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Narcissism today: What we know and what we need to learn

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Abstract

Narcissism is of great interest to behavioral scientists and the lay public. Research across the last 20 years has led to substantial progress in the conceptualization, measurement, and study of narcissism. The present paper reviews the current state of the field, identifying recent advances and outlining future directions. Advances include hierarchical conceptualizations of narcissism across one (narcissism), two (grandiose vs. vulnerable narcissism), and three factor levels (agentic extraversion, antagonism, narcissistic neuroticism), the development of measures to assess the components of narcissism, clarification of the relations between narcissism and self-esteem, an understanding of the behavioral and motivational dynamics underlying narcissistic actions and social outcomes, and insight regarding potential fluctuations between narcissistic states. Future directions point in general to increased research using the lower levels of the narcissism hierarchy, especially the three-factor level. At this level, more research is required on the etiology, heritability, stability, and centrality of the three components.

There is tremendous interest in narcissism among scientists and the public; narcissism has been studied or discussed in psychiatric patients, students, celebrities, CEOs, and American presidents. In its most prototypical forms, narcissistic individuals are intensely arrogant, domineering, aggressive, and callous towards others. Narcissistic individuals demand attention and respect while withholding both from others and operate in a putatively zero sum interpersonal world where there can be only one winner. Over the past 20 years, substantial progress has been made in the study of narcissism with regard to conceptualization, assessment, and methodology. Here we highlight recent advances in research on narcissism and outline what we see as important unresolved issues.

Hierarchical structure of narcissism

There is a growing recognition that many psychological and psychiatric constructs can be conceptualized at different hierarchical levels (e.g., Kotov et al., 2017). Research over the past two decades (cf., Wink, 1991) has revealed that narcissism can also be studied hierarchically (e.g., Cain et al., 2008) and is composed of, at minimum, 2 distinguishable dimensions – grandiose narcissism and vulnerable narcissism – with vastly different nomological networks (Miller et al., 2011). Generally, grandiose narcissism is associated with arrogance, entitlement, higher self-esteem, gregariousness, aggression, perceived likability, risk taking, and a zero-sum interpersonal approach. Conversely, vulnerable narcissism is associated with egocentrism, low and variable/contingent self-esteem, distrust of others, broad and enduring negative affectivity, and social isolation. The recognition of these dimensions and the development of relevant assessments have brought greater clarity to this field, which was often difficult to understand and synthesize as different operationalizations and assessments of narcissism failed to make clear which of these two dimensions were being assessed.

More recently, 3-factor models of narcissism have emerged providing a finer grained articulation of its core components (Crowe et al., 2019; Krizan & Herlache, 2018). These three-factor models are helpful in demonstrating both what is shared across narcissism dimensions and what is unique to grandiose and vulnerable narcissism, respectively. The first factor has been termed antagonism, rivalry, or entitlement and is common to both grandiose and vulnerable narcissism. Individuals high in antagonism tend to be arrogant, callous, deceitful, entitled, exploitative and cynical, irrespective of whether they are generally more grandiose or vulnerable in their presentation. The second factor has been termed agentic extraversion, admiration, or grandiosity is relatively more adaptive (i.e., causes the narcissistic individual fewer interpersonal problems), associated with assertiveness, leadership, high self-esteem, behavioral activation/approach orientation (e.g., a tendency to be proactive rather than reactive; and motivated by reward more than punishment), and uniquely characterizes grandiose narcissism. The third factor termed narcissistic neuroticism or vulnerability is core to vulnerable narcissism and is related to more fragile and contingent self-esteem, negative emotionality/emotional dysregulation, and experiences of shame and other self-conscious emotions. This dimension is largely synonymous with psychological distress but is also associated with interpersonal impairment (e.g., difficulties in relations with others).¹ The confluence of high scores on all three factors would be consistent with the version of narcissism instantiated as narcissistic personality disorder in the Diagnostic and Statistical manual of Mental Disorders (e.g., DSM-5; APA, 2013).

The initial move from a unidimensional (i.e., narcissism or narcissistic personality disorder) to a two-dimensional conceptualization (i.e., grandiose vs. vulnerable narcissism) represented an important advance over the past two decades. The more recent calls to move to an

¹ We use language from the trifurcated model of narcissism from here on out for the sake of clarity but note that other models (NARC; narcissistic spectrum model) use slightly different language.

even more articulated three-dimensional model should advance the field even further (see Figure 1). For instance, within grandiose narcissism, the antagonistic and agentic extraversion dimensions yield important differences in relation to basic traits, motives, values, self- and other-evaluations, social behaviors and interpersonal outcomes (Back, 2018; Back et al., 2013). Similarly, the three-factor approach clarifies narcissism's cloudy and variable relations with explicit self-esteem (e.g., self-esteem and agentic extraversion, $r \sim .30$; self-esteem and antagonism, $r \sim -.10$; self-esteem and neuroticism, $r \sim -.60$; Crowe et al., 2019). We strongly encourage researchers interested in narcissism to use instruments that allow for a bifurcation or, better yet, trifurcation of narcissism into these different components.

Narcissism \neq high self-esteem

Although narcissism's relation to self-esteem depends on which components of narcissism are emphasized, narcissism is not synonymous with high self-esteem. In a comparison of explicit self-esteem and grandiose narcissism using data from 11 samples and over 4000 participants, Hyatt and colleagues (2018) reported a mean correlation of .28 between the two constructs. More importantly, the correlates differed substantially; although grandiose narcissism and self-esteem are both related to an extraverted, assertive, and approach-oriented interpersonal style, self-esteem's correlates were almost entirely adaptive in nature (i.e., unrelated or negatively related to psychopathology or adverse correlates like aggression or attachment difficulties). Conversely, grandiose narcissism was uniquely linked to aggression, interpersonal coldness, antisociality, and a suite of interpersonally problematic traits (e.g., manipulativeness, deceitfulness, callousness, attention seeking). Even at particularly high levels of self-esteem, grandiose narcissism and self-esteem are not closely related as examined via analyses of

curvilinearity (Crowe et al., 2018). In fact, as scores on grandiose narcissism get higher, the relations to self-esteem grow weaker (Foster et al., 2016).

Assessment

The vast majority of work in narcissism relies on self-reports (see Supplemental Figure 1 for prominent examples and the degree to which each aligns with different dimensions from 2 and 3-factor models of narcissism), which may raise concerns about validity.² However, self-reports of narcissism correlate with informant reports in the range of most psychological constructs including general personality traits, suggesting that narcissistic self-reports are not especially error-laden relative to self-reports of general traits. Individuals who describe themselves as narcissistic endorse basic traits (grandiose, entitled, exploitative, assertive) and behaviors (e.g., aggressive, self-enhancing, self-promotional) consistent with the construct's nomological network. Individuals who self-report higher narcissism report that others view them as narcissistic and in a less than positive light, and understand that others' impressions of them grow less positive over time (e.g., Carlson et al., 2011; see also Paulhus, 1998). This suggests that narcissistic individuals understand how others see them but simply disagree with others' opinions or do not care about those opinions. It is important to note that grandiosely narcissistic individuals value being seen as dominant but not communal (Grijalva et al., 2016). Additionally, there is little evidence that narcissistic individuals provide invalid data in terms of endorsing overly positive characteristics (e.g., Sleep et al., 2017). Nevertheless, research that uses a multi-method approach to assessing narcissism (e.g., self and informant composites, affective and

² We present examples of narcissism items used to assess narcissism at the two and three-factor level. Grandiose narcissism – “I show others how special I am” (Narcissistic Admiration and Rivalry Questionnaire; Back et al., 2013). Vulnerable narcissism – “I typically get very angry when I’m unable to get what I want from others” (Pathological Narcissism Inventory; Pincus et al., 2009). Agentic extraversion – “I aspire to greatness” (Five-Factor Narcissism Inventory [FFNI]; Glover et al., 2012). Antagonism – “It’s fine to take advantage of persons to get ahead” (FFNI). Narcissistic neuroticism – “I feel ashamed when people judge me” (FFNI).

behavioral reactions to circumscribed situations assessed in laboratory settings) would be an improvement on the mono-method approach most commonly used in the literature to date. When only self-reports are used, authors should use more than a singular assessment to reduce the degree to which the literature is dominated by a single operationalization. This is quite doable given the creation of many reasonably short but validated narcissism measures.

Motivational dynamics: What underlies narcissistic actions?

A longstanding question is why narcissistic individuals act the way they do. Although relatively little research directly addresses the way narcissistic individuals select into and perceive social situations, and how they react emotionally to social cues, all of these should contribute to observable narcissistic expressions. Classic, mostly clinical conceptualizations of narcissism emphasize an inner insecurity or fragility as a driving force of grandiose narcissistic behavior. However, empirical evidence for this “mask model” of narcissism is lacking. Only antagonistic and neurotic aspects of narcissism are related to lower and more variable self-esteem, while agentic aspects of narcissism are robustly related to high and more stable self-esteem (Crowe et al., 2019; Geukes et al., 2017). Also, there is no evidence for higher explicit self-esteem co-occurring with lower implicit self-esteem (Mota et al., 2020), and experimental evidence for more thin-skinned reactions found for grandiose narcissism in the face of criticism/negative feedback await direct well-powered replications. Even the data that do exist – e.g., grandiose narcissism related to aggressive behavior following ego threat (e.g., Kjaervik & Bushman, in press) – do not speak to the inner experience and subsequent motivation that drives these reactions (e.g., drive to undo ego threat vs. drive to maintain superiority). Some naturalistic evidence suggests it is sensitivity to perceived status challenges as opposed to hostility that evokes these reactions (Wright et al., 2017). It remains an open empirical question whether,

within individuals, insecure and fragile aspects of narcissism contribute to its antagonistic and agentic expressions, whether such neurotic aspects of narcissism result from failed agentic and antagonistic strategies, or both (cf. Back, 2018).

More recent conceptualizations of narcissism emphasize agentic motivations and a striving for social status in particular as driving forces for (grandiose) narcissistic actions (Zeigler-Hill et al., 2019). According to the *status pursuit in narcissism* model (Grapsas et al., 2020) narcissism is related to the selection of situations that afford status, an increased attention to status-related cues, and increased behavioral activation following evaluations of these cues and appraisals of whether they can elevate their own status (agentic reactions following positive and antagonistic reactions following negative appraisals). These more complex hypotheses about the underlying motivational dynamics of narcissism need to be tested in large-scale empirical studies. Future research should also examine the emotional and behavioral expressions accompanying agentic, antagonistic, and neurotic modes of narcissism. Initial evidence points to distinct associations of neurotic narcissism to shame, antagonistic narcissism to hubristic pride and malicious envy, and agentic narcissism to benign envy (e.g., Lange et al., 2016).

Behavioral dynamics: When and how does narcissism exert its social influence

Although narcissism has been found to relate to a range of social outcomes, few studies have examined how narcissistic individuals get under others' skins. Following a dual-pathway approach to the social consequences of grandiose narcissism (Back et al., 2018), narcissism can be expressed in agentic behaviors (acting expressive and self-assured) as well as antagonistic behaviors (acting aggressive and other-derogative), with the former typically evoking positive and the latter typically evoking negative social impressions. Social context can moderate both the degree to which these behaviors are expressed and how they are evaluated. In more superficial

self-presentational situations that are typical for getting-acquainted contexts, agentic expressions of narcissism should be readily observable and evaluated positively while antagonistic expressions are not yet observable. In more intimate interactive situations that are typical for longer-term acquaintance, antagonistic aspects of narcissism should be expressed and lead to negative evaluations while agentic expressions might lose some of their appeal to partners with increased exposure. Initial evidence for this model has been found in the domains of peer (Leckelt et al., 2015) and romantic relationships (Wurst et al., 2018). Future research might expand the range of examined social contexts (e.g., leadership positions) and further specify relevant situational triggers that (a) moderate how strongly agentic and antagonistic narcissistic behaviors are expressed (by means of circumscribed motivational dynamics) and (b) how these expressions are perceived and evaluated by social partners.

Relations among narcissism dimensions: Do narcissistic individuals fluctuate between grandiose and vulnerable states

Another way to think about narcissistic grandiosity and vulnerability, outside of a dispositional view, is to conceive of them as states along a narcissistic process. Despite the theoretical implications, debate remains about how central these dynamics are, with some scholars positing that vacillation between these states is definitional (i.e., Pincus & Lukowitsky, 2010), whereas others believe that many narcissistic individuals primarily experience grandiosity or vulnerability with little to no oscillation beyond what is experienced by non-narcissistic individuals (i.e., Miller et al., 2017). Empirical data that can speak to this issue have only recently emerged. In a pair of cross-sectional studies, individuals selected for high narcissistic vulnerability experienced few periods of grandiosity but those selected for high grandiosity did experience periods of vulnerability characterized primarily by anger (Gore & Widiger, 2016;

Hyatt et al., 2018). Thus, selecting for grandiosity identifies individuals consistent with theoretical patterns, whereas vulnerability by itself may better reflect general personality pathology (Edershile, Simms, & Wright, 2019; Miller et al., 2018). However, a better methodology to answer this question involves intensive repeated assessments (Edershile, Woods, et al., 2019). Across three samples it was shown that there was both significant within-person (i.e., moment to moment) and between-person (i.e., individual differences) variability in narcissistic states. Moreover, whereas in a given moment grandiosity and vulnerability were largely independent ($r_s = .01$ to $.14$), individuals who were more grandiose were also more vulnerable ($r_s = .31$ to $.63$). This suggests that as traits these dimensions cohere in the same individual to a greater degree but function quite differently in the moment. Additionally, Edershile and Wright (2021) examined whether individuals who rated themselves as more narcissistic using traditional trait measures also exhibited more fluctuation within and between states. Using experience sampling methodologies in three large samples and using both 2 (grandiose vs. vulnerable) and 3 (antagonism vs. agentic extraversion vs. neuroticism) factor assessments, they found that both grandiosity and vulnerability each fluctuated significantly from moment to moment, and those higher in dispositional narcissism did, in fact, fluctuate more. The findings also highlighted the centrality of narcissistic antagonism given that it was associated with fluctuation in both grandiosity and vulnerability. Little evidence was found for “switching” or “shifting” between grandiose and vulnerable states, or that those who were more narcissistic did so any more than others.

Future Directions/Unresolved questions

The past 15-20 years has seen substantial gains in our understanding of narcissism, but there is much work to be done. Here we note a few of the topics that we believe require further

exploration including the factors that influence the etiology of narcissism components (e.g., from a parenting perspective – neglectful or hostile parenting vs. overvaluation [e.g., Brummelman et al., 2015]), the heritability of narcissism components, how newer aspects of narcissism such as communal and collective narcissism fit into these aforementioned models of narcissism, the stability of narcissism over time, as well as the factors that can drive change – be they therapeutic or non-therapeutic experiences (e.g., occupational experiences, marital or parental experiences). With regard to therapy, research is needed on the degree to which different therapeutic approaches can reduce narcissism, particularly the antagonistic and neurotic components that cause the most distress and impairment, and the mechanisms through which change occurs. Remarkably little rigorous empirical work has been done testing therapeutic approaches that might be useful for narcissism (e.g., dialectical behavior therapy and/or cognitive behavioral therapy for neuroticism components; cognitive behavior therapy and/or motivational interviewing for antagonism components). However, contemporary psychodynamic therapies are actively being adapted for this purpose (e.g., TFP-N; Stern et al., 2019). Such work is critical given the detrimental effects of narcissism on the individuals themselves and those around them.

Although recent advances in the assessment of narcissistic states have enabled intensive longitudinal studies, further replication and extension of this work is needed to better understand the interplay between grandiosity and vulnerability. Other questions to be resolved include which components of narcissism are more or less central to the construct. For instance, Back's work puts agentic extraversion (or admiration) as the central component whereas the authors of the trifurcated model see antagonism as the most central component. The arguments are the same, for the most part, in that each considers grandiosity as *the* central, most defining element of

narcissism, but they differ as to whether it is best subsumed under agentic extraversion or antagonism. This is difficult to resolve as grandiosity is roughly equally correlated with both dimensions (Crowe et al., 2019). From the trifurcated perspective, antagonism is the most central component because it is the piece that binds all narcissism dimensions together (i.e., found in both grandiose and vulnerable narcissism) whereas the others are largely specific to one or other. Antagonism is also a central piece of psychopathology writ large (e.g., Kotov et al., 2017) and underpins narcissism's relation to other relevant constructs like psychopathy, antisocial personality disorder, and Machiavellianism (e.g., Vize et al., 2020).

Others might argue that content from the narcissistic neuroticism domain – shame, self-consciousness, feelings of insecurity – might be the most critical to narcissism, if one follows psychodynamic mask models of narcissism that see grandiosity as a façade that hides deep seated feelings of self-doubt. In fact, one of the current authors believes that – definitionally – one cannot have narcissism without vulnerability. These questions require further. There is also a need for further study into narcissistic vulnerability itself - does it represent the experience of shame and other self-conscious emotions or rather reflect a broader emotion dysregulation process that follows thwarted attempts to maintain one's sense of superiority and status? We hope these types of questions receive greater attention over the next two decades.

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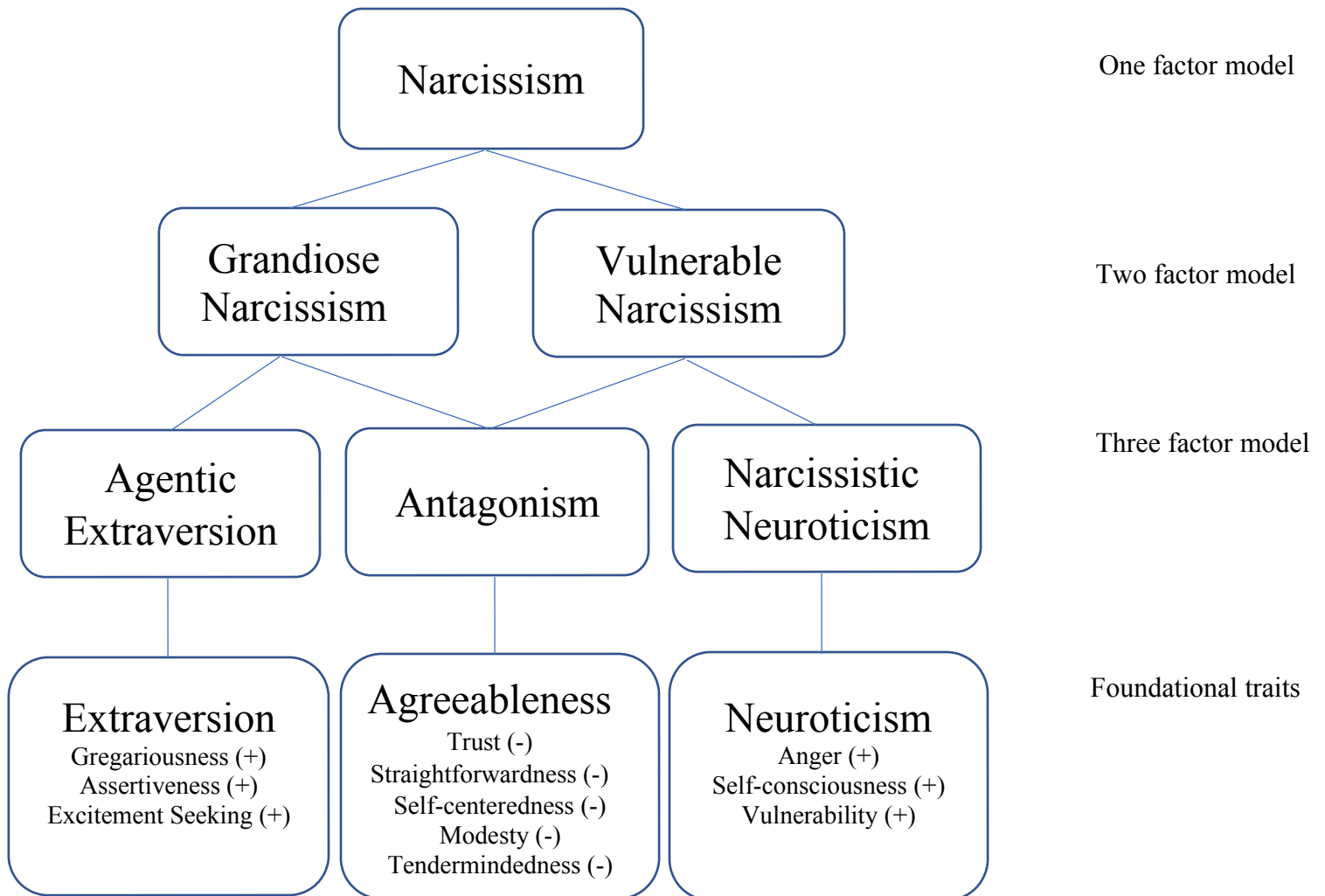
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Supplemental Figure 1. Variance accounted for in popular narcissism scales by higher-order factors

Note. Coverage was calculated using data described by Crowe and colleagues (2019). Factor scores for each dimension were correlated with each scale score. **Figure depicts r -squared values.** FFNI = Five Factor Narcissism Inventory – Short Form; FFNI-G = FFNI Grandiose Dimension; FFNI-V = FFNI Vulnerable Dimension; FFNI-AE = FFNI Agentic Extraversion; FFNI-A = FFNI Antagonism; FFNI-N = FFNI Neuroticism; NGS = Narcissistic Grandiosity Scale; NVS = Narcissistic Vulnerability Scale; HSNS = Hypersensitive Narcissism Scale; NARQ = Narcissistic Admiration and Rivalry Questionnaire; NARQ-A = NARQ Admiration; NARQ-R = NARQ Rivalry; NPI = Narcissistic Personality Inventory; PDQ-4+ = Personality Diagnostic Questionnaire-4 Narcissistic Personality Disorder Scale; PES = Psychological Entitlement Scale; PID-NPD = Personality Inventory for the DSM-5 NPD scale; PID-AS = PID-5 Attention Seeking; PID-G = PID-5 Grandiosity; PNI = Pathological Narcissism Inventory; PNI-G = PNI Grandiose dimension; PNI-V = PNI Vulnerable dimension; SCID = SCID-IV Personality Disorders Personality Questionnaire – NPD Scale; SD3-N = Short Dark Triad Narcissism scale.

Recommended Readings

Back, M. D. (2018). The narcissistic admiration and rivalry concept. In A. D. Hermann, A. B. Brunell, & J. D.

Foster (Eds.), *Handbook of Trait Narcissism* (pp. 57–67). Springer International Publishing.

---- This chapter provides a comprehensive overview on the Narcissistic Admiration and Rivalry Concept, summarizes empirical evidence on the distinct correlates, dynamics, and social outcomes of narcissistic admiration and rivalry, and outlines future prospects for an extended trifurcated within-person investigation of narcissism.

Cain, N. M., Pincus, A. L., & Ansell, E. B. (2008). Narcissism at the crossroads: Phenotypic description of pathological narcissism across clinical theory, social/personality psychology, and psychiatric diagnosis. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 28, 638-656.

---- This manuscript provides a comprehensive narrative review of how narcissism has been conceptualized and operationalized across the diverse fields of clinical psychology, psychiatry, and social/personality psychology, emphasizing the plurality of descriptions and definitions of the construct.

Carlson, E. N., Vazire, S., & Oltmanns, T. F. (2011). You probably think this paper's about you: narcissists' perceptions of their personality and reputation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 101, 185-201.

---- This manuscript reports finding from three studies that suggest that narcissistic individuals understand that others do not see them as positively as they see themselves, that others' perceptions of them decline with increased exposure, and that they are willing and able to endorse some negative traits (e.g., grandiosity).

Edershile, E.A., & Wright, A.G.C. (2021). Fluctuations in grandiose and vulnerable narcissistic states: A momentary perspective. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 120, 1386-1414.

---- This study examines fluctuation in, and switching between, grandiose and vulnerable states as assessed using ecological momentary assessments and dispositional predictors of amount and pattern of fluctuation in three large samples.

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---- Article provides a detailed review of ongoing controversies in the study of narcissism and includes topics related to the conceptualization and assessment of narcissism, possible etiological factors, distinction between self-esteem and narcissism, and how sampling may play an important role in how narcissism has been described.