



Justifications of entitlement in grandiose and vulnerable narcissism: The roles of injustice and superiority[☆]

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ABSTRACT

This research examines whether two people can be highly entitled but arrive at that conclusion in different ways. Using a lens of trait narcissism, we hypothesized that individuals high in grandiose narcissism (GN) justify entitlement via perceived superiority whereas individuals high in vulnerable narcissism (VN) justify entitlement via concerns of injustice. Participants across three studies ($n_s = 135\text{--}280$) completed narcissism and entitlement measures. Study 1 participants selected domains (e.g., admiration, power) to which they felt entitled and indicated reasons why. Study 2 and 3 tested mediation models with measures of superiority (i.e. perceived status) and injustice (i.e. felt victimhood). We found that both narcissistic variants reported high entitlement. However, people high in GN justified their entitlement with perceived superiority (e.g. "I am naturally deserving") which mediated associations between GN and entitlement. In contrast, people high in VN justified their entitlement with concerns of injustice (e.g. "I have been disadvantaged in the past") which mediated associations between VN and entitlement. Three additional studies ($n_s = 78\text{--}243$), reported in footnotes, replicated mediation models. This work furthers theoretical understanding on a core trait shared by the narcissistic variants and illuminates differences in how people justify deservingness.

1. Introduction

Entitlement is a commonly discussed issue in society today, as older adults often view younger generations as more entitled (Alton, 2017), colleges report detrimental outcomes for individuals who are academically entitled (Jiang et al., 2016), and more recent commentary on world events has called into question the role entitlement may play in serious acts of violence; for example, before killing sorority women, a man in Santa Barbara wrote a manifesto detailing the entitlement he felt toward deserving sex from women (Yan et al., 2014). These examples emphasize the need to better understand individuals' experiences of entitlement. One population known for their high entitlement are people high in trait narcissism. The current paper aims to explore the possibility that while entitlement can be defined as a unitary construct, this sense of deservingness can stem from different processes as observed in two variants of trait narcissism. Specifically, we explore whether individuals high in grandiose narcissism justify their entitlement through perceptions of superiority whereas individuals high in vulnerable narcissism justify their entitlement through their concerns of injustice.

1.1. The study of entitlement

Entitlement is a stable and pervasive belief that a person deserves more than others (Campbell et al., 2004) and commonly involves the expectation of special favors (Grubbs & Exline, 2016). Although having some entitlement can be beneficial, helping women ask for the pay they deserve (Major, 1994) or increasing creativity (Zitek & Vincent, 2015), entitlement often predicts negative consequences. For example, highly entitled people engage in more selfish and fewer helpful behaviors (Zitek et al., 2010), exhibit greater prejudice toward outgroups (Anastasio & Rose, 2014), and more strongly endorse sexist beliefs (Grubbs et al., 2014). Academically entitled college students externalize responsibility for course outcomes (Boswell, 2012) while entitled individuals at work think they deserve higher salaries (Campbell et al., 2004) and report lower job satisfaction and increased conflict with supervisors (Harvey & Martinko, 2009). Highly entitled people are also particularly vulnerable to psychological distress and volatile emotional reactions when their expectations go unmet (Grubbs & Exline, 2016). The destructive effects of entitlement reach even further as male entitlement increases the likelihood of coercing women into performing

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nonconsensual sexual acts (Richardson et al., 2017) and criminals are more likely to engage in violent behavior when their sense of entitlement is violated (Fisher and Hall, 2011).

These detrimental effects of high entitlement raise the question of whether all entitled people behave based on the same belief, “I deserve more, I deserve special treatment,” or if the bases for their entitlement can be vastly different. We propose that the latter is the case: specifically, that entitlement can arise through perceptions of superiority or through perceptions of injustice. People who feel entitled based on superiority perceive that they are better than others because of their own internal characteristics. This sense of superiority is what leads them to feel entitled to good outcomes and special treatment (“I’m an amazing person, so I deserve good outcomes”), and this perception does not have to be tied to reality. On the other hand, people who feel entitled based on injustice perceive that they are wrongfully worse off than others through no fault of their own. This forms a different basis for entitlement (“I’m unfairly disadvantaged, so I deserve good outcomes”), and again, this process can occur regardless of whether one’s perception matches reality. Thus, although two people can both be high in entitlement, their justifications for feeling entitled may stem from vastly different bases.

1.2. The case of grandiose and vulnerable narcissism

A population known for their high entitlement but whose entitlement may reasonably stem from these two different bases is that of people high in trait narcissism. Two narcissistic expressions exist: grandiose narcissism and vulnerable narcissism. These narcissistic expressions describe non-clinical personality traits that exist on a continuum. Individuals high in grandiose or vulnerable narcissism share features like interpersonal antagonism, self-absorption, entitlement, and need for distinctiveness (Freis, 2018; Krizan & Johar, 2012; Miller et al., 2011). However, the unique beliefs and experiences of these narcissistic variants may help isolate the proposed differences in how entitlement can be formed or justified.

Individuals high in trait grandiose narcissism are overconfident, manipulative, and feel superior and distinct (Freis, 2018; Krizan & Bushman, 2011; Macenczak et al., 2016). These individuals are chronic self-enhancers who are socially charming but value admiration much more than approval (Collins & Stukas, 2008; Paulhus, 1998). People high in grandiose narcissism have a strong desire for power and status and a high approach motivation (Campbell & Foster, 2007; Foster & Trimm, 2008).

In comparison, individuals high in trait vulnerable narcissism are still manipulative and feel distinct, but are hypersensitive, anxious, and lack self-confidence (Kealy et al., 2017; Wink, 1991). People high in vulnerable narcissism are preoccupied with grandiose fantasies (Rohmann et al., 2012) and are prone to feeling like others have failed to recognize their importance (Given-Wilson et al., 2011). Yet, these individuals rely heavily on the feedback of others to manage their self-esteem, and have a strong avoidance motivation (Besser & Priel, 2010; Foster & Trimm, 2008).

Despite their very divergent psychological and interpersonal experiences, much research has shown that both grandiose and vulnerable narcissism variants are highly entitled. For example, Zeigler-Hill et al. (2011) show that both grandiose and vulnerable narcissism correlate with highly entitled beliefs. Krizan & Johar (2012) and Miller et al. (2011) independently factor-analyzed several narcissism scales to find that both narcissistic grandiosity and vulnerability were associated with high entitlement. Furthermore, the recent Narcissism Spectrum Model (Krizan & Herlache, 2017) places entitlement as the defining core feature of narcissism, with entitlement in grandiose narcissism expressed through pride and entitlement in vulnerable narcissism expressed through reactivity.

Yet it seems incongruous for people high in either type of narcissism

to share a sense of heightened entitlement to good outcomes but undergo such subjectively different experiences of the world. Miller et al. (2011) have speculated that people high in grandiose narcissism may feel entitled to good outcomes because they believe they are better than others, whereas people high in vulnerable narcissism may feel entitled to good outcomes because they believe they are fragile (Miller et al., 2011). We make a similar hypothesis. We propose that while individuals high in narcissism are highly entitled, entitlement in grandiose narcissism may be more proximally based on self-enhancing perceptions of holding superior internal characteristics (i.e. perceived superiority) whereas entitlement in vulnerable narcissism may be more proximally based on ruminating about their concerns of injustice, or focusing on ways they feel unfairly disadvantaged in life compared to others (i.e. concerns of injustice).

1.3. Superior vs. injustice bases of entitlement in trait narcissism

Assessing the characteristics of grandiose and vulnerable narcissism supports these predictions. Individuals high in trait grandiose narcissism may be likely to use superiority-based justifications because they are highly self-confident and self-focused (Paulhus, 1998). If they compare themselves to others, such comparisons are typically downward and favorable to them (Krizan & Bushman, 2011). Their self-esteem is chronically high (Rose, 2002) and they are eager to self-promote (Stucke, 2003), often to boost their sense of specialness (Freis, 2018). If someone does attempt to taint the self-views of people high in grandiose narcissism, they are skilled in protecting their sense of self-importance by externalizing their anger and acting in aggressive or punitive ways toward the person they view as a transgressor (Bushman et al., 2003; Twenge & Campbell, 2003). This evidence suggests that entitlement within grandiose narcissism is likely based on their perceptions of superiority.

Individuals high in trait vulnerable narcissism, on the other hand, seem to lack the well-protected, inflated sense of self characteristic of grandiose narcissism. For example, after receiving feedback, people high in vulnerable narcissism tend to internalize shame and anxiety (Atlas & Them, 2008; Freis et al., 2015). Their self-worth is impacted by nearly every conceivable domain, including others’ approval (Zeigler-Hill et al., 2008). This leads people high in vulnerable narcissism to be particularly susceptible to upward social comparisons that can spark feelings of envy as they perceive others’ successes as unjust or out of reach (Krizan & Johar, 2012). As a result, individuals high in vulnerable narcissism have chronically low self-esteem (Rose, 2002) and feel incapable of achieving their desired goals (Brown et al., 2016). With such poor self-views, it may be difficult for these individuals to justify their entitlement based on a perception that they are superior. Instead, people high in vulnerable narcissism may feel entitled based on their concerns of being disadvantaged, where they view others as being unfairly better off than them. We hypothesize that this feeling of unfair inferiority may form a stronger basis for vulnerable narcissists’ sense of entitlement.

1.4. The current research

The present studies investigate the proposed bases of entitlement for people high in trait narcissism. Study 1 aimed to replicate past work showing that both variants of narcissism are highly entitled and explore whether their bases of entitlement diverge. Study 2 tested whether narcissistic perceptions of superiority vs. injustice differentially explain entitlement in grandiose and vulnerable narcissism. Finally, Study 3 aimed to replicate Study 2 and further clarify perceptions of deservingness behind feelings of superiority in grandiose narcissism and feelings of injustice in vulnerable narcissism.

We hypothesized that people high in either grandiose or vulnerable narcissism would report high entitlement but would come to hold these

entitled beliefs through different processes. Specifically, we hypothesized that individuals high in trait grandiose narcissism would report feeling entitled due to their perceptions of superiority that are inherent in their character (superiority-based entitlement), whereas individuals high in trait vulnerable narcissism would report a high sense of entitlement due to their concerns of personal injustice compared to others (injustice-based entitlement).

2. Study 1

Study 1 examined if entitlement exists as a shared characteristic or belief among grandiose and vulnerable narcissism. Study 1 also served as initial investigation for our superiority- vs. injustice-based entitlement hypothesis.

2.1. Methods and materials

2.1.1. Participants

Using a correlational design and two-tailed analyses with 80% power, we conservatively estimated the expected correlation at $r = 0.20$ for this first study. Therefore, we needed at least 194 participants. With concerns about power rising in psychology, we aimed for around 300 participants in this initial investigation. Study 1 included 317 students at a large Midwestern university who participated in exchange for course credit. We excluded 37 participants from analysis for failing attention checks during the study (i.e. “if you are carefully reading these questions please select strongly agree”) or not taking the study seriously (i.e. rating their seriousness a 1 or 2 out of 5 or only completing one-third of the survey with nonsensical answers such as “wat up” and “yeii”). This left 280 participants in analyses (142 females, $M_{age} = 19.01$, $SD_{age} = 1.49$).

2.1.2. Procedure

Participants received a link to this online study. After completing a consent form, participants answered a series of self-report questionnaires, including measures of grandiose narcissism, vulnerable narcissism, and entitlement (for further information on psychometric validity, see the online supplement). Next was a task designed to assess beliefs about entitlement; this was self-created as we could not locate a similar existing task in the literature. Participants read a list of 12 entitlement domains and selected the top three domains they generally felt most entitled to. The 12 entitlement domains were listed in alphabetical order and included admiration, appreciation, attention, friendship, happiness, influence, power, recognition, respect, status, voice, and wealth.¹ After making three selections, participants explained why they felt entitled to or deserving of the selected domain in free response form. This writing activity was meant to prompt participants to think of their own reasons ahead of time so their later choices, when selecting entitlement justification statements from a list, would be less biased from the options displayed (for exploratory analysis of the free-writing task, see the online supplement). After free-writing, participants selected one of seven given reasons that best explained why they felt entitled to the choices previously selected (e.g. respect, wealth, etc.). Making a selection after free-writing allowed participants to code their own responses by choosing a justification that best fit their reasons for feeling entitled. These reasons included: “I greatly desire it,” “Everyone is deserving of this,” “I am naturally deserving,” “I have been disadvantaged in the past,” “I am hard working,” “I am no different than everyone else,” and “Others have this and I do not.” Participants then rated all 12 of the entitlement domains on a 7-point scale from “Very Bad” to “Very Good.” The exact instructions were, “Do you view the following entitlements as being generally good or bad to have?” At

the end of the study, participants reported their demographics and were debriefed.²

2.1.3. Measures

The Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI) is a reliable and construct-valid measure of grandiose narcissism in non-clinical populations (for more information, see Raskin & Terry, 1988). The NPI uses 40 dichotomous items in which participants choose between one of two sentences that best describes them. For example, a participant would choose between a) “I am no better or worse than most people” and b) “I think I am a special person,” where the second sentence is the more narcissistic answer. We summed each narcissistic choice to create a total NPI score ($\alpha = 0.85$).

The Hypersensitive Narcissistic Scale (HSNS) is a psychometrically valid and reliable measure of vulnerable narcissism in non-clinical populations (for more information, see Hendin & Cheek, 1997). This ten-item measure is rated on a 5-point scale from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree.” Example items include, “My feelings are easily hurt by ridicule or by the slighting remarks of others” and “I dislike being with a group unless I know that I am appreciated by at least one of those present.” We averaged the items to create a total score of vulnerable narcissism ($\alpha = 0.75$).

Finally, the Psychological Entitlement Scale (PES; Campbell et al., 2004) and the Entitlement Rage subscale from the Pathological Narcissism Inventory (PNI-Rage; Pincus et al., 2009) assessed trait entitlement. The PES has nine items while the PNI-Rage subscale has eight items, both rated on a 7-point scale from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree.” Example items from the PES include “I honestly feel I'm just more deserving than others” and “People like me deserve an extra break now and then.” Example PNI-Rage items include “It irritates me when people don't notice how good a person I am” and “I get mad when people don't notice all that I do for them.” The PES has been extensively validated as a measure of general psychological entitlement (for more information, see Campbell et al., 2004), while the PNI-Rage is a subscale of a full validated measure of pathological narcissism (for more information, see Pincus et al., 2009). We averaged the items on each scale to create total scores of entitlement and entitlement rage (PES, $\alpha = 0.88$; PNI-Rage, $\alpha = 0.83$).

2.1.4. Hypotheses

We hypothesized that individuals higher in grandiose or vulnerable narcissism would report high entitlement (on the PES and PNI-Rage) but would diverge when explaining why they were entitled. Specifically, we hypothesized that people high in vulnerable narcissism would demonstrate an injustice focus by selecting explanations such as “I have been disadvantaged in the past” whereas people high in grandiose narcissism would demonstrate a superiority focus by selecting explanations such as “I am naturally deserving”.

2.2. Results & discussion

We first assessed whether participants high in grandiose or vulnerable narcissism are both highly entitled. Table 1 outlines the correlations, means, and standard deviations of continuous variables in this study. Both the NPI and HSNS positively correlated with psychological entitlement (PES) and entitlement rage (PNI-Rage), replicating past evidence (e.g. Miller et al., 2012) that both narcissistic variants share the characteristic of high entitlement.

We also analyzed how individuals high in grandiose or vulnerable narcissism responded when asked whether each entitlement domain is

¹ These were chosen after brainstorming domains among lab members and piloting among research assistants.

² This study also included several other measures designed to test separate hypotheses, the results of which are not reported in this paper. Other measured variables were self-esteem, self-doubt, implicit theories, self-perceptions of personality characteristics, and self-handicapping.

Table 1
Study 1 variables: correlations, means, and standard deviations.

Variable	1	2	3	Mean	SD
1. NPI				16.95	7.21
2. HSNS	−0.02			3.97	0.88
3. PES	0.39***	0.26***		3.36	1.03
4. PNI-Rage	0.23***	0.44***	0.46***	4.10	1.00

Note. NPI = Narcissistic Personality Inventory; HSNS = Hypersensitive Narcissism Scale; PES = Psychological Entitlement Scale; PNI-Rage = Entitlement Rage subscale of the Pathological Narcissism Inventory.

* $p \leq .05$.

** $p \leq .01$.

*** $p \leq .001$.

generally good or bad to have and when asked to choose the top three domains to which they felt entitled; these results are reported in full in the online supplement. As a brief summary, we found that people high in either grandiose or vulnerable narcissism believe it is good to be entitled in the domains of admiration, appreciation, attention, power, recognition, status, and wealth. However, they diverged in choosing their top three entitlement domains; individuals high in grandiose narcissism were more likely to choose domains of wealth, influence, status, and power, and were less likely to choose the domain of voice, whereas individuals high in vulnerable narcissism were more likely to choose the domain of status. See the online supplement for more details on these analyses.

Next, we tested our main hypothesis by exploring whether reasons for feeling entitled differed between people high in grandiose and vulnerable narcissism. To do so, we analyzed which justification statements participants selected to explain their entitlement domain choices. Because choosing a justification was a categorical choice, we dummy-coded whether or not each participant selected each potential justification.

Logistically regressing entitlement justifications onto the NPI revealed that individuals high in grandiose narcissism were more likely to explain their entitlement domain choices by selecting the following statements: “I am naturally deserving,” $b = 0.08$, $SE = 0.03$, Wald $X^2 = 8.83$, $p = .003$, *odds ratio* = 1.09, 95% *CI* [1.03, 1.14], “I greatly desire it,” $b = 0.06$, $SE = 0.02$, Wald $X^2 = 9.03$, $p = .003$, *odds ratio* = 1.06, 95% *CI* [1.02, 1.10], and “I am hard working,” $b = 0.06$, $SE = 0.02$, Wald $X^2 = 9.61$, $p = .002$, *odds ratio* = 1.06, 95% *CI* [1.02, 1.10]. Individuals high on the NPI were also less likely to say they chose entitlement domains based on the reason that “Everyone is deserving of [it],” $b = -0.13$, $SE = 0.03$, Wald $X^2 = 13.73$, $p < .001$, *odds ratio* = 0.88, 95% *CI* [0.83, 0.94]. The NPI did not significantly predict any other entitlement justification statement, all $bs \leq 0.02$, all $SE \leq 0.05$, all Wald $X^2 \leq 0.24$, all $ps \geq 0.62$, all *odds ratio* ≤ 1.02 , all 95% *CI* [≥ 0.91 , ≤ 1.12].

In comparison, logistically regressing entitlement justifications onto the HSNS showed that individuals high in vulnerable narcissism were significantly more likely to justify their choice of entitlement domains with the statement, “I have been disadvantaged in the past,” $b = 0.69$, $SE = 0.33$, Wald $X^2 = 4.39$, $p = .04$, *odds ratio* = 2.00, 95% *CI* [1.05, 3.82]. Individuals high on the HSNS were also marginally more likely to justify their choice of entitlements with the statement, “Others have this and I do not,” $b = 0.75$, $SE = 0.42$, Wald $X^2 = 3.20$, $p = .07$, *odds ratio* = 2.12, 95% *CI* [0.93, 4.85]. The HSNS did not significantly predict any other entitlement justification statement, all $bs \leq 0.30$, all $SE \leq 0.26$, all Wald $X^2 \leq 1.82$, all $ps \geq 0.18$, all *odds ratio* ≤ 1.35 , all 95% *CI* [≥ 0.48 , ≤ 2.09].

These results provide initial evidence for our hypothesis that people high in grandiose or vulnerable narcissism experience different bases of entitlement. Study 1 showed that people high in grandiose narcissism base their feelings of entitlement on perceived superiority. They feel naturally deserving and believe that others are not; indeed, not seeing

others as deserving likely helps to maintain their sense of specialness or advantage compared to others and perpetuates their high entitlement. In contrast, Study 1 showed that people high in vulnerable narcissism focus more on their concerns of injustice compared to others to explain their entitlement. Instead of feeling “naturally deserving,” they are sensitive to what others have and feel unfairly deprived in some way; this judgment may be what leads to such strong entitlement beliefs.

3. Study 2

Study 1 replicated past literature showing that the two narcissistic variants share high entitlement, but demonstrated that their reasons for being entitled diverged. Study 2 aimed to examine these differences further by investigating how perceptions of superiority or injustice may explain the mechanism through which individuals high in grandiose narcissism or vulnerable narcissism independently come to feel entitled.

3.1. Method and materials

3.1.1. Participants

Using a regression-based design and two-tailed analyses with 80% power, we averaged results from Study 1 to estimate Study 2's expected correlation at $r = 0.30$. Therefore, we needed at least 85 participants but once again aimed higher to improve reliability of results. Study 2 included 148 students at a large Midwestern university who participated in exchange for course credit.³ We excluded 13 participants from analyses for failing attention checks during the study (i.e. “if you are carefully reading these questions please select strongly agree”) or not taking the study seriously (i.e. rating their seriousness a 1 or 2 out of 5). This left 135 participants in analyses (92 females, $M_{age} = 18.62$, $SD_{age} = 1.11$).

3.1.2. Procedure

After completing a consent form, participants answered a series of self-report questionnaires, including measures of grandiose narcissism, vulnerable narcissism, entitlement, superiority, and injustice (for further evidence of psychometric validity, see the online supplement). Finally, participants reported their demographics and were debriefed.⁴

3.1.3. Measures

The shortened 16-item Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI-16; Ames et al., 2006) assessed trait grandiose narcissism. The NPI-16 is a psychometrically validated short version of the full 40-item NPI (for more information, see Ames et al., 2006). We once again took the total score of participants' responses to the dichotomous items ($\alpha = 0.73$). Then, identical to Study 1, participants completed the HSNS ($\alpha = 0.66$) and PES ($\alpha = 0.86$).

We used the Justice Sensitivity Inventory (JSI; Schmitt et al., 2010) to investigate participants' concerns with their perceived unjust disadvantage or victimhood. Specifically, the JSI has four psychometrically validated subscales intended to capture the intensity of people's reactions to, and their tendency to ruminate about, injustice or unfairness from the perspective of a victim, observer, beneficiary, and perpetrator. Each subscale consists of ten similarly worded items rated on a 7-point scale from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree” and are adjusted based on the specific perspective in question. The Victim Sensitivity subscale ($\alpha = 0.87$) asks participants to look at situations to

³ Each study reported in this paper recruited from a different participant pool so no restrictions were given on participant eligibility.

⁴ This study also included several other measures designed to test separate hypotheses, the results of which are not reported in this paper. Other measured variables were social comparison orientation, just world beliefs, system justification, and a manipulation regarding system justification that came after the measures reported in Study 2.

Table 2
Study 2 variables: correlations, means, and standard deviations.

Variable	1	2	3	4	Mean	SD
1. NPI-16					5.16	3.38
2. HSNS	−0.07				4.11	0.75
3. PES	0.50***	0.19*			3.32	0.95
4. JSI-Victim	0.09	0.36***	0.41***		4.64	0.93
5. POS	0.47***	0.17	0.48***	0.21*	3.64	1.47

Note. NPI-16 = Shortened Narcissistic Personality Inventory; HSNS = Hypersensitive Narcissism Scale; PES = Psychological Entitlement Scale; JSI = Justice Sensitivity Inventory. POS = Perceptions of Superiority.

* $p \leq .05$.

** $p \leq .01$.

*** $p \leq .001$.

the advantage of others and to their own disadvantage; for instance, “It makes me angry when others are undeservingly better off than me.” The JSI-Victim subscale was used as our primary measure for participants’ concerns of injustice. We also measured and analyzed the other three subscales of Observer Sensitivity, Beneficiary Sensitivity, and Perpetrator Sensitivity; see the online supplement for more details.

Since the JSI subscales did not capture the concept of superiority and we were unable to locate an existing scale directly assessing perceived superiority, we included an additional self-created exploratory measure to ask our college participants about their perceptions of superiority or status (POS) in the classroom: “In general, I am often better than other group members.” This statement was rated on a 7-point scale from “Not at all like me” to “Just like me.”

3.1.4. Hypotheses

Based on Study 1 results, we hypothesized that superiority (e.g. perceptions of status; POS) would mediate the association between grandiose narcissism and entitlement while injustice (e.g. felt victimhood; JSI-Victim) would mediate the association between vulnerable narcissism and entitlement.

3.2. Results & discussion

Table 2 outlines the correlations, means, and standard deviations of continuous variables in this study. Replicating Study 1 results, grandiose narcissism (NPI-16) and vulnerable narcissism (HSNS) positively correlated with psychological entitlement (PES). Furthermore, as hypothesized, the HSNS positively correlated to victim justice sensitivity (JSI-Victim) and the NPI-16 did not. Instead, the NPI-16 positively correlated to perceptions of superiority (POS) and the HSNS did not. These results support the hypothesis that individuals high in vulnerable narcissism view themselves as disadvantaged and identify with the injustice of feeling like a victim; in comparison, individuals high in grandiose narcissism see themselves as better than others.

3.2.1. Superiority and injustice mediations

To test the mechanisms behind differential senses of entitlement, we used Model 4 of Hayes’ (2013) PROCESS macro for SPSS, with a bootstrap sample set at 10,000. We mean-centered all continuous predictor variables prior to mediational analyses. As seen in Fig. 1, perceptions of superiority (POS) mediated the effect of grandiose narcissism (NPI-16) on psychological entitlement (PES), indirect effect: $b = 0.03$, $BootSE = 0.01$, 95% $BootCI$: [0.0113, 0.0639], $P_M = 0.24$. Concerns of injustice (JSI-Victim) did not mediate this effect, indirect effect: $b = 0.01$, $BootSE = 0.01$, 95% $BootCI$: [−0.0059, 0.0253], $P_M = 0.06$. Thus, the tendency for people higher in grandiose narcissism to report higher entitlement was statistically accounted for by their subjective perceptions of being superior or perceiving that they are better than others.

In comparison, as seen in Fig. 2, concerns of injustice (JSI-Victim)

mediated the effect of vulnerable narcissism (HSNS) on psychological entitlement (PES), indirect effect: $b = 0.14$, $BootSE = 0.05$, 95% $BootCI$: [0.0684, 0.2494], $P_M = 0.61$. Perceptions of superiority (POS) did not mediate this effect, indirect effects: $b = 0.09$, $BootSE = 0.06$, 95% $BootCI$: [−0.0150, 0.2163], $P_M \leq 0.37$. Thus, the tendency for people higher in vulnerable narcissism to report higher entitlement was statistically accounted for by their higher, albeit subjective, concerns of being disadvantaged compared to others.

These results provide additional support for the hypothesis that divergent bases of entitlement exist among the narcissistic variants. Individuals high in grandiose narcissism feel superior and thus deserving where as individuals high in vulnerable narcissism feel unfairly inferior but draw the same conclusion about their deservingness.⁵

4. Study 3

Study 1 and Study 2 provided converging evidence for superiority-based entitlement in grandiose narcissism and injustice-based entitlement in vulnerable narcissism. Study 3 aimed to further replicate these findings and solidify the importance of perceived deservedness in narcissistic entitlement. As discussed previously in Section 1.3, due to the high self-confidence and flexible self-enhancement strategies observed in grandiose narcissism (Campbell et al., 2002), we hypothesized they would focus on their entitlement as being due to intrinsic or deserved superiority. This is further bolstered by early results in Study 1, Section 2.2, where individuals high in grandiose narcissism felt “naturally deserving” and “hard working” – both intrinsic characteristics that boosts one’s self-image and sense of superiority over others. In contrast, due to the high self-doubt and susceptibility to envy observed in vulnerable narcissism (Krizan & Johar, 2012), we hypothesized they would focus on their entitlement as being justified from undeserved disadvantage, focusing more proximally on the subjective wrong-doing they feel others force upon them rather than on their own inherent characteristics. In Study 2, our measure of concerns for injustice already included judgments of deservedness (example item: “It makes me angry when others are undeservingly better off than me”), however the measure for perceived superiority did not; thus, in Study 3, we developed a more direct and comprehensive measure to further tap into the perception of intrinsic superiority. We also designed an additional measure to assess how easily participants can recall times when they were fairly better off and unfairly worse off than others to provide additional support for the role of deservedness in perceptions of superiority and injustice.

4.1. Method and materials

4.1.1. Participants

Using a regression-based design and two-tailed analyses with 80% power, we once again estimated the expected correlation at $r = 0.30$, thus requiring at least 85 participants. However, we hoped to improve measurement in Study 3, increase sample size, and perform more rigorous analyses to improve the reliability of effects. Therefore, we aimed for 200 participants. Study 3 included 211 students at a large

⁵ We also checked whether these mediation models were still significant when reversing the mediators and dependent variable. Indeed, the mediation model for grandiose narcissism was still significant when treating the PES as a mediator and perceived status as the dependent measure, indirect effect: $b = 0.07$, $BootSE = 0.02$, 95% $BootCI$ [0.03, 0.13]. The mediation model for vulnerable narcissism was also significant when treating PES as a mediator and JSI-Victim as a dependent measure, indirect effect: $b = 0.08$, $BootSE = 0.05$, 95% $BootCI$ [0.01, 0.21]. Although it is possible that greater entitlement explains feelings of superiority in grandiose narcissism and feelings of injustice in vulnerable narcissism, we propose the models described in the main text are most theoretically sound to understand the narcissistic variants. Future research could examine whether these processes may take a cyclical form, such as a self-perpetuating feedback loop.

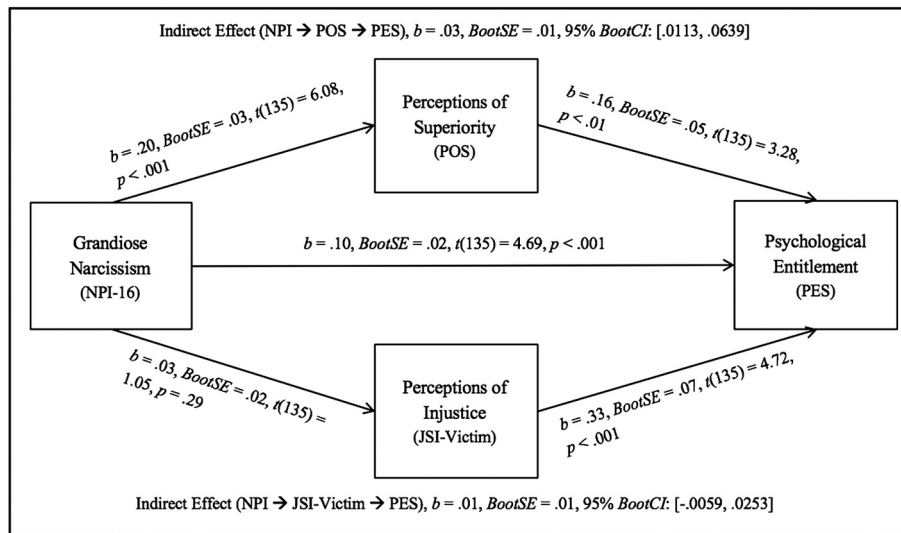


Fig. 1. Grandiose narcissism mediated by perceptions of superiority (not injustice) predicts level of entitlement.

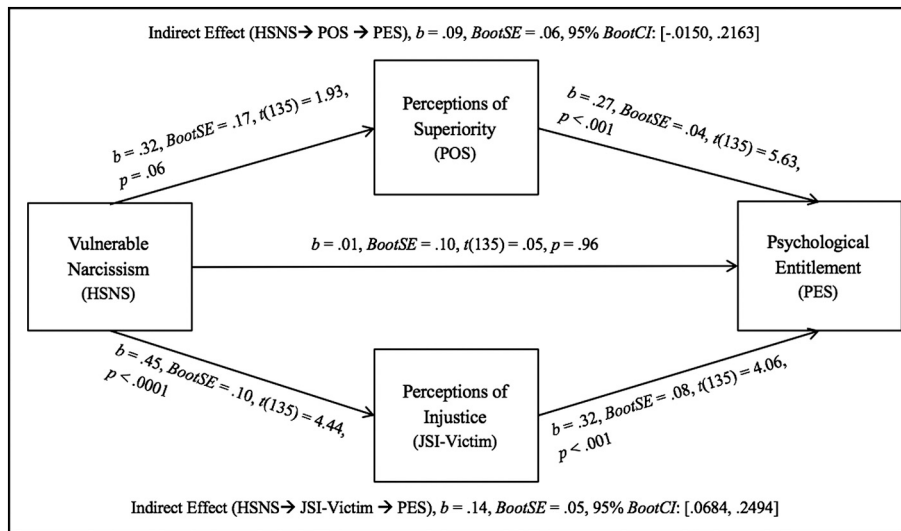


Fig. 2. Vulnerable narcissism mediated by perceptions of injustice (not superiority) predicts level of entitlement.

Midwestern university who participated in exchange for course credit. We excluded 2 participants from analyses for failing attention checks during the study (i.e. “if you are carefully reading these questions please select strongly agree”) or not taking the study seriously (i.e. completing less than one-third of the survey). This left 209 participants in analyses (132 females, $M_{age} = 20.14$, $SD_{age} = 4.05$).

4.1.2. Procedure

After completing a consent form, participants answered a series of self-report questionnaires, including measures of grandiose narcissism, vulnerable narcissism, entitlement, superiority, injustice, and additional questions on their perceptions of entitlement (for further information on psychometric validity, see the online supplement). Finally, participants reported their demographics and were debriefed.⁶

⁶ These self-report scales came from a larger study that included measures of self-esteem, self-doubt, social desirability, and a failed manipulation to prime entitlement. To account for any potential differences, we control for condition in all Study 3 analyses. Alternative analyses are available upon request.

4.1.3. Measures

Identical to Study 1, participants completed the full NPI ($\alpha = 0.85$), HSNS ($\alpha = 0.73$), and PES ($\alpha = 0.69$) to measure grandiose narcissism, vulnerable narcissism, and entitlement, respectively. Identical to Study 2, participants completed the JSI-Victim subscale ($\alpha = 0.86$) to measure their concerns of injustice.

To improve construct validity, participants completed a revised self-created measure of superiority where they rated five statements asking about their perceptions of superiority (POS): “I often feel superior to others around me,” “Most often I feel I have higher status than others around me,” “In general, I am often better than others,” “I deserve more status than I currently have,” and “I am naturally better than others.” Participants rated these statements on a 7-point scale from “Not at all like me” to “Just like me.” These five items loaded onto a single factor when compared with other measures in the study (see online supplement for factor analysis report). We summed all five items to create a total POS score ($\alpha = 0.89$).

Finally, we tested four new self-created items to clarify reasons for superiority-based or injustice-based entitlement. These items targeted a person's sense of being intrinsically better or worse off and being undeservingly better or worse off; because we were unable to locate

Table 3
Study 3 variables: correlations, means, and standard deviations.

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	Mean	SD
1. NPI									15.22	6.97
2. HSNS	0.19**								3.90	0.86
3. PES	0.29***	0.61***							3.66	0.80
4. JSI-Victim	0.13	0.52***	0.56***						4.36	0.97
5. POS	0.45***	0.39***	0.57***	0.34***					5.04	1.19
6. Deservedly Better Off	0.26***	0.12	0.16*	0.21**	0.26***				3.05	0.98
7. Undeservedly Better Off	0.08	0.06	0.07	0.16*	0.10	0.47***			2.75	1.00
8. Deservedly Worse Off	-0.04	0.04	0.09	0.11	0.04	0.11	0.22**		2.67	0.96
9. Undeservedly Worse Off	-0.05	0.19**	0.13	0.21**	0.10	0.17*	0.26***	0.49***	2.67	1.01

Note. NPI = Narcissistic Personality Inventory; HSNS = Hypersensitive Narcissism Scale; PES = Psychological Entitlement Scale; JSI-Victim = Justice Sensitivity Inventory, Victim subscale; POS = Perceptions of Superiority Scale.

* $p \leq .05$

** $p \leq .01$.

*** $p \leq .001$.

existing measures that briefly and precisely assessed these constructs, we created our own. Participants rated statements on a 5-point scale from “*Strongly Disagree*” to “*Strongly Agree*.” These statements included: “It’s easy to think about times when I was unfairly worse off compared to others,” “It’s easy to think about times when I was deservingly worse off compared to others,” “It’s easy to think about times when I was inherently better than others,” and “It’s easy to think about times when I was undeservingly better off than others.”

4.1.4. Hypotheses

Based on Study 1 and Study 2 results, we hypothesized that perceptions of superiority would mediate the association between grandiose narcissism and entitlement while concerns of injustice would mediate the association between vulnerable narcissism and entitlement. In addition, we hypothesized that individuals high in grandiose narcissism would report having the easiest time thinking of examples when they were inherently better than others while individuals high in vulnerable narcissism would find it easiest to think of times they were unfairly worse off compared to others.

4.2. Results & discussion

Table 3 outlines the correlations, means, and standard deviations of continuous variables in this study. Replicating results in Study 1 and Study 2, grandiose narcissism (NPI) and vulnerable narcissism (HSNS) positively correlated with psychological entitlement (PES). Furthermore, as hypothesized, grandiose narcissism (NPI) positively correlated to perceptions of superiority (POS) and vulnerable narcissism (HSNS) positively correlated to concerns of subjective injustice (JSI-Victim). However, vulnerable narcissism (HSNS) also positively correlated to perceptions of superiority (POS); see mediational analyses for a discussion of this finding.

Table 3 also confirms the assumption that feeling better off or worse off than others is qualified by whether a person is focused on their subjective status as being naturally earned or unfairly experienced. In line with hypotheses, grandiose narcissism (NPI) positively correlated to finding it easy to think of times they had been rightfully better off (Deservedly Better Off), but was not correlated to Undeservedly Better Off, Deservedly Worse Off, or Undeservedly Worse Off. Vulnerable narcissism (HSNS) positively correlated to finding it easy to think of times they had been unfairly worse off (Undeservedly Worse Off), but was not significantly correlated to Deservedly Better Off, Undeservedly Better Off, or Deservedly Worse Off.⁷ These results provide additional

support for our hypothesis that perceptions of superiority in grandiose narcissism are built on the belief that their superiority is intrinsic whereas concerns of injustice in vulnerable narcissism are built on the belief that their disadvantage is unfair or unwarranted.

4.2.1. Superiority and injustice mediations

To test whether the mechanisms behind differential senses of entitlement replicate from Study 2, we used Model 4 of Hayes’ (2013) PROCESS macro for SPSS, with a bootstrap sample set at 10,000. We mean-centered all continuous predictor variables prior to mediational analyses. As in Study 2, we entered both proposed mediating variables into the same model; however, because the NPI and HSNS showed a small positive association in this study, we also controlled for the opposite narcissism scale to isolate the unique grandiose narcissism and vulnerable narcissism effects.

As seen in Fig. 3, results for grandiose narcissism supported our hypotheses. Perceptions of superiority (POS) mediated the effect of grandiose narcissism (NPI) on psychological entitlement (PES), indirect effect: $b = 0.13$, $BootSE = 0.04$, 95% $BootCI$: [0.0669, 0.2125], $P_M = 0.69$, whereas concerns of subjective injustice (JSI-Victim) did not, indirect effect: $b = 0.01$, $BootSE = 0.02$, 95% $BootCI$: [-0.0227, 0.0463], $P_M = 0.05$. Thus, the tendency for people higher in grandiose narcissism to report higher entitlement was statistically accounted for by their subjective perceptions of being superior or perceiving that they are better than others, replicating Study 2.

As seen in Fig. 4, results for vulnerable narcissism once again supported hypotheses. Concerns of injustice (JSI-Victim) mediated the effect of vulnerable narcissism (HSNS) on psychological entitlement (PES), indirect effect: $b = 0.12$, $BootSE = 0.03$, 95% $BootCI$: [0.0680, 0.1848], $P_M = 0.25$. However, in contrast to Study 2 results, perceptions of superiority (POS) also mediated the link between HSNS and PES, indirect effect: $b = 0.08$, $BootSE = 0.02$, 95% $BootCI$: [0.0481, 0.1352], $P_M = 0.18$. Thus, the tendency for people higher in vulnerable narcissism to report higher entitlement was statistically accounted for by their subjective concerns of injustice or being disadvantaged compared to others, replicating Study 2, in addition to their subjective perceptions of being superior or believing that they are better than others.

(footnote continued)

HSNS: Deservedly Better Off, $r = 0.24$, $p \leq .001$, Undeservedly Better Off, $r = 0.07$, $p = .25$, Deservedly Worse Off, $r = -0.05$, $p = .52$, Undeservedly Worse off, $r = -0.09$, $p = .22$. Results patterns were also similar for the HSNS when controlling for the NPI, Deservedly Better Off, $r = 0.08$, $p = .28$, Undeservedly Better Off, $r = 0.05$, $p = .48$, Deservedly Worse Off, $r = -0.05$, $p = .46$, Undeservedly Worse Off, $r = 0.21$, $p \leq .01$.

⁷ Since the NPI and HSNS unexpectedly showed a small positive association in this study, we also ran partial correlations controlling for the opposite narcissism scale. Result patterns were similar for the NPI when controlling for the

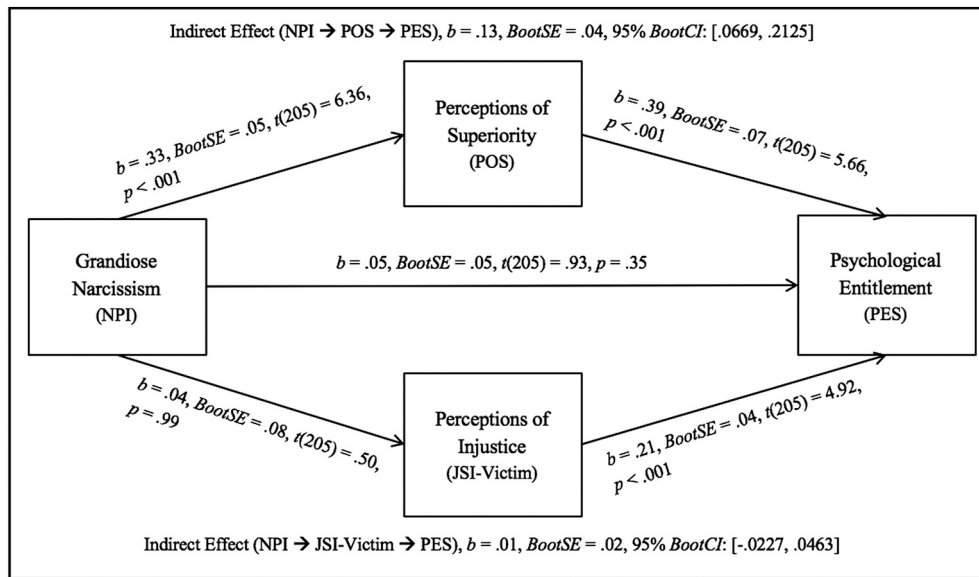


Fig. 3. Grandiose narcissism mediated by perceptions of superiority, not injustice, predicts level of entitlement (controlling for vulnerable narcissism).

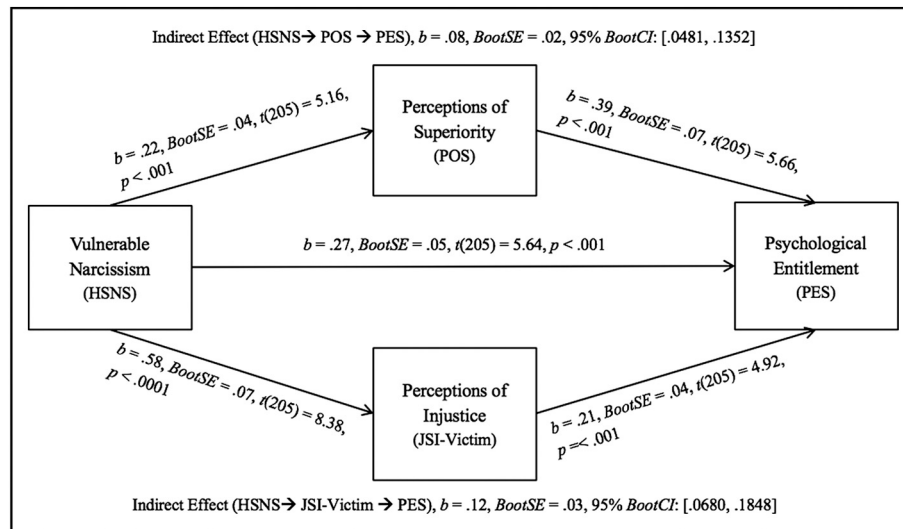


Fig. 4. Vulnerable narcissism mediated by perceptions of injustice and superiority predict level of entitlement (controlling for grandiose narcissism).

4.2.2. Replication studies

To further investigate the replicability of results for vulnerable narcissism, we analyzed three follow-up studies (see online supplement for full details) that included alternative measures such as the Five-Factor Narcissism Inventory (short-form; Sherman et al., 2015) and more diverse samples such as through Amazon's Mechanical Turk. We found entitlement in vulnerable narcissism can at times be mediated by feelings of both injustice and superiority while at other times only be mediated by feelings of injustice. Thus, individuals high in vulnerable narcissism may sometimes report superiority, or feeling inherently deserving, but what distinguishes them from grandiose narcissism is their relatively stronger tendency to focus on ways they feel subjectively worse off. This focus may be fostered by the discrepancy that individuals high in vulnerable narcissism are so sensitive to where their grandiose fantasies of importance are met with a lack of validation or recognition (Dickinson & Pincus, 2003; Given-Wilson et al., 2011). Their high uncertainty, insecurity, and prevention focus (Freis, 2018)

likely further this rumination making concerns of subjective injustice a more feasible way to consistently defend their feelings of entitlement. Nevertheless, while injustice is a consistent basis of entitlement, additional studies are still needed to further clarify when and why individuals high in vulnerable narcissism may focus on perceptions of superiority.

Broadly, these results provide continued support for the hypothesis that divergent bases of entitlement exist among the narcissistic variants. We replicated Study 1 and 2 results showing that individuals high in grandiose narcissism feel superior and thus deserving whereas individuals high in vulnerable narcissism feel unfairly worse off and yet draw the same conclusion that they're deserving.

5. General discussion

This work explored the divergent bases of entitlement in grandiose and vulnerable narcissism. These studies found that both narcissistic

variants are highly entitled but come to hold entitled beliefs through different bases of justification. Specifically, people high in grandiose narcissism hold high entitlement through positive judgments of the self that they feel are deservedly intrinsic. In comparison, people high in vulnerable narcissism hold high entitlement through injustice-based judgments where they focus on feeling unfairly worse off compared to others. These conclusions are supported through self-selected justifications in Study 1 and mediational analyses in Study 2 and 3.

This research clarifies that justifying one's entitlement is not just about the strict valence of social comparisons (feeling better off or worse off), but the assumptions behind those perceptions. Individuals high in grandiose narcissism see themselves as being inherently superior to others and thus entitled to good outcomes whereas individuals high in vulnerable narcissism are inclined to see themselves as undeservingly disadvantaged compared to others and thus entitled to good outcomes. It is not necessarily the case that individuals high in vulnerable narcissism are truly worse off, but that they feel inferior from their own subjective judgments of fairness. In contrast, individuals high in grandiose narcissism boost their perceptions of superiority by seeing it as an inherent or natural quality rather than having experienced an unfair advantage – they earned it. Therefore, a person's judgment of how they came to feel superior or worse off is a crucial part of what fuels their sense of entitlement.

5.1. Limitations

These studies are correlational in nature and cross-sectional in design. Therefore, future studies can help strengthen these findings by either manipulating a person's sense of superiority- or injustice-based entitlement and observing changes in intrapsychic and interpersonal consequences, incorporating implicit measures or performance-based measures, or using a time-lag or informant-based design to further test the conclusions the current data suggest. Similarly, and as previously mentioned, more research is needed to continue to understand when and why vulnerable narcissists will use superiority justifications in addition to their consistent use of injustice justifications. Finally, the large majority of the samples reported in this paper came from a college sample where narcissism scores are markedly higher compared to older populations. Although this research was replicated with alternative samples and measures, it is important to continue testing the external validity of these findings.

5.2. Implications & future directions

Future research could further delve into why such different bases of entitlement can arise. Taking individuals high in narcissism as an example, perhaps different experiences of self-absorption skew how these individuals interpret information in the first place and consequently cultivate justifications to support their entitled beliefs. For example, a person high in grandiose narcissism who reflects on their greatness will likely generate a greater number of inherent superiority-based arguments to confirm their entitlement. On the other hand, a person high in vulnerable narcissism who ruminates about their disadvantaged experiences compared to others may accumulate information to justify their deservingness through injustice-based reasons. Though narcissism helps illustrate the diverse experiences two entitled individuals may have, these processes could also apply to any individual absorbed in themselves.

While self-centered thought processes may fuel one's sense of entitlement, these different beliefs about deservedness could also have long-term impacts on behavior. For example, Fisher & Hall (2011) observed increased violence in criminals when their sense of entitlement was challenged. This may be akin to perceiving an unfair disadvantage to what one feels they deserve. Perhaps, injustice-based entitlement is

more likely to lead to harmful behavior that seeks to restore what an individual perceives as “deserved” justice, as detailed in the Santa Barbara gunman's manifesto (Roy, 2014): “All I ever wanted was to fit in and live a happy life amongst humanity, but I was cast out and rejected, forced to endure an existence of loneliness and insignificance, all because the females of the human species were incapable of seeing the value in me.” Thus, we recommend future research continue to examine the real-world impact of both superiority-based and injustice-based entitlement.

Better understanding the different bases of entitlement could translate into practical applications as well. The effectiveness of intervention programs designed to diminish entitlement, for instance, could be greatly enhanced by targeting the different processes of entitlement. Support and evidence for tailoring interventions to individual differences is growing (Almirall et al., 2012; Jacobson et al., 2015; Jacques-Hamilton et al., 2018). In assuming that all entitlement is experienced the same, interventions may have unintended consequences. For example, interventions may successfully mitigate one individual's sense of superiority-based entitlement but not affect, or may even fuel, the level of entitlement of another individual with injustice-based entitlement. Thus, the ability to identify a person's basis for his or her entitled beliefs holds potential benefits for those trying to manage or reduce entitlement levels.

Further clarifying the reality of injustice could also help clinicians treat individuals high in vulnerable narcissism. Being highly sensitive to concerns of inferiority coupled with ruminating or catastrophizing these experiences may disproportionately exaggerate an individual's perception of unfairness compared to their reality. While injustice-based entitlement could at times be beneficial for harmed or disadvantaged populations, the type of subjective judgments assessed within vulnerable narcissism is likely not. Thus, mental health practitioners can build on the knowledge gained from this paper to begin examining new therapeutic techniques to help vulnerably narcissistic clients manage their expectations.

5.3. Conclusion

In this paper we have examined whether entitlement differentially arises from superiority- or injustice-based reasons rooted in a sense of intrinsic or unfair circumstances. This distinction provides both theoretical and practical implications as we consider how the basis for individuals' entitlement can impact how they think about and engage in the world. Understanding how these bases for entitlement can manifest will enable us to better spot it in everyday life and, perhaps, to develop better strategies to mitigate it.

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CRediT authorship contribution statement

Stephanie D. Freis: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing - original draft, Writing - review & editing. **Ashley A. Hansen-Brown:** Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Validation, Writing - original draft, Writing - review & editing.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2020.110345>.

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