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Perfectionism and narcissism: Testing unique relationships and gender differences

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ABSTRACT

Theoretical models suggest narcissists' grandiose but fragile self-concept leads them to impose perfectionistic demands onto others and to promote an image of perfection in pursuit of others' admiration. It is unclear which perfectionism dimensions are uniquely related to narcissism and if the relationship between perfectionism and narcissism generalizes across men and women. The present study addresses these important gaps in knowledge. Other-oriented perfectionism and perfectionistic self-promotion were hypothesized to be positively related to narcissism. Potential differences between men and women were also explored. A sample of 983 undergraduates completed measures of trait perfectionism, perfectionistic self-presentation, perfectionism cognitions, and narcissism. As hypothesized, other-oriented perfectionism and perfectionistic self-promotion were both positively and uniquely related to narcissism. The perfectionism–narcissism relationship generalized across the men and the women in this study. Somewhat unexpectedly, nondisplay of imperfection was negatively and uniquely related to narcissism. The present study represents the most comprehensive test of the perfectionism–narcissism connection to date. Results support theoretical models suggesting narcissistic perfectionists are demanding, hyper-critical, entitled, and grandiose individuals who impose their need for perfection onto others and who engage in brash self-promotion of their (supposed) perfection to others.

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1. Introduction

Case histories and theoretical models suggest perfectionism may represent a central feature of narcissists' style of thinking, behaving, perceiving, and relating (e.g., Beck, Freeman, & Davis, 2004; Rothstein, 1999). Empirical studies support these case histories and theoretical models, with research indicating perfectionism and narcissism are moderately correlated (Hewitt et al., 2003). McCown and Carlson (2004) also found individuals diagnosed with Narcissistic Personality Disorder are more likely to demand perfection of others compared to individuals diagnosed with Mood Disorders (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). However, major gaps still exist in our understanding of the perfectionism–narcissism link. For instance, questions of gender differences are currently untested. We begin to address these gaps by conducting the most comprehensive test of the perfectionism–narcissism connection to date. In particular, we test if the relationship between narcissism and perfectionism generalizes across men and women.

1.1. Understanding the perfectionism–narcissism relationship

Narcissism is defined by grandiosity, entitlement, authority, superiority, exhibitionism, vanity, and exploitativeness (Raskin & Terry, 1988). Rothstein (1999) emphasized the role of perfectionism in narcissism, arguing the core of narcissism rests in a “felt quality of perfection” (p. 17). Kohut (1971) also highlighted the relation between perfectionism and narcissism. He argued that all people begin by fusing themselves to “self-objects” whom they regard as perfect (e.g., a grandiose, idealized image of parents; Kohut, 1971). He further maintained that non-narcissists grow out of this fusion, whereas narcissists persist in fusion to self-objects (Kohut, 1971). According to Kohut (1971), narcissists use idealized self-objects to reflect their grandiose image back upon the self. Cognitive theorists suggest narcissistic schemas involve entitled and perfectionistic expectations for others and perpetual dissatisfaction with others' perceived flaws (Beck et al., 2004). Millon, Davis, Millon, Escovar, and Meagher (2000) also noted narcissists' perceived superiority leads them to expect perfection from others – “hold[ing] others in contempt for being inferior or just being average” (p. 271). Narcissists' grandiose self-concept is thought to rest on a strong sense of worthlessness, prompting

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them to exhibit an image of perfect capability in pursuit of others' admiration and respect (Ronningstam, 2010). Sorotzkin (1985) also suggested narcissists may brashly present themselves as perfect to others in an effort to validate their grandiose self-image. In sum, theoretical models and clinical observations about the perfectionism–narcissism link point toward narcissists as imposing their need for perfection onto others and engaging in bold self-promotion of their (so-called) perfection to others.

Given the foregoing literature, Hewitt and Flett's model of perfectionism (e.g., Flett, Hewitt, Blankstein, & Gray, 1998; Hewitt & Flett, 1991; Hewitt et al., 2003) seems well-suited to examining the perfectionism–narcissism link, as it includes a role for both excessive demands directed at others and brash self-promotion of “perfect” attributes. These authors conceptualize the construct of perfectionism in terms of trait perfectionism, perfectionistic self-presentation, and perfectionism cognitions. Trait perfectionism distinguishes the source and direction of perfectionistic expectations (Hewitt & Flett, 1991), perfectionistic self-presentation involves the public interpersonal expression of perfectionism (Hewitt et al., 2003), and perfectionism cognitions involve the private intrapsychic expression of perfectionism (Flett et al., 1998).

To expand, trait perfectionism comprises self-oriented perfectionism (demanding perfection of oneself), other-oriented perfectionism (demanding perfection of others), and socially prescribed perfectionism (perceiving others are demanding perfection of oneself; Hewitt & Flett, 1991). Perfectionistic self-presentation includes perfectionistic self-promotion (brashly promoting a perfect image), nondisclosure of imperfection (concern over verbal disclosures of imperfection), and nondisplay of imperfection (concern over behavioral displays of imperfection; Hewitt et al., 2003). Perfectionism cognitions involve automatic thoughts with perfectionist themes (self-critical, ruminative thoughts reflecting an excessive need for goal attainment and discrepancies between the actual and ideal self; Flett et al., 1998).

Perfectionism dimensions are empirically distinct. These dimensions are differentially related to various outcomes, including disordered personality (Hewitt & Flett, 1991; Sherry, Hewitt, Flett, Lee-Baggeley, & Hall, 2007). More specifically, research indicates narcissism is positively correlated with other-oriented perfectionism (e.g., Trumpeter, Watson, & O'Leary, 2006) and perfectionistic self-promotion (e.g., Hewitt et al., 2003).

1.2. Advancing research on perfectionism and narcissism

It is unclear if the link between other-oriented perfectionism and narcissism holds after controlling for other perfectionism dimensions. Since perfectionism dimensions are moderately correlated (Hewitt et al., 2003), research is needed to test which perfectionism dimensions are uniquely related to narcissism. Researchers have also yet to study the link between perfectionism cognitions and narcissism, despite theoretical models suggesting narcissists report automatic thoughts reflecting hyper-competitiveness and a need for perfection (Beck et al., 2004).

Extant research (Hewitt et al., 2003) has assumed that – rather than tested if – the link between perfectionism and narcissism generalizes across men and women. This assumption may be untenable. Consistent with theoretical models highlighting narcissistic men's perceived authority (Beck et al., 2004), men may express their narcissism by imposing their perfectionistic expectations onto others (i.e., other-oriented perfectionism). Women may be less likely to engage in such behavior, because it goes against culturally held expectations for women's behavior. In contrast, evidence suggests narcissistic women, may express their narcissism by flaunting their “perfect” physical appearance to others (i.e., perfectionistic self-promotion; Beck et al., 2004). Put differently, men and women may conform to gender role expectations, with

men meeting their narcissistic needs for perfection by directly demanding perfection of others, and women meeting their narcissistic needs for perfection through attention-grabbing “perfect” physical appearance (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). Given gender role expectations potentially influencing the perfectionism–narcissism link, testing for gender differences seems important.

1.3. Hypotheses

Building on past research (Trumpeter, Watson, & O'Leary, 2006), we hypothesized other-oriented perfectionism and perfectionistic self-promotion would be uniquely related to narcissism after controlling for other perfectionism dimensions. We also tested this research question: Does the relationship between perfectionism and narcissism differ across men and women? Given the scarcity of research in this area, this question was considered exploratory.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were 983 undergraduates. Men ($n = 354$) averaged 19.66 years of age ($SD = 2.95$) and 1.89 years of university education ($SD = 0.98$). Women ($n = 629$) averaged 19.84 years of age ($SD = 3.29$) and 1.92 years of university education ($SD = 0.91$). In total, 26.7% of participants were European ($n = 262$), 51.9% were Asian ($n = 510$), 5.9% were East Indian ($n = 58$), and 15.5% belonged to other groups ($n = 153$).

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Perfectionism

Trait perfectionism was measured using the *Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale* (Hewitt & Flett, 1991). This 45-item measure contains three subscales: self-oriented perfectionism (e.g., “When I am working on something, I cannot relax until it is perfect”), other-oriented perfectionism (e.g., “If I ask someone to do something, I expect it to be done flawlessly”), and socially prescribed perfectionism (e.g., “People expect nothing less than perfection from me”). Participants responded on a 7-point scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Studies support the reliability and validity of this measure (Hewitt & Flett, 1991).

Perfectionistic self-presentation was measured using the *Perfectionistic Self-Presentation Scale* (Hewitt et al., 2003). This 27-item measure involves three subscales: perfectionistic self-promotion (e.g., “I try always to present a picture of perfection”), nondisclosure of imperfection (e.g., “Admitting failure to others is the worst possible thing”), and nondisplay of imperfection (e.g., “It would be awful if I made a fool of myself in front of others”). Participants responded using a 7-point scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Evidence supports both the reliability and the validity of this measure (Hewitt et al., 2003).

Perfectionism cognitions (e.g., “I should be perfect”) were measured using the 25-item *Perfectionism Cognitions Inventory* (Flett et al., 1998). Participants responded on a 5-point scale from 0 (*not at all*) to 4 (*all of the time*). Research supports the reliability and validity of this measure (Flett et al., 1998).

2.2.2. Narcissism

Narcissism was measured via the forced-choice, 40-item *Narcissistic Personality Inventory* (NPI; Raskin & Terry, 1988). In completing NPI items, respondents are asked to choose between two alternatives: one item representing narcissistic content (e.g., “I am an extraordinary person.”) and another item representing non-narcissistic content (e.g., “I am much like everybody else.”).

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