



## Uncovering the relationship between narcissism and identity formation

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### ABSTRACT

Grandiose and vulnerable narcissism are related to various intra and interpersonal consequences. The goal of the current paper is to assess how different facets of narcissism are related to the healthy and pathological identity formation modes. Aiming to address that, we assessed 479 Polish adolescents, aged between 14 and 16 years old ( $M = 14.90$ ;  $SD = 0.55$ ). Whereas agentic narcissism was related to healthy identity formation modes, neurotic narcissism was related to pathological ones. Furthermore, antagonistically-oriented facets of narcissism were both related to petrification, while more neurotic expressions of antagonistic narcissism were also related to pathological identity formation modes. Although exploratory in nature, our results extend the knowledge of narcissism consequences on identity formation during adolescence and suggest the need to distinguish these two faces of antagonism in further studies on narcissism.

### 1. Introduction

Answering the question of *who am I* and *what is my purpose in the world* absorbed people since the ancient times, leading to the development of fascinating philosophical ideas. Despite the philosophical nature of the problem, everyone answers these difficult questions alone, which leads to the development of one's identity – a *personal cognitive structure self-defining the individual, consisting of elements that the individual deems relevant to who he or she is* (Cieciuch & Topolewska, 2017, pp. 48–49). Although identity develops throughout the lifespan, adolescence is usually considered one of the most challenging times in this regard (Erikson, 1959). This is because, during adolescence, one faces an identity crisis, the resolution of which may result in either the development of more pathological or more adaptive forms of identity (Erikson, 1968). The negative consequences of an unsuccessful resolution of such crisis might be the development of an entitled sense of self-importance, frequently labelled as narcissism (Krizan & Herlache, 2018). Thus, the goal of the current manuscript is to assess how different facets of narcissism and identity are related one to another during the challenging period of adolescence.

#### 1.1. In an attempt to define narcissism

Narcissism, similarly to self-esteem, develops approximately during early childhood alongside the ability to form global self-evaluations and despite sometimes being considered as similar (e.g., by equating narcissism to exaggerated self-esteem), these are two qualitatively different constructs with different developmental processes, as while self-esteem reaches its lowest during the period of adolescence, narcissism reaches its peak during this period (Brummelman et al., 2016; Thomaes et al., 2008). For this reason, adolescence may be considered an adequate developmental period for studying narcissism, which is further supported by existing research providing evidence of invariance on how narcissism is understood by adolescents compared to adults (Rogoza & Danieluk, 2021). In general, narcissism has a hierarchical structure, which distinguishes two phenotypical manifestations: grandiose and vulnerable (Miller et al., 2011). While the former is characterized by overly high self-esteem, entitlement, self-enhancing behaviors, and social dominance, the latter is characterized by fragility, low self-esteem, hostile attributions, and social withdrawal (Blaschke et al., 2024; Miller et al., 2017; Rogoza et al., 2016). These two can be further decomposed into three specific facets: agentic (i.e., self-enhancing self-promotion, Back et al., 2013, specific to grandiose narcissism), neurotic (i.e., hypersensitivity and social withdrawal,

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Miller et al., 2018, specific to vulnerable narcissism), and antagonistic (i. e., hostile behaviors related to self-defense, Miller et al., 2021, shared by both, Rogoza, Crowe, et al., 2022).

Whereas these three facets delineate the full spectrum of narcissistic traits (cf., Krizan & Herlache, 2018; Miller et al., 2021), within the literature there are also models, which build upon this concept, attempting to offer theoretical interpretation of the underlying processes in grandiose and vulnerable narcissism. For instance, in grandiose narcissism, to maintain a grandiose self-view one may overestimate their own intelligence (agentic strategy of admiration, Back et al., 2013; Zajenkowski et al., 2020). However, when a grandiose self-view is threatened, this self-promoting strategy may become ineffective, shifting to devaluation of others and hostile behaviors (antagonistic strategy of rivalry, Back et al., 2013). In contrast, the goal in vulnerable narcissism is more about protecting one's fragile self-view from being hurt (Rogoza, Cieciuch, et al., 2022). To achieve this goal, one may withdraw from social interactions, hide the self, and fantasize about being admired (neurotic strategy of isolation, Di Sarno et al., 2020). However, in response to the elevated level of paranoid thoughts in vulnerable narcissism, one might evoke intense feelings of envy, perceive objectively non-existent dangers, engage in narcissistic projection and exhibit meanness (antagonistic strategy of enmity, Rogoza, Cieciuch, et al., 2022). Although both enmity and rivalry share an antagonistic nature, the expression of these strategies appears qualitatively distinct from one another (Rogoza, Cieciuch, et al., 2022). Summarizing, these findings indicate that narcissism is a complex structure, and accounting for its various strategies is an essential step towards understanding its different underlying processes. Of importance, it should be noted that these strategies correspond to the three-factor model (Miller et al., 2021), as admiration and isolation are good indicators of agentic and neurotic narcissism, respectively, while rivalry and enmity are considered as blends of antagonistic narcissism with the others (cf., Rogoza et al., 2025; Rogoza, Crowe, et al., 2022).

### 1.2. What constitutes identity?

The concepts of identity date back to Erikson (1959), who proposed a theory explaining identity formation, later operationalized by Marcia (1966, 1980) and eventually inspiring the development of identity formation models by Berzonsky (1989), Luyckx et al. (2006) and Crocetti et al. (2008). These models, however, provide somewhat competing definitions of identity and explanations of its formation. Accounting for the complex structure of identity, Cieciuch and Topolewska (2017) integrated these models and proposed eight distinct identity formation modes, defined as cognitive, emotional and behavioral mechanisms, engaged in the identity management. These modes are briefly described in Table 1.

This model (Cieciuch & Topolewska, 2017) builds upon two basic bipolar dimensions of identity formation modes, which are socialization (vs. defiance) and exploration (vs. petrification). Socialization refers to one's definition of self, which comprehends with the person's life role and developmental period of life (Topolewska & Cieciuch, 2017). Here, a person's identity forms a stable, coherent system in which individual identifies with the close people around them to best fulfill their duties (Cieciuch & Topolewska, 2017; Marcia, 1966). On the other side of this continuum lies defiance, which refers to the feeling of lack of place in the world, meaning that a person is not willing to commit to the socially expected life roles, thus potentially reinforcing the development of dissociated identity (Cieciuch & Topolewska, 2017; Erikson, 1959). In regard to the second dimension, the exploration mode refers to active searching for oneself through testing their possibilities, gaining insight into one's actions, judging whether an activity suits a given person, and solving identity-related dilemmas (Marcia, 1966; Topolewska & Cieciuch, 2017). This rather agentic mode lies in opposition to the petrification, a mode characterized by the identity fragmentation, meaning lack of interest in searching for self, minimal self-knowledge and a

**Table 1**  
Identity formation modes.

Healthy		Pathological	
Formation mode	Description	Formation mode	Description
Exploration	Insightful, active efforts and searching in building identity	Petrification	Lack of interest in searching and building an identity
Consolidation	Building a stable identity structure with an openness to its modification	Diffusion	Lack of stable identity structure, behavior dependent on the environment
Socialization	Identification with and commitment to a close group to best fulfill one's duties	Defiance	An identity constructed in opposition to social norms and roles
Moratorivity <sup>a</sup>	Active and chaotic searching without knowledge of what one is looking for	Normativity <sup>a</sup>	Forming an identity in line with others' expectations without criticism

<sup>a</sup> Note. Moratorivity and normativity lie on the edge of healthy vs pathological formation modes and are considered as neutral.

limited understanding of one's actions, which can be motivated by external factors resulting in contradictory behavior across various contexts (Cieciuch & Topolewska, 2017).

These two basic dimensions of identity formation modes can be combined one with the other, resulting in two more specific dimensions, such as consolidation (high socialization and exploration) vs. diffusion (low socialization and exploration) and moratorivity (high exploration and low socialization) vs. normativity (high socialization and low exploration). Consolidation is characterized by exploring different available options in an effort to build a stable but not stiff identity structure, as one remains open to its modifications through assimilation of new information (Cieciuch & Topolewska, 2017; Luyckx et al., 2006). In contrast, diffusion is driven by environmental factors and situational variables, potentially leading to a formation of an unstable, uncommitted identity (Marcia, 1966; Topolewska & Cieciuch, 2017). Moratorivity and normativity are considered the most complex, somewhat paradoxical identity formation modes. The former is characterized by an active search for one's identity, which is typical of exploration; however, the process itself – due to the impact of defiance – is chaotic. As a result, an individual undergoes a continuous process of identity formation, but the final effect is unstable and incoherent (Cieciuch & Topolewska, 2017; Erikson, 1968). Conversely, normativity refers to the creation of a self-structure in line with social expectations (due to high socialization), yet lacking activity towards searching for the “true” self (due to low exploration; Cieciuch & Topolewska, 2017). Thus, although socially adjusted, a person passively follows the possibilities imposed by others instead of testing their own (Berzonsky, 1989).

Depending on whether all these identity formation modes lead to the development of (mal) adaptive identity, they can be labelled as either healthy or pathological (Cieciuch & Topolewska, 2017; Topolewska-Siedzik & Cieciuch, 2019). Specifically, the modes that lead to lower well-being and reinforce disturbances in interpersonal relationships (petrification, defiance and diffusion) may be understood as pathological, whereas those linked to better intra- and interpersonal functioning can be labelled as healthy (exploration, socialization and consolidation; Cieciuch & Topolewska, 2017). The two remaining modes – moratorivity and normativity – are considered neutral (Topolewska & Cieciuch, 2017). Specifically, while moratorivity is active in nature, it may be connected to social disturbances (Erikson, 1959). In a similar vein, normativity, although passive in nature, is connected to general social adjustment (Cieciuch & Topolewska, 2017). Summing up, identity formation is an ongoing process, with various modes dominating different periods of life, particularly adolescence (Topolewska-Siedzik & Cieciuch, 2018). Considering the phenotypical differences between the

facets of narcissism, could it be that they are characterized by different identity formation modes? If so, are these differences also apparent at the level of narcissistic strategies used? In the current study we will attempt to address these questions.

### 1.3. Current study

Agentic narcissism (i.e., admiration) is usually related to more positive outcomes such as higher affective well-being and communion (Du et al., 2022; Scharbert et al., 2024). Thus, we expect it to be positively correlated with healthy identity formation modes (H1). Neurotic narcissism (i.e., isolation), due to its negative intra- and interpersonal outcomes (e.g. Di Sarno et al., 2020), along the internalizing symptoms, such as social anxiety or feelings of shame (e.g. Kroencke et al., 2023; Rogoza, 2025), is expected to be related to highest difficulties in identity formation. This is why we expect that neurotic narcissism will be positively correlated with pathological identity formation modes (H2). Antagonistic narcissism, in turn, is more reactive in nature and is related to higher variability but is unrelated (or weakly related) to such outcomes (e.g., to self-esteem; Geukes et al., 2017). Given that we perceive neurotic narcissism as the core of internalizing problems (Rogoza, Cieciuch, et al., 2022), our expectation is that the differentiation of agentic and neurotic-antagonism will result in lack of correlation with identity formation modes between agentic antagonism (i.e., rivalry) and a positive relation between pathological identity formation modes and neurotic antagonism (i.e., enmity; H3). Finally, given the most maladaptive nature of neurotic narcissism, we expect that the strength of correlation to maladaptive identity modes will be stronger as compared to the ones observed for neurotic antagonism (H4).

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants and procedure

The study included 479 adolescents from Polish public general secondary schools in medium-sized cities (with populations of 50,000–100,000). The participants were aged between 14 and 16 years ( $M = 14.90$ ,  $SD = 0.55$ ), with 60.5 % identifying as a female ( $n = 290$ ). The results reported in the current study were part of larger data collection efforts. Participation within the study was voluntary and participants provided us with informed consent, which was additionally gathered from the school principals and parents. The study took place in classrooms using computer labs, and the survey, including a set of questionnaires was distributed using an online platform during the classes. All of the data necessary for reproduction of results are available at: [https://osf.io/euhnz/?view\\_only=3336623fa6ef450d89ccaeb8b0731a2](https://osf.io/euhnz/?view_only=3336623fa6ef450d89ccaeb8b0731a2).

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. Narcissism

We used the Narcissistic Admiration and Rivalry Questionnaire (NARQ; Back et al., 2013; Polish adaptation: Rogoza et al., 2016) and the Vulnerable Isolation and Enmity Questionnaire (VIEQ; Rogoza, Cieciuch, et al., 2022). These instruments enable the measurement of all aspects of narcissism: agentic (admiration), agentic antagonism (rivalry), neurotic antagonism (enmity), and neurotic (isolation). The NARQ and VIEQ consist of 18 and 24 items, respectively, which respondents rate based on their self-perceived similarity using a six-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*). The internal consistency of all subscales was acceptable, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients as follows: admiration ( $\alpha = 0.89$ ), rivalry ( $\alpha = 0.86$ ), enmity ( $\alpha = 0.85$ ), and isolation ( $\alpha = 0.94$ ).

#### 2.2.2. Identity formation

To assess the identity formation modes, we used the Identity

Formation Modes Questionnaire (Topolewska & Cieciuch, 2017). This instrument comprises 40 items, which respondents evaluate based on how well each item describes them using a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*does not describe me at all*) to 5 (*describes me completely*). The questionnaire distinguishes eight subscales: Socialization ( $\alpha = 0.81$ ), Consolidation ( $\alpha = 0.72$ ), Exploration ( $\alpha = 0.74$ ), Moratorivity ( $\alpha = 0.81$ ), Defiance ( $\alpha = 0.82$ ), Diffusion ( $\alpha = 0.78$ ), Petrification ( $\alpha = 0.62$ ), and Normativity ( $\alpha = 0.73$ ).

## 3. Results

To test the hypotheses, we evaluated the zero-order relations between narcissism facets and identity formation modes,<sup>1</sup> which are presented in Table 2. As expected, admiration was positively associated with all healthy identity formation modes (supporting H1), and isolation was positively related with all pathological identity formation modes (supporting H2). In regard to antagonistic narcissism, whereas rivalry was unrelated to neither of the identity formation modes, enmity was positively related to all pathological identity formation modes (and also negatively to socialization, thus providing support for H3). We also compared whether the strength of the relationship with pathological identity formation modes differ between isolation and enmity. Results of the Z-test revealed that all of these coefficients differed, that is, isolation was more strongly related to defiance and diffusion, while enmity to petrification ( $p$ 's  $\leq 0.004$ ). In a similar vein, when isolation and enmity were entered into a linear regression model as independent variables and pathological formation modes as dependent variables, results corroborated these findings. After taking into account shared variance,

**Table 2**  
Relationship between narcissism and identity formation modes.

Identity/ narcissism	Grandiose		Vulnerable	
	Admiration	Rivalry	Enmity	Isolation
Healthy				
Exploration	0.22 [0.13, 0.31]*	0.04 [-0.05, 0.13]	-0.01 [-0.11, 0.09]	0.07 [-0.03, 0.18]
Consolidation	0.23 [0.14, 0.32]*	-0.01 [-0.09, 0.08]	-0.13 [-0.22, -0.03]	-0.09 [-0.18, 0.02]
Socialization	0.35 [0.26, 0.43]*	0.10 [0.01, 0.18]	-0.20 [-0.29, -0.12]*	-0.32 [-0.41, -0.22]*
Pathological				
Petrification	0.03 [-0.07, 0.13]	0.18 [0.09, 0.27]*	0.20 [0.11, 0.30]*	0.12 [0.02, 0.22]
Diffusion	-0.02 [-0.12, 0.08]	0.13 [0.03, 0.22]	0.32 [0.23, 0.41]*	0.41 [0.33, 0.49]*
Defiance	-0.12 [-0.21, -0.02]	0.01 [-0.08, 0.10]	0.31 [0.23, 0.40]*	0.48 [0.40, 0.55]*
Neutral				
Moratorivity	0.00 [-0.10, 0.10]	0.04 [-0.06, 0.12]	0.20 [0.11, 0.29]*	0.37 [0.28, 0.46]*
Normativity	0.21 [0.11, 0.30]*	0.03 [-0.07, 0.12]	-0.01 [-0.12, 0.09]	0.06 [-0.04, 0.17]

Note. Bonferroni correction for multiple testing applied. Correlations are marked with \* when  $p \leq .004$ .

<sup>1</sup> All zero-order correlations between study variables and additional regression-based analyses are available as supplementary materials at the OSF project ([https://osf.io/euhnz/?view\\_only=3336623fa6ef450d89ccaeb8b0731a2](https://osf.io/euhnz/?view_only=3336623fa6ef450d89ccaeb8b0731a2)).

only isolation was related to defiance and diffusion, and only enmity was related to petrification (thus, providing partial support for H4). Finally, in regard to neutral identity formation modes, we observed that only admiration was related to normativity, while both isolation and enmity were related to moratorivity.

#### 4. Discussion

Our first two hypotheses regarded the character of agentic and neurotic narcissism (i.e., admiration and isolation, respectively). In line with our expectations, we found that agentic narcissism was related to healthy identity formation modes, which are related to coherence in one's identity and adaptive psychosocial functioning (Schwartz & Petrova, 2018). Specifically, agentic narcissism was related to exploration (referring to active searching for self), consolidation (referring to openness to the modification of self-structure), and socialization (referring to identification with a close group and commitment to it). Also, as expected, we found that neurotic narcissism was related to pathological identity formation modes (i.e., diffusion, referring to unstable identity structure, and defiance, referring to the construction of identity in opposition to social norms). Such findings are generally congruent with the literature emphasizing that agentic narcissism has a more approaching character, oriented towards behavioral and cognitive exploration of the environment, while neurotic narcissism is characterized by an overall pattern of dysfunctional personality (Krizan & Herlache, 2018; Rogoza et al., 2016; Rogoza, Kowalski, et al., 2022).

##### 4.1. Differentiating the facets of vulnerable narcissism

While we did not expect rivalry to be related to identity formation modes, our third hypothesis assumed that enmity, as a facet of vulnerable narcissism, would be positively related to pathological identity formation modes. Although the observed pattern of correlations between identity formation modes and both facets of vulnerable narcissism (i.e., enmity and isolation) was in many points similar, a couple of differences emerged. Among the similarities, both were related to diffusion and defiance, which may suggest that both construct their identity in opposition to social values and are dependent on environmental feedback, resulting in unstable and ineffective formation of identity (Cieciuch & Topolewska, 2017; Erikson, 1959; Marcia, 1966). Nevertheless, these relations appeared stronger for isolation as compared to enmity. Such result was expected, as isolation is related to the general pathology of personality (Rogoza, Cieciuch, et al., 2022). The formation of such oppositional identity (i.e., defiant identity) may also be boosted by passively entitled expectations that „something should happen” (Pincus et al., 2009; Rogoza, Cieciuch, et al., 2022). In contrast to our expectations, enmity was more strongly related to petrification as compared to isolation, which may suggest limited capacity of enmity's coping abilities (Blasco-Belled et al., 2022).

##### 4.2. The neutral identity modes?

Although normativity and moratorivity are called “neutral” identity formation modes (Topolewska & Cieciuch, 2017), our results suggest that they may have unique associations with narcissism. Specifically, normativity was positively associated only with agentic narcissism. In general, the relation of agentic narcissism to assimilation of other people's norms, characterizing normativity, was somewhat unexpected, as agentic narcissism is described in terms of interpersonal dominance, pervasiveness, and charm (Grove et al., 2019; Rogoza, Kwiatkowska, et al., 2018; Rogoza, Żemojtel-Piotrowska, et al., 2018). It is possible, however, that the specific developmental period (i.e., adolescence) may facilitate this identity formation mode. Sense of belonging is a crucial value for adolescents, but it comes at the cost of unanimity, as behaving in line with group values and expectations may be connected to greater likability, which, in turn, may help sustain the grandiose self-view

(Laursen & Veenstra, 2023; Teunissen et al., 2012). As such, imposing oneself on others may not be an effective employment of strategy of admiration due to risk of exclusion, but rather presenting oneself as the best in a collective, coherent group.

The second neutral mode – moratorivity – is a key feature of a classic identity crisis (Marcia, 1966). Although moratorivity is characterized by an ongoing formation process, without yielding a final effect, it constitutes one of the stages of identity formation that can ultimately lead to the development of a healthy identity. However, if one remains in the moratorium status, it may as well result in an unresolved identity crisis, leading to a constant state of tension and identity impairment (Cieciuch & Topolewska, 2017). The relationship between moratorivity and vulnerable narcissism may reflect the lesser insight of those scoring high on vulnerable narcissism, who are characterized by reduced self-knowledge and a greater proneness to environmental information (Pincus et al., 2014). Such a constant state of tension, characterizing unresolved identity crisis, may therefore be considered one of the sources of internalizing symptoms in vulnerable narcissism (Cieciuch & Topolewska, 2017; Rogoza, 2025).

##### 4.3. Limitations

Although our research provides insight into so far understudied relationship between narcissism facets and identity formation during the time of adolescence, some limitations need to be considered. First, the correlational nature of our study, along with the cross-sectional character of our data, constrains conclusions about directionality of their relationship – do narcissistic facets impact pathological or healthy identity formation modes, or do certain identity formation modes facilitate the development of narcissism manifestations? Even though our study shows that they are connected, we cannot conclude whether identity formation modes foster the development of specific narcissism facets or is it the other way around. Given that both identity and narcissism start developing before adolescence (Thomaes et al., 2008), future longitudinal studies could address the directionality of their relationship and the stability of different identity formation modes, which could help estimate their mutual influence, as our study should be treated as exploratory in nature. Second, the reliability of the petrification subscale ( $\alpha = 0.62$ ) makes it harder to draw conclusions regarding the relationship between narcissism facets and petrification mode. Although the correlations between narcissism facets and petrification align with research regarding narcissism manifestations (e.g. Back, 2018), this result should be treated with caution.

#### 5. Conclusion

Despite these limitations our study makes a fair contribution to the field, addressing the research gap regarding the relationship between narcissism and identity formation and extending our understanding of this critical period in one's life, potentially inspiring future longitudinal studies (Erikson, 1968; Topolewska & Cieciuch, 2017). Specifically, we could draw three major conclusions: 1) agentic narcissism is related to the identity formation modes that are more likely to result in the development of a stable and adaptive identity, while 2) neurotic narcissism is related to identity formation modes that are more likely to result in ineffective solutions (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1966). Finally, 3) both expressions of narcissistic antagonism are related to petrification, which may suggest that both vulnerable and grandiose narcissism may experience identity fragmentation. Taken together, although these findings shed light on narcissism and identity formation connection, they suggest that the relationship between narcissism and identity formation is complex, requiring further empirical attention using longitudinal data to estimate their bidirectional influence on each other.

## CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Dawid Walczak:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. **Katarzyna Wiśniewska:** Formal analysis. **Julia Krakowska:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology. **Zofia Bocianowska:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology. **Seweryn Nogalski:** Validation. **Radosław Rogoza:** Supervision.

## Declaration of competing interest

None.

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## Data availability

<https://osf.io/euhnz/>  
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