

Abstract for the general public

The main objective of the current project is to address unanswered socially important questions about narcissism in the context of family and close relationships. Given the widespread popular media interest in “problems in relationships with narcissists” and experiences of their “victims”, we need to know more about the functioning of these relationships. We will investigate behaviors of highly narcissistic individuals and their partners in close relationships, likely mechanisms of developing excessive emotional codependency in their relationships, willingness to have children, parenting styles and practices of high narcissists, and also effects of popular therapeutic practices of self-compassion that might inadvertently increase state narcissism. Most of these socially relevant questions are difficult to examine with experimental designs, yet they deserve to be tackled as they spark a lot of public interest. If science fails to provide answers to them, popular media will do, drawing from folk psychology and fueling misconceptions about narcissism.

In the current project narcissism is understood as a dimension, a trait that everybody has to a smaller or greater degree. Highly narcissistic individuals desire to maintain a grandiose self, have a sense of entitlement and lack empathy and concern for others’ wellbeing. Narcissism is clearly associated with poor relationship functioning, yet, still, little is known about specific behaviors and mechanisms underlying these poor outcomes. We include various forms of narcissism in our investigation: grandiose agentic narcissism, narcissistic rivalry and admiration, communal, and vulnerable narcissism.

In a series of studies using various (correlational, longitudinal and experimental) methods, we will focus on narcissistic individuals as partners (line 1) and investigate factors likely promoting attraction to highly narcissistic partners, esp. low self-differentiation, i.e. poor emotional and cognitive separation (low autonomy) from others. We intend to determine if it is individuals with a preexisting vulnerability that tend to form relationships with potentially abusive partners or if the vulnerability develops over the course of a relationship. Both options are plausible and nonexclusive. Next, we will examine specific behaviors that high narcissists enact, esp. lying to their partners, as well as the extent to which their partners accurately detect it, and we will verify if these behaviors relate to relationship outcomes. Our preliminary data suggest that lying is an important problem and a common manipulation tactic in relationships with highly narcissistic persons that undermines trust and relationship satisfaction. Our results could help design therapeutic interventions for couples.

In another set of studies (line 2), we will use focus on narcissistic individuals as potential parents: we will model existing German longitudinal panel data and collect data representative for Polish population, to investigate narcissists’ motivations to have children, reasons they endorse for and against having children, and we will focus on gender differences. As narcissism is, according to many, on the rise and birthrates in Poland and western Europe are falling, it becomes increasingly important to understand factors underlying these population dynamics. We expect that narcissism among women is negatively related to willingness to have children and that it is due to gender roles and unique work-life tradeoffs that these status-driven women face. Next, we will examine parenting styles and practices of high narcissists, using the dataset of German Family Panel to compare parents’ and children’ perspectives on reported experiences and behaviors. Given the rise of narcissism in the general population, inevitably, increasing numbers of children (will) experience parenting done by high narcissists, self-focused impulsive persons prone to angry outbursts and aggression. Our results could facilitate future prevention and therapies.

Finally, we will test experimentally whether self-compassion, self-help and therapeutic practice involving self-forgiveness and self-acceptance, just like other popular therapeutic approaches, e.g. mindfulness (Ridderinkhof et al., 2017), backfires when applied by highly narcissistic individuals. It might be (despite assertions from the concept’s author; Neff, 2015) that self-compassion, while feeling good, exacerbates narcissism by mitigating feelings of guilt and shame, discouraging taking personal responsibility for own mistakes as well as further decreasing compassion for others.