

Research Spotlight: Me, Me, Me – Narcissism and Motivation to Lead

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Abstract

This study tests the relationships between grandiose narcissism and affective, calculative, social-normative motivation to lead (MTL), and avoidance to lead as well as between vulnerable narcissism and affective MTL and avoidance to lead. Further, we assess the moderating effect of narcissistic organizational identification (NOI). As expected, grandiose narcissism correlated positively with three dimensions of MTL, though the relationship with social-normative MTL disappeared when controlling for NOI and the interaction. Vulnerable narcissism was positively related to avoidance to lead, but not to affective MTL. Subsequent regression analysis revealed that vulnerable narcissism related negatively to affective MTL for individuals with low or moderate (but not high) NOI. Our study contributes to the integration of narcissism and leadership research by examining a differentiated conceptualization of narcissism, explaining why some individuals may actively approach, while others actively avoid leadership, and one of the boundary conditions which may facilitate narcissists' MTL.

Keywords: Grandiose narcissism; vulnerable narcissism; leadership; motivation to lead; narcissistic organizational identification

Introduction

Organizations are often concerned about a narrow talent pool and wish employees came forward to apply for leadership positions or training. Not all employees are equally likely to step forward when opportunities for leadership arise – and they may do so for a variety of different reasons (Badura et al., 2020). Research into leadership emergence has shown that narcissists have an advantage over less narcissistic employees (Grijalva et al., 2015). As narcissistic grandiosity shares core attributes with leadership (e.g., authority; Raskin & Terry, 1988), narcissists are also more likely to present themselves well in job interviews, because they seem confident, extraverted, and they appear to see opportunities where others see obstacles (Paulhus et al., 2013). However, narcissists can also pose risks to those whom they lead (Braun, 2017).

We therefore believe it is important to examine which types of narcissists are motivated to lead, which types of motivation they show, and how far different types of narcissists show different types of motivation to lead (MTL). So far, leadership research mainly focuses on grandiose narcissists (for a recent overview see Gauglitz, 2021), as they possess charismatic and leader-like attributes (e.g., inflated sense of the self, attention seeking behavior; Nevicka et al., 2011). In fact, status pursuit strategies are one factor that motivates narcissistic individuals to lead (Prundeanu et al., 2021). Here, we extend previous studies by differentiating between different dimensions of narcissism, specifically between grandiose and vulnerable narcissism (Miller et al., 2011) and their implications for different dimensions of MTL. According to the trifurcated model of narcissism (Weiss et al., 2019), both grandiose and vulnerable narcissism are characterized by antagonism. However, while grandiose narcissists possess assertive extraversion, neuroticism is what typifies vulnerable narcissists. We contend that only grandiose narcissists seek out a “stage to shine” (Nevicka et al., 2011) and aspire to leadership positions because of the social validation that comes with those positions. Thus, they should be high in affective, as well calculative and social-normative MTL. In contrast, we argue that this “stage to shine” implies a risk for vulnerable narcissists as it means exposing themselves to others’ judgments and that vulnerable narcissists are thus high on avoidance to lead and low on affective MTL.

Our study also includes a newer aspect of narcissism that more recently emerged in organizational behavior research, that is, narcissistic organizational identification (NOI) (Galvin et al., 2015) as a boundary condition that may differentially affect the relationships between grandiose and vulnerable narcissism and MTL. Leaders with high NOI believe “that their personal identity essentially constitutes the organization’s identity” (Fuller et al., 2018, p. 9). In other words, the organization’s identity becomes subsumed within the leader’s identity. We argue here that NOI amplifies the relationships between grandiose narcissism and affective, calculative, and social-normative MTL. Contrastingly, vulnerable narcissists might overcome some of their reservations to lead if they narcissistically identify with an organization. That is, NOI might stir feelings that they are needed and hence attenuate the negative relationship between vulnerable narcissism and affective MTL as well as the positive relationship with leadership avoidance.

Hypotheses

According to the trifurcated model of narcissism, both grandiose and vulnerable narcissism are characterized by interpersonal antagonism incorporating arrogance, hostility, a tendency to manipulate, and reactive anger (Weiss et al., 2019). However, while grandiose narcissism is related to agentic extraversion and approach tendencies, vulnerable narcissism possesses a unique link with neuroticism (Miller et al., 2016). Individuals high in grandiose narcissism demonstrate overconfidence, feel superior, seek interpersonal dominance, and crave social praise (Freis & Hansen-Brown, 2021; Miller et al., 2011). Vulnerable narcissists, in contrast, are extremely sensitive to criticism, socially withdrawn, and experience feelings of inferiority (Pincus & Lukowitsky, 2010).

Consequently, we contend that grandiose and vulnerable narcissism will relate differently to the dimensions of MTL. Literature distinguishes between affective, calculative, and social-normative MTL (Chan & Drasgow, 2001; Felfe, 2012). Affective MTL relates to the liking of or preference for leading. Calculative MTL refers to the costs and benefits of leading, that is, individuals are motivated to lead because of the costs and benefits they perceive leading to haveⁱ. Finally, social-normative MTL is related to a sense of duty and responsibility (e.g., leading because of social pressure; Chan & Drasgow, 2001). Importantly, Felfe and colleagues (2012) introduced a separate dimension of MTL,

namely avoidance to lead. It is described as a genuine lack of interest in leading in response to leadership-related demands.

In the present study, we explore all dimensions of MTL as a recent meta-analysis has shown that they are only modestly correlated and that each of them has a unique pattern of antecedents. Thus, they should be treated as a set of distinct motivational constructs (Badura et al., 2020). Affective MTL captures an intrinsic enjoyment and internalization of the leadership role as a form of self-pursuit. Calculative MTL is based on considerations that drive the individual to lead if the benefits outweigh the costs, whereas social-normative MTL can originate from the individual's belief that their leadership would benefit the collective (Badura et al., 2020). As such, we argue that given the tendency of grandiose narcissists to see themselves as superior and dominate others, they enjoy being able to demonstrate their leadership skills (Miller et al., 2016), thus should be high in affective MTL. Moreover, grandiose narcissists seek recognition from others and prefer settings that offer opportunities for self-promotion (Nevicka et al., 2011). They are likely to be more motivated to become leaders if it is going to benefit them (O'Reilly & Pfeffer, 2021), meaning they should be high in calculative MTL. Finally, while social-normative MTL refers to leading out of a sense of duty, we argue that grandiose narcissists are likely to be flattered by propositions to lead because they see an offer to become a leader as a means to raise their status and a form of social recognition of their unique talents (Grapsas et al., 2020; Stucke, 2003), meaning they should be high in social-normative MTL. Overall, the above reasoning also suggests that grandiose narcissism is negatively related to avoidance to lead.

Conversely, vulnerable narcissists are shy and introverted (Pincus & Lukowitsky, 2010), which makes them less likely to enjoy leading and being in charge of others (affective MTL). Furthermore, their self-esteem is more fragile and more dependent on others than that of grandiose narcissists (Rohmann et al., 2012; Zeigler-Hill et al., 2008), which also means that they see social interactions as potentially threatening and tend to avoid them (Besser & Priel, 2010). Leadership positions come with "elevated expectations, high levels of responsibility, and high visibility" (Kark et al., 2021, p. 3), and involve interactions that represent a threat to vulnerable narcissists due to a risk of negative

feedback or social exclusion (Mazinani et al., 2021). Overall, this is likely to mean that vulnerable narcissism is positively related to avoidance to lead. We refrain from assumptions regarding the relationships between vulnerable narcissism and social-normative or calculative MTL. It remains ambiguous whether, because of their self-affirmation needs, vulnerable narcissists may feel socially pressured to lead or calculate some of leadership's advantages. As such, we predict that:

H1: Grandiose narcissism is positively related to (a) affective, (b) calculative, (c) social-normative MTL and (d) negatively related to avoidance to lead.

H2: Vulnerable narcissism is negatively related to (a) affective MTL, but positively related to (b) avoidance to lead.

Individuals high in NOI regard themselves as core to the organization they work for (Galvin et al., 2015). NOI, understood as a cognitive state (Rousseau, 1998), has been described as the dark side of organizational identification (Fuller et al., 2018), in which the individual does not draw identification from their belonging to the organization, but rather feels that the organization draws its identity from them (Galvin et al., 2015). NOI can reach the point where leaders view the organization "being a simple reflection of their own personal identity" (Fuller et al., 2018, p. 18).

Although mainly expected to be found among people in power, we contend that NOI is equally important for those who aspire to lead. This is because it can strengthen the tendency of grandiose narcissists to see themselves as superior in their organizational context and thus more entitled to lead (Freis & Hansen-Brown, 2021), increasing their calculative MTL. In addition, if grandiose narcissists believe that they are personally responsible for the organization's success, they should be more comfortable with guiding others (affective MTL). For grandiose narcissists with high NOI, the organization is essentially who they are, thus it should strengthen their belief that they are the best to lead it (social-normative MTL) and further diminish their tendency to keep away from leading others. Based on these considerations, we assume that vulnerable narcissists high in NOI should have fewer reservations to engage in leadership (avoidance to lead) and feel more comfortable to demonstrate influence (affective MTL). As such, we predict that:

H3: NOI moderates the relationship between grandiose narcissism and (a) affective, (b) calculative, and (c) social-normative MTL, so that these relationships are more positive for high (vs low) NOI, and for avoidance to lead, so that the relationship is less negative for high (vs low) NOI.

H4: NOI moderates the relationship between vulnerable narcissism and (a) affective MTL and (b) avoidance to lead, so that the first relationship is less negative and the second one less positive for high (vs low) NOI.

Method

Sample and Design

The data were collected via a panel provider (respondi) from an employee sample in the United Kingdom at two points in time to separate measurements of independent and dependent variables and counteract same source bias. At T1, we asked the participants to indicate their narcissism (grandiose and vulnerable) and NOI. At T2, a few days later, participants indicated their MTL (affective, calculative, social-normative, avoidance). The final sample size was $N = 310$ (matched T1 and T2, after quality checks). Fifty-six percent of the participants were male. The mean age was 45.7 years ($SD = 11.14$). The majority (78.7%) had 10 years or more work experience. The participants worked in different sectors, such as healthcare, retail, or manufacturing.

Instruments

All answer scales ranged from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. Sample items and internal consistencies are displayed in the online supplementary material (OSM)**Error! Reference source not found.**

Motivation to Lead. We used Felfe et al.'s (2012) instrument to assess affective (9 items), calculative (7 items), social-normative (6 items) MTL and avoidance to lead (3 items).

Narcissism. We used the Five-Factor Narcissism Inventory (FFNI; Glover et al., 2012) from the 60-item short form by Sherman et al. (2015) to assess grandiose and vulnerable narcissism.

Narcissistic organizational identification. We used the 6-item instrument suggested by Galvin et al. (2015) to assess NOI.

Results

We first conducted correlation analyses to assess the relationships between the dimensions of narcissism and motivations to lead (H1-2), followed by moderated regression analyses using the Process macro in SPSS (Hayes, 2018), which allowed us to assess the moderating effect of NOI (H3-4). Table 1 (OSM) **Error! Reference source not found.** shows the correlations. Table 2 and 3 (OSM) show the moderated regression. As expected, grandiose narcissism was positively correlated with affective ($r = .51, p < .01$), calculative ($r = .48, p < .01$), and social-normative MTL ($r = .37, p < .01$), lending support to H1a-c, but not to avoidance to lead ($r = -.02, ns$), thus not supporting H1d. Vulnerable narcissism was positively correlated with avoidance to lead ($r = .36, p < .01$), supporting H2b, but not with affective MTL ($r = -.08, ns$), contrary to our expectations (H2a).

We tested H3 and H4 using Model 1 in the Process macro (Hayes, 2018) for the two independent variables and each of the three dependent variables. Grandiose narcissism was strongly positively related to affective MTL ($B = .92$; 95% CI [.27, 1.57]). The interaction was not significant ($B = -.04$; 95% CI [-.23, .15]). The results for calculative MTL were similar. Grandiose narcissism was strongly positively related to calculative MTL ($B = .76$; 95% CI [.26, 1.27]). The interaction was not significant ($B = -.08$; 95% CI [-.23, .07]). There was a non-significant relationship between grandiose narcissism and social-normative MTL ($B = .45$; 95% CI [-.15, 1.05]) and the interaction was not significant ($B = .01$; 95% CI [-.17, .18]). Finally, for avoidance to lead, neither the main effects for grandiose narcissism ($B = -.52$; $p = .19$; 95% CI [-1.29, .25]) nor the interaction ($B = .11$; $p = .35$; 95% CI [-.11, .34]) were significant. Thus, H3a-d were not supported. Vulnerable narcissism was strongly positively related to avoidance to lead ($B = 1.01$; 95% CI [.33, 1.69]). The interaction was not significant ($B = -.16$; $p = .14$; 95% CI [-.37, .05]), although the sign of the coefficient pointed in the expected direction. Further, the relationship between vulnerable narcissism and affective MTL was negative and significant ($B = -0.79$; 95% CI [-1.47, -.12]) and the interaction was significant but only on the $p < .10$ level ($B = -.16$; 95% CI [-.37, .05]), such that for individuals low in NOI, this relationship was significant and negative ($B = -.36$; 95% CI [-.60, -.12], see Table 4, OSM). Yet, among those with high NOI, the effect was not significant ($B = -.13$; 95% CI [-.35, .09]), with medium level NOI falling in between ($B = -.24$; 95% CI [-.43, -.05]). Thus, we conclude that there was some support for H4a (but

not for H4b), in that vulnerable narcissists with higher NOI were less negatively disposed towards affective MTL.

Discussion

Our research contributes to the literature in several ways. First, the aim of this study was to shed light on the differential relationships between narcissism and MTL, using the differentiation between grandiose and vulnerable narcissism (Sherman et al., 2015) as well as the different dimensions of MTL (Chan & Drasgow, 2001; Felfe, 2012). Limitations of this study notwithstanding (including a specific cultural context and single-source, self-report survey design), we assumed and found strong positive correlations between grandiose narcissism and affective, calculative, and social-normative MTL. Contrastingly, vulnerable narcissism was positively related to avoidance to lead.

Second, our results provide initial insights into the role of NOI in shaping the effects of narcissism on one's decision to pursue leadership (Galvin et al., 2015). In particular, we found that the relationship between vulnerable narcissism and affective MTL was only qualified through the moderated regression analysis, not in the simple correlation. Specifically, we had expected this relationship to be attenuated for high NOI. Indeed, this was the case as we found a negative relationship only for low and moderate NOI, whereas it became non-significant when NOI was high. While we had also argued that the positive relationships with the three MTL dimensions and the negative relationship with avoidance to lead would be increased for grandiose narcissists high in NOI, our results did not support this notion. When considered in conjunction with narcissism as a trait, NOI seems to have a weaker effect on MTL than expected. However, further research into this construct is needed to examine its relevance. One avenue might be to explore whether NOI differs in its predictive value for MTL at different levels of the organizational hierarchy. It might be more relevant for higher levels (e.g., executive), where leadership is more strongly tied to the fate of an organization (Fuller et al., 2018).

Overall, our results are interesting for future research into narcissism as the relationships for grandiose and vulnerable narcissism differ considerably. While our results support the notion that

grandiose narcissists are more motivated to lead, vulnerable narcissists are not. However, NOI may represent one boundary condition that attenuates their reluctance to lead. Future research could further explore other possible antecedents of the emergence of vulnerable narcissists as leaders. Finally, our findings are relevant for organizations, which can use them to safeguard key leadership positions from narcissistic individuals. Interestingly, although vulnerable narcissists may generally shy away from leadership, when they put their low and fragile selves onto the organization, they may feel more justified to lead it.

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Endnotes

ⁱ Please note that Chan and Drasgow (2001) originally introduced this dimension as non-calculative motivation to lead, assuming that individuals would be motivated to lead because they do not take into account the costs and benefits of leading. Here we follow Felfe et al.'s (2012) assumption that individuals are motivated to lead because of the costs and benefits of leading they perceive.