



Communal Narcissism: Theoretical and Empirical Support

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Abstract

Grandiose narcissists' global self-evaluations are characterized by exceptional self-importance, entitlement, and social power. But what are the specific content domains in which grandiose narcissists evaluate themselves so highly that they can subjectively justify their narcissistic self-evaluations at the global level? The classic view is that grandiose narcissists base their global self-evaluations on excessive self-enhancement in the agentic domain (e.g., extremely inflated self-views concerning intelligence, creativity, and scholastic aptitude), but not on excessive self-enhancement in the communal domain (e.g., no extremely inflated self-views concerning morality, prosociality, and interpersonal aptitude). We maintain that this classic view only captures one form of grandiose narcissism—agentic narcissism—at the expense of a complementary form: communal narcissism. Like agentic (i.e., classic) narcissists, communal narcissists hold global self-evaluations of exceptional self-importance, entitlement, and social power. Unlike agentic narcissists, how-

ever, communal narcissists base those global self-evaluations on excessive self-enhancement in the communal domain, not on excessive self-enhancement in the agentic domain. We review the theoretical and empirical support for communal narcissism's existence. We conclude that communal narcissism is real and that a full understanding of grandiose narcissism necessitates attention to both classic/agentic and communal narcissism.

Keywords

Communal narcissism · Grandiose narcissism · Self-concept content · Agency · Communion · Agency-communion model of narcissism

Grandiose narcissists see themselves as inordinately important, feel overly entitled to special treatment, and like to be exceptionally influential (Campbell, Bonacci, Shelton, Exline, & Bushman, 2004; Krizan & Herlache, 2018; Thomaes, Brummelman, & Sedikides, 2018). In other words, grandiose narcissists' *global* self-evaluations are characterized by super-exalted self-importance, entitlement, and social power. But what is the subjective evidence on which grandiose narcissists base those global self-evaluations? What are the *specific content domains* in which grandiose narcissists evaluate themselves so highly that they can subjectively

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justify their grandiose self-evaluations at the global level?

This question has been at the center of narcissism research since the publication of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Terry, 1988), the standard measure of grandiose narcissism used in 77% of published research (Cain, Pincus, & Ansell, 2008). By now, well over 30 studies have examined the subjective evidence with which grandiose/NPI narcissists justify their global self-evaluations. Grijalva and Zhang (2016) meta-analyzed those studies and found a coherent pattern of results: grandiose/NPI narcissists unduly overestimate themselves in one (but not the other) “big two” content domain of self-perception (Gebauer, Paulhus, & Neberich, 2013). In particular, they overestimate themselves in the *agentic* domain (e.g., intelligence, creativity, scholastic aptitude), but not in the *communal* domain (e.g., morality, prosociality, interpersonal aptitude). Put otherwise, they base their global self-evaluations on intemperately self-enhancing their agentic attributes, but not their communal attributes.

Grandiose/NPI narcissists’ selectivity in their excessive self-enhancement (agency, yes; communion, no) has become so influential in the narcissism literature that most theories revolve around it. For example, Paulhus and John (1998) classified grandiose/NPI narcissism as an egoistic (aka agentic) self-perception bias, not a moralistic (aka communal) self-perception bias. Likewise, Paulhus (2001) described grandiose/NPI narcissism as an extreme form of agency, at the expense of communion (see also Leary, 1957). Vazire and Funder (2006) equated grandiose/NPI narcissism with unmitigated agency and defined the latter as “overly positive self-views on agentic traits” (p. 161). Campbell and colleagues considered agentic self-enhancement so integral to grandiose/NPI narcissism that they labeled their theory the “agency model of narcissism” (Campbell, Brunell, & Finkel, 2006; Campbell & Foster, 2007). Finally, Sedikides and Campbell (2017) built their energy clash model of narcissistic leadership on the premise that narcissists unduly self-enhance in the agentic domain, not in the communal domain.

We (Gebauer, Sedikides, Verplanken, & Maio, 2012; Gebauer et al., 2018) wondered *why* grandiose/NPI narcissists evidently base their global self-evaluations on unduly self-enhancing their agentic attributes, but not their communal attributes. We considered several answers to that question and found one intriguing. Perhaps there is not one form of grandiose narcissism but two parallel forms, agentic and communal. Agentic narcissists would, by definition, base their global self-evaluations on unduly self-enhancing their agentic attributes. Communal narcissists, by contrast, would hold the same global self-evaluations but base them on unduly self-enhancing their communal attributes. From a traditional narcissism perspective, that possibility spelled trouble, as it assumed that the NPI is not a measure of grandiose narcissism per se but a measure of one form of it: agentic narcissism. Consequently, prior NPI-based work had examined one form of narcissism only (i.e., agentic narcissism) at the neglect of the other form (i.e., communal narcissism).

The small literature on communal narcissism has been mainly concerned with the question of whether communal narcissism is real. This concern is justifiable. The construct of communal narcissism is controversial from a traditional narcissism perspective. Also, establishing the construct would redirect the stream of narcissism research. We aim here to summarize theoretical and empirical support for the communal narcissism construct.

Theoretical Support for Communal Narcissism

Is communal narcissism an oxymoron? It appears like it from the vantage point of the traditional narcissism literature. In fact, communion is typically regarded as antithetical to grandiose narcissism. As a case in point, experiments that primed communion found a reduction in narcissism-signifying interpersonal behavior (Finkel, Campbell, Buffardi, Kumashiro, & Rusbult, 2009) and in grandiose/NPI narcissism itself (Giacomin & Jordan, 2014). Outside the narcissism literature, however, it is well-accepted

that global self-evaluations fall into content-specific factors (here: agentic and communal narcissism).

Consider global self-esteem, for example. Tafarodi and Milne (2002; see also Schmitt & Allik, 2005) factor analyzed Rosenberg's (1965) Self-Esteem Scale, the most widely used measure of *global* self-esteem (Blascovich & Tomaka, 1991). Self-esteem consisted of two factors: self-competence (aka agency) and self-liking (aka communion). Likewise, Paulhus and John (1994—as cited in Paulhus & John, 1998) factor analyzed self-enhancement indices regarding a diverse set of traits (i.e., dominance, extraversion, intellect, openness, neuroticism, ambition, agreeableness, nurturance, and dutifulness). Two factors emerged: a superhero-type (aka agency) self-perception bias and a saint-type (aka communion) self-perception bias. Furthermore, humility is relevant, too, because a hallmark of humility is the absence of self-enhancement (Hill & Laney, 2017) or grandiose narcissism (Miller, Price, Gentile, Lynam, & Campbell, 2012). The humility literature distinguishes between two factors: intellectual (aka agentic) humility and relational (aka communal) humility (Davis et al., 2011; Roberts & Wood, 2003).

Taken together, there is plenty of evidence outside the narcissism literature that global self-evaluations typically fall into the two content-specific factors of agency and communion. Gebauer et al. (2018) reasoned: If this is true for global self-evaluations in the “normal” range (i.e., self-esteem) and the biased range (i.e., self-enhancement, low humility), why shouldn't it also be true for global self-evaluations in the grandiose range (i.e., grandiose narcissism)? Put differently, the construct of communal narcissism may seem daring from a traditional narcissism perspective, but it seemed timely from a broader self-evaluation perspective.

Empirical Support for Communal Narcissism

Assuming that there are individuals who qualify as communal narcissists, what criteria would they have to meet? Gebauer et al. (2018) identi-

fied six such criteria. In this section, we describe those criteria and summarize relevant empirical evidence (for primary and detailed evidence, see Gebauer et al., 2018; for a complementary account, see Gebauer & Sedikides, *in press*). The criteria are (1) positive, but non-perfect, relation with agentic/NPI narcissism, (2) communal self-enhancement, (3) grandiose self-evaluations at the global level, (4) psychological adjustment, (5) distinctiveness from the communion facet of vulnerable narcissism, and (6) distinctiveness from communal self-perceptions. We note that communal narcissism is measured with the 16-item Communal Narcissism Inventory (CNI; Gebauer et al., 2012; see also: Žemojtel-Piotrowska, Czarna, Piotrowski, Baran, & Maltby, 2016). Sample items are the following: “I am extraordinarily trustworthy,” “I am the best friend someone can have,” “I will be able to solve world poverty,” and “I will bring freedom to the people.”

Criterion #1: Positive, But Non-perfect, Relation with Agentic/NPI Narcissism

To qualify as grandiose narcissism (vs. non-narcissism), communal narcissism must relate positively with agentic narcissism, given that agentic and communal narcissism are both presumed to be forms of grandiose narcissism. That positive relation, however, must not be perfect (i.e., latent $r < 0.85$; Clark & Watson, 1995), given that the two forms of grandiose narcissism are presumed to be distinguishable. The primary evidence points to such positive, but non-perfect, relation. As a case in point, the largest published study on the relation between agentic/NPI narcissism and communal narcissism (Fatfouta, Zeigler-Hill, & Schröder-Abé, 2017) used a sample of more than 1000 participants and found a medium-size relation (Cohen, 1988). Gebauer et al. (2018) obtained similar results in a meta-analysis on well over 7000 participants largely from the USA, the UK, and Germany (including Fatfouta et al.'s data). The omnibus correlation between agentic/NPI narcissism and communal narcissism was again of medium size (Cohen, 1988). Gebauer

et al. (2018) examined the relation between agentic/NPI narcissism and communal narcissism in a cross-cultural study of 50+ samples from various countries (total $N > 13,000$). The relation between agentic/NPI narcissism and communal narcissism differed somewhat between countries, but its size consistently ranged between medium and large (and was never perfect). Luo, Cai, Sedikides, and Song (2014) conducted a twin study to shed light on the shared genetic and environmental influences upon agentic/NPI and communal narcissism. Most of those influences were unique rather than shared. These genetic results further corroborate the conceptual distinction between agentic/NPI narcissism and communal narcissism.

Criterion #2: Communal Self-enhancement

To justify the prefix “communal,” communal narcissists ought to unduly self-enhance primarily in the communal domain. Gebauer et al. (2012) provided initial evidence for this proposition. They assessed agentic versus communal self-enhancement with a variant of the overclaiming task (Paulhus, Harms, Bruce, & Lysy, 2003). Specifically, one item-set assessed the degree to which participants overclaimed their knowledge in agentic domains (e.g., international stock market, chemistry and physics, market principles), whereas another item-set assessed the degree to which participants overclaimed their knowledge in communal domains (e.g., humanitarian aid organizations, nature and animal protection organizations, international health charities). The results concerning agentic/NPI narcissism replicated much previous research on agentic/NPI narcissism and agentic versus communal self-enhancement (Grijalva & Zhang, 2016). Compared to non-narcissists, agentic/NPI narcissists unduly overclaimed their agentic knowledge, but not their communal knowledge. (Actually, agentic/NPI narcissists overclaimed their communal knowledge particularly little.) More relevant to our purposes, the results concerning communal narcissism buttressed the conceptual viability of the communal narcissism

concept. Compared to non-narcissists, communal narcissists unduly overclaimed their communal knowledge, but not their agentic knowledge. Gebauer et al.’s (2012) original finding rested on a relatively small sample. Thus, to draw firmer conclusions, Gebauer et al. (2018) carried out a meta-analysis of seven samples that included agentic/NPI narcissism, communal narcissism, agentic overclaiming, and communal overclaiming. The meta-analysis included over 4000 participants (and, among them, the original participants from Gebauer et al., 2012). Results replicated the original findings very closely. Thus, Gebauer et al.’s (2012) initial findings stand on firm empirical ground.

Of importance, the evidence is not limited to the overclaiming task. Complementary findings come from two well-powered studies on grandiose narcissism (agentic/NPI and communal) and prosociality (Nehrlich, Gebauer, Sedikides, & Schoel, *in press*). In their first study, Nehrlich et al. compared grandiose narcissists’ prosociality self-reports with their actual prosocial behavior. In their second study, the authors compared grandiose narcissists’ prosociality self-reports with prosociality peer reports. The results across the two studies were highly consistent. Compared to non-narcissists, communal narcissists unduly overstated their prosociality and, thus, evinced particularly high levels of communal self-enhancement. By contrast, the results looked very different for agentic/NPI narcissists. Agentic/NPI narcissists did not overstate their prosociality any more or less than non-narcissists did. (For conceptually similar results in the domain of trust, see Yang et al., 2018).

Criterion #3: Grandiose Self-evaluations at the Global Level

To qualify as grandiose narcissists (vs. non-narcissists), communal narcissists must share with agentic/NPI narcissists the same global self-evaluations (i.e., super-exalted self-importance, entitlement, and social power). Gebauer et al. (2012) reported initial evidence for such sharing: positive relations between communal

narcissism and global self-evaluations of grandiose narcissists (i.e., grandiosity, entitlement, social power). Moreover, the relations between agentic/NPI narcissism and those global self-evaluations were similar in size. Furthermore, communal narcissism's relations with grandiosity, entitlement, and social power held when agentic/NPI narcissism was controlled for. Gebauer et al. (2018) recently sought to replicate the just-described pattern of results in a much larger sample ($N > 1000$) of U.S. adults. The results replicated very closely. Other researchers similarly found that communal narcissists report exacerbated levels of entitlement (Žemojtel-Piotrowska et al., 2016; Žemojtel-Piotrowska, Piotrowski, & Maltby, 2015). Additionally, experimental evidence suggests that communal narcissists' communal self-enhancement is in the service of upholding social power (Giacomin & Jordan, 2015). In all, the evidence converges in illustrating that communal narcissists and agentic/NPI narcissists hold the same global self-evaluations. Finally, Gebauer et al. (2018) found evidence for a positive relation between communal narcissism and entitlement in their cross-cultural study from 50+ countries. The positive relation between communal narcissism and entitlement appears to be pan-cultural.

Criterion #4: Psychological Adjustment

To qualify as grandiose narcissists (vs. vulnerable narcissists), communal narcissists must be psychologically well-adjusted, at least on an equal plain with non-narcissists (Barry & Malkin, 2010; Campbell, 2001; Dickinson & Pincus, 2003; Miller et al., 2011; Wink, 1991). Gebauer et al. (2012) provided initial evidence for communal narcissists' good psychological adjustment. In particular, they obtained a positive relation between communal narcissism and self-esteem. This relation was moderate in size, and it was also virtually identical in size with the relation between agentic/NPI narcissism and self-esteem (Sedikides, Rudich, Gregg, Kumashiro, & Rusbult, 2004). Moreover, Žemojtel-

Piotrowska, Clinton, and Piotrowski (2014) found positive relations between communal narcissism and life satisfaction, positive affect, social well-being, and self-esteem. Again, those relations were moderate and virtually identical in size with the relations between agentic/NPI narcissism and those four psychological adjustment indicators. In addition, Gebauer et al. (2018) conducted a meta-analysis on the relation between grandiose narcissism (agentic/NPI and communal narcissism) on the one hand and psychological adjustment on the other. That meta-analysis, too, confirmed prior findings (Gebauer et al., 2012; Žemojtel-Piotrowska et al., 2014) across diverse indicators of psychological adjustment.

Furthermore, Gebauer et al. (2018) examined the relation between communal narcissism and psychological adjustment (self-esteem, life satisfaction) in their cross-cultural study of 50+ countries. The different countries differed widely in the relation between communal narcissism and psychological adjustment (the same was true for the relation between agentic/NPI narcissism and psychological adjustment). Of importance, however, the relation between communal narcissism and psychological adjustment was never significantly negative. The omnibus effect size between communal narcissism and psychological adjustment was medium across all 50+ countries. Finally, the pattern of results regarding communal narcissism and psychological adjustment did not conceptually change when agentic/NPI narcissism was statistically controlled for (Gebauer et al., 2012, 2018).

Criterion #5: Distinctiveness from the Communion Facet of Vulnerable Narcissism

To qualify as grandiose narcissism (vs. vulnerable narcissism), communal narcissism must be empirically distinguishable from the communal facet of vulnerable/pathological narcissism, namely, the "self-sacrificing self-enhancement" facet (SSSE; Pincus et al., 2009). Gebauer et al. (2018) provided the first test of the relation between communal narcissism and SSSE by

relying on two large samples with over 1000 participants each. The results confirmed that the two constructs are distinct: The two constructs shared about 25% of their variance. Additionally, the nomological networks of communal narcissism and SSSE were very different. Controlling for SSSE, communal narcissism was moderately related to higher agentic/NPI narcissism (see criterion #1). By contrast, controlling for communal narcissism, SSSE was hardly related to agentic/NPI narcissism at all. Moreover, controlling for SSSE, communal narcissism was moderately related to better psychological adjustment (more positive affect, higher life satisfaction, less negative affect, lower anxiety, and lower depression). By contrast, controlling for communal narcissism, SSSE was moderately related to worse psychological adjustment (less positive affect, more negative affect, higher anxiety, and higher depression). Overall, these results indicate that communal narcissism and SSSE are distinct constructs: communal narcissism is a type of grandiose narcissism, whereas SSSE is a type of vulnerable narcissism.

Criterion #6: Distinctiveness from Communal Self-perceptions

To qualify as communal narcissism (vs. communal self-perceptions), communal narcissism must be empirically distinguishable from communal self-perceptions. The primary evidence points to a moderate positive relation. Gebauer et al. (2012) found moderate positive relations between communal narcissism and self-reports of communal orientations, feminine traits, and warmth-agreeableness in interpersonal relationships. Likewise, Nehrlich et al. (in press) found moderate positive relations between communal narcissism and prosociality self-reports (a core aspect of communion) across two studies. Additionally, Gebauer et al. (2018) devised a non-narcissistic version of the CNI. More precisely, they rephrased all 16 items in an effort to eliminate their narcissistic flavor. For example, the CNI item “I am the most helpful person I know” was rephrased to state “I am generally very helpful.”

Gebauer et al. (2018) examined the relations between the CNI, its non-narcissistic sibling, and three well-validated communion scales. The correlation between the CNI and its non-narcissistic version was positive, but far from perfect. Furthermore, the correlations between the CNI and the three communion scales were again only moderate in size and they were only about half the size of the correlation between the CNI’s non-narcissistic version and those three scales. Finally, Gebauer et al. (2018) found evidence for a moderate relation between communal narcissism and agreeableness (another core aspect of communion) in their cross-cultural study of 50+ countries. Thus, the moderate relation between communal narcissism and communal self-perceptions seems to be pan-cultural.

Taken together, we have summarized the empirical evidence for communal narcissism along six criteria. We have seen that there is good empirical support for most of these criteria, but we have also seen that some criteria have received more research attention than others. Table 7.1 provides an overview of the six criteria together with some estimate of the empirical support for each criterion. The table may be useful to identify research questions regarding communal narcissism that are in particular need of further empirical scrutiny.

Conclusion

From the traditional view of grandiose narcissism, the construct of communal narcissism is counter-intuitive and perhaps daring. Yet, there is now solid theorizing and substantial empirical evidence suggesting that communal narcissism is real. In the self-literature, it has long been an empirical fact that global self-evaluations (self-esteem, self-enhancement, and humility) fall into an agentic facet and a communal facet. From that theoretical vantage point, the proposal that grandiose narcissism also falls into agentic and communal facets appears timely, if not overdue. Also, the evidence for communal narcissism is plentiful (see Table 7.1). As a result, it has become clear by now that prior research has focused disproportionately on

Table 7.1 Six criteria for communal narcissism's existence and their amount of empirical support

Criterion	# of samples	# of participants	Multiple labs	Support
#1 Positive, but non-perfect, relation with agentic/NPI narcissism	70+	≈21,000	Yes	Very strong
#2 Communal self-enhancement	9	≈5000	No	Strong
#3 Grandiose self-evaluations at the global level	60+	≈16,000	Yes	Strong
#4 Psychological adjustment	70+	≈21,000	Yes	Very strong
#5 Distinctiveness from the communion facet of vulnerable narcissism	2	≈2000	No	Strong
#6 Distinctiveness from communal self-perceptions	60+	≈16,000	Yes	Very strong

We judged the amount of empirical support on (a) the number of studies, (b) the number of participants (total), (c) whether the data came from multiple independent labs or from our labs only, and (d) our subjective estimate of alternative explanations (e.g., we believe that the correlation between agentic and communal narcissism is subject to fewer alternative explanations than the correlation between communal narcissism and grandiose self-evaluations at the global level, because there is no strong consensus on what measures should be used to capture grandiose self-evaluations at the global level)

one side of the narcissistic coin (i.e., agentic narcissism) while overlooking the other side (i.e., communal narcissism). Consequently, the field knows much more about agentic than communal narcissism. Further research into the construct of communal narcissism promises to redress this imbalance.

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