

Conceptualizing grandiose and vulnerable narcissism as alternative status-seeking strategies: Insights from hierometer theory

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Abstract

Theory and research support a distinction between two forms of narcissism: grandiose and vulnerable. People high in grandiose narcissism are arrogant, extraverted, and authoritative, whereas people high in vulnerable narcissism are insecure, introverted, and diffident. I propose that a useful approach to understanding these two forms of narcissism is to view them through a socio-evolutionary lens. Guided by evolutionary adaptationist models of rank and, more specifically, by hierometer theory, I put forward a novel theoretical account of both forms of narcissism and examine contemporary research in light of it. Specifically, I conceptualize grandiose and vulnerable narcissism as two alternative status-seeking strategies. Whereas grandiose narcissism appears to operate as a status-promoting “hawk” strategy, vulnerable narcissism appears to operate as a status-protecting “dove” strategy. This parsimonious and functional account of grandiose and vulnerable narcissism sheds light on their similarities and differences, explains disparate and seemingly contradictory findings in the literature, and informs a better understanding of the paradoxical nature of narcissism.

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KEYWORDS

game theory, grandiose narcissism, hierometer theory, narcissism, social status, status, vulnerable narcissism

1 | INTRODUCTION

Recent years have witnessed increasing interest in the study of psychological phenomena from an evolutionary perspective. This article examines two forms of narcissism—grandiose and vulnerable—through a socio-evolutionary lens. Drawing together insights from evolutionary adaptationist models of rank and, led more specifically by hierometer theory, I propose a novel theoretical account of grandiose and vulnerable narcissism, conceptualizing them as alternative strategies to navigate status hierarchies. This account sheds light on the motives, cognitions, emotions, perceptions, and behaviors underlying the two forms of narcissism, illuminates their similarities and differences, and brings coherence to disparate findings. I begin by describing grandiose and vulnerable narcissism and then outline hierometer theory. Next, I examine relevant research on grandiose and vulnerable narcissism in light of this theoretical perspective. Finally, I identify gaps in the literature and future directions for theory and research.

2 | WHAT ARE GRANDIOSE AND VULNERABLE NARCISSISM?

The Oxford English Dictionary defines narcissism as “excessive self-love or vanity; self-admiration, self-centredness”. Scholars have distinguished between two forms or expressions of narcissism: grandiose and vulnerable (Wink, 1991). Grandiose narcissism (also known as overt or oblivious narcissism) is characterized by superiority, self-assurance, and dominance (Miller & Campbell, 2008). In contrast, vulnerable narcissism (also known as covert or hypersensitive narcissism) is characterized by inadequacy, self-doubt, and diffidence (Cain et al., 2008). Both forms of narcissism, however, are characterized by self-absorption, a sense of entitlement, and a lack of concern for others (Pincus & Lukowitsky, 2010).

Note that the terms ‘grandiose narcissism’ and ‘vulnerable narcissism’ refer to subclinical personality traits, not to personality disorders. The two traits lie on a continuum in the general population, with some people being more grandiosely or vulnerably narcissistic, and others less so. Both traits are typically assessed using self-report questionnaires, such as the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Terry, 1988) and the Narcissistic Admiration and Rivalry Questionnaire (NARQ; Back et al., 2013) for grandiose narcissism, and the Hypersensitive Narcissism Scale (HSNS; Hendin & Cheek, 1997) and the Narcissistic Vulnerability Scale (NVS; Crowe et al., 2018) for vulnerable narcissism. In addition, some self-report questionnaires such as the Five Factor Narcissism Inventory (FFNI; Glover et al., 2012) assess several facets of narcissism (e.g., exhibitionism, reactive anger). Scores on the relevant facets are then added together to create composites that assess grandiose or vulnerable narcissism, respectively.

2.1 | Grandiose and vulnerable narcissism: Intrapersonal profiles

Grandiose and vulnerable narcissism share several similarities, but also differ in important ways. Their similarities and differences can be examined from an intrapersonal or an interpersonal standpoint. The two forms of narcissism have distinct intrapersonal profiles. In terms of the Big Five model of personality (John & Srivastava, 1999), grandiosely narcissistic individuals are extraverted and emotionally stable, whereas vulnerably narcissistic individuals are introverted and neurotic (Miller et al., 2018). Both, however, are disagreeable. In addition,

grandiosely narcissistic individuals typically exhibit good psychological health (Sedikides et al., 2004). They report high self-esteem and life satisfaction, and low depression and anxiety (Rohmann et al., 2019). In contrast, vulnerably narcissistic individuals typically exhibit poor psychological health (Weiss & Miller, 2018). They report low self-esteem and happiness, and high depression and anxiety (Miller et al., 2011). Both grandiosely and vulnerably narcissistic individuals, however, show a propensity for anger, vindictiveness, and inauthenticity (Kaufman et al., 2020).

2.2 | Grandiose and vulnerable narcissism: Interpersonal profiles

Grandiose and vulnerable narcissism also have distinct interpersonal profiles. In terms of attachment styles (Bowlby, 1969), grandiosely narcissistic individuals report secure and dismissive attachment styles, reflective of positive self-views, whereas vulnerably narcissistic individuals report fearful and preoccupied attachment styles, reflective of negative self-views (Dickinson & Pincus, 2003). In addition, grandiosely narcissistic individuals are approach-oriented and promotion-focused when pursuing their goals: they seek to maximize success (Foster & Brennan, 2011). In contrast, vulnerably narcissistic individuals are avoidance-oriented and prevention-focused when pursuing their goals: they seek to minimize failure (Freis, 2018). Finally, in terms of the interpersonal circumplex model (Leary, 1957), which plots people's social relationships along the two orthogonal dimensions of agency (reflecting power and competence) and communion (reflecting cooperation and warmth), grandiosely narcissistic individuals score high on agency and low on communion, whereas vulnerably narcissistic individuals score low on communion (Miller et al., 2012).

As noted above, grandiose and vulnerable narcissism have several similarities and differences. What is not as well understood, however, is the overarching theoretical explanation for these similarities and differences. What overarching theoretical explanation might there be for grandiosely narcissistic individuals asserting themselves socially, but vulnerably narcissistic individuals shying away from confrontation? Or for grandiosely narcissistic individuals being dispositionally prone to pride, but vulnerably narcissistic individuals being dispositionally prone to shame? Whereas previous work has focused on the roles of extraversion, neuroticism, agreeableness, and self-esteem (Miller & Campbell, 2008; Miller et al., 2011, 2018; Sedikides et al., 2004), the present article focuses on the role of status hierarchies. Drawing on insights from hierometer theory, it posits that the two forms of narcissism operate as alternative ways of navigating status hierarchies. This theoretical perspective brings coherence to the narcissism literature, helps make sense of divergent and seemingly contradictory findings, and generates new insights to advance knowledge in this area.

3 | NAVIGATING STATUS HIERARCHIES

The need for status is considered a principal human motive (Anderson et al., 2015). Status reflects a person's position in the social hierarchy: it involves being *respected* and *admired* in the eyes of others (Magee & Galinsky, 2008). Status is agentic in character; it involves standing out (Fiske, 2010).¹

Status hierarchies are ubiquitous. They exist in nearly every known society and group: from hunter-gatherers to modern democracies, from schools and workplaces to sports teams and religious groups (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Status differences, moreover, are important. Higher status has been linked to better physical health (Adler et al., 2000), lower anxiety and depression (Mahadevan et al., 2016), and greater life satisfaction (Anderson et al., 2012). Thus, status is everywhere, and it matters.

Given how prevalent and powerful status hierarchies are, it is plausible that one or more psychological mechanisms evolved to enable individuals to navigate them. Although high status is desirable and comes with many benefits, it is not available simply for the taking. Its pursuit involves risks and costs (Van Tilburg &

Mahadevan, 2020). Individuals are aware of their own and others' relative positions in the hierarchy (Anderson et al., 2006), and status violations are often punished (Gilbert et al., 1995). Consequences range in severity from ignoring, glaring, and shouting to physical injury and death (Ridgeway, 2014). Thus, navigating status hierarchies represents an evolutionarily crucial challenge. It is not adaptive to compete when one cannot win, nor is it adaptive to avoid competing when one can win (Krebs & Davies, 1987). Consequently, individuals must pursue status sagaciously.

4 | HIEROMETER THEORY

Hierometer theory postulates that self-regard (i.e., self-esteem and grandiose narcissism) operates as part of an evolved psychological system to help individuals to navigate status hierarchies adaptively (Mahadevan et al., 2021). It tracks a person's status in the hierarchy and motivates status-optimizing behavior (Gregg et al., 2018). Rises and falls in status lead to corresponding rises and falls in self-regard: higher status predicts higher self-regard, and lower status predicts lower self-regard (Figure 1). Rises and falls in self-regard, in turn, lead to corresponding rises and falls in status-seeking behavior: higher self-regard predicts greater assertiveness or competitiveness, and lower self-regard predicts lesser assertiveness or competitiveness (Figure 1). Thus, hierometer theory posits a consolidatory dynamic among these social, psychological, and behavioral variables. Higher social status predicts greater behavioral assertiveness, with self-regard operating as the psychological bridge between the two (Gregg et al., 2017a, 2017b).

Hierometer theory is not the only theoretical perspective to link grandiose narcissism to status pursuit. The *extended agency model* (Campbell & Foster, 2007) postulates that grandiose narcissism comprises four core elements. These include entitled and inflated self-views, desire for self-esteem, approach orientation, and greater concern with agency than communion. Operating in tandem, these four elements facilitate status pursuit and attainment. Likewise, the *status pursuit in narcissism model* (Grapsas et al., 2020) postulates that grandiose narcissism is rooted in a desire for status and consists of a set of interconnected processes involving situation selection, vigilance to status-related cues, appraisal, and response execution. Grandiosely narcissistic individuals pursue status via two pathways: the admiration pathway, involving self-promotion, and the rivalry pathway, involving other-derogation. Each pathway affects how others view them, thereby affecting their status over time (Back et al., 2013; Zeigler-Hill et al., 2019). In a similar vein, self-regulatory process models of grandiose narcissism postulate that different narcissistic features operate in cohesion to create and maintain a grandiose self or a high-

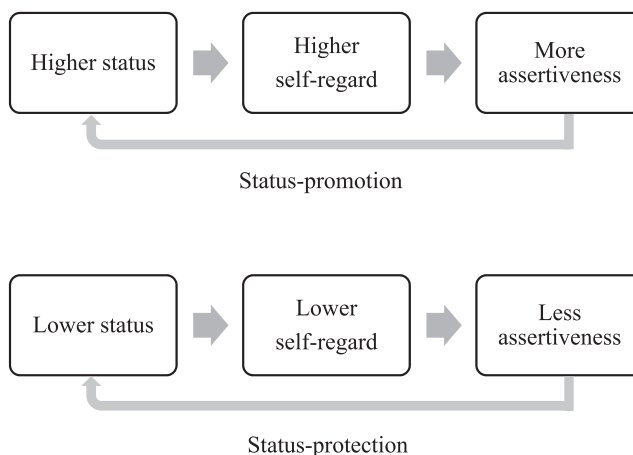


FIGURE 1 Graphical representation of the predictions of hierometer theory.

status position (Chen et al., 2024; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001; Zeigler-Hill & Vonk, 2023). Note, however, that all of these models focus on grandiose narcissism; they do not address vulnerable narcissism.

4.1 | Hawks and doves: Alternative status-seeking strategies

How does self-regard relate to seeking status? As articulated previously (Mahadevan et al., 2016), the classic card game of poker provides a helpful analogy for understanding different status-seeking strategies. In poker, players compete for a pot of money (Sklansky, 1994). Each player is dealt a set of cards, some (combinations) of which are considered to be more valuable than others. One player begins the round by placing a bet, and the game proceeds in a clockwise fashion, with each player responding in turn. A player may choose to *fold* (i.e., opt out of the game by declining to bet, thereby losing the amount bet so far and any further interest in the hand), *check or call* (i.e., stay in the game by matching the bet, and thereby retain an interest in the hand), *raise the stakes* (i.e., increase the amount of the bet), or *go all in* (i.e., invest all their resources in the round). The game continues until only one player remains, in which case, he or she wins the game and collects the pot, or until more than one player remains, in which case, the players reveal their hands in a public *showdown*, and the one with the best hand wins the game and collects the pot (Sklansky, 1994).

Seeking status is comparable to playing poker in the following manner: in poker, each player is dealt certain cards, which differ in value. Based on an evaluation of these cards, an estimation of their competitors' cards, and a consideration of the stakes involved, players must decide whether to bet, and whether to accept the betting challenges of the other players. Similarly, in social life, individuals must decide whether to compete based on an evaluation of their "cards" (i.e., their skills and abilities), an estimation of their competitors' "cards" (i.e., the competitors' skills and abilities), and a consideration of the "stakes" involved (i.e., the time, money, effort, and risk involved in competing).

When confronted with the prospect of social competition, an individual has two choices: to compete and thereby *escalate* the level of the competition, or to give in and thereby *de-escalate* the level of the competition (Slovan & Price, 1987). In the context of the intimidation-based encounters observed in many animal species, escalation is defined as "to try harder, threaten, overpower the other", and de-escalation as "to go for damage limitation, back-off, retreat, submit, give up" (Gilbert & Allan, 1998, p. 586). De-escalation by one party, and the acceptance of this de-escalation by the other party, resolves the encounter. Critically, this process is adaptive for both parties: it enables likely losers to survive and avoid injury, and enables likely winners to save time and energy by not having to engage with unworthy opponents (Gilbert et al., 1995).

Status pursuit in human beings (and in some higher primates) has evolved from being primarily intimidation-based to being primarily attraction-based (Barkow, 1975, 1980). That is, human beings frequently seek status not by attacking or intimidating others, but by impressing others with their positive attributes—their abilities, skills, knowledge, expertise, and experience (Henrich & Gil-White, 2001). Accordingly, in the context of complex human social competition, escalation refers to competition-intensifying behavior. It signifies being willing to assert oneself, to take on the competition, to persist. In contrast, de-escalation refers to competition-defusing behavior. It signifies being willing to defer, to concede to the competition, to give up.

In order to seek status optimally, individuals should escalate encounters they are likely to win and de-escalate encounters they are likely to lose (Krebs & Davies, 1987). That is, they need "know when to hold 'em, know when to fold 'em" (Schlitz, 1978). This requires a capacity to evaluate one's own abilities relative to those of one's competitors (Parker, 1974). Individuals who possess—or see themselves as possessing—the abilities, skills, and expertise to compete should opt for *status-promotion* and escalate competitions, whereas individuals who lack—or see themselves as lacking—the abilities, skills, and expertise to compete should opt for *status-protection* and de-escalate competitions (Slovan & Price, 1987).

These alternative status-seeking approaches have also been termed *hawk* and *dove strategies* (Maynard Smith, 1982). A hawk strategy is characterized by entering into high-stakes contests and competing against strong opponents for high payoffs, whereas a dove strategy is characterized by entering into low-stakes contests and

competing against weak opponents for low payoffs. When hawks win, they receive high payoffs, but when they lose, they sustain heavy losses of resources and reputation. When doves win, they receive low payoffs, but when they lose, they sustain smaller losses of resources and reputation. A hawk strategy maximizes gains in competitive victories and promotes status acquisition (i.e., status-promotion); a dove strategy minimizes losses in competitive defeats, protects existing status, and prevents further losses of status (i.e., status-protection). Accordingly, both strategies are adaptive: a hawk strategy entails high risk but offers high rewards; a dove strategy entails low risk but offers low rewards (Maynard Smith & Price, 1973).

Hierometer theory proposes that individuals with high self-regard will typically adopt a hawk approach to status seeking because, having a high opinion of themselves and their abilities, they judge their likelihood of success as high. In contrast, individuals with low self-regard will typically adopt a dove approach to status seeking because, having a low opinion of themselves and their abilities, they judge their likelihood of success as low. Thus, under the right conditions, both high and low self-regard are adaptive. High self-regard enables an individual to maximize the social, psychological, and financial rewards of competing when they can do so, facilitating status-promotion, whereas low self-regard enables an individual to minimize the social, psychological, and financial risks of competing when they cannot do so, facilitating status-protection.

5 | GRANDIOSE AND VULNERABLE NARCISSISM AS ALTERNATIVE STATUS-SEEKING STRATEGIES

Hierometer theory pertains to self-esteem and grandiose narcissism; it does not mention vulnerable narcissism. Extrapolating from this theory, I posit that grandiose and vulnerable narcissism may operate as alternative strategies to navigate status hierarchies (Figure 2). Specifically, whereas grandiose narcissism operates as a status-promoting hawk strategy, vulnerable narcissism operates as a status-protecting dove strategy (Figure 2).

This conceptualization of grandiose and vulnerable narcissism as alternative status-seeking strategies is consistent with their intrapersonal and interpersonal profiles described earlier. Grandiose narcissism is associated with extraversion, high self-esteem, high agency, boldness, and dominance—expressions of a hawk strategy (Table 1). In contrast, vulnerable narcissism is associated with introversion, low self-esteem, low agency, fearfulness, and inhibition—expressions of a dove strategy (Table 1). Several other lines of research also converge to support this framing. Below, I examine how grandiosely and vulnerably narcissistic individuals navigate status hierarchies. Specifically, I discuss: (a) desires for status, (b) sensitivity to status-related cues, (c) attainment of status,

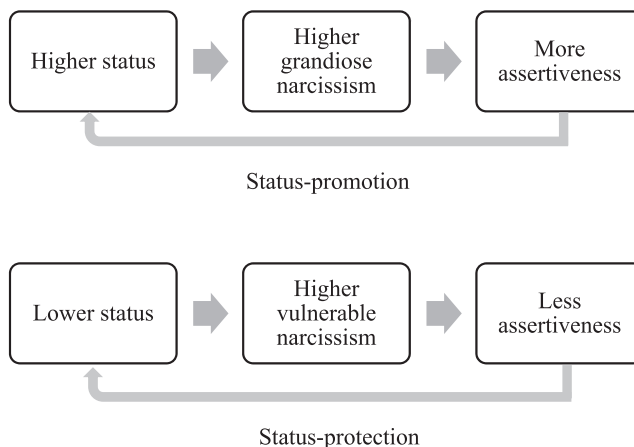


FIGURE 2 Graphical representation of predictions for grandiose and vulnerable narcissism.

TABLE 1 Summary of predictions for grandiose and vulnerable narcissism and hawk and dove strategies, respectively.

	Grandiose narcissism	Vulnerable narcissism
Personality	High extraversion	Low extraversion
	Low neuroticism	High neuroticism
	Low agreeableness	Low agreeableness
Motivation	Strong desire for status	Strong desire for status
	Promotion-focus	Prevention-focus
	Approach-orientation	Avoidance-orientation
Cognition	Sensitive to status-related cues	Sensitive to status-related cues
	High self-esteem	Low self-esteem
	Sense of superiority	Sense of inferiority
	High sense of entitlement	High sense of entitlement
	High self-centeredness	High self-centeredness
Emotion	High proneness to pride	Low proneness to pride
	High proneness to positive affect	High proneness to negative affect
	Low proneness to depression	High proneness to depression
	Low proneness to anxiety	High proneness to anxiety
	Low proneness to shame	High proneness to shame
Social position	High status attainment	Low status attainment
Behavior	Overt status seeking	Covert status seeking
	Assertiveness	Submissiveness
	Risk-tolerance	Risk-aversion
	Outgoingness	Inhibition
	Social skill	Social awkwardness
Status-seeking strategy	Hawk strategy	Dove strategy
	Status-promotion	Status-protection
	High risk, high-reward	Low risk, low-reward
	Escalation	De-escalation

(d) emotional concomitants of status, and (e) status-seeking behavior. Note that the majority of research to date has focused on grandiose narcissism; there is much less research on vulnerable narcissism, making a guiding theoretical account particularly useful (see Table 1 for a summary of predictions).

5.1 | Desires for status

If grandiose and vulnerable narcissism are to function as alternative status-seeking strategies, both should be associated with a desire for status. The desire for status, being fundamental, is present among most human beings (Anderson et al., 2015). Nonetheless, evidence suggests that both grandiosely and vulnerably narcissistic individuals show a heightened desire for status. In two cross-sectional studies, Mahadevan and Jordan (2022) examined the

extent to which grandiosely and vulnerably narcissistic individuals desired status and inclusion. They found that both grandiosely and vulnerably narcissistic individuals desired status, even after accounting for desires for inclusion. Likewise, Zeigler-Hill and colleagues found that both grandiosely and vulnerably narcissistic individuals reported a need for status, independently of a need to belong (Zeigler-Hill & Dehaghi, 2023; Zeigler-Hill et al., 2019). Furthermore, several clinical psychology studies indicate that the desire for respect, recognition, and admiration from others, along with fantasies of unlimited power, success, and brilliance, characterizes both grandiosely and vulnerably narcissistic individuals (Cain et al., 2008; Pincus & Lukowitsky, 2010). Thus, consistent with their operating as alternative status-seeking strategies, both grandiose and vulnerable narcissism are associated with a heightened desire for status.

5.2 | Sensitivity to status-related cues

If grandiose and vulnerable narcissism function as alternative status-seeking strategies, both should be associated with a heightened sensitivity to status-related cues. Consistent with this, grandiosely narcissistic individuals are highly sensitive to status-related cues. Using a dot probe task, Gu et al. (2013) found that grandiosely narcissistic individuals exhibited an attentional bias to performance-related words. They showed continued engagement with success-related words and heightened vigilance to failure-related words. In contrast, less grandiosely narcissistic individuals showed continued engagement with failure-related words and rejection-related words. Likewise, using a sequential subliminal priming paradigm combined with a lexical decision task, Horvath and Morf (2009) found that when presented with a negative, status-related prime ("failure"), grandiosely narcissistic individuals were quicker to recognize words associated with low agency (e.g., useless, weak, futile, incompetent) than were less grandiosely narcissistic individuals. In a similar vein, Hardaker et al. (2021) found that when presented with a negative, status-related prime ("humiliation"), grandiosely narcissistic individuals were quicker to recognize self-threatening stimuli than were less grandiosely narcissistic individuals.

Few studies have examined how vulnerably narcissistic individuals respond to status-related cues. However, some evidence suggests that they too display this heightened sensitivity. Hart et al. (2021) found that vulnerably narcissistic individuals experienced heightened arousal, lower mood, and lower self-esteem following failure than did less vulnerably narcissistic individuals. Thus, consistent with their operating as alternative status-seeking strategies, both grandiose and vulnerable narcissism appear to be associated with a heightened sensitivity to status-related cues.

5.3 | Attainment of status

If both grandiosely and vulnerably narcissistic individuals desire status and are sensitive to status-related cues, where do they diverge? Compatible with a status-promoting hawk strategy, grandiose narcissism is associated with high status attainment. High rank in different forms including socioeconomic class (Piff, 2014), management level (Wille et al., 2013), leadership role (Brunell et al., 2008), and salary (Spurk et al., 2015) all correlate positively with grandiose narcissism. Likewise, perceived status attainment (feeling respected and admired) correlates positively with grandiose narcissism, even after accounting for perceived inclusion attainment (feeling liked and accepted; Mahadevan et al., 2016, 2019a).

Daily fluctuations in social status also correlate positively with daily fluctuations in grandiose narcissism. In a daily-diary study, Giacomin and Jordan (2016) found that people were more grandiosely narcissistic on days when they experienced more agentic events. Likewise, Mahadevan et al. (2020) and Benson and Giacomin (2020) found

that people were more grandiosely narcissistic on days when their status was higher. These associations, moreover, were independent of daily communal events, daily inclusion, and daily self-esteem.

Importantly, the link between status attainment and grandiose narcissism is causal. In two experiments, Mahadevan et al. (2019a) orthogonally manipulated people's levels of status and inclusion and measured their state grandiose narcissism in response. Higher status, but not inclusion, led to higher state grandiose narcissism. Furthermore, grandiosely narcissistic individuals feel confident about achieving high rank in future. In a series of studies, Zitek and Jordan (2016) found that grandiosely narcissistic individuals expressed support for a range of hierarchical social structures including income inequality, group-based hierarchies, and business and organizational hierarchies. This preference was explained by grandiosely narcissistic individuals seeing themselves at—or likely to reach—the top of the hierarchy.

Fewer studies have examined how vulnerable narcissism relates to status attainment, and these studies have largely examined perceived, rather than objective, status attainment. However, evidence suggests that compatible with a status-protecting dove strategy, vulnerable narcissism is associated with low perceived status attainment. In two cross-sectional studies, Mahadevan and Jordan (2022) found that both grandiosely and vulnerably narcissistic individuals desired status; however, whereas grandiosely narcissistic individuals felt they had attained high status, vulnerably narcissistic individuals did not. Likewise, in two experience sampling studies, Kroencke et al. (2023) found that grandiose narcissism correlated with perceived status attainment (feeling respected and admired), whereas vulnerable narcissism correlated with perceived status neglect (feeling ignored and sidelined). In a similar vein, Edershile et al. (2023) found that low status attainment related to lower grandiose narcissism, and higher vulnerable narcissism, in both naturalistic and experimental settings.

Edershile and Wright (2021) additionally examined grandiosely and vulnerably narcissistic individuals' perceptions of others during naturalistic social interactions. They found that state grandiose narcissism was associated with perceiving others as submissive (i.e., high relative status), whereas state vulnerable narcissism was associated with perceiving others as dominant (i.e., low relative status). Finally, Freis and Hansen-Brown (2021) found that both grandiose and vulnerable narcissism were linked to a sense of entitlement. However, for grandiosely narcissistic individuals this sense of entitlement was explained by perceptions of superiority (e.g., "I am naturally deserving")—a high-status position—whereas for vulnerably narcissistic individuals it was explained by perceptions of injustice (e.g., "I have been disadvantaged in the past")—a low-status position. Thus, compatible with operating as hawk and dove strategies, respectively, grandiose narcissism appears to result from and promote high status attainment, whereas vulnerable narcissism appears to result from and promote low status attainment.

5.4 | Emotional concomitants of status

Further support for the conceptualization of grandiose and vulnerable narcissism as hawk and dove strategies, respectively, comes from examining the emotional profiles of each. Grandiosely and vulnerably narcissistic individuals exhibit emotional profiles that closely mirror those of high- and low- status individuals, respectively.

High-status individuals, like grandiosely narcissistic individuals, typically exhibit good psychological health. They experience more positive affect and less negative affect (Anderson et al., 2012), more pride (Tracy & Robins, 2007a, 2007b), and less depression, anxiety, and shame (Mahadevan et al., 2023a, 2023b). In contrast, low-status individuals, like vulnerably narcissistic individuals, typically exhibit poor psychological health. They experience more unhappiness and distress (Anderson et al., 2012), less pride (Tracy & Robins, 2007a, 2007b), and greater depression, anxiety, and shame (Mahadevan et al., 2023a, 2023b). Note that pride is an escalating emotion associated with high status attainment (Tracy & Robins, 2007a, 2007b). It arises in response to competitive victories, predicts assertive behaviors, and signals high status attainment to others (Kroencke et al., 2023; Tracy &

Matsumoto, 2008). In contrast, depression, anxiety, and shame are de-escalating emotions associated with low status attainment (Gilbert, 2000). They arise in response to competitive defeats, predict submission and withdrawal behaviors, and signal low status attainment to others (Mahadevan et al., 2023a, 2023b; Tracy & Matsumoto, 2008).

Finally, grandiosely and vulnerably narcissistic individuals vary in their experience of envy and schadenfreude. Krizan and Johar (2012) found that grandiose narcissism was unrelated to dispositional envy, situational envy, and schadenfreude towards a high-status peer. Instead, grandiosely narcissistic individuals believed that other people envied them—a high-status position. In contrast, vulnerable narcissism related positively to dispositional envy, situational envy, and schadenfreude towards a high-status peer—a low-status position. Thus, grandiosely narcissistic individuals exhibit the emotional concomitants of a status-promoting hawk strategy, whereas vulnerably narcissistic individuals exhibit the emotional concomitants of a status-protecting dove strategy.

5.5 | Status-seeking behavior

Finally, in line with grandiose and vulnerable narcissism functioning as hawk and dove strategies, respectively, the two differ in their status-seeking behaviors. Grandiosely narcissistic individuals display social potency (Campbell & Foster, 2007). They are socially skilled and charming (Back et al., 2013), and often popular with their peers (at least on first acquaintance; Paulhus, 1998). In contrast, vulnerably narcissistic individuals display social inhibition. They are shy and socially awkward (Miller et al., 2011), and often isolated and lonely (Miller et al., 2018).

Compatible with a hawk strategy, grandiosely narcissistic individuals seek status boldly. They actively pursue leadership roles and often emerge as group leaders, especially in situations of uncertainty (Brunell et al., 2008). They also behave assertively in everyday social contexts (Mahadevan et al., 2020), relish competition (Luchner et al., 2011), and react confrontationally when threatened (Twenge & Campbell, 2003). In contrast, compatible with a dove strategy, vulnerably narcissistic individuals seek status covertly. They behave submissively in everyday social contexts (Kroencke et al., 2023), avoid competition (Luchner et al., 2011), and shy away from confrontation (Miller et al., 2011). Notably, however, vulnerably narcissistic individuals engage in non-confrontational status seeking. They engage in conspicuous consumption, favoring ostentatious luxury products over practical ones (Neave et al., 2020). They also engage in game-playing and passive coercion towards rivals (Tortoriello et al., 2017).

Finally, exactly as a hawk strategy would predict, grandiosely narcissistic individuals “go for the gold”, favoring high risks and high rewards. They have an elevated behavioral activation system, experiencing reduced arousal in response to failure (Hart et al., 2021). They are approach-oriented, strongly motivated to approach desirable outcomes and weakly motivated to avoid undesirable ones (Foster & Brennan, 2011). They prefer high-risk, high-reward gambles (Lakey et al., 2008) and are prone to impulsive behavior (Vazire & Funder, 2006). In contrast, exactly as a dove strategy would predict, vulnerably narcissistic individuals “play it safe”, favoring low risks and low rewards. They have an elevated behavioral inhibition system, experiencing heightened arousal in response to failure (Hart et al., 2021). They are avoidance-oriented, strongly motivated to avoid undesirable outcomes and weakly motivated to approach desirable ones (Foster & Brennan, 2011). They are risk-averse (Freis, 2018) and avoid impulsive behavior (Malesza & Kaczmarek, 2018). Thus, consistent with a hawk strategy, grandiosely narcissistic individuals exhibit high-risk, high-reward status-seeking behaviors, whereas, consistent with a dove strategy, vulnerably narcissistic individuals exhibit low-risk, low-reward status-seeking behaviors.

5.6 | Summary

In summary, converging theory and research on personality, motivation, emotion, cognition, and behavior suggest that grandiose and vulnerable narcissism operate as hawk and dove status-seeking strategies, respectively. Both grandiosely and vulnerably narcissistic individuals desire status and are sensitive to status-related cues. However, grandiosely narcissistic individuals are extraverted, self-assured, and prone to pride. They are promotion-focused and approach-oriented. They pursue status boldly, take risks, and engage in high-stakes contests. In sum, they favor status-promotion, typically associated with higher status attainment. In contrast, vulnerably narcissistic individuals are introverted, insecure, and prone to depression, anxiety, and shame. They are prevention-focused and avoidance-oriented. They pursue status covertly, avoid risks, and engage in low-stakes contests. In sum, they favor status-protection, typically associated with lower status attainment.

6 | CAVEATS, LIMITATIONS, AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

There are several key areas for future theoretical and empirical work. First and foremost, the majority of research on narcissism and status pursuit has focused on grandiose narcissism. Future work should investigate vulnerable narcissism, particularly in relation to responses to status-related cues, objective versus perceived status attainment, and status-seeking behavior. In addition, some studies have assessed vulnerable narcissism using pathological narcissism measures, thereby blurring the distinction between subclinical narcissistic vulnerability and pathological narcissistic vulnerability. Although some scholars argue that the distinction between subclinical and pathological narcissism is not a meaningful one (Miller et al., 2017), future work might do well to use subclinical measures of vulnerable narcissism when assessing it as a personality trait or state.

The current article also focused on the classic two-factor model of grandiose and vulnerable narcissism. More recently, however, scholars have proposed three-factor models of narcissism. These include the Narcissism Spectrum Model (Krizan & Herlache, 2018) and the trifurcated model of narcissism (Weiss et al., 2019), which posit that narcissism reflects three broad dimensions: grandiosity or agentic extraversion, vulnerability or narcissistic neuroticism, and entitlement or antagonism, respectively. However, whereas the two-factor model has considerable theoretical and empirical support in both the social and personality psychology and the clinical psychology literatures (Cain et al., 2008; Wink, 1991), the three-factor models are newer and have less theoretical and empirical support (Weidmann et al., 2023). There is debate about the precise nature of the three dimensions and how best to measure them, with the Narcissism Spectrum Model emphasizing entitlement and the trifurcated model emphasizing antagonism. Furthermore, dimension-specific measures of the three dimensions are yet to be developed, with researchers instead relying on existing measures of grandiose and vulnerable narcissism (Weidmann et al., 2023), or the Big Five personality measures of neuroticism and agreeableness (Kroencke et al., 2023) to assess them. Accordingly, the current article focused on the two-factor narcissism model. Future work, however, could examine the three-factor narcissism models in relation to status pursuit.

Future work could also investigate how narcissism relates to social inclusion. Some evidence suggests that whereas grandiosely narcissistic individuals show a reduced desire for inclusion, especially in comparison to status, vulnerably narcissistic individuals desire inclusion as well as status (Mahadevan & Jordan, 2022; Zeigler-Hill & Dehaghi, 2023). This is important as it may denote another fundamental difference between the two forms of narcissism. Unlike their grandiosely narcissistic counterparts, vulnerably narcissistic individuals may be sensitive to inclusion-related cues and adopt social strategies to pursue both status and inclusion—perhaps in different contexts and circumstances. Investigating this relation will offer further insight into both forms of narcissism.

It would also be instructive to theoretically and empirically differentiate low self-esteem and vulnerable narcissism. Several scholars have painstakingly differentiated high self-esteem and grandiose narcissism—both

theoretically and empirically (Hyatt et al., 2018). A similar study of vulnerable narcissism—its causes, correlates, consequences, developmental origins, heritability, and malleability—vis-à-vis low self-esteem would greatly enhance knowledge of these traits.

Another relevant question concerns how narcissism relates to aggression. Several studies show that higher narcissism is associated with greater aggression (Kjærvik & Bushman, 2021). This may appear to contradict the idea that vulnerable narcissism operates as a dove strategy. However, although a dove strategy predisposes individuals to submit to stronger or higher-ranking individuals, aggression towards weaker or lower-ranking individuals may be increased (Price & Sloman, 1987; Schjelderup-Ebbe, 1935). Moreover, given that both grandiosely and vulnerably narcissistic individuals are self-centered, entitled, and antagonistic, both might be expected to behave aggressively. However, the type and target of their aggression may vary. Grandiosely narcissistic individuals may be more likely to engage in overt, high-risk aggression (e.g., proactive aggression, physical aggression, face-to-face bullying) aimed at high-ranking targets, whereas vulnerably narcissistic individuals may be more likely to engage in covert, low-risk aggression (e.g., reactive aggression, online bullying, online trolling) aimed at low-ranking targets. Consistent with this, some research has linked grandiose narcissism to proactive and face-to-face aggression, and vulnerable narcissism to reactive and anonymous online aggression (Chen et al., 2022; Du et al., 2022). Future work could further elaborate on these links by examining the type and target of grandiosely and vulnerably narcissistic individuals' aggression.

Finally, future work could examine how age and gender differences in narcissism relate to differences in status-seeking strategies. Studies show that men typically score higher on grandiose narcissism than women (although the two do not differ significantly on vulnerable narcissism; Grijalva et al., 2015). Young adults also typically score higher on grandiose narcissism than older adults (Weidmann et al., 2023). Consistent with the socio-evolutionary account put forward here, men and young adults might adopt high-risk, high-reward status-seeking approaches, whereas women and older adults might adopt low-risk, low-reward status-seeking approaches. Note, however, that the ability of age and gender to explain differences in narcissism in these studies was small, and so other factors may play a bigger role in determining the type of status-seeking strategies people adopt.

7 | CONCLUSIONS

Grandiosely narcissistic individuals are bold, confident, and charismatic, whereas vulnerably narcissistic individuals are cautious, insecure, and socially awkward. In this article, I examined these two forms of narcissism from a socio-evolutionary standpoint. Drawing together insights from evolutionary adaptationist models of rank and, more specifically, from hierometer theory, I proposed a novel theoretical account of grandiose and vulnerable narcissism as alternative status-seeking strategies and examined extant research in light of it. Both grandiose and vulnerably narcissistic individuals desire status and are sensitive to status-related cues. However, grandiose narcissism appears to operate as a hawk strategy involving high status attainment, escalating emotions, and assertive status-seeking behaviors (i.e., status-promotion), whereas vulnerable narcissism appears to operate as a dove strategy involving low status attainment, de-escalating emotions, and covert status-seeking behaviors (i.e., status-protection). This parsimonious and functional account illuminates the similarities and differences between grandiose and vulnerable narcissism, reconciles disparate findings, and offers insight into the paradoxical nature of these two faces of narcissism.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

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ENDNOTE

¹ The need for inclusion (also known as the need to belong) is also considered a principal human motive (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Inclusion reflects a person's position in the social collective: it involves being *liked* and *accepted* in the eyes of others (Gregg & Mahadevan, 2014). Inclusion is communal in character; it involves fitting in (Fiske, 2010).

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