Tame the Narcissistic Self: The Buffering Effect of Humility

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Research on the coexistence of contradictory traits has predominantly examined the interpersonal consequences of such personality complexity with minimum focus on within-person dynamics. This study investigates the cognitive process through which narcissism and humility coexist and interact to shape individuals' psychological entitlement. Drawing from self-concept theory and paradox theory, we propose that elevated levels of humility attenuate the relationship between narcissism and psychological entitlement. We conducted hierarchical linear regression analyses and simple slope tests using a sample of 451 individuals (47.2 % female) from a North American university. Our results suggest that humility effectively mitigates the impact of narcissism on psychological entitlement. Our study furthers the understanding of dynamic interplay between contradictory traits, contributing to both self-concept literature and the paradox theory through theoretical integration. We underscore the value of employing paradox theory in micro-level research that delves into the dynamic cognitive process within individuals.

Keywords: humility, narcissism, paradox, self-concept, psychological entitlement

INTRODUCTION

Elon Musk, the CEO of SpaceX, Tesla, and Twitter, is a renowned businessman widely recognized for his heroinic and ruthless public image (Roose, 2022). Despite being labeled as the worst malignant narcissist of all time (Adeniran, 2022), he also exhibits humility at times, for example during his May 21, 2021 appearance on comedy show *Saturday Night Live*. The seemingly contradictory personality traits coalesce to create a charismatic yet repulsive Elon, who garners both high praise and harsh criticism. Narcissism, characterized by a positive self-view and preoccupation with the self, is manifested through grandiosity, self-love, arrogance, entitlement, and hostility (Kausel et al., 2015). On the other hand, humility indicates the recognition of a greater power outside of oneself; thus, is grounded in an accurate self-view. Humility is behaviorally expressed as being aware of oneself, showing appreciation of others' accomplishment, and improving oneself constantly (Morris et al., 2005; Owens et al., 2013; Zhang et al., 2017). The fact that narcissism and humility are contradictory doesn't mean individuals are one-dimensional and can be only one of the two. As evidenced by the growing body of literature on this subject,

the multifaced personality has received increasingly scholarly attention (e.g., Zhang et al., 2017; Owens et al., 2015). For instance, leadership scholars have shown that narcissistic CEOs with a healthy amount of humility can enhance followers' evaluation of their leadership effectiveness, which further enhance followers' engagement and job performance (Zhang et al., 2017; Maldonado, 2015). Paradox theory provides "holistic and processual approaches" (Lewis & Smith, 2022, p.540) for understanding the complexity and "intricates of interwoven tensions" among traits.

While our understanding of the interplay between narcissism and humility has advanced (Owens et al., 2015; Maldonado, 2015; Maldonado et al., 2022), several questions remain under-explored, including: how opposing traits interact and counterbalance one another within individuals; what internal tensions arise as a result; and how individuals experience and navigate these tensions (Smith & Lewis, 2011)? To address this research gap, we investigate how the interplay between individuals' humility and narcissism shapes their psychological entitlement. Incorporating self-concept theory with paradox theory, we develop a theoretical framework to explore the cognitive underpinning and the tug-of-war within individuals and empirically test the hypotheses with a cross-sectional survey study.

Our study contributes to the literature in three main ways: First, focusing on the intrapersonal relationship (in contrast to the interpersonal relationship), we integrate two personality traits (humility and narcissism) and acknowledge the complexity of self-concept in shaping individuals' psychological entitlement. In this vein, we advanced the self-concept literature by addressing how contradictory self-concepts interact and how humility mitigates narcissistic psychological entitlement as a result. Secondly, to answer the call made by Hodson et al. (2018) and Lewis (2022), we apply the paradox theory, which has primarily used in macro-level research, at micro-level to investigate the dynamic and interplay of contradictory self-concepts. Finally, we highlight the utility of the paradoxical theory in personal development and growth for practitioners. Our findings highlight the complexity of individual differences, as well as the importance of acknowledging and balancing contradictory traits within oneself.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

In the following sections, we first develop the theoretical link between narcissism and sense of psychological entitlement using a self-concept lens. We then integrate the paradox and self-concept frameworks to unpack the cognitive dynamics underlying the interplay between narcissism and humility.

Understand Narcissism and Psychological Entitlement Through Self-Concept

Self-concept (SC) depicts a cognitive structure that provides individuals a coherent and integrated system of self-definitions and self-beliefs (Hoyle et al., 1999; Markus & Wurf, 1987). There are three distinct and interconnected elements in self-concept: self-knowledge, executive function, and interpersonal being (Baumeister, 1998, 2022). Self-knowledge concerns self-definition at a fundamental level. It captures an individual's experiences as a knower (i.e., who am I) (Bernstein & Elizabeth, 2018). Furthermore, self-concept is action oriented and functions as a motivational mechanism that drives self-regulation, known as the executive function or a doer (i.e., what do I do; Baumeister, 1998; Bernstein & Elizabeth, 2018). Finally, self-concept also regulates how an individual engage with others as an interpersonal being, or a member (i.e., who am I to other people). Taken together, via a self-concept lens, individuals' cognition, emotion, behavior, and social interaction are nothing more than a range of self-regulation motivated by self-goals, which produce the needs to self-verify, self-protect, and self-enhancement (Cooper and Thatcher, 2010; Vignoles et al., 2008).

Narcissism is characterized by one's cognitive-affective preoccupation with the self. When defining themselves, narcissists have a habit of exaggerating favorable and desirable attributes and accentuating their uniqueness and superiority (Ackerman & Donnellan, 2013; Oyserman et al., 2012). Such self-definition leads to a stable tendency to feel deserving of more praise and reward, subsequently increasing psychological entitlement (Harvey & Harris, 2010; Jiang et al., 2022). Narcissist's *self-knowledge* is notoriously inflated in the sense that they tend to view themselves as a critical component of the world.

A narcissistic self-concept and self-knowledge motivate a narcissistic **executive function** and thus become a source of behavioral standards. Put it another way, a wide range of cognitive, affective, and behavioral manifestations of narcissism are nothing but self-regulatory strategies utilized to achieve the narcissistic self-goals such as verifying and enhancing the grandiose and superior self (Campbell et al., 2011; Hu et al., 2022). Narcissists are overconfident about their capacity to exert control over decision-making, dominate the social environment. Narcissists have a strong desire to seek constant demands for excessive applause and admiration. Furthermore, narcissists' grandiose self-concept directly impacts how narcissists experience and evaluate **interpersonal relationships**. To sustain and enhance their superior self, narcissists strive to maintain a power gap from others and adopt various self-prioritizing strategies to protect their relational privilege (Keltner et al., 2003; Hu et al., 2022). Pursuing a power gap and believing in their own superiority in interpersonal relationships generate a sense of deservingness, which further enhancing psychological entitlement. Additionally, narcissists are motivated by self-enhancement to strengthen their self-image in a positive light and increase their perceived interpersonal competence. This interpersonal competence is manifested during social interactions and signals the ability to produce intended results during interaction with other social members (Foote & Cottrell's, 1955; Liu & Baumeister, 2016). Moreover, confidence in creating desirable outcomes during social interactions strengthens one's belief as an active member who can effectively control the environment and handle uncertainties across all circumstances.

Hence, we propose that:

***Hypothesis 1:** Narcissism is positively related to one's psychological entitlement.*

Paradoxical Perspective of Personality

Traditional polar thinking treats personalities as dichotomized properties situated at opposing ends of a standard dimension (Hodson et al., 2018, p.124). However, such a perspective is often criticized for oversimplifying personality and restricting our comprehension of the intricate nature of narcissism. In response to this issue, the paradox perspective accentuates multiple facets in personality configuration and recognizes personality as a spectrum, rather than a binary structure (Lewis & Smith, 2022; Zheng et al., 2018). Paradox is defined as "contradictory yet coexisting interrelated elements" (Smith & Lewis, 2011; Lewis & Smith, 2022; Zhang et al., 2017). Strategy scholars originally proposed paradox theory to comprehend the complexity and the dualistic forces at the macro level (Lewis & Smith, 2011; Zheng et al., 2018; Hahn et al., 2014; Smith, 2014). As time passes, paradox theory has received increasingly attention from micro scholars (Lewis & Smith, 2022).

On the one hand, paradox theory recognizes the dark and bright sides of personality traits. For instance, narcissism is notorious for hindering people from staying open-minded or forming an accurate self-concept. The closed-mindedness and self-centeredness of narcissists can impede a company's innovation by suppressing talented innovators (Chatterjee & Hambrick, 2007; Zhang et al., 2017). However, narcissism can also benefit radical innovation because it usually attracts admiration and attention (Mao et al., 2021; Sung et al, 2020; Nie et al., 2022). On the other hand, psychologists and micro scholars also use the paradox perspective as a theoretical framework to explain the interwoven tensions among opposing personalities. In this way, paradox theory liberates scholars from polarized thinking and allows contradictory traits, such as narcissism and humility, to coexist (Chen, 2018). Narcissism is characterized by a grandiose and exaggerated self-view, whereas humility entails an accurate self-view (Morris et al., 2005). Examining the tensions arising from these opposing personality traits through a paradox lens allows us to explore constructive or innovative approaches to manage tensions (Zheng, 2018, p.590; Lüscher & Lewis, 2008). In the following section, we will integrate a paradoxical lens with self-concept theory to elucidate how people cognitively encounter and address the tensions that arise from the interplay between narcissistic and humble self-views.

Tug of War Between Two Self-Concepts: Narcissism Coexists With Humility

Paradox theory elucidates the coexistence of contradicting traits within individual. Furthermore, mapping narcissism and humility onto three key elements of self-concept (i.e., ***self-knowledge***, ***executive function, and interpersonal being***) enables us to understand how the contradicting self-concepts of narcissism and humility interact.

When individuals with both narcissism and humble self-views cognitively form a basic self-concept ***(self-knowledge)***, their humble self-view may direct them to reevaluate their environment with the belief in a higher power beyond themselves (Morris et al., 2005). The awareness of not being the center of the universe coincides with narcissistic self-view (Nielsen et al., 2010, p.34), resulting a shift of focus during self-positioning, and ultimately reducing the demand for special treatment (Naumann et al., 2002). The tensions arise when the desire to be agentic and dominant (narcissism) conflicts with the need for communal and submissive behavior towards a greater power (humility).

As action-oriented motivational mechanism, the self-knowledge resulting from the interplay between narcissism and humility self-views will have a powerful influence on individual's self-regulation (***executive function***). Narcissists utilize self-enhancement strategies to secure a grandiose self, which in turn generates feelings of pride, admiration, and power through an inflated sense of control over their lives (Campbell et al., 2017). In contrast, humble individuals surrender their sense of control through self-transcendent pursuits. When a grounded-self view converges with the inflated self-view, a middle ground is created, which allows for a more accurate evaluation of the consequences of one's choice (Baumeister, 2022). In other words, acknowledging one's limitations reduces overconfidence and diminishes the exaggerated positive self-perception as well as psychological entitlement (Harvey & Harris, 2010; Loi et al., 2020). As a result, recognizing the limitations of people's power in changing external environment encourages the formation of a more realistic self-view and reduces entitlement (Seligman, 1975). In conclusion, humility weakens the relationship between narcissism and psychological entitlement through the shift of self-position and establishment of an accurate self-view.

Finally, the self-view tensions manifested in an individual's executive function can further impact individuals' ***experience of interpersonal being.*** A humble self-view encourages individuals to acknowledge other's achievements and stay open to new ideas, allowing narcissists to objectively evaluate their personal impact on others (Zhang et al., 2017).

Hence, we propose the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 2: Humility moderates the positive relationship between narcissism and one's psychological entitlement, such that this relationship will be weaker when humility is high versus low.

METHODS

Data and Sample

We recruited participants from a business school at a north American university. The group includes a total of 451 undergraduate students. (47.2 % female, 52.8% male; 66.30% White, 18.40% Hispanic; age $_{mean}$ = 22.6, age $_{SD}$ = 1.8).

Measures

Narcissism Personality Inventory

NPI was measured using the NPI-16 (Ames et al., 2006). Participants were asked to rate their agreement with 16 statements in terms of how accurately each statement describes themselves, using a 7-point scale from 1 (not at all accurate) to 7 (extremely accurate). A sample statement is "I like to be the center of attention." The Cronbach's alpha is 0.79.

Humility

Trait humility was measured using the established Honesty-Humility scale from Ashton & Lee (2009). Participants were asked to read four statements and decide how much they agree or disagree with that

statement, using a 5-point scale (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree). There were mainly two dimensions being captured: Modesty and greed-avoidance. A sample statement for modesty is "I want people to know that I am an important person of high status". A sample statement for greed-avoidance is "Having a lot of money is not especially important to me". It is worth noticing that certain items were reverse coded so that the higher humility score indicates someone being humbler. The Cronbach's alpha is 0.61.

Psychological Entitlement

Conceptualized as "a stable and pervasive sense that one deserves more and is entitled to more than others" (Campbell et al., 2004, p.30), psychological entitlement measure was adopted from Campbell et al.'s (2004) 9-item scale. Participants were asked to rate the degree that best reflects their own beliefs on a 7-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree, 7=strongly agree). A sample item is "I honestly feel I'm just more deserving than others". The Cronbach's alpha is 0.84.

To increase the accuracy of the relationships among main variables, we included several control variables (Bernerth & Aguinis, 2016), such as participants' gender (Grijalva et al., 2015; Leckelt et al., 2016) and age (Cragun et al., 2020).

Analysis

To empirically test the hypotheses, we first conducted a zero-order correlation among variables. Then we used hierarchical linear regression analyses to conduct moderation analysis after centering the predictor and the moderator, following comparison in the change of R squared before and after introducing the interaction term (Murphy & Aguinis, 2022). After then, we investigate the relationship between narcissism and outcome variables (psychological entitlement and sense of power) with one standard deviation above/below the mean score of humility. To increase the robustness of our analysis, we also introduced the control variables into the equation and compared the findings (Jiang et al., 2022). We used R (version: 2022.07.1+554) (R Development Core Team, 2019) to conduct statistical analysis.

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 presents the means (M), standard deviations (SDs), and correlations among the variables. Narcissism was positively associated with psychological entitlement ($r = 0.38, p < 0.01$) and sense of power ($r = 0.59, p < 0.01$). Further, narcissism was negatively associated with humility ($r = -0.38, p < 0.01$). The negative effect of humility could also be found in psychological entitlement ($r = -0.53, p < 0.01$) and sense of power ($r = -0.15, p < 0.01$). Such positive and significant relationships between narcissism and two outcome variables support Hypothesis 1 and 3 respectively. In addition, psychological entitlement was positively associated with sense of power ($r = 0.13, p < 0.01$).

TABLE 1
MEANS, STANDARD DEVIATIONS, AND CORRELATIONS

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Gender	0.53	0.5					
2. Ethnicity	4.55	1.17	.04 [-.05, .13]				
3. Age	1.82	0.88	.16** [.07, .25]	-.02 [-.11, .07]			

Variable	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5
4. NPI	4.37	0.69	.26** [.17, .34]	.05 [-.04, .14]	-.03 [-.13, .06]		
5. Humility	3.1	0.82	-.17** [-.26, -.08]	-.03 [-.12, .06]	.09 [-.00, .18]	-.38** [-.46, -.30]	
6. Psychological Entitlement	3.42	1.02	.05 [-.04, .14]	-.08 [-.17, .01]	-.00 [-.09, .09]	.38** [.30, .46]	-.53** [-.59, -.46]

Note.

1) *n* = 451.
2) Gender: 1= Male (52.8%); 0 = Female (47.2%).
3) Age: 1=18-20 (37.1%), 2=21-23 (51.7%), 3=24-26 (7.1%), 4=27-29 (2.4%), 5=30-32 (0.9%), 6=33-35 (0.4%), 7=above 36 (0.4%).
4) *M* and *SD* are used to represent mean and standard deviation, respectively. 95% confidence intervals for each correlation are listed in square brackets.
5) *: p < .05. **: p < .01.

Hypothesis Tests

Table 2 summarizes the hierarchical regression analyses, entailing the tampering effect of humility on narcissism in predicting psychological entitlement. We controlled for age and gender when running the statistical test (Carnes & Knotts, 2018; Campbell et al., 2004). As Table 2 indicates, the total effect of narcissism on psychological entitlement reduced from 0.610 to 0.317 after introducing humility. Humility was negatively related to psychological entitlement, $B = -0.746$, $t(203) = -14.25$, $p < .001$, $r = .311$. The interaction term created by narcissism and humility significantly predicted psychological entitlement ($r = -0.183$, 95% CI [-0.309,-0.058]). Moreover, the observed changes in R squared after adding the interaction term is significant ($\Delta R = 0.211$, F = 6.261), indicating a moderating effect. To follow-up the significant interaction, we calculate the Estimated Marginal Means (EMMs) of psychological entitlement at different levels (-1 SD/ mean/ +1 SD) of narcissism across different levels (-1 SD/ mean/ +1 SD) of humility, and test for the effect of narcissism at different levels of humility with simple slopes analysis. The simple slope shows that for those with low levels of humility (1 SD below humility), a one unit increase in narcissism links to 0.468 unit increase in psychological entitlement (95% CI[0.301, 0.634]); For those with an average level of humility (Mean = 3.105), a one unit increase in narcissism leads to a 0.317 unit increase in psychological entitlement (95% CI[0.188, 0.446]). For those with an high level of humility (1 SD above the mean), a one unit increase in narcissism is associated with 0.167 unit increase in psychological entitlement (95% CI[0.002, 0.331]). The results indicate that humility buffers the positive impact of narcissism on psychological entitlement, as the association between narcissism and psychological entitlement is weaker at higher level of humility. The interaction plot further supports such finding: as Figure 1 indicates, the positive association between narcissism and psychological entitlement is weakened as humility increases. Hence, Hypothesis 2 was supported.

TABLE 2
HIERARCHICAL REGRESSION ANALYSES SUMMARY

	Dependent variable	
	Psychological Entitlement	
	Main Effects	Interaction
	(1)	(2)
Constant	3.207***	3.167***
	(0.048)	(0.044)
Narcissism.c	0.610***	0.317***
	(0.070)	(0.066)
Humility.c		-0.634***
		(0.055)
Narcissism.c: Humility.c		-0.183***
		(0.064)
Observations	451	451
R^2	0.145	0.356
Adjusted R^2	0.143	0.352
Residual Std. Error	1.018 (df = 449)	0.886 (df = 447)
F Statistic	76.164*** (df = 1; 449)	82.425*** (df = 3; 447)

Note: *p**p***p<0.01

FIGURE 1
THE MODERATING EFFECT OF HUMILITY IN THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN NARCISSISM (NPI) AND PSYCHOLOGICAL ENTITLEMENT (N = 451)
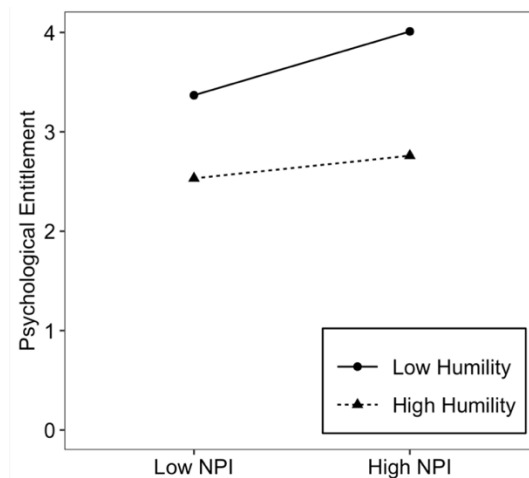
DISCUSSIONS

Our contributions are three-fold. Firstly, we add to the self-concept literature by recognizing the intricate interaction between conflicting self-concepts. Incorporating self-concept as a motivational

mechanism, the current study offers new insight into the psychological tendencies of narcissists in the presence of conflicting traits, such as humility. Additionally, by integrating two opposite self-concepts (narcissistic versus humble) and focusing on cognitive tensions, we offer a novel perspective on the traditional approach of understanding individuals' self-enhancement motivation (Baumeister et al., 1998; Baumeister, 2022; Gecas, 1982).

Secondly, we contribute to paradox theory by applying the framework to micro-level phenomenon. We highlight the needs to shift the focus from polar thinking to a more dynamic and multidimensional perspective when studying personality (Zheng, 2018). In this sense, our study aligns with the proposition that personality constructs exist on a continuum, challenging the traditional polar view (or the dilemma perspective) (Hodson et al., 2018). We suggest that the traditional polar view limits our understanding of the interplay of self-concepts. By highlighting the tensions embedded in contrasting self-concepts, we underline the benefits of considering the coexistence of contradictory self-concepts (Lewis & Smith, 2022). Additionally, our study responds to the call from other scholars by utilizing paradox theory to study intrapersonal cognitive processes. As lamented by Schad et al. (2016), paradox research has "been relatively silent about individual approaches" (p.25). Other paradox scholars also noted that paradoxical tensions have mainly been studied at the organizational level (Hahn et al., 2014). We need to further explore why and how individuals differ in acknowledging tension and balancing the coexistence of opposing subjects via paradox thinking. Our study thus contributes to the paradox literature by unpacking people's experiences of tension and elaborating key processes to harness paradoxical tensions constructively. We hope to inspire future research to emphasize the dynamic equilibrium and fully explore paradox theory's utility in micro research.

Our findings have several important practical implications for employees and managers. Previous research has shown that narcissistic employees don't have a realistic conception of their own talent and abilities, hence they don't take negative feedback well (Judge et al. 2006). Employees can buffer their narcissistic tendencies by developing a few behaviors characteristic of humility e.g., learning to recognize their limitations, admitting mistakes, and sincerely seeking the advice and feedback of others (Owens et al. 2015). We encourage employees to acknowledge and actively respond to the experience of the tensions from the paradoxical demands of narcissism and humility (Zhang et al., 2017). Organizations using personality assessments in the hiring process should ensure that narcissism is something they include. Interview questions that allow candidates to demonstrate times when they admitted mistakes and responded to negative feedback should be encouraged. Finally, since promotions for some individuals result in increased psychological entitlement, organizations should avoid rewarding a lack of humility as employees progress through the ranks of management. As previous studies noted, psychological entitlement creates adverse outcomes such as frustration, dissatisfaction, hostile behavior, unethical behavior, and selfish attitude (Harvey & Harris, 2010; Harvey & Martinko, 2009), which can be detrimental for organizational development and stakeholders' wellbeing. Hence, we present a novel way of taming the narcissistic side within individuals and minimizing the negative impact of psychological entitlement.

There are several limitations in the current study: First, our study utilized cross-sectional data—the nature of the sample limited our inference in the causal relationship among variables. To attain a more robust causal inference and better understand the trajectory of the co-existence and interaction between narcissism and humility, future research is encouraged to use longitudinal study design to deepen our understanding of the developmental nature of a narcissistic self and humble self. Another limitation is our finding is mainly based on a western population sample. Some studies noted that people from East Asian cultures are more prone to experience paradoxical traits (Ou et al., 2014; Zhang et al., 2017). Hence, we suggest future studies to replicate the finding by utilizing more culturally diversified participants to enhance the external validity of our finding (such as comparing the moderating effects of humility among the eastern group and western group or exploring the moderated moderation effect through incorporating Hofstede culture value).

CONCLUSION

We contribute to the self-concept literature by incorporating the paradox perspective into the self-concept literature. Our study provides a preliminary understanding of the potential benefits of integrating seemingly contradictory yet complementary traits within individuals. We demonstrate that narcissism can coexist and interact with humility to predict psychological outcomes such as psychological entitlement. Moreover, we propose a self-concept theoretical framework to deepen the understanding of the merit of humility. We encourage future research to further investigate the developmental trajectory of these traits, and explore potential gender and cultural differences in the interplay between narcissism and humility. Such research will enhance our understanding of the complexity and diversity of self-concept.

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