The interpersonal expression of perfectionism among grandiose and vulnerable narcissists: Perfectionistic self-presentation, effortless perfection, and the ability to seem perfect

Silvia Casale a,⁎, Giulia Fioravanti a, Laura Rugai a, Gordon L. Flett b, Paul L. Hewitt c

a Department of Health Sciences, Psychology and Psychiatry Unit, University of Florence, Florence, Italy
b Department of Psychology, York University, Toronto, Ontario, Canada
c Department of Psychology, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada

A R T I C L E   I N F O

Article history:
Received 5 April 2016
Received in revised form 10 May 2016
Accepted 11 May 2016
Available online 24 May 2016

Keywords:
Grandiose narcissism
Vulnerable narcissism
Perfectionistic self-presentation
Perfectionistic self-presentation capability
Effortless perfection
Hiding effort

A B S T R A C T

The current research focused on perfectionistic self-presentation and its relevance in models of narcissism as a form of overcompensation designed to deflect attention away from self-inadequacies. We took an extended view of perfectionistic self-presentation that includes a defensive need to seem effortlessly perfect and self-presentation capability. A sample of 305 students completed measures of narcissistic grandiosity, narcissistic vulnerability, perfectionistic self-presentation, effortless perfection, and perfectionistic self-presentation capability. Significant positive associations were found between grandiose narcissism and perfectionistic self-promotion and effortless perfection. Vulnerable narcissism was found to be associated with all facets of perfectionistic self-presentation, effortless perfection, and lower perceived ability to seem perfect. The present study paints a picture of grandiose narcissists as involved in promoting a perfect image of the self, pressured to be perfect with apparent ease and perceiving a sense of being able to promote such an image of perfection. In contrast, vulnerable perfectionists have a strong need to seem perfect but they feel unable to project this image. Our results are in keeping with the notion that vulnerable narcissists attempt to hide behind a mask but they do not feel fully capable of projecting an image of perfection.

© 2016 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Historically, much of the perfectionism literature has been focused on people who have been characterized as “neurotic perfectionists” because they want to be perfect but see themselves as consistently falling short of this exceptionally high standard (see Hamachek, 1978). In contrast, there is growing interest in another type of perfectionist described as the narcissistic perfectionist — that is, people with grandiose ambitions and standards and associated attributes who feel like they are perfect or they could be perfect (see Sorotzkin, 1985, 1998). This growing emphasis on narcissistic perfectionists is part of a greater awareness that certain perfectionists can have a very dark side to their personalities and they are capable of doing whatever it takes to achieve their grand ambitions (for related discussions, see Flett, Hewitt & Sherry, 2016; Marcus & Ziegler-Hill, 2015). This emphasis on narcissistic perfectionism has culminated in a new perfectionism measure that has incorporated subscales tapping narcissistic perfectionism (see Smith, Saklofske, Sherry, & Stoebber, in press).

Most studies in this area have focused on trait perfectionism dimensions and narcissism (for a review, see Flett, Sherry, Hewitt, & Nepon, 2014). The original scale development work by Hewitt and Flett (1991) on their Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale established that narcissism was associated with other-oriented perfectionism. Several subsequent studies (e.g., Stoebber, Sherry, & Nealis, 2015) have linked narcissism with trait perfectionism (for an overview see Flett et al., 2014). Our current work takes a different perspective by focusing on perfectionistic self-presentation in keeping with recent work that takes an extended approach by conceptualizing the perfectionism construct not only in terms of trait perfectionism but also in terms of perfectionistic self-presentation (Hewitt et al., 2003). Whereas trait perfectionism refers to the source and expectations of perfectionistic expectations, perfectionistic self-presentation involves the public interpersonal expression of perfectionism. Perfectionistic self-presentation (PSP) includes three distinct dimensions: perfectionistic self-promotion (proactively promoting a perfect image), non-disclosure of imperfections (concerns over verbal disclosure of imperfections), and non-display of imperfections (concerns over behavioral displays of imperfection). Trait perfectionism and PSP are considered to be conceptually distinct and PSP facets have been associated with a wide range of

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2016.05.026
0191-8869/© 2016 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.
psychological difficulties and deleterious outcomes, including depression (Cha, 2016), Machiavellianism (Sherry, Hewitt, Besser, Flett, & Klein, 2006), social disconnection (Chen, Hewitt, & Flett, 2015), and suicide risk (Roxborough et al., 2012).

Conceptual and empirical analyses suggest that perfectionistic self-presentation is implicated in various forms of personality disorder and dysfunction (see Ayearst, Flett, & Hewitt, 2012; Sherry, Hewitt, Flett, Lee-Bagley, & Hall, 2007). Sherry, Granlick, Hewitt, Sherry and Flett (2014) conducted the initial study that examined perfectionistic self-presentation and narcissism. Participants completed the Perfectionistic Self-Presentation Scale along with the Narcissistic Personality Inventory, which is largely a measure of grandiose narcissism when the focus is on the overall measure (Ames, Rose & Anderson, 2006). They highlighted that perfectionistic self-promotion was positively and uniquely associated with narcissism. This is consistent with results highlighting the tendency of grandiose narcissists to brag and take credit for positive outcomes (e.g., Campbell & Sedikides, 1999). Conversely, consistent with the tendency of grandiose narcissists to be immodest and deny weakness, concern over verbal disclosure and behavioral displays of imperfection were not associated significantly with overall narcissism.

In the current study, we sought to uniquely extend the literature in three significant respects—first, we re-examined narcissism and perfectionistic self-presentation based on an extended conceptualization of this self-presentational style that includes a need to seem effortlessly perfect. Independent research by two teams of researchers has shown recently that some perfectionistic people have an extreme orientation characterized by a belief in effortless perfection and a need or desire to seem perfect by hiding effort so that it is not visible to others. Flett, Nepon, Hewitt, Molnar and Zhao (2016) have recently further extended the construct of perfectionistic self-presentation by showing that the tendency to project an image of perfection by hiding effort is associated with and account for unique variance in adjustment difficulties. Similarly, Travers, Randall, Bryant, Conley and Bohnet (2015) sought empirical support for the effortless perfectionism construct by showing that their newly developed 10-item measure taps a distinct form of perfectionism and effortless perfection is a unique predictor—in relation to other perfectionism scales—of negative adjustment. The orientation toward effortless perfection and the tendency to hide effort is seen as a reflection of a highly defensive orientation toward the self and associated beliefs that emphasis the self as a fixed entity (see Flett, Nepon, Hewitt, Molnar and Zhao, 2016). It is our contention in the current work that people who are both narcissistic and perfectionistic have an excessive need to seem not only perfect but effortlessly perfect; that is, they will have an orientation toward effortless perfection and this should especially be the case for vulnerable, idealistic narcissists who tend to hide defensively behind a mask or façade.

Second, we took an extended view of the perfectionism construct that focused not only on perfectionistic self-presentation but also related individual differences in the self-perceived ability to seem perfect. At present, existing research on perfectionistic self-presentation has focused exclusively on the level of the need to seem perfect or avoid seeming imperfect; a related variable of importance that merits strong consideration is the extent to which the person who needs to seem perfect actually feels capable of projecting this image. To our knowledge, there has been no attempt thus to assess the key variable of self-presentation efficacy. However, the usefulness of considering self-presentation efficacy has been demonstrated in general research in the exercise and physical activity field (Gammage, Hall, & Gins, 2004) and in the social anxiety field (Maddux, Norton, & Leary, 1988). In the current context, individual differences in the self-perceived ability to seem perfect should be an important supplement to perfectionistic self-presentation and a potentially useful way of distinguishing narcissistic grandiosity versus narcissistic vulnerability. The existence of these two forms of narcissism was first conceptualized and examined by Wink (1991) and a considerable body of psychology literature (e.g., Hendin & Cheek, 1997) has confirmed the existence of two orthogonal constructs of narcissism. Grandiose and vulnerable narcissism share some core traits, such as a sense of entitlement and grandiose fantasies. However, vulnerable narcissism, but not grandiose narcissism, is largely marked by hypersensitivity, defensiveness, and insecurity (Dickinson & Pincus, 2003). The present study proposes that narcissistic vulnerability could reflect, at least in part, a sense of not being able to project an image of perfection. The perception of a low capability to appear perfect might explain the high levels of shame, the tendency to be self-critical and hypersensitive (Pincus et al., 2009), as well as the tendency to show social withdrawal and avoidance (Dickinson & Pincus, 2003) among vulnerable narcissists.

The present research aims to build upon previous results on the association between the two forms of narcissism and perfectionistic self-presentation by including a) the perception of one’s ability to display an image of perfection; and b) the tendency to appear perfect by hiding effort. We investigated whether these two new elements of perfectionistic self-presentation could account for additional variance in grandiose and vulnerable narcissism beyond that explained by the other three facets of perfectionistic self-presentation (PSP). We expected a positive association between the measures representing effortless perfection and both grandiose and vulnerable narcissism. It was also expected that vulnerable narcissism in particular would be associated with the perception of not being capable of seeming perfect (despite a strong need to seem perfect). Third, although our main focus was on perfectionistic self-presentation and narcissism, the inclusion of both new measures of effortless perfection in the current research provided us with the opportunity to compare and contrast the results involving these two independently developed measures.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

This research was conducted with a sample of 305 undergraduate students (54.2% F; mean age: 22.62 ± 3.08 years). Participants were approached by three female assistants. All the participants were Italian. Data collection consisted of written questionnaires and general information about the purposes of the study was announced to the participants. The participation was anonymous and participants were guaranteed confidentiality. No formative credits or remunerative rewards were given.

2.2. Measures

Grandiose narcissism was assessed through the Italian adaptation (Fossati, Borroni, & Maffei, 2008) of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI-16; Ames et al., 2006). The NPI-16 is a shorter, unidimensional measure of the NPI-40, designed to measure grandiose narcissism in non-clinical populations. It contains 16 pairs of items, each consisting of two conflicting proposals between which the participants must choose according to their own beliefs and feelings (e.g., “I like to be the center of the attention” vs. “I prefer to blend in with the crowd”). Notable face, internal, discriminant and predictive validity were reported for the NPI-16 (Ames et al., 2006).

The Italian adaptation (Fossati et al., 2009) of the Hypersensitive Narcissism Scale (HSNS; Hendin & Cheek, 1997) was used to assess vulnerable narcissism. The HSNS is a one-dimensional measure comprised of 10 items capturing narcissistic hypersensitivity (e.g., “My feelings are easily hurt by ridicule or by the slighting remarks of others”). Participants indicated the extent to which the items characterized their feelings and behavior using a response scale from 1 (very uncharacteristic or untrue) to 5 (very characteristic or true). The HSNS has demonstrated reliability and validity in numerous studies (e.g., Miller et al., 2011; Pincus et al., 2009). Evidence attests to the reliability and the validity
of the Italian version of the HSNS both in clinical and non-clinical participants (Fossati et al., 2009).

Perfectionistic self-presentation was assessed with the Perfectionistic Self-Presentation Scale (PSPS; Hewitt et al., 2003), a 27-item measure comprised of three subscales: perfectionistic self-promotion, nondisplay of imperfection and nondisclosure of imperfection. Perfectionistic self-promotion was captured with 10-item subscale (e.g., “I try always to present a picture of perfection”); higher scores on this subscale indicated higher level of perfectionistic self-presentational style characterized by the need to brashly promote oneself as perfect to others. Nondisplay of imperfection was measured with 10-item subscale (e.g., “It would be awful if I made a fool of myself in front of others”), higher scores on this subscale indicated higher level of perfectionistic self-presentational style characterized by the need to avoid behavioral demonstrations of one’s imperfection. Nondisclosure of imperfection was assessed with a seven-item subscale (e.g., “Admitting failure to others is the worst possible thing”) and higher scores on this scale indicated higher level of perfectionistic self-presentational style characterized by the need to avoid verbal disclosures of one’s imperfection. Participants responded to the items of the three subscales using a 7-point scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Evidence supports both the reliability and the validity of the PSPS (Hewitt et al., 2003). The psychometric properties of the Italian version of the Perfectionistic Self-Presentation Scale have been recently reported (Borroni et al., 2016). The PSPS total score and PSPS scales showed adequate internal consistency reliability estimates, and both the dimensionality analyses and confirmatory factor analysis supported the original three factors structure for PSPS items.

Perfectionistic self-presentational capability was assessed with the Perfectionistic Self-Presentational Capability Scale (PSPCS; Flett, Nepon, Hewitt, & Casale, 2016). This brief measure assesses the perception of one’s ability to display an image of perfection to others and consists of four items (“I often find myself in situations where my mistakes are on display for others to see”; “My attempts to seem perfectly capable usually fail short”; “I have made too many mistakes in front of other people” and “I lack the skills needed to make myself look or seem perfect to others”). Items were rated on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (completely disagree) to 7 (completely agree). Higher scores on this scale indicate lower levels of capability in seeming perfect.

Two measures were used to assess effortless perfectionism. The Effortless Perfectionism Scale (EPS; Travers et al., 2015) has 10 items that assess an intense pressure to be perfect without visible effort (e.g., “I believe that those who try harder are less intelligent than those who succeed with ease”), through a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (extremely). The EPS showed good test-retest reliability (r = 0.75). The Perfectionistic Self-Presentation Hiding Effort Scale (PSP-HES; Flett, Nepon, Hewitt, Molnar and Zhao, 2016), a four-item measure of the ability to portray an image of perfection while making it appear effortless (e.g., “I would like to seem or appear perfect without others knowing the lengths I will to achieve it”). Items were rated on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Higher score on this scale indicate levels of appearing perfect while hiding effort. This brief scale has adequate construct validity (Flett, Nepon, Hewitt, Molnar and Zhao, 2016).

The Italian versions of the PSPCS, EPS and PSP-HES were obtained using a back-translation method. The original and the back-translated version of the tests were then compared and judgments were made about their equivalence.

### 2.3. Statistical analyses

Four participants were excluded from the analysis because their NPI was incomplete (more of the 10% of missing responses). Statistical analyses were conducted on a sample of 301 undergraduates. After computing descriptive statistics, two hierarchical regression analyses were conducted to determine if perfectionistic self-presentational capability (Step 3) and effortless perfectionism (Step 4) predict vulnerable and grandiose narcissism over and above perfectionistic self-promotion, nondisplay of imperfection and nondisclosure of imperfection (Step 2), after controlling for gender (Step 1).

### 3. Results

The means, standard deviation and alpha coefficients for all the measures are shown in Table 1. Alphas were generally acceptable with the exception of the PSPS Nondisclosure subscale. Most notably, the new measures of effortless perfection and hiding effort had respective alphas of 0.77 and 0.78. Parenthetically, it should be noted that the two measures of effortless perfection were associated significantly with each other but not to the extent of being redundant (r = 0.48). Partial correlation analyses (Table 1) showed that vulnerable narcissism was no longer associated with the EPS after controlling for PSP-hiding effort, but the hiding effort subscale was still associated with narcissistic vulnerability after controlling for the EPS. However, the EPS was still associated with grandiose narcissism and the PSP-Hiding Effort subscale was still unrelated to grandiose narcissism. As is seen below in the regression results, the measures also differ in terms of their links with the narcissism dimensions.

The correlations between perfectionism and grandiose narcissism tended to be low in magnitude, but significant links were found between grandiose narcissism and perfectionistic self-promotion and effortless perfection. In contrast, stronger positive associations were found between vulnerable narcissism and all of the perfectionism dimensions, including self-presentation capability and effortless perfection.

### Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>M(SD)</th>
<th>α</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. NPI-16 grandiose narcissism</td>
<td>3.56 (2.97)</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. HSNS vulnerable narcissism</td>
<td>25.29 (5.97)</td>
<td>0.69</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. PSPS perfectionistic self-promotion</td>
<td>33.12 (11.36)</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. PSPS non-display of imperfection</td>
<td>35.67 (10.53)</td>
<td>0.81</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td>0.67</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. PSPS non-disclosure of imperfection</td>
<td>30.74 (6.71)</td>
<td>0.63</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td>0.57</td>
<td>0.54</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. PSPS perfectionistic self-presentation capability</td>
<td>11.89 (4.53)</td>
<td>0.73</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. EPS pressure to appear perfect</td>
<td>22.18 (6.41)</td>
<td>0.77</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. PSPS-hiding effort</td>
<td>11.60 (5.13)</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.35</td>
<td>0.59</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>0.58</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.48</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. N = 301. The abbreviations are as follows: NPI-16 = Narcissism Personality Inventory – 16; HSNS = Hypersensitive Narcissism Scale; PSPS = Perfectionistic Self-Presentation Scale; PSP-CS = Perfectionistic Self-Presentational Capability Scale; EPS = Effortless Perfection Scale; PSPS-Hiding = Perfectionistic Self-Presentation Hiding Effort Scale.

- a Partial correlation controlling for NPI-16.
- b Partial correlation controlling for EPS.
- * p < 0.05, two-tailed.
- ** p < 0.01, two-tailed.
- *** p < 0.001, two-tailed.
perfection (Table 1). Gender was associated with narcissism levels with men having higher grandiose narcissism than women (respectively M(SD) = 4.43 (3.10) and 2.81 (2.64), F (1, 299) = 23.92, p < 0.001, $\eta^2 = 0.10$), and women having higher vulnerable narcissism than men (respectively M(SD) = 25.92 (6.14) and 24.55 (5.70), F (1, 299) = 3.96, p < 0.05, $\eta^2 = 0.10$). After controlling for gender (Step 1) and the three perfectionistic self-presentation dimensions (Step 2), the inclusion of the perceived ability to seem perfect (Step 3) and the effortless perfectionism (Step 4) accounted for an additional amount of variance of grandiose narcissism scores (respectively 2.2% and 1.4%) beyond the overall 12.9% already explained by gender and the three PSPS subscales (Table 2). At the last step of the regression analysis, grandiose narcissism was found to be associated with gender, perfectionistic self-promotion, perfectionistic self-presentation capability and effortless perfectionism as measured by the EPS. The higher the grandiose narcissism levels, the higher the tendency to proactively promoting a perfect image, the perception to have the ability to appear perfect and the feeling of pressure to be perfect without visible effort.

On the other hand, regression results did not indicate a relationship between effortless perfectionism and vulnerable narcissism. In fact, whereas the inclusion of the perfectionistic self-presentation capability added a significant amount of variance to the model (2.7%), a significant effect of effortless perfectionism was not found (Table 2). Gender, perfectionistic self-promotion, non-display of imperfection, and perfectionistic self-presentation capability were associated with vulnerable narcissism. The final model explained 30% of the variance. The higher the tendency to proactively promoting a perfect image, the concerns over behavioral displays of imperfection and the lack of self-confidence in the ability to appear perfect the higher the vulnerable narcissism.

### 4. Discussion

The present research was conducted to extend the scope of inquiry on perfectionism and narcissism in three respects: (a) re-examine the association between perfectionistic self-presentation and narcissism; (b) incorporate an extended view of perfectionistic self-presentation that include an orientation toward effortless perfection; and (c) assess perfectionism and narcissism in terms of self-perceptions of being capable to seem perfect.

The overall pattern of results highlighted the importance of distinguishing narcissistic grandiosity and narcissistic vulnerability and the usefulness of an extended conceptualization of the perfectionism construct. First, it was evident that the concept of perfectionistic self-presentation is much more relevant in vulnerable narcissism relative to grandiose narcissism, though it is still relevant to some extent in grandiose narcissism (Sherry et al., 2014). This form of narcissism was associated weakly but significantly with perfectionistic self-promotion and effortless perfection as assessed by the Travers et al. (2015) scale. There was also evidence suggesting that this form of narcissism was associated with more negative appraisals of the capability to seem perfect at the correlational level, but it was associated with more positive appraisals after considering the variance attributable to other predictors in a regression analysis.

In contrast, stronger and more pervasive links between perfectionistic self-presentation and narcissism were found for vulnerable narcissism. All three PSPS facets and both measures of effortless perfection were associated positively with vulnerable narcissism. Moreover, students with high levels of vulnerable narcissism had desires to seem perfect but they had negative self-appraisals of their capability of seeming perfect. The results of our regression analysis showed that effortless perfection did not predict unique variance in narcissistic vulnerability beyond the three PSPS facets, but it was clearly the case that individual differences in the capability to seem perfect was a unique predictor. Collectively, these findings suggest that vulnerable narcissists might be attuned to their public image, but this might be a defensive process that reflects a core sense of inadequacy that extends to but is not limited to a sense of inefficacy about being able to project and maintain a positive public image.

The current findings have clear theoretical and practical implications. At the theoretical level, the findings illustrate the need for a broader focus on self-presentational concerns in models of narcissistic personality. While researchers and theorists have focused on how explicit versus implicit self-esteem might differ among vulnerable narcissists, relatively little consideration has been given to the possibility that narcissists are cognitively preoccupied with their public image and it is not good enough to seem good or excellent; rather they must seem perfect and avoid displays and disclosures that suggest otherwise. Meanwhile, at the practical level, one implication of our findings is that vulnerable young people who are both perfectionistic and narcissistic may be hiding their distress and underlying sense of inadequacy and lack of efficacy. It is important for clinicians and counselors to address the core self and identity issues that underscore their outward narcissism.

Although it was clearly not our main focus, the current research also provided some useful new information about the new measures of the orientation toward effortless perfection. Both measures were useful in the current research in terms of further elaborating the role of perfectionism in narcissism. But it was also evident from our results that these measures are related to each other but they are not highly correlated and they clearly are not redundant with each other. Moreover, they seem to differ in ways that are reflected in the variables associated with these measures. Our results suggest that an orientation toward effortless perfection and seeming perfect while hiding effort is largely unrelated to whether someone with these attributes feels capable of projecting an image of being effortlessly perfect.

#### 4.1. Limitations and future studies

The cross-sectional design used in the present study limits the ability to formally test causality. Future studies should also use observer reports of perfectionism and narcissism in order to overcome defensive
or self-presentational biases. Moreover, since past research found a tendency to report social withdrawal and avoidance among vulnerable narcissists (Dickinson & Pincus, 2003), future study should examine the mediating role of the capability to seem perfect in the association between vulnerable narcissism and social avoidance. Finally, participants were undergraduate students, which severely limits the generalizability of the present findings. Future studies should involve community and clinical samples.

References


