

Review

In Search of Narcissus

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Narcissism, a trait reflecting egocentric exceptionalism and social selfishness, has captured scholarly interest due to its intricate composition and social implications. The construct is polyhedral, comprising several key forms: grandiose versus vulnerable, agentic versus communal, admiring versus rivalrous, collective versus individual. These forms can be integrated into structural models that add predictive power or process models that add explanatory power. The narcissistic nucleus is argued, and partly shown, to be brittle in the face of self-threat. The nucleus may derive from being overvalued, or inconsistently socialised, by parents. Narcissism entails intrapersonal benefits, as it can confer psychological health, buffer against adversity, and facilitate performance. But it can also be an interpersonal and societal liability, partly remediable with narcissism-reduction interventions.

From Myth to Reality

Fascination with **narcissism** (see [Glossary](#)) dates back to the Roman poet Ovid (43 BC–17/18 AD). In Book III (titled *Narcissus and Echo*) of his 15-book magnum opus completed around 8 AD, Ovid narrates the myth of Narcissus, a handsome Greek hunter, and Echo, a mountain nymph. A lovelorn Echo follows Narcissus from a safe distance repeating his cries ‘Who’s there?’. Eventually, she musters up the courage to reveal her identity, but is summarily rebuffed by Narcissus. Heartbroken, she fades into loneliness, emitting only a sporadic echo sound. Infuriated by the incident, Echo’s patron Goddess, Nemesis, entices a thirsty Narcissus to a pond, where the youth fixates on his own reflection, falls in love with it, and, immobilised by its allure, melts away into the eponymous flower.

The myth has been recounted repeatedly in literature, art, and psychodynamic theorising. As time went by, its two central characters fused into one, giving rise to modern conceptions of narcissism: arrogance, vanity, disregard for others (Narcissus), and need for validation (Echo). ‘Narcissism’, in the meantime, has acquired remarkable scholarly and pop-cultural currency, as well as independence from a kindred construct, self-esteem ([Box 1](#)). This ‘lay of the land’ review will address recent advances in the psychological understanding of narcissism as a personality trait and point to promising research paths.

Polyhedral Narcissism

The narcissism literature has progressively been splitting the construct into various forms. These include, at the level of the individual, **grandiose narcissism**, further dichotomised into **agentic narcissism** versus **communal narcissism** and agentic narcissism further dichotomised into **admiring narcissism** versus **rivalrous narcissism**. Alongside this, **vulnerable narcissism** has been distinguished from grandiose and, at the group level, **collective narcissism** has been introduced ([Figure 1](#)). Narcissism might thus be considered a multicoloured spectrum. A ‘narcissist’ is shorthand for someone who scores high enough on one or more of these ‘colours’ ([Box 2](#)).

However, two features are arguably common to all forms of narcissism. One is egocentric exceptionalism. Narcissists of all sorts believe that they are superior and special, important and entitled.

Highlights

Narcissism is a polyhedral construct. It assumes different forms: grandiose versus vulnerable, agentic versus communal, admiring versus rivalrous, collective versus individual. These predict unique outcomes, but can be integrated under structural models that contribute predictive power or process models that contribute explanatory power.

The narcissistic nucleus may be unstable, especially for some forms (vulnerable, collective).

Parental overvaluation may predict grandiose narcissism, although the role of parental inconsistency in predicting other forms of narcissism (e.g., vulnerable) is worth investigating.

Narcissism may entail some intrapersonal benefits for narcissists (especially grandiose ones), such as psychological health, serving as a buffer against adversity, and motivating better performance.

Given that narcissism entails interpersonal and social costs, laboratory techniques have addressed ways to curtail it, although long-term and behaviour-oriented interventions are needed.

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Box 1. Separating Narcissism from Self-Esteem

Narcissism and self-esteem, once conflated, have now gone their separate ways. Granted, the two constructs are correlated, but weakly so ($r = 0.28$ [115]), and this association lessens as assessment tools improve in validity [116] or narcissists' self-reports increase in veracity [117]. Further, the association is not curvilinear: it does not strengthen at high levels of self-esteem [118]. If anything it is asymmetric: being high in narcissism means having high self-esteem, but having high self-esteem does not mean being high in narcissism (at least in terms of self-report).

This association reflects commonalities: both constructs are positively linked to agency and assertiveness [115]. But the constructs differ substantially. These differences are rooted in contrasting beliefs about the self. Whereas narcissists believe they are superior to others, with these beliefs often being unfounded, self-esteemers (persons with high self-esteem) believe they are worthy, with these beliefs grounded largely in reality [119,120]. The differences are additionally rooted in beliefs about others, or the connection between self and others. Whereas narcissists (with the possible exception of communal narcissists) despise or even dehumanise others, regard social interactions as zero-sum games, and affiliate primarily to garner adulation, self-esteemers acknowledge the intrinsic worth of others and pursue relatedness even when criticised [119,121]. The differences between narcissism and self-esteem are further rooted in interpersonal functionality. Whereas both narcissism and self-esteem help the individual navigate social hierarchies, self-esteem monitors fluctuations in social inclusion but narcissism monitors fluctuations in social status and inclusion [122,123]. Finally, the differences are rooted in the contrasting developmental trajectories. Whereas narcissism peaks in adolescence and gradually drops thereafter [78,124], self-esteem hits its nadir in adolescence but gradually picks up thereafter [125].

The previously-mentioned differences likely reflect distinct socialisation practices. The development of narcissism may be fostered through inflated praise, a focus on outperforming others, and conditional regard ('I am proud of you when you excel, I am ashamed of you when you don't'), but the development of self-esteem may be fostered through realistic feedback, a focus on growth, and unconditional regard (i.e., acceptance of the child as a worthy person, regardless of fluctuations in their performance [121]).

This literature has focused on the relation between grandiose narcissism and self-esteem. Future research will need to adopt a more granular approach, examining the relation between other forms of narcissism and self-esteem.

The other feature is social selfishness. Given their lofty sense of their own uniqueness, narcissists can afford to look down on others unempathetically, even antipathetically [1,2].

Grandiose versus Vulnerable Narcissism

The distinction between grandiose and vulnerable narcissism, two largely unrelated forms, has garnered the lion's share of attention [3,4]. For starters, the two forms vary somewhat on superiority beliefs. For example, relative to their vulnerable counterparts, grandiose narcissists are more likely to self-enhance on intelligence (view themselves as brighter than warranted by an objective standard [5,6]), trumpet their presumed perfection (engage in perfectionistic self-promotion [7]), compare themselves with less fortunate others (downward social comparison [8]), and perceive outcomes as under their control [9]. Also, the two forms vary somewhat on antipathy. For example, relative to grandiose narcissists, vulnerable narcissists are more likely to attribute hostile intent to ambiguous behaviour [10] and endorse behaving in interpersonally hostile ways [11].

Further, the two forms differ in their motivational underpinnings: grandiose narcissism is characterised by an approach or promotion orientation, vulnerable narcissism by an avoidance or prevention orientation [12,13]. As an example, grandiose narcissists focus on gains and pursue opportunities likely to highlight their distinctiveness, whereas vulnerable narcissists focus on losses and vigilantly defend against threats to their distinctiveness [14]. As another example, grandiose narcissists engage in assertive impression management strategies, presenting themselves as role models or intimidating, whereas vulnerable narcissists engage in defensive impression management strategies, owing up to their weaknesses [15]. Related to their distinct motivational patterns, or perhaps due to them, grandiose and vulnerable narcissists differ in emotionality. Grandiose narcissists experience greater subjective well-being, exhibit better emotion (anger) regulation, and are less plagued by discomforting emotions such as anxiety, depression, stress, envy, schadenfreude, and shame, whereas the

Glossary

Admirative narcissism: a form of narcissism characterised by the pursuit and maintenance of a haughty self-view by seeking social admiration through assertive self-promotion.

Agentic narcissism: a form of narcissism characterised by self-enhancement (i.e., highly inflated self-views) in the agentic domain (e.g., competence, creativity, intelligence, scholastic aptitude).

Collective narcissism: a form of narcissism characterised by the belief in the under-rated greatness of one's group or nation, hypersensitivity to intergroup threat, and retaliatory intergroup hostility.

Communal narcissism: a form of narcissism characterised by self-enhancement (i.e., highly inflated self-views) in the communal domain (e.g., warmth, prosociality, morality, interpersonal skills).

Grandiose narcissism: a form of narcissism characterised by an extraverted, exhibitionistic, self-assured, dominant, and manipulative interpersonal orientation.

Narcissism: the personality trait of narcissism reflects a belief system (beliefs about the self and others), a self-regulatory system, and strivings for intrapersonal and interpersonal gains. The common thread among the seven forms of narcissism is egocentric exceptionalism and social selfishness, that is, superiority and entitlement beliefs accompanied by indifference or antipathy toward others.

Process model: describes why narcissistic traits cluster.

Rivalrous narcissism: a form of narcissism characterised by the protection and maintenance of a haughty self-view by antagonising or derogating others.

Structural model: describes how narcissistic traits cluster.

Vulnerable narcissism: a form of narcissism characterised by an introverted, worrying, and defensive interpersonal orientation.

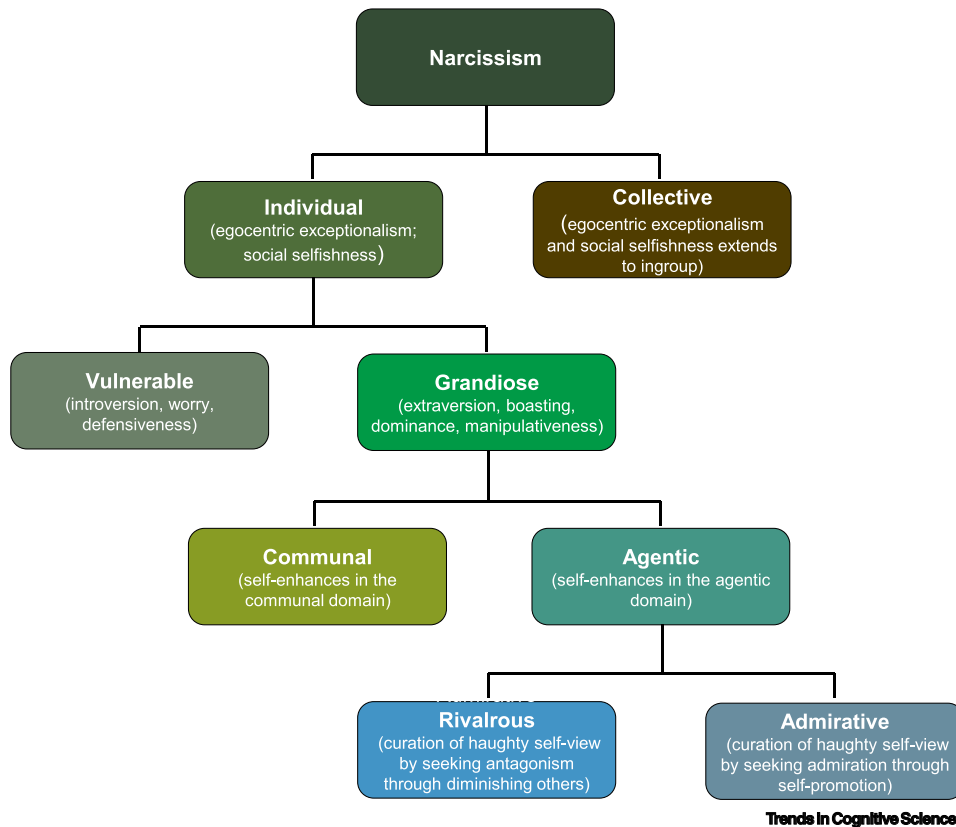


Figure 1. The Trait of Narcissism, Common Threads among Forms of Narcissism, and Additional Distinguishing Features of Forms of Narcissism.

opposite is true for vulnerable narcissists [6,11,16–20]. Indeed, the empirical networks of vulnerable narcissism and trait neuroticism are highly overlapping [21].

Agentic versus Communal Narcissism

Grandiose narcissism has been partitioned into agentic and communal, two positively related but adequately distinct forms [22]. The narcissistic duality is manifested as self-enhancement strivings in the agentic (ambition, drive) versus communal (sociality, morality) domain.

Evidence favours this duality. Whereas agentic narcissists consider themselves particularly intelligent and competent, communal narcissists consider themselves overly prosocial, altruistic, or fair [23–25], claim they trust others [26], and react with moral indignation at perceived unfairness [25]. However, communal narcissists do not behave prosocially relative to their low communal counterparts [24,25], nor are the signs of their excessively favourable self-views consistent: they regard themselves as highly communal at an explicit, but not an implicit, level [23]. Interestingly, communal narcissists receive social approval: compared with their agentic counterparts, such narcissists are liked better by others, partly because they make others feel liked by them [27].

Admirative versus Rivalrous Narcissism

Agentic narcissism has been subdivided into admirative and rivalrous, two positively associated but sufficiently independent forms [28–30]. This narcissistic duality is fuelled by approach and avoidance motivation, specifically, self-enhancement and self-protection. In that way, admirative

Box 2. The Measurement of Narcissism

The most well-validated and widely used scale for each form of narcissism follows, accompanied parenthetically by a sample item.

Collective narcissism: five-item Collective Narcissism Scale ([126]; 'My group deserves special treatment').

Grandiose narcissism, agentic: 40-item, forced-choice, Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI) [127]. The choice is between a narcissistic statement (N) and a non-narcissistic one. The NPI consists of seven components. (i) Authority ['I like having authority over people' (N) versus 'I don't mind following orders']. (ii) Self-sufficiency ['I can live my life in any way I want to' (N) versus 'People can't always live their lives in terms of what they want']. (iii) Exhibitionism ['I get upset when people don't notice how I look when I go out in public' (N) versus 'I don't mind blending into the crowd when I go out in public']. (iv) Entitlement ['I insist upon getting the respect that is due me' (N) versus 'I usually get the respect that I deserve']. (v) Exploitativeness ['People sometimes believe what I tell them' versus 'I can make anybody believe anything I want them to' (N)]. (vi) Superiority ['I am much like everybody else' versus 'I am an extraordinary person' (N)]. (vii) Vanity ['I like to look at myself in the mirror' (N) versus 'I am not particularly interested in looking at myself in the mirror']. Another factor-analytic approach [128] has produced three components: leadership/authority, grandiose exhibitionism, entitlement/exploitativeness. Finally, a factor-analytic approach relying on a rating-scale or single-stimulus format of the NPI [129], rather than a forced-choice format, has yielded five components: leadership, exhibitionism, vanity, manipulativeness, superiority.

Grandiose narcissism, admiration: seven-item admiration subscale of the Narcissistic Admiration and Rivalry Questionnaire ([28]; 'I will someday be famous').

Grandiose narcissism, communal: 16-item Communal Narcissism Inventory ([22]; 'I am the most helpful person I know').

Grandiose narcissism, rivalrous: seven-item rivalry subscale of the Narcissistic Admiration and Rivalry Questionnaire ([28]; 'I want my rivals to fail').

Vulnerable narcissism (VN): ten-item Hypersensitive Narcissism Scale ([130]; 'My feelings are easily hurt by ridicule or the slighting remarks of others').

narcissism resembles not only agentic but also communal narcissism [31,32], whereas rivalrous narcissism may resemble vulnerable narcissism [31,33].

The two motivational orientations indeed undergird self-perceptions. In comparison with rivalrous narcissists, admiring narcissists overestimate their intelligence [5,6], charisma [34], and socio-emotional abilities [35]. The two motivational orientations also undergird the function of other motives like status. Admiring narcissists seek status via prestige-based (competence, self-promotion) and partly dominance-based (fear, intimidation) strategies, whereas rivalrous narcissists seek status only via dominance-based strategies [36]. These orientations appear to produce differential perceptions of status: admiring narcissists believe they have high status, whereas rivalrous narcissists, having pre-emptively deployed defensive tactics, believe they have low status [36]. The two orientations likely undergird emotionality as well. Compared with their admiring counterparts, rivalrous narcissists manifest lower empathy [37], self-esteem, subjective well-being [38], and emotion regulation [39]. Lastly, the motivations have behavioural implications. Whereas admiring narcissism predicts employment and leadership, rivalrous narcissism predicts unemployment but not leadership [38].

Collective Narcissism versus Individual Narcissism

Collective narcissism extends a mix of grandiose and vulnerable narcissism to the group or nation level. Its conceptual map includes egocentric exceptionalism pertaining to one's ingroup, that is, belief in the ingroup's superiority and conviction that the ingroup is not recognised properly (entitlement). Further, the conceptual map includes hypersensitivity to intergroup threat, conspiratorial thinking, and retaliatory intergroup hostility [40].

Collective narcissism predicts support for right-wing populist parties [41] and it does so above and beyond nationalism (strong favouritism for one's nation), blind patriotism (unquestionable

allegiance to one's country), right-wing authoritarianism (submissiveness to authorities, punitiveness of deviants), or social dominance orientation (support for group-based hierarchies and dominance [40]). A reason collective narcissists are prone to retaliation against outgroups is to protect their fragile self-esteem, which is invested in the perceived exceptionalism of the ingroup [42].

Whither?

The river delta of narcissism, featuring a network of ever-widening distributaries, brings into sharp relief a classic problem of science: analysis versus synthesis [43,44], or, in more prosaic terms, splitting versus lumping. Narcissism forms have proliferated and there is no end in sight. Nascent empirical efforts, for example, are geared toward distinguishing between agentic collective narcissism and communal collective narcissism [45]. It may be a matter of time before other proposals break down admiring and rivalrous narcissism into agentic versus communal admiring and agentic versus communal rivalrous or break down vulnerable narcissism into admiring and rivalrous. To muddle the picture further, narcissism is itself part of the 'dark personality', a set of potentially problematic traits (along with psychopathy, Machiavellianism, and sadism [46,47]).

Splitting has its benefits. Different forms of narcissism offer unique insights (including prediction and explanation) into its intrapersonal dynamics and interpersonal processes. However, such forms fail to identify higher-order psychological processes, which is a strength of integrative models. These models can be structural, adding predictive power, or process, adding explanatory power (Box 3). The two traditions, splitting and lumping, will have to fight it off, it seems, before the field achieves consensus in favour of one or the other.

The Narcissistic Nucleus

Polyhedral as it may be, what is it like to be a narcissist? Debates about the nucleus of narcissistic personality have raged since the advent of psychoanalysis in early 20th century. Relevant conceptual statements, under the rubric of the 'mask model', posit that narcissists conceal a soft

Box 3. Integrative Attempts

Both structural and process models make attempts at integration. **Structural models** describe how narcissistic traits cluster but not why they cluster. The latter task is the point and purpose of process models.

Three models offer unifying accounts of grandiose and vulnerable narcissism. Two of these models are structural. According to the trifurcated model [11], grandiose and vulnerable narcissism are structured along the Big Five dimensions of agreeableness, extraversion, and neuroticism. Grandiose narcissists are seen as highly disagreeable extraverts who are not neurotic, whereas vulnerable narcissists are seen as less disagreeable extraverts who are neurotic. According to the narcissism spectrum model [12], egocentric exceptionalism takes the form of grandiose narcissism when it is approach-oriented or bold, culminating in hubris and exhibitionism, or takes the form of vulnerable narcissism when it is avoidance-oriented or reactive, culminating in resentment and defensiveness. The third model is process. According to self-determination theory [131], although both grandiose and vulnerable narcissists suffer from deficits in the satisfaction of basic needs (i.e., autonomy, relatedness, competence), the deficit is larger among the latter than the former.

Further, two structural models endeavour to integrate admiring, rivalrous, and vulnerable narcissism. The first [132] is based on the Circumplex of Personality Metatraits [133]. Admiring narcissism reflects sociability and dominance, whereas rivalrous and vulnerable narcissism reflect antagonism toward persons and norms, with vulnerable narcissism also reflecting neuroticism. The second model is based on a five-factor approach [134] and makes similar proposals.

Finally, two theoretical accounts purport to integrate all forms of narcissism. These accounts identify status pursuit as a unifying theme [36,122,123,135]. Hierometer theory [122,123] states that narcissism is sensitive to fluctuations in social status that thereby functionally regulate behavioural assertiveness; that is, enhanced social status fosters greater assertiveness via higher narcissism. The Status Pursuit in Narcissism model [135] describes how narcissists monitor their social environment, weighing the pros and cons of each social interaction, to maximise social status. Based on cues, they appraise prospective interactants for their potential to confer status and then approach and engage in social exchanges through self-promotion (admiring narcissists) or other-diminishment (rivalrous narcissists).

and brittle interior through intrapersonal grandiosity and abrasive interpersonal behaviour. They compensate for their deep-seated inadequacies and insecurities by indulging in self-valorising fantasies and behaving as condescending and entitled blowhards [30,48].

The mask model has the usual intuitive appeal and mystique of psychodynamic theorising, but the empirical landscape is complicated. The bulk of the literature has focused on *in situ* assessments of narcissism and on self-esteem discrepancies. In most cases, fragility has been operationalised as a discrepancy between explicit self-esteem and implicit self-esteem. The former is typically assessed with the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale [49], the latter with the Implicit Association Test [50]. A discrepancy between a (positive) explicit self-esteem and a (less positive) implicit self-esteem indicates support for the model. The evidence has been conflicting. Some studies report support for the model [51–54], but others do not [55–57] even when focusing exclusively on agency-related self-esteem [23].

An alternative perspective has advocated testing the mask model in dynamic settings, which simulate social interaction in the presence of self-threat. The pertinent version of the model is as follows. Narcissists have a fragile nucleus and so are hypervigilant to self-threat (words like ‘worthlessness’), detecting it expeditiously, assuming that their fragility has already been highlighted (through subliminal primes such as ‘failure’). Fast reaction times at an early word-exposure stage signal defensiveness of a fragile nucleus. At a later word-exposure stage, however, narcissists mask their hypervigilance, and so fragility, by regulating or slowing down their responses to a nondefensive level similar to that of individuals scoring low on narcissism, thus maintaining their psychological equilibrium and puffed-up façade. Empirical support for this version of the model has been consistent [58,59], albeit scarce and in need of replication.

Additional literature streams, involving clear or implied self-threat, furnish indirect support for the mask model. Narcissists display disproportionate physiological reactivity, in terms of cortisol and alpha-amylase levels or cardiovascular indices, to laboratory-induced or daily stress [60,61], including blushing, a hallmark of shame, when feeling undervalued [62]. They also manifest sharp changes in their emotionality (anxiety, anger, self-esteem) when they receive failure feedback [63]. Lastly, they exhibit greater variability in their daily affect and self-esteem in response to negative achievement-relevant life events [64,65].

Formulating and testing the mask model has been a challenge [66,67]. The distinction between *in situ* and dynamic settings may go some way into clarifying issues. Acknowledging the polyhedricity of narcissism may also help. Perhaps the mask model is more applicable to some forms of narcissism (vulnerable, rivalrous, collective) than others (grandiose, admiring, agentic, communal) in dynamic settings.

The Development of Narcissus

What are the developmental origins of the narcissistic nucleus, be it stable or liable to decay? Social learning models [68] emphasise parental overvaluation (oddly, a concept traceable to Freudian insights [69]). Children internalise the way they are treated by their parents. If treated as special and entitled, they will come to see themselves accordingly. Psychodynamic models [30,70], however, emphasise compensation. Children are reared by indifferent or cold parents. They come to behave as if they are special and entitled in an effort to gain parental approval and validation.

The scant evidence on the topic is mixed and is mostly correlational, relying on retrospective reports [71–73]. The exception is longitudinal research. A four-wave study, testing children 7–11 years old, obtained support for social learning models: parental overvaluation, rather than lack of warmth,

predicted higher narcissism [74]. Another observational longitudinal study identified a mechanism through which parental overvaluation works: inflated praise (e.g., 'You did incredibly well!' versus 'You did well'). However, inflated praise predicted higher narcissism among children with greater self-esteem, raising the possibility that self-esteem allows inflated praise to fall within a latitude of acceptance that facilitates its endorsement [75].

This longitudinal research examined level, not consistency, of parental overvaluation. Inconsistent parental treatment (inflated praise alternating with harsh feedback for same-level performance due to shifting standards) may also cascade into increases in narcissism. This would be equivalent to intermittent reinforcement preventing extinction behaviour by muddying the difference between reward and non-reward. Inconsistency may further arise by one parent praising and another criticising the child for the same performance outcome.

Several issues are worth empirical scrutiny. The first concerns the separate contribution of two parenting dimensions: overvaluing versus undervaluing and consistency versus inconsistency. The second concerns the differentiation between grandiose and vulnerable narcissism [76] and perhaps between one class of narcissism forms (grandiose, admiring, agentic, communal) and another (vulnerable, rivalrous, collective). Parental overvaluation coupled with parental consistency may give rise to grandiose narcissism, whereas parental overvaluation coupled with inconsistency may give rise to vulnerable narcissism. Relatedly, in a cross-sectional study of childhood experiences, parental overvaluation predicted grandiose narcissism, whereas adverse childhood experiences predicted vulnerable narcissism [77] in accord with the overlap between this form of narcissism and neuroticism [21]. More generally, theory development is sorely needed to guide empirical efforts. The third issue involves focusing on how narcissism develops across the life span. There are indications that levels of grandiose narcissism decrease from young to middle adulthood, depending on one's career and family pathways [78]. The last issue entails the interactive influence of societal context. Economic downturns, which encourage interdependence, have been linked to reductions in grandiose narcissism [79]. Social class may also be relevant. Middle- and upper-class parents, with their emphasis on uniqueness, may be more likely to breed narcissism in their children than are working-class or low-income parents [80].

Is Narcissism Good for Narcissists?

Is narcissism advantageous for the narcissist? Some forms (grandiose, admiring, communal) appear to enjoy better concurrent, but not necessarily long-term, psychological health than others (vulnerable, rivalrous, collective), perhaps due in part to a more stable nucleus. But in what other ways might narcissism be beneficial to the narcissists? I discuss two possibilities: as a buffer and a performance facilitator. The evidence, which relies on self-reports and student samples, pertains primarily to grandiose and secondarily to vulnerable narcissism.

Narcissism as a Buffer

Narcissism appears to have buffer potential. Adolescent girls viewed photographs of a very thin versus control (close-to-average body size) model. The two models were equally successful, having won *America's Next Top Model*. Next, participants were offered the opportunity to snack. Narcissistic girls were more likely to disidentify with the thin model (attach less importance to their appearance) and increase rather than decrease their food intake, especially when they were chronically insecure about their bodies. Narcissism, grandiose, in particular, buffered against the adverse consequences of thin-ideal exposure, shielding the more body-insecure individuals [81].

Why would narcissism have buffer potential? Research on mental toughness provides an answer. Mental toughness is a compound of confidence in one's abilities, sense of control over one's life,

propensity to meet challenges, and commitment to goal pursuit [82]. Grandiose narcissism is positively related to mental toughness [83]. In addition, grandiose narcissism predicts, through higher mental toughness, various health outcomes such as reduced subjective stress [20], depression [84], and subclinical psychopathology [85]. Vulnerable narcissism, however, predicts, through lower mental toughness, increased subjective stress [20] and depression [84].

A buffer perspective sheds light on another narcissistic peculiarity, reactions to neutral, even unfavourable, feedback. Narcissists often interpret neutral feedback in positive terms and even ignore or neglect unfavourable feedback (despite being annoyed by it), as they forge ahead with overconfidence [86,87]. Grandiose narcissism may buffer against the implications of such feedback. Future research could broaden the conceptualisation and application of the concept of buffer and examine it in conjunction with other forms of narcissism. Future research could also consider the role of other potential buffers such as resilience [88], hardiness [89], or grit [90].

Narcissism as Performance Facilitator

The mediating influence of mental toughness also accounts for some narcissistic performance surfeits. For example, grandiose narcissism is associated, via mental toughness, with positive educational outcomes like school grades [91]. Mental toughness may explain other performance outcomes such as innovation in the workplace, as expressed in one's ideas or supervisory ratings, through adaptability [92]. Adaptability to uncertainty, crises, or volatile social situations, a construct similar to propensity to challenge [82], may be positively linked to mental toughness and may additionally underlie the positive relation between grandiose narcissism and self-reported creative activities [93].

Grandiose narcissism can facilitate performance under certain conditions. Self-threat is a somewhat counterintuitive example. Self-threat, operationalised as negative feedback that is generic or that challenges participants' uniqueness, fosters stronger intentions to engage in a difficult assignment and more creative performance on an anagram task [94]. Similarly, grandiose narcissists with high levels of self-doubt (operationalised as within-person narcissistic vulnerability) persist longer toward their goals [95]. Perhaps self-threat, albeit initially likely to instigate defensiveness, mobilises mental toughness, resilience, or grit, in galvanising persistence. This pattern would be congruent with experimental tests of the mask model in dynamic settings [58,59].

Such mechanisms may also be mobilised not only by self-protection, as mentioned earlier, but also by self-enhancement. Grandiose narcissism predicts persistence on an impossible task, portrayed as an IQ test, when this route constitutes the only opportunity for success but not when alternatives exist [96]. Grandiose narcissism also predicts better performance in the presence of other self-enhancement opportunities, such as social pressure [96,97], competition [98], or public recognition [99]. The motivation to self-enhance may trigger one or more of the previously-mentioned mechanisms, culminating in improved performance.

Is There a Remedy to Narcissism?

Although grandiose narcissism may have psychological health benefits [100], it is generally considered a relational liability (Box 4) and more of a question mark than an asset when it comes to leadership (Box 5). What can be done, then, for damage control? Can narcissism be contained in the interest of others and society?

Containment would be easier, if narcissists acknowledged their blind spots. They rarely do so, however. Grandiose narcissists hold exaggerated views of their agentic attributes [101] and use them to make what they believe to be a favourable impression [102] or flout established

Box 4. Narcissism in Relationships

For the most part, narcissists' relationships, both non-romantic (acquaintanceships, friendships) and romantic, are troublesome.

In regard to non-romantic relationships, grandiose narcissists' interaction style is characterised by dominance and coldness (but vulnerable narcissists' only by coldness [136]). This is not surprising due to grandiose narcissists' deficits in perspective-taking and generosity and propensity to anger-based retaliation [137]. Indeed, narcissists, especially rivalrous narcissists, are unlikely to apologise for their interpersonal transgressions, as they experience lower empathy and guilt for the victim [138]. Grandiose narcissists' interaction style is reflected in the abiding impressions they give off in social media platforms: they are disliked and frequently become sources of conflict [139]. Their friendships are generally taxing [140], although admiring (but not rivalrous) narcissism is positively associated with friendship [38] and fosters popularity over time [141].

In regard to romantic relationships, the picture is also concerning for both grandiose narcissists and their partners [142], as grandiose narcissists engage in perfectionistic self-presentation [143], are on the look-out for alternatives [144], have sex for self-affirmation purposes [145], and report relationship satisfaction when their partner meets their agentic needs for status or attractiveness [146]. Further, both grandiose and vulnerable narcissists save symbols of mating success (i.e., trophies) from their prior relationships [147]. Moreover, both forms of narcissism report that they manipulate their partners through displays of jealousy to increase their control and power over them and vulnerable narcissists additionally report doing so for defensive reasons (e.g., to alleviate their insecurity, compensate for low self-esteem, or be vengeful [148]). The findings for admiring and rivalrous narcissists are mixed. On the one hand, both are linked to exploitation, as they are likely to share sexy photographs of their partner, provided she or he is attractive [149]. Admiring narcissists, however, use their partner's mate value to buttress their own perceptions of mate value, whereas rivalrous narcissists downgrade their partner's value to the level of their own [150]. On the other hand, both forms of narcissism are associated with giving and receiving partner respect [151] and, although rivalrous narcissism is linked to long-term relational difficulties, admiring narcissism is linked to short-term appeal [152].

etiquette in order to attract attention [103]. Grandiose narcissists' views of their communal attributes are more in accord with those of perceivers, but narcissists are content, even proud, of being disagreeable, combative, or uncaring; for them, communal attributes are a sign of weakness and they treat the relative absence of such attributes as a forum for self-enhancement [104, 105]. Additionally, grandiose narcissists believe that they convey more favourable impressions of themselves to others over time than they actually do [104] and even perceive themselves to be more narcissistic than others perceive them to be [106].

Finding remedies to narcissism, then, is a tricky business. One would need to implement techniques that counteract narcissistic tendencies without threatening narcissists, as self-threat

Box 5. Narcissism and Leadership

Prototypical leadership characteristics (extraversion, confidence or self-esteem, generalised self-efficacy, authority, dominance, empathy) are also typical narcissistic characteristics, with the exception of empathy. As such, narcissists are perceived to be leaders and are likely to be elected as leaders, perceptions and positions toward which they are propelled by their own needs for status, power, and social exhibitionism [153, 154]. But are they good leaders?

The relevant literature, which has focused on grandiose narcissism, has failed to find an overall positive association between narcissism and leadership effectiveness [114, 153]. Instead, this association is contingent on leadership timeline [114]. Upon entering the organisation, narcissists appeal to followers with their decisiveness, persistence in the face of failure, and even charisma (in the case of agentic and communal, but not rivalrous, narcissism [34]). Their boldness and vision may be conducive to innovation. However, as time goes by, the relationally dysfunctional narcissistic characteristics (e.g., disregard or contempt for others) begin to wear down on the followers and the narcissistic propensity for risk-taking, overconfidence, entitlement, and neglect of expert advice may conduce to trouble or even financial ruin. However, the association between narcissism-leadership and effectiveness may also be contingent on societal context [154]. Narcissists may be better able to engage in crisis management and push their agenda further in times of financial or societal uncertainty. Further, this association may be contingent on followership, that is, the extent to which followers maintain a favourable opinion of their narcissistic leader or are led to do so via leader impression management, such as frequent contact, and presenting oneself as endorsing similar values to followers or overcoming adversity [155]. Finally, the association may be contingent on leader-follower fit. On the one hand, narcissistic leaders may be more effective with submissive rather than dominant followers (dominance complementarity theory [156]). On the other hand, narcissists may be more effective among narcissistic followers, as the latter see themselves in their leader. Consistent with this view, narcissistic business students attain higher class grades when taught by narcissistic faculty [157].

might give rise to defensiveness [107]. One set of such laboratory techniques involve cultivating communal inclinations. These appear to be effective: instructing narcissists to take the perspective of others heightens their empathic concern [108]; instructing them to think of an occasion where they cared for another individual, or simply to repeat communal statements ('I am a caring person'), lowers their entitlement and exploitativeness [107]; subliminally priming them with communal images (an older man helping an elderly woman in a wheelchair) raises their commitment to their partner [109]; mentioning that a social interactant who had previously insulted them shares with them a rare fingerprint type or birthday decreases their vengefulness (noise blasts [110]); and, finally, a mix of such techniques (perspective-taking, strengthening perceived similarity to others, priming with interdependent words) lowers state narcissism and weakens subsequent desire for fame [107]. Yet, from the vantage point of the agency-communion model [31], it is possible that these techniques, while decreasing levels of agentic narcissism, only increase levels of communal narcissism. Additionally, mind-body practices, like yoga or meditation, are ineffectual, as they not only fail to curtail agentic narcissism, but also raise communal narcissism by reinforcing participants' beliefs in their superiority when it comes to yoga or meditation [111].

Paradoxically, a technique that strokes the narcissistic ego increases prosociality [112]. Self-focus imagination involves imagining the self (versus another person) in the scene of need. Narcissists (versus non-narcissists) exposed to charity appeals that instruct them to imagine the self (versus the recipient) immerse more deeply into the recipient's (a refugee's) plight, feel more empathetic for them, express stronger donation intentions, and actually donate more. Additionally, self-affirmation techniques, like pondering one's important values, decrease aggressive behaviour among at-risk youth who are narcissists [113], but through a different route: by relaxing defensiveness.

These techniques have been validated in the laboratory, albeit chiefly with self-reported outcomes. Longitudinal interventions that assess behavioural outcomes are needed. Structural changes in the narcissists' organisational or social environment, such as the introduction of checks and balances, may also prove effective [114]. Lastly, the research agenda will need to incorporate other forms of narcissism, especially vulnerable and communal.

Concluding Remarks

Fascination with trait or everyday narcissism shows no signs of abating. Researchers have approached the topic from social/personality, developmental, and organisational angles (among others). This review highlighted contemporary foci and drafted empirical paths.

Albeit commonly threaded by egocentric exceptionalism and social selfishness, many forms of narcissism, seven, to be exact, have emerged, encompassing assorted differentiating features (Figure 1). The distinction between two forms, grandiose versus vulnerable narcissism, has captured the lion's share of attention, due to the distinction's rich historical background, clinical significance, and germaneness to both individuals and groups. More research is needed to highlight the genetic, developmental (i.e., socialisation), and situational (i.e., feedback, life events) antecedents of this distinction, as well as its correlates and consequences. The seven forms of narcissism have been summarised in structural and **process models**. Integration, though a long way ahead, is desirable. In the meantime, more theoretical and empirical emphasis could be placed on process models in an attempt to improve explanation.

Narcissistic polyhedricity aside, what are narcissists like deep down inside? Is their core soft and fragile or is it hard and robust? Answering this question, separately for various forms of narcissism and especially grandiose versus vulnerable, can have widespread implications for the conceptualisation

Outstanding Questions

How and what forms of parental narcissism predicts which form of child narcissism?

How do socialisation practices predict different forms of child narcissism?

What are the physiological correlates of narcissism? What are the neural processes underlying narcissism?

What are the cognitive mechanisms involved in narcissists' reactions to feedback? How are attentional, memory, or judgmental processes implicated in the way narcissists neglect, misinterpret, or selectively engage in the feedback they receive?

Is narcissism guided by appetitive motivation? For example, does feeding a narcissist's extravagant fantasies pacify or magnify subsequent self-enhancement?

How are different profiles of narcissism (e.g., high on grandiose but low on vulnerable versus high on vulnerable but low on grandiose) related to psychological health, perceptions of others, and behaviour?

Self-determination theory predicts that deficits in basic needs (autonomy, relatedness, competence) are higher among vulnerable than grandiose narcissists. Does this prediction imply that a grandiose narcissist can be turned into a vulnerable narcissist by thwarting their psychological needs, or that a vulnerable narcissist can be turned into a grandiose narcissist by satisfying their psychological needs?

Are the interpersonal (non-romantic and romantic) relationships of communal narcissists less troublesome than those of agentic narcissists?

How are other forms of narcissism, besides grandiose, linked to leadership effectiveness? Under what circumstances do communal narcissists make more effective leaders than agentic narcissists?

There has been an overemphasis in the literature on self-reports, university students, and Western cultures. Are the results generalisable

of the trait and its relational, organisational, or clinical relevance. The answer may be contingent on whether narcissism is studied *in situ* or dynamically.

Returning to the issue of the development of narcissism, socialisation-based accounts have shown that excessive parental praise is linked, cross-sectionally and longitudinally, to elevated levels of narcissism. But this pertains to grandiose, and particularly agentic, narcissism. Other socialisation practices, such as inconsistent parental feedback (i.e., alternating between lavish praise and harsh criticism) for the same level performance on the part of the child, might nurture vulnerable narcissism, especially when the feedback fails to discount performance difficulty (i.e., whether the competition was tough or undemanding). Regardless, investigations ought to link socialisation practices to various forms of narcissism.

Whether narcissism is beneficial or harmful, and for whom, is another issue of keen societal interest. Grandiose narcissism may confer some health, buffer, or performance benefits, but it (as well as other forms of narcissism, such as vulnerable and rivalrous) can be a liability for others, organisations, and society at large, especially given the increased likelihood that narcissist will seek and attain positions of influence. Research could shed light on remedies to narcissism at both the relational and organisational level.

This review was hopefully able to map out the search for Narcissus. The search promises to intensify in the coming years (see [Outstanding Questions](#)). Ovid will be happy.

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to informant-reports or behaviour, community samples, and non-Western cultures, respectively?

Some cultures are seen as more narcissistic than others. Does this perception contribute to stereotyping of individual members of those cultures?

How do cultures enhance or suppress narcissism? How do cultures interact with societal context (e.g., economic boosts or busts, social class) and socialisation practices to shape the development of narcissism?

How can cultures help to 'make the best out of narcissists' by allowing them to become drivers of modernisation and innovation while avoiding instability and turmoil?

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