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The Indirect Effect of Mentalized Affectivity on the Relationship Between Perceived Narcissism in Others and View of Oneself

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Abstract

Mentalized affectivity, a component of mentalization, is a more complex form of emotion regulation which requires self-reflection and looking at current experiences through the lens of one's past experiences. It consists of three components of emotional experience: identifying, processing, and expressing. Healthy levels of mentalized affectivity can act as a protective buffer from adverse experiences and psychological distress. Therefore, without this system functioning properly, it may leave one vulnerable to psychological distress, especially when exposed to dysfunctional relationships such as those in relationships where one is perceived to have narcissism. The present study investigates how the capacity for mentalized affectivity might mediate the potential impact of relationships with perceptions of narcissism, both grandiose and vulnerable, on individual levels of self-criticism and fear of happiness. Participants (N = 297; 69.4% female) completed measures of perceptions of narcissism in others, and self-criticism, fears of happiness, and mentalized affectivity in themselves. Parallel mediation analysis reveals patterns of indirect effects of mentalized affectivity, suggesting unfavorable outcomes if systems are not in place to protect against these harmful relationships. Mentalized-based treatment may help bring awareness to the importance of these functions, stabilize mentalized affectivity abilities, and mitigate these experiences for such individuals.

Keywords: mentalization, mentalized affectivity, protective buffer, narcissism, self-criticism, fear of happiness.

Introduction

Our interpersonal relationships are important components of how we experience ourselves, impacting our overall happiness and satisfaction in life (Miller, 1999). The development of healthy interpersonal relationships can provide individuals with support, increase happiness, help develop skills, and influence their beliefs and behavior. Adaptive personality development is thought to involve the dialectic interaction between needs of relatedness and self-definition throughout the lifespan (Luyten & Blatt, 2013). However, when relationships are maladaptive, toxic, or problematic, they can disrupt healthy functioning and lead to negative psychological outcomes. Therefore, there is a potential adverse impact of relationships in that one individual might have a negative effect on another, insofar as the relationships end up being experienced as stressful, undesired and/or destructive (Perlman & Carcedo, 2011). This may be particularly evident when one person in a relationship has personality disorders, which inherently involve disruptions in interpersonal functioning. Although these relationships may affect us, we have the capacity to protect ourselves from these experiences through the healthy use of mentalization (Allen et al., 2003).

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Mentalized Affectivity: A Component of Mentalization

Mentalization is the mental ability to represent our experiences psychologically, and occurs when an individual reflects, interprets, and attempts to understand one's thoughts, feelings, and beliefs to better understand ourselves and communicate with others (Fonagy & Bateman, 2019; Sharp & Bevington, 2023). The capacity for mentalization is developed through early interactions with the social environment and provides the foundation for self-awareness, understanding thoughts and feelings, and affect regulation. The development of mentalization begins with a child's own mental states being understood and appropriately reacted to by caregivers (Fonagy et al., 2002). In the infant-caregiver relationship, the caregiver must mentalize what the infant is experiencing and feeling to help the infant begin to modulate their own emotions. When the adult successfully recognizes and exchanges affective signals with the child, the child begins to develop the capacity to understand others psychological experience and the ability to reflect on their own mental states (Fonagy & Bateman, 2019). However, if the caregiver does not properly mentalize and scaffold the child's experiences, the child is more likely to face impairments in reflection leading to disruptions in mentalizing.

Mentalization is comprised of multiple components reflecting different processes, and therefore is a multidimensional construct (Fonagy & Bateman, 2019). Mentalized affectivity addresses one such component by focusing on the ability to understand one's own feeling states. Mentalized affectivity consists of three components of emotional experience: identifying, processing, and expressing. Identifying includes naming and making sense of emotions in the context of an individual's personal history (Greenberg et al., 2017; Jurist, 2018). Processing includes altering or refining emotions which can involve changing the duration or intensity. Finally, expressing includes communicating emotions inwardly or outwardly. An individual's personal history and experiences influence how they will identify, process, and express their emotions (Greenberg et al., 2017). Mentalized affectivity is considered a more complex form of emotion regulation that requires self-reflection and involves the recognition that our past experiences and autobiographical memory influence current and future affect (Jurist, 2005). Therefore, mentalized affectivity is an important factor to address as it not only may serve as a vulnerability factor in psychopathology but also is a component of the change process in psychotherapy.

Previous research has used mentalization as a mediating factor and has successfully shown its impact (e.g., Parada-Fernández et al., 2021; Norup & Bo, 2019). Allen et al. (2003) suggests one's capacity for mentalization is key for fostering resilience. The authors state mentalization grants us the capability to be self-aware, control our behavior, and empathize with others. When these systems are not in place or there are impairments in one's capacity for mentalization, one is more susceptible to pathology (Gagliardini et al., 2018). Such imbalances could lead to failures in understanding the self and other's minds and emotions (Fonagy & Bateman, 2019). Our ability to appreciate our affective states appears to be a primary protective factor against psychological symptoms and transdiagnostic features of psychological distress (Gagliardini et al., 2018). Therefore, deficits in mentalized affectivity may create susceptibility to psychological difficulty, especially when exposed to harmful experiences or relationships.

Narcissism in Interpersonal Relationships

Being in a relationship with someone who exhibits traits of narcissism can often be distressing and create dysfunction for both the individual with narcissism and the other person (Crisp & Gabbard, 2020; Ogrodniczuk & Kealy, 2013). The individual with narcissism often desperately seeks admiration from others while the other person in the relationship is left feeling dominated, criticized, and controlled, contributing to a harmful cycle that perpetuates maladaptive functioning for both. The topic of narcissism has been studied well over a century but has gained more attention in recent years. Narcissism is not inherently pathological, as it is conceptualized as involving the affective and interpersonal maintenance of a generally positive view of self (Sasso et al., 2020). Although healthy narcissism provides a foundation for a consistent and positive view of oneself, pathological narcissism

involves acting only out of self-interest and demands of external validation to boost self-worth (Ronningstam, 2009; Pincus & Lukowitsky, 2010). Although the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (5th ed; DSM-5-TR; American Psychiatric Association, 2013) focuses on grandiose characteristics (e.g., need for admiration, lack of empathy, exploitative behaviors, entitlement), numerous studies have reported the existence of both grandiose and vulnerable narcissism, rather than one universal construct (e.g. Dickinson & Pincus, 2003; Miller & Campbell, 2008; Ronningstam, 2009; Wink, 1991). Grandiose narcissism reflects characteristics of dominance, aggression, exhibitionism, and high self-importance (Pincus & Lukowitsky, 2010; Miller et al., 2011; Wink, 1991). Individuals with grandiose narcissism often exhibit exploitative behaviors, act in ways to receive admiration through superiority, and work to control others. Alternatively, individuals with vulnerable narcissism reflect characteristics of hypersensitivity, a need for reassurance, interpersonal coldness, and criticism of others. Those with vulnerable narcissism are subject to feelings of inadequacy, shame, anxiety, and resentment. Additionally, individuals with both grandiose and vulnerable narcissism struggle with self-esteem and affect regulation, but their causes and coping mechanisms are different (Pincus & Lukowitsky, 2010). Those with grandiose narcissism cope with self-esteem regulation by exhibiting entitlement, inflicting superiority, and showing a lack of empathy while those with vulnerable narcissism fantasize about grandiose inflations about the self while simultaneously feeling guilt and shame regarding their desires. Additionally, individuals with both types of narcissism may act antagonistically, but their reasons behind acting in such a way may differ (Miller et al., 2011). Depending on the type of narcissism, the style and dynamic of interpersonal relationships may differ (Dickinson & Pincus, 2003; Miller et al., 2011). In relationships with others, those with grandiose narcissism may interpret other's behavior as hostile while those with vulnerable narcissism may act out of self-enhancement. Understanding the two types of narcissism can provide insight into how they function, including how they affect others in relationships.

Narcissism in interpersonal relationships often has a unique impact on the other individual involved (Ogrodniczuk & Kealy, 2013). Individuals with narcissism are not identified by their feelings, but how they make others feel, highlighting the interpersonal dysfunction of being in a relationship with one perceived to have narcissism. One of the integral components of being in a relationship with those who have narcissism is the impact on others emotionally. Those with grandiose narcissism might exhibit dominance, vindictiveness, and intrusiveness in interpersonal relationships while those with vulnerable narcissism might exhibit coldness, social avoidance, and exploitability (Dickinson & Pincus, 2003; Ogrodniczuk & Kealy, 2013). Sherry et al. (2018) describes how those with narcissism view others to be inferior and less important than themselves, will often criticize, and be hostile towards the other person. Those in relationships with individuals with both grandiose and vulnerable narcissism felt more disconnection, conflict, and insecurity based on how the narcissist would act and treat them (Day et al., 2022a). They tend to withdraw due to anxiety, depression, hostility, and dependency that arise as a result of the complicated dynamic between them as the individual with narcissism may act out creating an unhealthy cycle between the two. Additionally, those with narcissism have trouble understanding and caring about others' internal subjective experience (Gabbard & Crisp, 2018) and lack interest in empathy towards others. Because those with narcissism may not be aware of this deficit, they may act insensitively and have difficulties tolerating others' emotions which may deny the other person of their needs being met (Ronningstam, 2009). The repeated inability to understand and show emotional empathy by the individual with narcissism may limit the emotional experience of others, particularly happiness. For example, individuals with narcissism have also been reported to increase the level of depression in others (Day et al., 2022b). This increased depression can lead to reduced positive affectivity (Beblo et al., 2012). The authors found those who were depressed often suppressed their emotions, both positive and negative, because of their fear of affectivity. Although previous research shows the potential negative impact of these interpersonal relationships, less is known regarding what factors mediate how perceptions of narcissism in others impact our ability to maintain healthy psychological functioning.

The Impact of Mentalized Affectivity: Narcissistic Relationships, Self-Criticism, and Fear of Happiness

There is growing literature on the interpersonal dysfunction of those with narcissism and others' perceptions. For example, there is evidence of the psychological burden of being in a relationship with an individual who has narcissism and how coping styles such as emotional overinvolvement and criticism predicted participant burdens such as financial strain, time strain, personal distress, and guilt (Day et al., 2019, 2022b). However, no studies have looked at how awareness of our own emotional capacities mitigates the potential impact of being in a relationship with those who struggle with forms of narcissism on how we view ourselves. Mentalized affectivity allows one to properly assess current situations through the lens of past emotional experiences and protect against psychopathology (Fonagy & Bateman, 2019). How one views themselves both cognitively and emotionally connects to one's susceptibility to psychopathology. Two ways in which one views themselves with transdiagnostic features cutting across multiple disorders are self-criticism and fear of happiness. Therefore, without healthy use of mentalized affectivity, one potential byproduct of increased exposure to individuals with narcissism in relationships is self-criticism. Although self-criticism can be constructive and adaptive, it can also be destructive and harmful (Gilbert et al., 2004). Maladaptive self-criticism can be defined as a harsh self-evaluation when high expectations are not met (Shahar, 2015). Individuals with high levels of self-criticism often engage in self-destructive behaviors, emotion dysregulation, negative cognitions about the self, social isolation, rumination, feelings of shame, and inadequacy (Cavalcanti et al., 2021; Gilbert & Proctor, 2006). Additionally, self-criticism has been linked to several forms of psychopathology, including depression, anxiety, and eating disorders (Hermanto et al., 2016; Thew et al., 2017). Previous research has shown individuals who experience emotion dysregulation might engage in self-criticism as an emotion regulation strategy (Daros & Ruocco, 2021) which supports the idea mentalized affectivity plays a role in predicting self-criticism.

Relationships with others who have narcissism also impacts our emotional experience. Therefore, another potential byproduct of increased exposure to individuals with narcissism in close relationships without healthy use of mentalized affectivity is the development of a fear of happiness, defined as the repeated aversion to positive affectivity (Gilbert et al., 2012). One might develop a fear of happiness because they believe happiness doesn't last, feel it leads to suffering, or worry they won't detect something negative if they are happy. Clinical populations may also generate a fear of positive emotions because they find them alarming and have previous negative experiences with positive emotions (Gilbert et al., 2012). Additionally, individuals with alexithymia and emotion dysregulation have difficulties describing and identifying emotions associated with a fear of happiness. Gilbert et al. (2014) found alexithymia to be particularly common in depressed individuals which further implies those who are depressed may engender a fear of happiness. One might imagine this lack of ability to understand, be aware, and experience our emotions fully can impact how we experience and feel about ourselves.

Although there are theoretical investigations into the impact of individuals with narcissism on others, few have studied them empirically. Previous research has measured the perceptions of individuals with narcissism from others and the effects of relationships with perceived individuals with narcissism, but less is known whether these relationships with perceived individuals with narcissism can influence a person's experience of themselves when one considers their ability to identify, process, and express their emotions. Specifically, we are interested in how mentalized affectivity might indirectly affect the relationship between the impact of perceived individuals with grandiose and vulnerable narcissism on an individual's level of self-criticism and fear of happiness. The present study seeks to answer this question and analyze how experiences with individuals with narcissism affect the sense of self through the indirect effect of mentalized affectivity. We hypothesize perceptions of both forms of narcissism will have a negative impact on self-criticism and fear of happiness through the indirect effect of mentalized affectivity.

Method

Participants

Following approval from the Institutional Review Board and completion of informed consent, a total of 297 individuals participated (69.4% female, 29% male, 1.3% non-binary/third gender, and 0.3% prefer not to say). Participants ranged in age from 18 to 76 (M = 35.12, SD = 12.14). Participants reported their race as White (78.1%), Black or African American (9.8%), American Indian or Alaska Native (0.3%), Asian (5.4%), Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (0.3%), and other (6.1%). Individuals self-selected between the two types of narcissism, grandiose (49.8%) and vulnerable (50.2%) for the person they would describe. Participants were asked to select the type of relationship they would be describing in the study (33.7%, friend, 25.9% family relative, 20.9% parent, 6.7% former spouse/partner, 5.7% spouse/partner, 5.1% mentor, and 2% child) and the number of years they've known this person (M = 18.86, SD = 14.27).

Measures

Perceived Detection of Presence or Absence of Narcissism

The *Super Brief-Pathological Narcissism Inventory* (SB-PNI-CV; Schoenleber et al., 2015; Day et al., 2022b) was adapted and used to measure perceptions of grandiose and vulnerable narcissism in other people. Piped text was used to list the relationship of the selected person. The scale consists of 12 statements with scoring based on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (*not at all like them*) to 5 (*very much like them*). Some examples of statements included are, "When people don't notice my 'relationship type', they start to feel bad about themselves", "It's hard for my 'relationship type' to feel good about themselves unless they know other people admire them", and "My 'relationship type' often fantasizes about performing heroic deeds". The scale showed good internal consistency (α = .83).

Self-Criticism

The *Forms of Self-Criticizing/Attacking & Self-Reassuring Scale* (FSCRS; Gilbert et al., 2004) was used to measure an individual's self-critical thoughts and feelings. The self-report scale includes three subscales; however, only two were used to measure self-criticism: inadequate self and hated self. The scale consists of 22 statements with scoring based on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (*not like me at all*) to 4 (*extremely like me*). Some examples of statements included are, "I am easily disappointed with myself", "There is a part of me that feels I am not good enough", and "I have a sense of disgust with myself". Although the FSCRS originally separated self-criticism into inadequate self and hated self, previous research has shown the inadequate self and hated self are highly correlated in nonclinical samples and should be combined (Halamová et al., 2018). Therefore, the present study combined the inadequate self and the hated self (α = .93).

Fear of Happiness

The *Fear of Happiness Scale* (FOH; Gilbert et al., 2012) was used to measure an individual's anxieties and barriers with feeling happy and positive emotions. The self-report scale consists of nine statements with scoring based on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*not at all like me*) to 4 (*extremely like me*). Some examples of statements included are, "Feeling good makes me uncomfortable", "Good feelings never last", and "If you feel good you let your guard down". The scale showed high internal consistency (α = .91).

Mentalized Affectivity

The *Brief-Mentalized Affectivity* Scale (B-MAS; Greenberg et al., 2021) is a shortened self-report measure designed to evaluate three components of mentalized affectivity: identifying, processing, and expressing emotions. The scale consists of 12 statements with scoring based on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*disagree strongly*) to 7 (*agree strongly*). Some examples of statements included are, "I try to put effort into identifying my emotions", "When I'm filled with a negative emotion, I know how to handle it", and "People tell me I am good at expressing my emotions". The three subscales,

identifying (α = .75), processing (α = .75), and expressing (α = .74) showed acceptable internal consistency.

Procedure

The study began with approval from the Institutional Review Board. Recruitment occurred on Prolific, an online crowdsourcing tool for research participants. Participation was contingent on having a current or past personal relationship with someone for at least one year who fits the listed characteristics of narcissism. Descriptions of characteristics of individuals with both grandiose and vulnerable narcissism were given in the description of the study rather than using grandiose and vulnerable terms so participants would not be biased by the term narcissism or create definitions of the term that were not appropriate for the study (e.g., "This person may: Be entitled, lack empathy, require obedience, etc." for grandiose narcissism, or "This person may: Be sensitive to criticism, act cold toward others, hide feelings of shame or guilt, etc." for vulnerable narcissism). Separate advertisements were created for grandiose and vulnerable narcissism to ensure we received each type of narcissism. Participants from the grandiose study were excluded from the vulnerable study so they were not taking the study twice. Additional inclusion criteria were that participant's first language was English and had a minimum survey approval rating of 95% on Prolific. Participation was completely voluntary and anonymous so personal information could not be connected to the data. Each participant who volunteered gave consent before completing the survey and were informed that they would receive compensation for their time if their response was valid. If during the survey participants wanted to withdraw, they could do so without penalty. After participants validated that they had a past or current relationship with someone who has narcissism and identified that nature of their relationship, they completed demographic questions regarding age, gender, and race. The next section tasked participants with describing their relationship with the person they chose for the study in a minimum of 70 words, stating their relationship with their person, and identifying how long they have known them. The description of the selected individual using 70 words was not used for data analysis, but to ensure the individuals met the characteristics listed in the advertisements for the study. If the written description of the selected individual did not meet any of the listed characteristics or showed contradictory characteristics, the participant's data was excluded from the study. In order to ensure participants took the Pathological Narcissism Inventory-Carer Version (SB-PNI-CV) with their chosen person in mind, piped text was used in the statements of the measure. For example, if a participant selected "parent" as the relationship with their person, the measure would include statements such as, "My parent feels important when others rely on them". A cut off score of 36 (average of 3+) on the SB-PNI-CV was used as a screening measure (Day et al., 2022b) to ensure the selected individual met the threshold of grandiose or vulnerable narcissism. If the selected individual did not meet the threshold, the participant's data was excluded from the study. Lastly, participants completed measures of self-criticism, fear of happiness, and mentalized affectivity about themselves. These measures were counterbalanced to address any potential order effects. The survey included an attention check to ensure they were reading the questions clearly and anyone who failed the attention check was not included in the study. Participants were debriefed and resources were provided at the end of the survey for any emotional reactions or discomfort caused. After valid completion of all components of the study, participants on average were compensated approximately $12.00 per hour.

Results

Parallel mediation analysis was conducted using ordinary least squares path analysis in order to investigate the specific indirect effects of perceived narcissism in the relationship on self-criticism and fear of happiness through components of mentalized affectivity. Parallel mediation analysis works by controlling for one variable while holding other variables constant. Analysis utilized 5,000 bootstrapped samples, and the indirect effects of those different samples defined the lower and upper bounds of the confidence interval. If the indirect effect was significant, then the confidence interval would not include zero. A complete mediation would mean that the direct effect was not significant while the indirect

effect was, and a partial mediation would mean that the mediating variable has both direct and indirect effects. Refer to Table 1 for the correlation matrix including means, standard deviations, and correlations for all measures used.

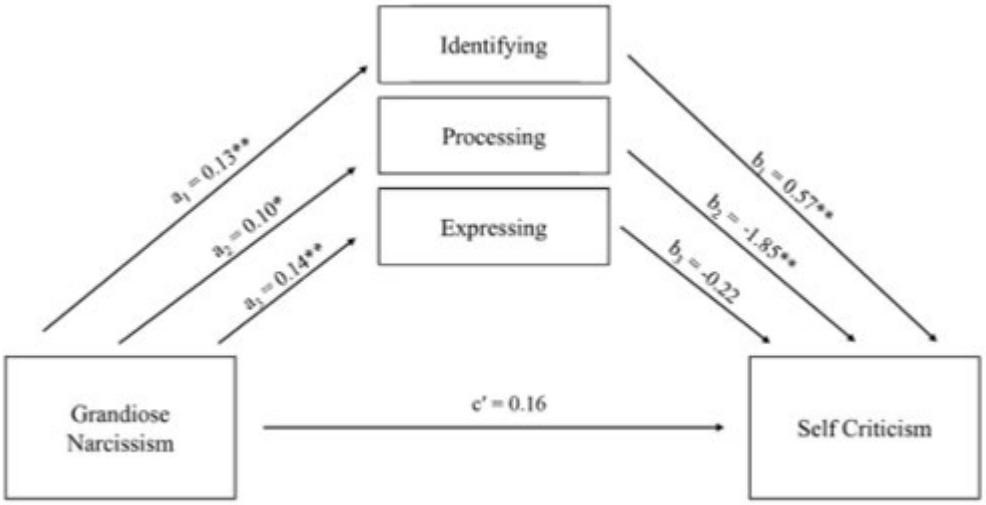
Table 1. Descriptive statistics and correlations for study variables

Variable	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Grandiose	25.77	6.27	-						
2. Vulnerable	22.30	6.28	.46**	-					
3. FSCRS	37.75	12.66	.01	.05	-				
4. FOH	21.56	8.37	-.08	-.03	.66**	-			
5. Identifying	20.78	4.19	.20**	.13**	.02	-.01	-		
6. Processing	8.50	4.60	.14*	.08	-.64**	-.45*	.25*	-	
7. Expressing	14.99	4.91	.18**	.17**	-.27**	-.28**	.18**	.34**	-

Note. * p < .05 ** p < .01

From a parallel mediation analysis, perceived grandiose narcissism in relationships indirectly influenced self-criticism through its effect on mentalized affectivity. As can be seen in Figure 1, participants who rated their relationships with significant others more grandiose had higher identifying (a_1 = 0.13, p < .01) and participants with higher identifying were more self-critical (b_1 = 0.57, p < .01). A bootstrap confidence interval for the indirect effect (ab_1 = 0.07) based on 5,000 bootstrap samples was entirely above zero (0.025 to 0.134). Additionally, participants who rated their relationships with significant others more grandiose had higher processing (a_2 = 0.10, p = .02) and participants with higher processing were less self-critical (b_2 = -1.85, p < .01). A bootstrap confidence interval for the indirect effect (ab_2 = -0.19) based on 5,000 bootstrap samples was entirely below zero (-0.353 to -0.022). The expressing (-0.075 to 0.004) subscale proved an insignificant indirect effect because the bootstrap confidence interval was between zero. Parallel mediation analysis did not reveal a direct effect between grandiose narcissism and self-criticism (c' = 0.16, p = .07), therefore mentalized affectivity completely mediates the relationship between perceptions of grandiosity and self-criticism.

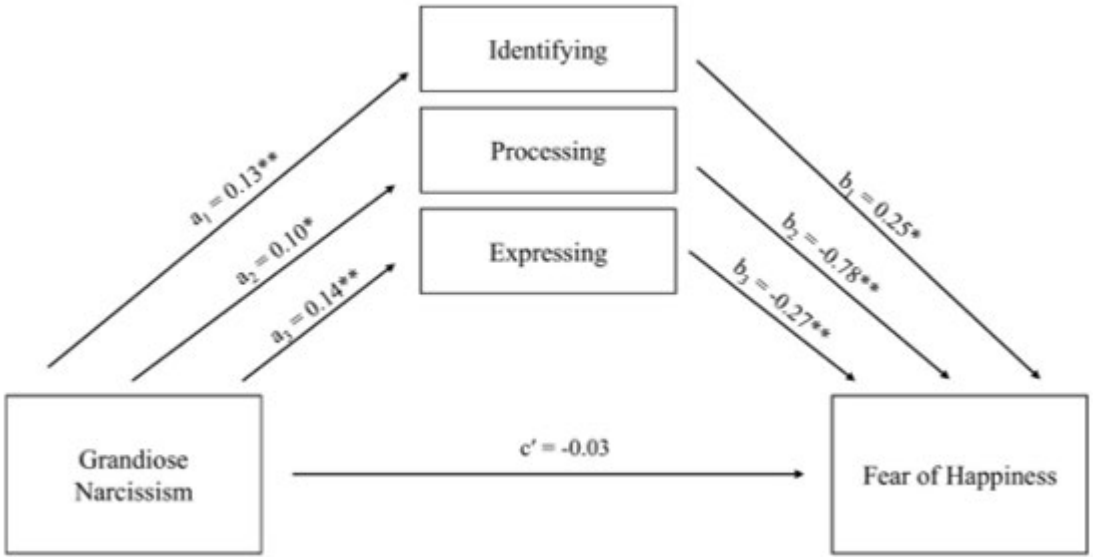
Figure 1. Parallel mediation between grandiose narcissism and self-criticism with mentalized affectivity components



Note. This figure demonstrates a parallel mediation using the mediating effect of three mentalized affectivity components in the relationship between grandiose narcissism and self-criticism. a1 is effect of grandiose narcissism on identifying, a2 is effect of grandiose narcissism on processing, a3 is effect of grandiose narcissism on expressing, b1 is effect of identifying on self-criticism, b2 is effect of processing on self-criticism, b3 is effect of expressing on self-criticism; c′ is direct effect of grandiose narcissism on self-criticism. * p < .05 ** p < .01.

From a parallel mediation analysis, perceived grandiose narcissism in relationships indirectly influenced fears of happiness through its effect on mentalized affectivity. As can be seen in Figure 2, participants who rated their relationships with significant others more grandiose had higher identifying (a_1 = 0.13, p < .01) and participants with higher identifying had more fears of happiness (b_1 = 0.25, p = .02). A bootstrap confidence interval for the indirect effect (ab_1 = 0.03) based on 5,000 bootstrap samples was entirely above zero (0.004 to 0.076). Participants who rated their relationships with significant others more grandiose had higher processing (a_2 = 0.10, p = .02) and participants with higher processing had fewer fears of happiness (b_2 = -0.78, p < .01). A bootstrap confidence interval for the indirect effect (ab_2 = -0.08) based on 5,000 bootstrap samples was entirely below zero (-0.156 to -0.006). Additionally, participants who rated their relationships with significant others more grandiose had higher expressing (a_3 = 0.14, p < .01) and participants with higher expressing had fewer fears of happiness (b_3 = -0.27, p < .01). A bootstrap confidence interval for the indirect effect (ab_3 = -0.04) based on 5,000 bootstrap samples was entirely below zero (-0.076 to -0.006). Parallel mediation analysis did not reveal a direct effect between grandiose narcissism and fears of happiness (c' = -0.03, p = .68) therefore mentalized affectivity completely mediates the relationship between perceptions of grandiosity and fears of happiness.

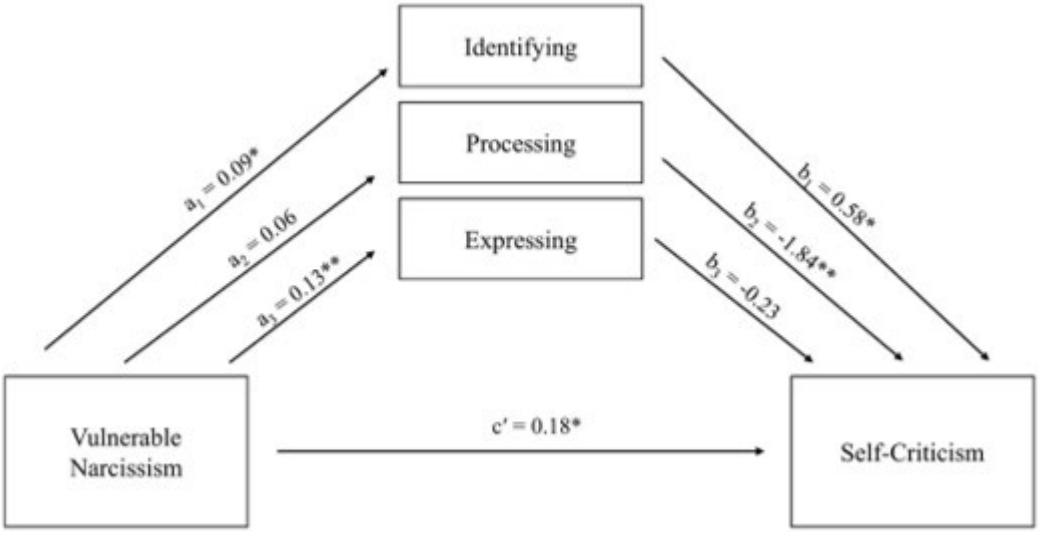
Figure 2. Parallel mediation between grandiose narcissism and fear of happiness with mentalized affectivity components



Note. This figure demonstrates a parallel mediation using the mediating effect of three mentalized affectivity components in the relationship between grandiose narcissism and fear of happiness. a1 is effect of grandiose narcissism on identifying, a2 is effect of grandiose narcissism on processing, a3 is effect of grandiose narcissism on expressing, b1 is effect of identifying on fear of happiness, b2 is effect of processing on fear of happiness, b3 is effect of expressing on fear of happiness; c′ is direct effect of grandiose narcissism on fear of happiness.
* p < .05 ** p < .01.

From a parallel mediation analysis, perceived vulnerable narcissism in relationships indirectly influenced self-criticism through its effect on mentalized affectivity. As can be seen in Figure 3, participants who rated their relationships with significant others more vulnerable had higher identifying (a_1 = 0.09, p = .02) and participants with higher identifying were more self-critical (b_1 = 0.58, p < .01). A bootstrap confidence interval for the indirect effect (ab_1 = 0.05) based on 5,000 bootstrap samples was entirely above zero (0.009 to 0.106). The processing (-0.275 to 0.041) expressing (-0.073 to 0.003) subscales proved insignificant indirect effects because the bootstrap confidence intervals were between zero. Additionally, parallel mediation analysis revealed a direct effect between vulnerable narcissism and self-criticism (c' = 0.18, p = .04) therefore mentalized affectivity partially mediates the relationship between perceptions of vulnerability and self-criticism.

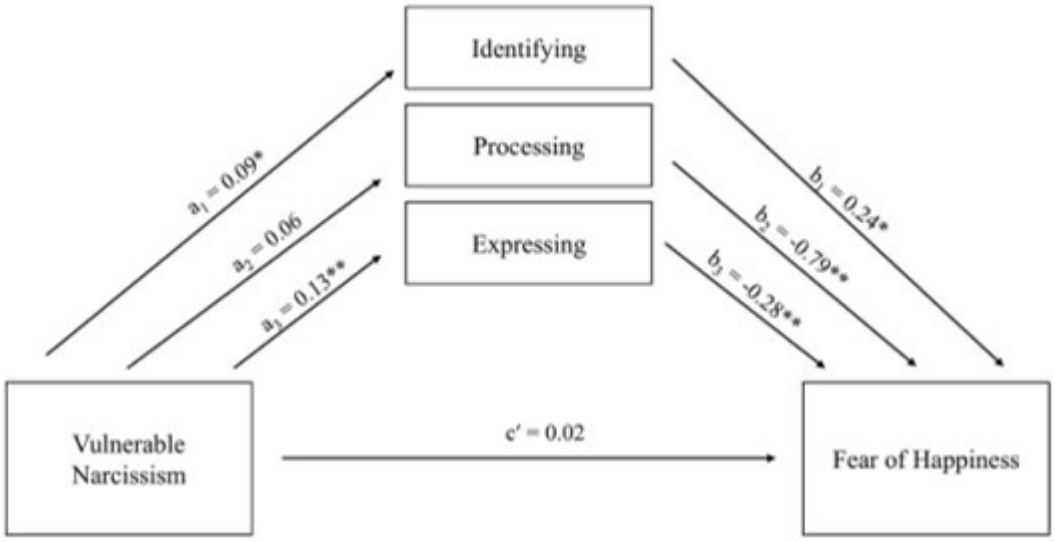
Figure 3. Parallel mediation between vulnerable narcissism and self-criticism with mentalized affectivity components



Note. This figure demonstrates a parallel mediation using the mediating effect of three mentalized affectivity components in the relationship between vulnerable narcissism and self-criticism. a_1 is effect of vulnerable narcissism on identifying, a_2 is effect of vulnerable narcissism on processing, a_3 is effect of vulnerable narcissism on expressing, b_1 is effect of identifying on self-criticism, b_2 is effect of processing on self-criticism, b_3 is effect of expressing on self-criticism; c' is direct effect of vulnerable narcissism on self-criticism. * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$.

From a parallel mediation analysis, perceived vulnerable narcissism in relationships indirectly influenced fears of happiness through its effect on mentalized affectivity. As can be seen in Figure 4, participants who rated their relationships with significant others more vulnerable had higher identifying ($a_1 = 0.09$, $p = .02$) and participants with higher identifying had more fears of happiness ($b_1 = 0.24$, $p = .02$). A bootstrap confidence interval for the indirect effect ($ab_1 = 0.02$) based on 5,000 bootstrap samples was entirely above zero (0.001 to 0.054). Additionally, participants who rated their relationships with significant others more vulnerable had higher expressing ($a_3 = 0.13$, $p < .01$) and participants with higher expressing had fewer fears of happiness ($b_3 = -0.28$, $p < .01$). A bootstrap confidence interval for the indirect effect ($ab_3 = -0.04$) based on 5,000 bootstrap samples was entirely below zero (-0.073 to -0.008). The processing (-0.120 to 0.017) subscale proved an insignificant indirect effect because the bootstrap confidence interval was between zero. Parallel mediation analysis did not reveal a direct effect between vulnerable narcissism and fears of happiness ($c' = 0.02$, $p = .76$) therefore mentalized affectivity completely mediates the relationship between perceptions of vulnerability and fears of happiness.

Figure 4. Parallel mediation between vulnerable narcissism and fear of happiness with mentalized affectivity components



Note. This figure demonstrates a parallel mediation using the mediating effect of three mentalized affectivity components in the relationship between vulnerable narcissism and fear of happiness. a_1 is effect of vulnerable narcissism on identifying, a_2 is effect of vulnerable narcissism on processing, a_3 is effect of vulnerable narcissism on expressing, b_1 is effect of identifying on fear of happiness, b_2 is effect of processing on fear of happiness, b_3 is effect of expressing on fear of happiness; c' is direct effect of vulnerable narcissism on fear of happiness.
* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the possible indirect effect of mentalized affectivity on the relationship between the two types of narcissism and both self-criticism and fear of happiness. Our hypothesis was supported whereas higher perceptions of narcissism in others predicted both self-criticism and fear of happiness indirectly though the ability to affectively mentalize. Specifically, the results of the parallel mediation showed a complete mediation of the relationship between perceptions of vulnerable narcissism and fear of happiness, perceptions of grandiose narcissism and self-criticism, perceptions of grandiose narcissism and fear of happiness, and a partial mediation of the relationship between perceptions of vulnerable narcissism and self-criticism. In general, our findings support a growing body of literature demonstrating the powerful indirect effects of various components of mentalized affectivity on transdiagnostic features of psychopathology (e.g., Goodwin & Luchner, 2023).

The results reveal a pattern of mentalized affectivity mediating the relationship between perceived narcissism and how we experience ourselves and our emotions. The results suggest higher levels of experienced narcissism in others predicts higher levels of self-criticism and fear of happiness when we consider our ability to identify, process, and express our emotions. In other words, relationships with individuals who one perceives to have narcissism can impact psychological struggles associated with psychopathology when we don't have the affective systems in place to protect and buffer these maladaptive relationships. When there are impairments in one's ability to affectively mentalize, one is prone to misunderstand their own feelings and other's feelings leading them to be vulnerable in unhealthy relationships (Fonagy & Bateman, 2019). This aligns with previous research highlighting the potential dysfunction that can occur in interpersonal relationships with individuals who struggle with narcissism. For example, Day et al. (2022b) found individuals in interpersonal relationships experienced anxiety, depression, and hostility. Additionally, those who experience higher levels of anxiety and

depression are more likely to experience deficits in mentalization (Belvederi Murri et al., 2017), engage in self-criticism (Gilbert et al., 2012; Thew et al., 2017), and develop a fear of happiness (Beblo et al., 2012). Deficits in mentalization and mentalized affectivity leave individuals with the inability to make sense of their feelings and emotionally regulate (Allen et al., 2003). The combination of impairments in deficits in mentalized affectivity and experienced narcissism in relationships might lead to distortions in how one feels about themselves and their emotions, increasing vulnerability to psychological distress and dysfunction.

Although there was no direct relationship, the identifying component of mentalized affectivity was identified as an indirect influence on the relationship between perceptions of narcissism in others and both self-criticism and fear of happiness. Our results show the identifying component of mentalized affectivity is associated with poorer psychological outcomes when considering the perception of higher narcissism in others, aligning with previous findings that those with high identification scores might use identification as a strategy to better understand themselves and a situation they may be in but does not necessarily mean they will be successful and experience better well-being (Greenberg et al., 2017). Individuals with both grandiose and vulnerable narcissism may increase susceptibility to negative emotions within individuals by denying their autonomy, enforcing obedience, and making them feel inferior or less important (Day et al., 2020; Gabbard & Crisp, 2018; Sherry et al., 2018). Deficits in mentalized affectivity, such as overidentification, could lead to a fixation on these negative emotions and impact how one views themselves.

Additionally, there was a consistent indirect effect of the processing component of mentalized affectivity on the severity of relationships with perceived grandiose narcissism and both self-criticism and fear of happiness, but not when relationships with vulnerable narcissism were perceived. Therefore, the combination of perceived grandiosity in others and difficulties in processing emotions may impact one's experience of themselves and their emotions. Our findings align with previous empirical studies that found individuals who are struggling with processing their emotions may resort to self-criticism as a strategy to help regulate their emotions because they have difficulties tolerating negative emotions (Daros & Rucco, 2021) and may even suppress them as a mechanism to avoid their emotions altogether (Gross & John, 2003). Individuals may resort to these strategies because of a lower distress tolerance and a wish to prioritize ending these emotional experiences. Those with grandiose narcissism are more likely to be clear and vocal with displeasure and disappointment (Pincus et al., 2009) whereas those with vulnerable narcissism are more likely to show these feelings in less obvious and indirect ways. When considering both the role of identifying and processing in relationships with grandiose narcissism in particular, it seems important to note the potential combined effects of mentalized affectivity deficits. For example, Jurist (2018) reports the combination of higher identifying and low processing has links to psychopathology which supports the finding that grandiosity predicts self-criticism and fear of happiness when individuals identify their emotions more and struggle with processing them.

The expressing component of mentalized affectivity was a significant mediator between both forms of narcissism and fear of happiness, but not self-criticism. Perceived grandiose and vulnerable narcissism in others may lead someone to reductions in emotional expression out of fear they may be criticized, devalued, require conformity, and be treated coldly for how they feel (Day et al., 2020; Pincus et al., 2009). This treatment may play a role in creating increased susceptibility to deficits in expression of an individual's emotions both outwardly and inwardly. Fitness (2015) states effective emotion communication is important for relationship and self-functioning. However, when in a relationship with someone perceived to have characteristics of narcissism who fails to understand or interpret another's emotions, the relationship may become dysfunctional and increase the likelihood of the other person to hide or suppress their emotions (Gross & John, 2003). The authors suggest suppression of emotions can create more negative emotions and less positive emotions. Continued suppression of emotions could lead to an aversion or fear of emotions, positive or negative (Beblo et al., 2012). Relationship dysfunction in addition to deficits in expression may lead to a complex impact on how we view ourselves and our emotions which would support the results showing less expression of emotions can

predict a fear of happiness. This relationship may not predict self-criticism because there is too much variability in the expression. Expression may be positive or negative in self-critical individuals depending on the context (Gilbert, 2003).

Despite these findings, it is important to note the study had a few limitations. The data was collected through self-report questionnaires which are subject to personal biases. The sample also predominantly consisted of white and female participants which might not accurately represent diverse populations. Second, we measured participants' perceptions of narcissism in close relationships, and therefore may not be accurate representations of the other person. Our sample also consisted of large groups of friend and parent relationships, therefore future research may benefit from investigating how other relationships (e.g., spouse, family relative, mentor) impact others. Finally, given the cross-sectional nature of the study, mentalized affectivity may not be the only mediator present; therefore, a longitudinal design should be implemented. For example, it might be useful to consider how exposure to a relationship with an individual who has narcissism erodes mentalized affectivity over time, thereby increasing vulnerability to various forms of psychopathology. Future research should consider what specific behaviors from those who struggle with narcissism lead to self-criticism and the development of a fear of happiness. Additionally, it would be helpful to investigate empirically if there is a link between different psychological disorders and specific patterns of mentalized affectivity given the increasing amount of data showing the possibility that identifying, processing, and expressing deficits may be present in various forms of psychopathology. Furthermore, research has shown how interventions targeting mentalization, such as mentalization-based treatment (MBT), might mitigate various pathological conditions.

Our study contributes to narcissism and mentalization based research and provides clinical implications regarding therapy and treatment to those who may be affected by individuals with narcissism. This research highlights the emotional impact of perceived narcissism in others and how deficits in our emotional experience can impact how we view ourselves. With increasing interest in addressing common factors across disorders (Sharp & Bevington, 2023) and because MBT has been found to be effective and useful in a variety of psychological disorders (Bateman & Fonagy, 2017), more attention should be placed on how to utilize interventions that address deficits in mentalized affectivity. Previously, mentalization-based treatment (MBT) has been used to restore balance in mentalization strategies, providing individuals the tools to strengthen their ability for mentalization and mentalized affectivity (Sharp et al., 2020). In this role, the therapist adopts a stance in which they are curious and collaborate with the client to understand their mental states and emotions (Sharp & Bevington, 2023). This helps helping to facilitate a corrective experience in which the client then begins to form a foundation of healthy oscillation between all polarities, automatic and controlled, internal and external, self and other, and cognitive and affective when appropriate.

Upon discovering the impacts of perceived narcissism on others, this form of intervention may be beneficial for individuals who have been exposed to relationships where one is perceived to have narcissism and struggle with self-criticism, fears of happiness, and other transdiagnostic features of psychopathology. Using this form of treatment where the therapist helps regulate and stabilize mentalization abilities, clients can begin to restore the protective benefits of mentalized affectivity (Sharp & Bevington, 2023). In this regard, clients can create new narratives of their emotional experience to help inform their perceptions and expectations for future situations and protect from psychological distress even when exposed to relationships they perceive to be harmful (Fonagy & Bateman, 2019). The results highlight how unhealthy use of mentalized affectivity can leave one more susceptible to harm in relationships. However, restoration in these abilities not only can alleviate interpersonal distress but can also build resilience and increase overall wellbeing (Allen et al., 2003; Jurist et al., 2023). Overall, we have a better understanding of how perceptions of narcissism in others may impact how we view ourselves and the importance of being aware and understanding our emotions. When we are mindful of our emotional experience and aware of how this system impacts our view of

ourselves, we can understand ourselves better and experience healthier functioning across all relationships in our lives.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no potential conflict of interest.

Ethical approval

The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at Rollins College, Winter Park, FL (20230315GB). Informed consent was obtained electronically from all participants before completing the survey.

Data Availability

The data of supporting the findings of this study can be made available by the corresponding author (GB) upon request.

Author CRediT Statement

GB was the principal investigator; AL supervised all aspects of the project. GB and AL collaborated on all components of the project: conceptualization, methodology, data collection and analysis, writing of original draft, editing, and revision.

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