



# Narcissus, exhausted: Self-compassion mediates the relationship between narcissism and school burnout



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## ABSTRACT

Previous research has linked narcissism with work-related burnout; however, no extant research has explored the relationship between narcissism and school-related burnout. From the standpoint of social mentality theory, narcissism may stem from an overactive threat system and a maladaptive self-soothing system. The purpose of this cross-sectional study was to investigate the relationship between narcissism, self-compassion, and school burnout in a large sample of U.S. college students. Narcissism was positively associated with school burnout. Narcissism had an indirect effect on school burnout through self-compassion, specifically through the over-identified and isolation components of self-compassion. Overall, the results are consistent with the notion that narcissism is associated with maladaptive threat and self-soothing systems and that these are associated with school burnout.

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## 1. Introduction

As many as 45% of U.S. college students fail to complete their degree within six years (Shapiro, Dundar, Yuan, Harrell, & Wakhungu, 2014). College dropout can be attributed to a wide array of factors, including poor academic performance and negative beliefs about earnings after college (Stinebrickner & Stinebrickner, 2014) as well as the availability of financial aid (Melguizo, Torres, & Jaime, 2011); however, college dropout has also been linked with school burnout (Adie & Wakefield, 2011; Bask & Salmela-Aro, 2013). Historically, the concept of burnout is associated with work-related contexts (Demerouti, Mostert, & Bakker, 2010; Innanen, Tolvanen, & Salmela-Aro, 2014; Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001; Schaufeli, Martinez, Marques-Pinto, Salanova, & Bakker, 2002). Because work and school can place similar pressures on an individual, burnout can also occur in an academic environment (Salmela-Aro, Kiuru, Leskinen, & Nurmi, 2009; Salmela-Aro & Upadyaya, 2014; Schaufeli et al., 2002; Walburg, 2014). While narcissism has been linked with work-related burnout (Farber, 1983), no extant research has explored the relationship between narcissism and school burnout. Both narcissism and school burnout can result in decreased well-being (Pincus & Lukowitsky, 2010; Salmela-Aro, Kiuru, et al., 2009; Salmela-Aro, Savolainen and Holopainen, 2009). Self-compassion, which involves a sensitivity and understanding of one's own suffering (Neff, 2003), has a positive relationship with well-being (Gilbert, 1989) and may remedy the ill

effects of narcissism and burnout (Barnard & Curry, 2012). The purpose of this study was to investigate whether narcissism has an indirect effect on school burnout through self-compassion among a large sample of U.S. college students.

## 2. School burnout

School burnout may be defined as a response to a student's inability to cope with achievement pressures (Parker & Salmela-Aro, 2011). School burnout consists of three components: emotional exhaustion from academic pressures, cynicism towards school, and feelings of inadequacy as a student (Salmela-Aro, Kiuru, et al., 2009). Emotional exhaustion from academic pressures – which includes chronic fatigue, rumination, and strain (Salmela-Aro, Kiuru, et al., 2009; Schaufeli et al., 2002) – resembles symptoms of stress and anxiety (Bagley, 1992; Byrne, Davenport, & Mazanov, 2007; McNamara, 2000). School-related cynicism is characterized by lower interest in and more negative attitudes towards schoolwork (Salmela-Aro, Kiuru, et al., 2009; Schaufeli et al., 2002). Feelings of inadequacy as a student refer to a lack of efficacy and diminished sense of accomplishment in a school context. Bask and Salmela-Aro (2013) found that school burnout increases over time and that, of the three components of school burnout, cynicism towards school was the largest predictor of school dropout. School burnout can lead to a host of negative outcomes, such as decreased academic achievement, somatic complications, anxiety, and depressive symptoms (Murberg & Bru, 2007; Salmela-Aro, Savolainen, et al., 2009; Silvar, 2001; Vasalampi, Salmela-Aro, & Nurmi, 2009). Many risk factors for school burnout have been identified, including low

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self-esteem and emotion-oriented coping (Silvar, 2001). Women are at greater risk of school burnout compared to men, perhaps because of higher fear of academic failure (Kiuru, Aunola, Nurmi, Leskinen, & Salmela-Aro, 2008) or more stress and internalizing symptoms (Hoffmann, Powlisha, & White, 2004).

### 3. Narcissism

Narcissism may be understood as a category – e.g., Narcissistic Personality Disorder in the *DSM-IV-TR* (APA, 2013) – or a trait (Wright et al., 2013). In this study, narcissism was operationalized as a trait. Narcissism has normal and pathological components (Maxwell, Donnellan, Hopwood, & Ackerman, 2011). Both components are associated with feelings of arrogance, entitlement, and grandiosity (Millon, 1996; Pincus & Lukowitsky, 2010). However, normal narcissism is positively correlated with self-esteem (Trzesniewski, Donnellan, & Robins, 2008), while pathological narcissism is associated with low self-esteem and maladaptive self-regulation (Maxwell et al., 2011). Because we were interested in the maladaptive aspects of narcissism in relation to burnout, the current study operationalized narcissism as pathological narcissism. Narcissism has also been associated with self-esteem instability (Kernis, Grannemann, & Barclay, 1989) and vulnerable self-concept (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). Previous research has explored the relationship between narcissism and motivation. Morf, Weir, and Davidov (2000) concluded that narcissists were motivated to complete ego-boosting tasks and mastery-avoidant activities, which has been linked to burnout (Isoard-Gautheur, Guillet-Descas, & Duda, 2013; Retelsdorf, Butler, Streblow, & Schiefele, 2010). Additionally, pathological narcissists use maladaptive strategies when coping with disappointment and threats to their self-image (Kernberg, 1998; Pincus et al., 2009; Ronningstam, 2005). Previous investigations have found significant gender differences in narcissism, with men generally having higher levels of narcissism than women (Corry, Merritt, Mrug, & Pamp, 2008; Foster, Campbell, & Twenge, 2003; Grijalva et al., 2014; Tschanz, Morf, & Turner, 1998).

### 4. Self-compassion and social mentality theory

Self-compassion involves treating oneself warmly during times of hardship and having a positive relationship with oneself (Neff, 2003; Neff, Rude, & Kirkpatrick, 2007). Self-compassion allows individuals to have an accurate and unbiased view of themselves (Peterson, 2014), rather than an inflated self-assessment (Breines & Chen, 2012; Kim, Chiu, & Zou, 2010). Self-compassion is positively associated with self-improvement motivation (Breines & Chen, 2012) and negatively associated with self-image preserving constructs, such as self-handicapping and sandbagging (Peterson, 2014). Self-compassion is also negatively correlated with self-criticism and rumination (Neff, 2003; Odou & Brinker, 2014), which may explain why college-aged women have lower levels of self-compassion than their male peers (Lockard, Hayes, Neff, & Locke, 2014; Neff, Hseih, & Dejitterat, 2005; Neff & McGehee, 2010), as women generally have higher levels of self-criticism and rumination (Leadbeater, Kuperminc, Blatt, & Hertzog, 1999; Nolen-Hoeksema, Larson, & Grayson, 1999).

Self-compassion is rooted in social mentality theory, which proposes that motivations for social relationships guide individuals' cognitive processes, emotions, and behavior (Liotti & Gilbert, 2011). Social mentality posits that there is a threat system, which includes feelings of insecurity and defensiveness, and a self-soothing system, which involves feelings of safety and secure attachment (Neff, Kirkpatrick, & Rude, 2007). Self-compassion promotes a sense of security and emotional calmness by deactivating the threat system and activating the self-soothing system (Gilbert, 2005; Neff, Kirkpatrick, et al., 2007). The theory posits that, by allowing an individual to self-soothe, self-compassion can contribute to an individual's well-being and their ability to successfully cope with the environment (Gilbert, 1989; Gilbert, 2005).

Narcissism can be conceptualized from the standpoint of social mentality theory. The vulnerability component of pathological narcissism encompasses feelings of low self-esteem and maladaptive response to perceived threats to self-image (Pincus et al., 2009) – akin to the threat system of social mentality theory. While negative feelings – such as anxiety, disgust, and anger – are normal responses to perceived threats (Gilbert, 2014), individuals with narcissistic vulnerability are particularly sensitive to threat and unable to regulate these negative emotions (Pincus, Cain, & Wright, 2014). Additionally, the threat system allows individuals to feel threatened by their negative affect, such as feelings of shame regarding intrusive fantasies (Gilbert, 2014). Again, this mirrors narcissistic vulnerability, which is characterized as feelings of shame regarding their grandiose fantasies (Pincus & Lukowitsky, 2010; Ronningstam, 2005). Narcissism has also been negatively associated with self-soothing (Steinberg & Shaw, 1997), which implies that pathological narcissists may have decreased functioning in their self-soothing system. This is further evidenced by narcissists' inclination towards avoidant- and anxiety-attachment styles (Smolewska & Dion, 2005), rather than safe attachment, a feature of the self-soothing system (Neff, Kirkpatrick, et al., 2007). School burnout can be viewed in the same theoretical context. Burnout, like pathological narcissism, is negatively correlated with safe attachment (Pines, 2004; Simmons, Gooty, Nelson, & Little, 2009; Smolewska & Dion, 2005).

### 5. The current study

The purpose of this study was to investigate relationships between narcissism, self-compassion, and school burnout in a large sample of U.S. college students. Consistent with previous research showing relationships between narcissism and work-related burnout (Farber, 1983), it was hypothesized ( $H_1$ ) that narcissism would be positively associated with school burnout. In terms of social mentality theory, narcissists may respond to perceived threat with maladaptive soothing, as functions of the threat- and soothing-systems (Gilbert, 2005; Neff, Kirkpatrick, et al., 2007). In accordance with this theory, it was hypothesized ( $H_2$ ) that narcissism would have an indirect effect on school burnout through self-compassion. We hypothesized ( $H_3$ ) that the over-identified and isolation components of self-compassion would mediate the relationship between narcissism and school burnout. The over-identified component relates to focusing on perceived threats to the self, and the isolation component encompasses feelings of being separated from others due to those perceived threats. Therefore, we hypothesized that narcissists, who are already vulnerable to perceived threat to the self, would be more likely to burnout if they dwelled on those feelings. Given that gender differences have been found on narcissism, self-compassion, and school burnout, we conducted exploratory analyses of gender differences on these variables as well as whether gender moderates any paths in the mediation models.

## 6. Methods

### 6.1. Participants

Participants consisted of undergraduate students age 18–30 ( $N = 813$ ; 71.30% female) enrolled in a psychology course at a large public university in the southern U.S. Participants were recruited through the department research website. Participant characteristics are displayed in Table 1.

### 6.2. Procedure

This study was approved by the university IRB. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Participants completed a survey online (remotely) and received course credit for participation.

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