms of trait perfectionism but also in terms of perfectionistic self-presentation (Hewitt et al., 2003). Whereas trait perfectionism refers to the source and expectations of perfectionistic expectations, perfectionistic self-presentation involves the public interpersonal expression of perfectionism. Perfectionistic self-presentation (PSP) includes three distinct dimensions: perfectionistic self-promotion (proactively promoting a perfect image), non-disclosure of imperfections (concerns over verbal disclosure of imperfections), and non-display of imperfections (concern over behavioral displays of imperfection). Trait perfectionism and PSP are considered to be conceptually distinct and PSP facets have been associated with a wide range of

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psychological difficulties and deleterious outcomes, including depression (Cha, 2016), Machiavellianism (Sherry, Hewitt, Besser, Flett, & Klein, 2006), social disconnection (Chen, Hewitt, & Flett, 2015), and suicide risk (Roxborough et al., 2012).

Conceptual and empirical analyses suggest that perfectionistic self-presentation is implicated in various forms of personality disorder and dysfunction (see Ayearst, Flett, & Hewitt, 2012; Sherry, Hewitt, Flett, Lee-Baggley, & Hall, 2007). Sherry, Gralnick, Hewitt, Sherry and Flett (2014) conducted the initial study that examined perfectionistic self-presentation and narcissism. Participants completed the Perfectionistic Self-Presentation Scale along with the Narcissistic Personality Inventory, which is largely a measure of grandiose narcissism when the focus is on the overall measure (Ames, Rose & Anderson, 2006). They highlighted that perfectionistic self-promotion was positively and uniquely associated with narcissism. This is consistent with results highlighting the tendency of grandiose narcissists to brag and take credit for positive outcomes (e.g., Campbell & Sedikides, 1999). Conversely, consistent with the tendency of grandiose narcissists to be immodest and deny weakness, concern over verbal disclosure and behavioral displays of imperfection were not associated significantly with overall narcissism.

In the current study, we sought to uniquely extend the literature in three significant respects—first, we re-examined narcissism and perfectionistic self-presentation based on an extended conceptualization of this self-presentational style that includes a need to seem effortlessly perfect. Independent research by two teams of researchers has shown recently that some perfectionistic people have an extreme orientation characterized by a belief in effortless perfection and a need or desire to seem perfect by hiding effort so that it is not visible to others. Flett, Nepon, Hewitt, Molnar and Zhao (2016) have recently further extended the construct of perfectionistic self-presentation by showing that the tendency to project an image of perfection by hiding effort is associated with and account for unique variance in adjustment difficulties. Similarly, Travers, Randall, Bryant, Conley and Bohnet (2015) sought empirical support for the effortless perfectionism construct by showing that their newly developed 10-item measure taps a distinct form of perfectionism and effortless perfection is a unique predictor – in relation to other perfectionism scales – of negative adjustment. The orientation toward effortless perfection and the tendency to hide effort is seen as a reflection of a highly defensive orientation toward the self and associated beliefs that emphasize the self as a fixed entity (see Flett, Nepon, Hewitt, Molnar and Zhao, 2016). It is our contention in the current work that people who are both narcissistic and perfectionistic have an excessive need to seem not only perfect but effortlessly perfect; that is, they will have an orientation toward effortless perfection and this should especially be the case for vulnerable, idealistic narcissists who tend to hide defensively behind a mask or façade.

Second, we took an extended view of the perfectionism construct that focused not only on perfectionistic self-presentation but also related individual differences in the self-perceived ability to seem perfect. At present, existing research on perfectionistic self-presentation has focused exclusively on the level of the need to seem perfect or avoid seeming imperfect; a related variable of importance that merits strong consideration is the extent to which the person who needs to seem perfect actually feels capable of projecting this image. To our knowledge, there has been no attempt thus to assess the key variable of self-presentation efficacy. However, the usefulness of considering self-presentation efficacy has been demonstrated in general research in the exercise and physical activity field (Gammage, Hall, & Ginis, 2004) and in the social anxiety field (Maddux, Norton, & Leary, 1988). In the current context, individual differences in the self-perceived ability to seem perfect should be an important supplement to perfectionistic self-presentation and a potentially useful way of distinguishing narcissistic grandiosity versus narcissistic vulnerability. The existence of these two forms of narcissism was first conceptualized and examined by Wink (1991) and a considerable body of psychology literature (e.g., Hendin &

Cheek, 1997) has confirmed the existence of two orthogonal constructs of narcissism. Grandiose and vulnerable narcissism share some core traits, such as a sense of entitlement and grandiose fantasies. However, vulnerable narcissism, but not grandiose narcissism, is largely marked by hypersensitivity, defensiveness, and insecurity (Dickinson & Pincus, 2003). The present study proposes that narcissistic vulnerability could reflect, at least in part, a sense of not being able to project an image of perfection. The perception of a low capability to appear perfect might explain the high levels of shame, the tendency to be self-critical and hypersensitive (Pincus et al., 2009), as well as the tendency to show social withdrawal and avoidance (Dickinson & Pincus, 2003) among vulnerable narcissists.

The present research aims to build upon previous results on the association between the two forms of narcissism and perfectionistic self-presentation by including a) the perception of one's ability to display an image of perfection; and b) the tendency to appear perfect by hiding effort. We investigated whether these two new elements of perfectionistic self-presentation could account for additional variance in grandiose and vulnerable narcissism beyond that explained by the other three facets of perfectionistic self-presentation (PSP). We expected a positive association between the measures representing effortless perfection and both grandiose and vulnerable narcissism. It was also expected that vulnerable narcissism in particular would be associated with the perception of not being capable of seeming perfect (despite a strong need to seem perfect). Third, although our main focus was on perfectionistic self-presentation and narcissism, the inclusion of both new measures of effortless perfection in the current research provided us with the opportunity to compare and contrast the results involving these two independently developed measures.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

This research was conducted with a sample of 305 undergraduate students (54.2% F; mean age: 22.62 ± 3.08 years). Participants were approached by three female assistants. All the participants were Italian. Data collection consisted of written questionnaires and general information about the purposes of the study was announced to the participants. The participation was anonymous and participants were guaranteed confidentiality. No formative credits or remunerative rewards were given.

2.2. Measures

Grandiose narcissism was assessed through the Italian adaptation (Fossati, Borroni, & Maffei, 2008) of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI-16; Ames et al., 2006). The NPI-16 is a shorter, unidimensional measure of the NPI-40, designed to measure grandiose narcissism in non-clinical populations. It contains 16 pairs of items, each consisting of two conflicting proposals between which the participants must choose according to their own beliefs and feelings (e.g., "I like to be the center of the attention" vs. "I prefer to blend in with the crowd"). Notable face, internal, discriminant and predictive validity were reported for the NPI-16 (Ames et al., 2006).

The Italian adaptation (Fossati et al., 2009) of the *Hypersensitive Narcissism Scale* (HSNS; Hendin & Cheek, 1997) was used to assess vulnerable narcissism. The HSNS is a one-dimensional measure comprised of 10 items capturing narcissistic hypersensitivity (e.g., "My feelings are easily hurt by ridicule or by the slighting remarks of others"). Participants indicated the extent to which the items characterized their feelings and behavior using a response scale from 1 (*very uncharacteristic or untrue*) to 5 (*very characteristic or true*). The HSNS has demonstrated reliability and validity in numerous studies (e.g., Miller et al., 2011; Pincus et al., 2009). Evidence attests to the reliability and the validity

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