

Do great expectations lead to great disappointments? Pathological narcissism and the evaluation of vacation experiences



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ABSTRACT

We wanted to examine whether narcissism affects the level of discrepancy between expectations for a vacation and the vacationer's actual experience. Using a pre–post panel design, we explored the association between narcissism and the confirmation of expectations for a vacation (the difference between the expectations of participants prior to a vacation and how they actually experience the vacation). Our sample consisted of 219 community-based vacationers (107 men and 112 women) from urban areas of Israel. The average age of the participants was 33.91 years ($SD = 8.47$). Participants completed measures at the beginning and end of a three-night vacation in a resort city in southern Israel (Eilat). In addition to a measure of pathological narcissism, the participants completed measures of their affective expectations (Time 1) and subjective experiences (Time 2). The link between pathological narcissism and positive affective expectations was moderated by gender such that pathological narcissistic personality features were associated with larger discrepancies between affective expectations and subjective experiences among men. Men with high levels of the vulnerable form of pathological narcissism reported being less satisfied with their vacation experiences than other individuals. These results suggest that narcissistic personality features and gender play roles in the anticipation of potentially pleasurable events, as well as how those events are actually experienced.

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A vacation is generally a trip undertaken for the purpose of leisure that involves an overnight stay away from home (Ryan, 2000). Vacations are thought to contribute to the overall life satisfaction and well-being of leisure travelers as they offer at least some freedom in choice of destination (Nawijn & Peeters, 2010), as well as enjoyable activities (Neal, Sirgy, & Uysal, 1999; Steyn, Saayman, & Nienaber, 2004). Vacations are likely to be more powerful recovery opportunities than ordinary free evenings and weekends because they often involve actively engaging in a variety of intentional recreational activities (Brey & Lehto, 2007; De Bloom et al., 2010). A meta-analysis concerning the effects of vacations (De Bloom et al., 2009) found that vacations have modest positive effects on health and well-being. However, vacations often fail to live up to the expectations of the traveler, which may result in limited reduction of stress and fewer benefits for the traveler's emotional well-being than might have been expected (Mitchell, Thompson, Peterson, & Cronk, 1997).

Many theories concerning affect contend that prior knowledge structures such as goals, expectations, and personality features partially determine affective reactions to events (e.g., Clore, Schwarz, & Conway,

1994; David, Green, Martin, & Suls, 1997). For example, expecting to have a positive experience may influence the extent to which an individual actually experiences positive affect during the event itself (Klaaren, Hodges, & Wilson, 1994). Leisure activities are an important part of life and individuals often find these activities to be satisfying and pleasurable. Despite the importance of leisure activities, psychology has paid relatively little attention to this aspect of life. Researchers have recently begun to examine how personality traits can influence an individual's approach to leisure and vacation activities. Personality traits such as extraversion, neuroticism, and sensation-seeking have been found to be associated with various aspects of leisure activities, including expectations, stress, and satisfaction surrounding these experiences (e.g., Besser & Priel, 2006; Furnham, 2004; Lu & Hu, 2005; Lu & Kao, 2009; Noser, Zeigler-Hill, & Besser, 2014). For example, Noser et al. (2014) found that individuals with high levels of psychopathy reported relatively low levels of enjoyment during their vacations when they perceived the vacation to be stressful. In contrast, individuals with low levels of psychopathy reported relatively high levels of enjoyment during their vacations regardless of their level of stress. These results suggest that personality features may play an important role in how individuals respond to leisure activities.

Narcissism is an important personality feature that has received considerable attention in the context of reactions to negative situations

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(e.g., stressful situations, failure, social rejection; Bachar, Hadar, & Shalev, 2005; Rhodewalt & Morf, 1998), but it has received relatively little attention in the context of positive situations, such as leisure activities and vacations. Narcissistic personality features have been linked to cognitive-affective patterns and the structure of the intrapsychic self (Blanck & Blanck, 1979; Kernberg, 1985; Kohut & Wolf, 1978). Morf and Rhodewalt (2001) defined narcissism as a personality process that is based on a grandiose yet vulnerable self-concept. Thus, narcissistic individuals are driven by an intense need for admiration and recognition, which is combined with difficulty in regulating these needs. Narcissism may present as grandiosity that is maladaptive and involves an overriding orientation toward self-enhancement (Morf, Torchetti, & Schürch, 2011). Narcissism may also manifest in expressions of vulnerability characterized by social withdrawal and emotional dysregulation, which often follow negative experiences such as a painful disappointment of entitled expectations or a self-enhancement failure (Pincus & Roche, 2011).

All individuals have normal narcissistic needs and motives (Kohut, 1977), but individuals with pathological manifestations of narcissism are particularly troubled when they are confronted with disappointment or events that threaten their positive self-views. Moreover, the pathological forms of narcissism have been found to be associated with negative emotions following negative events (e.g., Besser & Zeigler-Hill, 2010). For example, individuals with narcissistic personality features are often highly reactive to relatively mundane negative events (e.g., achievement failures) that have the capacity to undermine or threaten their positive views of themselves (e.g., Zeigler-Hill & Besser, 2013). This heightened reactivity of individuals with narcissistic personality features is due to the fact that their positive self-views are easily threatened by negative events (see Pincus & Roche, 2011, for an extended discussion).

The present study attempted to expand our understanding of the connection between personality traits and leisure activities by examining the links between narcissistic personality features and expectations for a vacation (pre-vacation), as well as how the vacation was actually experienced (post-vacation). Our first prediction was that individuals with high levels of grandiose narcissism would report more positive expectations for an upcoming vacation. The rationale for this prediction was that individuals with high levels of grandiose narcissism are often optimistic about future experiences (e.g., Farwell & Wohlwend-Lloyd, 1998; Hickman, Watson, & Morris, 1996). This optimism is often attributed to these individuals' positive illusions regarding their superiority and ability to exert a tremendous amount of control over the events in their lives (Watson, Sawrie, & Biderman, 1991).

Despite their optimism, individuals with high levels of grandiose narcissism do not tend to experience more positive events than other individuals. For example, narcissism has been found to be strongly associated with predictions of future grades, but not with the actual grades received (Farwell & Wohlwend-Lloyd, 1998). It has been argued that it is their grandiose yet fragile self-concept that leads narcissistic individuals to develop unrealistic expectations for themselves and their experiences, in an effort to promote an image of themselves as perfect as they pursue admiration from others (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). The discrepancy that individuals with high levels of grandiose narcissism may experience between their highly optimistic expectations and their actual experiences may lead them to feel at least somewhat dissatisfied (e.g., Sherry, Gralnick, Hewitt, Sherry, & Flett, 2014). We predicted that this sort of dissatisfaction would emerge in the present study such that individuals with high levels of grandiose narcissism would report greater discrepancies between their expectations and experiences than other individuals.

In summary, we expected that individuals with high levels of grandiose narcissism would have relatively high expectations for their vacations. As a result of these unrealistic or perfectionistic standards, we expected these individuals to be relatively disappointed by their actual vacation experiences (i.e., we expected to see a relatively large

discrepancy between their pre-vacation expectations and their actual vacation experiences). We did not have any clear predictions regarding vulnerable narcissism, but included it in our analyses for exploratory purposes.

1. Method

1.1. Participants and procedure

Participants were a community sample of 219 adults (107 men and 112 women) who spent a three-night vacation (Sunday through Wednesday or Wednesday through Saturday) with their spouses and at least one of their children at hotels in a resort city in southern Israel (Eilat). The average age of the participants was 33.91 years ($SD = 8.47$) and their average number of years of formal education was 15.27 ($SD = 2.42$). Participants were from urban areas across Israel and reported above-average socioeconomic status. Research assistants interviewed participants upon their arrival at their hotel prior to their checking in (Time 1) and again just before they checked out (Time 2). All interviews were held in private rooms. Participants arrived at the hotels in organized groups, which allowed the research assistants to approach each guest and 87% of those approached agreed to participate. Only one member of each family was allowed to participate (e.g., if a wife agreed to participate, then her husband was not invited). All of the participants who agreed to participate at Time 1 were reached and interviewed at Time 2. According to the records of the hotels and participant interviews, none of the participants experienced any major inconveniences (e.g., prolonged power outage) or unexpected negative events (e.g., illness or injury) during their vacations. All of the questionnaires used in the present study were administered in Hebrew after being translated from the original English versions using the back-translation method. The order of the presentation of questionnaires was randomized between participants and across the two sessions.

1.2. Measures

1.2.1. Pathological narcissism

The Pathological Narcissism Inventory (PNI; Pincus, 2013; Pincus et al., 2009) was used to assess the pathological forms of narcissism. The PNI is a 52-item measure for which responses are made on scales ranging from 0 (*not at all like me*) to 5 (*very much like me*). This instrument captures a range of phenomena along seven dimensions that are associated with pathological narcissism, such as tendency to exploit others (e.g., "I can make anyone believe anything I want them to"), tendency to experience grandiose fantasies (e.g., "I often fantasize about performing heroic deeds"), and tendency to become dysregulated in response to narcissistic injury (e.g., "I typically get very angry when I'm unable to get what I want from others"). As outlined in recent studies (Tritt, Ryder, Ring, & Pincus, 2010; Wright, Lukowitsky, Pincus, & Conroy, 2010), these seven dimensions load onto two higher-order factors referred as Narcissistic Grandiosity (i.e., Exploitative Tendencies, Self-Sacrificing Self-Enhancement, and Grandiose Fantasy; $\alpha = .94$) and Narcissistic Vulnerability (i.e., Contingent Self-Esteem, Hiding of the Self, Devaluing, and Entitlement Rage; $\alpha = .96$). A large body of experimental (e.g., Fetterman & Robinson, 2010), clinical (e.g., Ellison, Levy, Cain, Ansell, & Pincus, 2013), longitudinal (e.g., Roche, Pincus, Conroy, Hyde, & Ram, 2013), and correlational (e.g., Thomas, Wright, Lukowitsky, Donnellan, & Hopwood, 2012) research supports the validity of the PNI.

1.2.2. Expectations for vacation (Time 1) and experiences of the vacation (Time 2)

At Time 1, participants rated their level of agreement with three statements concerning vacations (e.g., Besser & Priel, 2006), to capture expectations about an upcoming vacation: "I expect to enjoy this vacation;" "I think this vacation will be fun;" and "I will be satisfied with this

vacation.” These items were based on those used in previous studies (e.g., Klaaren et al., 1994; Mitchell et al., 1997; Wirtz, Kruger, Scollon, & Diener, 2003) and participants provided responses using a scale that ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 10 (*strongly agree*). At Time 2, participants completed a set of identical items with the verb tense changed, to evaluate their overall vacation experience (e.g., “I enjoyed this vacation”). The scores for these items were transformed using an inverse function in order to reduce their skew. These transformed scores were standardized and averaged to create composite scores. We obtained internal consistency coefficients of 0.86 and 0.91 for the Time 1 Expectations and the Time 2 Experiences, respectively.

2. Results

The means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations for the measures are presented in Table 1. Men reported higher levels of grandiose narcissism than women ($M_{Men} = 3.39$, $SD_{Men} = 0.83$; $M_{Women} = 3.14$, $SD_{Women} = 0.87$; $t = 2.14$, $p = .03$), but the level of vulnerable narcissism did not differ between the men and women ($M_{Men} = 2.67$, $SD_{Men} = 0.82$; $M_{Women} = 2.66$, $SD_{Women} = 0.89$; $t = 0.13$, $p = .89$). No sex differences emerged for expectations for the vacation ($M_{Men} = 0.01$, $SD_{Men} = 0.88$; $M_{Women} = -0.01$, $SD_{Women} = 0.91$; $t = 0.22$, $p = .83$) or experiences of the vacation ($M_{Men} = -0.11$, $SD_{Men} = 0.95$; $M_{Women} = 0.11$, $SD_{Women} = 0.92$; $t = 1.77$, $p = .08$).

2.1. Expectations for the vacation

A moderated multiple regression analysis was used to examine the associations that PNI grandiosity, PNI vulnerability, and gender had with expectations for vacation. For this analysis, the continuous predictor variables were centered for the purpose of testing interactions (Aiken & West, 1991). The main effects of PNI grandiosity, PNI vulnerability, and gender were entered on Step 1 and the two-way interactions of PNI grandiosity \times gender and PNI vulnerability \times gender were entered on Step 2. The results of this analysis are displayed in Table 2. The main effect of PNI grandiosity emerged from this analysis ($\beta = .22$, $t = 2.41$, $p = .02$) such that individuals with higher levels of pathological grandiosity had higher expectations for their vacations. No other main effects or interactions emerged from this analysis.

2.2. Experiences of the vacation

A similar moderated multiple regression analysis was used to examine the associations that PNI grandiosity, PNI vulnerability, and gender had with the participants' actual vacation experiences (Time 2). In this analysis, we controlled for vacation expectations (Time 1) such that participants' experiences of the vacation (Time 2) reflect the discrepancy between their experiences and their expectations. The main effects of PNI grandiosity, PNI vulnerability, gender, and expectations for the vacation were entered on Step 1 and the two-way interactions of PNI grandiosity \times gender and PNI vulnerability \times gender were entered on Step 2. The results of this analysis are displayed in Table 3. Main effects emerged for gender ($\beta = -.12$, $t = -2.10$, $p = .04$) and vacation expectations ($\beta = .57$, $t = 9.87$, $p < .001$) such that women and those individuals who had more positive expectations for their vacations

Table 1
Correlations and descriptive statistics.

	1	2	3	4
1. PNI grandiosity	–			
2. PNI vulnerability	.66***	–		
3. Expectations for vacation (Time 1)	.23***	.17*	–	
4. Experiences of the vacation (Time 2)	-.01	-.05	.54***	–
<i>M</i>	3.26	2.66	0.00	0.00
<i>SD</i>	0.86	0.86	0.89	0.89

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

Table 2
Regressions of expectations for vacation on pathological narcissism and gender.

	Expectations for vacation		
	R^2	ΔR^2	β
<i>Step 1</i>	.05**	.05**	
PNI grandiosity			.22*
PNI vulnerability			.02
Gender			-.02
<i>Step 2</i>	.08**	.03	
PNI grandiosity \times Gender			.14
PNI vulnerability \times Gender			.11

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

reported more positive experiences. The main effect of gender was qualified by its interaction with PNI Vulnerability, which was observed on Step 2 ($\beta = -.21$, $t = -2.10$, $p = .04$). The predicted values for this interaction are presented in Fig. 1. Simple-slopes tests (Aiken & West, 1991) were conducted to probe this interaction. These simple-slopes tests found that the slope of the line representing the association between PNI vulnerability and experiences of the vacation for men was significant ($\beta = -.27$, $t = -2.50$, $p = .01$), but the slope of the line representing the association between PNI vulnerability and experiences of the vacation for women was not significant ($\beta = .03$, $t = 0.29$, $p = .77$). Taken together, these results indicate that men with high levels of the vulnerable form of pathological narcissism reported relatively less satisfaction with their vacations than other individuals.

3. Discussion

The goal of the present study was to examine the associations that pathological narcissism had with expectations for an upcoming vacation, as well as actual vacation experiences. As expected, the present study found that the grandiose form of pathological narcissism was associated with higher expectations before the start of a vacation. This finding is consistent with the results of previous studies showing that grandiose narcissism is positively associated with optimism concerning future experiences (e.g., Farwell & Wohlwend-Lloyd, 1998; Hickman et al., 1996). We believe that the association between the grandiose form of pathological narcissism and expectations for an upcoming vacation may be due to the positive illusions of individuals with high levels of pathological grandiosity concerning their ability to control events in their lives.

Moreover, while previous studies have demonstrated the negative relationship between narcissism and the ability to cope with stressful situations (Bacher et al., 2005; Rhodewalt & Morf, 1998), the present study expands this concept, illustrating the potential negative relationship between narcissism and responses to positive situations. It is possible that individuals with high levels of pathological grandiosity may tend to expect a vacation to be more pleasurable than it is likely to be. These expectations could be held even when, prior to the vacation, the individuals are objectively informed about what to expect regarding

Table 3
Regressions of experiences of the vacation on pathological narcissism, gender, and expectations for vacation.

	Experiences of the vacation		
	R^2	ΔR^2	β
<i>Step 1</i>	.33***	.33***	
PNI grandiosity			-.05
PNI vulnerability			-.11
Gender			-.12*
Expectations for vacation			.57***
<i>Step 2</i>	.35***	.02*	
PNI grandiosity \times Gender			.00
PNI vulnerability \times Gender			-.21*

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

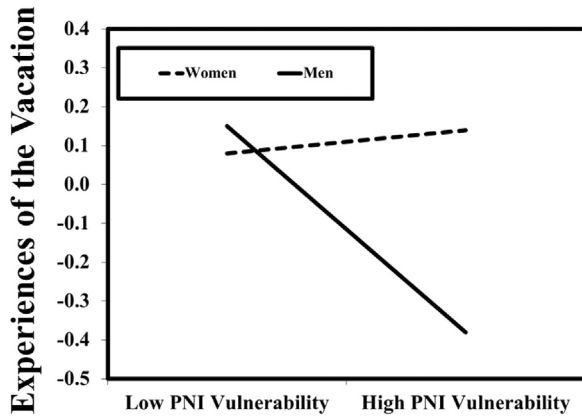


Fig. 1. Predicted values for experiences of the vacation illustrating the interaction of PNI vulnerability (at values one standard deviation above and below its mean) and gender.

their vacation. In this context, when events do not turn out as well as expected, individuals with high levels of pathological grandiosity may have significant difficulties and intensified negative emotions. Their unrealistic expectations combined with their disappointment might also be reflected in their memory of the vacation as unsatisfying, thereby limiting the potential positive effects of the vacation.

Interestingly, in our examination of the relationship between vulnerable narcissism and positive experiences of the vacation, we found that men with high levels of the vulnerable form of pathological narcissism reported less positive vacation experiences, relative to their expectations. This pattern may be explained, at least in part, by the sensitivity to ego threat and subsequent dysregulation of self-perception, emotions, and behaviors that characterizes individuals with the vulnerable form of pathological narcissism (Pincus, Cain, Wright, in press).

The symptomatology of narcissistic personality features resembles the masculine sex-role stereotype in many cultures, including physical expressions of anger, a strong need for power, and an authoritative leadership style (Akhtar & Thompson, 1982; Carroll, 1987; Haaken, 1983). These characteristics may lead men to feel more responsible for a wide array of events and to be more reactive when their experiences fail to meet their expectations or standards. This is consistent with some clinical observations regarding narcissistic individuals having difficulty garnering positive reinforcement from social, occupational, and recreational activities due to their tendency to set unrealistic or perfectionistic standards and expectations that are ultimately disappointed (Pincus et al., in press). It seems quite possible that a failure to meet these expectations might lead to considerable disappointment for men with high levels of narcissistic vulnerability. Taken together, the results of the present study provide further evidence of the importance of directing attention toward narcissistic personality features—in combination with gender—when considering the connection between expectations for an upcoming event and affective experiences of the actual event.

The present study had a number of strengths (e.g., community sample, real-life situations with a pre–post design, high ecological validity that stemmed from measuring real-life situations in vivo), but it is important to acknowledge its potential limitations. This study relied exclusively on self-report measures. As a result, it is possible that the findings of the study may have been influenced by distorted responses (e.g., socially desirable responding). For example, some individuals may have been reluctant to report negative experiences that they had during their vacations. Further studies should involve more direct observation of behaviors during vacations and involvement in leisure activities, along with additional measures of mood, stress, and well-being (e.g., psycho-biological indicators). In addition, the sample consisted of married individuals from urban areas in Israel, which may limit the generalizability of these results. The extent to which the

present results can be replicated in a more diverse sample (e.g., individuals with different racial/ethnic backgrounds, unmarried individuals, individuals who are not wealthy enough to vacation at this type of resort) is an important question for future research. Finally, the study focused on a relatively short period of vacation time. Any generalizing of the study findings to longer vacations or other sorts of leisure activities should be done with caution. Despite these limitations, the present study extends our understanding of the role that pathological narcissism may play in the link between the expectations for an upcoming event and experiences of that event. Although narcissism is often examined in the context of stressful and negative situations, it is our hope that these findings will encourage other researchers to consider the roles that narcissism may play in the anticipation of pleasurable events, as well as how those events are actually experienced.

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