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WHEN VULNERABLE NARCISSISTS TAKE THE LEAD: EXPLORING A BIFACTOR MODEL OF NARCISSISM AND ABUSIVE SUPERVISION INTENT

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ABSTRACT

In a sample of 926 German-speaking managers, a bifactor model of the Pathological Narcissism Inventory (PNI) differentiated between a general narcissism factor and two specific sub-factors, grandiosity and vulnerability. Vulnerability predicted abusive supervision intent through internal attributions and shame in response to failure.

INTRODUCTION

Abusive supervision, the "sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors, excluding physical contact" (Tepper, 2000, p. 178), is one form of workplace aggression from leaders directed at their followers. Meta-analytic findings support that abusive supervision threatens positive organizational functioning (Mackey, Frieder, Brees, & Martinko, 2017; Schyns & Schilling, 2013). Seeing that follower perceptions of abusive supervision relate negatively to desirable outcomes and positively to undesirable ones, it is unsurprising that management scholars seek to better understand what contributes to leaders showing abusive supervision (Zhang & Bednall, 2016). We are interested in leaders' traits, cognitions, and emotions as distal predictors which help explain why leaders feel driven to engage in abusive supervision (Antonakis, Day & Schyns, 2012). Our theorizing specifically draws on a self-regulatory perspective (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001) and the distinction between grandiosity and vulnerability (Pincus et al., 2009) to explain abusive supervision intent.

Narcissistic Grandiosity and Vulnerability

From a self-regulatory perspective, narcissism is of a paradoxical nature. Narcissists possess inflated egos implying grandiose self-views, yet the vulnerability of a super-ego requires continuous affirmation from others (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). This paradox is reflected in the distinction between narcissistic grandiosity and vulnerability, spurring a controversial debate about the conceptualization and measurement of narcissism (Edershile, Simms, & Wright, 2018; Jauk, Weigle, Lehmann, Benedek, & Neubauer, 2017; Miller, Hoffman, Gaughan, Gentile,

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Maples, & Campbell, 2011; Miller, Lynam, Hyatt, & Campbell, 2017). Grandiosity and vulnerability have been referred to as the "two faces" of narcissism (Wink, 1991, p. 590). What unites them is a lack of agreeableness, that is, the antagonistic fashion in which narcissists relate to others. Yet, in some respects, narcissistic grandiosity and vulnerability are also substantially different from each other (Edershile et al., 2018; Miller et al., 2017). Grandiosity incorporates attributes related to social dominance. It renders individuals "extraverted, socially bold, and even charming" (Jauk et al., 2017, p. 1). The drive for success is rooted in the motivation to receive praise from others (Nevicka, De Hoogh, Van Vianen, Beersma, & McIlwain, 2011). Vulnerability, in contrast, comprises the "oscillating or chronic conscious awareness and acknowledgment of vulnerable affects and self-states" (Pincus et al., 2009, p. 367). It is associated with attributes such as being "introverted, defensive, and avoidant" (Jauk et al., 2017, p. 1). Narcissistic vulnerability renders individuals more likely to be tormented by fear of failure and feelings of inadequacy (Miller et al., 2011).

Bifactor Models

Originally introduced over 80 years ago (Holzinger & Swineford, 1937), bifactor models have only recently experienced a revival, especially in the personality literature (Hanges, Scherbaum, & Reeve, 2015). Bifactor models assume that a general factor accounts for the covariance amongst all items, whereas specific factors explain additional variance in sub-groups of items that measure similar subdomains of the construct (Reise, 2012). A core distinction between second-order and bifactor models is that the latter conceptualize all factors (general and specific) as orthogonal to each other. Therefore, bifactor models are particularly useful when separating out the predictive value of general and specific factors in relation to a criterion variable as is the case in our research (Chen, West, & Sousa, 2006).

METHODS

We assessed narcissism with the Pathological Narcissism Inventory (PNI; Pincus et al., 2009; German translation: Morf et al., 2017) and analyzed its relationships with abusive supervision intent in three empirical studies. We first established the underlying factorial structure of the PNI, comparing a traditional second-order factor model to a bifactor solution to speak to an ongoing controversy about the conceptualization and measurement of narcissism (Edershile et al., 2018; Jauk et al., 2017; Miller et al., 2011, 2017). We then linked general narcissism, narcissistic grandiosity, and narcissistic vulnerability to abusive supervision intent. While these analyses were based on an overall sample collected across Studies 1 through 3 (N=926), Study 2 re-tested the relationships in a sub-sample (N=320) measuring at two time points, and included an additional measure of grandiosity (German version of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory, NPI; Schütz, Marcus & Sellin, 2004). Study 3 (N=431) employed a manipulation-of-mediator design to induce leaders' attributions in response to failure and test effects on shame and abusive supervision intent (Pirlott & MacKinnon, 2016).

SUMMARY OF RESULTS

Confirmatory factor analysis. We first estimated the traditional second-order factor model and compared it to a bifactor model. While the $\chi 2$ statistic was significant, the

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approximate fit indices pointed to an acceptable fit for both models. However, in the second-order factor model, the covariance between the two latent second-order factors was high, suggesting overlap possibly due to the existence of general narcissism factor. The results indicated that the PNI represented a general narcissism factor, which captured most of the variance in grandiosity, as well as the specific sub-factor, vulnerability.

Latent structural equation model (SEM). The latent SEM model with MLR estimation and 95% confidence intervals indicated a significant positive relationship between narcissism (general factor) and abusive supervision intent. The data also showed that narcissistic vulnerability (but not grandiosity) related positively to abusive supervision intent, above and beyond the general narcissism factor. The findings suggest that a general narcissism factor and narcissistic vulnerability, but not grandiosity, drive leaders' abusive supervision intent.

Experiment. We tested the impact of narcissism (Time 1) on abusive supervision intent (Time 2) for each of three experimental conditions (internal attribution, external attribution, control). In all three conditions, narcissistic grandiosity did not predict abusive supervision intent. In the external attribution condition, narcissistic vulnerability related positively to abusive supervision intent. However, the positive relationship between narcissistic vulnerability and abusive supervision intent was stronger in the control condition, in which the relationship remained unblocked by the experimental manipulation. An indirect effect from internal attribution to abusive supervision intent via shame occurred when we estimated a multiple mediation model with 10,000 bootstrap samples, supporting that internal attributions impacted shame and abusive supervision intent.

CONCLUSION

We demonstrated that the specific sub-factor narcissistic vulnerability was in fact reflected in the PNI and that its relationships with leadership went above and beyond a general narcissism factor, which has dominated the leadership literature to date (Braun, 2017). We thereby contribute to an area of leadership theory and research studying the role of individual differences in leadership that has not only a longstanding tradition, but is also a recent revival (Tuncdogan, Acar, & Stam, 2017). The research also shed light on possible mechanisms, suggesting that leaders with a vulnerable self are driven to aggress against their followers as they attribute failure internally and feel ashamed. We integrate stable traits (i.e., leader narcissism) and more variable responses (i.e., attributions of failure and shame) in an experimental study. The cold, hostile, and antagonistic manners in which vulnerable narcissists in leadership positions interact with their followers appear to be rooted in a fragile ego with a tendency to locate causes for failure within the self, but then to take the negative thoughts and feelings out on others. Although we can only draw preliminary conclusions in this regard, the findings suggest that the interplay between attributions and emotions needs further consideration in future research of leader narcissism (Connelly & Gooty, 2015).

REFERENCES AVAILABLE FROM THE AUTHORS