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Anthony D. Hermann • Amy B. Brunell  
Joshua D. Foster  
Editors

# Handbook of Trait Narcissism

Key Advances, Research Methods,  
and Controversies

 Springer



### Editors

Anthony D. Hermann  
Department of Psychology  
Bradley University  
Peoria, IL, USA

Amy B. Brunell  
Department of Psychology  
Ohio State University at Mansfield  
Mansfield, OH, USA

Joshua D. Foster  
Department of Psychology  
University of South Alabama  
Mobile, AL, USA

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## Preface

We are very pleased to present *The Handbook of Trait Narcissism: Key Advances, Research Methods, and Controversies*. This handbook is the first of its kind, an edited volume devoted to the latest theoretical and empirical developments on individual differences in narcissism in personality and social psychology. Ours, however, is not the first “handbook” dedicated to narcissism; Campbell and Miller (2011) paved the way with one which sought to bridge the clinical and personality-social “divide” providing a much-needed summary of recent work from both academic spheres. Our effort here is somewhat less ambitious but comes at a time in which narcissism research is exploding and theoretical development is happening at a rapid pace. According to PsychINFO, there have been over 1600 peer-reviewed journal articles published on the subject of narcissism since January of 2011, a more than 50% increase from all those published since the Narcissistic Personality Inventory was published in 1979! In order to accommodate as many topics as possible, we have adopted a “brief chapter” approach in which we have asked authors to summarize cutting-edge research and suggest future research directions in less than 3500 words. We believe this also serves the reader as well, as it makes it quicker and easier than ever before to keep abreast of the latest developments. We hope this handbook will serve the seasoned narcissism researcher trying to keep up with this rapidly advancing and fluid field, the novice researcher or student trying to gain a theoretical foothold, as well as the journalist or member of the public who desires an accurate yet accessible depiction of the science of narcissism.

Our editorial duties for this volume have given us a “bird’s eye” view of our field and we have several observations to offer our readers. First, narcissism research has spread to a dramatically wider variety of domains since Campbell and Miller’s (2011) volume. For example, our handbook includes chapters on topics like followership, memory, friendship, envy, religiosity, and bullying—topics that did not appear in the Campbell and Miller’s (2011) handbook. Moreover, new and fascinating empirical perspectives on the development of narcissism have appeared in the intervening years, which include advances in our understanding of the impact of parenting, economic conditions, behavioral genetics, and other factors, all of which can be found in the current volume.

Our initial intention was to develop a book that focused exclusively on grandiose narcissism research. However, we quickly realized that the literature on vulnerable narcissism had exploded recently as well and was often so



intimately linked to research on grandiose narcissism that it was impractical, and even misleading, to avoid the topic altogether. As a result, a substantial portion of the handbook addresses developments in the literatures on both grandiose and vulnerable narcissism. For example, we have four chapters entirely devoted to making key empirical and theoretical distinctions between the two constructs, and a great many chapters address vulnerable narcissism as a substantial subtopic. Questions remain, however, regarding which core traits vulnerable and grandiose narcissism share and how to best conceptualize these distinct (i.e., weakly correlated) personality traits. Moreover, the conceptual and empirical relation between grandiose narcissism, vulnerable narcissism, and the more clinically oriented constructs of pathological narcissism and narcissistic personality disorder remain underdeveloped. Nevertheless, we think readers of this volume will come away with a more nuanced understanding of narcissism and its many varieties.

A good deal of recent research has also made it very clear that individual differences in grandiosity and self-inflation can take many forms. For example, recent work on communal and collective narcissism has made a compelling case that trait self-aggrandizement can be based on prosocial traits ("I am the most charitable person!") and also be held on behalf of one's social group ("We are the best country on Earth!"). These developments have clearly arisen, at least in part, because there is still ample room in the field for psychometric and theoretical innovation. On the other hand, we still lack consensus on how to best measure many of our core constructs and those that are relevant, albeit distinct, from narcissism. The good news is that new and theoretically driven measures are emerging, which serve as useful tools as we seek to advance our knowledge in a more concerted and cumulative fashion.

As we present this work to you, we are filled with gratitude for the excellent contributions of all our authors and to be a part of an intellectually exciting field that is more relevant than ever. The three of us approached this daunting project with a combined sense of excitement and more than a little anxiety. Our anxieties were quickly replaced with feelings of appreciation and indebtedness, however, when we began to receive drafts of the individual chapters. They were overwhelmingly punctual and well-written and required modest levels of editing on our parts. We are so thankful to the contributors, who so clearly put significant effort into their chapters, and did so almost entirely as an act of collegiality. Who knew that narcissism researchers could be so selfless? More specifically, we are thankful for collegial support and advice from W. Keith Campbell and the encouragement and assistance of Morgan Ryan at Springer, without which this book would have never made it off the ground.

Peoria, IL, USA  
Mansfield, OH, USA  
Mobile, AL, USA

Anthony D. Hermann  
Amy B. Brunell  
Joshua D. Foster

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## Contributors

**Robert A. Ackerman** School of Behavioral and Brain Sciences, The University of Texas at Dallas, Richardson, TX, USA

**Mitja D. Back** Department of Psychology, University of Münster, Münster, Germany

**Christopher T. Barry** Department of Psychology, Washington State University, Pullman, WA, USA

**Alex J. Benson** Department of Psychology, University of Western Ontario, London, ON, Canada

**Emily C. Bianchi** Goizueta Business School, Emory University, Atlanta, GA, USA

**Jennifer K. Bosson** Department of Psychology, University of South Florida, Tampa, FL, USA

**Jennifer A. Brantley** Department of Psychology, University of South Alabama, Mobile, AL, USA

**Eddie Brummelman** Department of Psychology, Stanford University, Stanford, CA, USA

Research Institute of Child Development and Education, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

**Amy B. Brunell** Department of Psychology, The Ohio State University at Mansfield, Mansfield, OH, USA

**Melissa T. Buelow** Department of Psychology, The Ohio State University at Newark, Newark, OH, USA

**Huajian Cai** CAS Key Laboratory of Behavioral Science, Institute of Psychology, Chinese Academy of Sciences, Beijing, China

**Erika N. Carlson** University of Toronto, Mississauga, ON, Canada

**Kevin J. Carson** School of Behavioral and Brain Sciences, The University of Texas at Dallas, Richardson, TX, USA

**Sylvia Z. Cisek** School of Psychology, University of Southampton, Southampton, UK



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## Narcissistic Consumption

31

Constantine Sedikides, Claire M. Hart,  
and Sylwia Z. Cisek

### Abstract

This chapter is about conspicuous consumption and narcissists’ proneness to it. We distinguish, in particular, between two kinds of consumer goods, luxury and mundane. Luxury goods are flashy, expensive, impractical, and often overfunctional (complicated to use). Mundane goods, on the other hand, are common looking, affordable, practical, and functional. Consumers may purchase luxury products for symbolic reasons, such as the satisfaction of self-motives, whereas they may purchase mundane products for utilitarian reasons, such as maximizing product profitability and product price (“best value for money”). Evidence indicates that narcissists prefer symbolic over mundane products (e.g., hair conditioners, mobile phones, MP3 players, sunglasses). We argue that they do so for at least four interrelated reasons. The *first* pertains to positive distinctiveness, such as the desire for individuation (being unique or different) and elevation (feeling privileged or of higher social rank). The *second* reason is materialism: symbolic product purchasing

indicates financial success, wealth accumulation, and power. The *third* reason is the pursuit of meaning in life: symbolic purchasing contributes to perceptions of life as significant, purposeful, and coherent. The *fourth* and final reason is sexual signaling: symbolic product purchasing tends to increase the consumer’s sexual appeal. We ask whether the narcissistic consumer can be “rehabilitated” via a self-affirmation manipulation. We conclude by highlighting the need for a more in-depth examination of the four reasons for narcissistic symbolic product purchasing and also for clarifying whether the same reasons apply to other forms of narcissism, such as vulnerable narcissism.

### Keywords

Consumption · Luxury · Positive distinctiveness · Materialism · Meaning · Sexual signaling

In 1899, Thorstein Veblen coined the term “conspicuous consumption” to describe the parading of luxury goods (e.g., corsets, silver spoons) as markers of social rank or status. Luxury goods, also known as brand names, are far more available and accessible today. But not all mortals have a craving for them. The ones who do may qualify as narcissists.

C. Sedikides (✉) · C. M. Hart · S. Z. Cisek  
University of Southampton, Southampton, UK  
e-mail: cs2@soton.ac.uk



We begin in this chapter by classifying consumer goods as luxury versus mundane. We then discuss initial evidence showing that narcissists prefer luxury over mundane products and theorize about the reasons for doing so. Subsequently, we review empirical evidence linking reasons for narcissistic consumer preferences and conclude with a consideration of promising research paths.

### Consumer Goods: Luxury Versus Mundane

Consumer goods vary on several dimensions, one of which is of particular relevance. On the low end of this dimension, products are affordable (inexpensive), practical (easy to use), functional (deliver just what they are supposed to deliver), and common looking (plain or prototypical). We term such products *mundane*. On the high end of the dimension, products are unaffordable (expensive), impractical (complicated to apply), over-functional (deliver their key use but include many others uses), and uncommon looking (glamorous or flashy). We term such products *luxury*.

Consumers may purchase mundane products for utilitarian reasons, exemplified with the catchphrase "best value for money." Here, consumers engage in cost-benefit analysis, arriving at a rational choice that maximizes product profitability and product price (Deaton & Muellbauer, 1980; Zinkhan, 1992). They purchase mundane products in an effort to cope optimally with the pressures of daily life. In contrast, consumers may purchase luxury products for symbolic reasons. William James (1890) was the first to observe that products or, more generally, material possessions can define, and indeed become an extension of, the self: "A man's Self is the sum total of all that he CAN call his, not only his body and his psychic powers, but his clothes and his house, ... his lands, and yacht and bank-account" (p. 291). Sartre (1943/1958) similarly remarked that, "The totality of my possessions reflects the totality of my being. I am what I have" (p. 591). Theory and research have been kind to James'

and Sartre's insights. For example, products or possessions are often internalized to be part of one's self-definition (Belk, 1988; Dittmar, 2011) and are often used to express one's self attributes (Dunning, 2007; Kressman et al., 2006). In all, luxury products serve self-motives, and this is where narcissism comes into play (Sedikides, Gregg, Cisek, & Hart, 2007).

### Do Narcissists Prefer Luxury Products over Mundane Products?

In preliminary work, we attempted to establish "proof of concept," namely, that narcissists (grandiose narcissists, to be exact) prefer luxury over mundane products (Sedikides, Cisek, & Hart, 2011; see also Cisek et al., 2014). After responding to the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Terry, 1988), participants completed a booklet presenting them with examples (both pictorial and descriptive) of four types of products: hair conditioners, mobile phones, MP3 players, and sunglasses. One example reflected a luxury version, the other a mundane version. Participants viewed the photographs, read the descriptions, and chose the product they intended to buy. We computed a cumulative luxury product score by summing the number of relevant choices that participants made (range = 0–4) and entered that score in a regression analysis. Narcissism positively predicted the number of luxury products chosen for purchase. Narcissists seem to prefer luxury (over mundane) goods.

This proof of concept is reinforced by converging evidence. For example, narcissists tend to wear expensive and stylish clothes, with female narcissists being more likely to wear makeup, have plucked eyebrows, and show cleavage and male narcissists being unlikely to wear glasses (Vazire, Naumann, Rentfrow, & Gosling, 2008). Narcissists, then, "take better care of themselves" (Holtzman & Strube, 2010, p. 136), and, as a consequence, they are seen as more attractive by others (Holtzman & Strube, 2010).

### Why Would Narcissists Prefer Luxury Products?

We emphasize four key reasons why narcissists prefer luxury over mundane products: positive distinctiveness, materialism, meaning, and sexual signaling. We also review evidence for each reason.

#### Positive Distinctiveness

Positive distinctiveness refers to the intertwined motives of individuation (conveying that one is unique or different; Brewer, 1991; Snyder & Fromkin, 1980) and elevation (conveying that one's social rank is higher or privileged; Frank, 1985; Sedikides & Gregg, 2008). These motives are observable across individuals. For starters, scarce goods are alluring (Brock, 1968; Inman, Peter, & Raghubir, 1997).

Individuation has been shown to be a driving force of narcissistic consumer preferences, as illustrated by Lee, Gregg, and Park (2013; see also Lee & Seidle, 2012). Narcissists were particularly likely to purchase products that were unconventional and would help them look different from others or personalize them (Study 1). Also, narcissists, when deciding between free accessories, were more likely to choose a luxury product (i.e., leather case) over a gift coupon, given that the leather case was of limited edition and could be engraved with their name (Study 2). In addition, narcissists were especially likely to express preferences for a customized and distinct shirt to purchase it and to pay more for it (Study 3). Finally, narcissists were particularly eager to like a watch and purchase it by paying a higher price for it, when it was described as limited edition rather than as abundantly available (Study 4). More recently, De Bellis, Sprott, Herrmann, Bierhoff, and Rohmann (2016) also demonstrated that narcissists prefer more unique products and, further, that state narcissism can be primed via marketing communications to influence product uniqueness.

Elevation has also been shown to be a driving force of narcissistic consumer preferences;

Naderi and Paswan (2016) manipulated contextual features of the shopping environment (i.e., high or low product prices, prestigious or non-prestigious retail store) and examined resulting purchase intentions. Narcissists manifested stronger purchase intentions than non-narcissists when a high-priced product was sold at a prestigious retail store. Narcissists were presumably attracted by the status signals of product price and store image combined.

#### Materialism

Narcissists appear to desire material possessions (Cohen & Cohen, 1996), aspire to financial success (Roberts & Robins, 2000), and prioritize the acquisition of wealth (Kasser & Ryan, 1996). They are also prone to compulsive buying (Rose, 2007). Narcissists, then, are materialistic. There is some evidence that materialistic persons tend to purchase luxury products, for appearance and status reasons (Kressman et al., 2006; Richins, 1994). We (Hart, Cisek, & Sedikides, 2017) hypothesized that, if narcissists are materialistic, they will also manifest stronger preferences for luxury than mundane products. The data were consistent with this hypothesis. Across three studies, we showed that materialism mediated the relation between grandiose narcissism and preference for luxury items. That is, narcissism (assessed with the NPI) positively predicted materialism (assessed with the Material Values Scale; Richins & Dawson, 1992), which in turn positively predicted a preference for luxury over mundane products.

We describe this research in more detail. In Study 1, participants (university students) completed a consumer decision task. Specifically, they were presented with pictorial and descriptive information for seven pairs of products (one luxury, one mundane): mobile phone, sunglasses, hair conditioner, MP3 player, coffee machine, desk lamp, and laptop. For each pair, participants viewed the photographs, read the descriptions, and chose the product that they intended to buy. We computed a cumulative luxury product score by summing the number of luxury choices that



participants made (range = 0–7). Narcissism, via materialism, positively predicted the number of luxury products chosen for purchase. In Study 2, we tested the replicability of these findings using a large and diverse online sample. Participants completed a consumer decision task similar to Study 1. The task featured ten pairs of product choices: bike, watch, toaster, suitcase, sound system, coffee machine, exercise equipment, satellite navigation system, mobile phone, and MP4 player. Participants were also offered the opportunity to request additional information (pictorial and descriptive) about the luxury and mundane products before choosing which product they intended to buy. Again, narcissism positively predicted the number of luxury products chosen for purchase, and it did so via materialism. In Study 3, another online study, participants reported and rated products that they already owned. Higher narcissism predicted owning more luxury (e.g., fashionable) products, purchasing new products even when the old ones worked well, and characterizing the accessories they own as luxury rather than mundane. All these effects were mediated by materialism. Similar findings were reported in a recent investigation by Pilch and Górnik-Durose (2017). Narcissism positively predicted materialism, which in turn positively predicted preferences for luxury products (i.e., how important it is to possess the newest or most well-known type of products).

### Meaning

Meaning in life is the sense that one's existence is significant (i.e., has value), purposeful (i.e., has goals), and coherent (i.e., has predictability) (King, Heintzelman, & Ward, 2016). The pursuit of meaning is a central human concern (Frankl, 2006; Sartre, 1943/1958). Meaning can be derived from many domains, such as personal growth (O'Connor & Chamberlain, 2000), interpersonal relationships (Lambert et al., 2013), and investment in one's culture (Routledge et al., 2010). More generally, there is consensus that

meaning is derived from pursuing intrinsic goals rather than extrinsic goals (Kasser, Cohn, Kanner, & Ryan, 2007); in fact, the pursuit of extrinsic goals is thought to undercut meaning (Kashdan & Breen, 2007; Schlegel, Hicks, Arndt, & King, 2009). Intrinsic goals are internally motivated and satiate psychological needs such as belongingness (e.g., maintaining relationships, contributing to one's group or community). Extrinsic goals, on the other hand, are externally motivated and satiate self-serving needs such as positive evaluations or rewards (e.g., fame, money, luxury goods).

As we mentioned above, narcissism is positively linked to desire for material possessions, aspirations of financial success, and prioritization of extrinsic pursuits (Cohen & Cohen, 1996; Kasser & Ryan, 1996; Roberts & Robins, 2000). By contrast, narcissism is negatively linked to desire for intrinsic pursuits, such as fostering interpersonal bonds or helping others; in a similar vein, narcissists engage in activities likely to confer admiration and approval rather than personal mastery (Baumeister & Wallace, 2012; Morf, Weir, & Davidov, 2000). Narcissists, then, are likely to derive meaning from extrinsic pursuits (Sedikides, Hart, Cisek, & Routledge, 2013).

This hypothesis was put to the test by Abeyta, Routledge, and Sedikides (2017). In Study 1, narcissism was positively related to meaning ascribed to the pursuit of extrinsic goals, but not to meaning ascribed to the pursuit of intrinsic goals. Study 2 involved an experimental manipulation. After assessing narcissism (with the NPI), first-year undergraduate students viewed information that emphasized either the extrinsic (financial) benefits of university education or the intrinsic (personal fulfillment) benefits of university education and then reported the presence of meaning in their lives. Narcissism was positively associated with meaning when the extrinsic (but not intrinsic) value of university education was rendered salient. More important, emphasizing the extrinsic (vs. intrinsic) value of university education increased meaning among high (relative to low) narcissists.

### Sexual Signaling

According to the social signaling explanation, conspicuous consumption serves as a sexual signaling system (Lycett & Dunbar, 2000; Sundie et al., 2011). For example, men are more likely to use conspicuous consumption when they adopt a short-term rather than a long-term mating strategy. Just as the peacock uses his long, extravagant, and beautiful tail to entice his peahen (Darwin, 1872), males may use their possessions to display their economic resources and desirability as a mating partner.

Sundie et al. (2011) demonstrated that women perceive men who conspicuously consume as being interested in short-term rather than in long-term mating. Furthermore, conspicuous purchasing enhanced men's desirability as a short-term mate, but not as a long-term mate. We would link these findings to narcissism. Narcissists manifest restricted socio-sexuality, that is, they engage in more casual sex and have more sexual partners (Foster, Shrira, & Campbell, 2006; Schmitt et al., 2017). Also, they boast romantic success in short-term contexts (e.g., attracting potential sexual partners or dating; Jonason, Li, Webster, & Schmitt, 2009; Wurst et al., 2017) but suffer romantic setbacks in long-term contexts (Wurst et al., 2017). Although narcissists find it easy to start relationships (Bradlee & Emmons, 1992), they are less committed to current partners and are less interested in staying with them (Campbell & Foster, 2002; Wurst et al., 2017). In all, a further reason why narcissists indicate such strong preferences for luxury over mundane goods may be their proclivity to use luxury goods in order to improve their short-term mating appeal.

### Lingering Issues

In reviewing positive distinctiveness, materialism, meaning, and sexual signaling as explanations for narcissistic consumption, we assumed that preferences for luxury products serve to bolster an already inflated narcissistic self. This is so for grandiose narcissists. Recently, however, the construct of grandiose narcissism has been bro-

ken down into two facets: admiration and rivalry (Back et al., 2013). Narcissistic admiration maintains or elevates the narcissistic self via agentic self-enhancement, whereas narcissistic rivalry maintains or elevates the narcissistic self via antagonistic self-protection. It is likely that preference for luxury (over mundane) products will be stronger among persons high on narcissistic admiration than high on narcissistic rivalry.

Another form of narcissism, vulnerable narcissism, is also relevant. Vulnerable narcissism is marked not only by self-absorption and entitlement (as is grandiose narcissism) but also by hypersensitivity to criticism, shame, emotional reactivity, and distrust (Miller et al., 2011). Vulnerable narcissists may also be driven to conspicuous consumption (Veblen, 1934) but for a different reason than grandiose narcissism. In particular, conspicuous consumption may compensate for vulnerable narcissists' presumed inner fragility. Indirect evidence for this proposition was reported by Pilch and Górnik-Durose (2017; see also Hart et al., 2017, Study 3), who found that vulnerable narcissism predicted preferences for luxury products, and these preferences were mediated by materialism. More direct evidence indeed points to a positive link between inner fragility (i.e., self-doubt, inadequacy, insecurity) and materialism. For example, insecurity, either reported in one's dreams (Kasser & Kasser, 2001) or as an outcome of death cognition activation (Kasser & Sheldon, 2000), is related to materialism. Also, self-doubt predicts materialism, and manipulation of self-doubt (through memorization of such words as "doubtful," "uncertain," and "insecure") leads to higher level of materialism compared to a control condition (memorization of such words as "inside," "unicorn," and "double") (Chang & Arkin, 2002). Finally, persons expressing inadequacy in a given domain (e.g., tennis) are especially likely to own materialistic displays (e.g., brand-name clothing) that underpin the domain-relevant identity (i.e., tennis players; Braun & Wicklund, 1989). In all, inner fragility is positively associated with, and evokes, materialism, while materialistic displays can restore self-worth among persons high on inner fragility. In fact, it is possible that materialistic



value acts as a buffer against not only psychological pain but also physical pain (Cisek, Hart, & Sedikides, 2008).

As we discussed, narcissism is related to materialism (and, through it, to conspicuous consumption). Materialism is negatively associated with subjective well-being (Kasser & Ryan, 1993; Richins & Dawson, 1992). Nevertheless, grandiose narcissism is positively linked to subjective well-being (Sedikides, Rudich, Gregg, Kumashiro, & Rusbult, 2004). A reason for this link might have to do with grandiose narcissists deriving meaning from extrinsic pursuits (including the purchase of luxury good), as meaning is a key predictor of psychological well-being (Reker, Peacock, & Wong, 1987; Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006). This is a possibility worth testing.

Can narcissistic conspicuous consumption be rehabilitated? Feeling threatened (via an experimental manipulation) increases willingness to pay for unique, rare, and scarce products (i.e., photographs, computers, pens; Gao, Wheeler, & Shiv, 2009, Studies 1–2; Sivanathan & Pettit, 2010, Study 1), while lower self-esteem among lower-income participants mediates willingness to pay for a high-end car (Sivanathan & Pettit, 2010, Study 3). However, preferences for luxury products are eliminated or reduced following affirmation of one's important values or thinking about ownership of a high-status good (Gao et al., 2009, Study 3; Sivanathan & Pettit, 2010, Studies 2 and 4). It is worth exploring, then, whether self-affirmation is likely to attenuate narcissists' preferences for luxury goods over mundane goods.

## In Conclusion

Narcissists are unlikely to opt for the ordinary and pedestrian. They will seek the exclusive, flashy, and scarce. The preference of grandiose narcissists for luxury (over mundane) products is due to at least four reasons: positive distinctiveness, materialism, meaning, and sexual signaling. Future research will do well to localize these reasons in different facets of grandiose narcissism, such as admiration versus rivalry. The preference

of vulnerable narcissists for luxury products is due to at least one reason: inner fragility. Future research will need to document this reason using more rigorous designs.

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## The Narcissistic Pursuit of Status

32

Virgil Zeigler-Hill, Gillian A. McCabe,  
Jennifer K. Vrabel, Christopher M. Raby,  
and Sinead Cronin

### Abstract

This chapter considers the factors that motivate narcissistic individuals to pursue external validation. Narcissistic individuals pursue external validation through various strategies (e.g., appearance enhancement, social media use), but we focus primarily on the desire for status because we believe it may be especially helpful for understanding the intrapsychic processes and interpersonal behaviors that characterize narcissistic individuals. We argue that the narcissistic concern for status may help us understand why the self-presentational goals of narcissistic individuals often focus on issues surrounding self-promotion or intimidation rather than affiliation. The lack of concern that narcissistic individuals have for affiliation suggests that their self-promotional efforts are not regulated by typical concerns about also being liked which may shed light on the reasons they engage in interpersonal behaviors that others tend to find irritating and aversive (e.g., being selfish or arrogant). We conclude by suggesting that the desire for

status may be a fundamental aspect of narcissism that has the potential to provide additional insights into the cognitive processes and interpersonal behaviors that characterize narcissistic individuals rather than simply being one of the ways in which narcissistic individuals go about regulating their feelings of self-worth.

### Keywords

Status · Affiliation · Communion · Agency · Dominance-prestige model · Dominance · Prestige

Grandiose narcissism refers to a set of personality traits and processes that are centered around an extremely positive – yet potentially fragile – self-concept (see Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001, for a review). The fragile nature of this grandiose self-concept is thought to lead individuals with narcissistic tendencies to pursue external validation in order to maintain their inflated self-perceptions (see Wallace, 2011, for a competing view of narcissistic self-enhancement). The external validation pursued by narcissistic individuals often takes the form of seeking the attention of others and attempting to improve their positions within their social groups. For example, narcissistic individuals try to capture the attention of others through a wide variety of strategies that include

V. Zeigler-Hill (✉) · J. K. Vrabel · C. M. Raby  
S. Cronin  
Oakland University, Rochester, MI, USA  
e-mail: zeiglerh@oakland.edu

G. A. McCabe  
University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY, USA