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Narcissistic motivations to help during the COVID-19 quarantine

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ABSTRACT

We examined the extent to which trait narcissism was associated with helping behavior during the COVID-19 pandemic. We hypothesized that people higher in agentic grandiose narcissism would help during the COVID-19 quarantine for egoistic reasons and that communal grandiose narcissists would help because they care for the people in the community. Because vulnerable narcissists tend to self-protect, we expected them to be less helpful overall and report helping to either make themselves feel better or avoid social disapproval. We found supporting evidence such that agentic grandiose narcissists reported helping in a greater number of ways because they were motivated by self-promotion while communal narcissists helped in more ways because they were motivated by concern for others. Vulnerable narcissists reported doing less to help others and a lack of concern for others. Further, we found that the extent to which grandiose narcissists communicated more frequently about their various helping efforts was associated with increased state grandiose narcissism. These findings emphasize the self-focused nature of narcissistic personalities while highlighting unique differences between the narcissistic subtypes.

1. Introduction

Narcissists do not often come to mind when imagining helpful people, but not all prosocial acts are selfless. Previous research has described agentic grandiose narcissists as “strategic helpers” (Konrath et al., 2016) because agentic grandiose narcissists help under a specific set of criteria. For example, they are more likely to help in public situations and do so for selfish reasons such as self-promotion and resume-building (Brunell et al., 2014), although overall helping frequency may be low (Nehrlich et al., 2019). In the present paper, we extended research to include communal grandiose narcissism and vulnerable narcissism. We examined the unique experience of helping during the COVID-19 quarantine including why trait narcissists might be motivated to help and why they may frequently discuss their helping efforts with others.

1.1. Helping motives

We examined helping motivation through a functional analysis, which examines the reasons, purposes, plans, and goals that underlie people’s behavior (Snyder, 1993). Although helping behavior may be the same, the functions served through behavior and the underlying motivational processes for behavior may manifest themselves differently (Clary et al., 1998). For example, people may help because of humanitarian concerns for others, to obtain experience, to expand a social network of people, to avoid feeling guilt for not helping, or to self-enhance through helping. We expected the different narcissistic subtypes to exhibit unique motivations for helping.

1.2. Trait narcissism

Grandiose narcissists continuously seek to validate their self-perceived grandiosity, esteem, entitlement, and power. According to the agency-communal model of grandiose narcissism, there are two domains for narcissistic self-enhancement (Gebauer et al., 2012; Gebauer & Sedikides, 2018). Narcissists who self-enhance in the agentic domain (agentic grandiose narcissists; AN) do so in areas such as competence, intelligence, and independence while narcissists who self-enhance in the communal domain (communal grandiose narcissists; CN) do so in areas such as warmth, concern for others, and prosociality. Both AN and CN want to stand out, but CN are unique in focusing their efforts on being seen as the most caring person in their community. Thus, we might expect AN to help others as a means of showing off their competencies and CN to help others to show off how uniquely helpful they are.

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https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2022.111623
Received 7 July 2021; Received in revised form 26 February 2022; Accepted 19 March 2022
Available online 25 March 2022
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they are. Both types of grandiose narcissists are likely helping strategically when their behavior is noticed more publicly, but for communal narcissists that may be particularly true in situations that lean into their sense of self as “saints.”

Circumstances around the USA 2020 quarantine period spotlighted how heroic it was to help others. Examining how helpful CNs saw themselves during this unique time may help to clarify whether they are motivated by concern for others when helping or by recognition for their heroism. It is possible that CN may be genuinely motivated by concern for others, but past research suggests that CN can also be like AN in sheep's clothing, outwardly reporting selfless desires while harboring motivations by concern for others when helping, and their communication behavior during the pandemic. We predicted that narcissists would be particularly likely to make their helping efforts known which could exacerbate state narcissism levels. During the pandemic quarantine, it was difficult to engage in widely public acts of helping in-person, so if narcissists wanted recognition, they would have needed to voluntarily share that information with others. Bragging about one's helping efforts can be a particularly effective way to garner attention from others, but the consequence of gaining such validation could feed into the self-serving motives of narcissists. For example, previous research found that essential workers who bragged about their jobs experienced increases in state narcissism levels (Freis & Brunell, 2020). In a similar vein, Chen et al. (2019) found that participants felt more narcissistic on the days they reported more helping and Giacomin and Jordan (2016) found increases in state narcissism after experiences of recognition. Our present study investigates the combination of help and recognition which may compound the boosts to one's ego. We predicted that narcissists would be particularly likely to make their helping efforts known which could exacerbate state narcissism levels.

### 1.3. State narcissism

If narcissists employ strategic motives to help, this may have downstream consequences for their egos. For example, even if reporting saint-like reasons for helping, we wonder how often narcissists choose to keep their actions private or make it known publicly. Therefore, understanding why CN help may better explain the mismatch between holding self-perceptions of being exceedingly helpful but not necessarily behaving in helpful ways when given the opportunity (Nehrlig et al., 2019).

In addition to grandiose narcissism, another form of trait narcissism is vulnerable narcissism. According to the Narcissistic Spectrum Model (Krizan & Herlache, 2018), narcissists share the features of entitled self-importance but diverge in their functional orientations, with GN learning toward boldness (i.e., high approach motivation; seeking to satisfy self-aggrandizing goals) and VN leaning toward reactivity (i.e., high avoidance motivation; a volatile disposition that seeks to self-protect against threat). VN are less confident and depend on social approval from others to manage their self-image (Brown & Brunell, 2017; Brunell & Buelow, 2019). VN are not especially prosocial (Kauten & Barry, 2016) and only likely to help when there is high social pressure to do so (Lannin et al., 2014). We therefore expected VN to be less likely to help and, if helping is demonstrated, potentially motivated to either make themselves feel better or avoid social disapproval.

### 1.4. The current research

Participants self-reported their trait and state narcissism, their helping efforts in quarantine during Spring 2020, their motives for helping, and their communication behavior during the pandemic. We predicted that AN would report helping for egoistic reasons, such as self-promotion, replicating and extending prior work (Brunell et al., 2014). We expected CN, with their communal goals, would indicate they help...
because of concern for others. To the best of our knowledge, why CN are motivated to help has not been empirically examined. In addition, we examine VN for exploratory purposes; if VN is associated with helping behavior, we expected that it might be to help to feel better about themselves or to avoid social disapproval. Furthermore, we assessed the extent to which narcissists shared about how much they helped and if communicating about helping behaviors would inflate state narcissism levels.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

We recruited 231 participants from Prolific. We removed 2 participants for failing to pass our two attention check measures in the study, which left us with 229 participants total (103 men, 116 women, 4 self-identified as trans and 5 who did not indicate their gender; M\textsubscript{age} = 30.31, SD = 11.16). Of these participants, 151 indicated that they had engaged in helping behavior during the COVID-19 quarantine during Spring 2020 (M\textsubscript{hours} = 5.66 per week; SD = 8.40).

Participants indicated that they helped in a variety of ways, including making and distributing masks (10.0%), donations (32.3%), distributions of food and supplies (8.7%), health work (6.1%), delivery (7.4%), fundraising (9.2%), sharing COVID-related recommendations on social media (38.0%), sharing encouragements on social media (20.2%), and more. Participants also selected from (Freis & Brunell, 2020) and summed to create a total Communication Frequency score.

2.2. Materials

2.2.1. Trait narcissism

Participants were asked to complete three narcissism questionnaires. The shorted Narcissistic Personality Inventory (Gentile et al., 2013) measured AN. Participants rated 13 statements from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). For example, “I will usually show off if I get the chance.” Items were summed to create a total AN score. The Communal Narcissism Inventory (Gebauer et al., 2012) measured CN. Participants rated 16 statements from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). For example, “I will be known for the good deeds I will have done.” Items were summed to create a total CN score. The Hypersensitive Narcissism Scale (Hendin & Cheek, 1997) measured VN. Participants rated 10 statements from 1 (very untrue of me) to 7 (very true of me). For example, “I feel that I have enough on my hands without worrying about other peoples’ troubles.” Items were summed to create a total VN score.

2.2.2. Self-reported helping behavior

Participants self-reported the average number of hours per week they had been helping during the quarantine. Participants also selected from a list of options how they were helping during the pandemic (e.g., making and distributing masks). Participants could expand this list if an option was not provided. We summed how many options participants selected to create a measure of helping variety.

2.2.3. Motivation to help

Motivation to help during the pandemic was based on an adapted version of the Volunteer Functions Inventory (Clary et al., 1998). In the present version, participants rated how true each statement was for them regarding why they were helping during the COVID-19 pandemic, from 1 (not at all true for me) to 7 (very true for me). See Table 1 for a list of items.

2.2.4. Communication frequency

Four questions asked participants about the extent to which they told others about their helping efforts during the pandemic on a scale from 1 (never) to 5 (very frequently). This included communication over the phone, over video, in person, and over social media. Items were adapted from (Freis & Brunell, 2020) and summed to create a total Communication Frequency score.

2.2.5. State narcissism

For state measures, we used a modified version of the State Narcissism Scale (Freis & Brunell, 2020). This included 13 items to measure state CN, 15 items reflective of state AN, and 7 items reflective of state VN. We also included 2 items reflective of state self-esteem. All items were rated from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Items for each subscale were summed to create total state scores.

2.3. Procedure

Upon completing the online consent form, participants completed the trait narcissism scales. They were then asked if they had engaged in helping behavior during the quarantine of Spring 2020. If they indicated they had been helping, they were asked how they had been helping and how many hours per week they helped. They then answered the items about their motives for helping, how often they shared about their helping endeavors with others, and the measures of state narcissism.

Lastly, they provided demographic information and were debriefed.

3. Results

3.1. Preliminary analysis

We first subjected the motivation items to a principal components analysis with varimax rotation. Results suggested a four-factor solution that accounted for 51.15% of the total variance. For more information, see Table 1. Means, standard deviations, and α for each measure are presented in Table 2.

The full correlation matrix is presented in supplemental materials, but here we highlight key findings. We found that CN indicated they helped in more variety of ways (r(226) = 0.18, p = .008) and VN indicated helping in fewer ways (r(226) = −.013, p = .044). AN did not significantly relate to helping variety (r(226) = 0.06, p = .373). For number of hours helping, CN reported more hours (r(149) = 0.24, p = .003); AN (r(149) = 0.08, p = .354) and VN (r(149) = −0.01; p = .865) were non-significant. Thus, it seems that CN believed themselves to be more helpful during the crisis.

With regard to motives to help, AN was significantly correlated with the motives to feel good (r(148) = 0.21, p = .011), to self-promote (r(148) = 0.35, p < .001), and because of the challenge helping involved (r(148) = 0.22, p = .008), but not for concern for others (r(148) = 0.04, p = .600). CN was related to the enjoyment of the challenge (r(148) =

| Table 2 | Cronbach’s α, means, and standard deviations for study variables. |
|---------|----------------------|
|         | A        | M        | SD       |
| NPI-13  | 0.83     | 2.55     | 0.63     |
| CNI     | 0.93     | 4.04     | 1.08     |
| HSNS    | 0.81     | 3.85     | 0.98     |
| Helping variety | –     | 1.58     | 1.51     |
| Helping hours | –     | 5.66     | 8.40     |
| To feel good | 0.73    | 3.58     | 1.18     |
| Self-promotion | 0.77    | 2.46     | 1.12     |
| Enjoyment/challenge | 0.79   | 4.44     | 1.21     |
| Concern for others | 0.76   | 5.54     | 1.01     |
| Communication frequency | 0.84   | 6.33     | 2.80     |
| State AN | 0.90     | 5.09     | 1.01     |
| State CN | 0.90     | 4.12     | 1.02     |
| State VN | 0.78     | 4.68     | 1.09     |
| State SE | 0.82     | 3.72     | 1.52     |

Note. NPI-13 = Narcissistic Personality Inventory (13 items); CNI=Communal Narcissism Inventory; HSNS=Hypersensitive Narcissism Scale; State AN = state agentic narcissism; State CN = state communal narcissism, State VN = state vulnerable narcissism; State SE = state self-esteem.
| Independent variables | Path | b     | SE  | 95% CI          | ab$_{b_a}$ |
|-----------------------|------|-------|-----|-----------------|------------|
| Agentic narcissism    | Direct | -0.09 | 0.10 | -0.281, 0.095  |            |
|                       | Via to feel good | a    | 0.12 | 0.08 | -0.025, 0.272  |            |
|                       |                  | Indirect | -0.01 | 0.02 | -0.072, -0.058 |            |
|                       | Via self-promotion | a   | 0.31 | 0.08 | 0.148, 0.474   |            |
|                       |                  | Indirect | 0.06 | 0.04 | 0.001, 0.126   |            |
|                       | Via enjoyment/ challenge | a   | 0.16 | 0.08 | 0.005, 0.317   |            |
|                       |                  | Indirect | 0.03 | 0.03 | -0.001, 0.091  |            |
|                       | Via concern for others/reciprocity | a | -0.02 | 0.05 | -0.123, 0.092 |            |
|                       |                  | Indirect | -0.01 | 0.01 | -0.035, -0.029 |            |
| Communal narcissism   | Direct | 0.10 | 0.04 | 0.015, 0.189   |            |
|                       | Via to feel good | a    | 0.01 | 0.04 | -0.056, 0.083  |            |
|                       |                  | Indirect | -0.01 | 0.01 | -0.020, 0.005  |            |
|                       | Via self-promotion | a   | 0.01 | 0.04 | -0.069, 0.083  |            |
|                       |                  | Indirect | 0.01 | 0.01 | -0.012, 0.024  |            |
|                       | Via enjoyment/ challenge | a   | 0.07 | 0.04 | -0.007, 0.139  |            |
|                       |                  | Indirect | 0.01 | 0.01 | -0.001, 0.042  |            |
|                       | Via concern for others/reciprocity | a | 0.08 | 0.03 | 0.031, 0.131  |            |
|                       |                  | Indirect | 0.01 | 0.01 | -0.007, 0.038  |            |
| Vulnerable narcissism | Direct | 0.03 | 0.08 | -0.118, 0.186  |            |
|                       | Via to feel good | a    | 0.21 | 0.06 | 0.095, 0.326   |            |
|                       |                  | Indirect | -0.02 | 0.02 | -0.076, 0.014  |            |
|                       | Via self-promotion | a   | 0.10 | 0.06 | -0.023, 0.231  |            |
|                       |                  | Indirect | 0.02 | 0.02 | -0.002, 0.086  |            |
|                       | Via enjoyment/ challenge | a   | -0.07 | 0.06 | -0.196, 0.047  |            |
|                       |                  | Indirect | -0.01 | 0.02 | -0.064, -0.074 |            |
|                       | Via concern for others/reciprocity | a | -0.09 | 0.04 | -0.175, -0.009 |            |
|                       |                  | Indirect | -0.01 | 0.01 | -0.057, -0.061 |            |

Note. Path b (testing mediator effect on outcome) remains constant for: To feel good on helping hours, $b = -0.10$, SE = 0.12, 95% CI [-0.331, 0.132], self-promotion on helping hours, $b = 0.18$, SE = 0.11, 95% CI [-0.031, 0.398], enjoyment/challenge on helping hours $b = 0.19$, SE = 0.12, 95% CI [-0.038, 0.426], and concern for others/reciprocity on helping hours, $b = 0.12$, SE = 0.16, 95% CI [-0.192, 0.437]. The effect size ($ab_{b_a}$) is taken from the completely standardized indirect effect in PROCESS output.

0.23, $p = .005$) and concern for others ($r(148) = 0.28, p < .001$) but not for self-promotion ($r(148) = 0.12, p = .140$) or to feel good ($r(148) = 0.06, p = .496$). VN was related to the desire to feel good ($r(148) = 0.31, p < .001$) and to self-promote ($r(148) = 0.19, p = .021$), and less concern about others ($r(148) = -0.21, p = .011$). VN was not significantly related to the challenge of helping ($r(148) = -0.08, p = .323$).

Table 4

| Independent variables | Path | b     | SE  | 95% CI          | ab$_{b_a}$ |
|-----------------------|------|-------|-----|-----------------|------------|
| Agentic narcissism    | Direct | 0.01 | 0.01 | -0.020, 0.033  |            |
|                       | Via to feel good | A    | 0.12 | 0.08 | -0.025, 0.272  |            |
|                       |                  | Indirect | 0.01 | 0.01 | -0.004, -0.021 |            |
|                       | Via self-promotion | A   | 0.31 | 0.08 | 0.148, 0.474   |            |
|                       |                  | Indirect | 0.01 | 0.01 | 0.001, 0.005   |            |
|                       | Via enjoyment/ challenge | A   | 0.16 | 0.08 | -0.005, 0.317  |            |
|                       |                  | Indirect | -0.01 | 0.01 | -0.011, -0.065 |            |
|                       | Via concern for others/reciprocity | A | -0.02 | 0.05 | -0.123, 0.092 |            |
| Communal narcissism   | Direct | -0.01 | 0.01 | -0.012, 0.008  |            |
|                       | Via to feel good | A    | 0.01 | 0.04 | 0.056, 0.083   |            |
|                       |                  | Indirect | 0.01 | 0.01 | -0.001, 0.002  |            |
|                       | Via self-promotion | A   | 0.01 | 0.04 | -0.069, 0.083  |            |
|                       |                  | Indirect | 0.01 | 0.01 | -0.002, 0.024  |            |
|                       | Via enjoyment/ challenge | A   | 0.07 | 0.04 | -0.007, 0.139  |            |
|                       |                  | Indirect | -0.01 | 0.01 | -0.005, 0.001  |            |
|                       | Via concern for others/reciprocity | A | 0.08 | 0.03 | 0.031, 0.131  |            |
|                       |                  | Indirect | 0.01 | 0.01 | -0.001, 0.035  |            |
| Vulnerable narcissism | Direct | -0.02 | 0.01 | -0.037, 0.006  |            |
|                       | Via to feel good | A    | 0.21 | 0.06 | 0.095, 0.326   |            |
|                       |                  | Indirect | 0.01 | 0.01 | -0.007, -0.006 |            |
|                       | Via self-promotion | A   | 0.10 | 0.06 | -0.023, 0.231  |            |
|                       |                  | Indirect | 0.01 | 0.01 | -0.001, 0.012  |            |
|                       | Via enjoyment/ challenge | A   | -0.07 | 0.06 | -0.196, 0.047  |            |
|                       |                  | Indirect | 0.01 | 0.01 | -0.001, 0.008  |            |
|                       | Via concern for others/reciprocity | A | -0.09 | 0.04 | -0.175, -0.009 |            |
|                       |                  | Indirect | -0.01 | 0.01 | -0.020, -0.152 |            |

Note. Path b (testing mediator effect on outcome) remains consistent for: To feel good on helping variety, $b = 0.01$, SE = 0.79, 95% CI [-0.029, 0.037], self-promotion on helping variety, $b = 0.03$, SE = 0.02, 95% CI [0.001, 0.062], enjoyment/challenge on helping variety $b = -0.01$, SE = 0.02, 95% CI [-0.043, 0.023], and concern for others/reciprocity on helping variety, $b = 0.09$, SE = 0.02, 95% CI [0.045, 0.135]. The effect size ($ab_{b_a}$) is taken from the completely standardized indirect effect in PROCESS output.

3.2. Which motives predict helping behavior in trait narcissism?

We examined helping behavior in two ways: a) the number of hours participants volunteered and b) the various helping behaviors enacted. Using Hayes’ (2018) PROCESS macro for SPSS, with a bias-corrected bootstrap sample set at 10,000, we tested if different motives predicted number of hours helping among trait narcissists. We mean-centered all continuous predictor variables in the path analysis which is reported in Table 3. The number of reported hours helping was...
entered as the outcome variable, AN, CN, and VN were entered as predictors, and parallel mediators included the four motivations for helping: to feel good about myself, self-promotion, enjoyment/challenge, and concern for others/reciprocity. We observed that none of the measured motives accounted for the relationship between levels of narcissism and reported hours of helping.

Next, we investigated if motives for helping would predict trait narcissists’ various helping behaviors. Using the same PROCESS parameters (Hayes, 2018), we tested if the different motives predicted variety of helping behaviors among the three narcissistic subtypes, reported in Table 4 and visually represented in Fig. 1. The variety of ways participants reported helping was entered as the outcome variable, AN, CN, and VN were entered as predictors, and parallel mediators included the same four motivations for helping.

We observed that AN predicted greater ways of helping due to a higher self-promotion motive. CN predicted greater helping due to a higher concern for others or reciprocity motive. Finally, VN did not predict greater helping through these measured motives. Instead, VN predicted less variety of helping due to their lower concern for others. These results show that the likelihood for narcissistic individuals to help in a pandemic are differentially predicted by unique motives.1

### 3.3. Does helping and communication frequency predict changes in state narcissism?

Given narcissists’ tendency to self-promote, brag, and show-off (Palmer et al., 2016), we examined how helping behaviors associated with narcissists’ likelihood to communicate about their efforts. In addition, we sought to find out how bragging about helping might be associated with state narcissism levels. We hypothesized that AN and CN would report making their helping efforts more public by voluntarily communicating more frequently about their helping endeavors. To test this prediction, we computed a multiple regression model predicting communication frequency. All three trait narcissism variables predicted communicating about helping endeavors more frequently (for AN: $\beta = 0.25$, $t(144) = 2.98, p = .003$; CN: $\beta = 0.16$, $t(144) = 1.97, p = .050$; VN: $\beta = 0.21$, $t(144) = 2.74, p = .007$).

Next, we investigated if the association between having more variety of helping behaviors and state narcissism levels was accounted for by communication frequency. Using Hayes’ (2018) PROCESS macro for SPSS, with a bias-corrected bootstrap sample set at 10,000, we tested this hypothesis. We mean-centered all continuous predictor variables in the path analysis reported in Table 5 and visually represented in Fig. 2. We observed that greater variety of helping behaviors predicted greater communication frequency about helping. This, in turn, predicted increases in state AN and state CN. Greater communication about helping efforts did not impact state self-esteem levels nor state VN. When using helping hours as the predictor variable, we did not observe changes in any state measures (see supplement).

### 4. Discussion

Our study revealed that CNs viewed themselves as helpers during the pandemic by indicating they helped in more ways and served more hours. In addition, they indicated that they were motivated to help due

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1 Note that motivations to help did not predict the likelihood to communicate more frequently. This is likely because we specifically measured motives behind helping not motives to communicate. See supplement for analysis.

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Table 5: Path analyses testing the indirect effect of helping variety (predictor) via communication frequency (mediator) on state narcissism (outcome).

| Dependent variables | Path | $b$ | $SE$ | 95% CI | $ab_{cs}$ |
|--------------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| State agentic narcissism | B       | 2.22    | 0.43    | 1.36, 3.068 |        |
|                     | Direct  | -0.75   | 0.98    | -2.68, 1.186 |        |
|                     | Indirect| 0.98    | 0.56    | 0.13, 2.333 | 0.011, 0.180 |
| State communal narcissism | B       | 0.96    | 0.41    | 0.13, 1.790 |        |
|                     | Direct  | 0.24    | 0.90    | -1.54, 2.027 |        |
|                     | Indirect| 0.44    | 0.30    | 0.04, 0.93 | 0.005, 0.113 |
| State vulnerable narcissism | B       | 0.49    | 0.22    | 0.04, 0.925 |        |
|                     | Direct  | -0.71   | 0.51    | -1.72, 0.296 |        |
|                     | Indirect| 0.22    | 0.18    | 0.00, 0.74 | 0.000, 0.119 |
| State self-esteem | B       | -0.01   | 0.09    | -0.18, 0.168 |        |
|                     | Direct  | 0.47    | 0.20    | 0.06, 0.863 |        |
|                     | Indirect| -0.01   | 0.04    | -0.09, 0.073 | -0.040, 0.030 |

Note. Path $a$ (testing predictor effect on mediator) remains consistent for helping variety on communication frequency, $b = 0.46, SE = 0.18, 95\% CI [0.113, 0.806]. The effect size ($ab_{cs}$) is taken from the ratio of indirect effect to total effect in PROCESS output.
to humanitarian concerns or for reciprocity's sake. This reported behavior is consistent with their inflated self-views with respect to being the most helpful person they know and expecting they will be known for their good deeds and acts of caring (Gebauer & Sedikides, 2018). However, there is no way to determine if CN helped more or simply claimed to have helped more. By contrast, VN indicated that they were less helpful during the pandemic and indicated they had less concern about others. Lower rates of helping among VN are consistent with past research (Kauten & Barry, 2016) and may reflect that VN are more concerned with protecting themselves than caring for others, especially when confronting risks during a pandemic. When ANs indicated they helped, it was because they were looking for an opportunity to self-promote. This finding is consistent with previous research investigating that when ANs volunteer, it is for more selfish reasons (Brunell et al., 2014).

All three forms of narcissism were associated with communicating more frequently about their helping endeavors. Frequent communication about helping was associated in turn with boosts in state CN and AN. Further, although there was a correlation between helping and state narcissism (see supplement), this effect is likely explained by the act of bragging about helping efforts. For AN and CN, having a greater number of ways to brag was associated with boosts in state levels. Perhaps, helping in a wider variety of ways is a strategic approach as it gives the narcissist more to talk about when discussing their helping efforts compared to spending more hours on a singular task. Bragging about helping did not associate with the state narcissism of VN, probably because they helped less overall. It is also important to note that helping in a variety of ways and bragging about it did not impact state self-esteem, suggesting there is a unique benefit to narcissistic egos.

4.1. Limitations & future directions

The self-reported nature of this work limits the conclusions we can draw about how objectively helpful narcissists were acting during the pandemic. As previous research shows, CN's subjective self-reports are often inflated compared to objective measures (Nehrlich et al., 2019). It may be that narcissists’ reports of helping represent their perception rather than reality. It is also noteworthy that some modes of helping were more superficial (e.g., social media posts) than others (e.g., distributing food and supplies). However, examining narcissistic motives and perceptions in the unique context of the pandemic is a strength to this study. We observed unique differences in motivations to help and in state narcissism levels, which may be a result of helping and bragging about helping efforts. Future research could investigate how long these boosts to state narcissism levels last or further explore the motivations behind VN’s actions or mental states during the pandemic. Caution should also be used when understanding cross-sectional data. The path analyses reported in this study gave a more stringent test to our hypotheses and represent a theoretically sound order of variables but direct cause-and-effect should not be interpreted without proper experimentation or longitudinal design.

5. Conclusions

In sum, ANs and CNs reported they were more likely to help others during the pandemic but differed in their motivations. ANs unabashedly acted on egoistic motives while CNs maintained they were moved by humanitarian desires. VN lacked these same motives or frequencies in helping. We also observed increases in state grandiose narcissism associated with bragging about one's helping efforts, which was not observed in reports of state self-esteem. This study suggests that living through the unique context of a global pandemic may have given narcissists new ways to fulfill their motivations while using familiar methods. Specifically, the pandemic offered a diversity of ways to offer help and grandiose narcissists seemed particularly ready to use such efforts to boost their self-image.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, Stephanie D. Freis, upon reasonable request.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Stephanie D. Freis: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Software, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. Amy B. Brunell: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Software, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Acknowledgements

This work was supported in part by research funds at Ohio State University – Mansfield campus.
Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2022.111623.

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