



Different Forms of Narcissism and Leadership

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Abstract: Prior research has revealed relevant associations between narcissism and leadership, but most studies have focused on narcissism as a personality trait and its grandiose dimension. However, other forms of narcissism (e.g., vulnerable, pathological, and communal narcissism) might also be relevant for leadership but have mainly been neglected in leadership research. Therefore, in this research spotlight, I investigate the link between alternative forms of narcissism and leadership criteria such as leader emergence and leader effectiveness. Along with theoretical considerations, I will derive suggestions for future research on these forms of narcissism and leadership.

Keywords: grandiose narcissism, vulnerable narcissism, pathological narcissism, communal narcissism, leadership

There is an ongoing research interest in narcissism and its relation to leadership, which may be because narcissism is a paradoxical trait with both positive and negative sides (e.g., Braun, 2017; Campbell et al., 2011; Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006). Prevailing research on narcissism and leadership has focused on narcissism as a personality trait (in comparison to pathological narcissism) and its grandiose (in comparison to its vulnerable) facet. Furthermore, most researchers have focused on agentic (in comparison to communal) narcissism. In the current Research Spotlight, I will consider how alternative forms of narcissism (i.e., vulnerable, pathological, and communal narcissism) might enhance our understanding of narcissism in the context of leadership. In the following, I will first give a short overview of the prevailing perspective on narcissism in leadership research before discussing how alternative perspectives on narcissism might enhance our understanding of leadership.

Prevailing View on Narcissism in Leadership Research

Leadership researchers have mostly examined narcissism as a personality trait and its grandiose form (e.g., Braun, 2017), which I will refer to in the following as *grandiose narcissism*. Grandiose narcissism can be defined as “a relatively stable individual difference consisting of grandiosity, self-love and inflated self-views” (Campbell et al., 2011, p. 269) and can be described by three core elements

(Campbell & Foster, 2007): a narcissistic self, shallow relationships, and self-regulatory strategies. The narcissistic self includes feelings of specialness, uniqueness, entitlement, and a desire to achieve power, esteem, and status. Furthermore, grandiose narcissists lack empathy and emotional closeness, and their relationships are often superficial or exploitative. Finally, grandiose narcissists employ intrapsychic and interpersonal self-regulatory strategies to increase and maintain inflated self-views (e.g., fantasizing about grandiosity or using relationships to feel special). This description shows why grandiose narcissism may be relevant for leadership. For instance, grandiose narcissists might strive for leadership positions, as they like to have authority over others and see themselves as born leaders (e.g., Emmons, 1984; Raskin & Terry, 1988). Leadership positions offer power, status, and superiority – things that grandiose narcissists value and strive for (e.g., Bradlee & Emmons, 1992; Zeigler-Hill et al., 2018). A leader position might also enhance grandiose narcissistic leaders’ inflated self-views as it provides a stage to be seen (e.g., Nevicka et al., 2011). Research has shown that grandiose narcissism is linked to motivation to lead (e.g., Chen, 2016) and leader emergence (e.g., Grijalva et al., 2015). But are grandiose narcissists also good and effective leaders? While grandiose narcissistic leaders appear charming and receive positive leader-ratings at first sight (e.g., Ong et al., 2016), this picture changes as time goes by with a longer acquaintance, grandiose narcissistic leaders are rated less favorable (e.g., Judge et al., 2006; Ong et al., 2016). Leading also requires relationship-building with followers (e.g., Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995) – something grandiose narcissistic

leaders might not be good at because they are not interested in close and warm relationships (e.g., Campbell et al., 2002). Instead, grandiose narcissistic leaders might exploit their followers due to their selfishness, which might turn into destructive leadership (e.g., Krasikova et al., 2013) or abusive supervision (e.g., Waldman et al., 2018).

In sum, it seems that grandiose narcissism has (at least some) positive and (even more) negative implications for leadership – but does this also apply to vulnerable, pathological, and communal narcissism? In the following, I will describe how these other forms of narcissism might contribute to our understanding of leadership.

Vulnerable Narcissism and Leadership

Besides grandiose narcissism, vulnerable narcissism might also be related to leadership. While narcissistic grandiosity is linked to extraversion, exhibitionism, or overconfidence, narcissistic vulnerability is related to introversion, defensiveness, and neuroticism (e.g., Miller & Campbell, 2008; Wink, 1991). Yet, both dimensions share a core of antagonism and self-importance (see also Krizan & Herlache, 2018; Miller et al., 2017).

Prior research on narcissism and leadership mainly considered grandiose narcissism (Braun et al., 2019; Wirtz & Rigotti, 2020). We do not know much about whether vulnerable narcissism is linked to leadership and, if so, in which manner. One could argue that vulnerable narcissists are less likely to emerge as leaders, as they are less extraverted than their grandiose counterparts. Extraversion (a component associated with grandiose but not vulnerable narcissism, see, e.g., Miller & Campbell, 2008; Wink, 1991) can explain the link between grandiose narcissism and leader emergence (Grijalva et al., 2015). But individuals high in vulnerable narcissism have high levels of entitlement and self-importance, meaning that they care about their social image and status (similar to individuals high in grandiose narcissism; e.g., Krizan & Herlache, 2018). Thus, these individuals might believe that they deserve a leadership position, and that would provide them with status and social standing, which is important to them (e.g., Krizan & Herlache, 2018).

Provided that vulnerable narcissists achieve a leadership position, it might be that they have difficulties in building positive relationships with their followers, as they mistrust others (e.g., Miller et al., 2017) and trust is an important prerequisite for positive leader-follower relationships (e.g., Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Vulnerable narcissistic leaders might behave in disagreeable ways toward their followers as vulnerable narcissism includes antagonism (similar to grandiose narcissism; e.g., Miller et al., 2017). In line with this, the narcissistic vulnerability was linked to abusive

supervision intentions (Braun et al., 2019). Vulnerable narcissistic leaders might express their antagonism differently than grandiose narcissistic leaders, given that only vulnerable narcissism is linked to covert behaviors (e.g., Wink, 1991): For instance, vulnerable narcissistic leaders might engage in passive and less observable forms of destructive leadership.

Pathological Narcissism and Leadership

Another form of narcissism that might be related to leadership is pathological narcissism. In clinical psychology, pathological narcissism is considered a personality disorder termed Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD): According to the DSM-V, NPD describes a “pervasive pattern of grandiosity (in fantasy or behavior), need for admiration, and lack of empathy”, which consists of five or more of the following criteria: (1) a grandiose sense of self-importance; (2) fantasies of unlimited success, power, brilliance, and so forth; (3) a conviction of being special and unique; (4) a need for excessive admiration; (5) a sense of entitlement; (6) interpersonal exploitativeness; (7) a lack of empathy; (8) envy of others; (9) arrogant, haughty behaviors or attitudes. To be diagnosed as having NPD, individuals must experience distress or impairment. It is assumed that pathological narcissism is an extreme form of *normal* narcissism (e.g., Miller et al., 2017; Raskin & Hall, 1981), and as the latter shows important relations to leadership criteria, it can be expected that pathological narcissism does so, too. For instance, pathological narcissism contains high levels of self-importance and entitlement, a desire for power, and for being admired – all of which might attract individuals with pathological narcissism to leadership positions.

Due to their antagonistic behavioral style, individuals with pathological narcissism will likely behave aggressively toward their followers. Yet, besides the similarities of normal and pathological narcissism, there are also differences: pathological narcissism is accompanied by distress or impairment (e.g., Miller et al., 2017) – in contrast to normal narcissism, which is linked to psychological functioning and well-being (e.g., Sedikides et al., 2004). It is well documented that leaders' health and well-being impact their leader behavior such that leaders in bad health have difficulties functioning effectively in their role as a leader (e.g., Harms et al., 2017; Kaluza et al., 2020). Such leaders are more likely to show destructive and less likely to show constructive leader behaviors. Accordingly, given that pathological narcissism is associated with impaired well-being, pathological narcissistic leaders might be more likely to show destructive and less likely to show constructive leader behaviors.

Communal Narcissism and Leadership

Another form of narcissism that has been neglected in leadership research so far is communal narcissism (Gebauer et al., 2012). While the classic view on grandiose narcissism is that grandiose narcissists hold positive and inflated self-views in agentic domains (e.g., dominance, power, success; Campbell & Foster, 2007), it has been assumed that communal narcissists hold positive and inflated self-views in communal domains (e.g., helpfulness, trustworthiness, and warmth; Gebauer et al., 2012). Nevertheless, communal narcissists have the same central self-motives (e.g., grandiosity, entitlement, and power), but they pursue these self-motives by communal means (Gebauer et al., 2012).

Communal narcissists might strive for leadership positions as they strive for power and esteem (Gebauer et al., 2012). Furthermore, communal narcissist might be successful in achieving leadership positions, as they are likely to make positive first impressions by presenting themselves as other-oriented (Gebauer et al., 2012) and thus, as leaders who care about their followers. However, would communal narcissists make good leaders? Communal narcissistic leaders might be able to build positive relationships with their followers due to their communal orientation, and their ability to forgive (Fatfouta et al., 2017) and their enhanced liking of others (Rentzsch & Gebauer, 2019). Yet, initially, positive impressions might deteriorate over time (Gebauer et al., 2012) when others (e.g., followers) realize that the communal narcissistic leaders overclaimed to be other-oriented and, are in, fact self-focused. It is also assumed that communal narcissists behave aggressively but they show their aggression in communal ways (e.g., passive aggression; Gebauer et al., 2012). Thus, it might be that communal narcissistic leaders engage in communal forms of destructive leadership such as passive destructive behaviors, talking badly about followers behind their back, and so forth.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this Research Spotlight shows that while grandiose narcissism has received a large amount of research attention in the field of leadership, other types of narcissism (i.e., vulnerable, pathological, and communal narcissism) remain underexplored. Yet, as shown in this Research Spotlight, vulnerable, pathological, and communal narcissism might be related to leadership. On the one hand, these forms of narcissism might be linked to leadership similarly to grandiose narcissism (e.g., vulnerable narcissistic leaders might show aggressive behaviors toward followers, similar to grandiose narcissistic leaders who show abusive supervision; see e.g., Waldman et al., 2018). On the other hand, these forms of narcissism might be linked to leadership differently than grandiose narcissism

(e.g., it can be expected that vulnerable narcissistic leaders engage in more covert aggressive behaviors toward followers than grandiose narcissistic leaders). Therefore, future leadership research should consider vulnerable, pathological, and communal narcissism to gain a more holistic understanding of the effects of these forms of narcissism on leadership.

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