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The Many Faces of Narcissism: Phenomenology, Antecedents, and Consequences

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What is narcissism? What characteristics must someone possess to be considered narcissistic? Few concepts in psychology are as simultaneously familiar and perplexing as narcissism. The general public seems comfortable with the meaning of “narcissism” as celebrities, business leaders, and politicians are regularly labeled narcissistic in the popular media. Yet theory and research in psychology has historically underscored diverse, sometimes conflicting, views of what it means to be narcissistic. The articles in this special issue highlight many of the forms, facets and dimensions of narcissism that have been identified or clarified by recent theoretical and methodological advances (Back, Kufner, Gerlach, Rauthmann & Denissen, 2013; Cain, Pincus, & Ansell, 2008; Gebauer, Sedikides, Verplanken, & Maio, 2012; Krizan & Herlache, 2018; Miller, Lynam, Hyatt, & Campbell, 2017). These new models and measures challenge researchers to think deeply about what it means to be narcissistic, and aid efforts to integrate the diverse views of narcissism that have historically arisen from divergent disciplinary assumptions, theoretical orientations and analytic techniques. They have also contributed to substantial refinements in how researchers conceptualize and understand narcissism, its essential features, as well as its causes and consequences, as illustrated by the articles showcased in this special issue.

One of the earliest distinctions drawn in the relevant literature is that between *grandiose* and *vulnerable* expressions of narcissism (Dickinson & Pincus, 2003; Hendin & Cheek, 1997; Rothvon & Holmstrom, 1996; Wink, 1991). Both forms share common features of disagreeableness, self-importance, and entitlement, but diverge sharply in other ways. Grandiose narcissism is associated with extraversion, self-enhancement, immodesty, and high self-esteem, whereas vulnerable narcissism is associated with neuroticism, fragility, defensiveness, and low self-esteem. Advances in the measurement of each form have generated a more complete understanding of how they relate to, and differ from, each other.

Although both forms of narcissism are associated with antagonism, Hansen-Brown and Freis (2019) identify a social cognitive bias that may particularly fuel the antagonism of vulnerable narcissists: hostile attribution bias. They demonstrate that individuals who are high in vulnerable narcissism (but not grandiose narcissism) are especially likely to interpret others’ ambiguous behavior (e.g., a group of people laughing nearby) as motivated by hostile or malevolent intent (e.g., “They’re laughing at me”). These negative interpretations may cause vulnerable narcissists to undermine their own efforts to gain the social approval they are so eager to attain.

Edershile and Wright (2019) also examine how individuals high in grandiose and vulnerable narcissism differ in their perceptions of, and behavior toward, others. Through the lens of interpersonal theory (Pincus & Ansell, 2013)—which organizes interpersonal functioning along orthogonal axes of dominance and warmth—they examine links between narcissism and behavior in naturalistic interactions. Through experience sampling methods, their participants reported perceptions of their own behavior in everyday social interactions as well as the behavior of their interaction partners. Edershile and Wright find that grandiosity, at the dispositional level, is associated with dominance and coldness in interactions, whereas vulnerability is strongly associated only with coldness.

Notably, Edershile and Wright (2019) also measure fluctuations in *state* narcissism across interactions, acknowledging that narcissism differs not only between individuals but also within the same individual across time, in different situations (Giacomin & Jordan, 2016a,b). These momentary assessments of narcissism reveal a more dynamic picture of how narcissism relates to interpersonal perceptions. State grandiosity is associated with perceptions of others’ warmth and submissiveness and, in turn, with behaving in a more dominant and (to a lesser extent) warmer way. In contrast, state vulnerability is associated with perceptions of others’ dominance and coldness and, in turn, behaving more coldly. These results underscore the importance of considering both grandiose and vulnerable expressions of narcissism, as well as momentary fluctuations in narcissism.

Chen, Friesdorf, and Jordan (2019) also examine variability in state narcissism. Through experience sampling methods, they test how fluctuations in grandiose narcissism relate to everyday helping. Although narcissism may seem incompatible with prosocial, helping behavior, past research on how the two relate is mixed. Chen et al. observe that people are actually more helpful on days they experience more grandiosity than usual. They note that helping can be motivated by self-interest rather than altruism; grandiosity may primarily motivate egoistic helping. This possibility is consistent with their finding that grandiosity is most strongly associated with helping on days that participants were in unusually negative moods—suggesting their helping might serve a mood repair function.

To account further for inconsistency in prior findings of how grandiose narcissism relates to prosocial behavior, Chen et al. (2019) use the recent distinction drawn between *narcissistic admiration* and *rivalry* (Back et al., 2013). Grandiose narcissists may maintain their inflated self-views through assertive self-enhancement and self-promotion (narcissistic admiration) or antagonistic self-protection and devaluing others (narcissistic rivalry). This distinction fits well with recent tri-dimensional models of narcissism that suggest a central core of entitled self-importance or antagonism, which is expressed differently to the extent it is associated with agentic extraversion (grandiosity) or fragile neuroticism (vulnerability; Krizan & Herlache, 2018; Miller et al., 2017). Grandiose narcissism may represent a mix of agentic extraversion and antagonism, which are reflected in strategies of narcissistic admiration and rivalry respectively. Chen et al. find that trait grandiose narcissism, as a whole, is related to greater everyday helping, but that narcissistic rivalry, specifically, predicts less helping behavior.

Three additional articles demonstrate the importance of distinguishing between narcissistic admiration and rivalry for developing a more nuanced understanding of narcissism’s effects on interpersonal functioning. Burgmer, Weiss, and Ohmann (2019) examine how admiration and rivalry relate to empathy (see also: Back et al., 2013; Mota et al., 2019). Although higher narcissism is, overall, associated with lower empathy, Burgmer et al. find consistently that it is narcissistic rivalry, rather than admiration, that negatively predicts empathy. They also extend this finding in multiple ways. They illustrate that rivalry predicts not only low empathy, but also discordant emotions (e.g., feeling good in response to others’ negative experiences). They implicate mistrust in the link between rivalry and low empathy: Enhancing trust reduces this negative association. Lastly, they show that the low empathy of individuals high in narcissistic rivalry can have unexpected effects. Those who empathized highly with a girl suffering a terminal illness, in one of their studies, were more willing to divert funds from other patients to help her. Because those high in narcissistic rivalry experienced less empathy, they were more equitable in their allocation of resources, making fairer, more utilitarian moral judgments.

Vrabel, Zeigler-Hill, McCabe and Sauls (2019) examine how narcissistic admiration and rivalry relate to giving and receiving respect in relationships. Respect is important for romantic relationship functioning (Frei & Shaver, 2002; Owen, Quirk & Manthos, 2012) and reflects having esteem for another person and valuing their thoughts, feelings and behavior. Given their strong desire to attain status (Mahadevan, Gregg, & Sedikides, 2019), those higher in grandiose narcissism may be particularly concerned with and affected by respect in relationships. Vrabel et al. find that narcissistic admiration is associated with giving and receiving more respect, whereas rivalry is associated with giving and receiving less respect. Reports by romantic partners corroborate that individuals higher in admiration (for women, at least) are respected more by their partners, but those higher in rivalry are respected less. Notably, although those higher in admiration generally receive greater respect from their partners, when they do not, the relationship suffers. Individuals high in admiration who perceive less respect from their partners report being less satisfied and committed to their relationships.

Does grandiose narcissism also influence earlier stages of relationships, such as initial attraction? In a set of pre-registered studies, Weber, Geukes, Leckelt, and Back (2019) use the distinction between narcissistic admiration and rivalry to examine how narcissism relates to physical attractiveness. Individuals higher in grandiose narcissism consider themselves to be highly attractive, but prior research has only sometimes found a positive association between narcissism and physical attractiveness (Holtzman & Strube, 2010). Narcissism might be related to attractiveness through more effortful attention to appearance (reflected in adjustable indicators such as hairstyle and clothing) or “natural beauty” (reflected in fixed indicators such as facial and bodily features). The link between narcissism and “natural beauty” would hinge on evolutionary selection pressures favoring both narcissistic features (e.g., charm, dominance) and attractive physical features to support short-term mating strategies in some individuals (Holtzman & Strube, 2010). Weber et al. find a small positive relation between narcissism and physical attractiveness in two of three studies, a link that is specific to admiration rather than rivalry. Evidence for both the “hard work” and “natural beauty” explanations is inconsistent. The clearest conclusion is that the agentic aspects of narcissism specifically are rather modestly related to attractiveness.

Two articles extend the focus on agentic and antagonistic aspects of grandiose narcissism to the study of adolescents. Relatively little is known about the dimensional structure of narcissism in children and adolescents, but there is some evidence of distinct facets of narcissism in this age range (Thomaes & Brummelman, 2016). Wetzel, Atherton, and Robins (2019) examine how the exploitativeness and superiority facets of grandiose narcissism (reflecting antagonism and agency respectively) relate to problem behaviors known to become more prevalent in adolescence. In a multi-method longitudinal study, they demonstrate that exploitativeness may be a specific risk factor for youth. Exploitativeness, but not superiority, at age 14 predicts drug use and sexual activity at age 16 (controlling for their prevalence at age 14). Those higher in exploitativeness at age 14 report more delinquency at age 16, which is corroborated by their parents. They also display more symptoms of oppositional defiance disorder in psychiatric interviews.

Poorthius, Slagt, van Akan, Denissen, and Thomaes (2019) similarly suggest that adolescent antagonism may have uniquely negative consequences. They examine whether narcissism predicts changes in popularity as children transition from primary to secondary school and distinguish different forms of narcissism with self-esteem. Prior research suggests that narcissistic youth with higher self-esteem are especially hostile, abusive and aggressive (i.e., antagonistic; Thomaes, Bushman, Stegge, & Olthof, 2008). In a five-wave, cross-transition panel study, they find that narcissistic youth with modest self-esteem become more popular in the transition to secondary school, whereas those with high self-esteem become less popular. Although evidence for adults indicates that narcissists become less popular over time, Poorthius et al. report that narcissistic youth with modest self-esteem maintain their popularity throughout the school year, and those with high self-esteem remain consistently unpopular. These findings reinforce the conclusion that antagonistic narcissism is particularly detrimental for adolescents.

A final set of three studies address a perennial question: How do narcissists *really* feel about themselves? This question typically focuses on those high in grandiose narcissism, who report high self-esteem and inflated self-views. The psychodynamic “mask model” suggests these positive self-views mask insecurities and self-doubt (Kuchynka & Bosson, 2018). One way to test this possibility is to examine whether individuals high in grandiose narcissism have low implicit self-esteem. Some studies have obtained evidence for this possibility, but others have not. Mota et al. (2019) provide a comprehensive test of the relations between narcissism, explicit and implicit self-esteem in pre-registered analyses of 18 samples (total *N* = 5,547). They examine multiple forms of narcissism, focusing not only on antagonistic, agentic extraverted, and neurotic dimensions of narcissism, but also on communal narcissism (i.e., reflecting individuals who self-enhance on communal qualities; Gebauer et al., 2012). Mota et al. find that both agentic and communal narcissists have positive explicit self-views, whereas antagonistic and neurotic narcissists have negative self-views. They report no consistent effects for implicit self-esteem, providing scant evidence that narcissistic grandiosity masks negative implicit self-views.

Tests of whether grandiose narcissists have low implicit self-esteem provide a static, *in situ* test of the mask model. The final two articles test the more dynamic possibility that self-threat can reveal the underlying fragility of grandiose narcissists. Hardaker, Sedikides, and Tsakanikos (2019) replicate an earlier, dynamic test of the mask model conducted by Horvath and Morf (2009). When presented with a negative, self-relevant prime (“humiliation”), individuals higher in grandiose narcissism demonstrate immediate hypervigilance (at 149 ms), recognizing self-threatening stimuli faster than those lower in grandiose narcissism. This hypervigilance, however, quickly dissipates, suggesting that narcissists quickly self-regulate to conceal their fragility and, “preserve their steely exterior” (p. 2).

Hart, Tortoriello, Richardson, and Adams (2019) similarly test whether narcissistic fragility is revealed in more dynamic reactions to self-threat, while comparing the responses of individuals high in grandiose and vulnerable narcissism. They examine two distinct responses to failure. First, they find that failure contrasts sharply with the initially high performance expectations of both grandiose and vulnerable narcissists, which they then revise downward, leading to lower moods and state self-esteem. However, grandiose and vulnerable narcissists differ in their arousal, likely due to differences in the strength of their aversive arousal systems (Behavioral Inhibition Systems; Foster & Brennan, 2011). Those high in vulnerable narcissism experience heightened arousal, which further dampens self-esteem and mood. Individuals high in grandiose narcissism experience dampened arousal, which buffers their self-esteem and mood such that, overall, they react less to failure. As in the findings of Hardaker et al. (2019), however, grandiose narcissists’ apparently stoic exterior may mask a dynamic underlying fragility.

While there might not yet be a definitive answer to the question, “What is narcissism?”, historic controversies, fueled by differing disciplinary backgrounds and theoretical assumptions are yielding to a clearer, more consensual view of narcissism. Early clinical accounts converged around features of self-absorption, vanity and callousness (Levy, Ellison, & Reynoso, 2010). Beyond these features, descriptions of narcissism have differed so much that the narcissism literature might sometimes feel like William James’ (1890) description of the sensory experiences of a newborn: “one great blooming, buzzing confusion” (p. 488). Just as a child develops the concepts and schemas needed to make better sense of the world, psychologists continue to make theoretical, empirical and methodological advances that help make better sense of narcissism. The articles in this special issue highlight these advances. We hope that they also inspire further efforts to clarify the buzzing confusion of narcissism.

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