

Grandiose And Vulnerable Narcissism and Eating Pathology

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Narcissistic Personality Disorder

Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) is characterized by displays of grandiose self-importance, want of admiration, lack of empathy, exploitation of others, and low Agreeableness (Best & Maclaren, 2013). NPD is underdiagnosed, as most individuals who receive a diagnosis, it is after they have already been diagnosed with other mental health disorders (Muir et al., 2021). NPD is often comorbid with other mental health disorders such as anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, and substance use disorders (Muir et al., 2021). Individuals with NPD do not present in for treatment regarding NPD. After being in treatment for other mental health disorders a diagnosis of NPD is provided.(Roggingstam & Weinberg, 2013). NPD can be difficult to diagnose because it is a spectrum of traits, some individuals are high-functioning and would not appear to have a personality disorder, whereas others overtly show the characteristics (Roggingstam & Weignberg, 2013; Caligor et al., 2015). It is estimated that 17% of the general population have this disorder (Caligor et al., 2015). Overall, there is not a consensus of what treatment plan is best for individuals who do have NPD, though psychotherapy is commonly used.(Ellison et al., 2016).

Narcissistic characteristics are not the same in every individual with traits lying on a dimensional scale with some individuals having high levels and others having low levels of Narcissism (Green et al., 2020). NPD can be mentally taxing for those around them. Girls scoring higher in narcissistic traits may have surface level friendships as sharing would cause them to be vulnerable, and may constantly need validation and praise (Peets & Hodge, 2022). These interpersonal difficulties may cause strain on a relationship, ultimately leaving a friend to be overwhelmed and ultimately end the relationship. In romantic relationships, some may use

their partner to help satisfy their need for admiration (Vrabel et al., 2021). Some research suggests that both males and females diagnosed with NPD have a higher likelihood of engaging in physical and psychological abuse to their partners (Green et al., 2020).

Grandiose Narcissism

There has been quite a bit of research beyond NPD, which examines narcissism as a personality trait. Narcissism, as a trait, can be further broken into two subtypes: Vulnerable Narcissism and Grandiose Narcissism (Weiss & Miller, 2018). These subtypes have differential relations to self-esteem (Zhang et al., 2017). Grandiose Narcissism is characterized by grandiosity, exploitation of others for personal gain, lack of empathy, fantasies of unlimited success, believing themselves to be special, and arrogance (Gordon & Dornbeck, 2010).

Grandiose Narcissism in previous studies has been correlated with high levels of self-esteem, which may benefit the individual's mental health and reduce their psychological distress (Zhang et al., 2017) as one uses self-esteem as an emotion regulation tool. While Grandiose Narcissism may benefit the wellbeing of the individual with Narcissism, the wellbeing of others around them may suffer. For example, instances of poor treatment of their friends may occur because the individual needs admiration and may be unable to hold empathy for those around them (Peets & Hodge, 2022). Individuals with Grandiose Narcissism may engage in Impulsive behaviors this is thought to be explained by their beliefs that they are entitled to get what they want. This can lead to impulsive decisions with short-term benefits and immediate rewards, rather than patience and long-term rewards. Grandiose Narcissism is correlated with Five Factor Model low Agreeableness and high Extraversion (Campbell et al. 2013).

Vulnerable Narcissism

Unlike Grandiose Narcissism, Vulnerable Narcissism is characterized by feelings of inferiority, whereas the former is characterized by feelings of superiority. Vulnerable Narcissism is identified as high psychological distress, low self-esteem, feelings of inferiority, introversion, and lack of confidence (Zhang et al., 2017; Weiss & Miller, 2018). Unlike Grandiose Narcissism, which uses self-esteem to help regulate emotions, for individuals with Vulnerable Narcissism, their low self-esteem may be related to dysregulated emotions (Zhang et al., 2017). Vulnerable Narcissism also can be characterized as a need for outside approval and hypersensitivity to others' opinions (Gordon & Dornbeck, 2010). This can cause a variety of issues for those around them such as becoming angry or agitated when not getting the admiration they need (Gore & Widiger, 2016). Additionally, it may not be apparent to those around individuals who show traits of Vulnerable Narcissism until an instance of criticism or lack of attention, when the individual may show unreasonable anger (Gore & Widiger, 2016). Vulnerable Narcissism may be related to a fearful attachment style. These individuals are commonly described in relationships as worrying, anxious, and overly emotional (Miller et al., 2010). Also, individuals typically become withdrawn from situations and people if it allows for others to know their failures, or when their need for admiration is not met (Gore & Widiger, 2016). Vulnerable Narcissism is correlated with Five Factor Model low Agreeableness and high Neuroticism (Campbell et al., 2017). Neuroticism scores higher than any of the other factors, in relation to Vulnerable Narcissism (Miller et al., 2018). Specifically related to the current literature review, Vulnerable Narcissism is related to several different eating disorder symptoms.

Eating Pathology

Disordered eating behavior refers to behavior patterns such as restricting, binge eating, excessive exercise, and purging. Binge eating is referred to as several compulsive episodes of

overeating, causing psychological distress and disgust with oneself afterwards (Lo Coco et al., 2021). To further explain, binge eating includes eating when one may not be hungry, as well as still eating when being uncomfortably full (Zwaan, 2001). It is important to note that those who engage in binge eating feel a loss of control while in these binging episodes (Dingermans et al., 2002). Individuals who engage in binge eating show high levels of perfectionism and impulsivity (Christian et al., 2021). Additionally, binge eating commonly occurs after bouts of starvation and at the end of that period one will binge (Fairburn & Brownell, 2002). Binge eating is often used as coping strategy but can lead to outcomes such as obesity (Meany et al., 2013). Individuals who binge eat also show correlations with high Neuroticism and low Conscientiousness (Gillmartin et al., 2022).

Restrictive eating refers to either the attempt to or participating in the act of restricting calories, certain foods, extreme diets, or skipping meals (Solomon-Krakus et al., 2020). This can lead to one become malnourished, develop a nutrient deficiency, or possible supplement dependency (Zickgraf & Ellis, 2018). Restrictive eating behavior shows low levels of impulsivity and high levels of perfectionism (Christian et al., 2021; Fairburn & Brownell, 2002; Lavender et al., 2015). To add, one typically has very low self-esteem (Haynos et al., 2016). Restrictive eating also highly correlates with Obsessive Compulsive tendencies (Strauch & Erez, 2009). Restricting behaviors can be seen used as an emotion regulation strategy for some individuals (Haynos et al., 2018). Additionally, individuals who participate in restrictive behavior score high in Five Factor Model Neuroticism, low in Agreeableness, and high in Conscientiousness (Gillmartin et al., 2022).

Purging behavior includes use of laxatives or diuretics, and self-induced vomiting (Krug et al., 2020). Purging can have a negative effect on physical health, such as teeth erosion and

numerous issues with the GI tract and the esophagus (Forney et al., 2016). Individuals who engage in purging behavior tend to score lower in Five Factor Model Conscientiousness, low in Agreeableness, and high in Neuroticism (Gillmartin et al., 2022). Further, individuals who engage in purging are more impulsive and are more likely to be influenced by mood rather than dietary restrictions (Fairburn & Brownell, 2002). Other personality descriptions describe individuals who emotionally sensitive, low in self-esteem, and impulsive (Fairburn & Brownell, 2002). Purging is closely associated with anxiety and consistent thoughts of meal portion sizes (Brown et al., 2011). Purging has a high relation to loss of control while eating normal size portions or even small sized portions of food (Forney et al., 2014).

Excessive exercise refers to working out more than the recommended amount per week (3-5 times), which can lead to addiction (Iannos & Tiggemann, 1996). It can also be described as one who has immense guilt or shame for missing a work-out session (Mond et al., 2005). Men who show risk-taking and power over women behavior are more likely to engage in excessive exercise (Dawson & Hammer, 2020). Excessive exercise can be detrimental to physical and mental health, the overuse of certain muscles can cause injury and illness, as well the addiction to exercising can cause relational issues (Iannos & Tiggemann, 1996). Many individuals who engage do this to keep physically fit for the need of looking physically attractive (Mond & Calogero, 2009). However, this is not just a connection with dysregulation, there has also been a link with other types of eating disorders, especially with individuals who participate in obligatory exercise (sports/dancers) (Iannos & Triggemann, 1996).

Narcissism and Eating Pathology

Both subtypes of Narcissism are associated with an obsession with appearance and body image (Swami et al., 2015), although Vulnerable Narcissism is more correlated than Grandiose

Narcissism with eating pathology in general (Gordon & Dombek, 2010). Individuals who show symptoms of disordered eating may engage in two behaviors: weight preoccupation and body checking (Waller et al., 2008; Swami et al., 2015). Body checking refers to repeatedly checking one's body to ensure body shape is not changing and or is changing to meet one's own or societal standard (Shafran et al., 2004). In a study conducted by Swami et al. (2015), there was a correlation between individuals who show characteristics of Vulnerable Narcissism and traits of weight preoccupation. Individuals with Vulnerable Narcissism need admiration and recognition not only for their personality, but also for their physical characteristics, such as body type and shape (Swami et al., 2015). This need to meet societal standards can lead them to engage in body checking.

Results of Grandiose Narcissism with eating pathology has been equivocal. While some research find non-significant correlations with eating disordered symptoms (Di Pierro et al., 2020), other studies found a positive correlation between Grandiose Narcissism and eating disorder symptoms (Swami et al. 2015). A recent study conducted with males and females found a positive correlation seen between Grandiose Narcissism and disordered eating. This relationship is believed to be due to perfectionism and their extreme attention to their physique and appearance (Gordon & Dombek, 2010).

The motivation behind disordered eating in Grandiose Narcissism was different than what is found in Vulnerable Narcissism. Individuals with Grandiose Narcissistic traits did not have a drive for thinness and were higher in a drive for muscularity in both men and women (Gordon & Dombek, 2010). Additionally, individuals who show traits of Grandiose Narcissism feel the need to keep up with one's physical appearance, which could cause a negative body image issue if they are not fitting the societal narrative of beauty and body type (Swami et al.,

2015). Vulnerable Narcissism is believed to have a higher correlation to eating disorders due to the fact that they base their self-worth off of their physical appearance (Gordon & Dombeck, 2010).

Binge Eating

While there is not a lot of research specifically tying binge eating and Narcissism, the two share many characteristics. Individuals with Grandiose Narcissistic traits, and individuals who binge eat score very low on Agreeableness (Gillmartin et al., 2022; Prendergast et al., 2019). Individuals who score high on Binge eating symptoms also score very high on Neuroticism, potentially indicating a relationship between Binge eating symptoms and Vulnerable Narcissism (Gillmartin et al., 2022; Miller et al., 2018). Waller et al. (2008) found that women who had displayed Narcissistic traits were higher in symptoms of bingeing, not specifying which subtype. Binge eating is characterized as a disorder of impulsivity, with higher relationships with immediate rewards (Gilmartin et al., 2022). This may indicate a stronger relationship with Grandiose Narcissism, as individuals act more impulsively for the immediate reward, rather than being able to wait (Kaczmarek & Malesza, 2018). Additionally, individuals who show characteristics of binge eating have low levels of perfectionism (Christian et al., 2021), which is a shared trait between both subtypes. Due to the little research that has been conducted linking Binge Eating behavior and Narcissism, it seems as both could have a relationship. However Grandiose Narcissism may have a stronger relationship, in comparison to Vulnerable Narcissism.

Restricting

Like binge eating, there is not a lot of research that dives into Vulnerable and Grandiose Narcissism's relativity to restrictive eating. However, Waller et al. (2008) found that women who had displayed Narcissistic traits were higher in restricting behavior. Like Vulnerable Narcissism,

restrictive eating correlates more closely to perfectionism (Christian et al., 2021). Restrictive behavior is not as impulsive as other types of disordered eating, it is more methodical and thought out (Lavender et al., 2015). Of the two NPD subtypes, Vulnerable Narcissism is the least impulsive (impulsive), which would lead one to believe that individuals who are partake in restrictive eating behavior would more likely be those with Vulnerable Narcissism. While restrictive eating behavior and Grandiose Narcissism do share some similar Five Factor model facets, due to the need for impulsiveness, it makes it hard to understand if one would partake in this behavior. Further, restrictive eating behavior scores high in Consciousness (Gilmartin et al., 2022), similar to Vulnerable Narcissism. This would lead one to believe that Vulnerable Narcissism would have a higher positive correlation, and Grandiose would have a none to low positive correlation with restrictive eating behavior.

Purging

Purging relates to many negative emotions such as, anxiety, low self-esteem, and depression, similar to Vulnerable Narcissism (Maples et al., 2011). In Maples et al., 2011 study there was shown to be a high positive correlation with purging symptoms and Vulnerable Narcissism but a lack of a correlation with Grandiose Narcissism. Both Vulnerable Narcissism and purging behavior are very high in Neuroticism, which could explain the correlation. However, individuals with Grandiose Narcissism are highly impulsive due to the want of short-term rewards. Purging behavior is an impulsive act, so it is surprisingly that the two do not show a higher correlation. Waller et al. (2008) study showed that women who displayed Narcissistic traits were higher in symptoms of purging. While Grandiose Narcissism has similar impulsivity levels, it is more likely to be related to Vulnerable Narcissism, as seen in the previous research.

Vulnerable Narcissism has the high Neuroticism levels and emotional components that Grandiose tends to lack.

Excessive Exercise

Campbell and Waller (2010) conducted a study showing that excessive exercise has been linked to Narcissistic traits. Grandiose Narcissism has been seen to have the need for muscularity (Gordon & Dombeck, 2010), which could help explain the connection of excessive exercise. Individuals with Grandiose Narcissism desire to keep up with their physical appearance as they strive for a perfect outer appearance (Swami et al., 2015). While there is not much linking Vulnerable Narcissism, it could be believed that it is linked due to their need to look perfect and worthy (Zeigler-Hill et al., 2021). NPD in general is linked to addictive behaviors, and excessive exercise is a form of addictive behavior. Further, Vulnerable Narcissism is so highly related to fitting the societal ideals of a body, suggesting this an area of research to be investigated. However, due to existing research and similarities between Grandiose Narcissism and excessive exercise, Grandiose Narcissism seems to be more likely to have a higher positive correlation than what Vulnerable Narcissism would.

Impulsivity, Narcissism and Eating Pathology

Impulsivity refers to the act being unable to refrain from actions that may have negative consequences, or in inappropriate settings, or actions that show bad judgement (Evenden, 1999). Impulsivity is a common trait amongst individuals who display Narcissistic behavior (Kaczmarek & Malesza, 2018). These impulsive issues lead to addictions such as substance abuse, inability to cope with stress, and self-defeating behavior (Vazire & Funder, 2006). Many studies have found correlations between impulsivity and narcissistic behavior, including a study done by Kaczmarek and Malesza (2018), where narcissistic behavior tends to lead the

individual to feel entitled or wanting things their way. Impulsivity can be described as aggressive, as is Grandiose Narcissism (Miller et al., 2011; Lesch & Merschedorf, 2000). Compared with Grandiose Narcissism, Vulnerable Narcissism shows a lower positive correlation to impulsivity (Kaczmarek & Malesza, 2018). Both are still positive correlations with impulsivity, however Grandiose Narcissism tends to score higher in all facets, while Vulnerable Narcissism does not (Kaczmarek & Malesza, 2018). While there are not many studies done breaking down the subtypes of NPD. NPD does correlate with impulsivity, and in doing so, it often helps with self-defeating behavior (Vazire & Funder, 2006). Grandiose Narcissism desires short-term and immediate rewards, which is an example of how impulsivity works in this disorder. (Kaczmarek & Malesza, 2018).

Eating pathology, similar to NPD, has a range of impulsivity. Binge eating, for example, is often known for its loss of control which can attributed towards impulsivity (Schag et al., 2013). While not every individual who has binge eating disorder struggles with impulsivity it is often very common impulsivity is linked to it, due to its short-term rewards (Schag et al., 2013). Purging is also known to be a very high in impulsivity (Fairburn & Brownwell, 2002). Impulsivity is also commonly known to link to various types of addictions (Vazire & Funder, 2006). While, an exercise addiction (excessive exercise), tends to not be looked at with concern as other addictions, there are many negative health effects that can accompany. It is believed that impulsivity also does play a role in this type of addiction (Dawson & Hammer, 2020). The one outlier of impulsivity is restrictive eating, restriction is not seen to correlate with impulsivity almost at all, it shows more restraint, and thought-out planning (Christian et al., 2021).

Perfectionism, Narcissism, and Eating Pathology

Perfectionism refers to the high standards one puts on themselves (Stoeber et al., 2015). It is a personality trait shown as both a common denominator behind both eating disorder symptoms and narcissistic behaviors (Bardone-Cone, 2020). Individuals who show characteristics of Vulnerable Narcissism struggle with low self-esteem (Zhang et al., 2017). To combat this, research has seen that narcissists use perfectionism as a maintenance strategy (Hosack et al., 2022). Perfectionism can be seen to correlate with the seven traits of Vulnerable Narcissism used in this study (contingent self-esteem, devaluing others, entitlement rage, hiding the self, and grandiose fantasy) (Stoeber et al., 2015). Perfectionism, a need to fit either societal or personal standards, aligns with Vulnerable Narcissism and the want of admiration for the validation of others. Grandiose Narcissism is highly correlated with perfectionism, individuals with Grandiose Narcissism are seen to be vain and few themselves as perfection (Sherry et al., 2014). Grandiose Narcissism is also seen to be unique with the fact that they do not want to be seen as perfection, but they demand everyone around them to see them as perfect (Sherry et al., 2014).

Perfectionism can also be seen linked to purging and restrictive eating behavior as well as excessive exercise (Bardone-Cone et al., 2007). Eating pathology such as purging, restrictive eating, and excessive exercise are often times striving for the correct body shape and size, therefore fits the idea of perfectionism (Bardone-Cone et al., 2007). Both subtypes of Narcissism have correlations with perfectionism, which could help give an understanding of the link between disordered eating and Narcissistic behavior. Perfectionism is also linked to obsessive habits like working out, and avoiding foods (Luszczynska et al., 2015), similar to excessive exercise and restrictive eating. Vulnerable Narcissism Perfectionism can be seen through body checking which is a common for boosting self-esteem (Bardone-Cone et al., 2020). Binge eating

is the one exception from the other maladaptive behaviors that are discussed and does not relate to perfectionism. (Forbust et al., 2007).

Limitations of the current review

A common problem amongst current research is that studies either only focus on samples who only display symptoms of Vulnerable Narcissism, and not include individuals who display symptoms of Grandiose Narcissism, or vice versa. Studies need to include both to be able to properly understand the commonalities and the differences. Another limitation of existing studies is that they often use all-female samples (Gordon & Dombek, 2010). It is important to research eating pathology in both males and females. In a study conducted in a large university the female to male ratio was 3:1 (Eisenberg et al., 2011). This study is cited by many other articles, as it is one of the first to really investigate the prevalence in male students and how impactful it is to that population.

Another very important issue is the testing used for Narcissism, the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI), and the Pathological Narcissism Inventory (PNI), are most used. However, the NPI mainly focuses on Grandiose Narcissism, and the PNI focuses on Vulnerable Narcissism (Swami et al., 2015). Further, many of these studies do not use both to balance it out, but just focus on one which can skew the data.

Conclusions and Future Research

NPD subtypes, Grandiose and Vulnerable Narcissism, while vastly different both show perfectionism and impulsivity, and commonalities with eating pathology. NPD is highly underdiagnosed, and a lot more to be discovered on this topic, particularly regarding disordered eating. All four types of disordered eating looked at in this paper, restrictive eating, binge eating, excessive exercise, and purging, all have some commonality with at least one subtype of

narcissism. High impulsivity and perfectionism, as well as the Five Factor Model facets align with one another.

Future research should look at various eating disorders, and their relationship to Vulnerable and Grandiose Narcissism. As there is a connection between the two, that has not been explored in depth. Further, research should try to pinpoint why there is a correlation, and if there is a specific reason why to try and help find proper treatment, and preventative methods.

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