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*Pers Soc Psychol Bull* 2003; 29; 885

DOI: 10.1177/0146167203029007007

The online version of this article can be found at:  
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# Narcissists as “Victims”: The Role of Narcissism in the Perception of Transgressions

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*Narcissism is a set of traits that are motivated by the desire to establish and maintain a grandiose self-image. Consistent with this conceptualization, the authors hypothesized that narcissistic people perceive themselves to be the victims of other people's interpersonal transgressions more frequently than do less narcissistic people. In a 14-day diary study, the authors found that narcissism (particularly in its exploitiveness/entitlement dimension) was associated positively with the number and frequency of transgressions that respondents reported. The narcissism-victimization relationship appears to result, at least in part, from biased recall or self-presentation. The exploitiveness/entitlement dimension of narcissism may be particularly useful for explaining why narcissistic people report higher rates of interpersonal transgressions in their daily lives.*

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**Keywords:** narcissism; transgressions; personality; the self

**T**he construct of narcissism has roots in psychology dating back more than 100 years (Ellis, 1898). Narcissism is characterized by arrogance, grandiosity, and self-importance; a preoccupation with fantasies of success and power; a conviction that one is special or unique; a desire to receive the admiration of others; a sense of entitlement; interpersonally exploitive behavior; an inability to empathize with the needs and feelings of other people; and envy.

Rhodewalt and Morf (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001; Rhodewalt, 2001) recently introduced a dynamic, self-

regulatory processing model of narcissism that unites many of the empirical findings regarding the psychological and interpersonal correlates of narcissism. According to their model, the narcissistic self is characterized by unique types of self-knowledge, self-evaluation processes, and self-regulation processes. What seems to unite these unique characteristics of the narcissistic self, at least in Rhodewalt and Morf's model, is their common motivational core: the desire to maintain a self-image that is grandiose and generally positive but also brittle and vulnerable to fluctuation (see also Emmons, 1987).

## *Negative Interpersonal Events and Narcissistic Functioning*

Although narcissistic people do not have more total social interactions than do others, they have more negative ones (Rhodewalt, Madrian, & Cheney, 1998). Narcissistic functioning in response to such negative interpersonal events provides a particularly useful window for observing how narcissists' preoccupation with constructing and maintaining a grandiose self-image can influence their psychological and social functioning. Narcis-

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*PSPB*, Vol. 29 No. 7, July 2003 885-893

DOI: 10.1177/0146167203253083

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sistic people are prone to anger and aggression in response to negative feedback regarding their performance or competency (Raskin & Terry, 1988; Rhodewalt & Morf, 1998). Relatedly, narcissistic people have higher rates of aggressive behavior against people who threaten their self-esteem. Bushman and Baumeister (1998) described two studies in which they found that narcissistic people were more likely than were less narcissistic people to commit aggressive acts against people who evaluated their performance negatively on an essay-writing task. Of interest, Bushman and Baumeister also found that narcissistic people were not more aggressive against others who praised them or against innocent third parties. Because narcissistic people are preoccupied with establishing and defending an image of themselves as powerful, intelligent, and beautiful, situations that detract from this self-image may be experienced as having greater implications for personal harm than they might by less narcissistic people.

Bushman and Baumeister (1998) suggested that the links between narcissism, anger, and aggression might be due to the fact that narcissistic people are deficient in resources that inhibit retaliation, including impulse control and empathy. However, the links between narcissism and aggression also might reflect self-regulation processes that are motivated ultimately by the narcissist's preoccupation with building and maintaining a grandiose self-view. Namely, narcissists' preoccupation with propping up their overly favorable self-images might reduce their thresholds for taking offense at interpersonal events that occur in their daily lives because such behaviors might have threatening implications for their grandiose self-images.

This suggestion presupposes that narcissists approach the social world with a heightened sensitivity regarding the actions of other people. Some evidence suggests that this might be the case. Rhodewalt et al. (1998) found that narcissists' daily self-esteem was more dependent on the quality of their daily interpersonal interactions than was the daily self-esteem of less narcissistic people. Moreover, Rhodewalt and Morf (1995) found that scores on the Narcissistic Personality Inventory are directly related to scores on the Cook-Medley Hostility Scale, which reflects a cynical mistrust of others (Rhodewalt, 2001). Positing the existence of an increased sensitivity to offensive interpersonal behavior has a precedent in the literature on hostility. Researchers have been aware for some time that people with high levels of hostility and aggressiveness differ from less hostile and aggressive people not only in terms of poor affect regulation and impulse control but also in their cognitions about the social world. For example, people high in hostility and aggressiveness are more prone to attribute hostile intent to the behavior of others (e.g., Dodge, Price, Bachorowski, &

Newman, 1990; Graham & Hudley, 1994). Given the links between hostility and narcissism, narcissistic people may be similarly prone to a hostile attribution bias.

There are other good reasons why narcissists might be prone to perceiving themselves as frequent victims of transgressions. Consonant with Rhodewalt and Morf's model, narcissists might present themselves as the victims of other people's transgressions to soften the negative implications of poor performance in various domains of life for their self-esteem. For example, a narcissist might justify a poor athletic performance by believing that he or she would have performed better had he or she not been disappointed and hurt by so many people in life. Alternatively, narcissists might present their pasts as more hurtful than they actually were so that their accomplishments seem even more impressive (e.g., "Although I was disappointed and hurt at every turn by the people around me, I emerged victorious against all odds"). Relatedly, narcissists might present themselves as the victims of other people's mistreatment to justify treating people with similar disregard (e.g., Buss & Chiodo, 1991). Other research demonstrates that narcissists engage in a biased recall of their romantic histories after experiencing present-day romantic failures (Rhodewalt & Eddings, 2002), so perhaps narcissists also distort their memories of other types of past events in the service of maintaining their grandiose self-images.

Finally, it is possible that narcissists' hypothesized reports of incurring frequent transgressions reflect, at least in part, an accurate depiction of their social worlds. Given narcissists' frequent disrespect and disregard of others (Buss & Chiodo, 1991), their behavior may engender negative reactions (and most likely) negative behaviors from others in kind.

Is it possible to determine whether narcissists' self-reports of transgressions reflect the true state of their interpersonal worlds rather than simply biased recall or self-presentation? We think there is. Some self-report measures of daily life experience (e.g., experience sampling, daily diaries) provide strikingly different, and presumably more accurate, depictions of people's daily interpersonal lives than do other self-report measures (e.g., retrospective surveys that elicit memories over longer periods of time, such as 2 weeks). If narcissism is associated with the frequency of interpersonal transgressions as reported using both types of measures, then we might conclude that the narcissism-victimization link is, at least in part, likely to be a true reflection of narcissists' interpersonal worlds. However, if narcissism is correlated with the frequency of transgressions as assessed with a measure that likely reflects biased recall or self-presentation (e.g., a retrospective survey) after controlling for the measure that is more likely to reflect an accurate depiction of people's daily social interactions (e.g., a

daily diary), then we might conclude that the narcissism-victimization relationship reflects, at least in part, the operation of motivated biases in recall or reporting.

#### *Summary and Overview*

To explore these issues, we conducted a study in which we examined whether narcissism was related to people's self-reported frequency of incurring interpersonal transgressions in their daily lives. We hypothesized that narcissism would be related positively to (a) the number of transgressions people reported over a 14-day period of record keeping and (b) a retrospective measure of the frequency with which they incurred interpersonal transgressions during the same 14-day period. We also evaluated whether the relationship between narcissism and the perception of interpersonal transgressions persisted after controlling for the well-established effects of negative affectivity on the perception of stressful life events and negative environmental stimuli (Watson, 1988). Moreover, we examined whether the narcissism-victimization relationship could be attributed in part to biased recall or self-presentation.

#### METHOD

##### *Participants*

Participants were 186 student volunteers (approximately 75% women and 25% men;  $M$  age = 21.6 years) who were enrolled in a larger experimental study on the perception of transgressions (McCullough, Kilpatrick, Emmons, & Mooney, 2000). They received a small amount of credit in an undergraduate psychology course.

##### *Measures*

*Narcissism.* Participants completed the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI) (Raskin & Hall, 1979). The NPI consists of forced-choice items (e.g., "Sometimes I tell good stories" vs. "Everybody likes my stories"). Emmons (1987) uncovered a four-factor solution involving 37 of the 54 original NPI items. From this analysis, he recommended interpreting the NPI in terms of four subscales: (a) a 9-item measure of leadership/authority (e.g., "I see myself as a good leader"), (b) a 9-item measure of self-absorption/self-admiration (e.g., "I like to look at my body"), (c) an 11-item measure of superiority/arrogance (e.g., "Everybody likes to hear my stories"), and (d) an 8-item measure of exploitiveness/entitlement (e.g., "I insist on getting the respect that is due me"). Emmons (1987) reported internal consistency reliabilities for the total scale and the subscales ranging from  $\alpha = .68$  to  $.87$ . In the present sample, the four subscales were moderately intercorrelated,  $r$ s ranging from  $.15$  ( $p = .055$ ) to  $.32$  ( $p < .001$ ).

*Negative affectivity.* We measured participants' proneness to experience negative affect with the mean of their scores on seven emotion words (depressed/blue, unhappy, bored, tired, frustrated, worried/anxious, angry/hostile). Participants endorsed these seven items on a 7-point scale to indicate the extent to which they had experienced each of them during the previous month (where 0 = *not at all* and 6 = *extremely much*). Scores on this measure were highly correlated with scores on the same measure at the end of the study,  $r(N = 171) = .70$ ,  $p < .001$ . Correcting this correlation for attenuation due to unreliability (per Hunter & Schmidt, 1990) led to an estimated test-retest correlation of  $r = .82$ .

*Daily diary measure of interpersonal transgressions.* For 14 days, participants kept a daily diary of the interpersonal transgressions that they incurred. In these diaries, they wrote a few lines each day about each transgression incurred on that day. At the end of the study, two trained raters who were naïve regarding the hypotheses of the study determined the number of interpersonal offenses that participants had encountered. Raters read each diary and verified that each reported episode qualified as an interpersonal offense by comparing them to the following definition: "An unpleasant action, transgression, affront, or failure to act in an agreed upon manner that directly affected the participant (e.g., physical or verbal aggression, being stood up; a friend breaks a confidence)." Across the 14-day diary period, the daily probabilities that a participant would report having incurred at least one transgression ranged from  $.58$  to  $.81$ .

Because two raters assessed the total number of transgressions present in participants' 14-day diaries, variance in those ratings can be conceptualized as the result of one source of substantive variance (variance due to true differences in the numbers of transgressions that participants reported) and two sources of artifactual variance (variance caused by systematic differences in how the two raters used the rating scale and variance due to nonsystematic differences in how the raters used the rating scale, which is confounded with error). Given this rating design, interrater reliability was calculated using a variance components analysis. Specifically, the percentage of total variance among the ratings was partitioned into variance components that could be attributed to raters, participants, and the interaction of participants and raters (which is confounded with error). Because we wished for our conclusions to generalize to the universe of possible raters and study participants, we treated them as random effects. Interrater reliability was excellent, as noted by the fact that 95% of the variance in ratings could be attributed to differences among the participants (i.e., interrater reliability =  $.95$ ).

*Transgression Occurrences Measure (TOM)*. At the beginning and again at the end of the 14-day period, participants completed the 20-item Transgression Occurrences Measure (TOM). The TOM (see the appendix) was designed expressly for the present study to assess participants' perceptions of the frequency with which they encountered a variety of interpersonal transgressions (e.g., someone betrayed them, was violent toward them, stole from them, gossiped about them, or benefited from their misfortune) during the previous 14-day period. We selected these 20 transgressions for the TOM because we expected them to occur relatively frequently in a sample of university students. Approximately half of the transgressions were "sins of commission" that would be relatively unambiguous and thus highly visible to a third party (e.g., "stole from you," "degraded you in public," or "damaged something that belonged to you"), and approximately half were "sins of omission" that would be more subtle and/or less visible to a third party (e.g., "took advantage of you," "failed to appreciate you adequately," and "benefited from your misfortune"). Participants were instructed to "indicate how frequently the following events have occurred to you in your relationships with other people in the last 2 weeks." Items were rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale (where 0 = *not at all* and 6 = *constantly*). Items were aggregated by taking their arithmetic mean, with higher scores reflecting more frequent interpersonal transgressions. For the two administrations of the TOM, the estimated internal consistency reliability was  $\alpha = .87$  and  $.90$ , respectively. Scores from the two administrations were correlated at  $r(N = 171) = .59, p < .001$ .

Scores on the pre-diary and post-diary administrations of the TOM were correlated with the sum of people's reported interpersonal transgressions across the 14-day period derived from the daily diaries at  $r(N = 177) = .19, p < .01$ , and  $r(N = 170) = .30, p < .001$ , suggesting that they shared some (although by no means mostly) common variance, presumably reflecting (in part) true differences among persons in the perceived frequency with which they incurred interpersonal transgressions.

#### *Procedure*

After an in-class solicitation, participants completed the NPI, the negative affectivity items, the TOM, and other measures not related to the present study. Participants were told that the investigators were interested in "people's aggressive behavior toward you in the next 14 days." They were told that they would be serving as observers so that the investigators could better understand the nature of aggressive behavior. At that time, participants were trained on the use of the daily diaries. They were given examples of common offenses that they might record in their journals, including "someone

stands you up for an appointment or date," "someone hurts you physically or emotionally," and "a friend abandons you or betrays a trust." Then participants were instructed to note when and where each offense occurred and the circumstances surrounding the transgression. Participants were asked to record offenses at the end of each day.

After completing and returning the 14-day diaries to the investigators, participants completed the TOM a second time to indicate the frequency with which specific transgressions occurred against them during the 14 days during which they kept the daily diaries. They also completed some additional self-report measures not related to the present study.

#### *Analyses*

We analyzed the associations of the NPI with the total number of interpersonal transgressions that participants reported in their 14-day diaries and with their scores on the TOM using (a) zero-order correlations and (b) partial correlations in which we controlled for negative affectivity. We also conducted simultaneous multiple regression analyses to determine whether any of the four NPI subscales was uniquely important for predicting participants' transgression reports.

## RESULTS

### *Descriptive Statistics*

Means, standard deviations, and internal consistency reliability estimates for major study variables appear in Table 1.

### *Correlations of Narcissism With Number of Transgressions Reported in Daily Diaries*

Of the 186 original participants, 177 completed 14-day diaries of the transgressions they incurred. People who scored higher on the NPI reported having incurred significantly higher numbers of transgressions in their daily diaries,  $r(N = 177) = .24, p < .01$ . Even though negative affectivity was not significantly associated with the number of transgressions participants reported in their daily diaries,  $r = .06, p = .47$ , we examined the partial correlation of NPI scores and the numbers of transgressions reported in people's 14-day diaries after controlling for negative affectivity. Not surprisingly, the association persisted when negative affectivity was controlled, partial  $r = .24, p < .01$ .

We then examined the subscales of the NPI individually, substituting them one-by-one for the NPI total scale score. The resulting correlation coefficients appear in Table 2. Three of the four subscales (exploitiveness/entitlement, superiority/arrogance, and leadership/authority) were significantly related to the number of

**TABLE 1: Means, Standard Deviations, and Internal Consistency Reliability Estimates for Major Variables**

Variable	M	SD	Reliability
Narcissism <sup>a</sup>	11.93	5.49	.81
Leadership/authority subscale	5.15	2.67	.80
Self-absorption/self-admiration subscale	4.55	2.21	.70
Superiority/arrogance subscale	4.90	1.88	.64
Exploitativeness/entitlement subscale	2.84	1.67	.57
Negative affectivity	2.93	1.09	.85
Total number of transgressions: 14-day diary	13.90	7.44	.87
Transgression Occurrences Measure (TOM), post-diary	1.01	0.62	.87

a. Emmons (1987), 37-item version.

transgressions that people reported in their daily diaries (*rs* ranging from .17 to .21, *ps* < .05). These relationships persisted even when negative affectivity was controlled, *rs* ranging from .17 to .20, *ps* < .05.

We then conducted a simultaneous regression analysis in which the number of transgressions from participants' 14-day diaries was regressed on the four NPI subscales and negative affectivity. In this analysis (see Table 3, top panel), only the exploitativeness/entitlement subscale had even a marginally significant unique association with the number of transgressions in people's daily diaries, *B* = .63, *SE* = .37, *beta* = .14, *p* = .089. Thus, a participant who scored 1 point higher than another participant on exploitativeness/entitlement would be expected to experience .63 more transgressions during the 14-day study period. Together, the four NPI subscales and NA accounted for 7% of the variance in the number of transgressions in participants' daily diaries, *F*(5, 171) = 2.62, *p* = .026.

*Correlations of Narcissism and Scores on the Transgression Occurrences Measure*

We also correlated the NPI total score and subscale scores with scores from the post-diary administration of the TOM (see Table 2). The total NPI score was correlated with this measure, *r*(170) = .15, *p* = .045. The exploitativeness/entitlement subscale was correlated with the TOM, *r*(170) = .30, *p* < .001. None of the other three NPI subscales were significantly correlated with TOM scores, *rs* ranging from |.01| to |.13|, *ps* > .05.

Negative affectivity was related to TOM scores, *r*(170) = .33, *p* < .001. Thus, we examined whether the significant correlations of the NPI total scale score and the relevant subscales with TOM scores persisted when we controlled for negative affectivity. The correlations of the NPI total score with the TOM persisted when we controlled for negative affectivity, *rs*(167) = .18, *p* = .023. The correlation with the exploitativeness/entitlement

**TABLE 2: Correlations of Narcissism Scale and Subscale With Two Measures of Transgression Frequency, Before and After Controlling for Negative Affectivity**

Narcissism Measure	Correlation With Daily Diary Measure		Correlation With TOM	
	Zero-Order <sup>a</sup>	NA Controlled <sup>b</sup>	Zero-Order <sup>c</sup>	NA Controlled <sup>d</sup>
Narcissism (total scale score)	.25**	.25**	.15*	.18*
Leadership/authority subscale	.19*	.19**	.10	.13
Self-absorption/self-admiration subscale	.11	.13	-.01	.08
Superiority/arrogance subscale	.17*	.17*	.13	.11
Exploitativeness/entitlement subscale	.21**	.20**	.30***	.23**

a. *N* = 177.

b. *N* = 174.

c. *N* = 170.

d. *N* = 167.

\**p* ≤ .05. \*\**p* ≤ .01. \*\*\**p* ≤ .001.

subscale also persisted when negative affectivity was controlled, *r*(167) = .23, *p* < .01. Thus, the relationship between narcissism—particularly its exploitativeness/entitlement dimension—and the TOM could not be explained in terms of negative affectivity.

Next, we conducted a simultaneous regression analysis in which participants' TOM scores were regressed on the four NPI subscales and negative affectivity. In this analysis (see Table 3, bottom panel), only the exploitativeness/entitlement subscale had a significant unique association with people's TOM scores, *B* = .07, *SE* = .03, *beta* = .20, *p* = .012. Thus, a participant who was one point higher in exploitativeness/entitlement than another participant would be expected to have a TOM score that was .07 points higher. In the multiple regression, negative affectivity also had a significant unique association with scores on the TOM, *B* = .16, *SE* = .04, *beta* = .29, *p* < .001. Together, the four NPI subscales and NA accounted for 16% of the variance in participants' TOM scores, *F*(5, 165) = 6.39, *p* < .001.

As can be seen in Table 4, people higher in exploitativeness/entitlement endorsed all 20 transgressions at the end of the 14-day diary period more strongly than did people who were lower in exploitativeness/entitlement. Eleven of these 20 associations were statistically significant (*p* < .05, two-tailed). The leadership/authority and self-absorption/self-admiration subscales of the NPI (not shown) were not significantly correlated with any of the TOM transgressions, and the superiority/arrogance subscale was correlated significantly (*p* < .05, two-tailed) only with the transgression "someone benefited from your misfortune." Thus, exploitativeness/enti-

**TABLE 3: Multiple Regression of Daily Diary Measure of Transgressions and Transgression Occurrences Measure on the Subscales of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory and Negative Affectivity**

Predictor	B	SE	Beta
Daily diary measure <sup>a</sup>			
Leadership/authority subscale	.32	.23	.11
Self-absorption/self-admiration subscale	.14	.28	.04
Superiority/arrogance subscale	.30	.33	.08
Exploiteness/entitlement subscale	.63	.37	.14†
Negative affectivity	.20	.55	.03
R <sup>2</sup>			.07*
Post-diary transgression occurrences measure <sup>b</sup>			
Leadership/authority subscale	.01	.02	.04
Self-absorption/self-admiration subscale	.01	.02	.02
Superiority/arrogance subscale	.01	.03	.02
Exploiteness/entitlement subscale	.07	.03	.20*
Negative affectivity	.16	.04	.29**
R <sup>2</sup>			.16***

a. N = 177.

b. N = 171.

†p ≤ .10. \*p ≤ .05. \*\*p ≤ .01. \*\*\*p ≤ .001.

tlement clearly seemed to be the key dimension of narcissism for predicting the frequency with which participants reported the 20 transgressions on the TOM.

We could not discern a pattern to the transgressions that were correlated with exploitiveness/entitlement. Some were sins of commission and/or highly visible to a third party (e.g., “insulted you,” “damaged something that belonged to you,” “stole from you,” “told a secret they promised not to tell,” and “got you in trouble”) and others were sins of omission that were more vague, impressionistic, or less visible to a third party (e.g., “took advantage of you,” “betrayed you,” “failed to appreciate you adequately,” “benefited from your misfortune,” “was two-faced or insincere,” and “failed to protect you or stick up for your rights”).

Exploitive/entitled people were no more or less likely to report incurring relatively low-frequency or relatively high-frequency transgressions. Of the 13 transgressions that received mean frequency ratings of less than 1 (i.e., *very rarely*), 7 of them (54%) were correlated significantly and positively with exploitiveness/entitlement (e.g., “got you in trouble,” “stole from you”). Of the seven transgressions that received mean frequency ratings of 1 or more, four of them (57%) were correlated significantly and positively with exploitiveness/entitlement (e.g., “insulted you,” “teased you”). Thus, highly exploitive/entitled tended to report that they had been hard done by in vague, relatively frequent ways (e.g., neglected, insulted, taken advantage of) and also to report that they had incurred a host of concrete, potentially verifiable, low-frequency transgressions (e.g., having their property damaged or stolen).

**TABLE 4: Correlations of the 20 Transgressions on the Transgression Occurrences Measure (TOM) With the Exploiteness/Entitlement Subscale of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory**

Transgression	TOM Administration	
	Pre-Diary <sup>a</sup>	Post-Diary <sup>b</sup>
Insulted you	.24**	.30***
Took advantage of you	.22**	.19*
Betrayed you	.24**	.17*
Lied to you	.29***	.09
Was unfaithful to you	.22**	.09
Hurt you physically	.09	.04
Spread rumors or gossiped about you	.27***	.10
Damaged something that belonged to you	.17*	.20*
Stole from you	.22**	.26**
Failed to appreciate you adequately	.25**	.21**
Told a secret that they promised not to tell	.18*	.16*
Got even with you for something that happened previously	.08	.11
Benefited from your misfortune	.14	.15*
Teased you	.11	.13
Degraded you in public	.20**	.06
Was violent toward you	.16*	.06
Was “two-faced” or insincere	.29***	.20**
Got you in trouble	.23**	.29***
Told you something that hurt you	.21**	.09
Failed to protect you or stick up for your rights	.33***	.29***

a. N = 177.

b. N = 171.

\*p ≤ .05. \*\*p ≤ .01. \*\*\*p ≤ .001.

We also examined the correlations of the four NPI subscales and the TOM that was administered prior to the 14-day diary. Total scores from the pre-diary TOM were correlated at  $r(N=177) = .13 (p = .09)$ ,  $.09 (p = .22)$ ,  $.18 (p < .05)$ , and  $.35 (p < .001)$  with the leadership/authority, self-absorption/self-admiration, superiority/arrogance, and exploitiveness/entitlement dimensions of narcissism, respectively. Thus, exploitiveness/entitlement was clearly the most important dimension of narcissism for predicting scores on the pre-diary administration of the TOM. Of the 20 specific transgressions on the TOM, exploitiveness/entitlement was positively correlated with all of them, and significantly so with 16 of them (see Table 4). Leadership/authority was correlated with only 1 of the 20 transgressions from the pre-diary measure, self-absorption/self-admiration was correlated significantly with only 2 of the transgressions, and superiority/arrogance was correlated significantly with only 5 of the transgressions.

Because completing the TOM requires that respondents recall and integrate 2 weeks worth of life experience, whereas the daily diary measure of transgressions is based on an aggregation of 14 daily reports, it is reasonable to assume that the daily diary reports are more

accurate representations of the true frequency with which people incurred transgressions in their everyday lives during the 14-day diary period. If scores on exploitiveness/entitlement are correlated with the TOM after controlling for the number of transgressions that participants reported in their 14-day diaries, we might conclude that exploitiveness/entitlement is correlated with variance that arises from biased recall and/or reporting.

To investigate this possibility, we conducted two final multiple regressions. First, we regressed people's post-diary TOM scores on the four NPI subscales, negative affectivity, and number of transgressions reported in their daily diaries. Second, we regressed the numbers of transgressions that participants reported in their daily diaries on the four NPI subscales, negative affectivity, and their post-diary TOM scores. In the first regression, exploitiveness/entitlement was uniquely correlated with people's post-diary TOM scores after controlling for the number of transgressions in their daily diaries and negative affectivity ( $B = .06$ ,  $SE = .029$ ,  $\beta = .17$ ,  $p < .05$ ). However, the opposite was not true: In the second regression, exploitiveness/entitlement was not correlated with the number of transgressions in people's daily diaries after controlling for their post-diary TOM scores and negative affectivity ( $B = .36$ ,  $SE = .37$ ,  $\beta = .08$ ,  $p = .33$ ). None of the other NPI subscales were significant predictors in either of the two regressions. Thus, exploitiveness/entitlement was uniquely correlated with variance in people's transgression reports that may be attributable to biased recall and/or reporting.

## DISCUSSION

The dynamic self-regulatory processing model of the narcissistic self (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001; Rhodewalt, 2001) leads to the hypothesis that narcissistic people are motivated to perceive, recall, and report being victimized in daily life more frequently than are less narcissistic people. Using both daily diary and retrospective measures to capture people's perceptions of how often they incurred interpersonal transgressions, we found evidence in support of this hypothesis. People high in narcissism not only reported, on average, a higher number of transgressions in their lives on a day-to-day basis than did less narcissistic people but also when reflecting globally on the previous 2 weeks (on two different occasions) reported themselves to have incurred more frequent transgressions than did less narcissistic people. By and large, the associations of narcissism and perceived transgressions were not due to the effects of negative affectivity on people's perceptions of negative life events (e.g., Watson, 1988).

Many theorists (e.g., Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Emmons, 1987; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001; Rhodewalt, 2001) conceptualize narcissism as a set of traits that are motivated by a desire to establish and defend a grandiose image of oneself as important, unique, powerful, and beautiful, even though such a self-image is fragile and susceptible to fluctuation. This conceptualization of the narcissistic motivational core explains a broad host of phenomena (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001) and also affords three potential ways of explaining the associations that we observed in the present study.

### *Why Do Narcissists Present Themselves as Victims?*

*Heightened sensitivity to negative interpersonal events.* First, narcissistic people's motivation to maintain their grandiose self-images might make them more vigilant toward interpersonal events that could have negative implications for their self-image. This explanation is consonant with other research indicating that narcissists monitor their interpersonal worlds with hostility and suspicion (Rhodewalt & Morf, 1995) and are more susceptible to self-esteem fluctuations in response to negative interpersonal events (Rhodewalt et al., 1998). Transgressions would be important events to monitor because interpersonal harm typically has strong implications for one's image in the eyes of oneself and others (Heider, 1958).

This heightened sensitivity might manifest itself as higher standards for how narcissists expect to be treated by others. For example, narcissistic people might perceive behaviors that are considered indecorous but are otherwise innocent to most people (e.g., not offering a complement on someone's appearance, failing to say "please" or "thank you") as bona fide transgressions. Given the centrality of the exploitiveness/entitlement dimension of narcissism for explaining the present findings, exploitive/entitled narcissists may expect so much admiration, respect, and deference from others that they feel almost constantly disappointed and slighted. This heightened interpersonal sensitivity also might manifest itself as a "hostile attribution bias" (Dodge et al., 1990) that causes narcissists to infer negative intent in ambiguous situations.

*Distortion of the past for self-presentation concerns.* Second, narcissists may distort their recollections of transgressions to maintain their grandiose self-images. Such a process would be consistent with previous research demonstrating that narcissistic people distort recollections of the past in the service of maintaining a positive self-image (Rhodewalt & Eddings, 2002). Narcissists may try, by recalling themselves as frequent victims, to enhance the impressiveness of their successes in life (i.e., they may impress others with how well they have performed in life

despite having been handicapped by the interpersonal impediments that other people placed in their path). Alternatively, presenting a past riddled with interpersonal transgressions may be an effective way of attributing one's poor performance in various life domains to external factors so that they reflect less poorly on oneself. Narcissists also may present themselves as relatively frequent victims to justify their sense of entitlement and their willingness to exploit people to serve their own ends. This explanation seems particularly useful in light of the fact that exploitiveness/entitlement was the only dimension of narcissism that was consistently and uniquely associated with both transgression measures.

*Accurate reporting of more frequent victimization.* Third, narcissists may actually be victimized more frequently because other research suggests that narcissists experience more frequent negative interpersonal events in general (Rhodewalt et al., 1998). The narcissistic sense of entitlement and willingness to exploit others leads many narcissists to disregard others (Buss & Chiodo, 1991), and such behavior probably stimulates many interaction partners to mistreat the narcissists in kind. Thus, narcissists' reports of frequent transgression may actually reflect, in part, the true state of their social worlds.

However, to take exploitive/entitled narcissists' transgression reports at face value, one must believe that people steal from them, damage their property, insult them, betray them and their secrets, degrade them, lie to them, and fail to stick up for their rights at higher frequencies than do the people in the lives of less exploitive/entitled people. Although some of these transgressions (e.g., insults) occur rather frequently, some of them (e.g., stealing) are quite rare. That exploitive/entitled narcissists' lives could be so thoroughly beset by such a broad array of transgressions strains credulity, so were it not for the fact that exploitive/entitled narcissists also reported more frequent transgressions in their daily diary reports (which ostensibly would reflect daily interpersonal reality more accurately), we would be inclined to conclude that their frequent reports of incurring transgressions were solely caused by narcissistic sensitivity to negative interpersonal events or narcissistic self-presentation processes. Nevertheless, exploitiveness/entitlement predicted variance in people's scores on the TOM after controlling for their 14-day diary scores. We interpret this latter result as evidence that entitled/exploitive people report more frequent transgressions in their lives than can be justified based on the numbers of transgressions reported in their daily diaries, which suggests that narcissists' transgression reports are probably exaggerated to some extent (even if narcissistic people genuinely are indeed victimized more frequently). Whether the apparent exaggeration is occurring due to perception, self-

presentation, or some other psychological process remains to be investigated in future work.

### *Limitations*

Several limitations of the study's design and results should be noted. First, the associations between narcissism and perceived frequency of transgressions were small to medium in magnitude. Neither the NPI nor its subscales accounted for more than 9% of the variance in our measures of perceived transgressions (i.e.,  $r$ s were .30 or less). However, the fact that the associations of narcissism and perceived transgressions emerged from two methods for assessing interpersonal transgressions (the daily diary method and retrospective method), which themselves were only moderately correlated, suggests that this relationship is dependable (even if not large) and not solely the result of mono-method bias.

Relatedly, the effect size estimates that we obtained here were attenuated because the NPI subscales were not perfectly reliable. In the case of the exploitiveness/entitlement subscale—the very subscale that was associated most robustly with both transgression measures—the attenuation caused by its limited internal consistency reliability ( $\alpha = .57$ ) was appreciable. Had this subscale been measured with perfect reliability, its bivariate correlations with the daily diary measure and the retrospective measure (uncorrected  $r$ s = .21 and .30, respectively) would have increased by the inverse of the square root of the scale's reliability ( $1/.75 = 1.33$ , or a 33% increase). As a result, higher correlations (viz.,  $r$ s = .28 and .40, respectively) would have resulted (Schmidt & Hunter, 1996).

Finally, we note that our measures of the frequency of transgressions were based on self-report. Future studies that used other measures of transgression frequency (e.g., informant reports), or studies that involved experimental manipulations of interpersonal transgressions in the lab, would be helpful for exploring further whether narcissists' elevated tendencies to report interpersonal transgressions are due to biases in recall and/or reporting or whether they reflect the true state of narcissists' interpersonal worlds.

### *Conclusion*

Narcissists report experiencing interpersonal transgressions in their daily lives more frequently than do less narcissistic people. This finding is consistent with modern understandings of narcissism (e.g., Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001; Rhodewalt, 2001) and may help to illuminate the processes underlying narcissists' tendencies toward anger and retaliatory aggression (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998). Perhaps narcissists live in interpersonal worlds in which other people fail to live up to their unrealistically high expectations or in which they tend to

attribute hostility to others in ambiguous situations. Alternatively, narcissists may be motivated to present themselves to others as victims as a way of sweetening their successes, discounting their failures, or justifying their own mistreatment of others. Finally, there may be a grain of truth to the idea that narcissists indeed are victimized at higher rates than are their less narcissistic counterparts. Although more work would be valuable for adjudicating among these explanations, the present findings can be interpreted as an illustration of the perceptual, self-presentational, and behavioral lengths to which narcissists go to keep their grandiose self-images intact and perhaps also the interpersonal consequences of their self-expansive and self-protective efforts.

#### APPENDIX

##### Transgression Occurrences Measure (TOM)

Please indicate how frequently the following events have occurred to you in your relationships with other people in the last 2 weeks using the following scale:

- 0 = *not at all*  
 1 = *very rarely*  
 2 = *occasionally*  
 3 = *sometimes*  
 4 = *rather often*  
 5 = *quite often*  
 6 = *constantly*

How often did it occur in the last 2 weeks that someone:

- \_\_\_ 1. insulted you  
 \_\_\_ 2. took advantage of you  
 \_\_\_ 3. betrayed you  
 \_\_\_ 4. lied to you  
 \_\_\_ 5. was unfaithful to you  
 \_\_\_ 6. hurt you physically  
 \_\_\_ 7. spread rumors or gossiped about you  
 \_\_\_ 8. damaged something that belonged to you  
 \_\_\_ 9. stole from you  
 \_\_\_ 10. failed to appreciate you adequately  
 \_\_\_ 11. told a secret that they promised not to tell  
 \_\_\_ 12. got even with you for something that happened previously  
 \_\_\_ 13. benefited from your misfortune  
 \_\_\_ 14. teased you  
 \_\_\_ 15. degraded you in public  
 \_\_\_ 16. was violent toward you  
 \_\_\_ 17. was "two-faced" or insincere  
 \_\_\_ 18. got you in trouble  
 \_\_\_ 19. told you something that hurt you  
 \_\_\_ 20. failed to protect you or stick up for your rights

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Received March 18, 2002

Revision accepted July 29, 2002