PART II

Personal Security in Interpersonal Contexts
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NARCISSISM AND PROTECTION AGAINST SOCIAL THREAT

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In the 1960s, the United States was swept away with the self-esteem movement, a cause that stressed the importance of instilling a sense of positive self-regard and self-worth in children from a young age. The self-esteem movement bolstered children’s self-images by promoting praise and encouragement without correction. These practices were implemented to promote the assumed positive benefits of self-esteem and other forms of positive self-regard (e.g., self-efficacy), such as academic motivation, growth, and well-being (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003).

Unfortunately, this social vaccine rebounded, bringing to light some of the dangers of inflated self-regard. Many researchers have since shown that positive self-regard is a result of achievement rather than a cause (e.g., Bachman & O’Malley, 1986). Rather than promoting achievement and other positive outcomes, the self-esteem movement instead likely fostered a tendency to under-achieve. Support for this conclusion comes from a controlled field study by Forsyth and Kerr (1999), which found that students achieving at the D or F level in a university class actually performed worse on subsequent tests after receiving weekly self-esteem-boosting messages from the professor teaching the class. As Baumeister and colleagues (2003) assert, applying an intervention that encourages students to feel good about themselves regardless of achievement performance removes the reason to work hard in the first place, resulting in poorer performance. Thus, rather than encouraging higher achievement in schools, the self-esteem movement may have encouraged students to achieve less.

If pure, unadulterated positive self-regard is not optimal, what is? We consider optimal self-regard as one that is most adaptive and promotes the ability for the individual to flourish. Furthermore, optimal self-regard should promote personal security as defined and explored across the chapters within this edited volume. That is, as a consequence of possessing optimal self-regard, one is free from concern over loss and able to deal effectively with potential security threats that can lead to such concerns. Importantly, although the term “personal security” often evokes the idea of physical security, we use it in this chapter to refer to security in one’s sense of self, or ego security. Thus, as a consequence of possessing optimal self-regard, we assert that one becomes free from concern over others devaluing or failing to support the self and is moreover able to deal effectively with security threats that would lead to these concerns.

There are, unfortunately, a plethora of individuals who do not achieve optimal self-regard, including narcissistic individuals. Narcissism is often viewed as the dark side of high self-regard. These individuals have vastly inflated self-esteem, not conditional on actual performance, and behave in ways that incur negative interpersonal consequences (Baumeister et al., 2003; Soyer,
In this chapter, we will examine the adaptiveness of two proposed narcissistic subtypes and attempt to answer the question: what kind of narcissist is best at defending against the type of social threats that jeopardize an individual’s experience of personal security? Gaining a better understanding of what drives each narcissist can not only help in the business/professional sectors, to improve performance such as team project outcomes, but also help relationship partners who may interact with these personality types. In addition, elucidating the concept of narcissism may help clinicians better recognize the two narcissistic subtypes and design better intervention programs to reduce the maladaptive cognitions and behaviors present in these individuals.

Narcissism

Narcissism can be generally defined as a pattern of grandiose and arrogant behaviors and fantasies, lack of empathy, and extreme need for the admiring attention of others. Although people have presumably been narcissistic for centuries, this personality characteristic began to receive clinical attention in the early to mid-1900s from early psychodynamic theorists such as Freud, Horney, Kernberg, and Kohut (Sacksteder, 1990). Narcissism was included as a personality disorder in the third edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (*DSM-III*) in 1980 and has retained a place in the *DSM*’s personality disorders section throughout the years. The *DSM-5* delineates nine criteria for diagnosing Narcissistic Personality Disorder in adults, of which at least five must be met for diagnosis: exaggerated sense of self-importance, preoccupation with grandiose fantasies, belief that one is special or unique, need for excessive admiration, strong sense of entitlement, manipulation and exploitation of others, lack of empathy, envy of others and belief that others are envious of them, and engagement in arrogant and haughty behaviors (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Similarly, Ronningstam and Maltsberger identified 13 core characteristics of pathological narcissism based on their analysis of case studies involving narcissistic psychiatric patients, including entitlement, superiority, lack of empathy, need for admiring attention, and self-centered attitude (for a full list, see Ronningstam & Maltsberger, 1998).

Although Narcissistic Personality Disorder in the adult population is relatively rare, it may not be concluded that all other individuals lack narcissism. The *DSM-5* defines narcissism categorically, where individuals either meet the criteria for a personality disorder diagnosis or do not; in contrast, much recent research supports the conceptualization of narcissism as a personality trait (Foster & Campbell, 2007; Miller & Campbell, 2008, 2010; Widiger, 2010). Trait narcissism exists as a continuum on which everyone falls; thus, everyone has some level of narcissism.

The bulk of previous research has focused on narcissism as a single construct, but a growing area of research in the last few decades has suggested that this conceptualization is incomplete (Hickman, Watson, & Morris, 1996; Rathvon & Holmstrom, 1996; Wink, 1991). Such thinking was largely born from conflicting findings in empirical studies; for example, some studies have indicated that narcissism is positively correlated with well-being and self-esteem, while others have supported the opposite conclusion (e.g., Hickman et al., 1996). To address this inconsistency, researchers have proposed and increasingly supported the idea that narcissism can be divided into two separate subtypes based on fundamentally different characteristics (e.g., Dickinson & Pincus, 2003; Miller & Campbell, 2008).

Grandiose Narcissism

The first narcissistic subtype is most commonly referred to as grandiose narcissism. Grandiose narcissism most closely reflects the characteristics associated with the conceptualization of narcissism as a single construct and is the form most well known and portrayed in popular media. These
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Grandiose narcissists possess many positive attributes. These narcissists tend to be outgoing, charming, and confident, and they perform well under pressure (e.g., Back, Schmukle, & Egloff, 2010; Baumeister et al., 2003; Wallace & Baumeister, 2002; Watts, Lilenfeld, Smith, Miller, Campbell, et al., 2013). Many of these positive attributes are thought to arise from grandiose narcissists’ high approach motivation and low avoidance motivation, whereby individuals are more sensitive to the potential rewards of their efforts than to potential failures (Foster & Trimm, 2008). These narcissists often make good leaders, as their sense of grandiosity manifests in a dominant, agentic interpersonal style (Bosson, Lakey, Campbell, Zeigler-Hill, Jordan, & Kernis, 2008). Thus, some grandiose narcissistic traits can be quite adaptive in the short term.

However, grandiose narcissists seem to elicit an interesting mix of reactions from the people they interact with in the long term. Research shows that while the peers of narcissists initially perceive them positively when engaged in group projects (Paulhus, 1998), over the course of the project the narcissist’s initial charm wears off. By the end of the group interaction, peers tend to rate narcissists as cold, arrogant, inclined to brag, prone to overestimating the self, and hostile. This pattern translates into their romantic lives as well. Grandiose narcissists idealize close others for short periods of time, but eventually their sensitivity to criticism, low empathy, and willingness to exploit others break down the relationship. At this point, the narcissist seeks a new relationship partner with whom they may start the same cyclical procedure over again (Campbell & Foster, 2002). Thus, although grandiose narcissists may charm others with their charisma and confidence at first, they are eventually likely to become aggressive and domineering (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998, 2002; Reidy, Zeichner, Foster, & Martinez, 2008). These behavioral tendencies encapsulate why many see grandiose narcissism as a maladaptive personality trait.

Self-Regard Among Grandiose Narcissists. Historically, narcissism researchers and theorists believed that the superiority and self-love displayed by these individuals were merely a self-presentation strategy designed to conceal underlying feelings of inferiority and insecurity (Kernberg, 1975; Kohut, 1977). This conceptualization of narcissism, commonly referred to as the mask hypothesis, asserts that while these individuals report an inflated sense of self explicitly, deep down they are filled with self-doubts and thus would report low self-esteem implicitly. Inspired by this perspective, many researchers describe narcissists as envious of others, ashamed of themselves, and “in denial” of reality.

Despite its intuitive nature, evidence for the mask hypothesis is scarce. While grandiose narcissists do report high self-esteem on explicit measures (Rose, 2002), previous research has offered inconsistent findings regarding the existence of an underlying sense of inferiority. In a recent meta-analysis, Bosson and her colleagues (2008) found no support for the mask hypothesis. Other researchers have proposed models of unstable or fragile self-esteem among grandiose narcissists, but evidence for these models has produced mixed results (Bosson et al., 2008; Rhodewalt, Madrian, & Cheney, 1998; Zeigler-Hill, 2006).

Although models of discrepant, unstable, and fragile self-esteem do not seem to explain the self-regard of grandiose narcissists, models of domain-specific self-regard are more promising. For example, Campbell and colleagues found that grandiose narcissism was differentially associated with self-views in the domains of agency and communion (Campbell, Bosson, Goheen, Lakey, & Kernis, 2007). Agency refers to traits of competence, action, skill, and extraversion, while communion refers to traits of warmth, nurturance, kindness, affection, and agreeableness (Bosson et al., 2008). Notably, agentic traits function to distinguish the individual from others, while communal traits connect the individual to the social structure at large (Bakan, 1996). In their study, Campbell...
and colleagues (2007) found grandiose narcissism to be associated with positive self-views both explicitly and implicitly only in the domain of agency. In contrast, this type of narcissism was uncorrelated or slightly negatively correlated with explicit and implicit measures of communion. These findings suggest that grandiose narcissists base their self-worth in terms of agency (i.e., their ability to distinguish themselves from others), without care for communal concerns (i.e., their ability to connect to others). Thus, rather than investing energy into being good friends or romantic partners, grandiose narcissists seem to place great value on their ability to outperform others; this pursuit both confirms their own agentic superiority and has the potential to win admiration from others. For the grandiose narcissist, this is likely a win–win situation with a high probability of reinforcing their already inflated self-esteem.

Furthermore, grandiose narcissism has been linked with contingent self-esteem, where self-worth depends on meeting internal or external standards in certain domains. Grandiose narcissism has been consistently positively associated with contingent self-esteem in the competition domain (Crocker, Luhtanen, Cooper, & Bouvrette, 2003; Zeigler-Hill, Clark, & Pickard, 2008). Interestingly, this type of narcissism is generally uncorrelated or even negatively associated with other domains of contingent self-esteem, many of which are based on gaining the approval of others (e.g., others' approval, family support). Additionally, grandiose narcissism is uncorrelated with global measures of contingent self-esteem (Bosson et al., 2008).

Based on these findings, Zeigler-Hill and colleagues (2008) argue that grandiose narcissists are much more interested in gaining attention from others than in gaining others’ approval. Similarly, Arkin and Lakin (2001) suggested that grandiose narcissists may in fact interpret instances of interpersonal rejection or failure as obstacles rather than threats. Rather than feeling threatened by negative evaluations from others, grandiose narcissists may view such negative feedback as a sign of uncooperative behavior and become frustrated (Arkin & Lakin, 2001). Thus, grandiose narcissists do not require approval from others; instead, they seem to merely desire a passive audience to impress and receive admiration from.

Though a complete understanding of grandiose narcissists’ self-regard has not been reached, these findings do suggest that this type of narcissists base their judgments of self-worth in an agentic, internal manner. They do not place the basis of their self-esteem in the hands of others; rather, they seem to derive self-worth primarily from their ability to agentically pursue what they desire. In other words, these individuals want an audience to admire them but are unconcerned with any potential negative repercussions their actions may have on others. In sum, grandiose narcissists’ main aim is to reinforce their already high self-esteem.

**Vulnerable Narcissism**

The second subtype of narcissism is most commonly referred to as vulnerable narcissism. Like their grandiose counterparts, vulnerable narcissists are self-absorbed, exploitative, and aggressive, and they harbor entitled and grandiose thoughts (Krizan & Johar, 2012; Miller et al., 2011; Zeigler-Hill, Green, Arnau, Sisemore, & Myers, 2011). In contrast to grandiose narcissists, vulnerable narcissists seem to possess few, if any, beneficial qualities. In fact, the characteristics of a vulnerable narcissist create almost the perfect storm to produce detriments to well-being (Cooper, 1998; Krizan & Johar, 2012; Rose, 2002; Wink, 1991).

Vulnerable narcissists are hypervigilant and highly reactive to evaluative events (Gabbard, 1989). These individuals carefully monitor the reactions of others and tend to feel slighted at every turn (Gabbard, 1989); for example, when asked to imagine a scenario of interpersonal rejection (vs. a failure in achievement), vulnerable narcissists reported significantly higher negative mood states, including reactions of anger (Besser & Priel, 2010). Their hypersensitive nature appears common to a number of personality disorders such as avoidant personality disorder, borderline personal-
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ity disorder, and the previously recognized passive-aggressive personality disorder (Fossati, Borroni, Grazioli, Dornetti, Marcassoli, Maffei, & Cheek, 2009). Furthermore, vulnerable narcissists’ egocentric nature predicts dysfunction, including low cooperativeness and low interest in social relationships, while their emotion regulation style manifests in unnecessary worry and pessimism (Cooper, 1998; Fossati et al., 2009; Foster & Trimm, 2008; Krizan & Johar, 2012).

Additionally, vulnerable narcissism correlates positively to mental health’s two most common enemies: depression and anxiety (Malsberger, 1997; Rathvon & Holmstrom, 1996). Depression can refer to worries and rumination about how one fell short of one’s own or others’ expectations in the past, whereas anxiety can reflect worries about possible future shortcomings and mistakes. This tendency toward depression and anxiety may be related to avoidance and prevention-focused behaviors among vulnerable narcissists; in fact, vulnerable narcissism is known to be associated with avoidance motivation (Foster & Trimm, 2008).

In sum, vulnerable narcissism is associated with psychological distress, lowered sociability, and lowered self-acceptance due to its egocentric and hypersensitive nature. Importantly, the heavy avoidance motivation as well as the distress experienced by vulnerable narcissists represents different aspects (e.g., motivation, emotion) of the broader experience of personal insecurity (see also Hart, this volume).

Self-Regard Among Vulnerable Narcissists. Vulnerable narcissists also seem to differ from their grandiose counterparts in terms of self-regard. Primarily, these narcissists are known to exhibit low self-esteem on self-report measures (Rose, 2002) and are high in self-doubt and low in self-concept clarity (Freis & Arkin, n.p.). While many models of self-regard remain untested in association with vulnerable narcissism (e.g., stable self-esteem and self-efficacy), contingencies of self-worth do provide us with some insights into the type of self-regard experienced by vulnerable narcissists.

Zeigler-Hill and colleagues (2008) found that vulnerable narcissism was associated with contingent self-esteem in numerous domains. Specifically, vulnerable narcissism was positively associated with contingent self-worth in the domains of physical appearance, competition, academic competence, others’ approval, family support, and virtue. These associations suggest that the self-regard of vulnerable narcissists is more globally contingent, relative to grandiose narcissists’ specific contingency, and is based largely on the approval of others (Zeigler-Hill et al., 2008). As such, these individuals are believed to be incapable of regulating their own self-esteem, relying instead on the reactions and opinions of others (Cooper, 1998; Kealy & Rasmussen, 2012; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001; Zeigler-Hill et al., 2008).

In sum, the existing research suggests that vulnerable narcissists rely on the feedback of others to construct their self-esteem (Kealy & Rasmussen, 2012). Unlike grandiose narcissists, who confidently display their agency and garner admiration where they can, vulnerable narcissists seem to exist in a perpetual state of self-doubt or uncertainty about their internal experiences, such as their attitudes, beliefs, and self-evaluations (Cooper, 1998; Freis & Arkin, n.p.; Krizan & Johar, 2012). This leaves vulnerable narcissists hypersensitive to external information, constantly hoping to gain the approval of others to alleviate their own uncertainty about their worth.

Protection Against Social Threat

Social contexts provide abundant opportunities for narcissists’ self-regard to be challenged, disproved, and undermined. Whereas personal insecurity is the experience of concern over loss, threats are the cause of such experiences. Because their self-regard is contingent on others’ approval, others’ disapproval is particularly threatening to narcissists. This is especially the case for vulnerable narcissists, whose self-regard is globally contingent on the feedback of others. We would therefore suggest that the loss of one’s sense of self largely defines narcissists’ personal, intrapsychic
security concerns. Considering the different elements of grandiose and vulnerable narcissism, one can speculate as to how people with these elements may differ in their experiences of personal security. Much research investigating narcissists’ reactions to threat has accumulated in the field and will help us address this issue.

**Security Threats to Grandiose Narcissists**

Grandiose narcissists’ reactions to social threat are heavily shaped by their high self-regard. For example, narcissism has been reliably linked with self-enhancement tendencies in much previous research (Farwell & Wohlwend-Lloyd, 1998; Miller & Campbell, 2010; Sedikides, 1993). Grandiose narcissists are well known for making unrealistically positive evaluations of their own performance on tasks (John & Robins, 1994); they also make self-serving attributions to a much higher degree than less narcissistic individuals, attributing successes to their own ability and failures to the difficulty of the task (Stucke, 2003). High confidence in their own superiority, combined with their great ability to self-enhance, leaves little opportunity for the grandiose narcissist to feel disadvantaged or let their high self-regard waver for too long.

In fact, grandiose narcissists perceive many downward social comparisons in their world. Krizan and Bushman (2011) found that compared to high self-esteem individuals, narcissists were more likely to have an impression that they were “better off” after making comparisons with their friends, partners, and family members. Krizan and Bushman found no clear results linking narcissism with upward social comparison, however, likely because grandiose narcissists are known to have ambitions to associate with powerful and popular others, which may clash with their desire to assert superiority (Campbell & Foster, 2002; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). It appears that grandiose narcissists are pleased with themselves and are motivated to maintain that perspective but have an adaptive sense as to the most strategic times to assert their superiority.

Additional evidence for the adaptive nature of grandiose narcissism arises from the factor structure of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI), which is the scale most commonly used to assess grandiose narcissism (Raskin & Terry, 1988). While grandiose narcissists score high on the Entitlement/Exploitation (E/E) factor of the NPI, which is linked to maladaptiveness, it is high scores on the other three factors of the scale that help grandiose narcissists function adaptively: Leadership/Authority (L/A), Superiority/Arrogance (S/A), and Self-Absorption/Self-Admiration (S/S) (Emmons, 1984; Watson, Little, Sawrie, & Biderman, 1992). Thus, grandiose narcissists are motivated to assert and confirm their entitled expectations and hold additional characteristics that make them more successful than vulnerable narcissists in achieving this goal.

Still, while grandiose narcissists present an inflated self to the world that they believe is honest and genuine, others may interpret this presentation as arrogant or entitled. Thus, what the grandiose narcissist perceives may not necessarily match reality. Nevertheless, grandiose narcissists are skilled at creating and buying into their own illusions. Like the optimal margin theory suggested by Baumeister (1989), grandiose narcissists seem to experience wildly inflated positive illusions. Rather than the more temperate positive illusions experienced beneficially by the average population, grandiose narcissists operate under large distortions of self-glorification that are difficult to maintain on a daily basis. Thus, these narcissists are susceptible to higher stress levels associated with sustaining their inflated self-views. Essentially, in order to self-enhance and aggrandize most effectively, grandiose narcissists become efficient at biased processing and maintaining their sense of self, as evidenced by their tendency to engage in self-serving behaviors such as downward social comparisons (Ames & Kammrath, 2004; Arkin & Lakin, 2001; John & Robins, 1994; Krizan & Bushman, 2011). Furthermore, grandiose narcissists not only view the self as being extremely good and special but do so with great clarity, confidence, consistency, and stability in those self-views (Arkin & Lakin, 2001) and believe that their actual and ideal selves match (Rhodewalt & Morf,
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1995). So, while they may perceive themselves as and feel like the “top dog,” these subjective experiences do not necessarily correspond to their objective reality. Rather, it is the narcissist’s subjective perception that matters.

One of the most common ways that grandiose narcissists maintain their high self-regard is through defense mechanisms such as aggression and other exploitative behaviors. The theory of threatened egotism best captures the reasons behind grandiose narcissists’ aggressive actions. This theory states that when someone attempts to undermine or discredit an individual’s highly favorable self-view, aggression is used as a defense mechanism (Baumeister, Bushman, & Campbell, 2000). Specifically, rather than being spontaneous or proactive aggression, the aggression exhibited by grandiose narcissists is a reaction to ego threats from others. Bushman and Baumeister (1998) find support for this phenomenon among individuals high in grandiose narcissism, who seem to primarily aggress in response to ego threat provocations. Specifically, compared to high self-esteem individuals or individuals low in grandiose narcissism, when a person high in grandiose narcissism is faced with a personal insult, they display exceptionally high levels of aggression toward the source of the insult (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998). Grandiose narcissists did not displace aggression onto third-party individuals, however, suggesting an instrumental nature to their behavior. Other research supports the claim that grandiose narcissists become aggressive when a threat is directed at their ego. For example, Jones and Paulhus (2010) found that in contrast to psychopaths, who aggress more after a physical provocation, grandiose narcissists were once again more likely to aggress after a personal insult.

While scholars have reasoned that grandiose narcissists must be prone to feel shame in order for ego threats to instigate aggressive behavior (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998), research supporting this reasoning included a shameful “context” and not self-reports of shame from grandiose narcissists (Thomaes, Bushman, Stegge, & Olthof, 2008; Thomaes, Stegge, Olthof, Bushman, & Nezlek, 2011). In fact, other research using measures more indicative of grandiose narcissism finds that they do not internalize emotions or report feeling shame as initially proposed (Gramzow & Tangney, 1992; Watson, Hickman, Morris, Milliron, & Whiting, 1995); instead, shame-proneness is negatively correlated with grandiose narcissism. Thus, although they are known to be aggressive, these individuals do not seem to internalize negative emotions like shame.

Instead, previous research has found that externalizing blame is one of the most effective defense mechanisms utilized by grandiose narcissists to protect against social threats. Rhodewalt and Morf (1998) found that when grandiose narcissists’ expectations are violated, for instance when they receive negative performance or personality feedback, they experience anger, an externalizing emotion. Tvenge and Campbell (2003) also found that grandiose narcissists externalize a threat by feeling anger and exhibiting aggression, particularly after experiencing a social rejection. Finally, Kernis and Sun (1994) provide evidence on grandiose narcissists’ tendency to employ other coping strategies, such as devaluing the source of feedback when the information is threatening to one’s self. Thus, it seems that when confronting evidence that contradicts their self-view, grandiose narcissists often externalize blame to maintain their exaggerated levels of self-esteem and sense of self. Hence, we again see grandiose narcissists use defense mechanisms successfully to protect their personal security.

In sum, grandiose narcissists are highly ego-involved and are able to employ effective self-protection strategies against social threats to maintain personal security. Yet they are typically described by narcissism researchers as possessing a “mixed blessing” of adaptive and maladaptive characteristics. Their adaptive ability to maintain personal security in the sense of their desired sense of self is matched by their maladaptive tendencies to do harm to others with whom they interact (Campbell, Bush, Brunell, & Shelton, 2005). In fact, Dickinson and Pincus (2003) called grandiose narcissists the “oblivious narcissists” because of their observed lack of insight into the impact they have on others. For grandiose narcissists, basing their self-regard internally buffers...
them from personal security concerns (e.g., concerns with the loss of self), but their inflated beliefs about themselves still place them at greater risk for experiencing self-related personal security threats than the average population.

**Security Threats to Vulnerable Narcissists**

Just as grandiose narcissists’ reactions to social threat are shaped by their self-regard, so too are vulnerable narcissists’. In contrast to the grandiose narcissist, who maintains high self-regard through various mechanisms discussed previously, the vulnerable narcissist is plagued by low self-esteem and rumination in self-doubt. These characteristics are believed to greatly influence the responses vulnerable narcissists exhibit when faced with social threats.

A part of being narcissistic means vulnerable narcissists hold entitled expectations (Hendin & Cheek, 1997; Miller et al., 2011; Wink, 1991). However, the manifestation of vulnerable narcissists’ sense of entitlement is very different from that of grandiose narcissists. While grandiose narcissists seem to be entitled simply because they feel that they are superior beings, vulnerable narcissists may feel entitled because they feel that they are disadvantaged. In other words, vulnerable narcissists may ruminate over the outcomes that they believe they deserve. In turn, they tend to feel derogated and inferior in life in the sense that they are not getting what they are owed. Empirically speaking, vulnerable narcissists are known to experience far greater dispositional envy than grandiose narcissists (Krizan & Johar, 2012). Krizan and Johar (2012) speculated that this tendency toward envy may arise from sensitivity to upward social comparison, which may lead the vulnerable narcissist to perceive others’ success as unjust or out of reach. In sum, vulnerable narcissists perceive themselves as disadvantaged and are motivated to correct for this attribution.

Unfortunately, vulnerable narcissists do not seem to have the skill set to efficiently express their entitled expectations and therefore do not obtain desired outcomes. Like grandiose narcissists, vulnerable narcissists score high on the Entitlement/Exploitation (E/E) factor of the NPI; however, they score low on the other three more adaptive factors. Thus, their scores suggest that they do not possess the more adaptive skills that grandiose narcissists do (Emmons, 1984; Watson et al., 1992). In truth, it is hard to find a bright side to vulnerable narcissism. They do not experience positive outcomes in the short term, as they seem to lack the charismatic characteristics for which their grandiose counterparts are famous. Instead, their avoidance motivation likely leads to modest self-presentation and diminishes the likelihood for others to grant the vulnerable narcissist status.

In contrast to grandiose narcissists, whose positive illusions are inflated above Baumeister’s (1989) optimal margin of illusion, vulnerable narcissists seem to experience deficient illusions. In fact, vulnerable narcissists may see themselves and the world without the benefit of even the rose-colored glasses that the average population enjoys. This deficiency incurs high emotional costs for the vulnerable narcissist, likely contributing to this population’s high association with depression and anxiety, as previously discussed. Pragmatic costs may occur as well. Although deficient illusions may be beneficial in preventing the individual from taking unnecessary risks, this tendency may manifest in the vulnerable narcissist as an inability to take any risks to obtain what they feel they are owed, thus perpetuating the experience of disappointment in the face of their exaggerated entitled expectations.

Perpetual experiences of disappointment are further fueled by the reactions vulnerable narcissists have to social threat. For example, we know from past literature that vulnerable narcissists are hypersensitive to external information and exhibit low self-esteem (Cooper, 1998; Kealy & Rasmussen, 2012; Rose, 2002). They torture themselves by remaining self-absorbed while feeling uncertain about their desired outcomes. Since vulnerable narcissists have globally contingent but low self-regard, they are at risk for making more global attributions from internalization of failure, which can lead to shame (Lewis, 1971, 1987; Zeigler-Hill et al., 2008). Shame threatens one’s
personal security by undermining self-efficacy and feelings of deservingness for status, a trait that narcissists highly value. Unlike grandiose narcissists, who do not internalize experiences of shame, vulnerable narcissists are fully aware of and report the explicit experience of this self-conscious emotion (Atlas & Them, 2008; Malkin, Barry, & Zeigler-Hill, 2011).

As shame is an internalizing emotion that threatens vulnerable narcissists’ personal security, aggression may provide an opportunity to externalize insecurity and protect the self from such shame. Aggression in vulnerable narcissists has been theoretically proposed, but research by Krizan and Johar (2012) provides clarification on the links that may exist between different negative emotions. For instance, Krizan and Johar suggest that self-devaluation and hostility related to the vulnerable narcissist’s experience of envy could promote aggressive responding toward others. In contrast to grandiose narcissists, who aggress more purely as an ego-protection strategy, vulnerable narcissists may become caught in a perpetual shame-rage cycle, where anger and aggression are utilized to distract the vulnerable narcissists from their feelings of shame (Tracy & Robins, 2004). In other words, vulnerable narcissists engage in aggression for expressive purposes as a way to release emotions. This is in contrast to grandiose narcissists, who aggress for instrumental purposes, to teach the transgressor a lesson and reassert their superiority, as discussed by Arkin and Lakin (2001).

To explicate, this proposed shame-rage cycle may begin in vulnerable narcissists with their hypersensitivity to feedback from others. As previously discussed, vulnerable narcissists hold entitled expectations about what they are owed (e.g., Hendin & Cheek, 1997). In particular, vulnerable narcissists score high on the entitlement-rage scale (Miller et al., 2011), signifying that vulnerable narcissists become angry about what they are not getting but believe they deserve. Sooner or later, they realize that those very high expectations will not be fully met by others. This realization serves to remind vulnerable narcissists that they are dependent on others to meet their needs. This is especially problematic, as vulnerable narcissists view being interpersonally reliant as a sign of weakness and inadequacy (Kealy & Rasmussen, 2012). Recognition of this “weakness” can trigger feelings of shame, which has been linked to denying dependency on others (Besser & Priel, 2010). Denying, or blocking emotional recognition and expression of shame, leads to the externalization of blame and the experience of anger and rage as a result of rechanneling such emotional energy. This displacement of emotion feeds back into the loop by provoking further feelings of shame through a sense of fragility (Lewis, 1987; Tracy & Robins, 2004).

While empirical research has not directly tested the shame-rage cycle in vulnerable narcissists yet, unpublished work by Freis and Arkin provides initial evidence that vulnerable narcissists attempt to implement defense mechanisms, but these efforts to protect against personal insecurity are ultimately ineffective. Over two studies, participants completed self-report questionnaires before writing a personal or general essay on their adjustment to college. After rating their own performance on the writing task, participants received either negative or satisfactory feedback. Self-rated performance, current emotions, and aggression served as the main dependent variables. Freis and Arkin found that when vulnerable narcissists received external information disconfirming their self-beliefs on a performance (e.g., receiving negative feedback but believing they wrote a high-quality essay), these individuals felt greater shame and anger, and exhibited greater aggression, than individuals who scored low in vulnerable narcissism. Reporting high levels of shame was especially true when the performance was personally relevant. Furthermore, in this scenario, the average population (i.e., those low in vulnerable narcissism) were able to use motivated reasoning as a way to protect themselves from negative emotions. If one minimizes one’s concern over the source giving interpersonal feedback, the feedback became unsuccessful in influencing the average person’s emotional life. However, when vulnerable narcissists attempted to disqualify the importance of interpersonal feedback and minimize their investment in what the sources of feedback thought of them, they actually reported higher shame.
We posit that, consistent with prior work on hypersensitivity in vulnerable narcissists, this process occurs because vulnerable narcissists really do care about external feedback and what others think of them. Importantly, indirect support for this claim comes from the findings of Zeigler-Hill and colleagues (2008) discussed earlier in this chapter regarding contingencies of worth. Whereas grandiose narcissists look for attention, vulnerable narcissists seek approval from others to define their self-worth. Hence, as vulnerable narcissists attempt to engage in defense mechanisms to protect against social threat, such as devaluing the negative opinions of others, their self-doubting nature interferes with their ability to do so effectively and instead perpetuates the shame-rage cycle.

**Conclusion**

In sum, grandiose and vulnerable narcissists’ strategies to achieve personal security differ greatly. Grandiose narcissists are especially skilled in the domain of defense mechanisms, rationalizing threats by blaming others and failing to internalize negative emotions such as shame (Besser & Prietl, 2010; Dickinson & Pincus, 2003; Kealy & Rasmussen, 2012). Still, while the maintenance of illusions that a grandiose narcissist is able to uphold helps secure their sense of self when threat is present, it comes at the cost of antisocial behavior, such as blame externalization or aggression, toward others they interact with.

In contrast, while vulnerable narcissists attempt to engage in defense mechanisms of aggression and externalizing blame, they not only hurt those around them but do more damage to themselves, increasing feelings of shame. Vulnerable narcissists are dependent on feedback from others, but their expectations often go unrecognized. This, coupled with high self-uncertainty, leads to unhealthy patterns of self-focus and internalization that further hinder vulnerable narcissists’ confidence and ability to strategize to obtain what they desire. Thus, not only do vulnerable narcissists fail to protect the self against social threats to achieve personal security—they also cause detriments to others. Being hypersensitive and basing self-regard on external information leaves vulnerable narcissists more susceptible to experiences of insecurity than grandiose narcissists, who stake their self-regard on internal judgments of worth and superiority.

Greater personal security holds the potential to improve interactions between narcissists and the average population (e.g., in business or intimate relationship contexts). Grandiose and especially vulnerable narcissists may be prime candidates to benefit from some of the techniques to achieve personal security outlined in other chapters of this handbook. Work by Lemay (this volume), for instance, suggests that attentive attachment figures, such as friends, family, or clinicians, can bolster feelings of relational and identity security by effectively responding to the initial expressions of insecurity by narcissists. Beyond educating others on successful ways to interact with a grandiose or vulnerable narcissist, clinicians may be particularly well suited to apply this knowledge of narcissism and social threat to develop more effective intervention strategies to help narcissists better manage their personal security. As discussed by Gillath and Karantzas (this volume), exposing narcissists to repeated security primes may help bolster feelings of identity security in narcissists over time. This treatment may be especially useful in alleviating the maladaptive cognitions and behaviors found in vulnerable narcissists, who are at greater risk of losing personal security when faced with social threats.

Without such treatments, both grandiose and vulnerable narcissists remain far from establishing optimal self-regard and thus are not free from concern over the loss of self. Although grandiose narcissists’ characteristics allow them to experience a greater number of desired outcomes in life than vulnerable narcissists do, neither maintains a stable sense of personal security. Their egocentric focus keeps them vigilant to security threats in interpersonal contexts, keeping them from losing themselves in the satisfying social interactions many people take for granted.
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They consequently may be more susceptible to concerns over loss than are people who are not self-absorbed. While grandiose narcissists' lack of optimal self-regard results in damaging outcomes to partners, bystanders, or audiences, vulnerable narcissists' flawed self-regard holds harmful implications not only for others but for themselves as well. Thus, both grandiose and vulnerable narcissism may be considered maladaptive traits. However, from an ego security perspective, it seems that if you must be narcissistic, grandiose narcissism may reflect the lesser of the two narcissism evils.

References


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