



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Personality and Individual Differences

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/paid

Normal and pathological communal narcissism in relation to personality traits and values

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Agency
Communion
Narcissism
Personality
Values

ABSTRACT

Communal narcissism can be defined as grandiose self-views in the communal domain. Within the literature, two forms of communal narcissism, normal and pathological, can be distinguished. However, no study to date has investigated their convergence and divergence. Using a large community sample ($N = 781$), the current study aimed to fill this gap through examination of 1) the distinctiveness of normal and pathological communal narcissism; 2) their relationship to broad personality characteristics; and 3) values. Results suggest that 1) normal and pathological communal narcissism are structurally distinct constructs; 2) the difference in relation to personality characteristics is limited to neuroticism; and 3) they share the values of self-enhancement and self-transcendence.

1. Introduction

Can the trait of narcissism be realized in the communal domain? Although this question may be regarded as an oxymoron, Gebauer, Sedikides, Verplanken, and Maio (2012) suggested that the answer can be “yes” – especially so if it serves to satisfy the core self-motives of grandiosity, esteem, entitlement, and power, all of which refer to narcissistic personality features (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). Gebauer et al. (2012) elaborated that the distinction between agency (concentration on oneself and one's own goals) and communion (concentration on other people and interpersonal relations; Abele & Wojciszke, 2007) can also be applied to narcissism. This proposal can be considered as the foundation of the agency-communion model of narcissism (Gebauer et al., 2012), stipulating that there are two facets of narcissism, one of which is agentic and the other communal.

The agency-communion model of narcissism refers to normal narcissism (Paulhus, 2001). However, within the literature, pathological narcissism can also be distinguished (Pincus & Lukowitsky, 2010), which refers to the use of maladaptive self-regulatory strategies to deal with threats to one's self-image (Pincus et al., 2009). This raises the question of the extent to which the agency-communion model can also be applied to pathological narcissism. Indeed, a brief look into the literature reveals that one of the pathological narcissism components actually reflects the communal domain – through self-sacrificing self-enhancement (SSSE; Pincus et al., 2009). However, up to date, no study systematically compared these two forms of communal narcissism (i.e.,

normal and pathological). The current study aimed to fill this gap.

1.1. Normal communal narcissism

Normal communal narcissism presents an alternative form of normal agentic narcissism in which the same core self-motives (i.e., grandiosity, esteem, entitlement, power) are realized through communal (vs. agentic) means (Gebauer et al., 2012). On the basis of studies using the only existing measure of normal communal narcissism, that is, the Communal Narcissism Inventory (CNI; Gebauer et al., 2012), normal communal narcissists consider themselves as the most helpful person they know, the best friend one can have, amazing listeners, but also as the harbinger of freedom, happiness, and peace (Gebauer et al., 2012; Luo, Cai, Sedikides, & Song, 2014; Žemojtel-Piotrowska, Czarna, Piotrowski, Baran, & Maltby, 2016). Although these examples reflect a definite focus on the communal domain, empirical research also reports relations between normal communal narcissism and traits reflecting high agency like power, self-assuredness, and dominance (Gebauer et al., 2012; Žemojtel-Piotrowska et al., 2016). Moreover, it has been shown that normal communal narcissism is positively associated with self-reported pro-social behaviors but is also related to peer-reported aggression (Barry, Lui, Lee-Rowland, & Moran, 2017). Thus, it may be suggested that the underlying goal of normal communal narcissism (i.e., maintenance of grandiose self-views; Gebauer et al., 2012) is in fact not uniquely communal, but also agentic.

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2018.03.039>

Received 28 December 2017; Received in revised form 20 March 2018; Accepted 21 March 2018
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1.2. Pathological communal narcissism

Pathological communal narcissism is actually not interpreted as an alternative form of pathological narcissism, but rather as one of its facets (i.e., SSSE; Wright, Lukowitsky, Pincus, & Conroy, 2010). Existing research suggests that SSSE is somewhat specific and may be relatively unique in its content (Wright et al., 2013). Although the SSSE facet does not contain the label “communal”, it refers to using altruistic acts to support one's inflated self-image (Pincus et al., 2009). It therefore falls within the theoretical description of the agency-communion model of narcissism (Gebauer et al., 2012). Importantly, the items of SSSE clearly pinpoint to the communal domain, as they describe someone who makes sacrifices for the sake of others, helps others, cares for others, and likes to have friends – it is to show others what a good and important person one is (Pincus et al., 2009). As such, pathological communal narcissism has been linked to communal outcomes, such as prosocial behavior and empathic concern (Kauten & Barry, 2014; Morf et al., 2017; Schoenleber, Roche, Wetzel, Pincus, & Roberts, 2015). Similar to normal communal narcissism, however, its pathological expression has also been linked to traits reflecting high agency, including attention seeking, deceptiveness, dominance, and manipulateness (Schoenleber et al., 2015; Wright et al., 2013). Thus, pathological communal narcissism may also be perceived as a trait, which is agentic in nature (i.e., maintenance of an inflated self-image; Pincus et al., 2009), but fulfills this goal through communal means.

1.3. Convergence and divergence between normal and pathological communal narcissism

Normal and pathological communal narcissism seem to share the fundamentals, that is, the use of communal means to achieve agentic goals. Yet, there is also divergence between them as regards the clinical features, which are more prominent for pathological communal narcissism (Pincus et al., 2009). This may suggest that the two forms of communal narcissism (i.e., normal and pathological) are lying on a single continuum from normal to impaired functioning (Pincus & Lukowitsky, 2010). Indeed, whereas normal communal narcissism is associated with adaptive outcomes like higher self-esteem and subjective well-being (Zemajtel-Piotrowska, Clifton, & Piotrowski, 2014), pathological communal narcissism is associated with maladaptive outcomes like submissiveness, separation insecurity, anxiousness, emotional lability (Wright et al., 2013), guilt and shame proneness (Schoenleber et al., 2015) and, perfectionism (Stoerber, Sherry, & Nealis, 2015). Thus, normal and pathological communal narcissism seem to be distinct constructs with different nomological networks, which however seem to share underlying motivational dynamics.

1.4. Communal narcissism in relation to personality traits and basic values

Because personality traits and values constitute complementary characteristics describing the structure of personality and its underlying motivation (Cieciuch, 2012), it makes them a desirable reference point for most personality describing constructs. Therefore, the assessment of relations between normal and pathological communal narcissism and personality traits and values seems to be a promising direction in the assessment of their distinct outcomes and similar motivation. Despite this fact, up to date, no study systematically investigated the relations between normal and pathological communal narcissism and personality traits and basic values. In previous research, the pattern of relationships between normal and pathological communal narcissism and personality traits has been shown to be largely congruent with one major exception, namely neuroticism. Whereas normal communal narcissism is negatively associated with neuroticism (Gebauer et al., 2012), pathological communal narcissism is positively associated with it (Miller et al., 2011). As neuroticism is among the Big Five traits, which is most strongly linked to clinical and pathological outcomes (McCrae & Costa,

1997), this picture emphasizes the distinction between normal versus pathological narcissism in relation to normal personality traits.

Values, on the other hand, are interpreted as trans-situational motivational goals (Schwartz, 1992) and may be arranged in two bipolar dimensions comprising four higher-order values: openness to change (i.e., independence in thought and action as well as the need to seek excitement and pleasure) versus conservation (i.e., seeking security and stability in personal and societal life, adjusting to existing law and norms as well as acceptance and supporting habits, tradition, and culture) and self-enhancement (i.e., aspiration towards personal successes and having power over other people and material and social resources) versus self-transcendence (i.e., aspiration towards being reliable, trustworthy, caring and also valuing equality, fairness, and tolerance; Schwartz et al., 2012). Although agentic normal narcissism has been analyzed in the context of values (Rogoza, Wyszyńska, Maćkiewicz, & Cieciuch, 2016), a joint examination of normal and pathological communal narcissism in their relation to values is lacking so far. Gebauer et al. (2012) only analyzed the relations between normal communal narcissism and power and reported a positive relationship, which suggests that apart from self-reported communal correlates, normal communal narcissism may also possess an agentic motivation. As normal and pathological narcissism seem to mainly differ in their extremity (Pincus, 2013), their communal facets should share core (agentic) motives realized through similar (communal) means.

2. Current study

The current study addresses two main research questions. First, is the distinction between normal and pathological communal narcissism empirically plausible? Despite the fact that both facets assess communal expressions of narcissism, they were not directly compared in terms of the extent to which they capture convergent or divergent characteristics. We hypothesized that although both forms of communal narcissism should be positively related, it is possible to meaningfully differentiate between them. Second, is there any substantial divergence in basic personality characteristics and values between normal and pathological narcissism? This question provides an extension to the first hypothesis, as its aim is to provide evidence that apart from being different constructs, they also possess different correlates. On the basis of the aforementioned literature, we hypothesized that regarding personality traits, the differences should be visible in the most maladaptive personality trait, that is, neuroticism, which should be more strongly related to pathological (vs. normal) communal narcissism. Although the literature does not provide a clear picture of how the values of communal narcissists should look like, we reasoned that they should be similar for normal and pathological communal narcissism, which are both hypothesized to predict self-enhancement (representing the agentic component) and self-transcendence (representing the communal component).

3. Method

3.1. Participants and procedure

The study was conducted on a large community sample of Polish adults ($N = 781$) aged from 18 to 80 years ($M_{\text{age}} = 46.35$; $SD_{\text{age}} = 15.44$; 42.5% male). Participants were recruited online and, as an incentive, they were awarded with points, which they could exchange for rewards. The data presented in this manuscript was part of a larger data collection effort. Below we report all measures, which are of relevance to the current study.

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