

When are Grandiose and Vulnerable Narcissists Least Helpful?

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Abstract

Grandiosity and vulnerability are distinct dimensions of narcissism, but little research has examined their differences regarding prosocial behavior. This investigation is the first to test the hypotheses that grandiose narcissism predicts withholding help under high social pressure, whereas vulnerable narcissism predicts withholding help under low social pressure.

Undergraduate participants ($N=220$, $M_{age}=19.5$, 142 women) were partnered with a confederate for the supposed purpose of a mock counseling session. The confederate ruined the session by demonstrating inconsiderate behavior, after which the participant encountered two opportunities to help the confederate: one presented under high social pressure to help, the other presented under low social pressure to help. Measures also assessed participants' prosocial emotions, including empathy for and forgiveness of the confederate. Consistent with hypotheses, grandiose narcissism predicted less helping under high social pressure, whereas vulnerable narcissism predicted less helping under low social pressure, the latter relationship being mediated by reduced forgiveness. Vulnerable narcissism was also associated with less empathy and forgiveness. Grandiose and vulnerable narcissism differentially predicted helping behavior depending on the amount of social pressure to help. These results conform to theoretical distinctions between grandiosity and vulnerability regarding social dominance and internalization.

Keywords: narcissism; grandiose; vulnerable; helping; prosocial

Highlights

- Grandiose narcissism was associated with less helping under high social pressure.
- Vulnerable narcissism was associated with less helping under low social pressure.
- Vulnerable narcissism was associated with decreased empathy and forgiveness.

1. Introduction

Narcissism is generally characterized by a self-centered orientation, feelings of being special and entitled, and a pre-occupation with one's own self-worth (e.g., Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001; Miller & Campbell, 2008). Theorists, however, have long proposed that narcissism can present in different forms. Murray (1938) noted that narcissistic individuals experience *dual dynamics*, in that they exhibit delusions of grandeur and self-aggrandizement while also being prone to hypersensitivity, anxiety, and delusions of persecution. Kernberg (1975) held that narcissistic qualities such as entitlement, lack of empathy, and ruthlessness exist together with vulnerable aspects such as feeling inferior and experiencing dissatisfaction with life. Kernberg further maintained that these vulnerable features are often masked by a superficial, assertive interpersonal style. Similarly, Kohut (1977) conceived narcissists as struggling with two competing forces wherein a grandiose self struggles against a depleted self, the latter seeking to repress grandiosity. These various conceptualizations reflect general agreement that narcissism entails two sets of features: a grandiose aspect that is interpersonally domineering, demands attention, and demonstrates entitlement, and a vulnerable aspect that is socially encumbered by feelings of inadequacy and negative emotionality, although also characterized by entitlement and grandiose fantasy (Cain, Pincus & Ansell, 2008).

The idea that narcissism can involve both grandiose and vulnerable characteristics has also received empirical support. Representing a compilation of clinical evidence, the DSM-IV (American Psychiatric Association, 2000) indicates that individuals with Narcissistic Personality Disorder may not only believe themselves to be superior, special or unique, but can also be hypersensitive to perceived insult, criticism, or defeat. With regard to non-clinical manifestations of narcissism, factor analytic studies further suggest that narcissistic personality

characteristics coalesce along two largely independent dimensions that are suggestive of grandiosity and vulnerability (Cain et al., 2008; Pincus & Lukowitsky, 2010; Russ, Shedler, Bradley & Westen, 2008; Wink, 1991). Survey and self-report studies suggest that grandiose narcissism is associated with a dominant and exploitative interpersonal style, being oblivious to one's impact on others, and high approach motivation. Conversely, vulnerable narcissism is associated with a vindictive, socially avoidant interpersonal style, acute awareness of others' evaluations, hypersensitivity, passive-aggression, and high avoidance motivation (Dickinson & Pincus, 2003; Foster & Trimm, 2008; Gabbard, 1989; Given-Wilson, McIlwain & Warburton, 2011; Okada, 2010; Raskin, Novacek & Hogan, 1991; Schoenleber, Sadeh & Verona, 2011; Wink, 1991). With regard to core personality features, grandiose narcissism relates to high extraversion and low neuroticism, and vulnerable narcissism is associated with social avoidance and high neuroticism (Buss & Chiodo, 1991; Hendin & Cheek, 1997; Miller & Campbell, 2008; Pincus et al., 2009; Pincus & Roche, 2012). Thus, consideration of existing theoretical and empirical research suggests that grandiose and vulnerable narcissism should relate to different patterns of behavior.

1.1. Narcissism and Helpfulness

The literature has established that narcissistic personality characteristics are generally associated with maladaptive social attributes and behaviors, such as disagreeableness, psychopathy, and aggression (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Campbell, Bush, Brunell & Shelton, 2005; Fossati, Borroni, Eisenberg & Maffei, 2010; Holtzman, Vazire & Mehl, 2010). By contrast, very little is known regarding the relationship between narcissism and prosocial qualities, such as helping, empathy, and forgiveness (but see Besser & Zeigler-Hill, 2010; Given-Wilson et al., 2011; Hart & Hepper, 2012). The lack of relevant research in this area represents a

gap in the empirical record inasmuch as theory suggests that the self-focus connected with narcissism would create a disinclination toward prosocial behaviors and feelings. For instance, self-concern and insufficient consideration of others has been posited to decrease helpfulness and increase resentment in response to requests for help, and **experimental work shows that increasing self-concern reduces the willingness to be helpful** (Aderman & Berkowitz, 1983; Berkowitz, 1970). Empathy has also been shown to be an important motivator for helping, and **low empathy is a salient feature of narcissism** (Eisenberg, 2007; Karremans, Van Lange & Holland, 2005). To the degree that narcissism corresponds to a stable, consistent pattern of self-concern and reduced empathy, it **should entail a decreased willingness to be helpful**. For these reasons the current investigation focused on testing whether narcissism predicted differences in actual prosocial behaviors and feelings, an issue that has not been considered by prior research.

Although both grandiose and vulnerable narcissism should be associated with unhelpfulness, the fact that these dimensions of narcissism are relatively orthogonal raises the possibility that they may differ according to the conditions under which they lead to the withholding of help (Wink, 1991). **Grandiose narcissism's association with a dominant and domineering interpersonal style and disregard for others may permit grandiose narcissists to ignore or resist the norms and social pressure that induce compliance with help requests.** Additionally, given that grandiose narcissism's self-enhancement motivation may be rooted in desire for admiration, grandiose narcissists may openly refuse to help when being helpful does not afford an opportunity for self-enhancement (Wallace & Baumeister, 2002). Such open, public refusals to help someone who transgressed against them should be expected given the sensitivity of grandiose individuals to public status and their need for one-upmanship (Campbell, Reeder, Sedikides & Elliot, 2000). Thus, **grandiose narcissism should predict withholding help**

under high social pressure. However, because vulnerable narcissists are acutely sensitive to others' evaluations and lack externalizing qualities (Miller & Campbell, 2008), no clear relationship is expected between vulnerable narcissism and helping refusal under high social pressure.

In contrast, vulnerable narcissism should predict withholding help when social pressure to provide help is low and there is low accountability for one's actions, such as when one can remain relatively anonymous. Given these individuals' shyness and concerns about negative social evaluation (Dickinson & Pincus, 2003; Miller & Campbell, 2008), such low-pressure opportunities should allow these individuals to express their entitlement with less risk, permitting enactment of their tendency for vindictiveness (Given-Wilson et al., 2011). Furthermore, as a result of its links with internalization, rumination and emotional dysregulation (Krizan & Johar, 2012; Pincus & Roche, 2012; Schoenleber et al., 2011), **vulnerable narcissism should predict decreased prosocial emotions, including less empathy and less forgiveness,** in response to discourteous treatment. However, because the anonymity and indirectness of low social pressure removes the ability to directly bolster self-worth or demonstrate entitlement through publicly refusing to help, grandiose narcissism is not expected to predict helping under these circumstances. If supported, these relations would provide the first empirical support for theoretical distinctions between the two narcissism dimensions with respect to actual prosocial behaviors.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants included 220 undergraduates at a large Midwestern University (65% female; $M_{\text{age}}=19.5$) who were enrolled in introductory psychology and communication studies courses

who received course credit for their voluntary participation, thus constituting a convenience sample. Using scheduling software participants voluntarily scheduled their session time in the current study, and were not selected or screened on the basis of any criterion. No participants withdrew from the study prior to completion of all session activities.

2.2. Procedure

Participants expected to serve as lay-counselors to a partner, who was actually a confederate. At the start of session, the confederate requested if the participant could—for the confederate's benefit—complete a research project for an unrelated course. The experimenter noncommittally suggested it was a possibility if time permitted, thus providing a means whereby the participant could later help the confederate (Katz, Glass, Lucido & Farber, 1979).

After completing questionnaires that included narcissism measures, participants read about a personally upsetting event supposedly written by the confederate. Participants prepared to counsel the confederate, but were soon informed that the session had to be cancelled due to time constraints caused by the confederate's misbehavior. Specifically, the confederate arrived late, insisting on visiting the restroom during the study, only to then be discovered in the hallway speaking on a cellphone. Because norms strongly promote helping, the confederate's misbehavior was designed to increase variance in participants' helping behavior.

After cancelling the counseling session due to lack of time, the experimenter dismissed the confederate without credit, but instructed the participant to remain until the end of the scheduled time to complete additional materials, one being a measure of empathy for the confederate. After completing these materials, the experimenter explained that the supervising professor desired the participant's feedback about the irregular session and would be delivering questions. While waiting for the questions, the experimenter explicitly asked if the participant

would like to complete the confederate's research project, thus providing an opportunity to help under *high* social pressure. Subsequently the participant privately completed the professor's feedback questions, wherein they reported their forgiveness of the confederate and suggested how much leniency the professor should show the confederate, thus providing the opportunity to help under *low* social pressure.

The present data are from a larger investigation that included two between-subjects experimental manipulations intended to influence empathy and forgiveness. For one manipulation, the confederate's description of the upsetting event either omitted or included emotion words (e.g., feeling alone, scared). For the second manipulation, the experimenter instructed the participant either to approach the counseling session in an aloof manner, or to identify with the confederate. Because they are peripheral to this investigation, the manipulations are not further discussed, though they are the focus of another study unrelated to narcissism (Cornish, Guyll, Wade, Lannin & Madon, 2013). However, all analyses of this investigation controlled for these manipulations and their interaction, and manipulations did not interact with either dimension of narcissism, nor did the manipulations meaningfully alter coefficients or statistical significance for any result reported in this manuscript.

2.3. Measures

2.3.1. Grandiose narcissism. Grandiose narcissism was assessed with the 16-item Narcissistic Personality Inventory (Ames, Rose & Anderson, 2006), an instrument that taps grandiose characteristics of narcissism, including entitlement, self-absorption and superiority, with scores computed as the proportion of responses consistent with narcissism. In the present study, Cronbach's $\alpha=.66$, $M=0.29$, $SD=0.18$.

2.3.2. Vulnerable narcissism. Vulnerable narcissism was measured using the 10-item **Hypersensitive Narcissism Scale** (Hendin & Cheek, 1997), with responses (e.g., 1=*strongly disagree*, 5=*strongly agree*) being averaged. In the present study, Cronbach's $\alpha=.75$, $M=2.53$, $SD=0.60$.

2.3.3. Helping under high social pressure. Following Katz et al. (1979), participants were given the opportunity to help the confederate by completing a task that entailed repeatedly hand-copying the sentence, "*The quick brown fox jumped over the fence.*" Participants made helping decisions in response to the direct suggestion of the experimenter, to whom compliance was apparent. Thus, withholding help demonstrated a disregard for compliance expectations and a willingness to be accountable for that decision. The dichotomous decision constituted the helping measure under high social pressure, with 76.6% helping.

2.3.4. Helping under low social pressure. Believing they were providing feedback to the supervising professor, participants privately completed three items that provided the opportunity to indirectly and anonymously help the confederate by encouraging leniency. Items such as "*Does your partner deserve a second chance?*" and "*Should I speak with your partner about his/her behavior in the study?*" (1=*definitely yes*, 5=*definitely no*) were scored such that greater values reflected greater leniency, and subsequently averaged to yield a measure of helping under low social pressure. In the present study, Cronbach's $\alpha=.63$, $M=2.91$, $SD=0.80$.

2.3.5. Empathy. Participants reported their empathy toward the confederate by completing an 8-item empathy measure (Coke, Batson & McDavis, 1978) according to a 6-point scale (1=*not at all*, 6=*extremely*), with greater average responses indicating more empathy. In the present study, Cronbach's $\alpha=.95$, $M=2.69$, $SD=1.29$.

2.3.6. Forgiveness. Participants responded to the items “*How much do you feel like you have forgiven your partner for how he/she acted?*” and “*Right now, how angry are you at your partner?*” (1=*not at all*, 5=*completely*), with greater average responses reflecting more forgiveness. In the present study, Cronbach’s $\alpha=.74$, $M=3.43$, $SD=1.08$.

3. Results

3.1. Preliminary Analyses and Analytic Approach

The correlation between grandiose and vulnerable narcissism was small ($r=.09$, $p=.206$), indicating independent and largely orthogonal dimensions of narcissism. Exploratory analyses of demographic variables revealed that age predicted more grandiose narcissism ($r=.14$, $p=.045$), and less helping under high social pressure ($r=-.28$, $p < .001$), and that women were less grandiose ($t=3.74$, $p < .001$), and more likely to help under high social pressure ($\chi^2=11.77$, $p < .001$). Therefore, age and sex were statistically controlled in all analyses, though removal of these variables did not meaningfully alter coefficients or statistical significance. All analyses first tested the main effect terms for grandiose and vulnerable narcissism followed by their interaction. The latter never attained significance, and is omitted from the reported analyses.

3.3. Helping Under High Social Pressure

Hierarchical logistic regression analysis tested the relationship of grandiose and vulnerable narcissism to helping. Narcissism scores were standardized to facilitate interpretation. As shown in Table 1, Grandiose narcissism was associated with less helping ($b=-0.44$, $p=.016$, $OR=0.65$, 95% $CI=[0.45,0.92]$), indicating that the odds of helping for participants at $-1SD$ was 6.48 (helping rate=87%), whereas the odds of those at $+1SD$ was 2.72 (helping rate=73%), less than one-half that of low grandiose participants. Vulnerable narcissism did not predict helping under high social pressure ($b=0.16$, $p=.400$, $OR=1.17$, 95% $CI=[0.81,1.69]$).

3.4. Helping Under Low Social Pressure

As shown in Table 2, Grandiose narcissism did not predict helping under low social pressure ($b=-0.27, p=.400, \text{partial } \eta^2=.003$), although vulnerable narcissism did predict providing less help ($b=-0.24, p=.010, \text{partial } \eta^2=.031$).

3.5. Empathy

Regression results did not indicate a relationship between grandiose narcissism and empathy ($b=-0.71, p=.148, \text{partial } \eta^2=.010$), although vulnerable narcissism did predict less empathy ($b=-0.30, p=.035, \text{partial } \eta^2=.021$).

3.6. Forgiveness

Forgiveness was not related to grandiose narcissism ($b=-0.50, p=.234, \text{partial } \eta^2=.007$), whereas higher levels of vulnerable narcissism predicted less forgiveness ($b=-0.28, p=.024, \text{partial } \eta^2=.024$).

3.7. Testing Mediators of Vulnerable Narcissism Under Low Social Pressure

The association of vulnerable narcissism with less helping under low social pressure could reflect the fact that vulnerable narcissism was linked to experiencing less empathy and less forgiveness toward the confederate. We evaluated this possibility using a multiple mediator model (Figure 2) that controlled for all predictor variables (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). The specific indirect effect of vulnerable narcissism on helping under low social pressure through empathy was non-significant ($b=-0.01, 95\% \text{ CI}=[-0.04,0.01]$), thus failing to support empathy as a mediator. However, the specific indirect effect through forgiveness was significant ($b=-0.12, 95\% \text{ CI}=[-0.25,-0.01]$), a finding consistent with the interpretation that vulnerable narcissism was associated with less forgiveness, which led to less helping. The unique effect of vulnerable narcissism on helping was non-significant ($b=-0.11, p=.137$), constituting only 46% of the total

effect ($b=-0.24$). Thus, other mediators could not account for vulnerable narcissism's effect on helping.

Finally, given the link between empathy and forgiveness (Fehr, Gelfand & Nag, 2010), we evaluated empathy as a potential mediator of the relationship between vulnerable narcissism and forgiveness. Empathy had a significant direct effect on forgiveness, ($b=0.12, p=.047$), and was further supported as a mediator because the indirect effect of vulnerable narcissism on forgiveness through empathy achieved significance ($b=-0.04, 95\% CI=[-.10, -.00]$). The unique effect of vulnerable narcissism on forgiveness, although marginally significant, remained sizeable ($b=-0.24, p=.051$), equaling 87% of the total effect ($b=-0.28$). These results suggest that although a portion of vulnerable narcissism's effect on forgiveness was due to being less empathic, there exist additional effects of vulnerable narcissism on forgiveness that are not due to empathy.

4. Discussion

This study tested theoretically informed relationships of grandiose and vulnerable narcissism to the actual withholding of help and the reduced experience of prosocial emotions under conditions of high experimental realism. **As predicted, both dimensions of narcissism were associated with being less helpful,** although they differed with respect to the conditions under which unhelpful behavior was demonstrated. When social pressure to provide help was high, grandiose narcissism was associated with openly and directly refusing to work on a task for the confederate's benefit. Conversely, **when social pressure was low, vulnerable narcissism predicted being less helpful** by encouraging the supervising professor to show less leniency toward the confederate. Thus, **the pattern of results for withholding help under high versus low social pressure provides the first empirical support for theoretical distinctions between the two**

narcissism dimensions with regard to the enactment of prosocial behaviors. Grandiose narcissism entails the qualities of being interpersonally forceful, domineering, and at ease with acting upon feelings of entitlement—factors that would both decrease the willingness to suffer an imposition on another's behalf, and increase the ability to resist social pressure to do so. On the other hand, vulnerable narcissism is characterized by a hypersensitivity to others' evaluations, social avoidance, and negative affectivity. Although concern about others' judgments encourage helping under high social pressure, feelings of resentment and angry rumination likely motivate withholding help when social pressure is low, such as when behavior is anonymous and accountability is reduced.

Vulnerable narcissism also predicted empathizing less with the confederate, and being less forgiving of the confederate's behavior. These findings further support the view of vulnerable narcissism as a dimension of the trait associated with internalization and emotional dysregulation (Krizan & Johar, 2012). Further analysis indicated that the relationship between vulnerable narcissism and being unhelpful was mediated by less forgiveness, perhaps suggesting that vulnerable narcissism is more associated with the experience of narcissistic injury (cf. Kernberg, 1975). That is, in response to discourteous treatment, individuals characterized by vulnerable narcissism were more offended, less forgiving, and ultimately withheld help, at least when they could do so surreptitiously. Thus, these results resonate with previous survey research suggesting that vulnerable narcissism is associated with vindictiveness (Given-Wilson et al., 2011). Although reduced empathy did not mediate the relationship to less helping, it did partially mediate vulnerable narcissism's association with being less forgiving, suggesting a process whereby reduced empathy could lead to harboring resentment against others for perceived mistreatment.

Results of this study provide a novel perspective in understanding narcissists' interpersonal conduct. Whereas previous research has focused on aggressive behavior, findings of the current study indicate that narcissism can also negatively affect relationships through a disinclination to engage in positive behaviors, such as helping. Narcissists' tendency to withhold help in response to poor treatment may indicate a pettiness that works to erode relationships by discouraging magnanimous behaviors that would otherwise facilitate reconciliation (Paulhus, 1998). Moreover, theoretically meaningful differences between the dimensions of narcissism regarding how unhelpfulness was expressed highlight the relevance of considering grandiosity and vulnerability in understanding variant manifestations of narcissists' interpersonal behavior.

4.1. Strengths and Limitations

Several strengths characterize the present study. This investigation is the first to empirically confirm theoretical distinctions between grandiose and vulnerable narcissism regarding actual prosocial behaviors. Importantly, the study context was psychologically engaging to participants, who believed that their behaviors would truly affect another person's well-being. Thus, procedures minimized the validity concerns that attend participants' self-awareness in studies that rely on self-report methodology.

Even so, several limitations of the investigation warrant consideration. Though the current study documented how grandiose and vulnerable narcissism related differently to helping under conditions of high and low social pressure, the correlational design precludes causal interpretations. For example, it is conceivable that unmeasured variables such as agreeableness, self-monitoring, or state or trait anxiety could have affected individuals' prosocial responses. Although the possible effect of an unmeasured variable is a limitation that characterizes all correlational studies, it would be profitable for future research to control for additional

theoretically relevant constructs. A second limitation is that the precise factors that produced the observed differences between grandiose and vulnerable narcissism were not directly examined. Future research should manipulate variables that are hypothesized to mediate the effect of social pressure, such as personal accountability, or the degree to which helping is judged as normative. Another limitation is that all personality measures were self-report assessments, and thus may be subject to biased responding. Accordingly, it may be useful to develop additional methodologies for differentiating grandiose and vulnerable narcissism, perhaps based on behavioral observation, clinical criteria, or knowledgeable informants. In addition, the distinctiveness of the procedures raises questions regarding external validity; the study involved preparing for a mock counseling session, encountering a discourteous partner, and a study gone awry. However, in this study we sought to assess participants' behavior under conditions of high experimental and psychological realism, in which participants were psychologically engaged and deceived by the procedures. Therefore, unique procedures were necessary to create plausible circumstances that afforded both multiple opportunities to provide help to another, as well as occasions that solicited information regarding empathy and forgiveness for that same person. It seems likely that any procedure designed to achieve all those ends could not help but be unique. Nonetheless, further investigation should consider a variety of behavioral measures, interpersonal contexts, and procedures to evaluate the generality of the current findings.

5. Conclusions

This study provides the first test of theoretical distinctions between grandiose and vulnerable narcissism with respect to actual helping behavior and relevant prosocial emotions.

Results showed that although both aspects of narcissism were associated with decreased helpfulness, they differed with regard to the conditions under which that unhelpfulness was

expressed. When social pressure was high, grandiose narcissism was associated with greater ability to resist social norms by openly and explicitly refusing to provide help. By contrast, when social pressure was low, vulnerable narcissism predicted less help through privately encouraging an authority figure to show less leniency toward another, an effect that was mediated by less forgiveness. Together, these findings highlight the importance of narcissism and its particular manifestations for discouraging positive interaction behaviors that are critical to adaptive social functioning.

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Table 1

Helping under High Social Pressure

	<i>b</i>	OR	OR 95% CI
Intercept	1.43	-	-
Age	-0.60**	0.55	[0.37, 0.81]
Sex ^a	0.43*	1.53	[1.06, 2.21]
Grandiose Narcissism	-0.44*	0.65	[0.45, 0.92]
Vulnerable Narcissism	0.16	1.17	[0.81, 1.69]

Note. OR=odds ratio= e^b .

^aEffects coding for Sex (male=-1, female=+1) causes the effect associated with being female versus male to equal twice the reported coefficient.

* $p \leq .05$. ** $p \leq .01$.

Table 2

Helping under Low Social Pressure, Empathy, and Forgiveness

	Helping-LSP		Empathy		Forgiveness	
	<i>b</i>	(<i>SE</i>)	<i>b</i>	(<i>SE</i>)	<i>b</i>	(<i>SE</i>)
Intercept	2.95	-	3.20	-	3.41	-
Age	-0.00	(0.03)	0.03	(0.04)	0.04	(0.04)
Sex ^a	-0.05	(0.06)	0.02	(0.09)	-0.10	(0.08)
Grandiose Narcissism	-0.27	(0.32)	-0.71	(0.49)	-0.50	(0.42)
Vulnerable Narcissism	-0.24**	(0.09)	-0.30*	(0.14)	-0.28*	(0.12)

Note. LSP=low social pressure.

^aEffects coding for Sex (male=-1, female=+1) causes the effect associated with being female versus male to equal twice the reported coefficient.

* $p \leq .05$. ** $p \leq .01$.

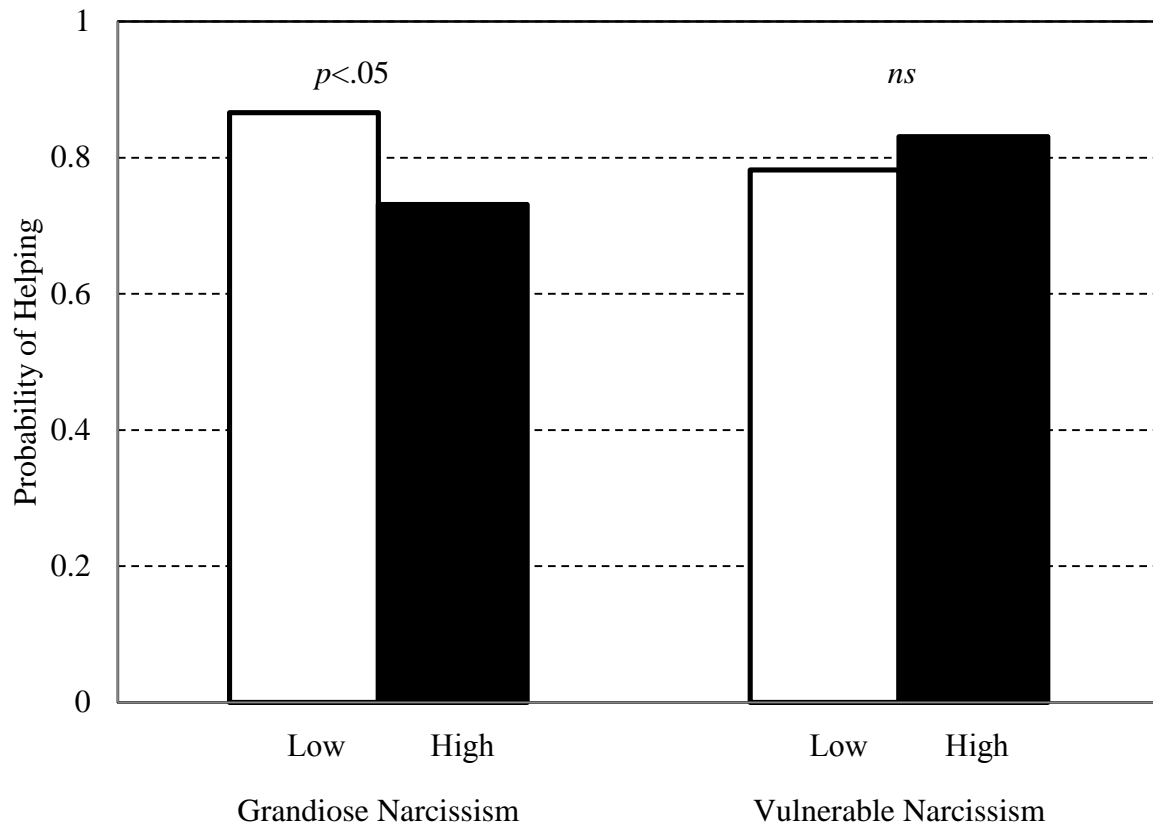


Figure 1. Relationship of grandiose and vulnerable narcissism to providing help under high social pressure. Probability of helping values correspond to those predicted by logistic regression when narcissism scores are either Low ($-1 SD$) or High ($+1 SD$) with all other predictors at their means.

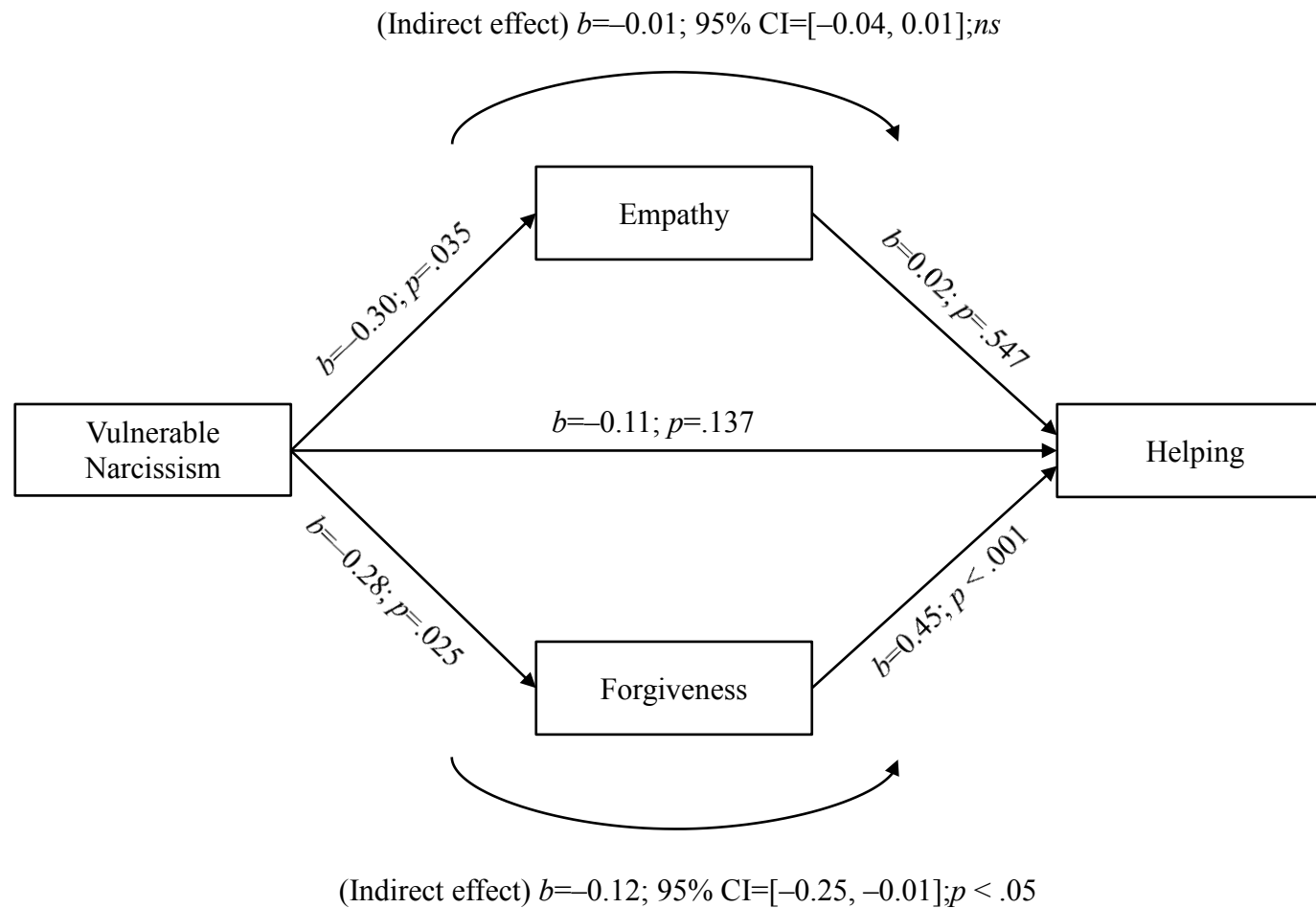


Figure 2. Evaluation of empathy and forgiveness as mediators of the relationship between vulnerable narcissism and providing less help under low social pressure. Because the error variances of the indirect effects are not constrained to be normally distributed, significance levels of indirect effects are indicated by 95% confidence intervals in lieu of exact p -values.