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## Perfectionism and narcissism: Testing unique relationships and gender differences

Simon B. Sherry<sup>a,\*</sup>, Tara M. Gralnick<sup>a</sup>, Paul L. Hewitt<sup>b</sup>, Dayna L. Sherry<sup>c</sup>, Gordon L. Flett<sup>d</sup><sup>a</sup> Department of Psychology, Dalhousie University, 1355 Oxford Street, PO Box 15000, Halifax, Nova Scotia B3H4R2, Canada<sup>b</sup> Department of Psychology, University of British Columbia, 2136 West Mall, D.T. Kenny Building, Vancouver, British Columbia V6T1Z4, Canada<sup>c</sup> Queen Elizabeth II Health Sciences Centre, 1276 South Park Street, Halifax, Nova Scotia B3H2Y9, Canada<sup>d</sup> Department of Psychology, York University, Behavioural Sciences Building, 4700 Keele Street, Toronto, Ontario M3J1P3, Canada

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### ABSTRACT

Theoretical models suggest narcissists' grandiose but fragile self-concept leads them to impose perfectionistic demands onto others and to promote an image of perfection in pursuit of others' admiration. It is unclear which perfectionism dimensions are uniquely related to narcissism and if the relationship between perfectionism and narcissism generalizes across men and women. The present study addresses these important gaps in knowledge. Other-oriented perfectionism and perfectionistic self-promotion were hypothesized to be positively related to narcissism. Potential differences between men and women were also explored. A sample of 983 undergraduates completed measures of trait perfectionism, perfectionistic self-presentation, perfectionism cognitions, and narcissism. As hypothesized, other-oriented perfectionism and perfectionistic self-promotion were both positively and uniquely related to narcissism. The perfectionism–narcissism relationship generalized across the men and the women in this study. Somewhat unexpectedly, nondisplay of imperfection was negatively and uniquely related to narcissism. The present study represents the most comprehensive test of the perfectionism–narcissism connection to date. Results support theoretical models suggesting narcissistic perfectionists are demanding, hyper-critical, entitled, and grandiose individuals who impose their need for perfection onto others and who engage in brash self-promotion of their (supposed) perfection to others.

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## 1. Introduction

Case histories and theoretical models suggest perfectionism may represent a central feature of narcissists' style of thinking, behaving, perceiving, and relating (e.g., Beck, Freeman, & Davis, 2004; Rothstein, 1999). Empirical studies support these case histories and theoretical models, with research indicating perfectionism and narcissism are moderately correlated (Hewitt et al., 2003). McCown and Carlson (2004) also found individuals diagnosed with Narcissistic Personality Disorder are more likely to demand perfection of others compared to individuals diagnosed with Mood Disorders (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). However, major gaps still exist in our understanding of the perfectionism–narcissism link. For instance, questions of gender differences are currently untested. We begin to address these gaps by conducting the most comprehensive test of the perfectionism–narcissism connection to date. In particular, we test if the relationship between narcissism and perfectionism generalizes across men and women.

### 1.1. Understanding the perfectionism–narcissism relationship

Narcissism is defined by grandiosity, entitlement, authority, superiority, exhibitionism, vanity, and exploitativeness (Raskin & Terry, 1988). Rothstein (1999) emphasized the role of perfectionism in narcissism, arguing the core of narcissism rests in a “felt quality of perfection” (p. 17). Kohut (1971) also highlighted the relation between perfectionism and narcissism. He argued that all people begin by fusing themselves to “self-objects” whom they regard as perfect (e.g., a grandiose, idealized image of parents; Kohut, 1971). He further maintained that non-narcissists grow out of this fusion, whereas narcissists persist in fusion to self-objects (Kohut, 1971). According to Kohut (1971), narcissists use idealized self-objects to reflect their grandiose image back upon the self. Cognitive theorists suggest narcissistic schemas involve entitled and perfectionistic expectations for others and perpetual dissatisfaction with others' perceived flaws (Beck et al., 2004). Millon, Davis, Millon, Escovar, and Meagher (2000) also noted narcissists' perceived superiority leads them to expect perfection from others – “hold[ing] others in contempt for being inferior or just being average” (p. 271). Narcissists' grandiose self-concept is thought to rest on a strong sense of worthlessness, prompting

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 902 494 8070; fax: +1 902 494 6585.

E-mail address: [simon.sherry@dal.ca](mailto:simon.sherry@dal.ca) (S.B. Sherry).

them to exhibit an image of perfect capability in pursuit of others' admiration and respect (Ronningstam, 2010). Sorotzkin (1985) also suggested narcissists may brashly present themselves as perfect to others in an effort to validate their grandiose self-image. In sum, theoretical models and clinical observations about the perfectionism–narcissism link point toward narcissists as imposing their need for perfection onto others and engaging in bold self-promotion of their (so-called) perfection to others.

Given the foregoing literature, Hewitt and Flett's model of perfectionism (e.g., Flett, Hewitt, Blankstein, & Gray, 1998; Hewitt & Flett, 1991; Hewitt et al., 2003) seems well-suited to examining the perfectionism–narcissism link, as it includes a role for both excessive demands directed at others and brash self-promotion of “perfect” attributes. These authors conceptualize the construct of perfectionism in terms of trait perfectionism, perfectionistic self-presentation, and perfectionism cognitions. Trait perfectionism distinguishes the source and direction of perfectionistic expectations (Hewitt & Flett, 1991), perfectionistic self-presentation involves the public interpersonal expression of perfectionism (Hewitt et al., 2003), and perfectionism cognitions involve the private intrapsychic expression of perfectionism (Flett et al., 1998).

To expand, trait perfectionism comprises self-oriented perfectionism (demanding perfection of oneself), other-oriented perfectionism (demanding perfection of others), and socially prescribed perfectionism (perceiving others are demanding perfection of oneself; Hewitt & Flett, 1991). Perfectionistic self-presentation includes perfectionistic self-promotion (brashly promoting a perfect image), nondisclosure of imperfection (concern over verbal disclosures of imperfection), and nondisplay of imperfection (concern over behavioral displays of imperfection; Hewitt et al., 2003). Perfectionism cognitions involve automatic thoughts with perfectionist themes (self-critical, ruminative thoughts reflecting an excessive need for goal attainment and discrepancies between the actual and ideal self; Flett et al., 1998).

Perfectionism dimensions are empirically distinct. These dimensions are differentially related to various outcomes, including disordered personality (Hewitt & Flett, 1991; Sherry, Hewitt, Flett, Lee-Baggeley, & Hall, 2007). More specifically, research indicates narcissism is positively correlated with other-oriented perfectionism (e.g., Trumpeter, Watson, & O'Leary, 2006) and perfectionistic self-promotion (e.g., Hewitt et al., 2003).

### 1.2. Advancing research on perfectionism and narcissism

It is unclear if the link between other-oriented perfectionism and narcissism holds after controlling for other perfectionism dimensions. Since perfectionism dimensions are moderately correlated (Hewitt et al., 2003), research is needed to test which perfectionism dimensions are uniquely related to narcissism. Researchers have also yet to study the link between perfectionism cognitions and narcissism, despite theoretical models suggesting narcissists report automatic thoughts reflecting hyper-competitiveness and a need for perfection (Beck et al., 2004).

Extant research (Hewitt et al., 2003) has assumed that – rather than tested if – the link between perfectionism and narcissism generalizes across men and women. This assumption may be untenable. Consistent with theoretical models highlighting narcissistic men's perceived authority (Beck et al., 2004), men may express their narcissism by imposing their perfectionistic expectations onto others (i.e., other-oriented perfectionism). Women may be less likely to engage in such behavior, because it goes against culturally held expectations for women's behavior. In contrast, evidence suggests narcissistic women, may express their narcissism by flaunting their “perfect” physical appearance to others (i.e., perfectionistic self-promotion; Beck et al., 2004). Put differently, men and women may conform to gender role expectations, with

men meeting their narcissistic needs for perfection by directly demanding perfection of others, and women meeting their narcissistic needs for perfection through attention-grabbing “perfect” physical appearance (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). Given gender role expectations potentially influencing the perfectionism–narcissism link, testing for gender differences seems important.

### 1.3. Hypotheses

Building on past research (Trumpeter, Watson, & O'Leary, 2006), we hypothesized other-oriented perfectionism and perfectionistic self-promotion would be uniquely related to narcissism after controlling for other perfectionism dimensions. We also tested this research question: Does the relationship between perfectionism and narcissism differ across men and women? Given the scarcity of research in this area, this question was considered exploratory.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

Participants were 983 undergraduates. Men ( $n = 354$ ) averaged 19.66 years of age ( $SD = 2.95$ ) and 1.89 years of university education ( $SD = 0.98$ ). Women ( $n = 629$ ) averaged 19.84 years of age ( $SD = 3.29$ ) and 1.92 years of university education ( $SD = 0.91$ ). In total, 26.7% of participants were European ( $n = 262$ ), 51.9% were Asian ( $n = 510$ ), 5.9% were East Indian ( $n = 58$ ), and 15.5% belonged to other groups ( $n = 153$ ).

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. Perfectionism

Trait perfectionism was measured using the *Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale* (Hewitt & Flett, 1991). This 45-item measure contains three subscales: self-oriented perfectionism (e.g., “When I am working on something, I cannot relax until it is perfect”), other-oriented perfectionism (e.g., “If I ask someone to do something, I expect it to be done flawlessly”), and socially prescribed perfectionism (e.g., “People expect nothing less than perfection from me”). Participants responded on a 7-point scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Studies support the reliability and validity of this measure (Hewitt & Flett, 1991).

Perfectionistic self-presentation was measured using the *Perfectionistic Self-Presentation Scale* (Hewitt et al., 2003). This 27-item measure involves three subscales: perfectionistic self-promotion (e.g., “I try always to present a picture of perfection”), nondisclosure of imperfection (e.g., “Admitting failure to others is the worst possible thing”), and nondisplay of imperfection (e.g., “It would be awful if I made a fool of myself in front of others”). Participants responded using a 7-point scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Evidence supports both the reliability and the validity of this measure (Hewitt et al., 2003).

Perfectionism cognitions (e.g., “I should be perfect”) were measured using the 25-item *Perfectionism Cognitions Inventory* (Flett et al., 1998). Participants responded on a 5-point scale from 0 (*not at all*) to 4 (*all of the time*). Research supports the reliability and validity of this measure (Flett et al., 1998).

#### 2.2.2. Narcissism

Narcissism was measured via the forced-choice, 40-item *Narcissistic Personality Inventory* (NPI; Raskin & Terry, 1988). In completing NPI items, respondents are asked to choose between two alternatives: one item representing narcissistic content (e.g., “I am an extraordinary person.”) and another item representing non-narcissistic content (e.g., “I am much like everybody else.”).

Items representing narcissistic content are scored with a 1, whereas item representing non-narcissistic content are scored with a 0. Studies support the reliability and validity of this measure (Raskin & Terry, 1988).

2.3. Procedure

Our study was approved by University of British Columbia Ethics Board. Participants were recruited from the University of British Columbia Psychology research pool. Participants completed paper-and-pencil questionnaires in a laboratory. No more than three participants were assessed at one time. All participants completed questionnaires in a private space apart from other people. Questionnaires were combined into one packet and completed in the order appearing in Section 2.2. All participants received a 1.0% bonus credit. Participants were debriefed.

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive statistics

Missing data was minimal across all measures (i.e., <2.0%). We used an expectation maximization algorithm in SPSS 17.0 to impute missing data. Means for measures (see Table 1) were within one standard deviation of means from past studies of undergraduates (e.g., Hewitt et al., 2003). Coefficients alpha for measures were acceptable ( $\alpha \geq .73$ ) and resembled prior studies (e.g., Hewitt et al., 2003; Raskin & Terry, 1988).

3.2. Bivariate correlations

Self-oriented, other-oriented, and socially prescribed perfectionism were significantly correlated in men and women (see Table 1). Perfectionistic self-presentation, nondisplay of imperfection, and nondisclosure of imperfection were significantly correlated in both genders. In men, trait perfectionism and perfectionistic self-presentation were less consistently correlated (with three of nine correlations nonsignificant); in women, trait perfectionism and perfectionistic self-presentation were significantly correlated. Perfectionism cognitions were significantly correlated with trait perfectionism and perfectionistic self-presentation in men and women.

Other-oriented perfectionism and perfectionistic self-promotion were significantly correlated with narcissism in both men and women. Socially prescribed perfectionism was significantly correlated with narcissism in men. Self-oriented perfectionism, nondisclosure of imperfection, nondisplay of imperfection, and perfectionism cognitions were not significantly correlated with

narcissism in men. Self-oriented perfectionism and perfectionism cognitions were significantly correlated with narcissism in women. Socially prescribed perfectionism, nondisclosure of imperfection, and nondisplay of imperfection were not significantly correlated with narcissism in women.

3.3. Hierarchical regression analyses with interaction

Two hierarchical regression analyses with interaction were conducted (see Table 2). In each analysis, narcissism was predicted. Step 1 involved demographic and perfectionism variables, whereas Step 2 involved the gender x perfectionism interaction vector. Following recommendations (Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003), predictor variables were centered.

As Table 2 illustrates, Asian Canadian ethnicity (coded non-Asian Canadian = 0 and Asian Canadian = 1) was negatively related to narcissism, suggesting Asian Canadians were less narcissistic than non-Asian Canadians. Consistent with hypotheses, other-oriented perfectionism and perfectionistic self-promotion were positively and uniquely associated with narcissism after controlling for other perfectionism dimensions. Nondisplay of imperfection was negatively and uniquely related to narcissism, a finding that was not hypothesized. Interaction vectors were nonsignificant and did not explain incremental variance in narcissism. This finding suggests the relationship between perfectionism and narcissism did not change depending on gender.

4. Discussion

Consistent with hypotheses, other-oriented perfectionism and perfectionistic self-promotion explained variance in narcissism after controlling for other perfectionism dimensions. Results supported longstanding, but mostly untested, theoretical models (e.g., Beck et al., 2004; Kohut, 1971; Millon et al., 2000; Ronningstam, 2010) describing narcissists as imposing expectations of perfection onto others and presenting an image of perfection to others. The perfectionism–narcissism link generalized across the men and women in our study. Somewhat unexpectedly, nondisplay of imperfection was negatively and uniquely related to narcissism.

4.1. An improved understanding of the perfectionism–narcissism relationship

Contrary to the notion that gender may represent an important factor in how narcissists express their needs for perfection (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001), results from our study suggest the perfectionism–narcissism relationship generalized across men and women. Narcissists do not seem to express their needs for perfection

Table 1  
Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations.

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	M	SD	$\alpha$
1. Self-oriented perfectionism	–	.45**	.19**	.45**	.12	.21**	.41**	.12	65.67	13.88	.83
2. Other-oriented perfectionism	.40**	–	.24**	.36**	.11	.12	.23**	.30**	56.81	10.12	.73
3. Socially prescribed perfectionism	.47**	.35**	–	.35**	.47**	.41**	.42**	.13**	55.39	11.33	.80
4. Perfectionistic self-promotion	.53**	.42**	.56**	–	.53**	.66**	.48**	.14**	40.39	9.70	.84
5. Nondisclosure of imperfection	.29**	.25**	.55**	.58**	–	.58**	.37**	.11	24.18	6.66	.76
6. Nondisplay of imperfection	.38**	.28**	.51**	.73**	.57**	–	.38**	–.06	39.91	10.01	.84
7. Perfectionism cognitions	.47**	.32**	.45**	.53**	.40**	.48**	–	.13	41.46	19.30	.94
8. Narcissism	.17**	.25**	.06	.22**	.09	–.02	.12**	–	15.66	6.93	.83
M	68.66	55.86	55.35	42.07	23.54	43.70	44.48	13.62	–	–	–
SD	14.66	10.15	13.03	10.50	7.14	10.22	20.40	6.95	–	–	–
$\alpha$	.89	.74	.85	.88	.80	.86	.94	.85	–	–	–

Note: Bivariate correlations for men (n = 354) are above the diagonal; bivariate correlations for women (n = 629) are below the diagonal. Means for measures were calculated by summing all the items in the measure.

\*\* p < .001.

**Table 2**  
Testing if gender moderates the perfectionism–narcissism connection.

Predicting narcissism			
Variable	$\Delta R^2$	$\Delta F$	$\beta$
Step 1	.18	21.52**	
Gender			-.08
European Canadian			.01
Asian Canadian			-.17**
Self-oriented perfectionism			-.03
Other-oriented perfectionism			.20**
Socially prescribed perfectionism			-.01
Perfectionistic self-promotion			.31**
Nondisclosure of imperfection			.07
Nondisplay of imperfection			-.34**
Perfectionism cognitions			.06
Step 2	.01	2.26	
Gender x self-oriented perfectionism			.26
Gender x other-oriented perfectionism			-.19
Gender x socially prescribed perfectionism			-.44
Gender x perfectionistic self-promotion			.49
Gender x nondisclosure of imperfection			-.05
Gender x nondisplay of imperfection			-.21
Gender x perfectionism cognitions			-.06

Note: For gender, men = 0 and women = 1. For ethnicity, non-European Canadian = 0 and European Canadian = 1; non-Asian Canadian = 0 and Asian Canadian = 1. This analysis involves 983 participants (i.e., 354 men and 629 women).

\*\*  $p < .001$ .

(e.g., demanding perfection of others) in conformity with gender role expectations. In fact, our data suggest there may be more similarities than differences when it comes to how male and female narcissists pursue perfection. Hierarchical regression analyses also suggested that Asian Canadians were less narcissistic than non-Asian Canadians. Self-aggrandizing, attention-grabbing narcissistic behavior may not be well-received in a more collectivistic Asian Canadian cultural context that deemphasizes individualism and specialness and that emphasizes obligation to community and a more critical stance toward the self (Foster, Campbell, & Twenge, 2003).

Our results also clarify which perfectionism dimensions are uniquely associated with narcissism. Narcissists do not appear to strive for perfection, as some authors have suggested (Ronningstam, 2010). Instead, narcissists appear to demand perfection of others and to showcase their (so-called) perfection to others (see also Hewitt et al., 2003; Trimpeter et al., 2006).

The unique relationship between other-oriented perfectionism and narcissism supports theoretical models describing narcissists as externalizing their self-criticism, expressing it as punitive thoughts toward others and excessive entitlement (Ronningstam, 2010). The unique relationship between perfectionistic self-promotion and narcissism supports theoretical models suggesting narcissists engage in self-glorification to maintain their self-esteem (Rothstein, 1999). Narcissists may flaunt their achievements because, without superior achievements, they feel themselves to be of little value (Ronningstam, 2010). As Beck et al. (2004) noted, “image [to narcissists] is everything because it is the armor of their self-worth” (p. 252).

Nondisplay of imperfection was not significantly correlated with narcissism (see Table 1), but was significantly and negatively related to narcissism in regression analyses (see Table 2). These findings may suggest a negative suppressor effect (i.e., a different effect for nondisplay of imperfection when other perfectionism variables are controlled; Cohen & Cohen, 1975). These results also suggest narcissists may hold few concerns about behaving imperfectly. Indeed, by imposing demands onto others and promoting their “perfection,” narcissists are behaving in an imperfect manner. Narcissists may not require their behavior to be perfect so long as they feel their faultless image remains intact. Overall, however,

caution is needed when interpreting our unexpected results involving nondisplay of imperfection (pending replication).

#### 4.2. Limitations and future directions

Our design is cross-sectional, preventing us from testing questions of directionality. Multiwave longitudinal designs are needed to address such questions. A more nuanced analysis of gender is also needed. Future studies might consider the contribution of gender roles (e.g., stereotypically masculine traits). Our predominantly female, young, Asian, educated sample raises questions about the representativeness and the generalizability of our data. It is unclear if our findings generalize to clinical or community samples. A more fine-grained analysis of narcissism is also needed. Future studies might investigate how specific dimensions of perfectionism (e.g., other-oriented perfectionism) relate to specific dimensions of narcissism (e.g., exploitiveness/entitlement; see Emmons, 1987). In future, researchers might also examine perfectionism in relation to other measures of narcissism purporting to assess more clinical (or pathological) features of narcissism (Pincus et al., 2009). Future studies might also use indirect measures (e.g., projective tests or implicit association tasks) of perfectionism and narcissism in an effort to overcome defensive or self-presentational biases (e.g., a reluctance to admit to concerns over behavioral displays of imperfection).

#### 4.3. Concluding remarks

The present study paints a picture of narcissistic perfectionists as demanding, hyper-critical, entitled, and grandiose individuals who impose their need for perfection onto others and who engage in brash self-promotion of their (supposed) perfection to others. This picture appears to hold for men and women alike.

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