

# Playing the Victim? Facets of Narcissism, Self-Perceived Victimhood, and the Mediating Role of Negative Affect

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## ABSTRACT

## KEYWORDS

narcissism  
grandiosity  
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negative affect  
transgressions  
the self

Prior research has shown that narcissistic individuals see themselves as victims of interpersonal transgressions more often than their less narcissistic counterparts. Yet, grandiose narcissism is a multidimensional construct and not all dimensions may necessarily demonstrate this positive relationship. Therefore, the purpose of the current study ( $N = 344$ ) was to examine the narcissism-victimhood relationship while paying particular attention to agentic and antagonistic facets of narcissism and examining negative affect as a potential mediator. Results revealed that the two narcissism facets have divergent indirect effects on perceptions of victimhood (i.e., negative for agentic narcissism and positive for antagonistic narcissism). These findings provide further evidence of the narcissistic duality and extend our understanding of the mechanisms that underlie the role of narcissism facets in the perception of victimhood.

Narcissism<sup>1</sup> continues to fascinate clinicians, researchers, and the general public. Narcissism can be defined as entitled self-importance, which is reflected in an inflated sense of deservingness and importance (Krizan & Herlache, 2018). Previous research has shown that individuals high in narcissism exhibit a greater inclination to perceive themselves as victims than their less narcissistic counterparts (Armaly & Enders; 2022; Day et al., 2020). Consistent with this, it has been shown that individuals high in narcissism are easily offended following interpersonal transgressions (McCullough et al., 2003). Specifically, narcissistic entitlement (i.e., a sense of deservingness) has been linked to perceptions of victimhood (McCullough et al., 2003). However, to date, we are not aware of research examining the psychological processes underlying this self-perception. The current study aimed to close this gap while simultaneously recognizing the well-known distinctions between agentic versus antagonistic narcissism facets (see Back, 2013). Specifically, we propose negative affect as a mediating mechanism and demonstrate opposing indirect effects depending on the narcissism facet in question.

Building on the Narcissistic Admiration and Rivalry Concept (NARC; Back et al., 2013), we expand previous work highlighting that a multidimensional examination of narcissism allows for a more nuanced understanding of this construct. Importantly, our study extends what is currently understood about the relationship between narcissism and perceptions of victimhood because these constructs have so far been examined in a simple predictor-criterion model. Yet,

examining mediating mechanisms underlying narcissists' victimhood perceptions is crucial because it can help us understand why and how individuals high in narcissism come to see themselves in certain social situations. In turn, this knowledge can aid in the development of tailored interventions for narcissistic individuals, and also inform prevention efforts by identifying potential risk factors and underlying psychological mechanisms.

## The Narcissistic Duality: Agentic and Antagonistic Narcissism

Traditionally, narcissism was conceptualized as a unitary (i.e., unidimensional) construct. Such a conceptualization resulted in ambiguous findings, as evidenced by a study showing a positive correlation between narcissism and trait emotional intelligence, along with a negative correlation between narcissism and empathy (Szabó & Bereczkei, 2017). Therefore, in recent years, researchers increasingly acknowledge the multidimensionality of narcissism. According to the NARC (Back, 2013; Leckelt et al., 2019), narcissism can be decomposed into at least two distinct, yet related, facets. First, agentic narcissism describes a self-enhancing tendency to approach social admiration through self-promotion. Second, antagonistic narcissism describes a self-protective tendency to avoid social failure through self-defense. While these fac-

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ets seem conceptually different, they serve the same goal of upholding grandiose self-views (Back et al., 2013).

Empirically, agentic narcissism is related to adjustment indicators, such as greater forgiveness (Fatfouta & Schröder-Abé, 2017), higher well-being (Žemojtel-Piotrowska et al., 2014), and more relationship satisfaction (Rentzsch et al., 2021). In contrast, antagonistic narcissism is related to maladjustment, such as vengeful, aggressive, and antisocial tendencies (Fatfouta et al., 2021). Consistent with these dysfunctional interpersonal orientations, individuals high in antagonistic (but less so agentic) narcissism are more watchful, skeptical, and distrusting of their social environment (Kwiatkowska et al., 2019). Relatedly, they are also more reactive to a lack of social approval, such as being perceived as unlikeable (Geukes et al., 2017). Given the pronounced self-protective tendencies in antagonistic narcissism and the fact that this facet is related to perceiving others as underappreciative and critical (Mota et al., 2023), we assert that especially the antagonistic narcissism facet should be positively related to perceptions of victimhood.

## Narcissism and Self-Perceived Victimhood

Victimhood can be defined in terms of legal (e.g., being the target of a crime), socio-cultural (e.g., being treated differently based on one's race/ethnicity), and self-defined dimensions (Druliolle & Brett 2018). Importantly, this last dimension suggests that individuals may personally identify as a victim based on their subjective experiences, feelings, and interpretations of events even if they do not meet the legal or societal criteria for victimhood. Therefore, self-perceived victimhood, which was the focus of the present study, describes someone who, regardless of the origin of their feelings or the objective reality of the situation, regards themselves as a victim and thus identifies as one (Armaly & Enders, 2022).

Self-perceived victimhood predicts entitlement and selfish behavior (Zitek et al., 2010), suggesting a close link between victimhood perceptions and narcissism. Indeed, previous research has shown that narcissism is positively related to victimhood perceptions (e.g., Armaly & Enders; 2022; Day et al., 2020; McCullough et al., 2003). However, most of these studies focused on a unidimensional view of narcissism, thereby failing to consider the nuanced differences between agentic and antagonistic narcissism. As a result, researchers may have overlooked how these distinct facets of narcissism relate to an individual's propensity to perceive themselves as victims—a gap we aimed to close in the present research.

Based on the literature outlined in the preceding subsection, it is plausible to suggest that individuals exhibiting high levels of agentic narcissism may be less likely to engage in self-perceived victimhood because they are oriented towards assertive self-enhancement – a stance incompatible with victimhood, which typically elicits neither admiration nor success. On the other hand, individuals exhibiting high levels of antagonistic narcissism may be more prone to self-perceived victimhood. Specifically, their sense of entitlement and desire for retribution can lead to frustration and feelings of victimization when they do not get what they believe they deserve (Back et al., 2013; Fatfouta et al., 2021).

## The Role of Negative Affect in the Narcissism-Victimhood Relationship

To date, the literature on the processes underlying the relationship between narcissism facets and perceptions of victimhood is lacking. Research suggests that affective dispositions, particularly negative affect, may mediate the relationship between narcissism and consequential outcomes (e.g., Wright et al., 2017). Because negative affect also plays a crucial role in self-regulation (Wagner & Heatherton, 2015), it constitutes an important variable to consider in the narcissism-victimhood relationship. Specifically, negative affect may be a mechanism through which narcissism and perceptions of victimhood are related, as it may help explain the heightened sensitivity of (antagonistic) narcissistic individuals to potential ego threats (e.g., Geukes et al., 2017). Affective dispositions remain relatively stable across time and exhibit consistency across a range of situations (Weiss & Cropanzo, 1996). In particular, negative affect reflects how an individual typically experiences aversive affective events or situations (Watson & Clark, 1984). Previous research has demonstrated that antagonistic (but less so agentic) narcissism is consistently related to increased negative affect, such as anxiety, anger, or shame (Grove et al., 2019). Relatedly, individuals high in antagonistic (but less so agentic) narcissism report greater dissatisfaction and decreased happiness (Leckelt et al., 2019). In turn, higher levels of negative affect may influence antagonistic narcissists' perception of a situation, making them more likely to interpret ambiguous experiences as intentional acts of harm. Based on these findings, our main hypothesis was that a higher level of antagonistic (agentic) narcissism will be associated with higher (lower) perceptions of victimhood, and negative affect will mediate this relationship.

## METHOD

### Participants and Procedure

A total of 344 German-speaking individuals were recruited via social media, blog posts, and institutional mailing lists to participate in an online study (82.3% females,  $M_{age} = 23.49$  years,  $SD_{age} = 4.58$ , age range: 18-54). Of the participants surveyed, the majority (73.3%) had a high school degree. After providing informed consent, participants completed the materials and measures described below. The study was administered in German using a noncommercial online-survey platform. As an incentive to participate, students obtained course credit. No data cleaning or correction procedures were performed on the data. The data associated with this article can be accessed via the Open Science Framework (OSF; [https://osf.io/ug65c/?view\\_only=90210e409c504520b55deecde257f8f6](https://osf.io/ug65c/?view_only=90210e409c504520b55deecde257f8f6)).

## Measures

### NARCISSISM

Narcissism was measured using the 18-item Narcissistic Admiration and Rivalry Questionnaire (German version: Back et al.,

2013), with nine items reflecting agentic narcissism (i.e., narcissistic admiration, “*I am great*”) and nine items reflecting antagonistic narcissism (i.e., narcissistic rivalry, “*I want my rivals to fail*”). Items were rated from 1 (*do not agree at all*) to 6 (*agree completely*).

## NEGATIVE AFFECT

Negative affect was measured using the 10-item negative affect subscale from the trait version of the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (Watson et al., 1988; German version: Breyer & Bluemke, 2016). Participants were asked to indicate how each of the ten different emotional states (e.g., “*anxious*”) corresponded with how they generally feel. Items were rated from 1 (*very slightly or not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*).

## PERCEPTIONS OF VICTIMHOOD

Perceptions of victimhood were measured using the 20-item Transgression Occurrences Measure (McCullough et al., 2003; German version: Steiner et al., 2011). Participants were asked to indicate how frequently each of the 20 different transgressions have occurred to them in their relationships with other people in the last 12 months (e.g., “*insulted you*”). Items were rated from 1 (*never*) to 4 (*often*).

## RESULTS

### Preliminary Analyses

We conducted a preliminary analysis to examine the influence of gender, included as a covariate, on the mediation results. However, this analysis produced the same result patterns as those outlined below and did not result in different conclusions. To maintain simplicity and prevent overfitting, we excluded gender from the mediation analyses presented below.

### Descriptive Statistics and Intercorrelations

Table 1 details descriptive statistics, reliabilities (Cronbach’s  $\alpha$ ), and zero-order correlations. Antagonistic narcissism (but not agentic narcissism) was statistically significantly positively correlated with perceptions

**TABLE 1.**  
Descriptive Statistics, Reliabilities, and Zero-Order Correlations Among Measures

Variable	1	2	3	4
1. Agentic narcissism	–			
2. Antagonistic narcissism	.33***	–		
3. Negative affect	–.11*	.39***	–	
4. Perceptions of victimhood	–.05	.25***	.57***	–
<i>M</i>	3.06	2.30	2.49	1.53
<i>SD</i>	0.83	0.84	0.70	0.40
Cronbach’s $\alpha$	.84	.84	.84	.88

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$  (all two-tailed).

of victimhood and negative affect. Moreover, negative affect was statistically significantly positively correlated with perceptions of victimhood.

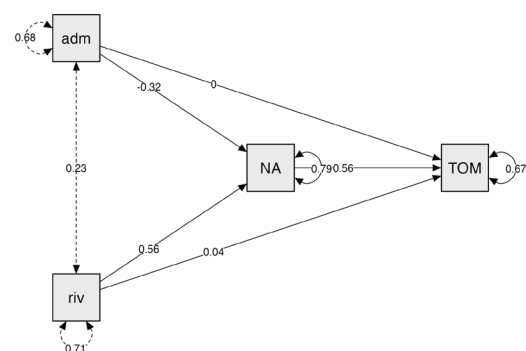
## Mediation Analysis

To test our main hypothesis, we used JASP software v0.17.1 (JASP Team, 2023) to determine whether negative affect mediates the relationship between narcissism facets and perceptions of victimhood. The results of the model are summarized in Figure 1 and fully support our mediation hypothesis.

Agentic narcissism was statistically significantly negatively related to negative affect,  $b = -.32$ ,  $SE = .061$ ,  $z = -5.26$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI:  $-.44$ ;  $-.20$ . In contrast, antagonistic narcissism was statistically significantly positively related to negative affect,  $b = .56$ ,  $SE = .060$ ,  $z = 9.33$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI:  $.44$ ;  $.68$ . Negative affect was statistically significantly positively related to perceptions of victimhood,  $b = .56$ ,  $SE = .050$ ,  $z = 11.28$ ,  $p < .001$ ; 95% CI:  $.46$ ;  $.66$ . As expected, the indirect effect of agentic narcissism on perceptions of victimhood via negative affect was negative and statistically significant,  $b = -.18$ ,  $SE = .038$ ,  $z = -4.77$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI:  $-.26$ ;  $-.11$ . Moreover, and as expected, the indirect effect of antagonistic narcissism on perceptions of victimhood via negative affect was positive and statistically significant,  $b = .32$ ,  $SE = .044$ ,  $z = 7.19$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI:  $.23$ ;  $.40$ . The direct effects of agentic and antagonistic narcissism on perceptions of victimhood controlling for negative affect, respectively, were not statistically significant ( $ps > .562$ ).

## DISCUSSION

The primary objective of the current study was to examine the relationship between agentic and antagonistic facets of narcissism and perceptions of victimhood. Results revealed divergent indirect effects for the two narcissism facets. Individuals high in agentic narcissism experienced less negative affect, which in turn predicted lower perceptions of victimhood. In contrast, individuals high in antagonistic narcissism



**FIGURE 1.**

Facets of narcissism predicting perceptions of victimhood and the mediating role of negative affect.

Note. Adm = agentic narcissism, riv = antagonistic narcissism, na = negative affect; tom = perceptions of victimhood.

experienced more negative affect, which in turn predicted greater perceptions of victimhood. Overall, the current study suggests that the relationship between narcissism and perceptions of victimhood is complex and cannot be generalized across all dimensions of narcissism.

The current findings conceptually replicate previous research by showing that narcissism is not only associated with trait anger (Kałowski et al., 2021), but also with perceptions of victimhood (Armaly & Enders, 2022; Day et al., 2020; McCullough et al., 2003). Adopting a multidimensional conceptualization of narcissism, our findings refine and extend the literature in this area by showing that it is only the socially malevolent (i.e., antagonistic) facet that is positively related to perceptions of victimhood. These findings cohere with recent work suggesting that individuals high in antagonistic (but less so agentic) narcissism are more judgmental of their experiences (Fatfouta & Heinze, 2022). Overall, these results align with previous research demonstrating that individuals high in antagonistic (but less so agentic) narcissism view their surroundings as a potential danger to their inflated sense of self (Back et al., 2013).

## Practical Implications

Based on the findings of the current study, there are at least three practical implications that can be drawn. First, the results suggest that not all facets of narcissism are equally related to perceptions of victimhood. Thus, interventions that target antagonistic narcissism specifically may be more effective in reducing victimhood perceptions in these individuals. Second, the study highlights the importance of considering negative affect as a potential mediator in the narcissism-victimhood link. This indicates that efforts that focus on reducing negative affect among individuals high in antagonistic narcissism may be effective in reducing perceptions of victimhood (e.g., through mindfulness practice). Third, the study recognizes the role of mediating mechanisms underlying the relationship between narcissism, its facets, and interpersonal outcomes.

We suggest that the mediation of the narcissism-victimhood link should be extended to include other dispositional tendencies beyond affect, such as cognitive biases (e.g., hostile attribution bias). Given that antagonistic narcissism reflects a hostile and defensive interpersonal style (Back et al., 2013), this bias seems worthy to consider from an intervention focus. Indeed, individuals high in antagonistic narcissism may be more inclined to interpret others' ambiguous behavior (e.g., forgetting to greet someone) as motivated by malevolent intent (e.g., "They failed to appreciate me adequately"). These hostile attributions, in turn, may motivate individuals high in antagonistic narcissism to approach their social environment with a heightened vigilance to the actions of others (McCullough et al., 2003; Mota et al., 2023).

## Limitations and Future Directions

Despite offering novel insights on the relationship between narcissism and perceptions of victimhood, the current study is not free from limitations. The design was correlational and, hence, does not allow for causal inferences. With regard to internal validity, our method was limited by the use of self-reports. We presupposed that the heightened

tendency of individuals high in narcissism to report victimization is reflective of an "actual" state of their interpersonal realm. Yet, methodologically, self-reported frequencies of interpersonal transgressions could be susceptible to biased self-presentation (McCullough et al., 2003). Longitudinal and/or experience sampling studies are recommended to verify whether the relationships found in the present research hold on a daily basis. With regard to external validity, because the sample was predominantly female, we must be cautious in generalizing our findings to other (e.g., clinical) samples. Finally, we assessed only two facets of narcissism (agentic and antagonistic), and therefore did not capture the full range of narcissistic traits. Other facets of narcissism, such as vulnerable/neurotic narcissism (Miller et al., 2018) or communal narcissism (Gebauer et al., 2012), may be important to consider in future research.

## Conclusion

The current study illustrates the value of assessing both agentic and antagonistic facets of narcissism in research investigating the role of narcissism in perceptions of victimhood. We demonstrated that the narcissism-victimhood association is differentially mediated by negative affect. Future work is needed to better understand the nature of this association. Are individuals high in narcissism more sensitive to interpersonal transgressions or do they (un)consciously distort their recollections of them?

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> When we speak of narcissism, we refer to grandiose narcissism as a personality trait in the normal (i.e., subclinical) population rather than to narcissistic personality disorder as a clinical diagnosis.

<sup>2</sup> We intentionally measured trait (vs. state) affect because we were interested in people's general affect, that is, their enduring emotional experiences that are deeply ingrained within their personality. In addition, research has shown that dispositional affect is a more robust predictor of behavioral outcomes than state affect (Wright & Staw, 1994).

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All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed consent was obtained from all individual adult participants included in the study.

The authors declare they have no conflict of interest

## DATA AVAILABILITY

The data associated with this article can be accessed via the Open Science Framework (OSF; [https://osf.io/ug65c/?view\\_only=90210e409c504520b55deecde257f8f6](https://osf.io/ug65c/?view_only=90210e409c504520b55deecde257f8f6)).

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