Current Conceptualizations of Narcissism

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Abstract

Purpose of review: Definitions of narcissism have traditionally differed across psychiatry and subfields of psychology. This review aims to highlight emerging points of consensus and suggest further directions needed to obtain a more comprehensive and cohesive conceptualization of the construct.

Recent findings: An emerging consensus is that stable individual differences in the phenotypic expression of narcissism are best captured with a taxonomy that includes the core traits of entitlement, grandiosity, and vulnerability. Recent work has also begun to conceptualize and assess narcissistic states matched with these dimensions. We combine emerging taxonomic knowledge with principles from Whole Trait Theory to propose a multilevel conceptualization of narcissism that focuses on its manifestation at the trait-, state-, and within-situation level.

Summary: Efforts to understand the phenotypic structure of the core traits associated with narcissism have been successful. As the field moves forward, it will become critical for researchers studying narcissism at multiple levels to align and integrate these perspectives so that a more comprehensive and cohesive conceptualization of the construct can be developed.

Key Words: Narcissism, Whole Trait Theory, Entitlement, Grandiosity, and Vulnerability.

Introduction

The construct of narcissism has a long intellectual history dating back to the writings of Havelock Ellis and Sigmund Freud. Most modern conceptualizations [1], however, are indebted to the theoretical work of Kernberg [2], Kohut [3], and Millon [4]. These theorists paved the way for including narcissistic personality disorder (NPD) in the third edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual [5]. The introduction of NPD as a distinct diagnostic category subsequently inspired considerable clinical interest in psychiatry [6] and research in psychology [7**].

An important issue related to the conceptualization of narcissism is whether it is best considered categorical or dimensional in nature. To test this, Aslinger and colleagues [8**] used finite mixture models to compare the fit of categorical, dimensional, and different hybrid models in five independent samples (e.g., clinical, community). Evidence consistently favored the dimensional model. We thus adopt a dimensional approach for this review.

Psychiatry and subfields of psychology have traditionally emphasized different elements of narcissism [1, 9] and recent integrative models [cf. 7**, 10**] highlight three core attributes that define the construct -- entitlement, grandiosity, and vulnerability. Entitlement reflects a belief that one is deserving of special benefits and attention. Grandiosity refers to an inflated estimation of abilities, accomplishments, and attributes. Last, vulnerability captures the emotional brittleness, hypersensitivity to criticism, and deficits in self-esteem regulation that figure prominently in clinical accounts of NPD.

The development of a common taxonomy of narcissistic traits holds the potential to clarify vexing substantive issues in the field (e.g., do narcissistic individuals have high self-esteem?), organize the various existing instruments for assessing narcissism, and facilitate a more rapid accumulation of knowledge. At the same time, research on dispositional traits is

unable to adequately speak to other central questions about the construct (e.g., do narcissistic individuals exhibit within-person fluctuations in grandiosity and vulnerability?) [11*]. This has prompted researchers to encourage more work on understanding narcissism at levels of analysis beyond traits [12, 13, 7**, 14].

In light of these recent developments, we believe that developing a comprehensive understanding of narcissism will likely require a shift towards a multilevel conceptualization that focuses on the manifestation of narcissism at the trait-, state-, and within-situation levels. As seen in Figure 1, we use the attributes of grandiosity, entitlement, and vulnerability to structure our conceptualization of narcissism at each level. Guided by Whole Trait Theory [15], we propose that trait-level narcissistic attributes (e.g., grandiosity) likely reflect density distributions of different states or the momentary thoughts, feelings, and behaviors (e.g., perfect, prestigious, and powerful) that accumulate across daily life. Further, we propose that dynamic processes involving social-cognitive variables (e.g., goals [e.g., self-promotion] and behaviors [e.g., self-assuredness]) that operate a the within-situation level provide the conceptual tools that help explain distributions of states. Accordingly, this review covers recent theoretical and empirical work on narcissism at each of these levels.

Trait-Level Conceptualization of Narcissism

Traits are broad characteristic tendencies in thoughts, feelings, and behavior that manifest consistency across a variety of situations and over time. A clinical diagnosis of NPD and most measures of narcissism assume that narcissism is a trait-like construct. Indeed, the diagnostic criteria for NPD explicitly state that it is "...a pervasive pattern…present in a variety of contexts…" [16]. Likewise, most measures (e.g., the Narcissistic Personality Inventory [NPI])

use language that implies the assessment of a stable individual difference (e.g., "I will usually show off if I get the chance").

Many controversies about narcissism boil down to disagreements about the defining or fundamental features of the construct [1, 17]. Work by Pincus and his colleagues [1, 17] helped to clarify that narcissism has two phenotypic expressions: grandiosity and vulnerability. Recent work has further argued that entitlement constitutes the core of narcissism that binds grandiosity and vulnerability together [7**, 10**]. Accordingly, the emerging consensus is that stable differences in narcissism are best represented by a tripartite conceptualization that includes the core traits of entitlement, grandiosity, and vulnerability [7**, 10**].

According to a consensus trait-level conceptualism, narcissism is an antagonistic interpersonal style that stems from an entitled self-image [7**, 10**]. Persons with greater levels of entitlement see themselves as special and/or important, have unrealistic expectations of others, and believe that they are owed special privileges [18**]. These entitled self-views and attitudes can result in demands for preferential treatment, a flagrant disregard of rules, and an assumption that positive outcomes are forthcoming without commensurate effort. When this entitled self-image is combined with higher levels of approach-related motivation and/or extraversion, narcissism shows a more grandiose expression [7**, 10**] that involves an inflated self-image (e.g., self-perceptions of brilliance) and regulatory strategies aimed at self-enhancement (e.g., exhibitionism) [17]. Alternatively, when the entitled self-image is combined with higher levels of avoidance-related motivation and/or neuroticism (i.e., emotional instability), narcissism is believed to show a more vulnerable expression [7**, 10**] that involves vacillations in self-image and compensatory regulatory strategies aimed at self-protection (e.g., devaluation of others) [17].

Research shows divergent nomological networks for entitlement, grandiosity, and vulnerability. Persons with greater entitlement are disagreeable [12, 19, 20*], more neurotic [12, 19], and to some extent, less conscientious [12, 19, 20*]. Entitled persons engage in more social comparison and report increased envy and less empathy [21]. In addition, they report increased conflict/aggression, a reduced tendency to forgive, and heightened negative affect that is characterized by anger rather than depression [12]. Persons with greater entitlement also appear to hold somewhat conflicting self-views, including greater hubristic pride [22] and modestly lower self-esteem [23**, 19] that is unstable [23**].

Similar to entitlement, persons with greater grandiosity are disagreeable [24, 12, 25, 26, 20*, but see 27], engage in more social comparison [21], and report somewhat increased envy [21]. However, they are also more extraverted [24, 12, 25, 19, 26, 27, 20*], less neurotic [24, 25, 19, 26, 27, but see 20*], and more approach motivated [12, 28, 7**, 21]. Persons with greater grandiosity pursue status in an agentic manner [29] and display modestly greater over-claiming bias [30]. They also report increased pride [26, 22] and subjective well-being [7**] and decreased negative affect (e.g., shame) [26]. Grandiosity is also linked to increased levels of self-esteem [24, 23**, 28, 7**, 19, 26, 27] that are stable [23**].

Last, persons with greater vulnerability are more neurotic [12, 25, 7**, 31, 26, but see 20*], less agreeable [12, 25, 31, 26, 20*], less extraverted [12, 25, 31, 26, 20*], and to some extent, less conscientious [12, 25, 31, 26, 20*]. They report increased avoidance-related motivations [28, 7**] and increased negative affect [26] that includes anger [7**, 32, 26], shame [26], and depressive symptoms [26]. Vulnerable persons report more aggression/hostility [32, 31, 26], less trust [12], and less relationship satisfaction [12]. Vulnerability is also linked to decreased positive affect [26] and self-esteem [28, 7**, 26].

The literature has thus far provided robust evidence regarding important commonalities and distinctions between grandiosity and vulnerability. It has also provided evidence that although entitlement may be common to both of these phenotypic expressions, it is a relatively distinct construct [33, 34, 35]. Future work in this area should further test this taxonomy, explore its underlying facet structure (e.g., using more comprehensive measures of narcissism such as the Five-Factor Model Narcissism Inventory [36]), and better understand how these traits interact with each other in predicting important life outcomes.

State-Level Conceptualization of Narcissism

States reflect momentary thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that vary across situations and over time. Recent evidence suggests that features of personality pathology [37], including those relevant to narcissism [38**], fluctuate in predictable ways over short-term periods. Compared to the trait-level conceptualization of the construct, however, relatively less work has focused on understanding narcissistic states.

Clinical writings on narcissism suggest that grandiose states and vulnerable states vacillate back and forth over time [17]. Supporting this, when clinicians and professors of clinical psychology were asked to think about someone with grandiose narcissism, they identified the presence of corresponding vulnerable features at least some of the time [39, see also 40]. The converse was not true, suggesting that grandiosity is specific to narcissism, but vulnerability better reflects general pathology [25]. This finding lends some credence to the fluctuation hypothesis and suggests that further work on narcissistic states is warranted.

The limited research in this area has generally adapted trait measures of grandiosity and vulnerability to investigate narcissistic states [38**, 41, 42, 43**]. Some initial investigations operationalized grandiose states using modified versions of the NPI-16 [44] to assess what was

felt at the moment [42, 43**]. Amid concerns that such measures may not possess appropriate sensitivity to capture within-person changes in momentary feelings, researchers have recently moved towards using adjective measures of grandiose (e.g., the Narcissistic Grandiosity Scale) [41, 43**] and vulnerable narcissism (e.g., the Narcissistic Vulnerability Scale) [41, 38**]. Grandiose states have thus been operationalized with adjectives such as "Prestigious", "Powerful", and "Perfect". Likewise, vulnerable states have been operationalized with adjectives such as "Ashamed", "Fragile", and "Insecure".

At a basic descriptive level, sizeable proportions of the variance in state measures of grandiose narcissism (e.g., 25-33%) [42, 43**] and vulnerable narcissism (e.g., close to 50%) [38**] can be attributed to within-person fluctuations in states that occur across moments within the same person. The administration of adjective-based state measures of grandiosity and vulnerability in momentary assessment designs (e.g., assessments collected in real time through smart phone applications) has shown that such measures possess adequate-to-excellent reliability for capturing within-person changes and good evidence of convergent and discriminant validity [38**, 41]. Edershile et al. [41] also provide evidence that the within-person averages of the Narcissistic Grandiosity Scale and Narcissistic Vulnerability Scale closely correspond to the same dispositional measures, which lends support to the idea that repeated occurrences of narcissistic states may give rise to dispositional traits [15, 45].

Within-person increases in state grandiosity are associated with increased self-esteem [41, 42, 43**], positive affect [41, 42], and negative affect [42], as well as modestly linked to increased extraverted behavior [41]. Within-person increases in state vulnerability, on the other hand, are strongly associated with increased negative affect, moderately linked to decreased warmth (e.g., withdrawal), and modestly linked to decreased self-esteem [41]. Somewhat

surprisingly, within-person states in grandiosity and vulnerability are largely uncorrelated, even as their averages are moderately to strongly correlated, consistent with a coherent personality syndrome [41].

Consistent with the tenets of Whole Trait Theory [15], we believe that future work concerning narcissistic states should take advantage of the knowledge that has been gained about the phenotypic structure of narcissistic traits. Although measures of grandiose and vulnerable states have been developed, state-level measures of entitlement have lagged behind. In addition to developing measures that provide a more comprehensive assessment of narcissistic states, the field would benefit from more descriptive work concerning the nature of state distributions across persons. Different variants of intensive longitudinal designs can also advance knowledge on this topic. Experience-sampling designs that capture relevant goals and construals of events, for instance, would facilitate the understanding of how between-situation differences contribute to the manifestation of different narcissistic states. Further, measurement burst designs would aid the understanding of how narcissistic states contribute to the development of narcissistic traits.

Within-Situation Level Conceptualization of Narcissism

The flipside of focusing on narcissistic states is the need to identify the situational features that both elicit and allow for the expression of grandiosity, vulnerability, and entitlement, as well as the specific patterns of thinking and feeling in the moment that underlie narcissistic states. We conceive the within-situation level of narcissism to contain those social-cognitive processes and short-term interpersonal dynamics connected with narcissistic states/traits. Structural units for this level typically include motives/goals, interpersonal processes, and perceptual processes. Researchers have promoted the utility of the social-

cognitive approach for studying personality pathology [46, 47], and a few theoretical models of narcissism have adopted this framework to understand the construct.

Morf and Rhodewalt [48], for instance, developed a dynamic self-regulatory processing model of narcissism to account for how the grandiose self-image is maintained over time. They propose that narcissists make use of various intrapersonal (e.g., distorting outcomes to appear superior) and interpersonal (e.g., exploitation, seeking admiration) strategies to bolster their unwieldy self-concept and regulate their self-esteem (for a recent review, see [49]). Pincus and his colleagues [17] described how narcissistic vulnerability results from deficient strategies to maintain a positive self-view. As Pincus and Lukowitsky [17] aptly noted, "The core feature of *pathological* narcissism is not grandiosity, but rather defective self-regulation leading to grandiose and vulnerable self and affect states" (p. 436; emphasis ours). Back and his colleagues proposed the Narcissistic Admiration and Rivalry Concept [34] process model to describe the two distinct strategies used to maintain a grandiose self-image (i.e., assertive self-enhancement [admiration] and antagonistic self-protection [rivalry]). Grubbs and Exline [18**] proposed a model of entitlement that explains how high levels of the trait may engender psychological distress (e.g., unmet expectations may lead to perceptions of injustice and anger) and subsequent defensive self-enhancement.

As a means of investigating the within-situation dynamics linked to narcissism, researchers sometimes use hypothetical vignettes or experimental/behavioral paradigms to examine how narcissistic traits/states make certain behavioral sequences more likely (e.g., [50, 51, 52]). Yang et al. [52], for instance, showed that certain perceptual deficiencies in narcissism contribute to making risky decisions. Intensive longitudinal designs have also been used to investigate this niche-making behavior. Using event-contingent recording with social

interactions, Roche and colleagues [47] showed that persons with higher levels of grandiosity displayed agentic non-reciprocity when they perceived their interaction partners as more communal. Similarly, Wright et al. [53**] used an ambulatory assessment design and found that psychiatric outpatients with greater levels of NPD reacted to perceptions of others' expressions of dominance with antagonistic behavior.

Comparatively less work has focused on how certain behavioral sequences promote greater levels of particular narcissistic traits/states. Highlighting the utility of experimental designs for this endeavor, recent work has shown that experimentally inducing higher levels of power increases state levels of grandiose narcissism [54]. To the best of our knowledge, however, the literature is missing basic descriptive accounts from non-experimental designs that showcase the diverse pathways by which narcissistic states are maintained or changed. In addition to using theory as a guide for identifying the within-situation dynamics linked with certain narcissistic features [13], we envision some of this work being done descriptively through empirical observation. Indeed, if we assume that higher levels of certain narcissistic states drive the development of narcissistic traits, then we should be looking for mediational patterns that predict higher levels of these states.

Conclusion

Research has made great strides in understanding the phenotypic structure of the defining traits associated with narcissism (i.e., a core of entitlement that manifests in grandiosity and/or vulnerability). Recent work has also begun to conceptualize and assess narcissistic states, and recent advances in technology and statistical techniques have made it possible to more faithfully model the within-situation dynamics linked to narcissism. It is critical for researchers studying narcissism at the trait-, state-, and within-situation levels to attempt to align and integrate these

perspectives so that a more comprehensive and cohesive conceptualization of the construct can be developed.

Key Points

1. The phenotypic structure of the traits associated with narcissism consists of a core of entitlement that manifests in grandiosity and/or vulnerability.

2. The past few years have seen an increase in research dedicated to conceptualizing and assessing narcissistic states. Recent advances in technology and statistical techniques have also made it possible to more faithfully model relevant within-situation dynamics.

3. As the field moves forward, it will become critical for researchers studying narcissism at the trait-, state-, and within-situation levels to develop a comprehensive and integrative conceptualization of the construct across these three levels.

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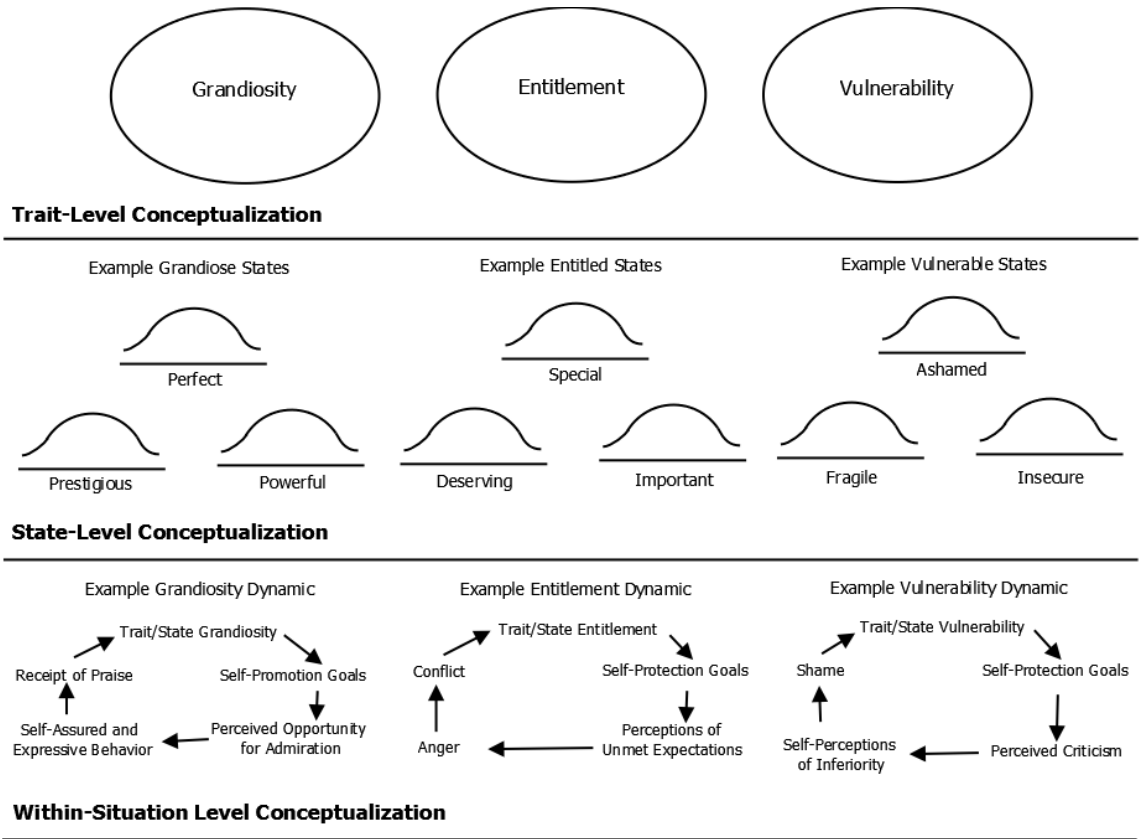
Figure 1. Multilevel Conceptualization of Narcissism.