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Fulfillment at Any Age

Why Do Some Narcissists Need to Be So Perfect?

A need for perfection drives those high in narcissism, according to new research

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We tend to think of narcissists as so self-promoting that they care less about attaining useful goals than about looking like they've accomplished them. If they do, so much the better, but if not, then as long as others think they have, that's fine. Narcissists are all about the glory, not about the doing, unless they happen to reach their desired ends in the process. Yet, researchers have puzzled over years about the possibility that people high in narcissism are also, paradoxically, high in perfectionism or the actual desire to achieve a flawless performance. Thus, there should be a side of narcissism that allows people to get things done, not just look like they have. A new analysis of 30 studies involving over 9,000 participants headed by University of Western Ontario psychologist Martin Smith and colleagues (2016) shows that there's more to the story than just a simple narcissism-perfectionism link.

Let's begin by considering the distinction between the two main forms of narcissism. In grandiose narcissism, the individual shows an unusual degree of self-preoccupation with looking better than everyone else. People high on this tendency will step over whomever they have to in order to gain attention and acclaim. They will also show little interest or concern in reflecting on their own inadequacies, and anyone who points these out to them will be treated with harsh derision. In vulnerable narcissism, individuals also show an unusual degree of self-preoccupation, but it's out of concern that they are not as good as everyone else. They feel as if they are the precipice of being exposed for their flaws and will be humiliated and shamed when this happens.

For individuals high on grandiose narcissism, then, the desire to seem perfect will color their

interactions with others. Envious of anyone who they think of as better than them, they become enraged when they're outdone by someone else. Even worse, they hate being criticized or confronted with any of their flaws. For example, perhaps you're on a committee with someone who's taken on an elected position out of a desire to win the election, not to do the actual work. When this become clear, and they're shirking their duties, anyone who points this out will be subjected to a vitriolic assault.

However, it's also possible for the highly grandiose individual to be motivated to achieve actual perfection. Perhaps this person is musically talented and wishes to excel in the domain of classical piano. It's pretty hard to fake perfection when it comes to a musical performance. Therefore, this individual will do everything possible to learn the techniques needed to achieve fame. The work that's needed takes an inner commitment to meeting the highest standards possible. In fact, individuals high in grandiose narcissism may actually earn some of their reputation through this self-directed drive toward perfection. Having attained this state, the grandiose narcissist goes further and engages on a campaign to convince everyone else of his or her actual perfection. This perfectionistic self-promotion then becomes an added feature of the highly grandiose narcissist's clamoring for admiration and respect.

Finally, there's an aspect of narcissistic grandiosity that involves the way other people, and their all-too-human flaws, are perceived. Truly grandiose narcissists have no patience with imperfections in others. They expect themselves to be perfect, and so everyone else should be too. This other-oriented perfectionism may seem a bit paradoxical if you imagine that the highly grandiose narcissist wants to seem better than everyone else. However, it is consistent with the quality of the highly narcissistic to lack empathy with others, which would include a haughty disregard for people who seem weak.

Now let's switch gears to people high in vulnerable narcissism. Their desire to be perfect involves the need to avoid the embarrassment of being found lacking in some quality key to their sense of identity. Their development of vulnerable narcissism may have occurred over time, particularly in childhood, when their parents, teachers, or other significant adults made demands on them to be the perfect athlete, musician, or student. These individuals felt that their performance had to be perfect in order to avoid the criticism and possibly harsh treatment their shortcomings or failures would generate. As adults, they still seek that outward approval and attention, not so they can feel better than everyone else (as is true in grandiose narcissism) but to avoid having their self-esteem further damaged.

Research should, Smith et al. argue, be able to establish the narcissism-perfectionism link quite clearly given this solid theoretical base. However, until now the field has produced a very mixed bag of results. This is due to variations from study to study in such important qualities as nature of the participants (including gender), the definition of “narcissism,” and the fact that perfectionism can be self-focused (wanting to be perfect to satisfy yourself) or other-oriented (wanting to be perfect to please others). Some studies have sample sizes that are too small to allow for adequate testing of the relationship. Thus, after 25 years, the field was in somewhat of a disarray. Using powerful procedures involved with “meta-analysis” (i.e. combining effects across studies), the Western Ontario team was able to consolidate the findings and come up with some answers.

One important point made by Smith and colleagues is that not all narcissists are the same, nor are all perfectionists. Furthermore, people aren’t just all one or another. Most studies in personality that examine narcissism are not investigating people with narcissistic personality disorder but instead are interested in the personality trait of narcissism, a trait along which people can vary. Making this meta-analysis unique was its inclusion of unpublished data, therefore eliminating the bias that can come from using studies in which only findings that meet the criterion of statistical significance are reported.

Taking all of these factors into account, **the main findings** to emerge from the meta-analysis were that those high on the grandiose form of narcissism were, as the authors expected, more likely to be high on self-oriented perfectionism, other-oriented perfectionism, and perfectionistic self-promotion. Their demand for perfection is, in the words of the authors, “more than just an extreme need for achievement and may involve a willingness in pursuit of status, power,

dominance, and physical beauty" (p. 98). Further, as expected, those high on vulnerable narcissism are preoccupied with perfection to avoid criticism, but it is criticism that they fully expect to receive; "Vulnerable narcissists expect and perceive criticism, judgment, and pressure from others" (p. 99).

Seeking perfection is a mindset that many people have, not just people high in narcissism. However, for those who tend toward narcissistic personalities, it's all about the particular type of narcissism in question. For the grandiose narcissist, as Smith et al. point out, "Image is everything" (p. 99) but for the vulnerable, it's approval that drives them toward perfection.

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To sum up, if you know someone who would qualify as high in grandiose narcissism, it's helpful to keep in mind how internally driven this person is to achieve the impossible. It might also make it impossible for you to tolerate this person's eternal quest for the ideal state of being. If the person is high on vulnerable narcissism, though, there are ways you can offer help and support. Achieving fulfillment doesn't have to mean achieving perfection but, sadly, for some high in narcissism, it may seem like the only route.

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Reference

Smith, M. M., Sherry, S. B., Chen, S., Saklofske, D. H., Flett, G. L., & Hewitt, P. L. (2016). Perfectionism and narcissism: A meta-analytic review. *Journal of Research In Personality*, 6490-101. doi:10.1016/j.jrp.2016.07.012