



Peer Perceptions of Communal Narcissism and Communalism in At-Risk Adolescents

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Abstract: The present study extended research on the relation of communal narcissism in adolescents with self- and peer-reported personality and behavior. Although communal narcissism may be associated with negative peer perceptions, a communal orientation that does not also convey superiority (i.e., communalism) may be viewed more favorably. Self- and peer-perceptions were investigated as a function of communal narcissism and a non-narcissistic communal orientation (i.e., by altering the Communal Narcissism Inventory to reflect more humble self-views). Participants were 246 adolescents, ages 16–19 years, who were attending a quasi-military residential program for youth who have dropped out, or were at-risk of dropping out, of school. Communal narcissism and communalism were significantly interrelated. Communal narcissism was negatively associated with unique variance in self-reported empathy, whereas communalism was positively associated with self-reported empathy and more strongly related to peer-reported prosociality. The role of superiority in communal domains in adolescent self-perception and peer relationships is discussed.

Keywords: communal narcissism, adolescent, peer perceptions

Narcissism is typically conceptualized as involving grandiose self-views in agentic domains (e.g., intelligence, attractiveness, leadership; Krizan & Bushman, 2011). However, Gebauer and colleagues (2012) proposed an agency-communion narcissism model, which considers a wider array of areas in which narcissistic individuals present a heightened sense of entitlement and superiority. In short, individuals high on agentic narcissism achieve self-enhancement through agency (e.g., asserting dominance over others, seeking to be the center of attention), whereas individuals with a communal narcissism orientation satisfy the same core self-motives through communalism (e.g., positive deeds for others as a means to gain admiration).

Communal narcissism involves actions and beliefs that are focused on one's unique ability to help and connect with others (Gebauer et al., 2012). Individuals with communal narcissism are likely to self-enhance regarding their own prosociality, particularly when compared to more objective measures of prosocial behavior (Nehrlich et al., 2019). Additionally, in prior research (Barry et al., 2017), adolescents who self-reported communal narcissism tended to also report higher levels of prosocial behavior. However, this perspective was not shared by their peers, as self-reported communal narcissism was not related to peer-reported prosocial behavior and was actually associated with

peer-reported aggression. Thus, communalism expressed through narcissism, or a sense of superiority, may convey antagonism to peers rather than its intended expression of being kind, friendly, and supportive of others as a means to meet social goals. In short, “even if one portrays a motivation to reach communal goals, a sense of superiority about one's capacity to do so could still generate peer conflict” (Barry et al., 2017; p. 3).

This study extends previous research by directly investigating whether adolescents who endorse communalism but without narcissistic/superior attitudes would be perceived more positively than would be the case for endorsements of communal narcissism, an issue not previously addressed with adolescents. That is, indications of superiority, which stand in contrast to true communalism, may help explain any negative peer perceptions of individuals high in communal narcissism. The Communal Narcissism Inventory (CNI; Gebauer et al., 2012) assesses grandiose presentations of communalism (“I am the most helpful person I know”). For the present study, we specifically chose to alter the CNI rather than use an existing measure of communalism. It is possible that simply eliminating the narcissistic tone of the CNI by minimizing implications of superiority and portraying more humility (“I try to be a helpful person”) might reduce the negative peer perceptions

reported in previous research on communal narcissism (Barry et al., 2017) and agentic narcissism in adolescents (Golmaryami & Barry, 2010; Grafeman et al., 2015). Our approach was somewhat similar to that used by Gebauer and Sedikides (2018) who assessed communalism through self-evaluative statements without superiority (“I am a helpful person”), with the present study incorporating motivation toward communalism (“I try to be helpful person”) as a means of eliminating indications of superiority. A potential implication of this line of research is determining whether conveying narcissism, even with a communal orientation, is damaging to adolescents’ reputations and peer relationships.

Developmentally, peer perception and a sense of belonging are important for an adolescent’s sense of self; consequently, adolescents tend to place strong value on peer relationships and have a heightened concern for peer affiliation and popularity (LaFontana & Cillessen, 2010). Adolescents continue to develop and refine behavioral strategies that can help meet interpersonal needs (Erdley & Asher, 1999). For some adolescents, agentic goals oriented toward dominance and social status may outweigh the perceived benefits of a communal orientation (Mayeux & Kraft, 2018), yet communal narcissism may allow a means to the same ends while also conveying concern for others. Although communalism may be seen as a way to reach such goals, a sense of superiority about one’s orientation toward others could backfire (see Barry et al., 2017). Continued consideration of these differences during adolescence is important, as most research on narcissism and adolescent peer perceptions has focused exclusively on agentic narcissism (Golmaryami & Barry, 2010; Grafeman et al., 2015).

Of particular theoretical interest is the apparent paradox involved in expressing concern for others (e.g., being a good friend, trying to help others) yet acting superior to them. Communally narcissistic attitudes may belie a lack of empathy for others, whereas communalism (i.e., without superior self-views in communal domains) may be indicative of genuine concern for others and more positive relationships. However, the interpersonal picture for communal narcissism is not altogether bleak, particularly in comparison to agentic narcissism. More specifically, communal narcissism is associated with greater mutual liking than agentic narcissism (Rentzsch & Gebauer, 2019), and communal narcissism conveyed through social media status updates is viewed less negatively than status updates that portray agentic narcissism (Lui et al., 2019).

Thus, the emerging research indicates that some aspects of communal narcissism may be somewhat adaptive in peer relationships but fall short of the interpersonal benefits connected to communalism, a distinction that is the central focus of this study. Another way in which the present

study sought to extend previous research on communal narcissism was through consideration of vulnerable, rather than grandiose, agentic narcissism. Grandiosity in agentic domains, which is typically how self-reported narcissism is measured, has shown nonsignificant relations with communal narcissism assessed via the CNI (Gebauer et al., 2012). It is unclear how communal narcissism might relate to characteristics of vulnerable narcissism. In short, vulnerable narcissism includes expression of anger and/or interpersonal sensitivity in response to ego threat and a tendency to devalue a need for connections to others (Pincus & Roche, 2011). Past research indicates that peers can achieve consensus in ratings of vulnerable narcissism (Lukowitsky & Pincus, 2013), suggesting that it, too, has an impact on interpersonal relationships. Taken together, communal narcissism and communalism may differ in their relations to vulnerable narcissism in that communalism would not be expected to involve emotional responses that hinge on interpersonal feedback.

Further, as communal narcissism involves self-enhancement motives, self- and peer-reports may diverge on various domains such as empathy or antisocial behavior, with communal narcissism demonstrating little difference from communalism on self-reports of these variables. Peers, on the other hand, may perceive differences as a function of the self-aggrandizement involved in communal narcissism. More specifically, a communal orientation, even if in the context of self-reported superiority, likely relates to self-reported empathy (Barry et al., 2017), but peer perceptions of empathy may be based on whether the communal orientation is narcissistic in nature. Similarly, previous research indicates that adolescent narcissism is connected to peer-reported antagonism and likelihood of future delinquency (Grafeman et al., 2015). To that end, communal narcissism and communalism may both relate to lower self-reported callous-unemotional (CU) traits and delinquency. CU traits have been a target of numerous studies in youth that conclude that these traits are related to lower empathy and more severe and persistent antisocial behavior (see Frick et al., 2014). Delinquency is also likely inversely related to communal narcissism and communalism from the vantage point of self-report; however, peers may make a distinction concerning aggressive or otherwise antisocial behavior based on whether a communal orientation is also narcissistic. These possibilities were also considered in the current study.

Hypotheses

Self-reported communal narcissism and communalism were both hypothesized to be significantly correlated with self-reported empathy, but communal narcissism was

expected to be more strongly positively related to vulnerable agentic narcissism than was communalism.

Relatively positive peer perceptions were expected to be associated with communalism. Specifically, it was hypothesized that communalism would be related to peer-reported prosociality and that this relation would be stronger than the relation between communal narcissism and peer-reported prosociality. Communalism was also expected to be negatively related to peer-reported antisociality, whereas communal narcissism was expected to be positively associated with peer-reported antisocial behavior.

Method

Participants

Participants were 246 adolescents, ages 16–19 years ($M = 16.53$, $SD = 0.63$ years), who were attending a quasi-military residential program for youth who are at-risk of dropping out, or who have dropped out, of high school. The majority ($n = 177$) of participants identified as male and Caucasian/White (55.3%), with 25.6% of participants identifying as Hispanic/Latinx, and the remaining 19.1% identifying as a member of another racial/ethnic group or multiple groups. This sample provided an opportunity to investigate peer perceptions among a group of adolescents who attended activities and lived together within the 22-week program. Peer-report data were collected approximately 21 weeks into the program; thus, peers had substantial familiarity with each other at the time of this assessment. This approach made it unlikely that any positive reports as a function of narcissism would be related to that construct's susceptibility to positive impressions at limited acquaintance (Back et al., 2010).

Measures

Communal Narcissism Inventory (CNI)

The CNI (Gebauer et al., 2012) is a 16-item inventory that assesses communal narcissism (e.g., "I am the best friend someone can have") on a 7-point response scale from *Strongly Disagree* to *Strongly Agree*. In the present sample, the internal consistency of CNI scores was $\alpha = .90$.

Communal Narcissism Inventory With Altered Wording

To test the study hypotheses, the wording of each CNI item was altered to reflect communalism by eliminating references to one's superiority on each item. The same response scale was used, and content was oriented toward the respondent's motivation toward communalism. The

original and altered CNI items are shown in Table 1. The internal consistency of scores for these reworded CNI items was excellent, $\alpha = .93$.

Self-Report of Delinquency (SRD)

The SRD (Elliott & Ageton, 1980) consists of 32 items, each of which asks respondents whether they have ever engaged in a particular behavior (e.g., "Have you ever stolen something worth \$5 or more?") in a *yes/no* format. Items assess violent, property, drug, and status offenses that are illegal for juveniles in the United States. The internal consistency of SRD scores in the present sample was $\alpha = .91$.

Basic Empathy Scale (BES)

The BES (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2006) measures self-reported affective (e.g., "I get caught up in other people's feelings easily") and cognitive (e.g., "I can understand my friend's happiness when she/he does well at something") empathy. It consists of 20 items, and in the present study, internal consistency of BES scores was $\alpha = .83$.

Inventory of Callous-Unemotional Traits (ICU)

The ICU (Essau et al., 2006) is a 24-item self-report measure that assesses callousness, uncaring, and unemotional features of CU traits in youth. Items (e.g., "I do not feel remorseful when I do something wrong") are rated on a 4-point response scale from *Not at all true* to *Definitely true*. Internal consistency of ICU total scores in the present sample was $\alpha = .80$.

Pathological Narcissism Inventory-Short (PNI-Short)

The PNI-Short (Schoenleber et al., 2018) assesses self-reported pathological narcissism through 28 items (e.g., "I can't stand relying on other people because it makes me feel weak"; "I often fantasize about being rewarded for my efforts") that are oriented toward a vulnerable form of narcissism. Furthermore, the focal points of PNI items are agentic characteristics. In the present sample, the internal consistency of total scores on the PNI-Short was $\alpha = .90$.

Peer Nomination

Peer-report was obtained via a peer nomination procedure whereby participants nominated up to 3 peers in their flight (i.e., groups of 30–40 individuals who attend classes and activities together as well as live together during the residential program) on 20 items. Items focused on positive social status (e.g., popularity, well-liked), negative social status (e.g., unpopular, not respected), and other interpersonal attributes (e.g., aggressive, friendly, brags about themselves, cold toward others).

Table 1. Original CNI items and corresponding items altered to reflect communalism

1. I am the most helpful person I know.	1. I try to be the most helpful person I can be.
2. I am going to bring peace and justice to the world.	2. I want to bring peace and justice to the world.
3. I am the best friend someone could have.	3. I try to be the best friend someone can have.
4. I will be well known for the good deeds I will have done.	4. I would like to be known for doing good deeds.
5. I am (going to be) the best parent on this planet.	5. I want to be the best parent.
6. I am the most caring person in my social surrounding.	6. I try to be the most caring person in my social surrounding.
7. In the future I will be well known for solving the world's problems.	7. In the future, I would like to solve the world's problems.
8. I greatly enrich others' lives.	8. I try to greatly enrich others' lives.
9. I will bring freedom to the people.	9. I hope to bring freedom to others.
10. I am an amazing listener.	10. I try to be a good listener.
11. I will be able to solve world poverty.	11. I would like to solve world poverty.
12. I have a positive influence on others.	12. I try to have a positive influence on others.
13. I am generally the most understanding person.	13. I try to be the most understanding person.
14. I'll make the world a much more beautiful place.	14. I want to make the world a beautiful place.
15. I am extraordinarily trustworthy.	15. I try to be extraordinarily trustworthy.
16. I will be famous for increasing people's well-being.	16. I would like to be known for increasing people's well-being.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for self-report variables

Variable (possible range)	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Range	Skewness
Communal Narcissism (16–112)	70.55 (13.92)	27–107	–.25
Communalism (16–112)	82.36 (17.26)	15–112	–.56
Vulnerable Narcissism (28–168)	97.15 (24.25)	7–150	–.55
CU Traits (0–72)	26.73 (8.31)	9–51	.25
Empathy (20–100)	70.42 (11.56)	32–96	–.13
Delinquency (0–32)	12.33 (7.21)	0–3	.19

Results

Self-Report

Table 2 displays descriptive statistics for the self-report variables and indicates that each variable was normally distributed in the present sample. On average, participants rated themselves higher on communalism ($M = 82.36$, $SD = 17.26$) than on communal narcissism ($M = 70.51$, $SD = 13.99$), $t(242) = 14.24$, $p < .001$. Despite their mean difference, self-reported communal narcissism (i.e., scores on the CNI) and communalism (i.e., scores from altered item wording of the CNI) were significantly interrelated, $r = .67$, $p < .001$. Each of these variables also demonstrated similar correlations with the other self-report variables in this study (i.e., non-significant correlation with delinquency; negative correlation with CU traits; positive correlations with vulnerable narcissism and empathy). To test differences in the strengths of the relations of self-report variables with communal narcissism and communalism, post hoc analyses using Fisher's z' transformation were conducted. As hypothesized, both communalism and

communal narcissism were significantly correlated with self-reported empathy. However, the correlation between self-reported communalism and self-reported empathy was stronger, $r = .53$, $p < .001$, than the correlation between communal narcissism and empathy, $r = .27$, $p < .001$, $z' = 4.29$, $p < .001$. In direct contrast to our hypothesis, the correlation between vulnerable narcissism and communalism, $r = .40$, $p < .001$, was stronger than the relation between vulnerable narcissism and communal narcissism, $r = .23$, $p < .001$, $z' = 3.49$, $p < .001$. Lastly, the negative relation between communalism and CU traits, $r = -.51$, $p < .001$, was somewhat stronger than the negative relation between communal narcissism and CU traits, $r = -.42$, $p < .001$, $z' = 2.00$, $p = .02$.

Simultaneous regression analyses with communal narcissism and communalism as predictors were conducted to examine the unique effects of each of these variables in predicting variance in the other self-report constructs (see Table 3). The Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) was acceptable (1.83) for all regressions. As shown in Table 3, despite their significant interrelation, communal narcissism and communalism demonstrated divergence in terms of

Table 3. Simultaneous regressions of self-report variables onto communal narcissism and communalism

Predictors	Vulnerable Narcissism	CU Traits	Empathy	Delinquency
Communal Narcissism	-.06	-.15*	-.18*	.01
Communalism	.45***	-.40***	.65***	-.07
Model R^2	.17***	.26***	.30***	.00

Note. Standardized regression weights are shown. * $p < .05$; *** $p < .001$.

their unique effects in predicting variance in the other self-report variables. More specifically, communal narcissism demonstrated unique, but small, negative effects on CU traits and empathy, whereas communalism was uniquely, positively associated with empathy and vulnerable narcissism, as well as negatively associated with variance in CU traits.

Peer Report

An exploratory factor analysis (i.e., Principal Components Analysis with Varimax rotation) of the peer nomination measure was conducted. Support was evident for a four-factor solution accounting for 75.3% of variance in total scores. Factor loadings are shown in Table 4, and based on item content, the dimensions were labeled “charismatic,” “rejected,” “prosocial,” and “antisocial.” Nominations of being “dominant” and being “well-liked” did not clearly load onto a single factor and were analyzed separately.

Correlations between peer-report dimensions and self-report variables are shown in Table 5. Contrary to expectations, communal narcissism was not related to negative peer perceptions (i.e., rejected, antisocial). Prosociality was the only peer-report dimension that was significantly correlated with communal narcissism or communalism. The separate dominant and well-liked items were not correlated with communal narcissism or communalism. Fisher’s z' transformation for dependent correlations was used to examine differences in the magnitude of the correlations of peer-reported variables with communal narcissism and communalism. As hypothesized, peer ratings on the prosocial dimension were more strongly correlated with communalism than with communal narcissism, $z' = 1.77$, $p = .04$.

To examine unique effects of communal narcissism and communalism on the variance of peer ratings, simultaneous regression analyses using communal narcissism and communalism as predictors were conducted (see Table 6). For the model predicting peer-reported prosociality, there was a unique main effect for communalism, with the standardized effect slightly increasing from the bivariate correlation when communal narcissism was partialled (see Tables 5 and 6). No other main effects were evident from these analyses.

Table 4. Factor loadings of peer nomination items

	Charismatic	Rejected	Prosocial	Antisocial
Manipulative	.89			
Popular	.88			
Has Many Friends	.77			
Leader	.76			
Respected	.75			
Confident	.74			
Well-Liked	.57		.52	
Dominant	.51			.52
Unpopular		.93		
Has No Friends		.91		
Not Respected		.91		
Disliked		.88		
Helpful			.83	
Gets Along with Others			.81	
Friendly			.81	
Empathetic			.80	
Hurtful				.93
Cold				.87
Aggressive				.81
Braggy				.63

Note. Factor loadings above .40 are shown.

Discussion

Adolescent self-reported communal narcissism and communalism were highly interrelated in the present sample; however, contrary to expectations, they did not translate to different peer perceptions. Instead, the convergence between those self-report variables was also evident in peer ratings. Both communal narcissism and communalism were weakly associated with peer-rated prosocial tendencies, suggesting that, to some degree, peers recognized the other-oriented features touted by participants’ self-reports. This pattern also indicates that adolescents who reported relatively high communal narcissism did not come across to their peers as particularly antagonistic or aggressive. In contrast, communal narcissism was not associated with prosociality in two large adult samples (Nehrlich et al., 2019), raising the question as to whether there is truly communalism in communal narcissism. Interestingly, agentic vulnerable narcissism was also not associated with negative peer perceptions in the present study, unlike what has been demonstrated for grandiose features of agentic narcissism in adolescents (Golmaryami & Barry, 2010; Grafeman et al., 2015).

Although peer reports did not convey negative views of individuals with communal narcissism, positive peer perceptions associated with communalism may have been muted when interpersonal superiority was included. Specifically,

Table 5. Correlations between self-report and peer-report variables

	Charismatic (Peer Report)	Rejected (Peer Report)	Prosocial (Peer Report)	Antisocial (Peer Report)
Communal Narcissism	.02	-.04	.14*	-.04
Communalism	.01	-.05	.23***	-.08
Vulnerable Narcissism	-.01	-.03	.03	-.04
CU Traits	-.01	-.01	-.16*	.06
Empathy	.08	-.03	.20**	-.09
Delinquency	.05	-.15*	-.11	.18**

Note. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Table 6. Simultaneous regressions of peer-report variables onto communal narcissism and communalism

Predictors	Charismatic	Rejected	Prosocial	Antisocial
Communal Narcissism	-.08	-.01	-.06	.04
Communalism	.07	-.05	.27**	-.11
Model R^2	.00	.00	.05**	.01

Note. Standardized regression weights are shown. ** $p < .01$.

the relations of peer-reported prosociality and self-reported empathy with communalism were stronger than those with communal narcissism. Additionally, the former relation strengthened slightly when controlling for communal narcissism. However, some relations with self-report variables were contrary to expectations. Most notably, communalism was more strongly related to self-reported vulnerable narcissism than was communal narcissism. This result may reflect a focus on interpersonal vulnerability in the PNI that better corresponds to communalism rather than communally narcissistic attitudes. That is, relative to communalism, communal narcissism may reflect both interpersonal vulnerability and grandiose attempts to address feelings of insecurity, consistent with Morf and Rhodewalt's (2001) dynamic self-regulation model of narcissism. In the case of communal narcissism, attempts to cast oneself as uniquely and supremely helpful to others may diminish expressions of vulnerability.

This line of research may point toward ways in which communal attitudes can facilitate social goals without sacrificing harmony in peer relationships. As described above, agentic and communal narcissism differ based on how individuals seek to achieve superiority objectives (Gebauer et al., 2012). In addition, heritability for agentic narcissism appears to be greater than for communal narcissism, and the environmental influences over each seem to differ as well (Luo et al., 2014). Adolescents who express communal narcissism may have learned that expressing other-oriented attitudes, even if not genuine, has social benefits. Indeed, beliefs about one's power may lead someone with communal narcissism to be less helpful when that sense of superiority over others is validated (Giacomin & Jordan, 2015). Previous work further indicates that this interpersonal style may be ineffective (Barry et al., 2017),

assuming that the individual does not wish to be perceived by peers as aggressive or antagonistic. However, in the present study, communal narcissism was positively associated with peer-reported prosociality and was negatively associated with self-reported CU traits. Despite these arguably positive trends, communalism was more strongly tied to peer perceptions of prosocial behavior and self-reported empathy, indicating a relative drawback to grandiosity in the communal domain for adolescents. Thus, to the extent that communal narcissism develops based on environmental feedback, alternative messages that favor communalism without an emphasis on interpersonal superiority or power might be important for improving adolescent relationships.

The present study had several limitations that should be considered. First, participants were recruited from a specific residential program for adolescents, so the generalizability of the present results to the larger population of adolescents may be limited. Nevertheless, this unique sample allowed for the use of peer reports among a group who were highly familiar with each other. In addition, the predominantly male and White composition of the present sample limits its applicability to the general population. Lastly, although the method of altering CNI items allowed a direct test of differences in self-reported and peer-reported functioning between communal narcissism and communalism, it is unclear whether the altered measure provided a comprehensive assessment of communalism. Continued research in this area may consider alternative approaches to evaluating a communal orientation devoid of narcissism.

Although study hypotheses were only partially supported, the present findings point to clear implications for how superior motives, even within a communal orientation, may be tied to less favorable peer impressions. More

complete understanding of communal narcissism in adolescents is needed in light of the unique aspects of adolescence that might foster narcissism (Roberts et al., 2010), and in turn, narcissism's behavioral, emotional, and social implications in youth (e.g., Barry et al., 2007; Barry & Malkin, 2010; Thomaes et al., 2008). The role of co-occurring psychopathology (e.g., conduct problems, anxiety, depression) in manifestations of communal narcissism and peer perceptions should be explored. Although individuals with communal narcissism may self-perceive positivity toward others (Barry et al., 2017; Gebauer et al., 2012), interpersonal relationships could become further strained if these same individuals do not recognize the social drawbacks of this dimension of self-perception.

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