

An examination of the relationship between Narcissism and Trust: The role of Gender

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Summary

This research article focused on the question whether there was a relationship between grandiose- and vulnerable narcissistic traits and trust, and examined a possible effect of gender. This could give additional information for the conceptualization of grandiose and vulnerable narcissistic traits. Using questionnaires, a community sample of 86 participants, 42 males with a total mean age of 32. were included in the analyses. Using ANCOVA analysis, using trust as the dependent variable, grandiose- and vulnerable narcissistic traits as independent variables and gender as fixed factor, a significant effect of vulnerable narcissistic traits on trust was found, with higher levels of narcissistic traits relating to lower levels of trust. This effect was not found for grandiose narcissistic traits. Gender had a significant effect on trust, with males having lower trust scores than females. No interaction effect between narcissistic traits and gender was found significant. Future research should focus on clinical populations, to determine whether the same pattern holds true at higher levels of narcissistic traits.

Personality can be defined as a dynamic and organized set of personal traits and patterns of behavior (Young, 1978). The range of normal variation in personality styles can explain much of human behavior without reference to notions of pathology (Eriksen, & Kress, 2005). We speak of a personality disorder when a person's personality leads to maladaptive patterns of behavior, cognition and inner experience. These patterns develop early, are inflexible, and are associated with significant distress or disability (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

Narcissism is one of the many personality constructs that constitutes our personality. Although most individuals have some narcissistic traits, high levels of narcissism can manifest themselves in a pathological form as narcissistic personality disorder. The DSM-5 describes narcissistic personality disorder as a pervasive pattern of grandiosity, need for admiration, and lack of empathy, beginning in early adulthood and present in a variety of contexts. A person with narcissistic personality disorder expresses five (or more) of the following traits: (1) a grandiose sense of self-importance, (2) a preoccupation with fantasies of unlimited success, power, brilliance, beauty, or ideal love, (3) believes that he or she is 'special' and unique and can only be understood by, or should associate with, other special or high-status people, (4) requires excessive admiration, (5) has a sense of entitlement, (6) is interpersonally exploitative, (7) lacks empathy, (8) is often envious of others or believes that others are envious of him or her and (9) shows arrogant, haughty behaviors or attitudes (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

One of the core elements of narcissism, as described by the DSM-5, is a grandiose sense of self (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Yet, despite the grandiosity, narcissists are also described as craving attention and affirmation, and are particularly concerned with how well they are doing and how favourable they are regarded. Morf and

Rhodewalt (2001) describe this occurrence, which may seem paradoxical at first glance, but is explainable upon further consideration. Narcissists show extremely positive, but simultaneously fragile self-views because their sense of grandiosity is not always confirmed by reality. Their reality consists of accomplishments, but failures as well. These failures could lead to interpersonal problems, one of these specific problems may be a difficulty forming trusting bonds with other individuals. Such communal characteristics, focused on maintaining and strengthening social relationships, tend to be negatively correlated with narcissism (Bradlee, & Emmons, 1992).

Because narcissists have incoherent views of themselves, and show more interpersonal problems such as exploitative, arrogant or envious behavior, their social bonds may suffer. The narcissist is apt to regulate self-esteem through domination of others, denial of any form of reliance on another person, intimidating demands, denigration of others for not meeting expectations, and devaluation of people that threaten his or her sense of superiority (Ogrodniczuk, Piper, Joyce, Steinberg, & Duggal, 2009). Because of this type of behavior, there seem to be more interpersonal problems in narcissistic individuals, compared to lower levels of narcissism. For example, narcissism was negatively related to commitment in ongoing romantic relationships (Campbell, & Foster, 2002). Trust might be an important aspect regarding the interpersonal problems narcissistic individuals have to face. Trust is a complex phenomenon which consists of many facets and levels, and which can be viewed from different angles. Economists tend to view trust as either calculative or institutional, whereas sociologists often find trust in socially embedded properties of relationships among people or institutions. This research article takes a psychological viewpoint of trust, whereby trust is described as a psychological state in which individuals are willing to accept vulnerability due to their positive expectations of the intentions or behavior of another (Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, & Camerer, 1998). Trust is not a behavior (e.g. cooperation) or a choice (e.g. taking a risk), but can be seen as a psychological state which requires the willingness to be vulnerable under conditions of risk and interdependence. The fact that a narcissist would have to accept some form of vulnerability might pose a problem considering forming these trusting bonds.

Narcissists set unrealistically high expectations for themselves because of their grandiose sense of self, but for others as well. However, these expectations are not confirmed in most situations, especially in social relations. As Morf and Rhodewalt (2001) argued, although narcissistic strategic efforts generally help maintain self-esteem and affect on the

short term, they negatively influence their interpersonal relationships and in the long run paradoxically undermine the self they are trying to build. Narcissists yearn and reach for self-affirmation, but destroy the very relationships on which they are dependent by focussing on themselves and not liking or caring for others, even disdaining them. Their egocentric focus may lead to the occurrence of trust violations, as they lack the skills required for a role (Butler, & Cantrell, 1984). However, due to their diminished awareness of social situations and their egocentric focus, narcissists might not recognize their own role and therefore blame others. Therefore, it may be possible that narcissists have deficits in having or developing trust in interpersonal relationships. Until now, little research on the relationship between narcissism and interpersonal trust has been done. This research article aims to diminish this gap in the literature, by examining the relationships between narcissistic traits and trust.

This article will focus on the distinction between grandiose and vulnerable narcissistic traits. Gabbard (1989) describes the grandiose subtype as a grandiose, arrogant, entitled, exploitative and envious individual, whereas the vulnerable narcissist is described as overtly self-inhibited and modest, but harbouring underlying grandiose expectations for oneself and others. Research by Dickinson and Pincus (2003) validated the grandiose and vulnerable subtypes of narcissistic character styles. The grandiose narcissistic individual has diminished awareness of the dissonance between his expectations and reality, and regards any conflict within the environment as external. The vulnerable narcissistic personality is more likely to experience conflict around his expectations and disappointment from interpersonal relationships following his expectations. It is expected that vulnerable narcissistic traits will be related to lower levels of trust, because vulnerable narcissistic personalities are more likely to experience conflict around expectations and disappointment from interpersonal relationships. However, it is expected there is a larger effect of grandiose narcissistic traits on trust, given the fact grandiose narcissist experience conflicts within the environment as external, with higher levels of grandiose narcissistic traits relating to lower levels of trust (Dickinson & Pincus, 2003).

Gender similarities seem to outnumber gender differences (Hyde, 2005), however Grijalva et al. (2015) found gender differences in narcissistic traits. They found that men tended to be more narcissistic than women, and this difference remained stable across different age cohorts. However, this difference did not apply to vulnerable narcissism, which can be seen as evidence for the existence of distinct traits. They explained this finding through a biosocial approach to social role theory (Wood, & Eagly, 2012). Gender roles emerge as

individuals observe men and women performing different tasks, or fulfilling different occupations, from which corresponding dispositional differences between men and women are inferred. Biological tendencies (e.g. childbirth and related reproductive activities) contribute to these gender role inferences. In context of social role theory, communal characteristics are consistent with the social roles emanating from women's reproductive activities, whereas agentic characteristics, such as assertiveness or competitiveness, are more consistent with men's historical activities as hunting (Ember, 1978). As there seem to be differences among men and women in agentic and communal characteristics, and narcissists emphasize agentic over communal interests because more value is placed on getting ahead than getting along socially (Foster, & Brennan, 2011), it is reasonable to expect gender differences in narcissistic traits.

Using an investment game, researchers examined the existence of gender differences in trust behaviors. Their results demonstrated that men are more trusting than women, and that women are more trustworthy than men. They found no biases towards neither gender. They also did not find any interactions across genders, indicating that men are just as trusting and trustworthy toward women as toward other men. The same applied to women towards men and other women (Buchan, Croson, & Solnick, 2008). Other researchers examined gender differences in relationship between narcissism and trust indirectly. Zhou, Li, Zhang and Zeng (2012) examined the relationship between narcissism and friendship quality dimensions, such as trust, and found there was a significant relationship between narcissistic traits and the friendship quality dimension 'trust & support' among boys, but there was no such correlation for girls, suggesting a possible interaction effect for gender on the relationship between narcissism and trust. The combination of men exhibiting higher levels of narcissistic traits, and narcissists emphasising agentic over communal interests, might lead to a stronger effect of narcissistic traits on trust in men compared to women.

As it seems, there are some conflicting results regarding interaction effects between gender and narcissism. However, understanding differences between vulnerable and grandiose narcissistic traits, along with possible gender differences, is important for defining and understanding the conceptualization of different narcissistic traits, as a lot of research has shown vulnerable and grandiose narcissistic traits to be distinct. This research will also examine a possible interaction effect, as inconclusive results have been found relating to narcissism and gender, by giving an answer to the question: 'What is the effect of narcissism on trust, and are there differences between males and females?' There will be several

hypotheses following this question. The first hypothesis states that a significant relationship between narcissistic traits and trust is expected, with higher levels of narcissism relating to lower levels of trust for both grandiose and vulnerable narcissistic traits. The second hypothesis is men show higher levels of especially grandiose narcissism (Tschanz, Morf, & Turner, 1998; Grijalve et al., 2015), and therefore lower levels of trust compared to women. Through social role theory, this can also be explained (Wood, & Eagly, 2012). As women fulfil social roles which emphasize communal characteristics, e.g. creating and maintaining social bonds, it seems reasonable to expect women will display higher levels of trust. No differences in vulnerable narcissistic traits are expected. Finally, as Zhou et al. (2012) found that narcissism was related to trust among boys but not for girls, it is expected there will be a significant interaction between the different narcissistic traits and gender on trust. The combination between a gender difference in narcissistic traits, the negative relationship between narcissism and communal characteristics, and social roles, lead to a stronger effect of narcissistic traits on trust in men than women.

Methods

Participants

A community sample was used to measure narcissistic traits and trust. Only participants of 18 years and older were asked to participate, but otherwise there were no criteria for exclusion for this community sample.

A total of 86 participants filled in all the required questionnaires. Of those participants, 42 were male (48.8%), and the total sample had a mean age of 32.05 years old ($SD = 15.31$), with a minimum age of 18 and a maximum of 75. Most participants identified themselves as Dutch (90.7%), one identified as European (1.2%) and one participant identified as Christian (1.2%). The rest of the participants (5.8%) did not enter their ethnicity. At face value, there seemed no notable differences in included and excluded participants regarding gender, age, occupation, social status and neither did the available data of narcissistic traits and trust.

Procedure

Researchers asked people in their vicinity whether they would like to participate by completing several questionnaires. Participants were given brief instructions and explanation about the aims of this research and, if they agreed to participate, they received an envelope containing the questionnaires. Participants were also reassured about their anonymity, and

that participating was on a voluntary basis.

Instruments

Narcissistic traits. To measure the amount of narcissistic traits participants possess, the Pathological Narcissism Inventory-NL (Rossi et al., 2012) was administered. The PNI-NL is a Dutch translation of the PNI-52, a questionnaire that measures narcissistic personality pathology. It assesses two dimensions of pathological narcissism spanning problems with narcissistic grandiosity and narcissistic vulnerability, which consist of seven underlying factors. The seven factors are contingent self-esteem (CSE), exploitativeness (EXP), self-sacrificing self-enhancement (SSSE), hiding the self (HS), grandiose fantasy (GF), devaluing (DEV), and entitlement rage (ER). Four PNI scales assess grandiose characteristics (EXP, SSSE, GF, and ER), whereas the other three subscales (CSE, HS, and DEV) assess vulnerable characteristics (Pincus et al., 2009). According to Ackerman et al. (2011), the reliability for the narcissistic grandiosity dimension is good ($\alpha = .85$) and is excellent for the vulnerable dimension ($\alpha = .91$), with this study finding acceptable (grandiose: $\alpha = .79$) to good (vulnerable: $\alpha = .82$) reliabilities as well. The PNI-NL questionnaire consists of 52 descriptive Dutch statements such as '*I need others to acknowledge me*' and '*Everybody likes to hear my stories*'. Participants have to indicate on a six-point scale whether they think the description fits them or not, with 0 meaning '*not at all like me*' and 5 meaning '*very much like me*'.

Trust. The subscale trust/mistrust of the MEPSI (Modified Erikson Psychosocial Stage Inventory; Darling-Fisher, & Leidy, 1988) will be administered as a measure of trust. The MEPSI is a modified version of the Erikson Psychosocial Stage Inventory (Rosenthal, Gurney, & Moore, 1981). Reliability has been shown to be acceptable to good ($\alpha = .71 - .89$). Participants have to rate items on a five-point scale whether they believe 10 different statements are true, with 1 meaning '*hardly ever true*' and 5 meaning '*almost always true*'. This questionnaire will lead to two outcome measures, a score of trust, and a score of mistrust. The responses to the mistrust-items will be reversed, this way an overall score of trust will be obtained. An example of an item indicating trust resolution is '*I trust people*'. An example of a mistrust item is '*People try to take advantage of me*'.

Reliability of the MEPSI in this study was found to be beneath acceptable ($\alpha = .462$). When looking at Cronbach's Alpha if an item were to be deleted, it showed reliability became somewhat better if item 2 ('I am worried I will lose control of my feelings') would be deleted ($\alpha = .604$). Another look at Cronbach's Alpha if items were to be deleted proved reliability would also improve if item 3 ('Other people understand me') would be deleted ($\alpha = .699$).

Additional deletion of items did not improve reliability any further, leaving 8 of the 10 original items used in the analyses.

Data analysis

Using listwise deletion, participants who missed data for narcissistic traits, trust or gender were deleted from analysis. Of the original 99 participants, a total of 13 participants missed one of these variables and were therefore deleted. 2 participants missed a trust score, 10 participants missed data for one of the narcissism scales, and 1 participant forgot to enter his or her gender, leaving a total of 86 participants used in the analysis.

First, to determine whether there are relationships between vulnerable- and grandiose narcissistic traits and trust, correlations will be calculated between these variables. To determine if there are differences between males and females in the different narcissistic traits, an independent-samples t-test will be performed, using gender as the grouping variable and grandiose- and vulnerable narcissistic traits as dependent variables. To examine whether there are gender differences in trust, an ANCOVA will be performed. This analysis will use gender as its fixed factor. The total scores of the vulnerable and grandiose narcissistic traits will be used as covariates, along with the total trust score as its dependent variable. Using this analysis, it is possible to examine whether there is an interaction effect between gender and the narcissism scales on the total trust score. It would be possible to examine the hypothesis using a MRA analysis and creating a dummy variable for gender, which lead to the same results, however ANCOVA is used because of the researchers' further developed knowledge of this analysis.

Results

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
pniVuln	86	1,00	94,00	43,1163	20,22952
pniGra	86	14,00	93,00	52,4419	20,06437
mepsiTot	86	17,00	39,00	31,3256	4,39904
Valid N (listwise)	86				

Table 1 Descriptive statistics

Table 1 shows average scores of vulnerable and grandiose narcissistic traits, and the average trust score. Table 2 shows the different correlations between gender, grandiose and vulnerable narcissistic traits, and trust. According to the first hypothesis, there should be significant relationships between narcissism and trust. There seem to be significant

relationships for both grandiose- ($r = -.368, p = .000$) and vulnerable ($r = -.500, p = .000$) narcissistic traits with trust. There also was a significant correlation between grandiose- and vulnerable narcissistic traits ($r = .725, p = .000$). There was no significant relationship between trust and gender ($r = 0.046, p = .673$).

Variables	1.	2.	3.	4.
1. Sex	1			
2. pniVuln	.031	1		
3. pniGra	-.180	.725**	1	
4. mepsiTot	.673*	-.500**	-.368**	1

Table 2 Correlations between gender, grandiose and vulnerable narcissistic traits, and trust

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

According to the second hypothesis, there should be a significant effect of gender on trust, with males having lower levels of trust but higher levels of narcissism. Neither vulnerable ($t = -.285, p = .369$) nor grandiose narcissistic vulnerable traits ($t = 1.678, p = .845$) differed among males and females. Looking at the univariate main effect of gender, a significant effect of gender on the total trust score was found ($F(1, 86) = 5.338, p = .023$), with males having lower total trust scores compared to women ($b = -5.435$).

Looking at the covariates (e.g. the narcissism subscales), there does not seem to be a significant effect of grandiose narcissistic traits on trust ($F(1, 86) = 0.023, p = .879$) but it seems there is a significant effect of vulnerable narcissistic traits on trust ($F(1, 86) = 11.038, p = .001$), with higher levels of vulnerable narcissistic traits relating to lower levels of trust ($b = -.152$).

Finally, according to the third hypothesis there should a significant interaction effect between narcissistic traits and gender on trust. There was no evidence of a significant interaction effects of gender and vulnerable narcissistic traits ($F(1, 86) = 2.692, p = .105$) or gender and grandiose narcissistic traits ($F(1, 86) = 0.026, p = .872$) on trust, which can be seen in table 3.

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	515,133 ^a	5	103,027	7,296	,000	,313
Intercept	12844,722	1	12844,722	909,562	,000	,919
Sex	75,381	1	75,381	5,338	,023	,063
pniVuln	155,872	1	155,872	11,038	,001	,121
pniGra	,329	1	,329	,023	,879	,000
Sex * pniVuln	38,017	1	38,017	2,692	,105	,033

Sex * pniGra	,368	1	,368	,026	,872	,000
Error	1129,750	80	14,122			
Total	86036,000	86				
Corrected Total	1644,884	85				

Table 3 The ANCOVA test of between-subject effects

Discussion

This article focussed on the question what the effect of narcissistic traits on trust was, and if there were differences in gender. The first hypothesis, there would be a significant relationship between both grandiose and vulnerable narcissistic traits with trust, was confirmed. Significant relationships were found. According to the second hypothesis, men would show higher levels of narcissistic traits and lower levels of trust. This hypothesis was not confirmed. No differences in levels of trust and narcissistic traits were found, but the effect trust differed between genders. Specifically, men did not have higher levels of grandiose narcissism, but had lower levels of trust compared to women. Finally, the third hypothesis expected a significant interaction between the different narcissistic traits and gender on trust. This hypothesis also was not confirmed. There were no significant interactions between narcissistic traits and gender.

As expected, there was a significant relationship between narcissistic traits, both grandiose and vulnerable, and trust, with higher narcissistic traits correlating with lower levels of trust, with a smaller correlation between grandiose narcissistic traits and trust compared to vulnerable narcissistic traits. The grandiose narcissistic personality has diminished awareness of the dissonance between his expectations and reality, and regards any conflict within the environment as external. Therefore, it was expected higher levels of grandiose narcissistic traits related to relatively lower levels of trust compared to vulnerable narcissistic traits. Apparently, vulnerable narcissistic traits have a stronger relationship with trust, which might be due to experienced conflict around expectations and reality, and disappointment from interpersonal relationships.

This research article found a significant effect of vulnerable narcissism on trust. The vulnerable narcissistic personality is more likely to experience conflict around his or her entitled expectations. Vulnerable narcissists are less equipped, in comparison to grandiose narcissists, to use self-enhancement strategies to modulate their self-esteem, and often must rely upon external feedback from others to manage their self-esteem (Dickinson, & Pincus, 2003). However, this external feedback might not align with the needs of the vulnerable narcissist, which can lead to cracks in their interpersonal trust. Because of the cross-sectional

design of this study, it also might be possible for trust to have an effect on vulnerable narcissistic traits. As trust requires individuals to accept vulnerability due to their expectations of the intentions or behavior of others, devious expectations might lead to the breakdown of trust and the idea of a supposedly higher level of one self's functioning, compared to others (Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, & Camerer, 1998).

In contrast to vulnerable narcissistic traits, there was no significant effect of grandiose narcissistic traits on trust. Grandiose narcissists have diminished awareness of the dissonance between their expectations and reality, along with the impact this has on relationships and any conflict within the environment is generally experienced as external (Dickinson and Pincus, 2003). An explanation for this finding might be found in their observed lack of insight into the impact they have on others, which might lead to perceived trust irrespective of social encounter outcomes.

It was expected that at the base of an interaction effect, there would be a significant main effect of gender upon trust, since men were expected to have higher levels of narcissistic traits. Analysis showed a significant difference in the amount of trust between males and females, females showed higher levels of trust in comparison with men. This finding is not in line with earlier research findings, which found men are more trusting than females (Buchan, Croson, & Solnick, 2008). This difference might be due to different ways of examining trust. This article examined trust using questionnaire data, while Buchan et al. used an investment game. Using a questionnaire requires introspection from participants. However, when people introspect to analyse their behaviour and the reasons for their actions, they tend to mislead themselves (Wilson, 2002). When future researchers decide to examine trust behaviour, it would be best if they combined the two different methods (e.g. questionnaire data and investment games), to see whether the different methods lead to different results.

There were no significant interaction effects of narcissistic traits and gender on the amount of trust. Because this research is not experimental, there are several explanations why there is no difference in this relationship. The main explanation for this finding is there apparently is no difference in the working mechanism of narcissistic trait among men and women. As there was a significant effect of vulnerable narcissistic traits on trust, there is some evidence for a working mechanism, but this does not differ between men and women. This is in accordance with research done by Mehdizadeh (2010), who found no significant interaction effects between narcissism and gender with posting self-promotional content on Facebook. An alternative explanation for this finding might be found in friendships of

narcissists. Researchers examined the similarities of friends in their narcissistic traits, and what they found was narcissism predicted similarity in Big Five domains among friends (Maaß, Lämmle, Bensch, & Ziegler, 2016). As similarity breeds liking, similarity among peers might have an effect on trust.

This article has contributed to the conceptualization of grandiose and vulnerable narcissism. Gabbard (1989) described the grandiose subtype as a grandiose, arrogant, entitled, exploitative and envious individual, whereas he described the vulnerable narcissist as overly self-inhibited and modest, but harbouring underlying grandiose expectations for oneself and others. Additionally can be stated vulnerable narcissists have trouble with trusting others. Whether this is due to unfavourable external feedback or by devious expectations of others has yet to be examined. Knowing how people with different kinds and levels of narcissistic traits behave is important because personality is a broad concept, with many different aspects and many different consequences. Knowing the effect of certain traits or personality styles, and letting these relationships known to the public, may change the way we treat others around us. For example, as seen vulnerable narcissists have trouble trusting others. If we can create a safe environment, where vulnerable narcissists feel accepted, they might have fewer difficulties forming trusting bonds.

Using a community sample is one of the limitations of this study. As most individuals possess some narcissistic traits, it is profound to state most individuals possess less narcissistic traits compared to patients with narcissistic personality disorder. Therefore, it is likely (sub-)clinical levels of narcissistic traits probably are under-represented in this sample. Future research should aim to include individuals from a clinical population suffering from narcissistic personality disorder, or at least individuals with sub-clinical levels of narcissistic traits, to examine whether these findings can be generalized, or whether there are differences in clinical- and non-clinical populations regarding narcissism and trust. Because trust is an important aspect of the (therapeutic) bond between therapist and patient, it would be valuable to examine whether higher levels of (vulnerable) narcissistic traits also relate to trust, keeping favourable therapeutic outcomes in mind.

This article focussed on the question what the effect of different narcissistic traits on trust was, and whether there were differences between males and females. As we have seen, vulnerable narcissistic traits seem to affect trust, but grandiose narcissistic traits did not, with no differences between men and women in these relationships. Additional research is needed to uncover the underlying mechanisms why vulnerable narcissistic traits do, but grandiose

narcissistic traits do not have an effect on trust, and can be done to determine whether the same holds true for clinical populations.

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