Short Communication

Narcissism and lack of interpersonal forgiveness: The mediating role of state anger, state rumination, and state empathy ☆

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ABSTRACT

The present study investigated the unique contributions of two distinct dimensions of narcissism – admiration and rivalry – to two facets of unforgiveness: revenge and avoidance. In addition, we examined whether state anger, state rumination, and state empathy mediate this relationship. Using a large sample ($N = 1040$), we found that admiration was negatively related to revenge and avoidance via higher empathy for the transgressor. By contrast, rivalry was positively related to revenge and avoidance via greater anger and rumination and less empathy. Findings suggest that the mechanisms through which narcissism and lack of forgiveness are associated are better understood if we disentangle admiration and rivalry and consider both cognitive and affective antecedents of narcissists' unforgiving motivations.

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1. Introduction

A large body of research on forgiveness has demonstrated that individual difference variables affect one's response to transgressions (for an overview, see Fehr, Gelfand, & Nag, 2010). In particular, narcissism has been argued to have an "inhibitory effect on the forgiveness process" (Emmons, 2000, p. 164). Narcissism is characterized by feelings of entitlement, self-enhancement, exploitative interpersonal behavior, and lack of empathy for others (Rhodewalt & Peterson, 2009). Narcissists[2] tend to behave aggressively when faced with social rejection (Twenge & Campbell, 2003). Indeed, it has been demonstrated that narcissistic individuals have a lower tendency to react to interpersonal offenses with forgiveness (Eaton, Struthers, & Santelli, 2006). Specifically, narcissistic entitlement (i.e., a sense of deserving special treatment) has been

linked to reduced forgiveness (Exline, Baumeister, Bushman, Campbell, & Finkel, 2004).

Studies examining the narcissism–forgiveness link almost exclusively relied on one questionnaire, the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Hall, 1979). Although widely used, it has been criticized for conflating both adaptive and maladaptive dimensions of narcissism into one composite. Moreover, it has been suggested that narcissism will be better understood if we distinguish these dimensions (Ackerman et al., 2011). Specifically, as condensed in the Narcissistic Admiration and Rivalry Concept (NARC; Back et al., 2013), narcissism can be conceptualized as the interplay of two distinct social strategies: First, the propensity for assertive self-enhancement by means of self-promotion (*admiration)* and, second, the propensity for antagonistic self-protection by means of self-defense (*rivalry*). Empirically, admiration is related to adjustment indicators (e.g., self-assuredness, problem-focused reactions to transgressions), whereas rivalry is related to maladjustment (e.g., entitlement, more hostile reactions). Despite the well-established link between narcissism and reduced forgiveness, little is known about the facet-specific contributions of admiration and rivalry to lack of forgiveness. Consistent with the NARC, we reasoned that unforgiveness should be related to rivalry but less so to admiration.

Furthermore, the underlying mechanisms that mediate the association between narcissism and unforgiveness are largely

unexplored. Here, we argue that three socio-cognitive variables – state anger, state rumination, and state empathy – might prove promising. Anger, rumination, and reduced empathy have been prominent variables in predicting a lack of forgiveness (Fehr et al., 2010). Narcissists report higher anger in the face of transgressions, such as an interpersonal rejection (Twenge & Campbell, 2003). Further, Krizan and Johar (in press, Study 3) found that narcissistic entitlement is associated with rumination. Finally, narcissism has been shown to predict low empathy (Watson & Morris, 1991). Thus, we hypothesized a multiple mediator model in which these socio-cognitive variables (state anger, state rumination, and state empathy) are key factors accounting for lack of forgiveness in narcissistic rivalry and admiration.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

A total of 1040 individuals (M_{age} = 22.8, SD = 4.9, range: 18–50; 81.1% female) from Germany (74.6%), Austria (24.4%), and Switzerland (1.0%) were recruited via advertising on a social networking site to complete an online study. As an incentive, they were given the option to enter a lottery for one of four 25 € gift cards. All participants provided informed consent.

Participants completed a measure of narcissism (see below) and were then instructed to bring to mind a real-life situation in which someone had hurt them. Next, they were requested to "indicate your current thoughts and feelings about the person who hurt you; that is, we want to know how you feel about that person *right now*." Participants then completed the measures described below. All measures were administered in German language.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Narcissism

The Narcissistic Admirations and Rivalry Questionnaire (NARQ; Back et al., 2013) was used to assess both facets of narcissism, admiration (9 Items; e.g., "I am great") and rivalry (9 Items; e.g., "I want my rivals to fail"). Items were rated from 1 (*do not agree at all*) to 6 (*agree completely*).

2.2.2. State anger

Participants were asked to rate their momentary anger toward the transgressor on a face-valid single item ("I am very angry about what he/she did to me"; 1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*).

2.2.3. State rumination

Participants also provided information about how much they currently ruminated about the transgression ("I can't stop thinking about what he/she did to me"; 1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*).

2.2.4. State empathy

To measure empathic feelings for the transgressor, we used the empathy measure by Batson and Shaw (1991). Participants were instructed to rate the extent to which they currently experienced each feeling for their transgressor (8 items; e.g., "softhearted"; 1 = *not at all*, 5 = *very much*).

2.2.5. Lack of forgiveness

Lack of forgiveness was measured with the Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations Inventory (TRIM; McCullough et al., 1998). It assesses individuals' current motivations toward a real-life transgressor and is divided into two subscales: revenge (5 items; e.g., "I'll make him/her pay") and avoidance (7 items; e.g., "I withdraw from him/her"). Items were rated from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). High levels of revenge and avoidance indicate a lack of forgiveness.

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations

Table 1 details descriptive statistics, reliabilities, and intercorrelations for all measures. Because we were interested in the facet-specific effects of admiration and rivalry on lack of forgiveness, we calculated uniqueness scores by regressing each of the two NARC facets on the other one. The resulting residual scores reflect the amount of variance of each facet that is not shared by the other one and, hence, provide a more accurate estimate of the unique contribution of each facet to the narcissism–forgiveness link (for a similar procedure, see Penke & Asendorpf, 2008).

The unique variance of the admiration facet showed no relations with revenge, avoidance, and anger, but it was negatively correlated with rumination and positively correlated with empathy. The unique variance of the rivalry facet, by contrast, was positively correlated with revenge, avoidance, anger, and rumination, but negatively correlated with empathy.

3.2. Mediation analyses

To test the possible mediating roles of state anger, state rumination, and state empathy, we performed bootstrapping analyses

Table 1
Means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations among measures.

Measure	M	SD	α	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Admiration	3.08	.83	.84	–								
Rivalry	2.33	.83	.83	.39[***]/−.39[***]	–							
State anger[a]	3.80	1.00	–	.02/−.03	.11[***]/.12[***]	–						
State rumination[a]	3.30	1.12	–	−.04/−.07[*]	−06/.08[**]	.42[***]	–					
State empathy	2.24	.94	.93	.05/.09[**]	−.07[*]/−.10[***]	−.25[***]	.01	–				
Revenge	2.12	.80	.84	.12[***]/−.02	.35[***]/.33[***]	.37[***]	.22[***]	−.38[***]	–			
Avoidance	3.43	.97	.90	−.01/−.04	.07[*]/.08[**]	.27[***]	.09[**]	−.63[***]	.37[***]	–		
Gender	–	–	–	.20[***]/.13[***]	.21[***]/.15[***]	−.13[***]	−.13[***]	−.03	.12[***]	−.01	–	
Age	22.8	4.9	–	−.02/.02	−.09[**]/−.09[**]	−.02	−.04	.01	−.05	.03	.05	–

Note. N = 1040. For admiration and rivalry, uniqueness correlations (i.e., the amount of variance of each facet that is not shared by the other one) are shown next to the respective zero-order correlations with the other measures. Gender was coded as female = 0, male = 1.
[a] Single-item measures.
[*] $p \leqslant .05$.
[**] $p \leqslant .01$.
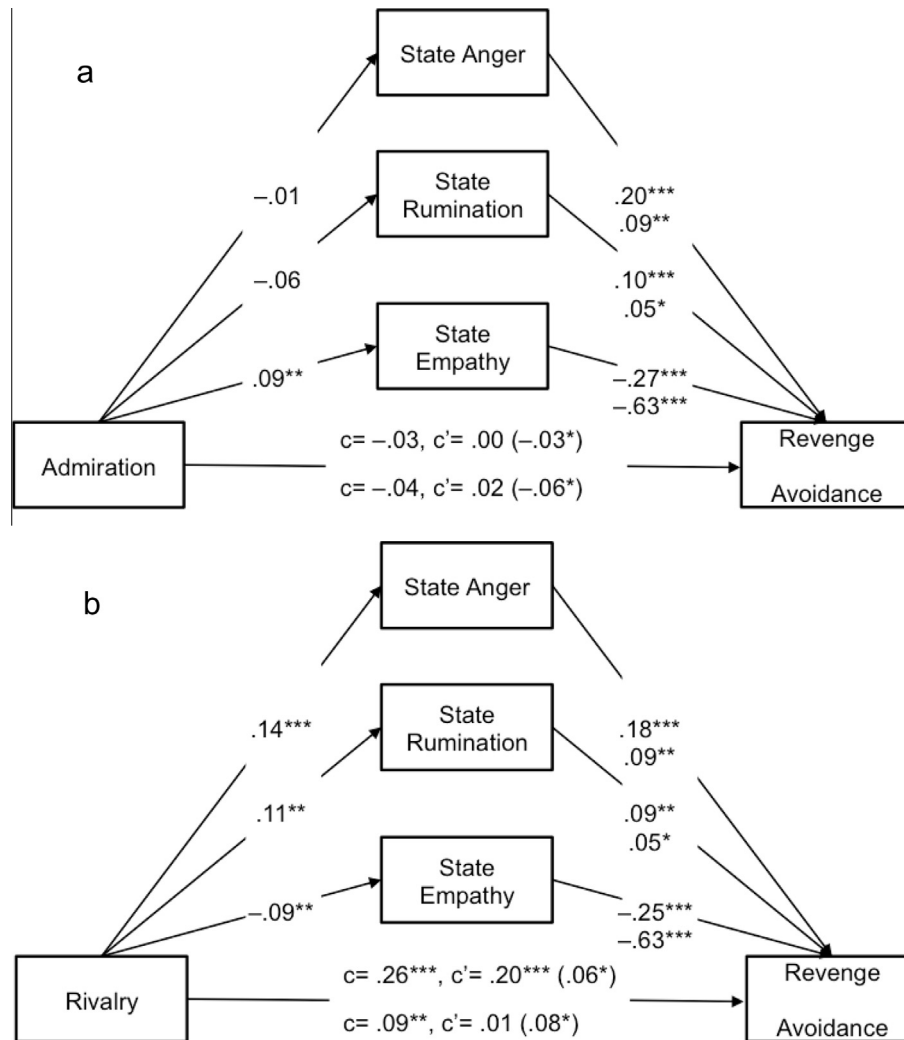[***] $p \leqslant .001$ (two-tailed).

Fig. 1. Multiple mediation models for the unique effects of admiration (panel a) and rivalry (panel b) on unforgiveness facets (revenge and avoidance) via state anger, state rumination, and state empathy. Coefficients represent standardized regression coefficients while controlling for gender and age (not shown in figure); c is the total effect of each narcissism facet on revenge/avoidance, and c' is the direct effect after correcting for proposed mediators; total indirect effects are in parentheses. $N = 1040$. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$ (two-tailed).

using the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2013); we applied 5000 bootstrap resamples with 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals (CIs). A significant indirect effect of a mediator is present for CIs that do not contain zero. A total of four models were computed with the NARQ uniqueness scores (admiration and rivalry) as independent variables and lack of forgiveness (revenge and avoidance) as dependent variables. All models controlled for gender (coded as female = 0, male = 1) and age given that past research has found that these variables are correlated with both narcissism and forgiveness (Foster, Campbell, & Twenge, 2003; Ghaemmaghami, Allemand, & Martin, 2011).

The total effects of admiration on revenge as well as avoidance were not significant, respectively (both $ps > .20$). However, an indirect effect of a mediator can still occur (Preacher & Hayes, 2004). Indeed, state empathy was a significant mediator (95% CI [−.040, −.008]), such that greater admiration was associated with less revenge through higher empathy for the transgressor (Fig. 1a). For avoidance as an outcome variable, the pattern of results was similar: Again, greater admiration was associated with less avoidance through higher empathy for the transgressor (95% CI [−.090, −.016]).

The total effect of rivalry on revenge was significant ($p < .001$). State anger (95% CI [.014, .039]), state rumination (95% CI [.004,

.019]), and state empathy (95% CI [.009, .040]) were significant mediators, such that rivalry was associated with higher revenge through greater anger, greater rumination, and less empathy (Fig. 1b). When avoidance was analyzed as outcome variable, results again revealed significant multiple mediation effects of state anger (95% CI [.005, .024]), state rumination (95% CI [.001, .014]), and state empathy (95% CI [.020, .094]), such that rivalry was associated with higher avoidance through greater anger and rumination and less empathy.

4. Discussion

Drawing on a large and heterogeneous sample, the current study examined the associations between two distinct dimensions of narcissism – admiration and rivalry – and lack of forgiveness (i.e., revenge and avoidance). Admiration was unrelated to revenge and avoidance, but the overall zero effects may be explained by the mitigating effect of state empathy: Individuals high in admiration experienced more empathic feelings for their transgressor, which in turn predicted less revenge and avoidance. Thus, empathy functioned as a suppressor variable such that its inclusion in mediation models yielded significant negative relationships between admiration and revenge/avoidance. Rivalry, by contrast, was related to

greater revenge and this association was mediated by state anger, state rumination, and state empathy. Conceptually, our results underscore the importance of distinguishing between two narcissistic dimensions when considering reactions to interpersonal hurt: one that entails responses that promote forgiveness (admiration) and another that entails adverse responses (rivalry).

In line with previous studies illustrating that narcissism is linked to negative interpersonal outcomes (Back et al., 2013; Eaton et al., 2006), we found that it is the antagonistic (i.e., rivalry) aspect of narcissism that is most robustly associated with revenge in response to real-life transgressions. Importantly, we conceptually replicated findings by Exline et al. (2004), who showed that narcissistic entitlement is associated with less forgiveness of transgressions. Our findings move beyond past work, however, by scrutinizing the mechanisms by which facets of narcissism and lack of forgiveness are related.

Our results may imply that the cognitive mechanisms mediating this link should be extended to include further variables, such as higher perceived intentionality of the transgression or the attribution of malevolent intentions on the side of the perpetrator. Given that individuals high in rivalry (but not admiration) are generally distrustful of others (Back et al., 2013), these attribution styles might be plausible. Indeed, attributing a transgression as being intentional has been found to be negatively related to forgiveness (Fehr et al., 2010). Similarly, inferring malevolent intentions even in seemingly regretful perpetrators has been shown to be linked to pronounced unforgiveness (Gerlach, Allemand, Agroskin, & Denissen, 2012).

Finally, our results also suggest that facets of narcissism might differ in their adaptiveness: Admiration was positively related to empathy for the transgressor but it was negatively related to ruminating about the hurt. Rivalry, however, demonstrated inverse relations with these socio-cognitive variables; it was negatively related to empathy but positively related to rumination. Although consistent with recent conceptualizations of admiration as the bright side of narcissism and rivalry as its dark side (Back et al., 2013), it should also be noted that such classification is rather crude (Robins, Tracy, & Shaver, 2001) and awaits further qualification in future research.

4.1. Limitations and future directions

While our large sample allowed us to detect the observed effects with sufficient precision (Schönbrodt & Perugini, 2013), admittedly, some of the effects were rather modest in size (e.g., the significant suppression effects observed for empathy in the analysis of admiration and lack of forgiveness) and thus warrant interpretative caution. Another point refers to the use of single-item measures of state anger and state rumination. Although this has been shown to produce valid data (e.g., Allemand, Steiner, & Hill, 2013), future work should include multi-item measures of these constructs. We also encourage the use of non self-report measures, as individuals might not always be aware of their thoughts and feelings toward their transgressor.[3] Such measures could include behavioral observations or indirect measures of forgiveness (Fatfouta, Schröder-Abé, & Merkl, 2014).

Given the cross-sectional nature of our study, causal pathways regarding the relations between admiration as well as rivalry and lack of forgiveness cannot be established. Longitudinal or experimental studies that investigate this more thoroughly are certainly an avenue for future work. Such studies might also use other conceptualizations and measures of narcissism (for an overview, see Rhodewalt & Peterson, 2009) to examine the generalizability of

the current results. In addition, our study focused on one specific transgression situation. Using experience-sampling designs, future studies could examine whether the present relations also hold on a day-to-day basis and with different types of transgressions. Previous research, for example, has shown that narcissists often present themselves as victims; that is, they report an increased number of interpersonal transgressions in their daily interactions (McCullough, Emmons, Kilpatrick, & Mooney, 2003). We would anticipate the antagonistic style of individuals high in rivalry to promote enhanced recollection of past transgressions rather than the assertive style of individuals high in admiration. Finally, it would be valuable to further examine the narcissism–forgiveness link in close (i.e., romantic) relationships and, specifically, narcissists' reactions to partner transgressions. As outlined in Back et al. (2013), using partner reports of relationship behaviors (e.g., accommodation) and perceptions (e.g., commitment) might be beneficial. Again, we would expect individuals high in rivalry to demonstrate less accommodative behavior and commitment toward their partner than individuals high in admiration. Future studies are necessary to test these predictions in more depth.

4.2. Conclusions

The current study adds to our limited understanding of the processes underlying the links between two distinct facets of narcissism – admiration and rivalry – and lack of forgiveness. We demonstrated that this association is differentially mediated by state anger, state rumination, and state empathy. Subsequent work is needed to identify further cognitive mechanisms of this link and, ultimately, to better clarify the causal pathways among these variables.

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[3] We thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing us to this possibility.

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