



# Perceived agency mediates the link between the narcissistic subtypes and self-esteem



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## ABSTRACT

Grandiose and vulnerable narcissism share some core features (e.g., entitlement, self-absorption) but differ in other important ways (e.g., self-esteem). To reconcile these differing characteristics, we predicted that differences in perceived agency mediate the association between narcissistic subtypes and differences in self-esteem. One hundred college students completed self-report measures of grandiose narcissism, vulnerable narcissism, explicit global self-esteem, and perceived agency. As predicted, grandiose narcissism was positively associated with agency and self-esteem, whereas vulnerable narcissism was negatively associated with agency and self-esteem. Perceived agency also mediated the associations between each narcissistic subtype and self-esteem. Furthermore, a partial correlation showed that when controlling for agency, the previously null correlation between measures of grandiose and vulnerable narcissism became significantly positive. These findings indicate that agency serves as a primary differentiator between the narcissistic subtypes.

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## 1. Introduction

Most people can conjure up an image of a narcissist. Perhaps the narcissist in our mind's eye is overt—someone who thinks only of themselves and brags about their superiority to others, expecting admiration. Or perhaps the narcissist we think of is covert—someone who secretly harbors extravagant fantasies about all the things they deserve but have never attained. Are these two types of narcissist equally capable of achieving the outcomes they desire? And if not, does this lead to differences in their psychological well-being?

Historically, narcissism has been considered primarily as a psychological disorder studied from a clinical perspective (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). However, narcissism has received much empirical attention in recent decades from social and personality psychologists who view the construct as an individual difference variable (Foster & Campbell, 2007; Miller & Campbell, 2010). According to this view, narcissism exists as a continuum on which the general population is normally distributed (Raskin & Hall, 1979); thus, everyone possesses some level of narcissism.<sup>1</sup>

Much of the work on non-clinical narcissism focuses on understanding the social impact that narcissists have on others, such as in team settings (e.g., John & Robins, 1994), the workplace (e.g., Meier & Semmer, 2012), and interpersonal relationships (e.g., Campbell, 1999).

However, this research depends on assumptions regarding the key features of narcissism and the processes that account for the association between narcissism and other important variables (e.g., self-esteem). In this paper, we argue that the current literature is missing a key piece of that knowledge. Specifically, we aimed to gain a better understanding of how grandiose and vulnerable narcissists perceive themselves in terms of agency.

### 1.1. The narcissistic subtypes

Researchers have proposed that two distinct subtypes of trait narcissism exist, typically called grandiose and vulnerable narcissism (Hendin & Cheek, 1997; Wink, 1991). Grandiose and vulnerable narcissists share several key narcissistic features: entitlement, self-absorption, aggression, exploitation, and grandiose fantasy (Dickinson & Pincus, 2003; Miller et al., 2011). However, the two narcissistic subtypes differ in many important ways, including self-esteem and well-being.

Grandiose narcissists most closely match the stereotypical image of narcissism. These individuals are arrogant (Akhtar & Thomson, 1982), competitive (Zeigler-Hill, Clark, & Pickard, 2008), impulsive (Vazire & Funder, 2006), and approach-oriented (Foster & Trimm, 2008). They perceive themselves as superior (Krizan & Bushman, 2011) and exhibit high self-esteem and well-being (Rose, 2002). At least in the short-term, grandiose narcissism is associated with some adaptive benefits (Brookes, 2015; Rose, 2002). These narcissists procure good outcomes for the self, although this often occurs at the expense of others (Paulhus, 1998). For example, grandiose narcissists' tendency to self-enhance leads to boosts in self-esteem (Rose, 2002; Taylor & Brown, 1988), but these narcissists are quick to sacrifice the well-being of

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<sup>1</sup> Although it is a continuous construct, for brevity, we refer to people high in trait narcissism as "narcissists."

others to promote their own (Campbell, Bush, Brunell, & Shelton, 2005). They also attribute their successes to their own ability and distance themselves from failure by blaming external sources (Kernis & Sun, 1994; Morf & Rhodewalt, 1998). In general, grandiose narcissists carefully craft and maintain their positive self-views, even when protecting their well-being results in negative consequences for others.

In contrast, vulnerable narcissists exhibit a more maladaptive set of characteristics. They are hypersensitive (Hendin & Cheek, 1997), anxious (Wink, 1991), and insecure (Kernberg, 1986), as well as defensive (Freis, Brown, Carroll & Arkin, in press; Wink, 1991) and shame-prone (Malkin, Barry, & Zeigler-Hill, 2011). Self-doubt plagues the vulnerable narcissist (Wink, 1991), who tends to internalize emotions (Malkin et al., 2011). Vulnerable narcissists may even experience a kind of depressive realism, without the emotional benefits of illusory self-enhancement (Rose, 2002; Taylor & Brown, 1988). In general, vulnerable narcissists view themselves negatively (Malkin et al., 2011) and experience low self-esteem and lowered well-being (Rose, 2002).

Thus, though they share key narcissistic features, grandiose and vulnerable narcissists experience vastly different psychological outcomes. Whereas grandiose narcissists feel entitled, are self-absorbed, and experience inflated self-esteem, vulnerable narcissists' characteristics seem contradictory. Vulnerable narcissists are still entitled and self-absorbed, but they simultaneously have low self-esteem. Ample literature demonstrates these similarities and differences between the two subtypes, but little past work attempts to explain why such differences occur. Our purpose is to shed light on a mediating variable that could explain the subtype differences discussed in the literature.

Specifically, we propose that self-perceptions of agency may explain the self-esteem differences in grandiose and vulnerable narcissists. Agency refers to traits of extraversion, action, and competence (Bakan, 1966; Bosson et al., 2008). Agentic tendencies stem from the desire to distinguish the self from others. This dimension allows a person to bring about desired outcomes, generally through efficient goal pursuit and attainment. Agency-oriented individuals strive for self-assertion, achievement, and power (Bakan, 1966). Although grandiose and vulnerable narcissists share key features such as entitlement and self-absorption, it is possible that their sense of agency differs and underlies their contrasting self-esteem levels.

### 1.2. Grandiose narcissism and perceived agency

Grandiose narcissism has historically been associated with high levels of agency, both theoretically and empirically. Campbell, Brunell, and Finkel's (2006) Agency Model of Narcissism proposes that grandiose narcissists focus on agentic concerns to regulate their self-esteem. To this end, grandiose narcissists employ agentic interpersonal strategies, such as seeking out trophy partners, viewing themselves as better than others, and constantly self-enhancing and self-promoting (Campbell et al., 2006). Grandiose narcissists hone their charisma, extraversion, and self-confidence to superficially impress others and gain admiration. These behaviors are likely often successful, helping the grandiose narcissist achieve desired outcomes such as a promotion at work or an attractive partner, as well as subsequently reinforcing their high self-esteem.

Empirical evidence also demonstrates strong links between grandiose narcissism and agency. For example, grandiose narcissists evaluate themselves positively in domains of agency on both explicit and implicit levels (Campbell, Bosson, Goheen, Lakey, & Kernis, 2007). They self-enhance primarily on status-relevant attributes, including intelligence (Campbell, Rudich, & Sedikides, 2002), and competition plays a central role in their lives. Grandiose narcissists base their self-worth in competition with others, but no other externally validated domain (e.g., others' approval; Zeigler-Hill et al., 2008). In the commons dilemma, grandiose narcissists engage in significantly more competitive than cooperative behavior, resulting in a benefit to the narcissist at the cost of other individuals and to the commons as a whole (Campbell et al.,

2005). In sum, both theory and research support the positive relationship between grandiose narcissism and agency.

### 1.3. Vulnerable narcissism and perceived agency

In contrast to the considerable evidence related to grandiose narcissism, the links between vulnerable narcissism and agency are far less clear. That said, some evidence suggests that vulnerable narcissism may be associated with a lack of agency. For example, Kernberg (1986) hypothesized that these narcissists lack self-confidence and initiative. Additionally, Pincus et al. (2009) theorized that vulnerable narcissists hold entitled expectations of others—in that they feel entitled to special treatment from others—but are incapable of adequately expressing those expectations (Pincus et al., 2009), suggesting that they may be unable to achieve the outcomes they feel they deserve. Empirically speaking, vulnerable narcissists are generally anxious, hesitant, and unsure (Foster & Trimm, 2008). More recently and most convincingly, Brookes (2015) demonstrated that vulnerable narcissism is associated with low self-efficacy, which can be thought of as an expression of agency (Bandura, 1986).

Overall, these speculations and findings suggest that vulnerable narcissists may feel entitled to good outcomes, but incapable of orchestrating the desired outcomes they feel they deserve. Unlike grandiose narcissists whose every move seems strategically aimed at self-enhancement and confirmation of their own superiority, vulnerable narcissists may feel like they deserve good things but that others are responsible for recognizing their deservingness and acting accordingly. Thus, in stark contrast to grandiose narcissists, vulnerable narcissists may actually lack a sense of personal agency.

### 1.4. The impact of perceived agency on self-esteem

The value of understanding perceived agency among the narcissistic subtypes arises from the potential to explain differences observed in grandiose and vulnerable narcissists, including self-esteem levels. Past research has shown that people tend to base their self-esteem, at least partly, on their feelings of agency (e.g., Tafarodi & Swann, 2001; Wojciszke, Baryla, Parzuchowski, Szymkow, & Abele, 2011). Thus, it seems theoretically plausible that if grandiose and vulnerable narcissists experience differing levels of agency, this could contribute to their experiences of high or low self-esteem. Accordingly, we predict that 1.) grandiose narcissists' high personal agency will lead to high self-esteem and 2.) vulnerable narcissists' low personal agency will lead to low self-esteem. Thus, differing perceived agency to attain the good outcomes which narcissists feel they deserve may serve as the divider that leads to psychological benefits for one (grandiose narcissists) and detriments for the other (vulnerable narcissists).

### 1.5. The current research

Overall, the links between grandiose narcissism and agency have been clearly demonstrated through theory and research findings, but these links are unclear for vulnerable narcissists. Given that the distinction between the two narcissistic subtypes has been widely accepted, it seems imperative that researchers begin to balance the established empirical work on the agentic qualities of grandiose narcissists with new work that clarifies these links for vulnerable narcissists. Importantly, the characteristic of agency may also help explain the differences observed in the two narcissistic subtypes, including divergent levels of self-esteem. The current study aimed to examine this gap in the literature.

We examined agentic self-perceptions and associated impacts on explicit global self-esteem among the narcissistic subtypes through trait self-ratings. We predicted that grandiose narcissists would rate themselves high in agentic traits, replicating past research. We hypothesized that vulnerable narcissists, on the other hand, would rate

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