Early Impressions of Grandiose Narcissists: A Dual-Pathway Perspective

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Already in Ovid's poetry more than two thousand years ago, Narcissus is described as someone who attracts attention and is desired as a social partner ("Legions of lusty men and bevies of girls desired him." Metamorphoses, Book III, Narcissus and Echo). In many writings about narcissism, narcissists are described as "charming and socially facile" (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001, p. 177) or as "enjoyable to work with initially" (Young & Pinsky, 2006, p. 470). Indeed, getting-to-know situations are made for narcissists. These situations offer an opportunity to self-present and impress others, satisfying narcissists' motivation for admiration and glory rather than mutual liking (Campbell & Foster, 2007; Hart, Adams, & Burton, 2016; Miller, Price, Gentile, Lynam, & Campbell, 2012; Rhodewalt & Morf, 1995; Wallace & Baumeister, 2002). Getting-to-know contexts are also a complex playing field for narcissists, because they are not inherently interested in others and tend to react more sensitive to (imagined) signs of critique (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Geukes et al., 2017; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). So what exactly do early impressions of narcissists look like in reality (i.e., in empirical research)? And how do they emerge? Are they consistent across different social contexts? And how lasting are they? In the following, we first summarize the variety of existing empirical findings on the association between narcissism and personality impressions as well as liking at zero and short-term acquaintance. We then present a dual-pathway framework that organizes these findings and specifies the moderating conditions of more or less positive first impressions of narcissists. We close with a number of suggestions for future research that build on our dual-pathway perspective.

Previous findings: A mixed blessing

A first line of research has analyzed the personality impressions narcissists make (see Carlson, Naumann, & Vazire, 2011 for an overview). These studies showed that first impressions of narcissists across a wide range of contexts including email-addresses (Back, Schmukle, & Egloff, 2008), Facebook pages (Buffardi, & Campbell, 2008), photographs (Vazire, Naumann, Rentfrow, & Gosling, 2008) or direct interactions (Back et al., 2013;

Carlson, Naumann et al., 2011; Carlson Vazire, & Oltmanns, 2011; Paulhus, 1998), capture key defining features of narcissism. In some studies, results indicated more extraverted, agentic impression outcomes (e.g. being perceived as entertaining, assertive, sociable, self-confident), while other studies found more disagreeable, antagonistic impression outcomes (e.g., being perceived as aggressive, untrustworthy, arrogant, hostile), and still others showed that narcissists evoked both kinds of narcissistic impressions (Küfner et al., 2013). Consequently, when unacquainted perceivers are directly asked about target's narcissism, these narcissism judgments tend to be somewhat accurate (Back et al., 2013; Buffardi & Campbell, 2008; Vazire et al., 2008).

A second line of research investigated how positively versus negatively narcissists are evaluated during early social encounters, that is, narcissists' popularity at zero and short-term acquaintance. In accordance, with Ovid's description of Narcissus' charm, a number of studies indicated that narcissism is positively related to initial judgments of likability (i.e., a higher popularity). In one early study, Paulhus (1998) investigated meetings of college work groups from early acquaintance onwards for seven consecutive weeks. While narcissism was related to being disliked at the end of the study, it was related to being liked initially after the first meeting. Also, students with higher levels of narcissism were evaluated as more open, competent, and well-adjusted by their peers. Back, Schmukle, and Egloff (2010) analyzed the effect of student's narcissism on their popularity at zero acquaintance—when they first met their fellow students and before any direct interaction had taken place. At the start of an introductory session for psychology freshmen, students introduced themselves individually in front of the whole cohort of fellow students for a couple of seconds and were immediately evaluated by all others. Again, narcissism was positively related to being liked. To understand the processes explaining the initial popularity of narcissists, a Brunswikian lens model framework (Back & Nestler, 2016; Back, Schmukle, & Egloff, 2011; Nestler & Back, 2013) was applied, that specifies the directly observable cues (such as physical appearances and

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behaviors) that mediate the association between targets not directly observable latent traits (such as narcissism) and impressions evoked in observers of targets (such as liking judgments). In line with this framework, narcissist's initial popularity could be explained by individual differences in specific appearances and behaviors: Narcissists were liked more, *because* they dressed fancier (e.g., fashionable dress; stylish hair), showed a charming facial expression (i.e. looked more self-assured and friendly), and self-assured body movements (e.g., straight posture, smooth movements) —all of which led to positive liking judgments. Positive associations between narcissism and being liked were also found in other self-presentational and dyadic small-talk contexts (Carlson, Vazire et al., 2011; Miller et al., 2011; see Küfner, Nestler, & Back, 2013, for an overview).

Interestingly, narcissism has been shown to lead to similar positive early impressions in the domains of romantic relationships (see Campbell, Brunell, & Finkel, 2006, and Wurst et al., 2017 for overviews) and leadership (see Campbell, Hoffman, Campbell, & Marchisio, 2011, and Grijalva, Harms, Newman, Gaddis, & Fraley, 2015, for overviews). Despite the fact that narcissism evokes problems in long-term committed relationships such as lower emotional intimacy, love, and trust and higher conflict frequency and intensity, it is related to romantic success in short-term contexts such as physical and sexual attraction, mate appeal, and dating. Similarly, despite having mixed effects on leadership effectiveness (articulation of change-oriented goals, and the facilitation of work group creativity but also risky, exploitative, and unethical behaviors), narcissism is related to leadership emergence (i.e., narcissists are more likely to be chosen as leaders).

There are, however, also a couple of studies that revealed no or even negative effects of narcissism on initial evaluations, such as in ambiguous decision-making tasks (Rauthmann, 2012), get-to-know-you conversations in small groups (Carlson, Naumann, et al., 2011), and intimacy-creating dyadic conversations after ego-threat (Heatherton & Vohs, 2000) (see Küfner et al., 2013, for an overview). Thus, initial impressions of narcissists not only contain

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positive aspects pointing to a certain charm and self-assuredness but also negative aspects such as arrogance and lack of trust. How to make sense of these mixed findings regarding early personality and liking impressions of narcissists? What explains the curious course of impression formation from very first to subsequent and later impressions narcissist make?

Making sense of the impressions narcissists make: A Dual-Pathway Model

In order to resolve these seemingly opposite effects, we propose a dual-pathway account that describes two behavioral process pathways mediating the effects of narcissism on resulting impressions. This model has proven useful in sorting existing findings and to derive novel predictions regarding the factors that moderate the narcissism-impression links (see Küfner et al., 2013, and Leckelt et al., 2015, for details).

Two Behavioral Pathways to Popularity: Distinct Behavioral Expression, Impression Formation, and Evaluation Processes

Personality traits like narcissism are not directly observable, and therefore, cannot have a direct effect on impressions that are evoked in social partners (Back, Baumert et al., 2011). Instead, for traits to have an influence on judgments in others, they need to be expressed in observable behaviors. These behaviors have to be detected and utilized to form an impression (Back & Nestler, 2016; Back et al., 2011; Funder, 1999; Nestler & Back, 2013). In the case of judgments of likeability, this also involves an evaluation process (Leckelt et al., 2015). That is, for narcissists to be (dis)liked, a sequential behavioral pathway consisting of behavioral expression, impression formation and evaluation processes has to be completed: They have to express certain behaviors that are observable and are used by perceivers to form a personality impression that is evaluated more or less positively (or negatively).

According to the dual-pathway model of narcissists' popularity (Küfner et al., 2013; Leckelt et al., 2015), and in line with recent two-dimensional conceptualizations of grandiose narcissism (Back et al., 2013), there are two such pathways that need to be distinguished; an

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agentic and an antagonistic pathway (see Figure 1; the effects of social contexts will be discussed in the next part of this chapter). On the one hand, grandiose narcissism relates to the tendency to behave dominant and expressive. This behavioral expression, in turn, leads to the impression of being assertive in social partners, which is evaluated positively, and, thus, fosters popularity. This first series of processes constitutes the agentic pathway. On the other hand, grandiose narcissism relates to arrogant and combative behavior. This behavioral expression, in turn, leads to the impression of being aggressive, which is evaluated negatively and, thus, fosters unpopularity. This second series of processes constitutes the antagonistic pathway.

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

Depending on which of the two pathways is stronger in a situation, a positive (agentic pathway is stronger), a negative (antagonistic pathway is stronger), or no (both pathways cancel each other out) association between narcissism and popularity can result. These dual-pathway dynamics have now been replicated in several laboratory samples with real-life interactions in small groups of young adults that involved narcissism reports, independently coded actual behavior, as well as round-robin ratings of personality impressions and liking evaluations (Küfner et al., 2013; Leckelt et al., 2015). The dual-pathway model does not only help to explain in a fine-grained process-oriented way *how* a given effect of narcissism on personality impressions and subsequent liking evaluations emerged; it also allows delineating *moderating effects* of contextual and personal variables. We will now focus on three particularly relevant moderators: the social context, the acquaintance level, and the dimension of narcissism being investigated.

Effects of the social context

Previous research has shown that the impressions narcissists evoke are not uniform but vary depending on the context they are investigated in. According to the dual-pathway model, the influence of social context should be driven by effects on the one and/or the other pathway (see Figure 1). The stronger a social context (a) evokes or allows to express charming, self-assured behavior (behavioral expression process stage), (b) makes this behavior salient as an indicator of assertiveness (impression formation process stage), and (c) the more it emphasizes the value of assertiveness (evaluation process stage), the stronger the positive associations between narcissism and popularity should be (agentic pathway). In contrast, the stronger a social context evokes or allows differences in arrogant and combative behaviors, makes arrogant and combative behavior salient as an indicator of aggressiveness, and emphasizes the value of communion and trustworthiness (antagonistic pathway), the more negative associations between narcissism and popularity should result.

Following this perspective, the degree to which a situation is a one-sided self-presentation (triggering the agentic pathway) versus an intimate interaction (triggering the antagonistic pathway) should be a particularly relevant aspect of the situational context. The mixed findings of previous research can be understood as a consequence of each study realizing a different social context that was more or less self-presentational versus interactive (and increasingly intimate), and thus, triggered the two pathways to different degrees. In line with this logic, previous studies that found a positive effect of narcissism on popularity were characterized by a rather self-presentational context, whereas previous studies that showed a negative effect were characterized by a more intimate and interactive context (see Küfner et al., 2013, for an overview).

More direct evidence for the moderating effect of the interactive context on the dual-pathway dynamics stems from a series of laboratory studies in which the two behavioral pathways were directly observed and the situational context was varied. Küfner and colleagues (2013) focused on a group discussion that involved self-presentational as well as

more intimate, interactive aspects. In this mixed situation, the agentic and the antagonistic pathway, were both evident but cancelled each other out (replicated in two samples): Narcissists behaved more dominantly and expressively, which made them seen as more assertive, and thereby, more popular. But at the same time they behaved in a more arrogant and combative way, which made them seen as aggressive, and thereby unpopular. Leckelt and colleagues (2015) provided another replication of this pattern of effects in a similar mixed situation. In addition, however, by applying a number of further situational contexts, they showed that the pattern of associations systematically changes in line with the dual-pathway model. In a pure self-presentational context, differences in arrogant behaviors were not observable, making the antagonistic pathway ineffective—resulting in more positive effects of narcissism (carried via the agentic pathway). Finally, in a more intimate, interactional context (e.g., discussing moral dilemma or each other's positive and negative personality characteristics), uncommunal perceptions (e.g., being seen as aggressive or untrustworthy) were evaluated increasingly more negative, while being seen as assertive was evaluated less (but still) positively.

Acquaintance effects

According to Campbell and Campbell's (2009) contextual reinforcement model, narcissism is beneficial in early stages of acquaintance (the 'emerging zone'), but as the level of acquaintance increases (the 'enduring zone'), narcissism becomes detrimental. Applied to the personality and liking impressions of narcissists, and from the perspective of the dual-pathway model, this moderating role of the acquaintance level directly follows from the above-mentioned effects of situational contexts. With an increase in acquaintance-level the typical situational affordances also change (see Figure 1). Zero acquaintance situations are typically more superficial and one-sided, and allow narcissists to break the ice by their agentic self-presentational style. Also, there are few reasons and chances to display aggression and arrogance. As people get to know each other, however, situations get more intimate and

potentially controversial. The consideration of each other's views, dealing with negative feedback, and a modest interaction style become increasingly important; all of which narcissists are not particularly prone to. In a nutshell, narcissists' popularity declines over time because getting acquainted goes along with a shift from self-presentation to intimate interaction and, therefore, an increased triggering of the antagonistic as opposed to the agentic pathway. These temporal dynamics and the underlying behavioral process pathways have recently been confirmed in a longitudinal laboratory study designed to mimic the natural acquaintance process (Leckelt et al., 2015). In their study, Leckelt and colleagues related narcissism to observed behaviors, interpersonal perceptions of interaction partners, and popularity among group members. Groups interacted in 1-hour long weekly sessions over the course of three weeks where each session was designed to mimic the getting-acquainted-process (ranging from self-introduction in Week 1, through team work tasks in Week 2, to controversial discussions in Week 3). This way, the behavioral, perceptual, and evaluative processes of narcissists' initially greater but in the long-run declining popularity were revealed.

Effects of the acquaintance level on the narcissism-popularity association can, therefore, be understood as a consequence of changing social context which differentially affects the two narcissistic pathways. In addition, the social contexts can also influence what level of acquaintance is attainable; i.e., the context can influence whether people are able to get to know each other well. Please also note that acquaintance level and context only typically go hand in hand in a probabilistic sense (i.e. they are positively correlated; which explains why context features can explain typical acquaintance effects on the narcissism-popularity relation) but they don't necessarily need to. The effects on narcissistic process dynamics should always be driven by defined context features, meaning that the antagonistic pathway could be triggered in short-term acquaintance if an immediate intimate and controversial situation is created (e.g., a stress interview during a job application; freshman

being thrown into a political discussion) and the agentic pathway could have a stronger effect than usual within well-acquaintances in more superficial self-presentational contexts (e.g., an important meeting at work with the CEO present; or having a karaoke party with friends).

Effects of Dimensions of Grandiose Narcissism

Both of the pathways described above can be differentially aligned to dimensions of grandiose narcissism (see Figure 1). Recent research on the structure and correlates of narcissism (Back et al., 2013; Brown, Budzek, & Tamborski, 2009; Krizan & Herlache, in press; Miller et al., 2016) converges in that grandiose narcissism is thought to entail aspects that can be sorted into more agentic (e.g., grandiosity, dominance, leadership) and more antagonistic dimensions (e.g., arrogance, exploitativeness, devaluation of others). The Narcissistic Admiration and Rivalry Concept (NARC; Back et al., 2013) provides a conceptual framework for these distinct dimensions of grandiose narcissism as being rooted in different social strategies to maintain a grandiose self: the tendency to attain social admiration by means of self-promotion (assertive self-enhancement) and the tendency to prevent social failure by means of self-defense (antagonistic self-protection). These motivational dynamics are thought to result in distinct behavioral dynamics termed *narcissistic admiration* and *narcissistic rivalry*. Admiration reflects the agentic pathway, rivalry reflects the antagonistic pathway. In line with the dual-pathway approach and the NARC, measures of admiration indeed predicted narcissists' popularity at first sight (via dominant, expressive behaviors, and being seen as assertive), while rivalry predicted its decline over time by an increase in arrogant, combative behaviors, and being seen as aggressive/untrustworthy (Leckelt et al., 2015).

Similarly, in the romantic context, Wurst and colleagues (2017) showed that the short-term romantic appeal associated with narcissism is primarily attributable to agentic narcissism (i.e. narcissistic admiration), whereas the long-term romantic problems associated with narcissism are primarily attributable to antagonistic narcissism (i.e. narcissistic rivalry).

Future Directions: Further Applications of the Dual-Pathway Model across Samples, Contexts, and Designs

It is our hope that the dual-pathway approach helps to systemize previous findings on early impressions of narcissists and also outlines some conceptual and methodological guidance for future research on this complex issue. Future research should try to apply and replicate the complex effects and behavioral dynamics of grandiose narcissism across a wider range of populations, contexts, and designs.

While the dual-pathway model is well-supported in the domain of non-romantic peer-relations among educated young adults, it should be tested with samples of different age, sociodemographic, and cultural backgrounds. Similarly, fine-grained process analyses should also be applied to the domains of romantic relationships and leadership contexts. In both domains, there is evidence for positive initial impressions of narcissists (i.e., narcissism is related to dating success and leadership emergence) and more problematic outcomes later on (i.e., narcissism is related to relationship and work conflict). We predict that the outlined sequential agentic and antagonistic pathways will help to further disentangle the effects of grandiose narcissism across situational contexts in these domains as well.

Previous research on early impressions of narcissists that incorporated behavioral processes has been conducted in predefined laboratory contexts. This methodological approach has several advantages such as a better control over the social situation, the environment, and number of interaction partners. It also comes along, however, with certain drawbacks, such as limited knowledge regarding the psychological relevance participants ascribe to the situation and concerning the frequency with which participants select into situations with similar environmental features and interaction partners in their real-life. At the same time, field investigations come with their own challenges, for example, when it comes to the direct assessment of behavior (e.g., via experience-sampled interaction partner-reports or smartphone sensing) and the disentangling of effects due to narcissists' selection of situations

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and partners from effects of their behavior within a given situation. Optimally, future research should try to combine laboratory and field-based studies and try to assess the relevant process dynamics in both (see Wrzus & Mehl, 2015).

By investigating different samples in the contexts of peer, romantic, and work-related impressions across laboratory and field designs that allow to measure the involved behavioral processes and to differentiate between situational contexts and narcissism dimensions, future research guided by a dual-pathway approach will reveal further exciting findings about the curious and consequential impressions narcissists make.

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Figure caption

Figure 1. A dual-pathway model of grandiose narcissism and early interpersonal impressions.

Acquaintance level
zero vs. short-term vs. long-term;

Situational context
one-sided, self-presentational vs. intimate, interactive

Narcissism dimension
agentic (e.g., narcissistic admiration) vs. antagonistic (e.g., narcissistic rivalry)

Narcissism

dominant-expressive behavior

Being seen as assertive

arrogant-combative behavior

Being seen as aggressive

Popularity

behavioral expression

impression formation

evaluation