

**I don't feel ya:**

**How narcissism shapes empathy**

Pascal Burgmer<sup>1</sup>, Alexa Weiss<sup>2</sup>, & Katharina Ohmann<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*University of Kent, United Kingdom*

<sup>2</sup>*Bielefeld University, Germany*

<sup>3</sup>*University of Cologne, Germany*

Word count: 7,499

**Author Note**

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Pascal Burgmer, School of Psychology, Keynes College, University of Kent, Canterbury, Kent, CT2 7NP, United Kingdom, e-mail: [p.burgmer@kent.ac.uk](mailto:p.burgmer@kent.ac.uk), ORCID ID <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3664-0539>.

<<< *Accepted version before copy-editing in press at Self & Identity* >>>

### **Abstract**

Those who tend towards a self-absorbed personality are less likely to “feel others.” Indeed, subclinical narcissism has been linked to decreased empathy: Individuals high in narcissism seem to neglect what other people are thinking and feeling and are less likely to emotionally share others’ mental states. Three studies ( $N = 1,008$ ) extend the literature on narcissism and empathy in some important ways. We suggest that the empathy deficit among narcissists does not make an exception for close friends, that it manifests not only in less, but also in discordant affect, and that it is mainly driven by the antagonistic dimension of narcissism (Studies 1 and 2). Moreover, employing an experimental manipulation, the present findings offer a novel way of attenuating this empathy deficit among narcissists: the experience of trust (Study 2). Finally, a pre-registered laboratory study documents a “bright” consequence of narcissists’ empathy deficit with respect to parochial altruism (Study 3). Hence, as unfortunate as narcissists’ empathy deficit might be, it is not set in stone. Additionally, a narcissistic spotlight that shines exclusively on the self can reduce some of the parochialism that empathy for specific, often close others entails.

*Keywords:* Narcissism; Narcissistic Rivalry; Empathy; Contagion; Parochial Altruism

“I hear you.”

*Written talking point by Donald J. Trump, 45<sup>th</sup> President of the United States of America, at the February 21, 2018 meeting with students who survived the February 14, 2018 shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida.*

### **Introduction**

Former U.S. president Barack Obama has identified the “empathy deficit” as the biggest deficit in the world.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, some empirical research attests to a decline of empathy (Twenge, Campbell, & Freeman, 2012). Empathy, broadly understood as experiencing the inferred feelings of others (Bloom, 2017), seems of critical importance to how people coordinate their social lives. Consequently, our empathic abilities do not only matter in national and international politics, but they are crucial for successfully navigating through our social world (Batson et al., 1997).

Previous research supports the intuition that those who tend towards a rather self-absorbed personality have trouble appreciating and sharing what others think and feel. In fact, (grandiose) narcissism is defined by “[...] a grandiose view of the self, a strong sense of entitlement and superiority, a lack of empathy and a need for social admiration, as well as tendencies to show dominant, charming, bragging, impulsive, and aggressive behaviors” (Back, Kufner, Dufner, Gerlach, Rauthmann, & Denissen, 2013, p. 1014). Yet, systematic empirical research into the underpinnings of the intimate relation between someone’s narcissistic personality tendencies and their empathy deficit is still developing, with important questions remaining unanswered: What is the scope of narcissists’<sup>2</sup> empathy deficit? Which boundary conditions might attenuate it? Are there bright sides to decreased empathy among narcissists? We designed the present research to address these questions.

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://cultureofempathy.com/References/Quotes.htm>, for a collection of Obama’s statements on empathy.

<sup>2</sup> For brevity, we use the word narcissist as short form. We do not imply any categorical or clinical meaning.

### **Narcissism and Empathy**

While empathy can broadly be understood as experiencing what someone else is feeling (Bloom, 2017), the construct is commonly viewed as comprising multiple components such as emotional (e.g., emotional contagion), cognitive (e.g., perspective-taking), and motivational (empathic concern) ones (Zaki, 2017). For example, upon understanding that a close friend is upset about failing an exam (cognitive empathy), one may share that feeling and become upset as well (affective empathy) and/or experience concern and compassion towards the friend (motivational component). Previous research has often relied on composite measures such as the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI; Davis, 1983) that comprises numerous empathy facets (e.g., empathic concern and perspective-taking; e.g., Back et al., 2013; Hepper, Hart, & Sedikides, 2014). Consistent with this multifaceted conceptualization of empathy, the present studies employ different measures of empathy, addressing core components of the construct.

The pivotal role of empathy in our social lives notwithstanding, there are many psychological forces counteracting our attempts to see the world from other persons' perspectives and experience what they think and feel. For example, people may sometimes fail at empathy, because it is difficult. Recent research has begun to unravel the motivational nature of empathy, indicating that empathy can be a choice that we make, and that choosing empathy may come at a substantial psychological price (Cameron, Hutcherson, Ferguson, Scheffer, Hadjiandreou, & Inzlicht, 2019). Empathic reactions may thus not always come naturally, and there are stable differences in the inclination for empathy (Davis, 1983).

While narcissism is associated with intrapersonal benefits (Sedikides, Rudich, Gregg, Kumashiro, & Rusbult, 2004), its interpersonal costs are well documented (Back et al., 2013). Complementing findings of a correlation between subclinical narcissism and self-reported empathy (e.g., Jonason, Lyons, Bethell, & Ross, 2013; Vonk, Zeigler-Hill, Mayhew, & Mercer, 2013), recent research established that this empathy deficit also applies to specific

target persons and that it is evident on a psycho-physiological level of measurement (Hepper et al., 2014). The empathy deficit among those high in grandiose narcissism has previously largely been demonstrated for the affective component, whereas the evidence with regard to cognitive empathy is less univocal (e.g., Turner, Foster, & Webster, 2019; Wai & Tiliopoulos, 2012). Importantly, previous work has also demonstrated that those high in narcissism can be motivated to react with empathy, thus rendering the empathy deficit among narcissists more a motivational than a cognitive issue (Hepper et al., 2014).

The current state of the empirical research, however, also leaves some important questions unanswered. Here, we aim to shed more light on four issues, relating to the differentiation of the narcissism construct, its relation to affective reactions to both positive and negative emotional episodes of specific target persons, the experience of trust as a potential moderator of these reactions, and reduced parochialism in the moral domain as a result of attenuated empathy among narcissists.

### **Differential Effects of Narcissism on Empathy**

Previous research has often relied on the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Terry, 1988; e.g., Hepper et al., 2014), whereas there is much less research addressing how different facets of the narcissism construct might be related to empathy (but see Fatfouta, Gerlach, Schröder-Abé, & Merkl, 2015; Mota et al., 2019). For example, the Narcissistic Admiration and Rivalry Concept (NARC, Back et al., 2013) differentiates two positively related but distinct dimensions of narcissism: admiration and rivalry. Whereas narcissists are generally assumed to maintain a sense of grandiosity, they can accomplish this by different social strategies which each have distinct intra- and interindividual consequences. Specifically, the admiration dimension refers to the strategy of assertive self-enhancement, whereas the rivalry dimension refers to antagonistic self-protection (Back et al., 2013). Most relevant to the present research, rivalry seems to show strong and negative relations with measures of trait empathy, whereas admiration seems to show considerably weaker and

positive relations with trait empathy as a “general interpersonal orientation” (Back et al., 2013, Study 5, p. 1026). Other research using the IRI (Davis, 1983) found that rivalry negatively predicted self-perceived socioemotional cognition (e.g., affective and cognitive empathy), and the reverse effect for admiration (Mota et al., 2019). Complementing this work with more situational measures, Fatfouta and colleagues (2015) found that rivalry negatively predicted forgiveness with someone who did something hurtful, while admiration emerged as a positive predictor of forgiveness. In the case of rivalry, this effect was mediated by decreased empathic concern towards the transgressor (as well as increased anger and rumination). The relationship between admiration and increased forgiveness was mediated by increased empathic concern only. Together, these previous findings indicate a robust and negative relation between rivalry and measures of self-reported empathic concern, and they suggest a somewhat weaker and positive relation between admiration and empathic concern. At the same time, this previous research examined empathic concern without eliciting a target person’s emotional experience (Fatfouta et al., 2015), or it has relied solely on trait measures of empathy (Back et al., 2013; Mota et al., 2019). Consequently, it remains unclear how precisely rivalry (while controlling for admiration) relates to empathic reactions towards specific target persons’ emotional states, for example, a close friend or a stranger in need—typical empathic reactions elicited by daily-life social encounters (Bloom, 2017).

### **Reactions to Positive and Negative Affect of Others**

Consistently, previous research has also not addressed empathic reactions of those high in rivalry to negative *and* positive emotions of target persons. Does rivalry merely decrease concern for others (e.g., empathic concern; Davis, 1983), or does it motivate a distinct and relatively discordant<sup>3</sup> affective reaction, similar to specific social emotions such

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<sup>3</sup> We are using the term “discordant” in a relative, not absolute sense. Consistent with Epstude and Mussweiler (2009), we refer to discordant affect as the tendency to affectively diverge from a standard, whereas we refer to concordant affect as the tendency to affectively converge with a standard. In comparison, schadenfreude and envy would both be examples of full-blown discordant emotions.

as schadenfreude (e.g., positive empathic reaction when confronted with another's negative emotion)? Experiencing the (positive and negative) feelings of others is referred to as emotional contagion and can be viewed as a "common sense" of empathy (Bloom, 2017) or an instantiation of the "emotional component" of empathy (Zaki, 2017; Zaki & Ochsner, 2012). Here, we are interested in extending previous research by isolating affective sharing reactions among those high in narcissistic rivalry to both positive and negative emotional experiences of specific target persons.

### **The Experience of Trust as a Boundary Condition**

Potential moderators of the relation between narcissism and empathy have only recently been addressed (Hepper et al., 2014). A motivational framework allows researchers to investigate additional psychological variables such as social trust that may influence narcissists' empathy inclinations. Corresponding to the motivational underpinnings of costly empathy (Zaki, 2014), trust can be construed as the willingness to accept a vulnerability in social encounters, that is, to accept a potentially costly risk based on positive expectations about other's intentions or behaviors (Rosseau, Sitkin, Burt, & Camerer, 1998). For those high in rivalry a permanent threat to the ego (Back et al., 2013) might be associated with the motivation to avoid exposing one's vulnerability to others and being exploited, which can in turn cause negative self-blaming emotions (Burgmer & Weiss, 2019; Vohs, Chin, & Baumeister, 2007). Such motives, in turn, should entail shutting an eye to others' (potential) needs, keeping them at a safe distance. In addition, distrust contributes to an overly negative view of others. In fact, as rivalry comprises facets such as supremacy, devaluation, and aggressiveness (Back et al., 2013), those high in rivalry may also possibly display "motivated callousness" to avoid having to deal with negative emotions of others to which they themselves might have contributed. Moreover, acknowledging and empathizing with another's *positive* emotional experience (e.g., about a successful exam) might pose a threat to the self (potentially invoking envy; Lange, Crusius, & Hagemeyer, 2016). Reducing the

perception of others as a threat may thus promote the motivation for empathic reactions. In addition there is also a cognitive argument to be made: Both distrust (Posten & Mussweiler, 2013) and narcissism (Ohmann & Burgmer, 2016) are associated with a comparative focus on differences. Perceived differences between the self and others, in turn, render it more unlikely that people will engage in empathy (Mitchell, Macrae, & Banaji, 2006). Taken together, both motivational and cognitive underpinnings of narcissistic rivalry are consistent with the idea that the experience of trust might be a promising candidate to increase empathy among narcissists.

### **Reduced Moral Parochialism as a Bright Side**

Lastly, empathy seems like an exclusively positive and desirable psychological capacity (Batson et al., 1997). Narcissists' empathy deficit has consequently mostly been framed as a dark side, responsible for undermining social relationships and behaviors, particularly in the case of narcissistic rivalry (Back et al., 2013). However, empathy may also entail some undesirable downstream consequences (Bloom, 2017), rendering narcissists' relatively low empathic inclinations a potential advantage in some decision-making contexts. Specifically, empathy can be parochial, like a spotlight, only focusing on those who are close, similar, and important to us (Bloom, 2017). However, those under our personal spotlight, and whose suffering is salient to us, tend to represent a very limited and biased sample of all the people who are suffering and who might need our help. In that sense, some have argued that empathy can produce anti-social and immoral consequences (Batson, Klein, Highberger, & Shaw, 1995; Bloom, 2017; Breithaupt, 2019). Narcissistic egocentric tendencies, on the other hand, may reduce such an empathy-based parochialism by focusing the spotlight on the self and thereby leaving others equally in the shadow. Less empathy, under these circumstances, may then lead to less biased and more rational decision making in the moral domain, for example, when empathy with a specific target person would otherwise motivate us to make



decisions that selectively favor that person at the detriment of others with whom we might not feel empathic (Batson et al., 1995; Gleichgerrcht & Young, 2013).

### **Present Research**

We report three studies that extend previous research on the relation between narcissism and empathy. In addition to the three studies reported here, a pilot study (Supplemental Online Material, SOM) tested whether grandiose narcissism would not only be associated with less empathic concern, but relatively more discordant affect when confronted with positive and negative target experiences. That study also included a close other as focal target person, thereby providing a more conservative test for reduced empathy compared to empathy towards strangers. Study 1 used a similar, but simplified design, again investigating discordant affective reactions towards a close other's affective experiences. In addition, we assessed assertive and antagonistic dimensions of narcissism (i.e., admiration and rivalry; Back et al., 2013). Study 2 introduced a novel moderator and assessed trait empathy: Experiencing trust (vs. distrust) attenuated the negative relation between narcissism and empathy, thereby revealing an important and novel boundary condition of the present findings. Lastly, Study 3 again replicated the strong and inverse relation between antagonistic narcissism and empathy. Importantly, in that pre-registered laboratory study, we also explored a potential bright side of reduced empathy among narcissists: mitigated parochial altruism, defined as partiality towards individuals with whom one feels empathy, even if that violates moral principles such as fairness (Batson et al., 1995).

For all studies, we report all measures, conditions if any, data exclusions, and how we determined our sample sizes. Additionally, we report sensitivity power analyses and post-hoc power for key effects (Faul, Erdfelder, Buchner, & Lang, 2009; Schoemann, Boulton, & Short, 2017).

## Study 1

### Narcissistic Rivalry and Empathy

We designed Study 1 to replicate the findings from a pilot study (SOM) with a larger sample and a simplified and improved vignette paradigm. Moreover, we replaced the Narcissistic Personality Inventory from the pilot study by the Narcissistic Admiration and Rivalry Questionnaire (NARQ; Back et al., 2013). We reasoned that narcissistic rivalry (vs. admiration) would be related to relatively stronger discordant affect as a reaction to a close other's emotional experiences.

### Method

**Participants and design.** To allow for an adequately powered replication of the pilot study's results, we recruited 301 U.S. American adults via Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk). In all MTurk studies, participants received modest monetary compensation (i.e., approximately \$0.50). Two participants were excluded for failing an attention check (see below) and one for not indicating the name or initials of the target person. The final sample thus comprised 298 adults (128 females, 168 males, 2 self-identified as "other",  $M_{age} = 37.52$ ,  $SD = 12.32$ ). A sensitivity power analysis indicated that this sample allowed us to detect a small effect ( $f^2 \geq 0.027$ ) with 80% statistical power.

In a correlational design, all participants saw the identical measures in the order described below (i.e., narcissism measure followed by empathy measure). Valence of target's affect (positive vs. negative) was manipulated within participants. Specifically, all participants saw a total of four scenarios (two positive, two negative). Presentation order for the empathy scenarios was randomized for each participant.

**Procedure and materials.** First, participants completed the NARQ (Back et al., 2013), an 18-item questionnaire comprising nine statements assessing narcissistic rivalry (e.g., "I can barely stand it if another person is at the center of events") and nine statements assessing narcissistic admiration (e.g., "I deserve to be seen as a great personality").

Participants indicated their agreement to each statement on a scale from 1 (*not agree at all*) to 6 (*agree completely*). We computed mean scores for rivalry (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .84$ ,  $M = 2.32$ ,  $SD = 0.91$ ) and admiration ( $\alpha = .87$ ,  $M = 2.98$ ,  $SD = 0.97$ ) (Table 1).

Next, participants thought about a friend of theirs and indicated his or her name or initials. Specifically, we defined "friend" as someone participants knew and with whom they frequently communicated. Participants indicated their friend's name or initials and proceeded to read four short scenarios, either involving a positive event (i.e., a new romantic relationship and a successful exam) or a negative event (i.e., loss of a close relative and failing an important exam) of this friend (Kimura, Daibo, & Yogo, 2008). The empathy measure assessed participants' experienced affect. Specifically, following each scenario, participants read: "How did you feel, when [friend's name] disclosed the emotional experience in the episode?", followed by two items of general affect on seven-point bipolar scales from 1 (*bad; sad*) to 7 (*good; happy*). We coded responses such that high values reflect more positive affect (positive episodes:  $\alpha = .90$ ; negative episodes:  $\alpha = .92$ ). Finally, participants saw an attention-check item, prompting them to move a slider to a certain position on the screen.

## Results and Discussion

Confirming the vignette procedure, a  $t$ -test for dependent samples revealed that participants overall experienced more positive affect for their friend's positive episodes ( $M = 6.23$ ,  $SD = 0.95$ ) than for their friend's negative episodes ( $M = 1.92$ ,  $SD = 1.10$ ),  $t(297) = 40.15$ ,  $p < .001$ , Cohen's  $d = 4.01$ , 95%  $CI_d [3.63, 4.39]$ . Importantly, narcissistic rivalry and narcissistic admiration differentially predicted experienced affect for positive and for negative episodes. Regressing participants' experienced positive affect for positive episodes simultaneously on rivalry and admiration revealed that rivalry emerged as a strong negative predictor,  $\beta = -.357$ ,  $SE = .061$ ,  $t = -6.14$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95%  $CI_\beta [-.480, -.240]$ , whereas admiration emerged as a weak positive predictor,  $\beta = .112$ ,  $SE = .057$ ,  $t = 1.93$ ,  $p = .054$ , 95%  $CI_\beta [.009, .218]$ . For negative episodes, however, rivalry emerged as a strong positive

predictor of positive affect,  $\beta = .275$ ,  $SE = .071$ ,  $t = 4.70$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95%  $CI_{\beta}$  [.149, .407], whereas admiration did not emerge as a significant predictor,  $\beta = .086$ ,  $SE = .066$ ,  $t = 1.46$ ,  $p = .145$ , 95%  $CI_{\beta}$  [-.031, .203].

Overall, these results replicate the pilot study (SOM) with higher statistical power. Specifically, for the predictive effects of narcissistic rivalry, the current study showed a post-hoc power of  $> 99\%$  for both positive episodes and negative episodes (compared to the predictive effects of grandiose narcissism as assessed in the pilot study). They further reveal that particularly the antagonistic dimension of narcissism (i.e., rivalry) seems responsible for participants' relatively discordant affective reactions following their friend's emotional experiences. This replicates and extends previous research on the differential effects of narcissistic rivalry and admiration on trait empathy (Back et al., 2013; Mota et al., 2019).

It should be noted though that the discordant affect observed for narcissistic rivalry is still overall characterized by target-consistent valence. That is, participants with high values on rivalry still experienced negative affect when confronted with their friend's negative experiences. These negative target experiences thus did not make them happy (as one would expect in the case of *schadenfreude*), but rather less unhappy (or relatively more happy) compared to participants with low values on rivalry. The reverse was true for the positive target emotions (see SOM, for details). Additionally, in the current study, all participants saw two positive and two negative target scenarios that might also have differed regarding severity and controllability of the event (e.g., failing an exam vs. losing a close relative). Based on previous research (Kimura et al., 2008), both the positive-valence and the negative-valence scenarios included situations that can be considered rather low on severity but high on controllability (i.e., passing vs. failing an exam), in addition to those rather high on severity but low on controllability (i.e., losing a close relative vs. finding the right partner). As we did neither manipulate nor measure severity and controllability, any potential systematic covariation with valence can, however, not entirely be ruled out in the current study.

Table 1. *Zero-order correlations between narcissistic rivalry and narcissistic admiration (NARQ) and experienced positive affect for positive and negative target episodes (Study 1).*

Variables	1	2	3
1. Narcissistic rivalry (NARQ)			
2. Narcissistic admiration (NARQ)	.332***		
3. Positive affect (positive episode)	-.319***	-.006	
4. Positive affect (negative episode)	.304***	.177**	-.647***

*Note.* \*\*\* $p < .001$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \* $p < .05$ .

## Study 2

### Narcissistic Rivalry, Trust, and Empathy

Having established that narcissism—particularly narcissistic rivalry—is related to relatively discordant affect following a close other’s emotional experiences, we next turn to a potential boundary condition that might mitigate narcissists’ empathy deficit. Previous research showed that enhancing cognitive perspective-taking (i.e., *understanding* others’ emotions) as a precursor of affective empathy (i.e., *sharing* others’ emotions) can motivate narcissists to experience more empathy (Hepper et al., 2014). We sought to extend this research and explore the role of experienced trust (vs. distrust) in narcissists’ lack of empathy.

As we have seen, particularly the antagonistic dimension of narcissism is related to decreased empathy, and this dimension is also associated with decreased trust in other people (Back et al., 2013; Kwiatkowska, Jułkowski, Rogoza, Żemojtel-Piotrowska, & Fatfouta, 2019). Those high in narcissistic rivalry are theorized to perceive others as a potential threat to their grandiosity, consequently engaging in antagonistic self-protection, for example, via devaluation of others (Back et al., 2013), or preemptive aggressive behavior in an attempt to avoid anticipated exploitation (Burgmer & Weiss, 2019). We therefore contend that the

experience of trust would allow those high in narcissistic rivalry (controlling for admiration) to attend to others' needs and affect by showing empathy, because it attenuates the perceptions of others as threat.

## Method

**Participants and design.** As the design of the current study involved two between-subjects conditions, we recruited 404 U.S. American adults via MTurk. A total of 23 participants were excluded from analyses, because they failed an attention check or did not complete the trust/distrust writing task. The final sample thus comprised 381 adults (157 females, 224 males,  $M_{age} = 35.00$ ,  $SD = 11.13$ ). A sensitivity power analysis indicated that this sample allowed us to detect a small effect ( $f^2 \geq 0.021$ ) with 80% statistical power. Participants were randomly assigned to either a trust or a distrust condition and worked on all measures in the order described below.

**Procedure and materials.** First, all participants again completed the NARQ (Back et al., 2013), providing separate indices for narcissistic rivalry ( $\alpha = .86$ ,  $M = 2.24$ ,  $SD = 0.93$ ) and admiration ( $\alpha = .90$ ,  $M = 3.01$ ,  $SD = 1.07$ ).

Next, participants worked on a task on "autobiographical memories." Similar to previous research (Weiss, Burgmer, & Mussweiler, 2018), participants in the trust (distrust) condition recalled and wrote about an incident in their lives, where they trusted (distrusted) someone else. The manipulation of trust (distrust) therefore occurred independent from the empathy measure.

Subsequently, all participants completed the Basic-Empathy-Scale in Adults (BES-A; Carré, Stefaniak, D'Ambrosio, Bensalah, & Besche-Richard, 2013)—a recently developed and validated self-report measure of empathy. This questionnaire contains 20 items assessing affective ("After being with a friend who is sad about something, I usually feel sad") and cognitive ("I can understand my friend's happiness when she/he does well at something") components of empathy. Responses were given on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7

(*strongly agree*). For the current purposes, responses to all items were collapsed to form one empathy index ( $\alpha = .92$ ,  $M = 5.10$ ,  $SD = 0.97$ ). Results for the two-factor solution differentiating affective and cognitive empathy can be found in the SOM. Embedded in this questionnaire, participants saw an attention-check item as previously used.

Finally, as a manipulation check, participants indicated how much trust they experienced in the situation they had described earlier (1 = *not at all*; 7 = *very much*).

## Results and Discussion

**Manipulation check.** Confirming the trust/distrust manipulation, a *t*-test for independent samples revealed that participants reported higher levels of trust in the trust ( $M = 6.18$ ,  $SD = 1.00$ ) than distrust ( $M = 2.63$ ,  $SD = 1.93$ ) condition,  $t(272.14) = 22.44$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 2.24$ , 95%  $CI_d$  [1.97, 2.51].

**Empathy.** A simultaneous regression analysis across conditions replicated previous results: With a post-hoc power of > 99%, rivalry again emerged as a strong negative predictor of empathy,  $\beta = -.329$ ,  $SE = 0.54$ ,  $t = -6.09$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95%  $CI_\beta$  [-.442, -.211],  $f^2 = 0.098$ , whereas admiration emerged as a considerably weaker and positive predictor,  $\beta = .115$ ,  $SE = .054$ ,  $t = 2.12$ ,  $p = .034$ , 95%  $CI_\beta$  [-.015, .244]. In addition, a *t*-test for independent samples revealed that participants in the trust condition ( $M = 5.19$ ,  $SD = 0.90$ ) reported slightly, but non-significantly higher levels of empathy than did participants in the distrust condition ( $M = 5.00$ ,  $SD = 1.04$ ),  $t(379) = 1.96$ ,  $p = .051$ ,  $d = 0.20$ , 95%  $CI_d$  [-.001, .392].

Next, using the PROCESS Macro Model #1 (Preacher & Hayes, 2008), we ran a moderation analysis with rivalry as predictor, empathy as criterion, and dummy-coded condition (0 = distrust, 1 = trust) as moderator, while controlling for admiration and its interaction with condition (Table 2). As expected, and with a post-hoc power of 66%, this analysis revealed a significant interaction effect rivalry  $\times$  condition,  $b = .261$ ,  $SE = .112$ ,  $t = 2.34$ ,  $p = .020$ , 95%  $CI_b$  [.042, .480],  $f^2 = 0.015$  (Figure 1). Specifically, under conditions of distrust, rivalry strongly and negatively predicted participants' empathy scores,  $b = -.477$ ,  $SE$

= .081,  $t = -5.91$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI<sub>b</sub> [-.635, -.318]. Under conditions of trust, however, this relationship was substantially mitigated, albeit still significant,  $b = -.216$ ,  $SE = .078$ ,  $t = -2.80$ ,  $p = .005$ , 95% CI<sub>b</sub> [-.367, -.064]. Our findings also yielded an unexpected interaction effect between admiration and trust and largely comparable predictive effects of rivalry and admiration on both affective and cognitive empathy (see SOM for details).

Taken together, these results replicate the differential and inverse relation between narcissistic rivalry and empathy (Back et al., 2013). They further extend previous research on the boundary conditions of narcissists' lack of empathy (Hepper et al., 2014) by introducing the experience of trust as a mitigating factor. Perceptions of distrust and others as threat are at the heart of narcissistic rivalry's self-defense (Back et al., 2013; Burgmer & Weiss, 2019)—however, experiencing trust may allow for less defensive attending to others' need and affect, thereby boosting empathy among narcissists.



Table 2. Regression of empathy on rivalry, admiration, trust/distrust condition and the interactions rivalry  $\times$  condition and admiration  $\times$  condition (Study 2).

Predictors	$b$ (SE)	$t$	$p$	95% CI for $b$	
				lower	upper
Constant	5.462 (0.216)	25.281	.000	5.037	5.866
Narcissistic rivalry	-0.477 (0.081)	-5.905	.000	-0.635	-0.318
Narcissistic admiration	0.204 (0.067)	3.066	.002	0.073	0.336
Condition	0.210 (0.311)	0.675	.500	-0.402	0.822
Rivalry $\times$ condition	0.261 (0.112)	2.339	.020	0.042	0.480
Admiration $\times$ condition	-0.204 (0.098)	-2.089	.037	-0.397	-0.012
$R^2$	.115				
$F$ for change in $R^2$ (1, 375)	5.472				

Note. Results are based on bootstrapping with 5,000 samples. Trust/distrust condition was coded 0 = distrust, 1 = trust.

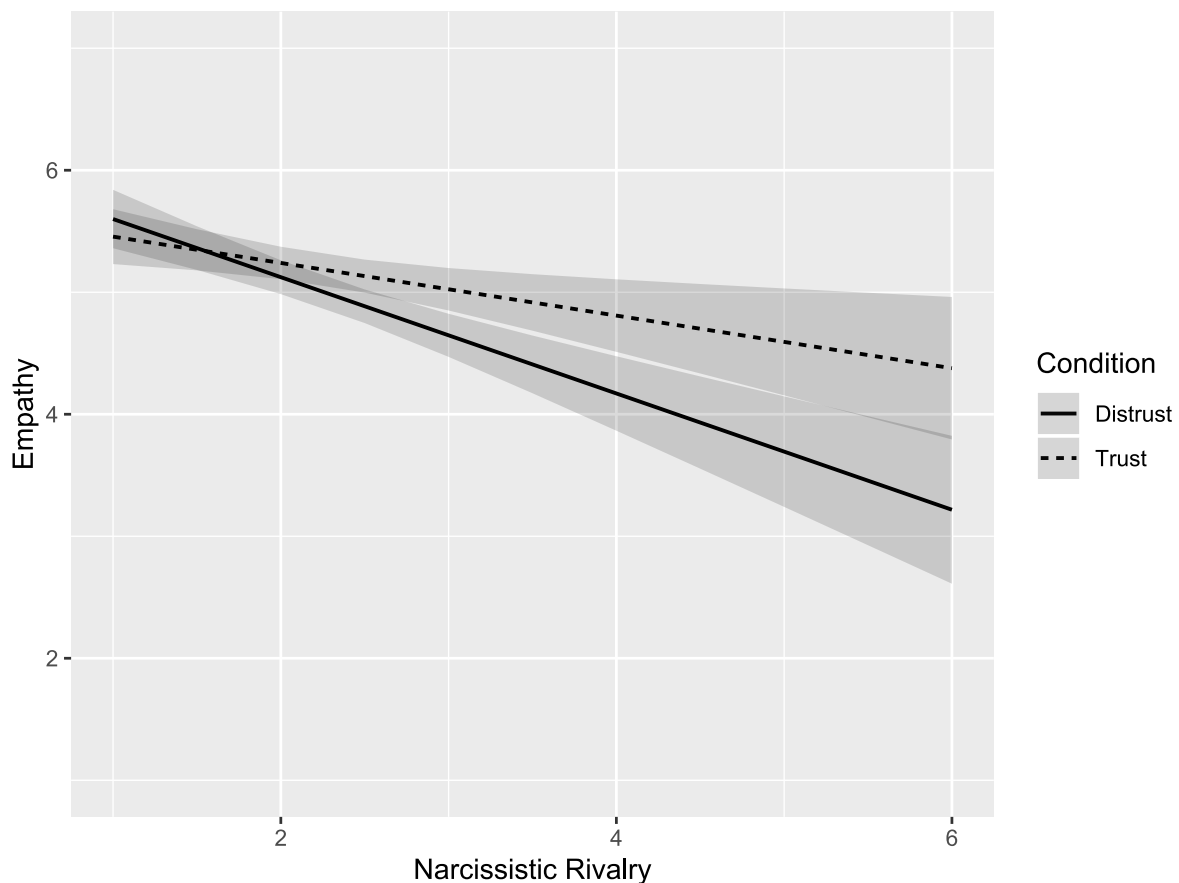


Figure 1. Empathy as a function of trust/distrust condition and narcissistic rivalry (Study 2). Participants' empathy scores in the trust or distrust condition (controlling for admiration and its interaction with trust/distrust condition). Higher values indicate greater empathy (scale 1-7).

### Study 3

#### Narcissistic Rivalry and Parochial Altruism

The goal of our final study was threefold: First, we sought to replicate the negative effect of narcissistic rivalry on target-specific empathy with a specific, but this time unfamiliar target person. Second, we aimed at applying the previous results to the domain of altruism, in particular, empathy-induced, parochial altruism (Batson et al., 1995). Third, we ran a pre-registered (<http://aspredicted.org/blind.php?x=9jf836>) laboratory study with a large German student sample to enhance the generalizability of the current findings across diverse populations and contexts.

We predicted that narcissistic rivalry (controlling for admiration) would negatively predict target-specific empathy and empathy-induced altruism. Further, based on the literature linking target-specific empathy to parochial altruism (Batson et al., 1995), we expected that empathy would positively predict altruism, and that the relationship between rivalry and altruism would be mediated by empathy.

#### Method

**Participants and design.** We pre-registered a sample of approximately 330 participants, aimed at achieving stable estimates of the expected correlations. A total of 339 German-speaking university students participated.<sup>4</sup> Following the pre-registered criteria, ten participants were removed from analyses for not passing an attention check ( $n = 8$ ) or based on observations made by our research assistants in the laboratory (e.g., inattentive responding;  $n = 2$ ), leaving a final sample of 329 students (211 females, 116 males, 2 self-identified as “diverse”,  $M_{\text{age}} = 23.94$ ,  $SD = 5.93$ ). A sensitivity power analysis indicated that this sample

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<sup>4</sup> Due to budget restraints, this study was appended to an unrelated study on zero-sum beliefs and moral judgments in close friendships. Details can be obtained from the corresponding author.

allowed us to detect a small effect ( $f^2 \geq 0.024$ ) with 80% statistical power. In a correlational design, all participants saw the identical measures in the order described below.

**Procedure and materials.** First, participants completed a German version of the NARQ (Back et al., 2013), providing separate indices for narcissistic rivalry ( $\alpha = .78$ ,  $M = 2.20$ ,  $SD = 0.75$ ) and admiration ( $\alpha = .84$ ,  $M = 3.10$ ,  $SD = 0.86$ ) (Table 3). As part of the questionnaire, we included an attention-check item.

Second, as our empathy measure, participants saw a photo of a target person (“Carla”), a little girl in a hospital bed with medical tubes attached to her. Adapting the paradigm by Batson and colleagues (1995), participants learned that Carla was suffering from a fatal metabolic disease, which would most likely kill her within the next weeks, and that the focus during her remaining time was to make her as comfortable as possible (Appendix). They subsequently responded to six items (e.g., sympathetic, warm, compassionate), on a scale from 1 (*does not apply at all*) to 7 (*completely applies*), indicating how they felt when contemplating about Carla and her situation. Responses were collapsed to form one empathy score ( $\alpha = .83$ ,  $M = 5.37$ ,  $SD = 1.13$ ).

Next, as our altruism measure, participants received additional information about an organization named “Quality of Life” offering special assistance to terminally ill children and their families. Participants learned that the organization’s resources were limited, but that on a case-by-case basis some children received particularly intense support. Importantly, participants also learned that such special treatment would be at the expense of all other children and families (see Batson et al., 1995, Experiment 2, for a similar scenario). The idea of this paradigm was thus to pit participants’ empathy-induced parochial altruism (i.e., preferentially supporting Carla and her family) against utilitarian moral principles (i.e., providing care to as many children as possible). The inclination for empathy-induced altruism among participants was assessed with four items (e.g., “Considering her urgent situation, Carla should definitely receive preferential treatment”) on a scale from 1 (*do not agree at all*)

to 7 (*completely agree*). Responses were collapsed to form one altruism score ( $\alpha = .77$ ,  $M = 5.08$ ,  $SD = 1.12$ ).

## Results and Discussion

**Empathy.** A one-sample *t*-test revealed that the paradigm was successful such that participants, on average, indeed empathized with the target person,  $t(328) = 22.05$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 1.22$ , 95%  $CI_d$  [1.07, 1.36], test value = 4. As predicted, in a simultaneous regression analysis, with a post-hoc power of 77%, narcissistic rivalry emerged as a negative predictor of target-specific empathy,  $\beta = -.160$ ,  $SE = .059$ ,  $t = -2.73$ ,  $p = .007$ , 95%  $CI_\beta$  [-.279, -.039]. Narcissistic admiration, however, was unrelated to empathy,  $\beta = .026$ ,  $SE = .059$ ,  $t = 0.45$ ,  $p = .657$ , 95%  $CI_\beta$  [-.100, .141].

**Altruism.** Consistent with felt empathy, a one-sample *t*-test revealed that participants also overall evinced a clear tendency to support the target person, despite the cost for other ill children,  $t(328) = 17.43$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.96$ , 95%  $CI_d$  [0.83, 1.09], test value = 4. As expected, in a simultaneous regression analysis, with a post-hoc power of 46%, rivalry emerged as a negative predictor of altruism,  $\beta = -.108$ ,  $SE = .059$ ,  $t = -1.83$ ,  $p = .068$ , 95%  $CI_\beta$  [-.237, .006]—however, this effect fell short of conventional levels of significance. There was no relation between admiration and altruism,  $\beta = .054$ ,  $SE = .059$ ,  $t = 0.91$ ,  $p = .362$ , 95%  $CI_\beta$  [-.083, .181].

Adding empathy—which positively predicted parochial altruism with a post-hoc power of > 99%,  $\beta = .307$ ,  $SE = .053$ ,  $t = 5.77$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95%  $CI_\beta$  [.206, .410]—to the regression revealed that the previously observed weak relation between rivalry and altruism was further reduced,  $\beta = -.059$ ,  $SE = .057$ ,  $t = -1.03$ ,  $p = .302$ , 95%  $CI_\beta$  [-.175, .049]. As predicted, with a post-hoc power of 79%, a bias-corrected bootstrapping analysis using PROCESS Macro Model #4 (Preacher & Hayes, 2008), and including admiration as a

covariate, indicated a significant indirect effect of rivalry on altruism via empathy,  $b = -.049$ ,  $SE = .020$ , 95% CI<sub>b</sub> [-.092, -.014] (Figure 2)<sup>5</sup>.

Overall, results from our final study suggest that, under some conditions, narcissists' lack of empathy may protect them from parochial moral decisions. Specifically, those high in narcissistic rivalry again showed decreased empathy with a focal target person, and they were slightly less biased when favoring a target person over others who were similarly deserving. While the predictive effect of rivalry on altruism did not reach conventional levels of significance, it was significantly reduced by adding empathy to the model. In line with others (Rucker, Preacher, Tormala, & Petty, 2011), we believe that this significant indirect effect is of theoretical interest even in the absence of a significant direct effect. One reason for the weak negative direct effect of rivalry on parochial altruism might have been that instead of feeling less inclined to want the target person to receive preferential treatment over others (i.e., low scores on the altruism scale), those high in rivalry simply felt indifferent towards her, thus producing medium scores. This is, however, in line with our theorizing: Those high in narcissistic rivalry are less inclined to advocate preferential treatment for one individual insofar they do not empathize with that individual. Not "feeling others" can therefore allow for a less biased moral decision (Bloom, 2017; Gleichgerrcht & Young, 2013).

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<sup>5</sup> When repeated with log-transformed values, the mediational analysis again yielded a significant indirect effect of rivalry, controlling for admiration, on altruism via empathy,  $b = -.032$ ,  $SE = .011$ , 95% CI<sub>b</sub> [-.056, -.012].

Table 3. Zero-order correlations between narcissistic rivalry and narcissistic admiration (NARQ), experienced empathy and altruism (Study 3).

Variables	1	2	3
1. Narcissistic rivalry			
2. Narcissistic admiration	.359***		
3. Empathy	-.151**	-.031	
4. Altruism	-.089	.015	.314***

Note. \*\*\* $p < .001$ , \*\* $p < .01$ .

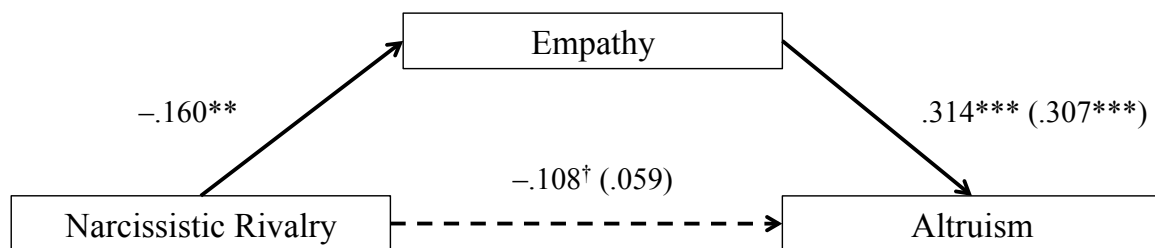


Figure 2. Mediation model wherein empathy underlies the relation between narcissistic rivalry and altruism. Numbers represent standardized regression coefficients; Numbers in parentheses represent standardized simultaneous regression coefficients. All analyses included narcissistic admiration as a covariate. As admiration did neither predict empathy nor altruism, its paths are omitted for clarity. Results are based on bootstrapping with 5,000 samples (Study 3). \*\*\* $p < .001$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , † $p < .10$ .

### General Discussion

Narcissists have been found to be less likely to “feel others.” The present findings contribute to our understanding of the psychological underpinnings of the intimate relation between narcissism and empathy. Specifically, we replicate the predictive effect of narcissistic rivalry (vs. admiration) on trait empathy (Study 2; see also Back et al., 2013; Mota et al., 2019) and extend it to empathic reactions to a specific target person's emotional experience: a close other (Study 1) and a strange other (Study 3). Our results further suggest that rivalry does not only entail reduced empathic concern, but that it predicts discordant (i.e.,

diverging) empathic reactions to a target's emotional experience. It is the antagonistic dimension of narcissism, in particular, that seems to be at the heart of narcissists' lack of empathy (Studies 1-3), which may be grounded in distrust and perceptions of threat among those high in narcissistic rivalry (Back et al., 2013; Burgmer & Weiss, 2019; Kwiatkowska et al., 2019). Consequently, increasing the psychological experience of trust mitigates the inverse relation between antagonistic narcissism and empathy (Study 2), thereby adding to our knowledge of potential boundary conditions. Lastly, decreased empathy can, under some circumstances, entail less biased moral decision making (Batson et al., 1995; Bloom, 2017; Gleichgerrcht & Young, 2013). Particularly, when empathy-induced altruism is pitted against a more balanced utilitarian—and presumably fairer—choice, narcissists are more immune against the influence of empathy with a focal target person on their decision making, thereby rendering their reaction less parochial (Study 3).

The present research has limitations as well. We decided to adopt a broad approach wherein we operationalized various facets of the empathy construct in each of our studies (e.g., target-specific emotional contagion in Study 1 and the pilot study; affective and cognitive trait empathy in Study 2; target-specific empathic concern or compassion in Study 3). This allowed us to generalize the predictive effects of narcissistic rivalry across empathy components and targets. Yet, we did not a-priori articulate hypotheses with regard to these different empathy facets, and did not systematically compare them in our studies. It should be noted that we found comparable predictive effects of rivalry on affective as well as cognitive empathy (Study 2; see SOM, for details). Those for cognitive empathy were even more robust than for affective empathy, which is at odds with previous findings which sometimes found positive relations between grandiose narcissism and cognitive empathy (e.g., Turner et al., 2019). This inconsistency may be attributable to the differentiation of rivalry and admiration in the current research or a suboptimal differentiation of the two empathy components by the measure we used in Study 2 (Carré et al., 2013, p. 686). Specifically, self-report measures of

cognitive empathy may often tap into motivated dismissal of others' mental states rather than actual empathic performance. In sum, more research is needed to address how narcissistic rivalry (vs. admiration) may differentially predict the various components of empathy.

Notably, whereas we found consistent evidence for our key prediction, that is, the negative predictive effect of narcissistic rivalry on empathy across studies, narcissistic admiration was not always significantly related to empathy. Specifically, Studies 1 and 2 found rather weak support for a positive relation between admiration and empathy (Back et al., 2013), whereas Study 3 yielded no effect of admiration on either empathy or altruism (see SOM, for a more detailed discussion of admiration). Beyond the differentiation that the NARC (Back et al., 2013) offers, promising avenues for future research might include other conceptualizations of narcissism such as communal (vs. agentic) narcissism (Gebauer, Sedikides, Verplanken, Maio, 2012). Whereas communal narcissists have the same self-motives as agentic narcissists, the former achieve those via communal means—among which could be empathy and prosociality. However, while communal narcissists seem to desire self-enhancement via such communal means, they do not necessarily show the corresponding behaviors (Nehrlich, Gebauer, Sedikides, & Schoel, 2018).

For those who tend towards narcissism, the spotlight is mostly shining on themselves, whereas others are left in the dark—ironically, at least equally so, thus potentially mitigating some of the biased decision making that can be the result of strong empathic reactions. Additionally, not all narcissists are alike: Particularly those who view others as untrustworthy and a potential threat seem to disengage from them, not feeling them. Increasing the psychological experience of trust can thus be a powerful tool for these narcissists, reducing perceived threat and allowing them to attend to others' needs and feelings.



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## Appendix

### Empathy Measure (Study 3) (translated from German)

Short Scenario

**Please have a look at the photo below and imagine the situation described.**

[*photo is available upon request from the corresponding author*]

This is Carla, a four-year old girl with a rare metabolic disease. Unfortunately, this disease cannot be treated. According to the medical prognosis, she and her family must prepare for her to die within the upcoming weeks. Thus, the focus now is on spending the remaining weeks with her family and making sure that she will be as comfortable as possible.

**How did you feel as you were thinking about Carla and her situation?**

- 1) Sympathetic
- 2) Warm
- 3) Compassionate
- 4) Softhearted
- 5) Tender
- 6) Moved

[Scale from 1 = *does not apply at all*, to 7 = *completely applies*]

Adapted from: Batson et al. (1995)

### Altruism Measure (Study 3) (translated from German)

**Please imagine the following situation:**

Imagine that there was an organization named Quality of Life. This charity collects donations and works together with parents and doctors to support terminally ill children during their remaining time, by providing special medical, social, and psychological assistance. This type of support evidently facilitates coping with this difficult situation for all parties involved.

However, Quality of Life's resources are limited, that is, not all children and parents can receive such support. On a case-by-case basis, some children and their families can receive particularly intense support though. Due to budget restraints, such case-based measures are of course always at the expense of the remaining children.

**Please think about Carla again and subsequently indicate your agreement to the following statements:**

- 1) In Carla's special case, I would support such a case-based assistance.
- 2) Considering her urgent situation, Carla should definitely receive preferential treatment.
- 3) If *Quality of Life* succeeded in supporting Carla and her family, I would like that.
- 4) Because Carla's situation is particularly urgent, *Quality of Life* should support her.

[Scale from 1 = *do not agree at all*, to 7 = *completely agree*]

Adapted from: Batson et al. (1995)