Narcissism through a self-regulation lens: A critical review

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Carine Bothma

Summary

Recent approaches to narcissism focus on the ability to regulate one's own self-esteem. The DSM-5 links the typical features of narcissistic personality disorder to self-regulation by explaining how narcissism, due to a variable and vulnerable self-esteem, is characterised by self-regulation attempts through attention and approval seeking, and either overt or covert grandiosity. A self-regulation perspective can therefore lend itself as a valuable avenue to understanding the functioning of narcissistic individuals.

While a great deal of work has been done to understand narcissism, it has not been extensively described from a self-regulation perspective. In addition, there seems to be a relative lack of recent advances in dedicated model development on narcissism from a self-regulation perspective. A large body of research exists; however, studies are often focused on specific mechanisms or components of self-regulation only, not including a comprehensive view of self-regulation as a process, and often not forming part of the studies' main focus. The aim of this study is therefore to critically review and synthesize existing scientific literature on narcissism from a self-regulation perspective and based on the review propose a hypothetical model for the self-regulation mechanisms associated with narcissism.

A critical review was done to synthesize the findings and subsequently propose a hypothetical model of narcissism from a self-regulation perspective. The search initially yielded 238 studies which were then independently scrutinized by both authors to remove duplications and to check for relevancy and scientific quality. Through a thematic analysis, eight themes were identified from the final 31 studies. Results showed that narcissists are strongly biased toward certain goals which they pursue in a rigid manner. Narcissistic self-regulation was found to be maladaptive due to poor mentalisation abilities, emotional dysregulation, automatic responding, and their tendency to make inappropriate adjustments following feedback. Self-control emerged as a possible moderating factor in narcissistic self-

regulation as narcissists may well be capable of self-control, use low self-control because of diminished conflict over personal desires or, interestingly, a power strategy. The results also provided strong evidence for different self-regulation strategies: grandiose narcissists were found to be more promotion focused while vulnerable narcissists maintain their self-esteem through social approval. Grandiose narcissists were found to respond to threat by repression which affords them more positive outcomes. In contrast, vulnerable narcissists were found to employ suppression, thereby remaining painfully aware of their perceived shortcomings and leading to negative intrapersonal outcomes. Based on the review findings, a hypothetical model for the self-regulation mechanisms associated with narcissism was proposed. The model is based on two major premises about its structure as well as six minor premises based on narcissism within each phase of self-regulation. Limitations were indicated and finally, recommendations were made for future research.

Permission to submit

I, the supervisor of this study, hereby declare that the article, titled *Narcissism through a self-regulation lens: a critical review*, written by Carine Bothma, does reflect the research regarding the subject matter. I hereby grant permission that she may submit the mini-dissertation for examination purposes, and I confirm that the mini-dissertation submitted is in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree Master of Health Sciences in Clinical Psychology at the Potchefstroom Campus of the North-West University. The article may also be submitted to the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* for publication purposes.

Prof. K.F.H. Botha
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Declaration

I, Carine Bothma, declare that this research study, *Narcissism through a self-regulation lens: a critical review*, is my own, original work. This research study forms part of my master's degree in Clinical Psychology at the North-West University in Potchefstroom. All parties required to provide consent in conducting this research study have done so, and all reference material has been acknowledged.

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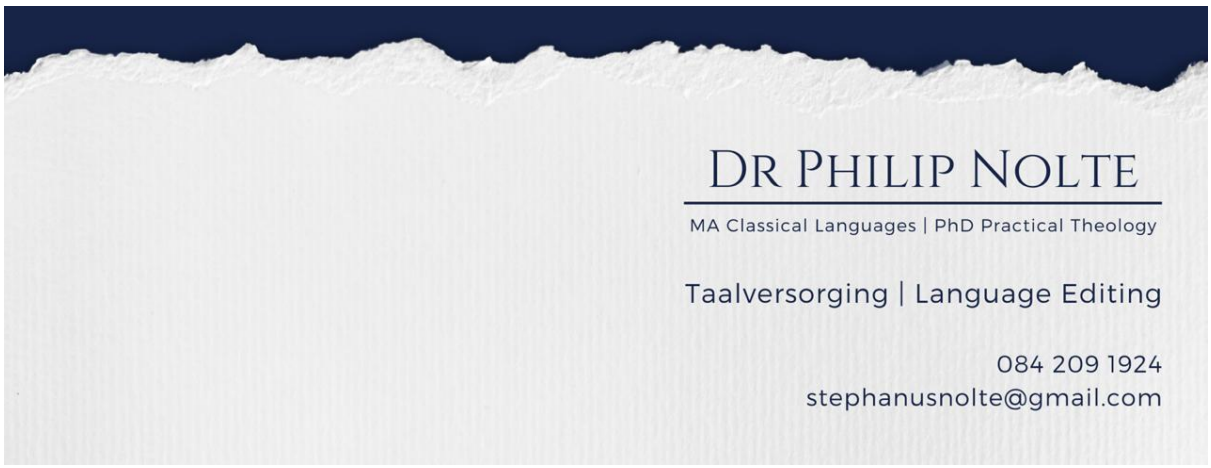
Language editing declaration



24 November 2022

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

RE: LANGUAGE EDITING DECLARATION

This document is to declare that I, Dr Philip Nolte, have completed the language editing of the mini-dissertation of Ms Carine Bothma for the Master's degree in Health Sciences (Clinical Psychology) at the North-West University (NWU). The title of the dissertation is *Narcissism through a self-regulation lens: a critical review.*

Kind regards.

Dr Philip Nolte

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CHAPTER 1: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

In Greek mythology, Narcissus, the son of a river god, was a handsome young man who fell in love with his own reflection in a pool of water (Spotnitz & Resnikoff, 1954). The term "narcissism" was derived from this myth, and first used by Ellis in 1898 to refer to auto-eroticism in which the self is desired as a sexual object (Russell, 1985). Since then, significant work has gone into the development of narcissism as a psychological concept. Despite great differences and debate between the contributors in the field of narcissism the term has always retained the central idea of self-interest.

The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (5th ed.; DSM–5; American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 669) defines narcissistic personality disorder (NPD) as a "pervasive pattern of grandiosity (in fantasy or behaviour), need for admiration, and lack of empathy, beginning by early adulthood and present in a variety of contexts". Individuals with NPD are further described as entitled, arrogant, with an inflated sense of self-importance, fantasizing about power and success, and being envious and interpersonally exploitative. Paradoxically, the DSM-5 also describes a perpetually frail self-esteem in these individuals who are sensitive to the slights of others, and react with rage, shame, and disbelief when their needs are not met (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Due to this combination of traits the interpersonal relationships of these individuals are said to be typically impaired.

Self-regulation may provide a useful explanation for the unique functioning of narcissistic individuals. However, very little consensus exists in the literature about the definition of narcissism despite the best efforts of the DSM-5. Therefore, a more in-depth look into the development of narcissism as a psychological concept is needed to (a)

accurately understand the available research on the topic, and (b) accurately apply a self-regulation perspective to the concept of narcissism.

Contested views on the definition of narcissism

Narcissism is often described from a psychoanalytic perspective, focusing on developmental arrests and structural conflicts. Freud (2014) described narcissism as a defence against Oedipal difficulties. According to Freud, pathological narcissism (or secondary narcissism) is based in immaturity and involves withdrawing love from the object in favour of love for the self. Following Freud's contribution, Otto Kernberg (1970; 1974; 1975) and Heinz Kohut (1971; 1972) developed radically different theories on narcissism despite both prescribing to the psychoanalytic school of thought. Their work paved the way for the understanding of narcissism for decades to come. It can be hypothesised that their differing theories also marked a divergence in the definition of narcissism that is still heavily debated today. Therefore, a thorough understanding of their theories is deemed essential when engaging with the topic of narcissism.

Kernberg (1974, p. 258) defined narcissism as a "libidinal investment in a pathological self-structure". Kernberg (1975, p. 316) believed that the relationship between self-love and object-love is *interdependent* and that a pathological "grandiose self" is therefore formed within a frustrating mother-child relationship. According to Kernberg (1970), the grandiose self consists of three structural elements: (a) the real self—childhood reinforcement of being special, (b) the ideal self—fantasies of power, wealth, and beauty that compensates for severe frustration in childhood, and (c) the ideal object—fantasies of a loving and accepting mother that contrasts the lived reality. Kernberg (1974) employed this view of personality aetiology to distinguish between healthy and pathological narcissism, with the former being a result of good inner-object relations and abundant object love and the latter a result of bad inner-object relations. As such, Kernberg saw healthy narcissism as an

increased investment in objects which leads to mature self-esteem in adulthood. In contrast, he viewed pathological narcissism as a libidinal investment in an integrated but pathological self-structure, that is, the grandiose self (Kernberg,1975). Moreover, Kernberg held that pathological narcissism is a secondary defence against the fragmenting of both the self-concept and the concept of significant others whereby the individual wrestles between idealised and persecutory experiences. Kernberg therefore holds that the grandiose self operates to inflate the self-concept in order to hide feelings of worthlessness and inferiority. He continued that this is often evident in the narcissistic use of the splitting defence, characterised by idealisation and devaluation. In addition, Kernberg (1974) regarded aggression and rage as an integral part of pathological narcissism, and believed it to be *instinctual* in nature and borne from early frustrations with the maternal object.

In stark contrast to Kernberg, Kohut (1971; 1972) theorised two *independent* lines of development. The grandiose self ("*I am perfect*") is seen as a normal, primitive self-configuration in which a child needs their caregiver to mirror their internal state (Kohut, 1971). Kohut argued that authentic approval, admiration, and encouragement from the caregiver will lead to a sense of worth and positive self-regard (Kohut, 1971). The second configuration is the idealized parent image or omnipotent object whereby children can ascribe perfection to a self-object ("*you are perfect but I am part of you*") in order to feel safe and contained by identifying with a powerful protector. In normal development the idealized parent image leads to the child feeling supported, empowered, and able to self-regulate (Kohut, 1971). Kohut argued that this line of development provides the foundation of psychic structures which enable children to internalise the adult's functions and form a cohesive sense of self. It follows that Kohut's view of the narcissistic personality revolves around arrested development where the grandiose self and idealised parent image are retained due to a lack of mirroring by an empathic caregiver that could be idealised. Without a cohesive nuclear self

the narcissistic personality mobilises one of the two configurations with the aim of stabilising the precarious sense of self (Kohut, 1971). When the grandiose self is mobilised, the individual seeks an object to mirror their grandiosity, while the mobilisation of the idealised parent *imago* plays out in the need to merge with an idealised object (Kohut, 1971). However, Kohut (1972) also argued that the parent-figure can never be replaced, and therefore the narcissistic individual is consistently disappointed by the self or object who cannot meet their expectations. This failure leads to rejection of the object as well as the rise of narcissistic rage. Consequently, Kohut (1972) viewed narcissistic aggression as a *reaction* to threat and not an intrinsic part of the personality. Kohut (1971) was also less concerned with the target of libidinal investment (i.e., self versus object), and more interested in the *nature* of the libido, which he described as narcissistic when idealizing or aggrandizing.

Five decades after the Kernberg-Kohut debate began narcissism remains a contested term. Despite, and perhaps due to, much research and debate very little consensus exists on the criteria most central to narcissism, leading to inconsistent definitions of the term and criticism of the DSM-5 (Ackerman et al., 2016). The DSM-5 (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. xli) holds that it is intended as a "practical, functional, and flexible guide" for the diagnosis and treatment of mental disorders. However, the categorical classification system of the DSM-5 often does not capture clinical experience or scientific observations—something that is acknowledged by the manual and echoed in the literature.

Efforts to improve the description of NPD in the DSM-5 include that of Miller et al. (2017) who suggested a change in the traits required to make such a diagnosis by exchanging attention seeking with entitlement. They further suggested two specifiers: grandiosity and/or vulnerability, which would be described by specific traits from different trait domains. Prior to the release of the DSM-5, Ronningstam (2009, p. 118) also suggested the following definition for NPD: "A pervasive pattern of fluctuating and vulnerable self-esteem ranging

from grandiosity and assertiveness to inferiority or insecurity, with self-enhancing and self-serving interpersonal behaviour, and intense reactions to perceived threats, beginning in early adulthood and present in a variety of contexts".

From the literature, it seems that the definition of the term is largely dependent on the approach in question (Ackerman et al., 2016; Campbell & Miller, 2011; Miller et al., 2017; Pincus & Lukowitsky, 2010). Most notably is the difference in focus between social-personality research and clinical approaches (Campbell & Miller, 2011). Divergent views on *normal versus pathological narcissism* contributes to the inconsistent definitions of the term. While authors agree that both forms of narcissism exist, some advocate for a single continuum with health and pathology as extreme poles (MacDonald, 2014; Rogoza et al., 2019; Ronningstam, 2005a), while others see the distinctions as two separate personality dimensions (Pincus et al., 2009).

Closely related to this debate is the distinction of *grandiose and/or vulnerable narcissism*. Overall, social-personality research tends to highlight narcissistic grandiosity, while clinical approaches emphasize both grandiosity *and* vulnerability (Cain et al., 2008; Campbell et al., 2011). Ronningstam (2009) stated that narcissistic individuals oscillate between grandiosity and vulnerability. Kernberg (2009, p. 106) similarly noted that the narcissistic personality experiences "bouts of insecurity disrupting their sense of grandiosity or specialness". The importance of narcissistic vulnerability is highlighted by a substantial amount of clinical work that describes it as: ideal-hungry (Kohut & Wolf, 1978), covert (Akhtar & Thomson, 1982; Cooper, 1981), thin-skinned (Rosenfeld, 1987), hypervigilant (Gabbard, 1989), overtly vulnerable (Gersten, 1991), closet (Masterson, 1993), infantilized, spoiled child and shamed child (Fiscalini, 1993), diffident (Hunt, 1995), compensatory (Millon, 1996), and shy (Ronningstam & Gabbard, 2005).

In contrast, the same authors described the grandiose self-states of the narcissist as: mirror-hungry (Kohut & Wolf, 1978), overt (Akhtar & Thomson, 1982; Cooper, 1981), thick-skinned (Rosenfeld, 1987), oblivious (Gabbard, 1989), overtly grandiose (Gersten, 1991), exhibitionistic (Masterson, 1993), uncivilized spoiled child and special child (Fiscalini, 1993), classical (Hunt, 1995), unprincipled (Millon, 1996), and arrogant (Ronningstam & Gabbard, 2005). This grandiose picture is aligned with that of the NPD criteria of the DSM-5 as well as the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI) that has been dominating assessment in social-personality research on narcissistic personality traits (Cain et al., 2008), and which compromises low neuroticism, high extraversion, and high antagonism (Miller and Campbell, 2008). To this end, Miller and Campbell (2008, p. 452) stated that in social-personality research "there is little evidence for the 'brittleness' found in the clinical description".

According to the DSM-5 (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), narcissistic pathology is determined by the subjective distress and functional impairment of the individual. This view led to a belief that grandiose narcissism is normal/adaptive, while vulnerable narcissism is unhealthy/pathological (Pincus & Lukowitsky, 2010). However, Miller et al. (2017) warns that grandiose narcissism can erroneously be perceived as normal or adaptive when individuals have high self-esteem and do not experience subjective distress, as this view discounts the distress caused to others and therefore paints a faulty picture of functionality. By the same token, distress in individuals with more vulnerable narcissistic traits should not summarily be regarded as pathology. However, Miller et al. (2017) also argue that narcissism (both grandiose and vulnerable) can be pathological when it is pervasive, extreme, rigid, and causes substantial impairment and distress. In addition, Ronningstam (2009), who regards the regulation of self-esteem as the central motivation in narcissistic functioning argues that the extent to which narcissistic behaviour should be regarded as pathological depends on the individual's ability to regulate their own self-esteem.

In line with this view, the DSM-5 (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) provides an alternative model for personality disorders in Section III which also links the typical features of NPD to self-regulation, and describes it as "variable and vulnerable self-esteem, with attempts at regulation through attention and approval seeking, and either overt or covert grandiosity" (p. 763). It follows that a self-regulation perspective—an increasingly important concept in describing and understanding human personality and behaviour—can lend itself well to understanding the functioning of narcissistic individuals. While a great deal of work has been done to understand narcissism, the literature suggests that it has not been extensively described from a self-regulation perspective, with a few exceptions (Denissen et al., 2013; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001) to which we will return later.

Self-regulation

Self-regulation is the "regulation of the self by the self" (Forgas et al., 2009, p. 4). This involves changing the self in some way to bring it in line with a certain idea, value, or concept, also known as a standard, reference, or goal (Carver & Scheier, 1982; MacKenzie et al., 2012). Further, a review by Fitzsimons and Bargh (2004) report strong evidence that self-regulation can happen consciously and/or unconsciously. The development of self-regulation as a science is based on the pioneering work of Carver and Scheier (1982) who adapted cybernetic control theory to show how behaviour consists of four components arranged in a linear feedback loop. This closed, negative loop is designed to reduce any disparity from a standard. The elements in this loop include (a) reference, (b) input, (c) comparator, and (d) output. The *input* refers to the current state (a cognitive, affective, or behavioural state) which is compared to a *reference* using the *comparator* mechanism. If any discrepancies are detected between the existing state and the reference value, a behaviour is executed that prompts a change in the system and ultimately reduces any inconsistencies experienced. This behaviour is called the *output* (Carver & Scheier, 1982). It follows that, in order to self-

regulate effectively people need to be committed to certain goals (reference), be able to monitor (compare) their current situation (input) with their goals and be able to make the necessary adjustments (output) to minimize inconsistencies between the two (Carver & Scheier, 2017a).

Vohs and Baumeister (2004) hold that "self-regulation cannot succeed unless it is successful both at monitoring the state in relation to the goal and at making the changes and adjustments as desired" (p. 2). It implies a certain level of flexibility within the self, making self-regulation imperative in managing and maintaining social relationships (Forgas et al., 2009). In this regard, Leary and Downs (1995) made a unique contribution to self-regulation research with their concept of *sociometer*—a mechanism that functions to monitor and respond to social cues that reflect the relational worth of the individual. According to Leary et al. (1998), a sociometer can be hypersensitive to social cues, causing extreme fluctuations in affective states and self-esteem in response to minor social feedback or minimal changes in the environment. In addition to dysfunctional affect self-regulation failure has a significantly negative impact on other health and social problems like alcoholism (Hull & Slone, 2004), smoking (Sayette, 2004), drug addiction (Sayette, 2004), obesity (Thayer, 2001), excessive spending (Faber & Vohs, 2004), and crime (Hirschi, 2004), amongst others. Conversely, effective self-regulation is seen as the foundation of healthy psychological functioning (Hoyle, 2010) and affords individuals a sense of social belonging (Vohs & Ciarocco, 2004). Successful self-regulation thus involves effective regulation of affect, cognitions, and behaviour (Larsen & Prizmic, 2004).

Narcissism and self-regulation

Denissen et al. (2013) conceptualized personality as a regulatory system where trait-related behaviours are strategically used as a means to a desired end. They hold that specific personality traits play a role in (a) selection—whether you seek or avoid a certain situation,

(b) modification—altering the environment or a social role, (c) directing attention—towards or away from certain stimuli, (d) changing appraisal—redefining stress as a challenge, and (e) suppression—refraining from acting on an emotion or perception. Focussing on grandiose narcissism, Denissen et al. (2013) found that narcissists tend to select situations that will bring them status, attend to cues that involve status, and appraise situations for the possibility of either increasing their status or decreasing the status of others.

In a study on affective reactions to success and failure, Rhodewalt and Morf (1998) found that narcissists experience greater *fluctuations in self-esteem* (compared to less narcissistic participants) in reaction to learning either positive or negative information about themselves. They deduced that the narcissist's positive self-view is dependent on the feedback of others and that they are incredibly sensitive to negative feedback, perceiving it as a threat to self-esteem. These findings are reminiscent of Kernberg's mask model that explains narcissism as grandiose behaviour that serves to hide a deeply insecure sense of self (Kernberg, 1974).

Consequently, Morf and Rhodewalt (2001) proposed a *dynamic self-regulatory processing model* that explains narcissism by focusing on the interaction between narcissistic self-interest, goals, motives, and social context. This model describes the complex interpersonal dynamics that is characteristic of narcissism, and thus include both traits and processes in a single model. The authors argue that narcissists self-regulate by seeking admiration and positive feedback from others. Therefore, they proposed that the social, cognitive, and affective personality processes of narcissism are employed towards motivated self-construction, always working towards a "desired self" and meeting self-evaluative needs (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001, p. 178).

In an updated version of this model Morf et al. (2012, p. 57) explain the cognitive, affective, and motivational components of personality as a "mental construal system" that

represents how the individual thinks and feels about himself, his desired self, his goals and expectations, and how he thinks about others in relation to himself. This system can be said to activate the self-regulatory processes of the individual which can be intrapersonal and/or interpersonal in nature.

Applied specifically to narcissism measured by the NPI, Morf et al. (2012) found that narcissists' *self-construals* include explicit and implicit levels—a finding that supports clinical theories. On the explicit level narcissists present themselves as high in self-esteem, special, unique, intelligent, and therefore overconfident (Morf et al., 2012). However, on the implicit level narcissists appear to be vulnerable as can be seen in their volatility and need for excessive self-affirmation when experiencing ego-threat (Morf et al., 2012). This vulnerability is believed to be linked to low, implicit self-esteem, shame, and hypervigilance (Morf et al., 2012). In addition, narcissists hold *other-construals* whereby individuals who are regarded as inferior to the self are devalued, while admired others are idealised and associated with (Morf et al., 2012).

Morf et al. (2012) hold that the narcissistic mental construals of self and others directly drive their self-regulation strategies. *Intrapersonal* strategies include (but is not limited to): assigning any success to their superiority, distorting negative feedback, editing their own history, drawing on fantasy, self-sabotaging in order to create plausible reasons when potential failure is feared, and employing aggression as a buffer for experiences of worthlessness (Morf et al., 2012). *Interpersonal* strategies include the exploitation of opportunities in order to gain superiority and admiration (such as dominating in a group, taking a leadership role, wearing expensive clothing, and acquiring a "trophy" partner), interpersonal controlling behaviours (such as intrusiveness, inducing guilt, and withdrawing affection), as well as hostile and aggressive behaviour in response to social threat (Morf et al., 2012).

Campbell and Campbell (2009) also made a unique contribution in the form of their *contextual reinforcement model*, developed as a complement to existing dynamic feedback models. They specifically applied a narrow focus of self-regulation that refers to the regulating of contents that define the personality (Campbell & Campbell, 2009). According to these authors, self-representations not only draw on the existing self-concept but is also formed during each interaction with the social environment in service of a desired identity. Campbell and Campbell (2009) continue that intrapersonal processes can be a result of disappointment when the ideal self-representation could not be achieved in the interpersonal realm and includes self-regulation through biased interpretations of feedback and performance, selective attention to specific features of tasks or environment, as well as a selective or distorted recall of historic outcomes. However, they also acknowledge a reciprocal interaction between intra- and interpersonal self-regulatory processes. This model aids in understanding the contexts in which narcissism both thrive and fail with cost and benefit in the short and long term. It holds that the short-term benefit of preserving a positive self-view in the face of threat is more salient to the narcissist than the potential long-term cost of their aggrandizing behaviour, especially since the self-regulation strategies involved in preserving a superior self is automatic and nonreflective in nature (Campbell & Campbell, 2009). It follows that narcissistic self-regulation strategies might be successful in the short term but ultimately self-defeating in the long term, as they alienate the social audience they depend on for social affirmation (Campbell & Campbell, 2009).

Ronningstam (2009) explains that narcissists often attempt self-regulation through interpersonal control, and even aggression. This is aligned with the view of Campbell and Campbell (2009), as well as that of Morf et al. (2012) who explained that the relentless efforts to affirm the self through the admiration of others often achieve quite the opposite, as this behaviour wears people down (Morf et al., 2012). It can therefore be said that the

narcissist is trapped in a condemning cycle of perpetual self-esteem chasing (Morf et al., 2012). From a cybernetic view this resembles a stable system that is open to change and as such lends itself well to a self-regulation perspective.

Conclusion

While it is clear from the literature that narcissism remains a contested term, it is also clear that it has a profoundly negative impact on individuals and their relationships. Literature also holds that the self-regulation strategies of narcissistic individuals seem to be informed by their personalities. These strategies are described as somewhat short-sighted in that it serves them in the short-term but ultimately fails in the long-term. It is therefore increasingly important to understand how narcissists regulate themselves in an effort to obtain their goals and maintain not only self-esteem but also their relationships.

Preview of Chapters 2 and 3

Chapter 2 of this study is presented in the form of a manuscript that will be submitted for possible publication to the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. The aim of Chapter 2 is to critically review and synthesise existing literature on the self-regulation processes in narcissism. In addition, a new hypothetical model for narcissistic self-regulation is proposed, based on the evidence found in the results. Chapter 3 serves as a critical reflection of the researcher's personal experiences whilst undertaking this study.

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CHAPTER 2: ARTICLE

Guidelines for Authors

This article, which forms part of the researcher's mini-dissertation, will be submitted to the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* for possible publication. Therefore, the article complies with the submission guidelines of the journal, as laid out below:

Submission sections

Manuscripts should be submitted to the appropriate section editor of the journal. The three sections of the journal include: (a) Attitudes and Social Cognition, (b) Interpersonal Relations and Group Processes, and (c) Personality Processes and Individual Differences. This article will be submitted to the latter section.

Preparing a manuscript for submission

Formatting

Manuscripts must be submitted electronically in MSWord Document format (.doc). In addition, manuscripts should follow the 7th edition of the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (APA style). The APA 7 formatting style dictates a choice between Times New Roman font size 12, or Arial font size 11 as well as double spacing throughout. This article employs the former option. Margin spaces should be 1 inch (2.54 cm) and paragraphs should be left-aligned. The Journal of Personality and Social Psychology has no formal word limit for submissions but manuscripts should nevertheless be written in a succinct manner.

Abstract and keywords

Manuscripts should include an abstract which should appear on a separate page. Abstracts may contain a maximum of 250 words and a maximum of five keywords.

References

In line with the APA 7 style of formatting, references should appear in alphabetical order with a hanging indent in the reference list. Each reference should be appropriately cited in the text so that in-text references match the reference list.

Tables

Tables should be created using MSWord's 'insert table' function, and the use of spaces or tabs should be avoided. Tables should be labelled with Arabic numerals and titled appropriately above the table. All tables should be embedded within the manuscript, and not provided after the references.

Figures

Graphic files should be supplied to the journal as Tiff or EPS files. To ensure optimal printing the line weight for line art should be a minimum of 0.5 points. Symbol legends should be placed below the figure. Figures should be numbered using Arabic numerals and captioned below the figure. All figures should be embedded within the manuscript and not provided after the references.

Academic writing and language editing

The use of language editing services is not mandatory for publication in the journal, and the journal makes it clear that these services does not guarantee selection for publication. Language editing is therefore employed at the discretion of the author and for the benefit of improving and checking the quality of the language used.

Publication policies

APA policy prohibits the submission of the same manuscript to multiple publications at the same time. Any possible conflict of interest should also be reported on. In addition, authors should state in writing that they have adhered to APA ethical standards when samples are human or animal.

Article

Narcissism through a self-regulation lens: a critical review

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Abstract

Narcissism has not been extensively described from a self-regulation perspective, nor has there been recent advances in dedicated model development on narcissism from a self-regulation perspective. The aim of this study is therefore to critically review and synthesize existing scientific literature on narcissism from a self-regulation perspective and based on the review propose a hypothetical model. A thematic analysis yielded eight themes from 31 studies. Results show that narcissists are strongly biased toward certain goals which they pursue in a rigid manner. The results also provided strong evidence for different self-regulation strategies between grandiose and vulnerable narcissists. Based on the review findings, a hypothetical model for the self-regulation mechanisms associated with narcissism was proposed. Limitations are discussed and recommendations for future research are made.

Keywords: *narcissism; narcissistic personality disorder; self-regulation; self-control; self-monitoring; adjustment; critical review.*

Introduction

Narcissistic personality disorder (NPD) is a "pervasive pattern of grandiosity, need for admiration, and lack of empathy, beginning by early adulthood and present in a variety of contexts" (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th^{h} ed., American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 669). It is further characterised by a sense of entitlement, arrogance, an inflated sense of self-importance, fantasies about power and success, and being envious and interpersonally exploitative. At the same time, individuals with NPD may have a frail self-esteem and often react with rage, shame, and disbelief when their needs are not met (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

Exploring and understanding narcissism has a dynamic history—after Freud's original work in the 1920s Kernberg and Kohut developed radically different psychoanalytic theories (Kernberg, 1970; 1974; 1975; Kohut, 1971; 1972)Five decades later narcissism remains a contested term as very little consensus exists on its definition, criteria, and function (Ackerman et al., 2016; Campbell & Miller, 2011; Miller et al., 2017; Pincus & Lukowitsky, 2010). Prior to the release of the DSM-5 Ronningstam (2009) published alternative formulations of the construct and criteria for NPD as a suggestion for the new edition of the manual. A few years after that, Miller et al. (2017) suggested a change in the traits required to make a diagnosis by exchanging attention seeking with entitlement. They further suggest two specifiers: grandiosity and/or vulnerability, described from different trait domains. These proposed changes reflect the disagreement on the criteria most central to narcissism (Ackerman et al., 2016), perhaps most obvious in the so-called grandiosity/adaptive versus vulnerability/pathological debate.

While some believe that narcissism exists on a continuum with normal and pathological narcissism as extreme poles (MacDonald, 2014; Ronningstam, 2005a), others see it as two separate personality dimensions (Pincus et al., 2009; Pincus & Lukowitsky,

2010). Furthermore, Miller et al. (2017) warn against the common perception that grandiose narcissism is normal or even adaptive in its own right, while vulnerable narcissism is pathological due to the distress associated with it. This is because, Miller et al. (2017) indicate, both grandiose and vulnerable narcissism can be pathological when it is pervasive, extreme, rigid, and cause substantial impairment and distress.

A more recent approach to narcissism which may also be a key factor to the extent to which narcissistic behaviour should be regarded as pathological, may depend on the individual's ability to regulate their own self-esteem (Ronningstam, 2009). According to Ronningstam (2009), the *regulation of self-esteem* is the central motivation in narcissistic functioning. In addition, the DSM-5 (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 763) provides an alternative model for personality disorders in Section III, which also links the typical features of NPD to self-regulation: "…presenting with a variable and vulnerable self-esteem, with attempts at regulation through attention and approval seeking, and either overt or covert grandiosity." It therefore follows that a self-regulation perspective can lend itself as a valuable avenue to understanding the functioning of narcissistic individuals.

Self-regulation as a scientific concept developed from Carver and Scheier's (1982) work on cybernetic control theory in the 1970s and 1980s. It involves changing the self in some way to bring it in line with a certain idea, value, or concept, also known as a standard, reference, or goal (Carver & Scheier, 1982; MacKenzie et al., 2012) and implies intra- and interpersonal flexibility (Forgas et al., 2009). In order to self-regulate effectively people need to be committed to certain goals, be able to monitor their current situation with their goals and be able to make the necessary adjustments to minimize inconsistencies between the two (Carver & Scheier, 2017a). Self-regulation is argued to be the foundation of healthy psychological functioning (Hoyle, 2010) and a sense of social belonging (Vohs & Ciarocco, 2004). Research indicates that self-regulation failure has a significantly negative impact on

health and social problems, including issues such as alcoholism (Hull & Slone, 2004), smoking (Sayette, 2004), drug addiction (Sayette, 2004), obesity (Thayer, 2001), excessive spending (Faber & Vohs, 2004), and crime (Hirschi, 2004), amongst others.

In earlier studies linking narcissism with self-regulation, Rhodewalt and Morf (1998) found that narcissists, compared to non-narcissists, experience greater *fluctuations in self-esteem* in reaction to learning either positive or negative information about themselves. They deduced that the narcissist's positive self-view is dependent on the feedback of others and that they are incredibly sensitive to negative feedback, perceiving it as a threat to self-esteem. These findings are reminiscent of Kernberg's mask model that explains narcissism as grandiose behaviour that serves to hide a deeply insecure sense of self (cited in Miller et al., 2017). Morf and Rhodewalt (2001) thereupon proposed a *dynamic self-regulatory processing model* that focuses on the interaction between narcissistic self-interest, goals, motives, and social context. According to their model narcissists self-regulate by employing their social, cognitive, and affective processes towards a "desired self" (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001, p. 178), seeking admiration and positive feedback from others. This is part of the narcissist's "mental construal system" (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001, p. 57, in an updated version of the model) that represents how they think and feel about themselves, their desired selves, and about others in relation to themselves, activating the self-regulatory processes they apply both intra- and interpersonally. According to Denissen et al. (2013), personality itself is a regulatory system where trait-related behaviours are strategically used as a means to a desired end.

Narcissists' self-regulatory efforts come with certain costs due to their focus on obtaining the admiration of others. According to Campbell and Campbell's (2009) *contextual reinforcement model* narcissists' self-regulation strategies are strongly related to self-enhancement processes which might be successful at first but ultimately fail them later.

Ronningstam (2009) argues that narcissists often attempt self-regulation through interpersonal control and even aggression. In their relentless efforts to affirm the self through the admiration of others, they often achieve quite the opposite, as this behaviour wears people down (Morf et al., 2012). It is therefore no surprise that these authors argue that "the insatiable need to affirm the self thus creates a never-ending quest for the narcissist, one doomed to fail" (Morf et al., 2012, p. 56).

While a great deal of work has been done to understand narcissism, the literature suggests that, with a few exceptions (Campbell & Campbell, 2009; Denissen et al., 2013; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001, 2012), it has not been extensively described from a self-regulation perspective. More specifically, there seems to be a relative lack of recent advances in dedicated model development on narcissism from a self-regulation perspective. Although an extensive literature search has shown that a large body of research exists, studies are often focused on specific mechanisms or components of self-regulation only, not including a comprehensive view of self-regulation as a process, and often not forming part of the studies' main focus.

As narcissism has a profoundly negative impact on individuals and their relationships (Campbell & Campbell, 2009) it is increasingly important to understand how narcissists regulate themselves to obtain their goals and maintain their relationships. This is particularly important as the treatment of narcissism is perceived as complex and difficult, if not impossible (Ronningstam, 2017). By critically reviewing available studies and including the most recent advances in narcissism and self-regulation research, a better understanding can be developed that could be used to identify gaps in current research and to propose guidelines for future research.

The aim of this study is therefore to critically review and synthesize existing scientific literature on narcissism from a self-regulation perspective and based on the review propose a hypothetical model for the self-regulation mechanisms associated with narcissism.

Method

Research design

A critical review (De Klerk & Pretorius, 2019; Grant & Booth, 2009) was done to take stock of existing literature, that is, to critically synthesize the findings and subsequently propose a hypothetical model of narcissism from a self-regulation perspective. This allowed for an exploration status of and gaps in current knowledge as well as the identification of needs and directions for future research.

Procedure

The study was approved by the Scientific committee of the COMPRES (Community Psychosocial Research) research entity as well as HREC (Health Ethics Research Committee) of the North-West University. The SALSA approach (Grant & Booth, 2009) was followed to conduct the search, consisting of the following steps: (a) search, (b) appraisal, (c) synthesis, and (d) analysis. The search was conducted by both authors in consultation with a librarian. Appraisal, synthesis, and analysis were first independently done by each author, followed by a discussion to reach consensus on the inclusion of studies as well as the final themes.

Search strategy

A systematic search was done using EBSCO Discovery Services (EDS) on the North-West University's database portal. EDS include search engines like EBSCOhost, ScienceDirect, PsycARTICLES, PsycINFO, JSTOR journals, and MEDLINE. A Boolean search was done, using the keywords ("narciss*" OR "NPD" AND "self-reg*" OR "self-control") to identify peer-reviewed, full text and PhD studies published no later than 2000 and focusing on research participants 18 years and older (narcissistic personality disorder is

only diagnosed at the age of 18, while self-regulation is not expected to be fully developed before the age of 18) irrespective of age or gender.

The search initially yielded 238 studies which were then independently scrutinized by both authors to remove duplications and to check for relevancy, based on the following questions: *Does the study provide insight in the self-regulatory processes involved in narcissism? Will the study significantly contribute to the aims of the critical review?* Through this process 67 studies were identified and then assessed for quality, using the following criteria: (a) publication in a peer-reviewed, accredited journal, or as chapter in a textbook by a reputable publishing agency; (b) a clear research question and appropriate aims; (c) methodology clearly described and appropriately executed; (d) study comes to a credible conclusion regarding the aims it set out to achieve. This yielded 31 studies for final inclusion in the review.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006) was applied to analyse the data. Both authors read through the studies to get fully acquainted with each study. Extracted data were then independently coded and combined into potential themes and subthemes. Independent visual mind maps were also drawn based on this initial process. Next, the two authors compared their analyses to address redundancy and overlap, to split themes into subthemes, and to combine themes where appropriate. Each theme was then critically explored to reach consensus on its crux, after which it was given a final descriptive name.

Results

Eight themes were identified and will be presented in order of relative strength (number of studies). Before presenting the themes, it is important to highlight a few points regarding how narcissism is viewed and reported differently within the review studies: First,

some studies, but not all, distinguish between grandiose and vulnerable narcissism. Second, some understand the different faces of narcissism from a trait perspective, differentiating between antagonism and/or neuroticism. In the third place, some studies view them as different dimensions, while others view them as different ways of presenting narcissism within the same individual. Fourth, depending on which measurement was used and related to the previous two points, studies also differ in terms of the emphasis they place on the primitive, mature, or mixed self-structures of narcissism. These will be referred to in the results section as reported by each study but will be critically discussed in the discussion section.

Table 1

Themes and related studies

No.	Theme	Related studies
1	Self-control & impulsivity (9 studies)	Bogaerts et al. (2021); Fatfouta et al. (2022); Hart et al. (2017); Hoffman et al. (2012); Larson et al. (2015); Miller et al. (2009); Neave et al. (2020); Rose (2007); Vaughn et al. (2007)
2	Response to threat (7 studies)	Foti (2012); Garcia et al. (2015); Hardaker et al. (2021); Horvath & Morf (2009); Kealy et al. (2017); Loeffler et al. (2020); Miller et al. (2009).
3	Reward seeking & risk taking (6 studies)	Adams et al. (2014); Brunell et al. (2017); Campbell et al. (2004); Horvath & Morf, (2009); Miller et al. (2009); Yang et al. (2018)
4	Interpersonal regulation (6 studies)	Hoffman et al. (2012); Horvath & Morf, (2010); Nicholls et al. (2011); Ozimek et al. (2018); Roche et al. (2013); Zeigler-Hill et al. (2021)
5	Self-enhancement (5 studies)	Bogaerts et al (2021); Chester et al. (2016); Horvath & Morf, (2010); Wallace et al. (2009)
6	Regulatory orientation (4 studies)	Di Santo et al. (2021); Hanke et al. (2019); Hyun et al. (2021); Miller et al. (2009)
7	Self-monitoring (4 studies)	Bogaerts et al. (2021); Hardaker et al. (2021); Horvath & Morf, (2009); Valikhani et al., 2020)
8	Emotion regulation (3 studies)	Loeffler et al., (2020); Ponzoni et al., (2021); Valikhani et al. (2020)

Theme 1 - Self-control and impulsivity

Nine studies include findings on self-control and/or impulsivity—two concepts that directly influence each other as they work in opposite directions. This relation is clearly

explained by Bogaerts et al. (2021) stating that while *self-control* is a process whereby the subjective value of two options is considered to produce the best results relative to long-term goals, whereas *impulsivity* functions to satisfy the most immediate needs, often at the expense of long-term goals.

Hoffman et al. (2012) found that individuals high in narcissistic entitlement did not report higher levels of desire, however, they reported less conflict about their desires compared to other people. As such, they continue, narcissistic individuals might not see a reason to refrain from acting on their desires. Fatfouta et al. (2022), Larson et al. (2015), and Vaughn (2007) specifically found a link between low levels of self-control, violence, and aggressive behaviour in narcissists. Although Miller et al. (2009) found no direct relation between impulsivity and narcissism they found that *both* narcissism and impulsivity predicts aggressive or risky behaviours. They further explain that self-defeating behaviour is often the result of the narcissistic drive to pursue self-enhancement along with an antagonistic interpersonal orientation. According to Fatfouta et al. (2022), self-control is a mediating factor for antagonistic narcissists as it might lead to more adaptive interpersonal functioning. Bogaerts at al. (2012) found a higher level of self-control and identity integration in grandiose narcissists compared to vulnerable narcissists. In addition, they found that a lower level of self-control specifically puts vulnerable narcissists at higher risk for antisocial behaviour, possibly due to their lower levels of identity integration. Vaughn et al. (2007) link narcissism and poor self-control to anxiety, yet suggest there may be other pathways from narcissism to low self-control and ultimately antisocial behaviour.

The relation between self-control and narcissism were also linked to consumer behaviour. Rose (2007) found that narcissism is negatively related to impulse control and positively related to materialism and compulsive buying. Neave et al. (2020) linked both grandiose and vulnerable narcissism to conspicuous consumption, but in different ways. For

grandiose narcissists who possess a strong desire to differentiate from others, approval-seeking in the form of a need-for-uniqueness mediates the relationship between narcissism and conspicuous consumption. In contrast, no evidence was found for this mediating relationship in vulnerable narcissism. Following this, the authors hypothesised that vulnerable narcissists may consume conspicuously to avoid disapproval, instead of seeking approval.

Finally, it is interesting to note that self-control may be applied strategically by narcissists. Hart et al. (2017), for example, found that narcissistic individuals prefer to portray an image of *low* self-control, explaining that they may strategically use this as a power motivation of intending not to inhibit their urges. However, the authors state that because they have used self-report measures and relied on correlational analyses they were unable to conclusively demonstrate that narcissists' low self-control is causally related to a self-presentation process.

Theme 2 – Response to threat

Narcissists in general seem to be hypersensitive to threatening stimuli, for example, ego-threat and worthlessness (Horvath & Morf, 2009) as well as humiliation (Hardaker et al., 2021). This is most probably due to an underdeveloped, internalized ego structure as initially described by Kohut on immature narcissism (Garcia et al., 2015) and a fragility masked by a defensive, grandiose exterior (Hardaker et al., 2021). Because threat is perceived as a direct and immediate risk to their self-esteem narcissists tend to react swiftly and automatically in a way that avoids threat and protects the self (Horvath & Morf, 2009). Hardaker et al. (2021) found supporting evidence that narcissists, compared to non-narcissists, show a heightened response time in defence to threatening stimuli. Horvath et al. (2009) further suggest that narcissists regulate by first activating and then inhibiting in response to threat.

Swift activation of defensive behaviours may lead to externalized coping with self-defeating outcomes, for example, frustration, anger, and aggression (Garcia et al., 2015; Kealy et al., 2017; Miller et al., 2009), substance use (Kealy et al., 2017; Miller et al., 2009) foul language (Miller et al., 2009), risk taking (Kealy et al., 2017; Miller et al., 2009), problematic consumption (Miller et al., 2009), and even suicide (Miller et al., 2009). Compared to the previous theme, here self-control and impulsivity were associated with a weak ego structure and fragile self-esteem (Garcia et al., 2015; Horvath & Morf, 2009), especially when social support is absent (Garcia et al., 2015). Foti (2012) found that a higher level of narcissism combined with lower executive functioning predicts an increased risk for aggression in males when faced with an ego-threat, however, it is not clear whether this suggests a link with self-control, processing of threat, or both.

In addition, and subsequent to activation, narcissists seem to inhibit responses to threat situations either through repression (inhibition of unwanted mental content outside conscious awareness) or suppression (intentional and conscious effort to inhibit unwanted mental content) (Horvath & Morf, 2009; Loeffler, et al., 2020). In the first of two studies Horvath and Morf (2009) found narcissists high in grandiosity to be vigilant for worthlessness, followed by *repression* of worthlessness. In the second study they confirmed that inhibition takes place through repression and not suppression, therefore, the protection of their sense of grandiosity occurs without intention and outside of awareness. Loeffler et al (2020) found support for Horvath and Morf's (2009) study, but in a healthy sample—while those with grandiose narcissistic traits refrain from suppression, those high in vulnerable narcissistic traits more frequently employ suppression as a self-regulation strategy. While suppression has some short-term benefits, it is only partially effective with more negative implications for mental health and well-being than repression (Loeffler et al., 2020).

Therefore, vulnerable narcissism is associated with reduced life satisfaction and symptoms such as depression and anhedonia (Loeffler et al., 2020).

Theme 3 - Reward seeking and risk-taking

Miller and colleagues (2009), exploring a mediation model of narcissism in two studies, found trait narcissism not strongly linked to impulsivity yet linked to traits like sensation seeking and lower scores on aversion motivation. This, they conclude, suggest that narcissistic individuals have a stronger sensitivity to reward and a diminished sensitivity to punishment or non-reward. More specifically, the authors found that trait narcissism is strongly associated with a proclivity towards action that may lead to reward, often through sensation-seeking, self-enhancement, and increased status or domination, despite the possible costs thereof. The authors continue by stating that this is not a reflection of an inability to weigh the cost and benefits of behaviour but rather a very strong motivation to immediately and forcefully obtain the reward while largely ignoring the costs. In a good example of high sensation seeking versus low sensitivity to punishment, Adams et al. (2014) found that narcissists often use *offensive language* to grab attention as a reward in itself, and by implication, not because of poor self-control, impulsivity, or protection of a sense of grandiosity in response to a specific threat (themes 1 & 2). Their study also shows that narcissists view foul language as less offensive compared to non-narcissists. It follows that *insensitivity* to the offensiveness of the language acts as a mediating factor in the relationship between narcissism and offensive language (Adams et al., 2014).

It is therefore not surprising that narcissists often make *risky decision*s in their pursuit of rewards (Campbell et al. 2004; Yang et al. 2018). Campbell et al. (2004) found that overconfidence in narcissists increased their willingness to place risky bets. This stems from narcissists' tendency to overestimate their ability and knowledge which often has negative consequences on performance (Campbell et al., 2004). Yang et al. (2018), however, proposed

(a) a deficiency in error monitoring, and (b) a deficiency in action updating to explain why high-risk behaviour continues even after feedback on the outcome. While they did not find evidence to support their hypothesis for error monitoring, they did find support for *deficiency in action updating*. This suggests that narcissists *are* able to detect their errors but they struggle to update their mental representation. As such, they are unlikely to change maladaptive behaviour following feedback (Yang et al., 2018). This means that individuals high in narcissism are unlikely to learn from feedback despite understanding what is conveyed. Similarly, Horvath and Morf (2009) held that narcissists do not learn from their mistakes, which they ascribed to the repression of negative feedback to maintain self-esteem and avoid feelings of worthlessness.

One study (Brunell et al., 2017), however, sheds caution on the results above, as they found that grandiose and pathological narcissism did not *consistently* predict risky decision making. According to these authors decision making depends on the kind of task involved as well as the manner in which narcissism presents.

Theme 4 - Interpersonal regulation

The majority of the six studies included here based their research on how self-regulation, based on the three key personality features of narcissism, impacts interpersonal relationships.

A high level of antagonism and low level of agreeableness were significantly associated with more dominance-based strategies, characterised by direct competition with others and an eagerness toward the display of competence (Zeigler-Hill et al., 2021). Employing tests of competitiveness, Nicholls et al. (2011) found that narcissists reduce closeness with significant others when outperformed in an area they regard as important to their self-esteem. However, results also suggest that when a friend outperforms the narcissist in a domain of relevant unimportance (for example, moral virtue) they can accept and even

benefit from the friend's success because the friend's position holds no threat to their positive self-evaluation (Nicholls et al., 2011). Although Horvath et al. (2010) focused more on self-enhancement as a goal in narcissism, their findings seem to be relevant in this case—they found that narcissists exploited self-enhancement opportunities and blatantly promoted themselves in a way that others might view as immodest and therefore socially unacceptable. They hold that this self-regulation towards the goal of superiority often hold negative social consequences in the long run. (Horvath et al., 2010).

Hoffman et al. (2012) similarly found high levels of entitlement in narcissists related to diminished conflict regarding personal desires. The authors subsequently hold that the narcissistic pursuance of urges might be far more problematic to others than to the narcissist, who is "unlikely to recognize reasons to hold back" (Hoffman et al., 2012, p.1332). According to Roche et al. (2013), agency plays a meaningful and complicated role in the interpersonal outcomes of narcissistic individuals. Low agency in the primitive defences group related to interpersonal dependence, while high agency may lead to aggression, disagreeableness, and low levels of empathy. However, when more mature defences are at play, high agency can also lead to adaptive extraversion (Roche et al., 2013).

A high level of extraversion (the assertive/extraversion aspect) was associated with motives to pursue status through prestige and leadership-based strategies, thus through efforts that would avoid or reduce conflict (Zeigler-Hill et al., 2021). These authors further argue that this personality aspect might also be willing to use dominance-based strategies but hypothesise that this will only happen when the other strategies are likely to fail. Horvath et al. (2010) found that narcissists with high self-esteem utilise more self-protecting strategies, specifically in agentic domains, while neglecting social acceptance in communal domains. This is supported by Ozimek et al. (2018) who found grandiose narcissists to use Facebook less often than vulnerable narcissists as they do not have strong social comparison needs.

Finally, Zeigler-Hill et al. (2021) found the vulnerable/neurotic aspect of narcissism to be negatively associated with the use of leadership-based strategies in two of their three studies. Ozimek et al. (2018) found social comparison to be a mediating factor in the relationship between vulnerable narcissism and Facebook use, in contrast to grandiose narcissism. According to the authors this shows that vulnerable narcissists use Facebook as a strategy to attain their strong social comparison goals.

Theme 5 - Self-enhancement

Closely related to, yet distinct from reward seeking and risk taking, narcissists' primary goal is often that of self-enhancement. According to Bogaerts et al (2021), self-enhancement is more evident in grandiose narcissists due to their tendency to employ overt strategies to preserve self-esteem, compared to vulnerable narcissists who depend more on positive feedback from others. Narcissistic self-enhancement is also different compared to individuals with a healthy self-esteem in which room is left for socially accepted self-presentation (Horvath & Morf, 2010). As such, narcissistic self-goals differ from those of non-narcissists with high self-esteem and subsequently result in distinctly different self-regulation strategies.

According to Wallace and colleagues (2009), narcissists are highly motivated to persist on tasks that offer a route to self-enhancement. They found that, when only one route exists, narcissists will persist in the task beyond that of their healthy control counterparts. This is believed to be linked to their high level of confidence that stems from a high-performance expectation (Wallace et al., 2009). In addition, they were found to give up faster than the healthy control sample when presented with alternative tasks that offer a seemingly easier route to self-enhancement. As such, due to the unique motivation displayed by the narcissists, their task persistence was seen to shift significantly with changing circumstances (Wallace et al., 2009).

Interestingly the focus on narcissistic self-enhancement is evident in deficiencies in frontostriatal connectivity (Chester et al., 2016). Using diffusion tensor imaging (DTI), these authors found impaired white matter pathways that are important in the preservation of self-esteem in grandiose narcissists. These findings suggest that narcissists may seek external validation to compensate for a biological self-reward deficiency. It follows that narcissists may have a greater discrepancy between their actual and desired self-esteem levels than their non-narcissistic counterparts (Chester et al., 2016). The authors further suggest that self-reports of high self-esteem may reflect successful efforts to obtain external affirmation, or alternatively, that the DTI images might reflect implicit low self-esteem that is never reported by individuals whose goals are primarily to self-enhance.

Theme 6 - Regulatory orientation

Four studies reported on narcissists' regulatory orientation which refers to the approach individuals take in securing success as well as to respond to perceived discrepancies between goals and current behaviour. Regulatory orientation consists of *regulatory focus* and *regulatory mode* based on Higgins' Regulatory Focus Theory (Hanke et al., 2019) as well as his later Regulatory Mode Theory (Di Santo et al., 2021; Hanke et al., 2019). Regulatory focus refers to the way people engage in self-regulation—either with a promotion focus or a prevention focus. Regulatory mode, in contrast, refers to how people compare and evaluate their progress toward a goal ("assessment") and how they move from state to state to initiate and maintain goal-directed behaviour ("locomotion") (Hanke et al., 2019).

Hanke et al. (2019) found that grandiose narcissists tend to be promotion-focused, making them approach-orientated. This related positively with locomotion strength and a higher subjective life satisfaction. In contrast, vulnerable narcissists were found to have low promotion strength and a high assessment-orientation, leading them to ruminate over discrepancies between their actual and desired state and a subsequent decrease in life-

satisfaction (Hanke et al., 2019). Miller et al. (2009), in their earlier study (see theme 3), also found narcissistic individuals to lean towards approach behaviour in contexts that they perceive as rewarding, such as situations that provide an opportunity for self-enhancement or status increase. However, they did not differentiate between grandiose and vulnerable narcissists. Hyun et al. (2021) found that grandiose narcissists employ proactive coping strategies (viewing external stimuli as a challenge rather than a threat) far more than vulnerable narcissists, leading the former to experience higher life satisfaction, lower stress levels, and generally better subjective mental health than the vulnerable group.

Di Santo et al. (2021) examined the extent to which narcissism mediates the effect of the assessment and locomotion regulatory modes on positivity. They found that assessment was positively associated with all dimensions of narcissism, while locomotion was positively associated with leadership, manipulation, grandiose exhibition, fantasy, and superiority. Locomotion was further found to be unrelated to contingent self-esteem, devaluing of the self, and entitlement (Di Santo et al., 2021). They further argue that it is precisely the *self-regulation strategies* of narcissists that lead to their outlook on life. Although they found that assessment and locomotion can both lead to positivity, the results also show that assessment can lead to a negative outlook when associated with maladaptive narcissism such as devaluing the self and relying on the admiration of others.

Theme 7 - Self-monitoring

Four studies report on narcissistic individuals' self-monitoring—the ability to be aware of and reflect on one's own mental state and to use feedback from the environment to change behaviour. According to Valikhani et al. (2020), personality disorders are associated with inadequacy in, among others, self-knowledge and mindfulness. More specifically, they found deficiencies in mindfulness in narcissistic personality disorder, characterised by a lack of mentalisation—that is, difficulty to understand own and others' affective and cognitive

states. As such, the authors continue, compared to mindful individuals, those with narcissistic personalities find it difficult to be grounded in real life away from their fantasies, needs, and defences as they have an exaggerated sense of self-importance, constantly thinking about unlimited success, power, and being praised. They are often so preoccupied with these thinking processes, that they are not able to be reflective about and able to disengage from their own mental processes (Valikhani et al. 2019).

According to Horvath et al. (2009), narcissistic defences operate in an automatic fashion—that is, outside conscious awareness—and active during the initial stages of information processing. Narcissists are therefore hypervigilant for threat (compare theme 2), for example, worthlessness (Horvath et al., 2009) or any stimuli that poses a danger to their self-esteem (Hardaker et al., 2021). As a result, their self-monitoring systems are biased towards ego-threatening stimuli (Horvath et al., 2009) and negative social feedback (Bogaerts et al., 2021).

Theme 8 - Emotion regulation

Narcissists often struggle to understand not only their own affective states, but also those of others (Loeffler et al., 2020) According to Valikhani et al. (2020), this often results in ego-syntonic fantasies of power and being unique on an intrapersonal level and may translate to limited empathy and alienating self-aggrandizement in the interpersonal arena. In a study on the relationship between vulnerable narcissism and suicidal ideation, Ponzoni et al. (2021) found strong evidence that suicidal ideation is positively correlated to vulnerable narcissism but not with grandiose narcissism. These authors found that “hiding the self” and “devaluing” plays a significant role in the severity of suicidal ideation in vulnerable narcissists (Ponzoni et al., 2021, p.473). In addition, Ponzoni et al. (2021) found emotional dysregulation to completely mediate the relationship between vulnerable narcissism and

suicidal ideation as the perception of insufficient strategies to deal with negative emotions were found to be more distressing than the negative emotions in itself (Ponzoni et al., 2021).

Discussion

From a critical review perspective, it is clear that the relationship between narcissism and self-regulation is complex due to inconsistency in how narcissism is defined, measured, and categorized, as well as the diverse nature of self-regulation concepts, theory, and research, among others. "Pathological narcissism" is often described as the type of narcissism that leads to subjective distress (or vulnerable narcissism), while "mature/adaptive narcissism" often refers to narcissism that leads to perceived positive outcomes (or grandiose narcissism) (Kealy et al., 2017; Roche et al.,2013). In addition, some authors describe types of narcissism from a trait perspective, thereby linking vulnerable narcissism to neuroticism, and grandiose narcissism to antagonism (Miller and Campbell, 2008; Zeigler-Hill et al., 2021).

These differences support the strong perception in the field that narcissism is difficult to capture and to assess (Lukowitksy & Pincus, 2013), as it "… stubbornly persists in puzzling psychologists' attempt in understanding it" (Krizan & Herlache, 2018, p.3). Add to this the relative lack of evidence available on many key aspects of self-regulation in narcissism research, the findings should be interpreted with caution. Consequently, the discussion will critically consider how key issues related to narcissism may influence self-regulation, and how that may impact on their intra- and interpersonal functioning.

First, evidence emerged that narcissists are strongly *biased toward certain goals* based on their biological and psychological vulnerabilities. These goals (theme 5) focus on self-enhancement and self-promotion in the case of grandiose/antagonistic narcissism, and approval by others in the case of vulnerable narcissism. The strong focus on these goals was described as a possible way to seek external validation for deficiencies in biological self-

reward and a weak ego structure. Further, due to a low sensitivity to punishment/non-reward and their own desires as well as the avoidance of ego-threat (themes 2 and 3), narcissistic goals seem to be strongly *reward-based* with a high premium on sensation seeking, attention, and approval. Due to the importance of these goals, narcissists tend to choose goals which may require them to *take risks* (theme 3) and, specifically in the case of grandiose narcissism, to be *competitive* (theme 6).

According to Klug and Maier (2015), goals are seen as a cognitive representation of possible states or outcomes that an individual seeks to attain. These are based on cognitive representations of the self, which are influenced by fundamental psychological needs as well as norms and rituals of culture. In terms of goals as a reference point, it is thus clear that narcissists' expectations would be difficult to met, decreasing the chances for goal achievement and at the same time increasing the necessity of further maladaptive strategies. One reason for this is the strong sense of entitlement, characterized by exaggerated expectations and exploitative behaviour (Grubbs & Exline, 2016). Entitlement consistently co-occurs with both grandiose and vulnerable features of narcissism in both normal and clinical populations (Krizan and Herlache, 2018), and almost always leads to a self-sustaining feedback loop of unmet expectations, disappointment, ego threat, and perceptions of injustice (Grubbs & Exline, 2016). It is therefore not surprising that narcissists are often trapped in what Morf et al. (2012) call a condemned cycle of perpetual self-esteem chasing.

Second**,** once their self-enhancement goals are put into action, narcissists seem to be inflexible in their pursuit—either *driven to pursue them rather strongly*, especially when it can lead to self-enhancement on their own terms (themes 5 & 6), or *easily giving up* when not on their own terms (theme 5). To achieve their goals of self-enhancement, entitlement, and attention on their terms, different regulatory orientations are used (themes 4 & 6). At the same time, due to their sensitivity to threat (theme 2), low sensitivity to punishment (theme 3), and

less conflict about their own desires (theme 2), these regulatory modes, especially those used within the grandiose or antagonistic styles, may be fuelled by selfishness and further risk-taking throughout the goal-implementation process.

The review confirms the conceptualization of personality as a regulatory system in which trait-related behaviours are strategically used to achieve a desired end (Denisson et al., 2013), often characterised by the manifestation of combinations of approach- and avoidance-oriented qualities of entitlement and self-importance (Krizan & Herlache, 2018). According to Seo et al. (2018), setting goals is not enough for goal attainment as people often fail to achieve their goals due to procrastination, temptations, and distractions. According to Riddell et al. (2022), goals may also be difficult to attain due to inadequate resources, competing demands, other important goals, or simply because a goal may be too unrealistic. As such, goal persistence is often overestimated—in some cases goal disengagement offers the opportunity to move on from futile goals and reengage with alternative pursuits. What is therefore needed is a flexible approach—that is, to be able to identify when to persist and when to disengage. According to Riddell et al. (2022), the key factor here may be the nature of goals itself. In a number of experiments they have showed that autonomous goals nurture adaptive strategies—that is, persistence in difficult goals but disengagement from unattainable goals. In contrast, controlled goals when self-worth is "on the line" (Riddell et al., 2022) undermine striving to realise difficult goals, resulting in threat appraisals and giving up on coping as well as finding it harder to disengage from unattainable goals. This clearly shows how the narcissistic inflexibility in goal pursuit as identified in the review may further trap them in a failed cycle of self-enhancement.

Third**,** evidence on *self-control* is somewhat contradictory (theme 1). As such, care should be taken not to link all narcissistic impulsivity to poor self-control, because grandiose narcissism seems to be associated with adequate self-control in most cases while some

evidence also exist that it may be linked to the high premise narcissists put on reward-seeking. In this regard, it seems, narcissists may use low self-control strategically (theme 2), but whether it has interpersonal aims or whether they intentionally choose not to apply self-control when rewards are imminent needs to be explored in further research. According to Duckworth et al. (2016), manipulating the context to one's advantage may be a highly effective form of self-control. As self-control involves the mental suppression of an impulse, it is hard work. Consequently, it is associated with terms like effortful control and ego depletion. Therefore, Duckworth et al. (2016) argue that things are often done that feel good right away even if one has enough life experience to know otherwise. Might it be, then, that narcissists may find self-control even harder to obtain than most people, as they are often met with scepticism, humiliation, and rejection from others? If so, self-control would be of significance for narcissists during two phases of self-regulation: first, as part of goal implementation (in response to the temptation of short-term rewards), and second, as part of adjustment (in response to interpersonal conflict). Whatever the aims or intentions are, self-control is important as it protects higher-order goals against temptations that promise immediate satisfaction (Van Koningsbruggen et al., 2011) as well as against inappropriate responding to interpersonal conflict (Jimmieson et al., 2017). As such, self-control can be viewed as a moderating factor whereby both goal implementation and adjustment processes are influenced by the level of self-control the individual employs.

Fourth**,** narcissists have some challenges in terms of self-monitoring, specifically related to (a) a lack of mindfulness (theme 7), (b) automatic responding (themes 2 & 7), and (c) poor emotional regulation (theme 8). Based on the review, narcissists primarily use social comparison (theme 4) and hyper-sensitivity to ego threat (theme 2) to self-monitor. Based on theme 2, however, these are not exclusive categories as most sources of ego threat originate from social interaction, for example, humiliation or rejection. While grandiose narcissism is

more associated with vigilance of worthlessness (theme 2), vulnerable narcissism depends more on social acceptance (theme 4) and perceive negative social feedback as far more threatening (theme 2).

Mindfulness is extremely important in self-monitoring (Davis-Siegel et al., 2015; Schultz & Ryan, 2015) as it consists of a pre-reflexive, non-evaluative, reflecting process without distortions or conceptual thoughts. It therefore helps the individual to be aware of what is currently happening as a first phase in self-monitoring. More specifically, it enables the individual to keep track of tasks by paying attention to intentions and being aware of awareness (Davis-Siegel et al., 2015) and increases reflective behaviour, specifically perspective taking (Mösler et al., 2022). The mindful individual therefore reflects on the self and the environment in a way that prevents automatic behaviour (Mösler et al., 2022).

Further, Carver and Scheier (2017b) explain the importance of affect/emotion in self-monitoring: feelings can be seen as a feedback process that runs simultaneously with behaviour to provide feedback on how effective behaviour reduce a discrepancy. In this regard, *positive affect* arises when the reduction rate is high enough to exceed the criterion, *negative affect* when the rate of progress is below the criterion, and *no affect* when the rate is indistinguishable from the criterion. According to Koole and Aldao (2017), emotions are understood as people's valanced (positive or negative) reactions to events that they perceive as relevant to their ongoing concerns. Thus, when people engage in emotion regulation they compare their current emotional state to a desired emotional state and take appropriate steps to bring their current emotional state closer to the desired emotional state. A lack of mindfulness and poor emotional regulation may therefore be a key factor in narcissists' difficulty to engage appropriately with the social environment as well as responding appropriately to their own positive and negative affect.

Fifth**,** not surprisingly, narcissists often seem to make *inappropriate adjustments* when they perceive a discrepancy between their goals and current outcomes. Theme 2 strongly suggests that when threatened in different ways they tend to respond swiftly and automatically, often through externalized coping or through either repression in grandiose narcissists or suppression in vulnerable narcissists. In addition, as narcissists lack flexibility in goal pursuit (theme 5) they may, even when aware of discrepancies, respond in rigid ways as well as take unnecessary risks in their decision making (theme 3). Due to vulnerable narcissists' regulatory orientation of assessment and avoidance they specifically tend to ruminate over discrepancies between current and desired states (theme 6). Further, some evidence emerged regarding poor action updating (theme 3), therefore suggesting that they are prone to repeat the same mistakes in their responses. These responses are typically not healthy over the long term. Therefore, it is no surprise that vulnerable narcissists, compared to grandiose narcissists, often experience a decrease in life-satisfaction, increased levels of stress, depression, substance use, and suicidal ideation (theme 2), especially if associated with emotional dysregulation (theme 8).

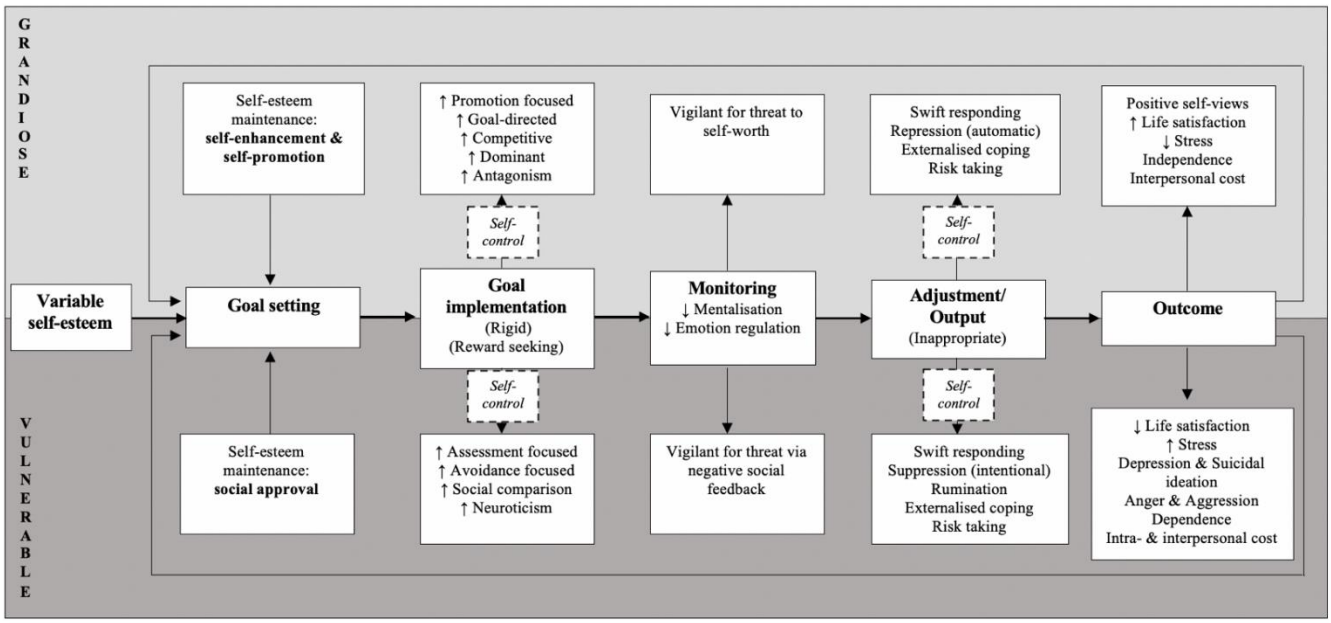
In self-regulation research it is evident that being diverse, reflective, and flexible is extremely adaptive (Chandra & Leong, 2016). According to Southward et al. (2018), variability across different situations, for example, larger emotion regulation repertoires, adaptively applied, increase the chance of improved psychological health. Adaptive may mean different things (Southward et al., 2018) and even though greater persistence when working toward a goal may be adaptive when facing obstacles, in many cases switching emotion regulation strategies when given feedback may be more adaptive. It is evident from the review that narcissists struggle to apply this flexibility in most situations.

Hypothetical model

Based on the results and the five main discussion points above, a hypothetical model of narcissism from a self-regulation perspective is proposed (Figure 1). The development of the model is based on two major premises:

Figure 1.

Hypothetical model of narcissistic self-regulation.



Model structure premise

The best way to propose a hypothetical model from a self-regulation perspective, is to present it according to the typical self-regulation phases of goal setting, goal implementation, self-monitoring, adjustment/output, and an additional phase, 'outcome', used here to indicate the outcome of the adjustment/output phase.

Different narcissistic styles premise

Although there is some overlap, grandiose and vulnerable narcissism seem to have distinctly different self-regulation styles, a duality that the model will have to clearly

incorporate. To explain the model itself six minor premises are made, each representing a different phase in the self-regulation process. These premises are discussed below:

Goal setting premise

A variable and vulnerable self-esteem is found in both types of narcissism (Hardaker et al., 2021; Horvath et al., 2009; 2010;), and the need to maintain this fragile self-esteem informs narcissistic goal setting to a large extent (Horvath et al., 2010). However, grandiose narcissists set goals with the aim of self-enhancement and self-promotion (Hanke et al., 2019), while vulnerable narcissists seek social approval (Bogaerts et al., 2021).

Goal implementation premise

Goal implementation in both types of narcissists is rigid in nature (Wallace et al., 2009), despite different regulatory orientations. Grandiose narcissists are found to be promotion focused, goal-directed (Hanke et al., 2019), competitive, dominant, and high in antagonism (Nicholls et al., 2011; Zeigler-Hill et al., 2021). Therefore, they tend to pursue their goals in a forceful manner. On the other hand, vulnerable narcissists tend to be assessment and avoidance focused (Hanke et al., 2019). They are also higher in neuroticism and pursue their goals through social comparison (Ozimek et al., 2018). In both cases goal implementation may be moderated by the level of self-control exhibited by the narcissist. As seen in the results, narcissists may possess adequate self-control (Hoffman et al., 2012; Miller et al. 2009) but might not see any reason to refrain from pursuing their desires (Hoffman et al., 2012), or might in fact use low self-control as a power strategy or excuse for poor behaviour (Hart et al., 2017).

Self-monitoring premise

The self-monitoring processes of both types of narcissism is characterised by poor mentalisation (Valikhani et al., 2020) and emotion regulation abilities (Loeffler et al., 2020; Ponzoni et al., 2021). However, vulnerable narcissists tend to be specifically hypervigilant to

threat in the form of negative social feedback (Bogaerts et al., 2021), while grandiose narcissists guard against any threat to their self-worth (Horvath & Morf, 2009).

Adjustment / output premise

Narcissists often adjust in inappropriate ways in the face of self-esteem threat. This can be ascribed to their rigidity and lack of reflexivity (Valikhani et al., 2020) which dictates a repeat of previous regulatory strategies (Horvath and Morf, 2009; Yang et al., 2018). Instead of adjusting themselves in accordance with feedback from the environment, narcissists tend to cope through externalising behaviours and by increasing their risk taking to meet their goals (Campbell et al. 2004; & Yang et al. 2018). While both react swiftly (Hardaker et al., 2021), grandiose narcissists use repression (Horvath et al., 2009) while vulnerable narcissists employ suppression (Loeffler et al., 2020) to ward off threat to self-esteem. As in goal-implementation, the process of adjustment is also moderated by the level of self-control the narcissist can muster—whether by choice or by instinct—and may play a significant role in adjustment when responding to interpersonal conflict.

Outcome premise

Repression affords grandiose narcissists rather favourable perceived outcomes such as positive self-views, high life satisfaction, and low stress (Hanke et al., 2019; Hyun et al., 2021). In contrast, suppression leads to negative experienced outcomes (Loeffler et al., 2020). This includes decreased life satisfaction (Hanke et al., 2019; Hyun et al., 2021; Loeffler et al., 2020), high levels of stress (Hyun et al., 2021), depression (Loeffler et al., 2020), suicidal ideation (Ponzoni et al., 2021), as well as anger and aggression (Kealy et al., 2017). As vulnerable narcissists are dependent on others for the maintenance of their self-esteem (Garcia et al., 2015; Roche et al., 2013) they experience both intra- and interpersonal difficulties. While grandiose narcissism is often described as adaptive due to their perceived positive outcomes and lack of personal suffering, research indicates that the self-regulation

strategies employed by this group is maladaptive due to the interpersonal cost it causes (Bogaerts et al., 2021; Miller et al., 2009; Zeigler-Hill et al., 2021).

Recursive premise

Due to the pervasive nature of the narcissist's variable self-esteem, coupled with a lack of reflexivity, poor mentalisation, and either repression or suppression, narcissistic self-regulation can be viewed as a closed feedback loop whereby learning is made difficult, if not impossible. Plainly stated, the recursive process ensures that the pursuit for self-esteem repeats itself over and over.

Limitations

Important limitations of the current review study include the fact that a critical review is not exhaustive in nature, especially when compared to a systematic review. In addition, only studies published in the English language were included, which creates the possibility that important works in other languages might have been excluded. Moreover, the inconsistencies whereby narcissism is defined in the literature, along with the discrepancies in the way narcissism is assessed by different measures, means that results must be interpreted with caution. In addition, the diverse plethora of self-regulation concepts not only poses a challenge but to some extent a risk in application. As such, conclusions cannot be viewed as definitive in nature but should rather be seen as a contribution from which further research can be launched.

Conclusion

The aim of this review study was to critically review and synthesize existing scientific literature on narcissism from a self-regulation perspective. Results showed that narcissists are strongly biased toward certain goals which they pursue in a rigid manner. Narcissistic self-regulation was found to be maladaptive due to poor mentalisation abilities, emotional

dysregulation, automatic responding, and their tendency to make inappropriate adjustments following feedback. Self-control emerged as a possible moderating factor in narcissistic self-regulation as narcissists may well be capable of self-control, use low self-control because of diminished conflict over personal desires or, interestingly, a power strategy. The results also provided strong evidence for *different* self-regulation strategies: grandiose narcissists were found to be more promotion focused while vulnerable narcissists maintain their self-esteem through social approval. Grandiose narcissists were found to respond to threat by repression which affords them more positive outcomes. In contrast, vulnerable narcissists were found to employ suppression, thereby remaining painfully aware of their perceived shortcomings and leading to negative intrapersonal outcomes. Based on the review findings, a hypothetical model for the self-regulation mechanisms associated with narcissism was proposed.

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CHAPTER 3

Critical reflection

For as long as I can remember I have been fascinated by personality. Even as a child I found individual differences intriguing, wondering why some people are more patient than others, or why some individuals in my immediate surroundings became so angry in the face of seemingly insignificant events. This interest only grew during my stage management career in the performing arts where I often encountered people with particularly challenging personalities. In the theatre, these individuals are often labelled as “divas” or “difficult”. However, it was my experience that unregulated outbursts and foul language were rather well tolerated in such an artistic environment as this kind of behaviour is often viewed as the purview of the creative genius. I observed first-hand the different regulatory processes that made it possible for some to cope with bad reviews, while others lived only for praise and would fall apart in the face of criticism. However, I lacked the knowledge that would afford me an understanding of the underlying functions of those self-regulation strategies that were clearly related to the personality in question.

Entering my M1 year in clinical psychology was a dream come true, and when I found out that one of my lecturers had a special interest in self-regulation I jumped at the chance to work with him. Combining the topic of self-regulation with narcissism felt like a very natural pairing for me and I didn’t think twice about my research topic. However, I quickly found out that I entered a world of debate and confusion. The literature on narcissism alone is vast and I found navigating the different views on the topic really challenging. Embarrassingly, I underestimated the depth of the topic and tried a few short-cuts in the form of reading only the most recent literature. Naturally this didn’t work, as a proper understanding of narcissism inevitably leads to a deep delve into its origin as a psychological

concept. I've also had to familiarise myself with assessment instruments used in narcissism research, as this (in addition to the specific school of thought) influence the results of the studies. Regarding self-regulation models, I was very surprised to learn that it was originally adapted from cybernetic theory—a topic covered very well in UNISA's honours course and something that stood me in good stead.

During my original discussion with my supervisor, he warned me of the possible impact that a study like this might have on a researcher. My own experiences (both familial and professional) meant that this topic was rather personal for me. However, I endeavoured to approach it in a scientific way. I wanted to be objective and unbiased in what I found and reported. I admit that I previously had a rather disdainful attitude towards people that I viewed as narcissistic, but as the saying goes, a funny thing happened on the way to the opera. Through my research, I came to view these individuals in a much different light and found an increase in my empathy towards them (as is so often the case with increased awareness and knowledge).

As nothing happens in a vacuum it also bears noting that this new-found knowledge helped me tremendously when I encountered the patient population during my internship year at a psychiatric hospital. In a sense my clinical experience fuelled my research interest and vice versa. I entered the research process with certain pertinent questions that I wanted answers to, and while I did find some answers I'm also left with questions at the end of the process. To me, this highlights the nature of research whereby no one researcher will ever be able to provide all the answers at once. Therefore, I view my small part as one brick that others might use to build a house in the future.

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North-West University Health Research Ethics Committee (NWU-HREC)

Tel: 018 299-1206
Email: Ethics-HRECApply@nwu.ac.za (for human studies)

21 October 2021

RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE LETTER OF DECISION: NO RISK

Based on the review by the North-West University Health Research Ethics Committee (NWU-HREC) on 21/10/2021, the NWU-HREC hereby clears your study as a no risk study. This implies that the NWU-HREC grants its permission that, provided the general conditions specified below are met, the study may be initiated, using the ethics number below.

Study title: Narcissism through a self-regulation lens: a critical review
Principal Investigator/Study Supervisor/Researcher: Prof KFH Botha
Student: C Bothma - 38298406

Ethics number:

N	W	U	-	0	0	3	1	3	-	2	1	-	A	1
Institution				Study Number						Year			Status	

Status: S = Submission; R = Re-Submission; P = Provisional Authorisation; A = Authorisation

Application Type: Single study
Commencement date: 21/10/2021

Risk: No Risk

General conditions:

The following general terms and conditions will apply:

- *The commencement date indicates the first date that the study may be started.*
- *In the interest of ethical responsibility, the NWU-HREC reserves the right to:*
  - *request access to any information or data at any time during the course or after completion of the study;*
  - *to ask further questions, seek additional information, require further modification or monitor the conduct of your research;*
  - *withdraw or postpone clearance if:*
    - *any unethical principles or practices of the study are revealed or suspected;*
    - *it becomes apparent that any relevant information was withheld from the NWU-HREC or that information has been false or misrepresented;*
    - *submission of the required amendments, or reporting of adverse events or incidents was not done in a timely manner and accurately; and/or*
    - *new institutional rules, national legislation or international conventions deem it necessary.*
- *NWU-HREC can be contacted for further information via Ethics-HRECApply@nwu.ac.za or 018 299 1206*

Please note: Due to the nature of the study i.e. (systematic review of previously published articles), this study will be able to proceed during the current alert level, following receipt of the approval letter. No additional COVID-19 restrictions have been placed on the study except that the researcher must ensure that before proceeding with the study that all research team members have reviewed the North-West University COVID-19 Occupational Health and Safety Standard Operating Procedure.

The NWU-HREC would like to remain at your service and wishes you well with your study. Please do not hesitate to contact the NWU-HREC for any further enquiries or requests for assistance.

Yours sincerely,

Digitally signed by Prof Petra Bester
Date: 2021.10.26 08:35:46 +02'00'

NWU-HREC Chairperson

Digitally signed by Wayne Towers
Date: 2021.10.21 19:45:10 +02'00'

Head of the Faculty of Health Sciences Ethics Office for Research, Training and Support

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