



Multidimensional perfectionism and narcissism: Grandiose or vulnerable?



Joachim Stoeber^{a,*}, Simon B. Sherry^b, Logan J. Nealis^b

^a School of Psychology, University of Kent, Canterbury, United Kingdom

^b Department of Psychology and Neuroscience, Dalhousie University, Halifax, Canada

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 29 January 2015

Received in revised form 16 February 2015

Accepted 20 February 2015

Available online 7 March 2015

Keywords:

Multidimensional perfectionism

Narcissism

Grandiosity

Vulnerability

Pathological narcissism

Hypersensitive narcissism

Gender

ABSTRACT

Multidimensional perfectionism is related to grandiose narcissism, with other-oriented perfectionism showing the strongest, most consistent relationships. The relationships with vulnerable narcissism, however, are unclear. Our study investigated how three forms of perfectionism—self-oriented, other-oriented, and socially prescribed perfectionism (Hewitt & Flett, 1991)—are related to narcissistic grandiosity and vulnerability. A sample of 375 university students completed the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (Raskin & Terry, 1988), Hypersensitive Narcissism Scale (Hendin & Cheek, 1997), and Pathological Narcissism Inventory (Pincus et al., 2009) capturing various facets of narcissistic grandiosity and vulnerability. Multiple regressions were conducted controlling for the overlap between the three forms of perfectionism and gender. Other-oriented perfectionism showed unique positive relationships with key facets of grandiose narcissism. In contrast, socially prescribed perfectionism showed positive relationships with all facets of vulnerable narcissism. Self- and other-oriented perfectionism showed positive relationships with individual facets only. Other-oriented perfectionism appears to represent a form of perfectionism predominantly related to narcissistic grandiosity, whereas socially prescribed perfectionism is predominantly related to narcissistic vulnerability. As the first study to examine perfectionism in relation to narcissistic grandiosity and vulnerability, our research both extends and clarifies the nomological network of the perfectionism construct in important ways.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Multidimensional perfectionism

Perfectionism is a personality trait characterized by striving for flawlessness, setting exceedingly high standards of performance, and evaluating one's behavior in an overly critical way (Flett & Hewitt, 2002; Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990). Evidence suggests perfectionism is best conceptualized as multidimensional (Enns & Cox, 2002), with different forms of perfectionism each having their own unique characteristics.

One of the most influential and widely researched conceptualizations of multidimensional perfectionism is Hewitt and Flett's (1991) model, which differentiates three forms of perfectionism: self-oriented, other-oriented, and socially prescribed. Self-oriented perfectionism comprises internally motivated beliefs that striving for perfection and being perfect are important. Self-oriented

perfectionists have exceedingly high personal standards, strive for perfection, expect to be perfect, and are highly self-critical if they fail to meet these expectations. In contrast, other-oriented perfectionism comprises internally motivated beliefs that it is important for others to strive for perfection and be perfect. Other-oriented perfectionists expect others to be perfect, and are highly critical of others who fail to meet these expectations. Finally, socially prescribed perfectionism comprises externally motivated beliefs that striving for perfection and being perfect are important to others. Socially prescribed perfectionists believe that others expect them to be perfect, and that others will be highly critical of them if they fail to meet their expectations (Hewitt & Flett, 1991, 2004).

1.2. Multidimensional perfectionism and narcissism

Narcissism has been described as a “cognitive-affective preoccupation with the self” (Westen, 1990, p. 227) associated with the pursuit of gratification through vanity or egotistic admiration of one's own attributes. While narcissism research originated from studies of psychopathology (see Raskin & Terry, 1988), narcissistic

* Corresponding author at: School of Psychology, University of Kent, Canterbury, Kent CT2 7NP, United Kingdom. Tel.: +44 1227 824196; fax: +44 1227 827030.

E-mail address: J.Stoeber@kent.ac.uk (J. Stoeber).

tendencies are normative and widespread in the general population. This may be especially true for aspects of “normal narcissism” that Raskin and Terry (1988) described as reflecting individual differences in showing off one’s accomplishments, being preoccupied with physical appearance, feeling superior to others, and feeling entitled to special treatment. In fact, some authors suggest we are living in an age of entitlement where narcissism is increasingly common (Twenge, Konrath, Foster, Campbell, & Bushman, 2008). Narcissism is also a unique predictor of many consequential outcomes including criminal behavior, interpersonal problems, anger, workplace incivility, aggression, and difficulties in psychotherapy (e.g., Pincus, Cain, & Wright, 2014), suggesting a need to better understand this potentially destructive trait.

The relationships between multidimensional perfectionism and narcissism were investigated from the beginning of Hewitt and Flett’s (1991) research differentiating the three forms of perfectionism. This research has gained new momentum because of renewed interest in other-oriented perfectionism and its unique relationships with narcissism (e.g., Sherry, Gralnick, Hewitt, Sherry, & Flett, 2014; Stoeber, 2014a). The renewed interest in other-oriented perfectionism is relevant because—when all three forms of perfectionism are considered while simultaneously controlling for their overlap—other-oriented perfectionism appears to be the form of perfectionism with unique positive relationships with narcissism. In a study investigating the relationships of self-oriented, other-oriented, and socially prescribed perfectionism with narcissism measured with the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (Raskin & Terry, 1988), other-oriented perfectionism emerged as the only form that showed positive unique relationships (Sherry et al., 2014). The same pattern was observed in another study (Stoeber, 2014a) measuring narcissism with the Dirty Dozen (Jonason & Webster, 2010), a brief measure of the dark triad of personality (narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy). Again, other-oriented perfectionism emerged as the only form of perfectionism showing positive unique relationships with narcissism. Furthermore, in a study examining how the three forms of perfectionism were related to pathological personality traits measured with the Personality Inventory for the DSM-5 (Krueger, Derringer, Markon, Watson, & Skodol, 2013), other-oriented perfectionism showed unique positive relationships with the two traits defining narcissistic personality disorder: grandiosity and attention seeking (Stoeber, 2014b). Together, these findings suggest that only other-oriented shows unique positive relationships with narcissism, whereas self-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionism show no consistent relationships with narcissism once their overlap with other-oriented perfectionism is taken into account.

1.3. Narcissism: grandiosity and vulnerability

There is, however, a caveat to this suggestion. Narcissism research differentiates between grandiose narcissism and vulnerable narcissism (Pincus & Roche, 2011), and the narcissism measures used in the previous mentioned studies (Sherry et al., 2014; Stoeber, 2014a, 2014b) captured grandiose narcissism exclusively. Consequently, the unique positive relationship of other-oriented perfectionism with narcissism may be restricted to grandiose narcissism.

Grandiose narcissism, the form of narcissism considered most prototypical of narcissism, is characterized by an inflated positive self-image of one’s skills and authority combined with exhibitionism, attitudes of entitlement, and a tendency toward exploitativeness. Grandiose narcissism is mostly overt, making it highly visible to others. In contrast, vulnerable narcissism is mostly covert and is characterized by a need for other people’s recognition (e.g., validation or admiration) and a sense of self-worth that is contingent

upon this recognition. If other people’s recognition is not forthcoming or is doubtful, vulnerable narcissism is related to social avoidance and withdrawal (Miller et al., 2011; Pincus et al., 2009).

The differentiation of grandiose versus vulnerable narcissism is important because these two aspects of narcissism have shown different, sometimes opposite, relationships with indicators of well-being, adjustment, and psychopathology (Pincus & Roche, 2011). In particular, grandiose narcissism shows positive correlations with explicit self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1965) indicating that grandiose narcissists have a high sense of self-worth. In contrast, vulnerable narcissism shows negative correlations with explicit self-esteem, indicating that vulnerable narcissists have a low sense of self-worth (e.g., Miller et al., 2011; Pincus et al., 2009).

Other-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionism have also shown opposite relations with explicit self-esteem, with other-oriented perfectionism showing positive correlations and socially prescribed perfectionism showing negative correlations (Flett, Hewitt, Blankstein, & O’Brien, 1991; Watson, Varnell, & Morris, 1999–2000). This suggests that socially prescribed perfectionism should be positively related to vulnerable narcissism. No study to date has investigated the relationships between multidimensional perfectionism and vulnerable narcissism. A study by Watson et al. (1999–2000), however, investigated perfectionism and pathological narcissism, which combines grandiose and vulnerable narcissism (Pincus & Roche, 2011), using the O’Brien Multiphasic Narcissism Inventory (OMNI; O’Brien, 1987). Two of the OMNI subscales (narcissistic personality, narcissistic abused personality) showed negative correlations with explicit self-esteem proposing that they tapped vulnerable narcissism. Both subscales showed significantly larger correlations with socially prescribed perfectionism than other-oriented perfectionism, again suggesting that socially prescribed perfectionism is the form of perfectionism predominantly related to vulnerable narcissism.

1.4. The present study

Watson et al.’s (1990–2000) study had a number of limitations. First, the OMNI is not a widely used and validated measure of pathological narcissism. Moreover, it was not designed to differentiate grandiose and vulnerable narcissism (O’Brien, 1987). Second, when testing the perfectionism–narcissism relationships, the study controlled for individual differences in explicit self-esteem but not for the overlap between the three forms of perfectionism (which have shown significant positive intercorrelations; Hewitt & Flett, 2004). Hence, it remained unclear which significant relationships between perfectionism and narcissism were unique and which were due to the overlap between the three forms of perfectionism.

Against this background, the aim of the present study was to examine the unique relationships of self-oriented, other-oriented, and socially prescribed perfectionism with grandiose and vulnerable narcissism using widely used and validated measures of narcissism. We also controlled for gender differences, as men have shown higher levels of grandiose narcissism compared to women (Grijalva et al., *in press*). In line with previous research, we expected other-oriented perfectionism to show the strongest associations with grandiose narcissism. In contrast, we expected socially prescribed perfectionism to show the strongest associations with vulnerable narcissism.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

A sample of 375 students (68 men, 307 women) studying at the University of Kent was recruited via the School of Psychology’s

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