



Perceived agency mediates the link between the narcissistic subtypes and self-esteem



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ABSTRACT

Grandiose and vulnerable narcissism share some core features (e.g., entitlement, self-absorption) but differ in other important ways (e.g., self-esteem). To reconcile these differing characteristics, we predicted that differences in perceived agency mediate the association between narcissistic subtypes and differences in self-esteem. One hundred college students completed self-report measures of grandiose narcissism, vulnerable narcissism, explicit global self-esteem, and perceived agency. As predicted, grandiose narcissism was positively associated with agency and self-esteem, whereas vulnerable narcissism was negatively associated with agency and self-esteem. Perceived agency also mediated the associations between each narcissistic subtype and self-esteem. Furthermore, a partial correlation showed that when controlling for agency, the previously null correlation between measures of grandiose and vulnerable narcissism became significantly positive. These findings indicate that agency serves as a primary differentiator between the narcissistic subtypes.

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1. Introduction

Most people can conjure up an image of a narcissist. Perhaps the narcissist in our mind's eye is overt—someone who thinks only of themselves and brags about their superiority to others, expecting admiration. Or perhaps the narcissist we think of is covert—someone who secretly harbors extravagant fantasies about all the things they deserve but have never attained. Are these two types of narcissist equally capable of achieving the outcomes they desire? And if not, does this lead to differences in their psychological well-being?

Historically, narcissism has been considered primarily as a psychological disorder studied from a clinical perspective (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). However, narcissism has received much empirical attention in recent decades from social and personality psychologists who view the construct as an individual difference variable (Foster & Campbell, 2007; Miller & Campbell, 2010). According to this view, narcissism exists as a continuum on which the general population is normally distributed (Raskin & Hall, 1979); thus, everyone possesses some level of narcissism.¹

Much of the work on non-clinical narcissism focuses on understanding the social impact that narcissists have on others, such as in team settings (e.g., John & Robins, 1994), the workplace (e.g., Meier & Semmer, 2012), and interpersonal relationships (e.g., Campbell, 1999).

However, this research depends on assumptions regarding the key features of narcissism and the processes that account for the association between narcissism and other important variables (e.g., self-esteem). In this paper, we argue that the current literature is missing a key piece of that knowledge. Specifically, we aimed to gain a better understanding of how grandiose and vulnerable narcissists perceive themselves in terms of agency.

1.1. The narcissistic subtypes

Researchers have proposed that two distinct subtypes of trait narcissism exist, typically called grandiose and vulnerable narcissism (Hendin & Cheek, 1997; Wink, 1991). Grandiose and vulnerable narcissists share several key narcissistic features: entitlement, self-absorption, aggression, exploitation, and grandiose fantasy (Dickinson & Pincus, 2003; Miller et al., 2011). However, the two narcissistic subtypes differ in many important ways, including self-esteem and well-being.

Grandiose narcissists most closely match the stereotypical image of narcissism. These individuals are arrogant (Akhtar & Thomson, 1982), competitive (Zeigler-Hill, Clark, & Pickard, 2008), impulsive (Vazire & Funder, 2006), and approach-oriented (Foster & Trimm, 2008). They perceive themselves as superior (Krizan & Bushman, 2011) and exhibit high self-esteem and well-being (Rose, 2002). At least in the short-term, grandiose narcissism is associated with some adaptive benefits (Brookes, 2015; Rose, 2002). These narcissists procure good outcomes for the self, although this often occurs at the expense of others (Paulhus, 1998). For example, grandiose narcissists' tendency to self-enhance leads to boosts in self-esteem (Rose, 2002; Taylor & Brown, 1988), but these narcissists are quick to sacrifice the well-being of

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¹ Although it is a continuous construct, for brevity, we refer to people high in trait narcissism as "narcissists."

others to promote their own (Campbell, Bush, Brunell, & Shelton, 2005). They also attribute their successes to their own ability and distance themselves from failure by blaming external sources (Kernis & Sun, 1994; Morf & Rhodewalt, 1998). In general, grandiose narcissists carefully craft and maintain their positive self-views, even when protecting their well-being results in negative consequences for others.

In contrast, vulnerable narcissists exhibit a more maladaptive set of characteristics. They are hypersensitive (Hendin & Cheek, 1997), anxious (Wink, 1991), and insecure (Kernberg, 1986), as well as defensive (Freis, Brown, Carroll & Arkin, in press; Wink, 1991) and shame-prone (Malkin, Barry, & Zeigler-Hill, 2011). Self-doubt plagues the vulnerable narcissist (Wink, 1991), who tends to internalize emotions (Malkin et al., 2011). Vulnerable narcissists may even experience a kind of depressive realism, without the emotional benefits of illusory self-enhancement (Rose, 2002; Taylor & Brown, 1988). In general, vulnerable narcissists view themselves negatively (Malkin et al., 2011) and experience low self-esteem and lowered well-being (Rose, 2002).

Thus, though they share key narcissistic features, grandiose and vulnerable narcissists experience vastly different psychological outcomes. Whereas grandiose narcissists feel entitled, are self-absorbed, and experience inflated self-esteem, vulnerable narcissists' characteristics seem contradictory. Vulnerable narcissists are still entitled and self-absorbed, but they simultaneously have low self-esteem. Ample literature demonstrates these similarities and differences between the two subtypes, but little past work attempts to explain why such differences occur. Our purpose is to shed light on a mediating variable that could explain the subtype differences discussed in the literature.

Specifically, we propose that self-perceptions of agency may explain the self-esteem differences in grandiose and vulnerable narcissists. Agency refers to traits of extraversion, action, and competence (Bakan, 1966; Bosson et al., 2008). Agentic tendencies stem from the desire to distinguish the self from others. This dimension allows a person to bring about desired outcomes, generally through efficient goal pursuit and attainment. Agency-oriented individuals strive for self-assertion, achievement, and power (Bakan, 1966). Although grandiose and vulnerable narcissists share key features such as entitlement and self-absorption, it is possible that their sense of agency differs and underlies their contrasting self-esteem levels.

1.2. Grandiose narcissism and perceived agency

Grandiose narcissism has historically been associated with high levels of agency, both theoretically and empirically. Campbell, Brunell, and Finkel's (2006) Agency Model of Narcissism proposes that grandiose narcissists focus on agentic concerns to regulate their self-esteem. To this end, grandiose narcissists employ agentic interpersonal strategies, such as seeking out trophy partners, viewing themselves as better than others, and constantly self-enhancing and self-promoting (Campbell et al., 2006). Grandiose narcissists hone their charisma, extraversion, and self-confidence to superficially impress others and gain admiration. These behaviors are likely often successful, helping the grandiose narcissist achieve desired outcomes such as a promotion at work or an attractive partner, as well as subsequently reinforcing their high self-esteem.

Empirical evidence also demonstrates strong links between grandiose narcissism and agency. For example, grandiose narcissists evaluate themselves positively in domains of agency on both explicit and implicit levels (Campbell, Bosson, Goheen, Lakey, & Kernis, 2007). They self-enhance primarily on status-relevant attributes, including intelligence (Campbell, Rudich, & Sedikides, 2002), and competition plays a central role in their lives. Grandiose narcissists base their self-worth in competition with others, but no other externally validated domain (e.g., others' approval; Zeigler-Hill et al., 2008). In the commons dilemma, grandiose narcissists engage in significantly more competitive than cooperative behavior, resulting in a benefit to the narcissist at the cost of other individuals and to the commons as a whole (Campbell et al.,

2005). In sum, both theory and research support the positive relationship between grandiose narcissism and agency.

1.3. Vulnerable narcissism and perceived agency

In contrast to the considerable evidence related to grandiose narcissism, the links between vulnerable narcissism and agency are far less clear. That said, some evidence suggests that vulnerable narcissism may be associated with a lack of agency. For example, Kernberg (1986) hypothesized that these narcissists lack self-confidence and initiative. Additionally, Pincus et al. (2009) theorized that vulnerable narcissists hold entitled expectations of others—in that they feel entitled to special treatment from others—but are incapable of adequately expressing those expectations (Pincus et al., 2009), suggesting that they may be unable to achieve the outcomes they feel they deserve. Empirically speaking, vulnerable narcissists are generally anxious, hesitant, and unsure (Foster & Trimm, 2008). More recently and most convincingly, Brookes (2015) demonstrated that vulnerable narcissism is associated with low self-efficacy, which can be thought of as an expression of agency (Bandura, 1986).

Overall, these speculations and findings suggest that vulnerable narcissists may feel entitled to good outcomes, but incapable of orchestrating the desired outcomes they feel they deserve. Unlike grandiose narcissists whose every move seems strategically aimed at self-enhancement and confirmation of their own superiority, vulnerable narcissists may feel like they deserve good things but that others are responsible for recognizing their deservingness and acting accordingly. Thus, in stark contrast to grandiose narcissists, vulnerable narcissists may actually lack a sense of personal agency.

1.4. The impact of perceived agency on self-esteem

The value of understanding perceived agency among the narcissistic subtypes arises from the potential to explain differences observed in grandiose and vulnerable narcissists, including self-esteem levels. Past research has shown that people tend to base their self-esteem, at least partly, on their feelings of agency (e.g., Tafarodi & Swann, 2001; Wojciszke, Baryla, Parzuchowski, Szymkow, & Abele, 2011). Thus, it seems theoretically plausible that if grandiose and vulnerable narcissists experience differing levels of agency, this could contribute to their experiences of high or low self-esteem. Accordingly, we predict that 1.) grandiose narcissists' high personal agency will lead to high self-esteem and 2.) vulnerable narcissists' low personal agency will lead to low self-esteem. Thus, differing perceived agency to attain the good outcomes which narcissists feel they deserve may serve as the divider that leads to psychological benefits for one (grandiose narcissists) and detriments for the other (vulnerable narcissists).

1.5. The current research

Overall, the links between grandiose narcissism and agency have been clearly demonstrated through theory and research findings, but these links are unclear for vulnerable narcissists. Given that the distinction between the two narcissistic subtypes has been widely accepted, it seems imperative that researchers begin to balance the established empirical work on the agentic qualities of grandiose narcissists with new work that clarifies these links for vulnerable narcissists. Importantly, the characteristic of agency may also help explain the differences observed in the two narcissistic subtypes, including divergent levels of self-esteem. The current study aimed to examine this gap in the literature.

We examined agentic self-perceptions and associated impacts on explicit global self-esteem among the narcissistic subtypes through trait self-ratings. We predicted that grandiose narcissists would rate themselves high in agentic traits, replicating past research. We hypothesized that vulnerable narcissists, on the other hand, would rate

themselves low in agentic traits. We tested a mediation model in which perceived agency mediates the relationship between each narcissistic subtype and self-esteem. Furthermore, we tested whether controlling for perceived agency creates a positive correlation between our measures of grandiose and vulnerable narcissism. Such findings would provide initial evidence that differing perceptions of agency is a primary contributor to different outcomes for the narcissistic subtypes.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were 101 undergraduate students at a large midwestern university who completed the study in exchange for course credit. One participant was excluded for indicating that they did not take the study seriously, reporting a 1 on a five-point scale from “not at all seriously” to “very seriously.” The final sample consisted of 100 participants (58 female, $M_{age} = 18.82$).

2.2. Materials & procedure

After completing a consent form, participants were assessed for grandiose narcissism, vulnerable narcissism, and explicit global self-esteem, and were asked to rate themselves on a list of agentic traits. Participants were then asked to report how seriously they took the study, along with their demographics, and were debriefed.

2.2.1. Narcissistic Personality Inventory

The Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Terry, 1988) was used to assess grandiose narcissism ($\alpha = .80$). The NPI consists of 40 forced-choice items where participants indicate which of two statements they identify with most. For each pair of statements, one represents a more narcissistic statement. Examples of more narcissistic statements include “I am an extraordinary person,” “I know that I am good because everybody keeps telling me so,” and “I am more capable than other people.” The number of more narcissistic responses given by the participant were summed to create a total score of grandiose narcissism.

2.2.2. Hypersensitive Narcissism Scale

The 10-item Hypersensitive Narcissism Scale (HSNS; Hendin & Cheek, 1997) was used to measure vulnerable narcissism ($\alpha = .76$). Participants indicated how well each statement described them, on a scale ranging from 1 (“very uncharacteristic or untrue; strongly disagree”) to 5 (“very characteristic or true; strongly agree”). The HSNS includes items such as “I dislike sharing the credit of an achievement with others,” “My feelings are easily hurt by ridicule or by the slighting remarks of others,” and “I can become entirely absorbed in thinking about my personal affairs, my health, my cares or my relations to others.” All ten items were summed to create a total score of vulnerable narcissism.

2.2.3. Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale

The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES; Rosenberg, 1965) was used to assess explicit global self-esteem ($\alpha = .91$). Participants indicated the extent to which they agreed with ten statements on a scale ranging from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 4 (“strongly agree”). Example RSES items include “I feel that I have a number of good qualities” and “On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.” All ten items were summed to create a total score of self-esteem.

2.2.4. Agentic trait self-ratings

An agentic trait list was taken from Campbell et al. (2007). Participants rated themselves on a series of trait words on a scale from 1 (“not like me”) to 5 (“very like me”). High agency traits included “assertive,” “outspoken,” and “dominant.” Ratings for traits representing low

Table 1

Correlations, means, and standard deviations of Study 1 variables.

Variable	1	2	3	Mean	SD
1. NPI				15.84	7.17
2. HSNS	.04			28.76	4.96
3. RSES	.42**	-.19 [†]		29.68	4.27
4. Agency	.60**	-.23 [†]	.42**	43.71	8.20

Note. NPI: Narcissistic Personality Inventory. HSNS: Hypersensitive Narcissism Scale. RSES: Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale.

** $p < .01$.

* $p < .05$.

[†] $p < .10$.

agency, such as “reserved,” “submissive,” and “inhibited,” were reverse-scored. The ratings were summed to create an agency score ($\alpha = .89$).

3. Results²

3.1. Bivariate correlations: agentic trait self-ratings

Table 1 outlines the bivariate correlations, means, and standard deviations of all variables used in the study. All continuous variables were mean-centered for analyses.

Replicating past work, grandiose narcissism was positively correlated with agency ($r = .59, p < .01$); in contrast, vulnerable narcissism was negatively correlated with agency ($r = -.23, p = .02$). These findings support our predictions and provide evidence that grandiose and vulnerable narcissists perceive themselves differently in terms of agency. Importantly, unlike grandiose narcissists, vulnerable narcissists perceive themselves as low in agency, indicating that they do not see themselves as competent and capable. This represents a significant deviation from decades of narcissism theory and research which suggests that narcissism is universally associated with high agency (e.g., Freud, 1931) and more closely aligns with Brookes' (2015) finding that vulnerable narcissism is associated with low self-efficacy.

3.2. Mediation: the impact of perceived agency on self-esteem

A mediation analysis using PROCESS (Hayes, 2012) and bootstrapping methods with 5000 resamples (Preacher & Hayes, 2008) showed that the effect of grandiose narcissism on self-esteem was mediated by agency, indirect effect $b = .10$, BootSE = .05, 95% BootCI [.0147, .1958]. Thus, the tendency for people higher in grandiose narcissism to report higher explicit global self-esteem was partially statistically accounted for by their higher self-evaluations of agency (Fig. 1).

A second mediation analysis using PROCESS (Hayes, 2012) and bootstrapping methods with 5000 resamples (Preacher & Hayes, 2008) showed that the marginally significant effect of vulnerable narcissism on self-esteem was also mediated by agency, indirect effect $b = -.08$, BootSE = .04, 95% BootCI [-.1769, -.0194]. Thus, the tendency for people higher in vulnerable narcissism to report lower explicit global self-esteem was statistically accounted for by their lower self-evaluations of agency (Fig. 2).

² Due to the current state of science and the value of increased replication in our field, we have replicated the findings reported in this paper in a similarly designed study with 122 participants. For brevity, we will report the appropriate replication results in footnote format. In the replication study, grandiose narcissism positively correlated with agentic trait self-ratings ($r = .58, p < .01$) and vulnerable narcissism negatively correlated with agentic trait self-ratings ($r = -.35, p < .01$). The effect of grandiose narcissism on self-esteem was mediated by agency, indirect effect $b = .24$, BootSE = .05, 95% BootCI [.1544, .3467]. The effect of vulnerable narcissism on self-esteem was also mediated by agency, indirect effect $b = -.14$, BootSE = .05, 95% BootCI [-.2548, -.0669]. Additionally, grandiose and vulnerable narcissism were not correlated at the bivariate level ($r = .09, p = .33$); however, when controlling for agency, the partial correlation between grandiose and vulnerable narcissism was significant and positive ($pr = .38, p < .01$). Thus, all findings reported in the current study were replicated in the replication study.

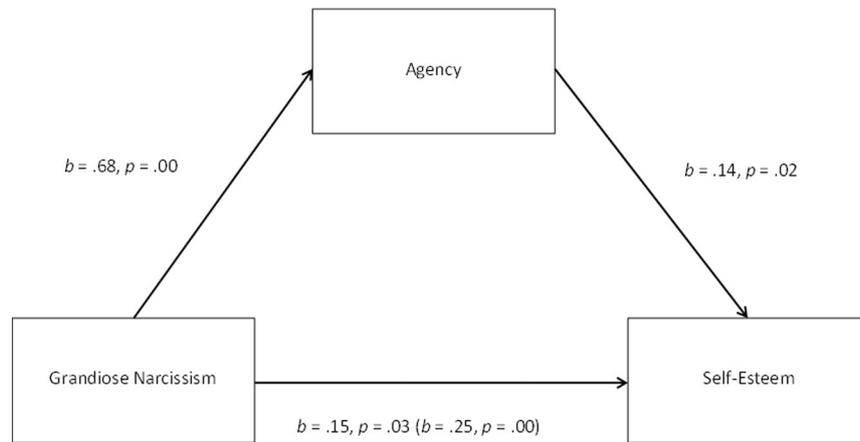


Fig. 1. Self-esteem as a consequence of grandiose narcissism and perceived agency.

These significant mediation models provide support for the prediction that grandiose and vulnerable narcissists experience differences in self-esteem due to their differing sense of agency. As hypothesized, vulnerable narcissists feel incapable of achieving the good outcomes to which they feel entitled, and this lack of agency contributes to their low self-esteem. This is in contrast to grandiose narcissists, who perceive themselves as possessing the agency necessary to achieve those good outcomes and thus experience high self-esteem. Consequently, this model helps answer the question of how both narcissistic subtypes are entitled but experience different levels of self-esteem.

3.3. Partial correlation: additional support for agency as a differentiator

Typically, measures of grandiose and vulnerable narcissism are uncorrelated (e.g., Hendin & Cheek, 1997), as they were in the current data. This null correlation may occur because grandiose and vulnerable narcissists share some features (e.g., entitlement, self-absorption) but diverge on others (e.g., self-esteem, hypersensitivity to others). Importantly, the mediation model reported above showed that one major difference between the subtypes (i.e., self-esteem) can be accounted for by differences in agency. Thus, it is plausible that controlling for the key feature of agency may result in a positive correlation between the measures of grandiose and vulnerable narcissism used in the current study. Therefore, we computed the partial correlation between grandiose narcissism and vulnerable narcissism, controlling for agency; this partial correlation was significant and positive ($r = .22, p = .03$). This supports the proposal that agency is a primary differentiator between the two subtypes. Notably, the partial correlation between grandiose and vulnerable narcissism when controlling for self-esteem remained non-significant ($r = .13, p = .20$), indicating that self-esteem does not serve a similar differentiating function.

4. Discussion

The current research investigated whether grandiose and vulnerable narcissists perceive themselves differently in terms of agency. As expected, grandiose narcissism was associated with high self-rated agency whereas vulnerable narcissism was associated with low self-rated agency. These findings provided evidence that grandiose narcissists view themselves as capable and efficacious, whereas vulnerable narcissists do not. More importantly, the divergent experience of agency impacts each narcissist's self-esteem.

In the current study, we found that differences in agency mediated the association between narcissistic subtypes and explicit global self-esteem, such that high agency mediated the link between grandiose narcissism and high self-esteem, whereas low agency mediated the relationship between vulnerable narcissism and low self-esteem. Thus,

some of the differential experiences of grandiose and vulnerable narcissism can be explained by differences in agency. For instance, although grandiose and vulnerable narcissists share traits such as entitlement, vulnerable narcissists do not believe they possess the skills or agentic traits necessary to orchestrate desired outcomes for themselves. This lack of agency is what drives the detriments to vulnerable narcissists' self-esteem in contrast to grandiose narcissists' experience. This likely leads grandiose and vulnerable narcissists to experience life very differently, particularly in the realm of goal pursuit.

Due to the cross-sectional (vs. longitudinal) nature of this design, however, a causal sequence of events cannot yet be verified. Specifically, the model is also significant when the agency and self-esteem variables are flipped and self-esteem becomes the mediator.³ In other words, while agency may lead to differences in self-esteem, a cyclical process may also be occurring where the narcissists' self-esteem levels and perceived agency create a perpetual feedback loop. For example, vulnerable narcissists' low perceived agency may lead to low self-esteem, which may then reinforce their poor motivation and lack of agency, making it difficult to break a downward cycle of poor self-views. In comparison, grandiose narcissists may experience an upward cycle where instances of high agency over time increases self-esteem, which further increases perceived agency. In sum, there are still open questions in regard to studying the possible dynamic nature of these variables and their implications on grandiose and vulnerable narcissists' daily lives. Future research may involve testing this possible spiral more specifically than was done here; for example, a longitudinal study over one or two weeks involving daily reports of state self-esteem, agency ratings for the day's activities, and goal attainment for the day may provide a test of the spiral across time.

Notably, partial correlation analyses provided additional support for the importance of agency in distinguishing the outcomes (e.g., self-esteem) experienced by grandiose and vulnerable narcissists. We found that when controlling for agency, grandiose and vulnerable narcissism are positively correlated. Importantly, this association suggests that the difference in perceived agency represents a fundamental distinction between the narcissistic subtypes. Thus, consistent with the predicted mediation models, this finding suggests that differential agency may account for much of the divergent experiences (such as self-esteem, negative emotionality) which separate grandiose narcissists from vulnerable narcissists.

³ The effect of grandiose narcissism on agency was mediated by self-esteem, indirect effect $b = .10$, BootSE = .06, 95% BootCI [.0152, .2464]. The effect of vulnerable narcissism on agency was mediated by self-esteem, indirect effect $b = -.12$, BootSE = .08, 95% BootCI [-.3177, -.0095].

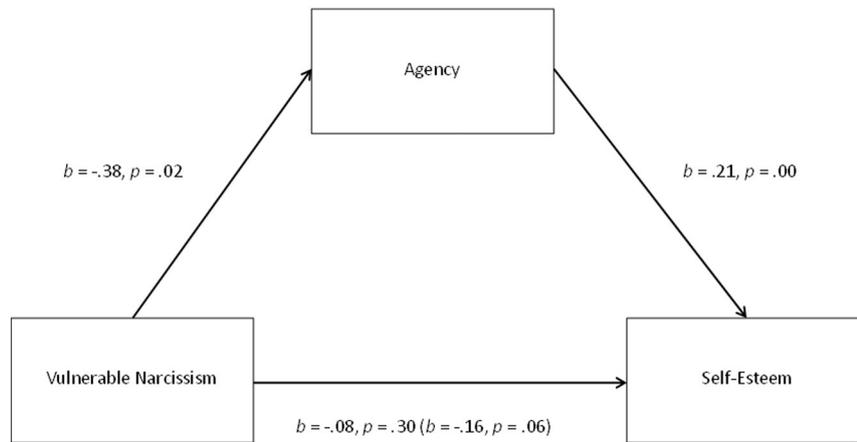


Fig. 2. Self-esteem as a consequence of vulnerable narcissism and perceived agency.

4.1. Limitations

As mentioned previously, future research may primarily rectify the directionality limitation of the mediation model. We also did not account for the effects of socially desirable responding in the current study. It is possible that vulnerable narcissists do not respond in socially desirable ways, which may have impacted their responses to the agentic self-ratings in the study presented here. Future studies should incorporate measures of social desirability to assess this possibility. Additionally, we only measured explicit global self-esteem in the current study; results may differ for other kinds of self-esteem (e.g., implicit self-esteem, stable vs. unstable self-esteem). Future research may also address whether gender differences in perceived agency or the mediating effect of agency on self-esteem exist, and whether these results are generalizable to age groups other than college students. Lastly, the current study examined self-perceptions of agency; future work may examine whether grandiose and vulnerable narcissists truly differ in objective agentic behavior, such as task performance and persistence.

4.2. Conclusion

In sum, the present research demonstrates the importance of self-perceptions to differential outcomes for the two types of narcissist. Specifically, the perception that one possesses or does not possess agency represents a fundamental distinction between grandiose and vulnerable narcissists, where grandiose narcissists possess agency and experience positive self-esteem outcomes whereas vulnerable narcissists do not possess agency and experience negative self-esteem outcomes. This difference in perceived agency may provide an answer to the question of why one type of narcissist is more adaptive than the other; in short, grandiose narcissists are capable of achieving the outcomes they desire whereas vulnerable narcissists are not. This work paves the way for further investigation of the implications of these characteristics in various settings including business or work, interpersonal relationships, and even therapeutic contexts. In any scenario where agency comes into play, grandiose and vulnerable narcissists are likely to undergo very different experiences and attain very different outcomes.

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