Issues Resolved and Unresolved in Pathological Narcissism

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Abstract

Narcissism is one of the oldest personality constructs, and yet debates about its definition and structure have been a topic of intense debate over the past decade. Recent independent reviews of the literature have proposed conceptually identical triarchic structural models of individual differences in pathological narcissism. In each model entitlement serves as the core of the construct, and its expression is moderated by basic personality/temperament to manifest in exhibitionism or vulnerability. However, the clinical observation that individuals high in pathological narcissism vacillate between grandiose and vulnerable states remains understudied and poorly understood. We review the recent research that has driven the contentious debates, emerging points of consensus, and necessary future directions for research.

Highlights

1. Pathological narcissism manifests in narcissistic grandiosity and vulnerability
2. Broad agreement exists that grandiosity reflects unique aspects narcissism
3. Vulnerability likely reflects general personality pathology
4. Dynamic within-person relationships between grandiosity and vulnerability are poorly understood

Issues Resolved and Unresolved in Pathological Narcissism

Narcissism is one of the oldest personality constructs, and yet remains one of the most hotly debated [1,2]. The past decade has seen a rapid expansion of narcissism research, fueled in large part by increased interest in the diverse ways narcissism may manifest [3,4]. Consequently, this has triggered a rise in new measurement development aimed at capturing the various aspects of narcissism [e.g., 5,6,7,8,9]. However, findings across studies using different measures have often resulted in a puzzling mix of results, which has led to debates about measure adequacy and questions about the theoretical coherence of the construct [e.g., 4,10,11]. We review the principal issues leading up to this fractured state of affairs, emerging points of consensus, and necessary future directions for research.

A Construct Divided: Narcissistic Grandiosity and Vulnerability

At the root of definitional debates in narcissism is the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder's* (DSM) decision to initially emphasize, and then selectively retain over successive revisions, the overtly grandiose features in its criteria for narcissistic personality disorder (NPD) [12,13]. In contrast, clinical theory has emphasized both grandiose and vulnerable features [e.g., 3,14-18]. Although the reasons are likely multiple, one must speculate whether this disconnect is responsible for the striking neglect of NPD in psychiatric research. With the exception of several early small-sample studies by Gunderson and Ronningstam [19,20], there have been few empirical investigations designed to study individuals diagnosed with NPD per se.¹ Indeed, we are aware of only one dataset in the past decade designed as a case-control study for NPD [see e.g., 21,22]. When studies have used clinical samples, any focus on NPD is largely in secondary analyses [e.g., 23,24] or as part of an omnibus examination of personality disorders [e.g., 25].

¹ Note that we are not arguing that narcissism is best represented by a categorical DSM diagnosis, rather we are merely using this as an example of psychiatry researchers' disregard for the construct.

Ironically, the criteria spurned by the clinical community spawned a measure and cottage industry of narcissism research in basic personality psychology. The Narcissistic Personality Inventory [26,27] was initially developed to measure the DSM's articulation of narcissism, has since enjoyed use in thousands of studies [2,3,4], and until recently was the overwhelmingly most used measure of narcissism (77% of studies on narcissism used it from 1985-2006; [2]). The NPI has its detractors and defenders (the critiques and rejoinders have been well summarized elsewhere [e.g., 4,2]), but regardless of one's perspective, all agree that it is exclusively a measure of grandiosity, lacking in appreciable vulnerable content. Thus, until approximately ten years ago, the bulk of the narcissism literature was based on a single measure of grandiose narcissism. Although this did not prevent the accumulation of a body of work with important findings and revelations, it contributed to an incomplete picture of pathological narcissism as described in the clinical literature (i.e., inclusive of vulnerability). Several authors have characterized this discrepancy as stemming from different conceptualizations of narcissism across social/personality psychology and psychiatry/clinical psychology [3,28,29]. However, given the NPI's provenance, we believe this characterization fails to capture the intellectual heritage of the discrepancy, and instead it reflects an issue of measurement.

There were notable exceptions to this trend, including seminal work by Wink [30], and the development of the Hypersensitive Narcissism Scale [31]. However, looking at the citation patterns for each of these, one can see that both enjoyed only modest interest until approximately ten years ago, at which point their annual citation rates increased dramatically. These patterns are reflective of a marked rise in interest in narcissistic vulnerability. Although the causes for this eruption of research on narcissistic vulnerability are difficult to pinpoint, early publications by different research groups [e.g., 3,28] and development of the Pathological Narcissism Inventory [5,32] were clear catalysts. Additional measures that include prominent vulnerability scales, such as the Five-Factor Narcissism Inventory [6], followed several years later and have continued to fuel the trend.

On the one hand, renewed interest in and development of novel tools to study narcissistic vulnerability has begun to harmonize empirical investigations with clinical theory. On the other hand, the now voluminous research on the nomological networks of grandiosity and vulnerability has emphasized the longstanding difficulty of reconciling and integrating two seemingly incompatible dimensions under one construct. That is to say, traditional concepts like the “mask model,” that argued that outward grandiosity compensates for inner vulnerability have no more empirical support now than they did in the past, and several authors have shown that the patterns of correlations for measures of grandiosity and vulnerability with criterion measures are largely divergent if not incompatible [33-37]. This has led to questions of whether there may in fact be diverse “subtypes” of narcissism, or, more broadly, whether grandiosity and vulnerability even reflect the same core construct. As noted above, others, particularly clinical theorists, have viewed the two manifestations of narcissism as emerging from the same core pathology. Ultimately, rather than clarify the empirical landscape by aligning it with theoretical propositions, the explicit interest in vulnerability and its measurement has contributed to a more fractured state of the science.

Rapprochement: Structural Integration

Despite the perceived lack of coherence between grandiosity and vulnerability, within the last year there has been two virtually identical proposals, by Krizan and Herlache [1] and Miller and colleagues [2], for integrating grandiosity and vulnerability within a single structural model of narcissism. Each of these proposals arrived at the same structure from separate reviews of the literature with distinct emphases. Both groups accentuate an essential core of narcissism, as well as moderation in its expression as a function of underlying temperament [1] or personality [2]. We refer to the core here as *entitlement* as others have before us [38,39], and refer to the two moderating dimensions as *exhibitionism* and *vulnerability*. Krizan and Herlache link exhibitionism and vulnerability to approach and avoidance systems, whereas Miller and colleagues, operating from the framework of the Big Five personality traits, link these to

extraversion and neuroticism. Regardless of the terminology, these are, in effect, the same model. Entitlement/self-importance/antagonism is placed at the core, and its expression is moderated by other features of the individual's personality to be either exhibitionistic/extraverted or vulnerable/neurotic.

Due in large part to the persistent lack of agreement on the definition and core features of narcissism, a host of measures have been developed to assess the construct, which in turn contributed to the diversity of results and further lack of agreement. The above-mentioned novel organization (Entitlement, Exhibitionism, and Vulnerability) resolves many of the seemingly discrepant results by being inclusive enough to accommodate most measures and narrow enough to be summarized in a three-domain structure. Table 1 shows where scales of different narcissism measures fall with respect to these three domains.

In our opinion, this structure organizes the growing field of measures, and provides a synthetic framework for understanding existing results and the manifestation of dispositional individual differences in pathological narcissism. We would further argue, based not only on the accumulated body of research on narcissistic vulnerability's nomological net [e.g., 33-37,40], but also recent structural research on personality disorder features [41-42], that high vulnerability reflects a narcissistic character structure operating at a borderline level of functioning, as has been articulated by clinical theorists [e.g., 43]. This explains the diffuse pattern of associations between vulnerability scales and virtually all DSM personality disorders and pathological personality disorder traits as it captures all personality disorders with similar levels of functioning. Moreover, narcissistic vulnerability is not merely neuroticism. Although individuals high in narcissistic vulnerability are likely to endorse many of the items on a neuroticism scale, as they suffer from bouts of low mood, anxiety, anger, and affective instability, narcissistic vulnerability also contains themes of interpersonal detachment and antagonism that are not central to neuroticism. By the same token, individuals high in narcissistic vulnerability are likely to endorse low conscientiousness, and elevated disinhibition,

in line with their tendency to become behaviorally dysregulated. Consistent with the view in the DSM Section II, the perspectives offered by other theorists, and structural models of personality pathology, the grandiose features are those that are unique to narcissism (or cut across a much narrower range of near neighbor pathologies). In the framework of the DSM-5 Section III Alternative Model of Personality Disorders, the material specific to NPD listed in Criterion A largely encompasses the vulnerable features, the traits in Criterion B (Grandiosity, Attention Seeking) cover the exhibitionistic features, and entitlement can be found in both the Criterion A and B descriptors.

Thus, we would argue that the “triarchic” model of narcissism [1,2] moves the field toward consensus on the dispositional structure of narcissism, suggesting that narcissism covers a range of manifestations that are continuously distributed leading to finely-graded individual differences, and not grandiose and vulnerable subtypes. We suggest that what has been termed narcissistic vulnerability is consistent with the broad deficits described as borderline pathology in clinical theory, and has major implications for differences in level of functioning among individuals who possess the core grandiose narcissistic features (entitlement and exhibitionism). Entitlement and exhibitionism can also be costly and impairing. However, unlike vulnerability, entitlement and exhibitionism may also result in gain or benefit, especially in the short term. Individual differences in the specific blends of these domains lead to a highly heterogeneous narcissism phenotype.

Moving Forward: Studying Dynamic Within-Person Processes

Despite the emerging consensus on the structure of narcissistic traits, questions remain about potentially important within-person dynamic processes. In other words, clinical observation has routinely described fluctuation between grandiose and vulnerable states that is not well captured by the broad individual differences described in the previous section [15-18]. These views have contributed to a shift in basic personality psychology from the study of the structure of individual differences to dynamic processes that give rise to dispositional traits [44-

45]. This perspective recognizes that individuals may have a “preferred” set-point, which reflects their trait level, around which they fluctuate across time and situations. Thus, individuals high in pathological narcissism may dispositionally spend more time in either grandiose or vulnerable states, but will from time to time oscillate from one to the other, accounting for the clinical observation of dynamic processes within a single person.

Research on these dynamic processes has lagged behind research examining the dispositional manifestation of narcissism, although there have recently been some promising advances. Gore and Widiger [46] showed, and this has since been replicated by Hyatt and colleagues [47], that when individuals are selected for matching a description of a grandiose narcissist, not only are they rated high in grandiosity, but their raters also describe bouts or periods where they exhibit vulnerable features. The opposite pattern is not true, consistent with our view that vulnerability reflects non-specific personality pathology. Nevertheless, this cross-sectional research is strongly suggestive of the vacillating pattern described in the clinical narcissism literature.

Ultimately, to fully understand these dynamic within-person processes, research that adopts an intensive longitudinal design will be needed. Some such research exists, although it has largely focused on self-esteem instability [48-49] or focused solely on grandiosity [50]. Furthermore, the results from this prior work have been equivocal, making it unclear whether narcissism is related to fluctuations in functioning. However, many of these studies suffered from major limitations, and some of the more recent work using the most sophisticated designs has been more promising [e.g., 49]. Additionally, as Wright and Simms [51] showed, virtually all manifestations of personality pathology fluctuate from day to day, including features relevant to narcissism, suggesting that the minimum requirement of variability across time in grandiosity and vulnerability is likely to be present. Nevertheless, work designed to measure fluctuation in grandiosity and vulnerability, and potential switches between states, needs to be undertaken.

Finally, evidence of fluctuation and/or switching between states across time is merely the first step needed to understand the dynamic processes of narcissism. Clinical theory and research in related domains (e.g., borderline personality pathology) both indicate that any observed variability is likely the result of the individual attempting to regulate self, affect, and their interpersonal field [52]. For example, Wright and colleagues [24] showed that the higher a patient's NPD features, the more likely they were to respond to perceptions of dominance when interacting with another person with negative affect and quarrelsome behavior; the negative affect served as a mediator between perceptions of dominance and quarrelsome behavior. This suggests that perceiving another as asserting their dominance or taking control triggers individuals high in NPD features, resulting in dysregulated affect and ultimately hostile behavior. More such research that focuses on the contingencies and eliciting factors of narcissistic pathology is needed. It holds the promise to identify targets for intervention that might disrupt the maintenance mechanisms of the pathology.

Conclusion

In summary, pathological narcissism is reflected in a broad array of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. At its core are entitled motivations, expectations, and beliefs, that when coupled with individual differences in certain domains of personality, namely extraversion/approach-orientation and neuroticism/avoidance-orientation, manifests in dispositionally grandiose or vulnerable presentations. This much is agreed upon. Theory and emerging research additionally suggest that pathologically narcissistic individuals *do or can* vacillate between grandiose and vulnerable states. However, a great deal more systematic research using temporally sensitive designs (e.g., ambulatory assessment) is needed to study these putative dynamic phenomena to (a) empirically describe the phenomena, (b) establish norms, and (c) evaluate potential triggers and contingencies.

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Table 1. *Higher-order Narcissism Domains Captured by Different Narcissism Measures*

Measure	Narcissism Domain		
	Exhibitionism (Grandiosity) [Extraverted]	Entitlement (Self-Importance) [Antagonistic]	Vulnerability (Vulnerability) [Neurotic]
PNI			
Grandiosity	x	X	x
Vulnerability		x	X
NPI			
Leadership/Authority	X	x	
Grandiose Exhibitionism	X		
Entitlement/Exploitativeness		X	
FFNI			
Grandiosity	X	x	
Vulnerability		x	X
NARQ			
Admiration	X		
Rivalry		X	x
NGS	X		
HSNS			X
PES	x	X	

Note. **X**=scale considered to be primarily captured by the domain; x=scale considered to be secondarily captured by the domain. Parentheses reflect label used by Krizan and Herlache (2017); Bracketed terms reflect labels used by Miller et al. (2017). PNI = Pathological Narcissism Inventory; NPI = Narcissistic Personality Inventory; FFNI = Five-Factor Narcissism Inventory; NARQ = Narcissistic Admiration and Rivalry Questionnaire; NGS = Narcissistic Grandiosity Scale; HSNS = Hypersensitive Narcissism Scale; PES = Psychological Entitlement Scale. NPI scales based on analyses by Ackerman and colleagues [52].

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