The Emotional Life of Vulnerable Narcissists

THESIS

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to better illuminate a vulnerable narcissist’s daily emotional life. In two studies, participants completed self-report questionnaires before writing an essay on their adjustment to college. In Study 2, a manipulation of self-relevancy was added to this writing task. After rating their own performance on the writing task, participants received either negative or satisfactory feedback. They then rated their essay again and reported their current emotions. Lastly, in Study 1 participants completed extra process measures while in Study 2 they completed an aggression measure. Across both studies, it was found that feedback which disconfirmed vulnerable narcissists’ self-reported performance ratings led to greater emotionality. Study 2 showed this was especially true when the performance was personally relevant. Specifically, shame was higher when personally relevant feedback was mismatched with self-ratings of performance. Anger and/or aggression were also higher when a mismatch occurred but were uninfluenced by self-relevancy. Furthermore, vulnerable narcissists’ attempts to disqualify the importance of interpersonal feedback led to greater shame in the end. The discussion addresses the conceptual and practical implications of these findings.
Dedicated to my parents, Tom and Janis Freis
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Chapter 1: Introduction

In the 1960s, the United States was swept away with the self-esteem movement, a cause that stressed the importance of instilling a sense of positive self-regard and self-worth in children from a young age. The self-esteem movement bolstered children’s self-images by promoting praise and encouragement without correction. These practices were implemented to promote the assumed positive benefits of self-esteem such as student motivation, growth, and well-being. Unfortunately, this social vaccine, aimed to increase and protect the egos of the country’s youth, rebounded and the dangers of inflated self-esteem became of great interest. Researchers (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003; Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996; Crocker, 2002) not only found evidence that failed to support the positive role of self-esteem in well-being but, in addition, accumulated ample evidence of the costs in pursuing high self-esteem (e.g. reactive aggression and emotional vulnerability).

The most extensive work addressing the detriments of high self-esteem arises in research on narcissism, a pathological disorder summarized by an inflated sense of self, lack of empathy, uniqueness, arrogance, envy towards others, grandiose fantasy, and need for admiring attention (for a full list of characteristics see Ronningstam & Maltsberger, 1998). Early evidence suggests that narcissistic individuals not only have high self-esteem, but have inflated self-esteem that is non-contingent on actual
performance (Baumeister et al., 2003; Soyer, Rovenpor, & Kopelman, 1999). However, more recent research across fields of psychology has been suggesting that not all narcissists have inflated self-esteem. Instead, contemporary research proposes that two subtypes of narcissism exist, namely grandiose and vulnerable narcissism. The purpose of this work is to elucidate the experiences and psychology of vulnerable narcissists, the lesser known of the two narcissistic subtypes.

The history of narcissism research is rich, starting with the theorizing of psychodynamic researchers such as Freud, Kohut, and Kernberg (Sacksteder, 1990). While they held nuanced perspectives on narcissism, all viewed pathological narcissism as an outcome in response to inconsistent early childhood interactions. Thus, the beginning of narcissism research focused on narcissism as a single construct. This perspective still holds today as seen in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (5th ed., American Psychiatric Association, 2013). While it is rare for a person to meet the criteria for Narcissistic Personality Disorder, that does not mean narcissism is itself uncommon. Instead, social psychologists view narcissism as a trait which exists on a continuum (Foster & Campbell, 2007; Miller & Campbell, 2008; Miller & Campbell, 2010; Widiger, 2010). Everyone has some level of narcissism along the continuum, but only a person with narcissistic traits that reach a certain problematic threshold can be diagnosed with the personality disorder. As a clinical concept, the bulk of previous research has focused on narcissism as a single, continuous construct, illustrated by the traits set out by the DSM-5; not until the past two decades has a growing area of research suggested that this conceptualization of narcissism is
incomplete (Hickman, Watson, & Morris, 1996; Rathvon & Holmstrom, 1996; Wink, 1991). Instead, narcissism can be divided into two separate subtypes, grandiose and vulnerable, based on fundamentally different characteristics (e.g. Dickinson & Pincus, 2003; Miller & Campbell, 2008).

Grandiose Narcissism

To best understand vulnerable narcissism, the concept of interest to this line of research, it is essential to first outline grandiose narcissism to distinguish the differing trait constructs. Grandiose narcissism most closely reflects the characteristics associated with the conceptualization of narcissism as a single construct and is the form most well-known and portrayed in popular media. These narcissists are marked by explicit self-absorption and arrogance, high self-esteem, exploitativeness, entitlement, and interpersonal hostility (Besser & Priel, 2010; Emmons, 1987; Miller, Hoffman, Gaughan, Gentile, Maples, & Campbell, 2011; Miller, Price, Gentile, Lynam, & Campbell 2012; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2011).

There are many often-overlooked positive attributes related to grandiose narcissism, such as being outgoing or charming, confident, and performing well under pressure (e.g. Back, Schmukle, & Egloff, 2010; Baumeister et al., 2003; Wallace & Baumeister, 2002; Watts, Lilienfeld, Smith, Miller, Campbell, et al., 2013). In fact, research shows that when narcissists are involved in a group project, peers’ perceptions of the narcissist are initially positive (Paulhus, 1998). Thus, some grandiose narcissistic traits can be quite adaptive in the short term. However, by the end of the group interaction, these same peer perceptions become notably more negative, leading
participants to rate the narcissist as cold, arrogant, inclined to brag, prone to overestimating the self, and hostile. It is these negative qualities, including narcissists’ impulsive, romantically fickle, stubborn, and aggressive nature, that attract much empirical attention to grandiose narcissism (e.g. Brunell & Campbell, 2011; Foster & Trimm, 2008; Reidy, Zeichner, Foster, & Martinez, 2008). While it is true that bystanders may be charmed by grandiose narcissists’ charisma and confidence that arises from their high self-esteem and secure sense of agency, grandiose narcissists are eventually likely to become aggressive and domineering (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; 2002; Reidy et al., 2008). This behavioral tendency encapsulates why many see grandiose narcissism as maladaptive. One of the grandiose narcissists’ flaws arises from the harm they do to others they interact with (Campbell, Bush, Brunell, & Shelton, 2005). When a grandiose narcissist becomes defensive and aggressive, he may succeed in maintaining high self-regard, but it is to the detriments of others.

The introduction of two subtypes of narcissism addresses a key problem with the theoretical construct of narcissism as a cohesive whole. The DSM-5 criteria and theories laid out by various researchers suggest that narcissists have extremely high self-esteem and genuinely believe that they are superior to all others while simultaneously experiencing feelings of inferiority (Besser & Priel, 2010; Dickinson & Pincus, 2003; & Kealy & Rasmussen, 2012). Influenced by the original theorists of narcissism, many researchers and the public have found this conceptualization of narcissism, called the mask hypothesis, intuitively appealing. Specifically, the mask hypothesis asserts that while narcissists explicitly report an inflated sense of self, deep down they are filled
with self-doubts (Jordan, Spencer, Zanna, Hoshino-Browne, & Correll, 2003). Inspired by this perspective, many have used words or phrases such as envious, ashamed, and “in denial” to describe narcissists. However, a recent meta-analysis questioned the reliability of the mask hypothesis and found no evidence for this theory (Bosson, Lakey, Campbell, Zeigler-Hill, Jordan, & Kernis, 2008). Therefore, instead of attempting to expand the single construct of narcissism to fit nuanced data, more and more researchers are now embracing the idea of delineating two subtypes of narcissism.

**Vulnerable Narcissism**

The second subtype of narcissism has gone through many name changes over the years, such as covert, closet, shy, or vulnerable narcissism. Like grandiose narcissists, vulnerable narcissists are self-absorbed, exploitative, aggressive, and harbor entitled and grandiose thoughts (Miller et al., 2011; Krizan & Johar, 2012; Zeigler-Hill, Green, Arnau, Sisemore, & Myers, 2011). However, vulnerable narcissists also have uncertainty about their internal experiences, such as attitudes, beliefs, and self-evaluations that lead them to rely heavily on feedback from others (Kealy & Rasmussen, 2012). This is the paradox of vulnerable narcissism: Their entitlement leads them to think deep down that “I deserve more!” but they doubt this sentiment.¹ Their grandiose desires are not matched by a conviction of personal efficacy to seek the affirmation they believe is due (Cooper, 1998). This avoidance motivation leads vulnerable narcissists to present modestly and evade many situations where their self-beliefs may be tested or confronted (Fossati, Borroni, Grazioli, Dornetti, Marcassoli, Maffei, & Cheek, 2009;   

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¹ This is not to suggest that vulnerable narcissists hold high implicit self-esteem. This sense of deservingness is proposed to arise from deep-seated feelings of entitlement, not high implicit self-esteem.
Foster & Trimm, 2008). Thus, due to skill deficits in garnering the outcomes they believe they deserve, and the disconnect between internal feelings of entitlement and external modesty and shyness, it can be difficult to spot a vulnerable narcissist (Cooper, 1998; Kernberg, 1986; Miller et al., 2011; Wink, 1991). Nonetheless, while it may be challenging for an observer to identify a vulnerable narcissist and the conflicts he is experiencing, the psychological conflict vulnerable narcissists feel is still very real.

The characteristics of a vulnerable narcissist create almost the perfect storm to produce detriments to well-being (Cooper, 1998; Krizan & Johar, 2012; Rose, 2002; Wink, 1991). Their hypersensitive nature appears common to a number of personality disorders such as avoidant personality disorder, borderline personality disorder, and passive-aggressive personality disorder (Fossati et al., 2009). Furthermore, vulnerable narcissists’ egocentric nature predicts dysfunction including low cooperativeness and low interest or inhibition in social relationships, while their emotion regulation style manifests in unnecessary worry and pessimism (Cooper, 1998; Fossati et al., 2009; Foster & Trimm, 2008; Krizan & Johar, 2012). Generally speaking, vulnerable narcissism positively correlates with mental health’s two common colds: depression and anxiety (Maltsberger, 1997; Rathvon & Holmstrom, 1996). Depression concerns worries and rumination about how one fell short of their own or others’ expectations in the past, whereas anxiety reflects worrying about possible future shortcomings and mistakes. Both depression and anxiety can thus lead to avoidance and prevention-focused behaviors related to vulnerable narcissism (Foster & Trimm, 2008). In sum, vulnerable
narcissism is associated with psychological distress, lowered sociability, and lowered self-acceptance due to its egocentric and hypersensitive nature.

The dysfunctional nature of vulnerable narcissism brings to light another distinction between the narcissistic subtypes. Where grandiose narcissists are maladaptive in how they treat others, vulnerable narcissists are maladaptive due to the harm they inflict on themselves. Vulnerable narcissists live in turmoil, believing they deserve more but doubting this sentiment. For these reasons, vulnerable narcissists seem incapable of regulating their own self-esteem, relying instead on feedback from others to evaluate their self-worth but never being satisfied with such feedback (Cooper, 1998; Kealy & Rasmussen, 2012; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2011; Zeigler-Hill, Clark, & Pickard, 2008). Vulnerable narcissists’ expectations set them up for disappointment and a damaging emotional life.

From these distinctions between the two subtypes of narcissism, it may seem a bit *weird* that terminology has developed to refer to vulnerable narcissists as in fact still “narcissistic.” The connotation around the word narcissist leads people to picture someone who feels superior and is confident in that judgment, but to be vulnerable is to have chronic self-doubt (Wink, 1991). Miller and colleagues (2012) best describe the distinction between the two subtypes of narcissism as follows: grandiose narcissists are people who grant themselves both status and self-love; vulnerable narcissists, on the other hand, grant themselves status but not love. That is to say, grandiose narcissists are both self-absorbed and confident in their superior self-views whereas vulnerable narcissists believe to be special but have doubts about these self-views. In antithesis to
grandiose narcissists, who are the hallmark of inflated self-regard, vulnerable narcissists report explicit, low self-esteem (Rose, 2002). Hence, self-esteem is not the theme connecting these two types of narcissism. Instead, five theoretical constructs are proposed to be the connecting links and make both subtypes, in fact, narcissistic. These five traits include a sense of entitlement, self-absorption, exploitativeness, interpersonal aggression, and grandiose fantasy (Miller et al., 2011; Krizan & Johar, 2012; Zeigler-Hill et al., 2011). While some empirical evidence supports grandiose and vulnerable narcissists’ endorsement of items related to these five characteristics (Miller et al., 2011; Krizan & Johar, 2012; Zeigler-Hill et al., 2011), we believe the nature or phenomenological experience of these traits to be fundamentally different, thereby contributing to the stark contrasts in daily life experiences for grandiose and vulnerable narcissists.

Self-Conscious Emotions

Tracy and Robins (2004) highlight how narcissists’ chronic self-focused attention, or their self-absorption, could increase susceptibility to self-conscious emotions. While grandiose narcissists have many adaptive qualities to protect themselves from negative emotions or negative self-attributions (Emmons, 1987; Tracy & Robin, 2004; Watson, Little, Sawrie, & Biderman, 1992), vulnerable narcissists are not as resilient. Having low levels of resiliency makes individuals prone to a) blame external factors for negative outcomes and respond with aggressive behaviors, or b) blame internal factors and become depressed or anxious (Huey & Weisz, 1997). Vulnerable narcissists’ are especially prone to these self-blaming behaviors after
experiencing a threat due to their low self-worth. If their entitled and grandiose beliefs are not met by others, internal attributions can be made leading to self-conscious emotions such as shame or anger and aggression.

Past scholars have speculated that vulnerable narcissists’ self-conscious emotions result from their sense of entitlement or deservingness, devoid of more adaptive traits such as leadership, authority, and self-admiration (Ben-Ze’ev, 1996; Emmons, 1987; Kohut, 1972; Krizan & Johar, 2012). In other words, vulnerable narcissists feel entitled, but tend to shift between insistent expression of entitled beliefs and renunciation of ever having had those entitled beliefs. This fluctuation often occurs as a result of others’ failure to meet the narcissist’s expectations. Once vulnerable narcissists realize that their expectations will not be met, they often feel ashamed over having needed anything from the other person at all, which leads to a state of denial over having those needs (Besser & Priel, 2010). Such shame and denial is problematic for vulnerable narcissists who view being interpersonally reliant as a sign of weakness and inadequacy (Kealy & Rasmussen, 2012). Recognition of this “weakness” can lead to experiences of shame, anger, and a sense of fragility, setting off a shame-rage cycle (Lewis, 1987). Vulnerable narcissists seem to lack an arsenal of adaptive tools to aid in coping with setbacks in daily life, making them less equipped to regulate their own reactions and emotions when their entitled beliefs are not met.

Self-conscious emotions include embarrassment, guilt, humiliation, or pride (Tangney, 1995; Tracy, Robins, & Tangney, 2007). However, due to the conceptual links between vulnerable narcissism and the shame-rage cycle, the emotions most
pertinent to this work include shame and anger. These emotions are found to engender a shame-rage cycle the most (Tangney, Wagner, Fletcher, Gramzow, 1992; Tracy et al., 2007) and have been proposed in past theory to be central to vulnerable narcissists’ emotional experience (Kealy & Rasmussen, 2012).

Anger is a negative emotion both in terms of subjective experience and social evaluation. Anger is an arousing motive often involving the assignment of blame, and is responsible for many forms of aggression (Averill, 1983; Papps & O’Carroll, 1998). Moreover, anger is central to the emotional life of both grandiose and vulnerable narcissists because anger, aggression, and antagonism towards others allow the expression of this emotion in a way that protects a sense of self (Raskin, Novacek, & Hogan, 1991; Dickerson & Pincus, 2003; Krizan & Johar, 2012; Miller et al., 2011). However, the experience of anger may function and arise uniquely in vulnerable narcissists. For example, self-esteem has been an important dimension used to differentiate the tendencies to experience and express anger. Because low-self-esteem individuals, such as vulnerable narcissists, view themselves and those around them negatively, threats to a low self-regard are likely to be particularly aversive (Papps & O’Carroll, 1998).

The second emotion, shame, is also proposed to play a central role in the emotional life of narcissists (Lewis, 1971, 1987; Morrison, 1989). Shame results from a negative evaluation of the stable, global self following a perceived failure; in other words, shame is elicited when an individual attributes the cause of a negative event to internal factors (e.g., Bosson & Prewitt-Freilino, 2007; Lewis, 1971; Tracy & Robins,
2004). While the positive associations between narcissism and shame are premised on the understanding of narcissism as a single construct as in the clinical literature (Ritter, Vater, Rusch, Schroder-Abe, Schutz, et al., 2013), other research has found that shame relates differentially to narcissists’ reports of emotion dependent on different characteristics within a narcissist’s personality (Gramzow & Tangney, 1992). Empirical evidence on shame-proneness is thus clouded when defining narcissism as a single-construct.

Researchers have also investigated shame in the better-known subtype of grandiose narcissism and have applied similar hypotheses from the understanding of narcissism as a single-construct. For example, because high grandiose narcissism was found to be necessary for insult to lead to aggression (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998), researchers have reasoned that grandiose narcissists must be prone to feel shame in order for insult to instigate such aggressive behavior. However, research supporting this reasoning included a shameful “context” and not self-reports of shame from grandiose narcissists, nor inclusion of research on their counter-part, vulnerable narcissists (Thomaes, Bushman, Stegge, & Olthof, 2008; Thomaes, Stegge, Olthof, Bushman, & Nezlek, 2011). In fact, other research using measures more indicative of grandiose narcissism find that they do not internalize emotions or report feeling shame as initially proposed (Gramzow & Tangney, 1992; Watson, Hickman, & Morris, 1995); instead, shame-proneness is negatively correlated with grandiose narcissism.

Therefore, just as self-esteem produces conflicting results when narcissism is studied as a single construct, so too does shame. For example, some studies have
indicated that narcissism as a single construct is positively correlated with well-being and self-esteem, while others have supported the opposite conclusion (Hickman et al., 1996; Rathvon & Holmstrom, 1996; Wink, 1991). We know by dividing the construct of narcissism into subtypes these differences in self-esteem can be accounted for because vulnerable narcissists explicitly report low self-esteem while grandiose narcissists report high self-esteem. Vulnerable narcissists are similarly unique in the context of shame as they are fully aware and report the explicit experience of this self-conscious emotion (Atlas & Them, 2008, Malkin et al., 2011), whereas grandiose narcissists do not. Hence, while anger is an emotion to give insight into both narcissists’ daily life, shame is of particular interest due to the unique role it plays in vulnerable narcissism.

Research Purpose

Taken as a whole, the purpose of this investigation is to examine the experience of emotional turmoil and better illuminate a vulnerable narcissist’s daily life. Vulnerable narcissists desire more out of life, but lack the necessary confidence to accomplish what they feel they deserve. It is this combination of 1) entitled self-views, what makes them narcissistic from the start, and 2) a hypersensitivity to the world that is what leads them to question themselves and engenders shame and anger. Given the detrimental consequences of this combination for social relationships and well-being, it is important to understand when and why shame and anger play such pivotal roles in the life of a vulnerable narcissist and when vulnerable narcissists feel the most emotional turmoil. We are faced with external information about ourselves all the time, but how does that really impact a vulnerable narcissist?
The present research aims to examine how vulnerable narcissists respond to self-relevant, evaluative feedback. Specifically, across two studies participants received evaluative feedback on an essay they wrote, and then were given the opportunity to express their feelings of shame and anger. The purpose of these studies is to determine when vulnerable narcissists react to such evaluative feedback with shame, and when they react with anger. Moreover, the present research explores possible underlying mechanisms for these emotional reactions by assessing participants’ own ratings of their essays as an instantiation of their feelings of entitlement regarding feedback about their performance.

**Literature Review**

Past research using a feedback paradigm provides insight into the self-reports we may expect from vulnerable narcissists. First, in a study by Atlas and Them (2008), participants completed various questionnaires including a measure of vulnerable narcissism and their current emotions. They then gave a speech on the “adjustment to college life.” Participants believed they would be observed, videotaped, and evaluated while giving the speech. Participants rated their performance and then were given feedback on their performance from two judges (either positive, mixed, or negative). The positive feedback participants received noted that both of the two judges rated the speech positively. The mixed feedback informed participants that one judge had rated the speech positively and one judge had rated it negatively. The negative feedback stated both judges rated the speech negatively. Finally, participants rated their performance
again as well as how much they would like to meet the judges, see the videotape, how much they will continue to think about the performance, and their current emotions.

A measure of “internalized negative mood” was taken from participants’ ratings of their current emotions, and included the items: angry at self, guilty, self-critical, and worthless. Participants who scored high on vulnerable narcissism reported significantly more internalized negative mood when given positive feedback. When receiving mixed or negative feedback, vulnerable narcissists still showed tendency to report greater internalized negative mood, relative to individuals low on vulnerable narcissism, but the trend was not significant.

Finally, relative to individuals low in vulnerable narcissism, vulnerable narcissists rated their performance more negatively both prior to and after receiving feedback. This relationship between vulnerable narcissism and performance self-ratings did not take into account the specific type of feedback being given. Therefore, we do not know if these self-ratings on performance would differ based on feedback type.

With correlational data from Atlas and Them (2008), we were uncertain of the strength and replicability of their results. For instance, rating their performance lower than the average population (or those low in vulnerable narcissism) is consistent with self-ratings of individuals who have low self-esteem, but is contradictory to the fact that vulnerable narcissists harbor entitled beliefs and think they are due more than they receive. Thus, considering vulnerable narcissists’ hypersensitivity and entitled nature, we predict that whether it be shame or anger, the most emotion would be occurring for those high in vulnerable narcissism who specifically received negative feedback. It is
under this condition that the greatest theoretical mismatch exists between what the vulnerable narcissist desires, or feels entitled to, and the external feedback they actually receive. This notion of increased emotion after negative feedback is derived from past work on the other subtype of narcissism, grandiose narcissism. When grandiose narcissists’ expectations are violated, specifically when they receive negative performance or personality feedback, they experience anger (Rhodewalt & Morf, 1998). They then employ coping strategies to undo the feedback ramifications such as devaluing the source of the negative feedback (Kernis & Sun, 1994). Consistent with the notion of expectancy violation, negative feedback was predicted to evoke the most turmoil or negative emotions in vulnerable narcissists, particularly when participants believe they deserved high performance marks.

However, one other study to date provides empirical support for Atlas and Them (2008) and against our hypothesis that negative feedback would evoke the most turmoil in vulnerable narcissists. Malkin et al. (2011) had participants complete various questionnaires at Time 1 including a measure of vulnerable narcissism as well as measures for shame, guilt, and anxiety. At Time 2, four weeks later, participants took a general knowledge quiz. Participants then received positive, neutral, or negative feedback. The positive feedback included a handwritten note that said, “You did much better than other people your age. Great Job!” The neutral feedback included no feedback or handwritten note. Lastly, the negative feedback was a handwritten note that stated, “You did worse than everyone else your age. We are very disappointed in you!” Participants then completed the emotion measures again and were asked to answer
manipulation check questions including, “How would you rate your performance on the task just completed?”

In Malkin and colleagues’ (2011) study, participants rated their performance on the general knowledge quiz in line with the feedback they received. For example, if they were told they did well, they rated their performance better than if they received no feedback at all. Therefore, all participants were influenced by the feedback, but the authors did not report whether, or how, vulnerable narcissists compared to the average population.

Participants’ levels of anxiety did not significantly differ during the experiment; however, levels of shame did vary. At Time 1, when only questionnaires were completed, those who scored high in vulnerable narcissism also scored high on a shame questionnaire. Once participants received feedback at Time 2, all participants in the study reported the highest level of shame after receiving positive feedback, following by negative feedback, and finally neutral feedback. However, individuals’ levels of vulnerable narcissism only impacted reported shame for positive feedback. Those who scored high in vulnerable narcissism reported the highest levels of shame after receiving positive feedback. Those who scored low in vulnerable narcissism still felt more shame than if they received negative or neutral feedback, but not as much shame as vulnerable narcissists. Therefore, in both Atlas and Them (2008) and Malkin and colleagues’ (2011) research, vulnerable narcissists reported the most internalized negative emotions after receiving positive feedback.
While these reports conclude that receiving positive feedback most strongly
relates to the internalization of negative emotions, especially in reference to vulnerable
narcissists, skepticism remains. In fact, Malkin and colleagues (2011) originally
hypothesized that negative feedback would be most influential in the emotional life of
vulnerable narcissists. It seems counterintuitive for individuals defined by a sense of
entitlement to feel greater self-conscious emotions after positive feedback. Under the
positive feedback condition is where the greatest match would exist between entitled
beliefs and outcome. Unfortunately, while both sets of studies are consistent in terms of
feedback type, they obtained different results when it came to vulnerable narcissists
rating their own performance. This performance rating is essential to capturing a
vulnerable narcissists’ contextual expectation, yet neither research team incorporated
this variable into their analyses. Therefore, the mechanism and more specific conditions
behind these findings are still open for exploration. Our studies incorporated
participants’ self-reported performance ratings into analyses to address the questions left

Additionally, the negative emotions experienced, including shame and anger, are
conflated in the Atlas and Them (2008) research, hindering our understanding of shame
and anger as unique emotional experiences. Malkin and colleagues (2011) provide a
clearer explication of the relationship between vulnerable narcissists and experiences of
shame. Yet, looking closer at the empirical evidence, it is notable that these authors use
a very strong feedback manipulation. Positive feedback does not consist of a simple,
“good job,” but an overly inflated announcement of great performance, with an
exclamation point, no less. Work by Brummelman, Thomaes, Orobio de Castro, Overbeek, and Bushman (2014), has shown that inflated praise can cause shame in low self-esteem children. It is possible that these shame-inducing effects of inflated positive feedback may similarly impact the emotional reactions of vulnerable narcissists. In other words, drawing broad conclusions about the effects of positive feedback may be premature.

The Present Studies

Study 1 is intended to conceptually replicate and extend the Atlas and Them (2008) research to set the stage for exploring when shame and anger may be uniquely evoked, specifically as a function of self-reported performance ratings. In addition, to address the potential confound of inflated positive feedback, we chose to use what Atlas and Them (2008) termed “mixed” feedback. We interpret this to be a more modest form of positive feedback, giving a participant the sense his or her work was, in essence, satisfactory. Thus, Study 2 continues the pursuit of elucidating the consistency of vulnerable narcissists’ reactions to external information to discover what contextual moderators may account for the varying emotional experiences of vulnerable narcissists. Study 2 provides further conditional effects that may influence when shame and anger arise and incorporates a behavioral measure of aggression to capture what the downstream consequences of these emotions may be.

In sum, two competing hypotheses exist. On one hand, due to vulnerable narcissists’ entitled beliefs, we expect negative feedback to produce the most emotional turmoil, evidenced by reported shame and anger, as a function of self-reported
performance ratings. In contrast, past literature would suggest that the satisfactory feedback condition may arouse the most negative emotions in vulnerable narcissists. We seek to elucidate the consistency of vulnerable narcissists’ reactions to external information and probe further to discover what driving mechanisms or contextual factors may account for the emotional experiences of vulnerable narcissists.
Chapter 2: Study 1

The existing research on vulnerable narcissists’ emotional life when faced with external information has either focused on providing inflated positive feedback to produce greater amounts of internalized emotions, or overlooked the importance of recognizing self-conscious emotions as having independent antecedents or consequences. Instead, research has aggregated self-reports on emotions, such as shame, feeling self-critical, and feeling worthless, thus preventing insight into the distinct nature of each individual emotion. Furthermore, vulnerable narcissists’ entitled perceptions of their own performance have been overlooked as a possible contributing factor to the experience of these negative emotions.

In Study 1, we used a between-subjects design inspired by Atlas and Them’s (2008) methods, manipulating the single variable of feedback type to begin investigating the validity of vulnerable narcissists’ emotional reaction to external information. We believe providing satisfactory feedback, in comparison to negative feedback, will give a clearer picture of vulnerable narcissist’ daily emotional life and best test the competing hypotheses. As a modification, self-reported performance ratings were incorporated to better illuminate the predictive conditions under which the emotions of shame and anger may arise.
Method

Participants

Eighty-five participants completed the study online in exchange for course credit in an undergraduate psychology course at Ohio State University. The data of two participants were excluded because they completed less than half of the survey. The data of five participants were removed because they failed to pass attention check measures included in the study such as, “if you are carefully reading this question, please select strongly agree.” Finally, the data of one participant was excluded after reporting that they did not take the study seriously, reporting a 1 on a five-point scale from “Not at all seriously” to “Very seriously.” Thus, the final sample consisted of 77 participants (43 female, ages 18-28, 57 Caucasian, 52 college freshman).

Materials & Procedure

Participants were sent a link to the study at 9:00am and were given until 5:00pm that same day to complete the study at their convenience. They were asked to complete the study in one sitting. After completing a consent form, participants began by filling out a series of self-report questionnaires, including measures of vulnerable narcissism, self-esteem, and entitlement (see Appendices D through F) before completing the main portion of the study which included writing an essay on the topic of “adjustment to college” (see Appendix A). Participants were not directed to write about anything specific, but they were encouraged to give examples and write about 200-400 words. In addition, participants were told that as they were writing their essays, the computer would be recording their behavior as they type so judges could observe their progress on
a separate monitor in order to deliver feedback more quickly. After completing the essay, participants rated the quality of their own writing (see Appendix G) to ensure they reflected on their performance and made their own performance judgments before being randomly assigned to one of the two feedback conditions.

Feedback received was either satisfactory or negative (see Appendix B). In the satisfactory feedback condition, one judge rated the essay positively while one judge rated it negatively, therefore concluding the participant did a sufficient job on the writing task. In comparison, in the negative feedback condition both judges rated the essay negatively and concluded that the participant did a poor job on the writing task. Participants then rated their essay quality again (see Appendix G) along with their current emotions (see Appendix H). Next, participants wrote a short description of the essay task and their performance with the understanding that their description might be used to introduce the task to future participants. This was included for purposes of a manipulation check to ensure participants had read the feedback they received. Finally, participants completed several process measures to provide insight into what they were thinking and experiencing during the study (see Appendix I). A fuller description of the process measures appears later in these methods. At the end of the study, participants were probed for suspicion, asked to report how seriously they took the study along with their demographics, and were debriefed.

Measurement of Vulnerable Narcissism. The Hypersensitive Narcissistic Scale (HSNS; Hendin & Cheek, 1997) was employed to assess vulnerable narcissism. This is a ten-item measure rated on a 5-point scale from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly
Agree.” Items included statements such as, “My feelings are easily hurt by ridicule or by the slighting remarks of others,” “I dislike being with a group unless I know that I am appreciated by at least one of those present,” and “I feel that I have enough on my hands without worrying about other people’s troubles.” The items were averaged to create a total score of vulnerable narcissism ($\alpha = .77$).

**Measurement of Self-Esteem.** Participants completed the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES; Rosenberg, 1965) to assess trait self-esteem. This ten-item measure is rated on a 5-point scale from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree.” Items included statements such as, “On the whole, I am satisfied with myself” and “I feel that I’m a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others.” The items were averaged to create a total score of self-esteem ($\alpha = .91$).

**Measurement of Entitlement.** The Psychological Entitlement Scale (PES; Campbell, Bonacci, Shelton, Exline, & Bushman, 2004) was used to assess trait entitlement as it is the most universal measure of entitlement. The PES consists of nine items rated on a 7-point scale from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree.” Example items include, “I honestly feel I’m just more deserving than others” and “People like me deserve an extra break now and then.” Items were averaged to create a total score of entitlement ($\alpha = .82$).

**Measurement of Essay Quality.** To assess participants’ perceptions of the quality of their essay, we created a six-item measure rated on a 5-point scale from “Very Bad” to “Very Good.” Example items include, “The quality of my writing was _____,” “Compared to others I probably did _____ on the writing task,” and “It would be _____
if my essay was shown to others as an example in the future.” The items were averaged to create a total score of essay quality at Time 1, before the feedback ($\alpha = .75$), and Time 2, after the feedback ($\alpha = .83$).

**Measurement of Emotion.** The PANAS (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988) scale was used to assess participants’ current emotions. Since we were specifically interested in shame and anger, we enhanced the PANAS by incorporating additional emotions based on a paper by Thomaes et al. (2011). A total shame score ($\alpha = .90$) was computed by taking participants’ average ratings of the following emotions: humiliated, foolish, stupid, and ashamed. A total anger score ($\alpha = .91$) was based on the average ratings of annoyed, mad, and angry.

**Process Measures.** To better assess participants’ experiences and thoughts during the experiment, several questions were included near the end of the survey. Participants rated their perceptions of the judges who gave feedback on multiple characteristics. For instance, participants rated how much they agreed with the statement, “The first [second] judge who provided negative [positive] feedback was _____.” This was rated on a 5-point scale from “Strongly Agree” to “Strongly Disagree” and included adjectives such as helpful, mistaken, insightful, and useless. Negative adjectives were reverse scored before averaging all items together to create a total score of the perceptions of the first judge ($\alpha = .84$) and perceptions of the second judge ($\alpha = .85$).

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2 The change to the PANAS scale was prompted by results obtained in our pilot study in which floor effects were occurring on reported emotions. The additional measures to tap the same emotions were therefore included in an attempt to increase internal consistency.
Questions to probe participants’ perceptions of the feedback and task itself were also included. For example, participants rated the following questions on a 5-point scale from “Strongly Agree” to “Strongly Disagree,” “I was concerned with how much the judges liked me,” “I was concerned with how smart the judges thought I was,” and “I believed the feedback I received was real.”

Past literature has highlighted the importance of interpersonal concerns over achievement concerns among vulnerable narcissists (Besser & Priel, 2010), so these process measures were included to capture the phenomenological process of vulnerable narcissists’ interpersonal concerns. Furthermore, participants’ descriptions of the judges should be essential for determining what element of the feedback participants were most focused on. For example, in the satisfactory condition, the first judge provided positive feedback while the second judge gave negative feedback. The items measuring participants’ ratings of the judges were thus included to clarify whether participants would absorb this feedback globally or show distinct reactions to each judge separately. The remaining items were included to verify the validity of the manipulation and the clarity of the task being asked of participants, as not understanding the task would influence participants’ subsequent experiences.

Results and Discussion

Before assessing the effects of the feedback manipulation to test the competing hypotheses, manipulation checks were conducted as well as analyses to verify patterns among vulnerable narcissists and their essay quality ratings. We then examined participants’ emotional reaction to feedback, looking at shame and anger separately.
Note that although there was some indication of floor effects on the measure of emotion (participants’ average ratings of emotions ranged from 1-3 on a 5-point scale), meaningful differences still emerged. Finally, process measures were utilized to gain insight into the mechanisms behind participants’ reported emotions. Table 1 outlines the correlations, means, and standard deviations of continuous variables used in this study. All continuous variables were mean-centered for analyses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>1</th>
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<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. HSNS</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2.96</td>
<td>.66</td>
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<td>2. RSES</td>
<td>-0.47**</td>
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<td>.70</td>
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<td>3. PES</td>
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<td></td>
<td>3.48</td>
<td>.93</td>
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<td>4. Essay Quality at Time 1</td>
<td>-0.16</td>
<td>0.27*</td>
<td>0.28*</td>
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<td>3.33</td>
<td>.56</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Essay Quality at Time 2</td>
<td>-0.09</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>0.22†</td>
<td>0.73**</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2.98</td>
<td>.73</td>
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<td>6. Shame</td>
<td>0.42**</td>
<td>-0.48**</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>-0.06</td>
<td>-0.11</td>
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<td>1.57</td>
<td>.81</td>
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<td>7. Anger</td>
<td>0.41**</td>
<td>-0.25*</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.67**</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1.63</td>
<td>.97</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Believe Feedback</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
<td>-0.20†</td>
<td>-0.18</td>
<td>-0.29**</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>-0.21†</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2.44</td>
<td>1.16</td>
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<td>9. Concerned Judges Like Me</td>
<td>0.21†</td>
<td>-0.23*</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.22†</td>
<td>0.19†</td>
<td>0.37**</td>
<td>0.25*</td>
<td>-0.21†</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.35</td>
<td>1.20</td>
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<tr>
<td>10. Concerned Judges Think I’m Smart</td>
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<td>-0.29*</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.22†</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.41**</td>
<td>0.22†</td>
<td>-0.17</td>
<td>0.86**</td>
<td>2.61</td>
<td>1.33</td>
</tr>
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Note. HSNS: Hypersensitivity Narcissism Scale. RSES: Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale. PES: Psychological Entitlement Scale. **p.<.01; *p < .05; †p < .10

Manipulation Check: The purpose of the manipulation was to make participants feel that others perceived their performance on the writing task as either poor or sufficient. The effectiveness of this manipulation was assessed by analyzing how

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3 It is highly unusual to find a low correlation between the HSNS and PES. While high HSNS participants did show a negatively skewed distribution on the PES, low HSNS participants had a bimodal distribution, making it difficult to obtain a significant correlation. Based on past literature, this work still conceptually assumes that vulnerable narcissism positively correlates to entitlement.
participants described their performance to potential future participants. Descriptions were coded as 1 if participants reported they did sufficient, okay, or well on the task and -1 if they stated they did poorly or bad. An independent samples t-test with feedback condition as the independent variable and coded descriptions of performance as the dependent variable yielded a significant difference such that participants in the negative feedback condition described their essays more negatively ($M = -0.63, SD = .67$) than those in the satisfactory feedback condition ($M = 0.58, SD = .69$), $t(174) = 7.75, p = .000$. Furthermore, the comments participants made in these descriptions suggest that many interpreted the satisfactory feedback as moderately positive. Example comments include: “I did sufficient on the essay and felt I did well,” “I believe I adequately completed this task,” and “I think I did fairly well on the writing task.” In comparison, the negative feedback condition was unambiguous in interpretation. Most participants stated the outcome directly, for example, “I received a poor quality grade on the essay.”

A process measure item provided further confirmation for the effectiveness of the feedback conditions. An independent samples t-test with feedback condition as the independent variable and ratings on the statement “I think the judges see my skill level as high” as the dependent variable yielded a significant difference. Participants in the negative feedback condition were less likely to think the judges saw their skill level as high ($M = 1.59, SD = .71$) than those in the satisfactory feedback condition ($M = 2.58, SD = .81$), $t(175) = 5.79, p = .000$. This provides further support for the effectiveness of the manipulation.
Participants did not report unclarity regarding the writing task. A one-sample t-test revealed that the significant majority of participants reported that they “Disagree” or “Strongly Disagree” to the following statements: “I was confused on what the writing task was asking me to do,” $M = 2.68, SD = 1.20, t(76) = 19.61, p = .000$, and “I was unsure how to write a good essay,” $M = 2.52, SD = 1.10, t(76) = 20.18, p = .000$.

However, conducting an independent samples t-test with feedback condition as the independent variable and ratings on the statement “I believe the feedback I received was real” as the dependent variable, it was found that participants were more likely to believe the feedback if they received negative feedback, where the judges were consistent in their conclusions ($M = 2.76, SD = 1.14$) than when they received satisfactory feedback where the judges differed in the feedback they provided ($M = 2.08, SD = 1.11$), $t(1,75) = 2.63, p = .01$. We explore how this may influence participants’ experience during the discussion portion of this section.

Finally, participants’ perceptions of the judges were significantly different across the two conditions. An independent samples t-test with feedback condition as the independent variable and participants’ perceptions of judges as the dependent variable yielded a significant difference such that participants in the negative feedback condition rated Judge 1 less positively ($M = -.29, SD = .57$) than participants who received satisfactory feedback ($M = .34, SD = .61$), $t(1,75) = -4.67, p = .000$. Ratings on Judge 2 trended in the same direction, negative feedback, $M = -.12, SD = .61$, satisfactory feedback, $M = .13, SD = .79$, $t(1,75) = -1.64, p = .11$. This suggests that participants drew more global conclusions from the feedback and did not distinguish between the
different pieces of feedback Judges 1 and 2 provided in the satisfactory feedback condition. In essence, it seems participants viewed satisfactory feedback more positively as a whole, compared to negative feedback, but were skeptical of the satisfactory feedback’s validity.

*Essay Quality.* A simple linear regression with the HSNS as the independent variable and essay quality ratings at Time 1, before receiving feedback, as the dependent variable did not produce significant effects, $b = -.13$, $SE = .10$, $t(75) = -1.37$, $p = .17$, consistent with findings that vulnerable narcissists self-present modestly. Similarly, the HSNS did not predict Time 2 essay quality ratings, $b = -.10$, $SE = .13$, $t(75) = -.79$, $p = .43$. However, a regression analysis revealed that the HSNS marginally moderated the relationship between feedback condition and the change in essay quality ratings from Time 1 to Time 2, $b = .15$, $SE = .08$, $t(73) = 1.88$, $p = .06$. Those who scored low on the HSNS rated their essay quality as significantly better after receiving satisfactory feedback relative to receiving negative feedback, $b = -.27$, $SE = .08$, $t(73) = -3.55$, $p = .0007$. In comparison, participants who scored high on the HSNS, vulnerable narcissists, showed no significant change in their essay quality ratings as a function of feedback type, $b = -.07$, $SE = .08$, $t(73) = -.91$, $p = .37$. Feedback affected low HSNS participants’ perceived quality of their own essays. Low HSNS participants, or the average population, seemed to accept the feedback and adjusted their performance perceptions accordingly. However, while vulnerable narcissists are proposed to be hypersensitive to external information, their performance perceptions were relatively unaffected by the feedback they received. We believe vulnerable narcissists delay their commitment to
self-judgments, still anticipating the delivery of feedback at Time 1. Once vulnerable narcissists received external information, they were reactive and defensive. Thus, vulnerable narcissists increased commitment to their self-beliefs at Time 2 instead of assimilating the feedback into their self-concepts. In other words, vulnerable narcissists saw the feedback as a threat and remained firm in their self-beliefs whereas the average population accommodated external information more readily.

_Shame._ A multiple regression analysis revealed no significant differences in shame as a function of HSNS and feedback type received, $b = .15, SE = .26, t(73) = .59, p = .56$. However, if it is true that vulnerable narcissists have entitled beliefs, then a relationship should exist between how well they think they did on the essay and an emotional reaction to what feedback they receive, to the extent that a mismatch between expectations and feedback exists. Using Time 1 essay quality ratings before receiving feedback is the purest measure of expectations. However, regressing reported levels of shame on the HSNS, essay quality ratings at Time 1, feedback type, and the relevant interactions revealed no significant effects, $b = -.20, SE = .22, t(69) = -.88, p = .38$. In comparison, when we used Time 2 essay quality ratings after participants had committed to their performance self-beliefs, the 3-way interaction was significant, $b = .68, SE = .28, t(69) = 2.45, p = .02$ (see Figure 1). Although the number of participants provides lower than ideal power, we found that when participants scored low on the HSNS, there was no interaction of essay quality or feedback type, $b = -.33, SE = .36, t(69) = -.92, p = .36$. There was a marginally significant interaction of feedback type and essay quality when participants scored high on the HSNS, $b = .56, SE = .32, t(69) = 1.74, p = .09$. 
Particularly, those who scored high on the HSNS reported significantly more shame after receiving negative, rather than satisfactory, feedback if they believed they wrote a high quality essay, $b = .73$, $SE = .33$, $t(69) = 2.23$, $p = .03$. These effects cannot simply be explained by other, related individual differences, such self-esteem and entitlement. By regressing self-esteem and entitlement onto the HSNS, the HSNS residual still marginally predicts shame, 3-way interaction: $b = -.37$, $SE = .20$, $t(69) = -1.90$, $p = .06$.

Figure 1. Shame as a function of vulnerable narcissism (HSNS), reported essay quality at Time 2, and feedback type. *$p<.05$
Anger. Similar to shame, a multiple regression analysis of anger on the HSNS and feedback type was not significant, $b = -.25$, $SE = .31$, $t(73) = -.81$, $p = .42$. Regressing anger on the HSNS, essay quality ratings at Time 1, feedback type, and the relevant interactions also did not produce significant effects as was true for shame, $b = -.37$, $SE = .27$, $t(69) = -1.37$, $p = .18$. However, using moderational analyses to regress reported levels of anger on the HSNS, essay quality ratings at Time 2, feedback type, and the relevant interactions, revealed a significant 3-way interaction, $b = .99$, $SE = .31$, $t(69) = 3.16$, $p = .002$ (see Figure 2). While participants low on the HSNS did not experience significantly different levels of anger based on feedback type or essay quality, $b = .05$, $SE = .41$, $t(69) = .12$, $p = .90$; we found a significant interaction of feedback type and essay quality when participants scored high on the HSNS, $b = 1.35$, $SE = .36$, $t(69) = 3.73$, $p = .0004$. Specifically, similar to shame, high HSNS participants reported significantly more anger after receiving negative, compared to satisfactory, feedback if they believed they wrote a high quality essay, $b = .58$, $SE = .19$, $t(69) = 2.99$, $p = .004$. In contrast to shame, however, high HSNS participants who believed they wrote a low quality essay reported more anger after receiving satisfactory feedback, $b = -.77$, $SE = .19$, $t(69) = -2.52$, $p = .01$. These effects cannot simply be explained by self-esteem or entitlement. After regressing self-esteem and entitlement onto the HSNS, the HSNS residual still significantly predicted shame, 3-way interaction: $b = -.50$, $SE = .22$, $t(69) = -2.25$, $p = .03$. 
These results suggest that feedback highlighted the mismatch between vulnerable narcissists’ self-views and the external information they received. This became more apparent during Time 2 ratings of essay quality as vulnerable narcissists became more committed in their performance ratings after receiving feedback while the average population assimilated the feedback into their self-perceptions. As a result of increased commitment to self-reported performance ratings, vulnerable narcissists were more
susceptible to experiencing a negative emotional life. When both judges rated participants’ performance as poor in the negative feedback condition, little room was left for reinterpretation. If a vulnerable narcissist believes he performed well but receives negative feedback, he is upset because he believes he deserved better. This mismatch between self-beliefs and outcome evokes negative emotion conveyed through both greater shame and anger. Vulnerable narcissists’ shame may arise due to rumination over not having properly conveyed their good performance for the judges or from desiring greater outcomes in the first place and being let down, especially considering that past experiences likely discount the probability of having expectations fulfilled. Anger may then arise because of either the incorrect conclusions drawn by the judges or because the vulnerable narcissist feels angry at himself for feeling shame in the first place.

In comparison, receiving satisfactory feedback influenced emotion in a slightly different way. One explanation as to why there is no difference in shame but an increase in anger among vulnerable narcissists who believed they wrote a low quality essay after receiving satisfactory feedback builds on the fact that all participants in our sample tended to view satisfactory feedback as less believable, likely due to its discrepant nature (Slater & Rouner, 1996). Receiving conflicting feedback from the two judges could signal to participants that the judges lack credibility or the feedback has no real implications one could draw on to make self-judgments. As a result, this satisfactory feedback would thwart internalization of emotion such as shame since the information is not seen as self-relevant or reliable. However, the discrepant conclusions from the two
judges do still evoke anger in those who rated their own essay quality as poor. Thus, it
could be the case that feedback that is not credible and mismatched with self-beliefs is
evoking anger without producing shame.

Unfortunately, previously reported results that incorporate the HSNS do not
interact with the believability of the feedback to predict emotions specifically for
vulnerable narcissists, anger, $b = -.17, SE = .33, t(61) = -.50, p = .62$, shame, $b = -.19, SE$
$= .26, t(61) = -.72, p = .48$. Vulnerable narcissists’ emotional reactions were not
specifically influenced by how much they believed the feedback. In other words, it is
unlikely that anger is simply being directed at the experimenter for providing discrepant
or unreliable feedback to the participant. Instead, there is a meaningful pattern that must
be addressed when strictly looking at the effects of anger for vulnerable narcissists.

Since past research has found that positive feedback leads to greater emotional
reactions, we must consider the possibility that vulnerable narcissists feel greater anger
not because of the discrepancy of the feedback, but because of the subtle, positive
valance implied by the feedback. Although satisfactory feedback conceptually aligns
with vulnerable narcissists’ feelings of entitlement, it does not always align with specific
performance ratings. Thus, satisfactory feedback may be positive enough to confirm
feelings of entitlement and thereby reduce reported shame, but still arouse anger due to
the contradiction of self-performance beliefs. In other words, we propose that
participants direct anger toward the source who violated their self-beliefs. This may
arise when self-beliefs and outcomes are mismatched either because participants
believed their essay was high-quality but received negative feedback, or because they
believed their essay was low-quality but received satisfactory feedback. In comparison, 
shame arose only when the mismatch signaled poor self-evaluations, something 
vulnerable narcissists struggle with due to their low self-esteem. In either case, while 
anger brews in vulnerable narcissists after they receive satisfactory feedback, this type of 
feedback does not produce the same extremity of turmoil and negative emotions in 
vulnerable narcissists that consistently negative feedback does.

**Moderated Mediation.** To investigate the phenomenology of vulnerable 
narcissists and how they come to experience the turmoil and negative emotions in their 
world, we conducted a moderated mediational analysis incorporating ratings from the 
process measures collected near the end of the study.

Utilizing Model 18 of Hayes’ (2013) PROCESS macro for SPSS, with a 
bootstrap sample set at 5000, significant moderated mediation was revealed (see Figure 
3). The direct effect of feedback on shame was positive, showing that negative feedback 
(coded as 1) produced marginally significantly more shame than satisfactory feedback 
(coded as 0), $b = .34$, $SE = .18$, $t(68) = 1.88$, $p = .06$. However, following the indirect 
pathway we see this directional effect reverse. Participants who received negative 
feedback reported being less concerned about what the judges think of them, including 
whether or not participants perceived that the judges liked them or if the judges thought 
they were smart, $b = -.92$, $SE = .26$, $t(68) = -3.56$, $p = .0007$. Participants having less 
concern for what the judges think of them lead to no difference in reported shame for 
those who rated their essay quality as low, regardless of their standing on the HSNS, low 
HSNS, $b = -.12$, BootSE = .13, 95% BootCI [-.40, .15], high HSNS, $b = -.125$, 95%
BootCI [-.64, .03]. In comparison, when participants rated their essay quality as high, it was only those high on the HSNS, or vulnerable narcissists, who received negative feedback and reported less concern for what the judges think of them that led to significantly higher reports of shame, low HSNS, $b = -.02$, BootSE $= .12$, 95% BootCI [-.26, .23], high HSNS, $b = -.49$, 95% BootCI [-1.03, -.12]. Therefore, only vulnerable narcissists with the greatest mismatch between feedback and self-beliefs (i.e. perceptions of high essay quality) reported greater shame after attempting to discredit their concern for what the judges think of them.

Figure 3. Shame as a consequence of feedback type and concern for what the judges think about the participant as a function of perception of essay quality at Time 2 and vulnerable narcissism (HSNS).

Importantly, essay quality ratings did not moderate additional paths in the mediation model (e.g. path a, between feedback to ratings of concern for what judges think, $b = -1.40$, BootSE $= 1.34$, $t(68) = -1.05$, $p = .30$), suggesting that consideration of
essay quality specifically occurred after participants engaged in motivated reasoning by rating their concern for what judges thought as low if they received negative feedback. Furthermore, these analyses remain significant even when controlling for self-esteem and entitlement within the model, direct effect, $b = .35$, BootSE = .17, $t(66) = 2.03$, $p = .05$, indirect effect of feedback type on concern for what the judges think, $b = -.88$, BootSE = .25, $t(66) = -3.48$, $p = .0009$, low essay quality and low HSNS, $b = -.09$, BootSE = .13, 95% BootCI [-.33, .21], low essay quality and high HSNS, $b = -.26$, BootSE = .16, 95% BootCI [-.64, .004], high essay quality and low HSNS, $b = -.05$, BootSE = .11, 95% BootCI [-.12, .32], high essay quality and high HSNS, $b = -.41$, BootSE = .18, 95% BootCI [-.91, -.13]. However, this moderated mediational analysis was not significant for anger.

This moderated mediational analysis yields insight into the processes leading to shame in vulnerable narcissists. Vulnerable narcissists reported more shame after receiving negative feedback if they rated concern for what the judges think of them as low and also rated their own performance as good. This result can be interpreted as a failure to effectively implement defense mechanisms. In the average population, or those low in vulnerable narcissism, those who receive negative feedback and report being less concerned about what the judges think do not experience any higher or lower levels of shame. Participants are simply showing that they do not care about the feedback so there is no relationship to shame. This is a type of defense mechanism or motivated reasoning to try and discount the sources of negative feedback to maintain a high view of one’s self. The average population is essentially blaming the judges for their poor conclusions.
and dismissing them, consequently causing the judges’ opinions to be unsuccessful in affecting the average person’s emotional life.

However, when vulnerable narcissists receive negative feedback and try to discount how much they care about what the judges think of them, they actually report higher shame. We posit that vulnerable narcissists really do care about external feedback and what others think of them. Zeigler-Hill and colleagues (2008) found that the two types of narcissists have different contingencies of worth. Whereas grandiose narcissists look for attention, vulnerable narcissists seek approval from others to define their self-worth. Hence, as vulnerable narcissists are trying to engage in this defense mechanism, attempting to discount how much they care about what the judges think of them through self-report, their self-doubting nature interferes with their ability to execute the defense mechanism effectively. Still, a measure of difficulty in discounting concern with judges was not collected so this explanation cannot be tested, leaving the model open to other interpretations.

Although future research can incorporate such measures to clarify these mechanisms, the logic of the moderated mediation model suggests that vulnerable narcissists cannot implement motivated reasoning, another sign of vulnerable narcissists’ inability to regulate their own self-esteem (Cooper, 1998; Kealy & Rasmussen, 2012; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2011; Zeigler-Hill et al., 2008). This reliance on, but simultaneous denial of, external feedback may explain why vulnerable narcissists report more shame. They need external feedback to reinforce their self-status because they cannot do it themselves, but feel ashamed for needing it (Besser & Priel, 2010), or ashamed for a
performance that elicits negative feedback. In other words, when a vulnerable narcissist is faced with a mismatch between self-beliefs and external information, they place greater weight on others’ judgments than on their own, a very ineffective way to manage one’s emotional life.

In comparison, the lack of parallel mediating effects on anger may result from participants directing anger toward the source who contradicted their self-beliefs, thus focusing their attention outward. Shame, on the other hand, focuses attention inward. Therefore, already feeling bad about themselves (i.e. low self-esteem), shame may alert vulnerable narcissists to protect themselves more and engage in defense. Anger poses less immediate threat to the individual. However, although vulnerable narcissists fail at their initial attempt to implement defense mechanisms, leading to greater shame, this increased shame may still lead to conceptually greater anger downstream. Thus, anger could arise through a more distant indirect pathway and thus serve as a defense mechanism in and of itself. As feeling shame is an unpleasant experience, some researchers suggest individuals will react to their emotion of shame by externalizing that energy into anger, or rage (Kohut, 1972; Lewis, 1987; Tangney et al., 1992; Tracy et al., 2007). Yet, fully uncovering the mechanisms through which anger arises necessitates further research.

In sum, we found initial support for our hypothesis that vulnerable narcissists experience the greatest turmoil or negative emotions of shame and anger after receiving negative feedback as a function of their self-reported performance ratings. This contradicts past research that suggested positive feedback would be most shame-
provoking. In addition, moderated mediation analyses revealed the process of motivated reasoning by which external feedback may instigate shame in vulnerable narcissists faced with poor evaluations. Nonetheless, parallel results are not observed for both emotions as anger was observed in any case where vulnerable narcissists experience a mismatch between their performance self-beliefs and the feedback they receive.

Although these findings provide support for the roles that shame and anger can play in vulnerable narcissists’ lives, greater clarity on the conditions which engender each emotion is still needed.
Chapter 3: Study 2

Study 1 illustrated that many similarities exist between the occurrence of shame and anger among vulnerable narcissists in response to evaluative, self-relevant feedback. Importantly, the results also began to outline circumstances under which these two specific emotions can be distinguished. To address this and other issues, the purpose of Study 2 was to better delineate the conditions under which shame and anger are uniquely evoked and to consolidate our findings with data from previous research.

Past literature has clearly shown that vulnerable narcissists are very ego-involved (Hendin & Cheek, 1997; Miller et al., 2011; Miller et al., 2012; Krizan & Johar, 2012; Wink, 1991), and many of the items on the HSNS used to measure vulnerable narcissism capture this self-absorbed characteristic. For example, “I easily become wrapped up in my own interests and forget the existence of others” and “I can become entirely absorbed in thinking about my personal affairs, my health, my cares or my relations to others” reflect the self-centered nature of vulnerable narcissists. Moreover, participants’ self-reported performance ratings proved pivotal in vulnerable narcissists’ emotional experience when receiving external information in Study 1. To capture the importance of self-absorption and self-relevance, a second manipulation was added to Study 2 to strengthen the relevance of the performance task for participants. Thus, Study 2 manipulated both the valence of the feedback as well as the self-relevance of the
performance task. Furthermore, considering the theoretical underpinnings of vulnerable narcissists’ shame-rage cycle, a behavioral measure of aggression was included as an additional measure of anger. The inclusion of the aggression measure is also intended to address the floor effects on self-reported current emotions observed in Study 1.

Concentrating on vulnerable narcissists, we predict that shame, anger, and aggression arise when outcomes are mismatched with entitled beliefs on a personally relevant task. Specifically, when high HSNS individuals write a personal essay and rate their performance as high but receive negative feedback they will report greater shame, anger, and exhibit more aggression. In comparison, only anger and aggression are predicted to be present when high HSNS individuals write a personal essay, rate their performance as low, but receive satisfactory feedback essay. This pattern of results for both shame and anger would be consistent with those observed in Study 1. In conditions that are not personally relevant, we predict low levels of shame in vulnerable narcissists, regardless of their self-reported performance ratings. However, writing a non-personal essay may still evoke some level of anger as this emotion seems to be a more global response to feedback that contradicts performance self-beliefs. In addition, high personal relevance in the task is predicted to be necessary for any condition of anger to instigate an overt expression of aggression. (See Table 2 for a summary of hypotheses.)
Table 2

Study 2 Hypotheses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HSNS</th>
<th>Negative Feedback</th>
<th>Satisfactory Feedback</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>General Essay</td>
<td>Personal Essay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High Essay Quality</td>
<td>Anger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low Essay Quality</td>
<td>Shame Anger Aggression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low Essay Quality</td>
<td>Anger</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Method

Participants

One hundred and thirty participants completed the study in exchange for course credit in an undergraduate psychology course at Ohio State University. Participants signed up for the study on a university website and completed the study in a laboratory context. Between one and four participants were present for a session and were seated at individual computers in separate rooms. The data of five participants were excluded because they completed less than half of the survey. The data of fifteen participants were removed because they failed to pass attention check measures; and finally, two participants were excluded after reporting that they did not take the study seriously, reporting a 1 or 2 on a five-point scale from “Not at all seriously” to “Very seriously.” Thus, the final sample consisted of 108 participants (47 female, ages 18-38, 76 Caucasian, 65 college freshman).
Materials & Procedure

The study design closely followed that of Study 1\textsuperscript{4}, with the exception of an additional manipulation and behavioral measure. Thus, Study 2 was a between-subjects, 2x2 design manipulating feedback type (satisfactory vs. negative) and essay type (general vs. personal). After giving consent, participants completed the same measures of vulnerable narcissism ($\alpha = .64$), self-esteem ($\alpha = .89$), and entitlement ($\alpha = .89$) used in Study 1 (see Appendix D through I). Participants were then randomly assigned to write either a personal or a general essay about adjustment to college (see Appendix C), and were again told that their computer would be connected to judges’ computers in a separate room so that the judges could observe and more quickly assess the participants’ writing. Once participants finished their essays, they rated the quality of their own writing, were randomly assigned to receive either satisfactory or negative feedback (see Appendix B), and then rated the quality of their essay again. These ratings were completed on the same six-item measure used in Study 1, and again provided essay quality ratings at Time 1 ($\alpha = .75$) and Time 2 ($\alpha = .84$). After providing the second essay quality rating, participants rated their current emotions using the PANAS scale, providing both a total shame score ($\alpha = .90$) and a total anger score ($\alpha = .81$). Next, participants wrote a short description about the essay task and their performance before they began a noise blast task to assess their level of aggression. At the end of the study,

\textsuperscript{4} Due to the timely nature of data collection in a lab setting, Study 2 commenced directly after our pilot study but before additional process measures were included as in Study 1. Thus, process measure data is not available for Study 2.
participants were probed for suspicion and asked how seriously they took the study along with their demographics. They were then debriefed.

Aggression. An additional behavioral measure was included to supplement our emotion measure of anger in order to extend the findings from Study 1 into a behavioral domain as well as address the floor effects in Study 1. This behavioral measure for aggression included a noise blast task, also called a competitive reaction time (CRT) task. This CRT task is a hallmark measure of aggression in an individual that has been used by many researchers in the past (e.g. Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Thomaes, Bushman, Stegge, & Oltof, 2008).

In a CRT task, participants are led to believe they have been randomly paired with another participant. This pairing is always presented as gender matched but in fact, no opponent exists. The software is programed to give noise blasts to participants in a controlled fashion. Participants are given detailed instructions about the task, complete several practice trials at the start of the study, and are then reminded of the instructions before beginning the task at the end of the experiment. Specifically, participants are to select a noise level and duration of noise for their partner to hear through headphones. The noise is very unpleasant (i.e. consists of radio static) and can range from 55dB to 100dB in 5dB increments. Once participants make their selections they see a traffic light on the screen. When the light turns green, they must press the spacebar as quickly as possible. Participants believe that whoever presses the spacebar fastest will cause their opponent to be blasted with the noise. The noise level and duration of noise that the participant selects on the first trial are summed to compute an overall aggression score.
Results and Discussion

Participants’ emotional reactions to feedback were assessed with analyses similar to those conducted in Study 1, but which incorporated the third variable of essay quality ratings. As in Study 1, floor effects emerged on the measure of emotion (participants’ average ratings of emotions ranged from 1-3 on a 5-point scale); however, meaningful results were still obtained. Finally, essay type was incorporated into analyses to best understand participants’ emotional reaction to different feedback. Ratings of essay quality at Time 2 were again used for all study analyses as it best represents the increased commitment to performance self-beliefs after being confronted with feedback. Table 3 outlines the correlations, means, and standard deviations of continuous variables used in this study. All continuous variables were again mean-centered for analyses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HSNS</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2.89</td>
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<tr>
<td>RSES</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3.77</td>
<td>.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PES</td>
<td>0.27**</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3.15</td>
<td>1.04</td>
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<td>Essay Quality at Time 1</td>
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<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3.42</td>
<td>.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Essay Quality at Time 2</td>
<td>-0.12</td>
<td>0.109</td>
<td>-0.05</td>
<td>0.75**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3.17</td>
<td>.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shame</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>-0.37**</td>
<td>-0.06</td>
<td>-0.27**</td>
<td>-0.32**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1.31</td>
<td>.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anger</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>-0.18†</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
<td>0.48**</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.46</td>
<td>.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aggression</td>
<td>-0.09</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
<td>-0.14</td>
<td>5.58</td>
<td>3.79</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. HSNS: Hypersensitivity Narcissism Scale. RSES: Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale. PES: Psychological Entitlement Scale. **p<.01; *p < .05; †p<.10

Manipulation Check. The purpose of the manipulation was to make participants feel that others perceived their performance on the writing task as either poor or sufficient. Participants’ descriptions of their performance were again coded as 1 if
participants reported they did sufficient, okay, or well on the task and -1 if they stated they did poorly or bad. An independent samples t-test yielded significant differences similar to Study 1, satisfactory feedback, $M = .68, SD = .64$, negative feedback, $M = -.70, SD = .57$, $t(1,105) = 11.765, p = .000$. Participants’ comments once again suggested that many interpreted the satisfactory feedback as moderately positive, for example, “The judges said my writing was sufficient, which I guess means that it was good.” In comparison, the negative feedback condition was clearly negative, for example, “I did not perform well on the essay and was given a poor [rating].”

*Shame.* A multiple regression analysis reveal no significant differences in shame among HSNS ratings and feedback type received, $b = .14, SE = .12, t(104) = 1.139, p = .26$. However, a trending 3-way interaction emerged between HSNS, essay quality ratings at Time 2, and feedback type, $b = -26, SE = .18, t(100) = -1.44, p = .15$ (see Figure 4). When participants scored low on the HSNS, there was no interaction of essay quality and feedback type, $b = -.16, SE = .13, t(100) = -1.23, p = .22$. However, there was a significant interaction of feedback type and essay quality when participants were high on the HSNS, $b = -.43, SE = .13, t(100) = -3.20, p = .002$. Similar to the pattern found in Study 1, high HSNS participants who believed they wrote a high quality essay reported somewhat more shame after receiving negative feedback compared to satisfactory feedback, although this effect did not reach statistical significant, $b = -.13, SE = .12, t(100) = -1.11, p = .27$. Now, however, in Study 2 an additional, and significant, effect emerged among those who rated their essay quality as low. Participants who scored high on the HSNS reported significantly more shame after
receiving satisfactory feedback, compared to receiving negative feedback, if they believed they wrote a low quality essay, $b = .47$, $SE = .13$, $t(100) = 3.60$, $p = .0005$. Due to power issues, however, these effects lose marginal significance when using the residual left after regressing self-esteem and entitlement onto the HSNS, 3-way interaction: $b = -.22$, $SE = .18$, $t(100) = -1.24$, $p = .22$.

Figure 4. Shame as a function of vulnerable narcissism (HSNS), reported essay quality at Time 2, and feedback type. *$p<.05$, †$p<.10$
Observing that satisfactory feedback lead to more shame than negative feedback when participants thought their essays were of poor quality is a novel finding from Study 2. To better understand how each feedback type may be leading to the same emotional experience of shame, we turn towards analyses of our second manipulation of essay type, whether participants wrote a personal or general essay about adjustment to college. Regressing reported levels of shame on the HSNS, feedback type, essay quality at Time 2, essay type, and the relevant interaction terms, a non-significant 4-way interaction was revealed, \( b = -0.22, SE = 0.19, t(92) = -1.15, p = .25 \) (see Figure 5). Nonetheless, we believed this result to still be meaningful, although not significant due to the insufficient power from the data to support such large analyses. Therefore, the interaction was probed further.
Figure 5. Shame as a function of vulnerable narcissism (HSNS), reported essay quality at Time 2, essay type, and feedback type. *p<.05, †p<.10.
Breaking down the analyses into 3-way interactions yielded significant results for high HSNS individuals, \( b = -.31, \ SE = .15, t(92) = -2.12, p = .04 \) (bottom panels), but not for those who score low on the HSNS, \( b = -.08, \ SE = .13, t(92) = -.61, p = .55 \) (top panels). Using the 3-way interaction of high HSNS individuals as a focal point, we observe marginally significant results in the 2-way interaction as a function of low essay quality ratings, \( b = .26, \ SE = .14, t(92) = 1.84, p = .07 \) (bottom left panel), but not for high essay quality, \( b = -.18, \ SE = .14, t(92) = -1.30, p = .20 \) (bottom right panel). The pattern shows that vulnerable narcissists reported the greatest levels of shame when they wrote a personal essay, believed their essay to be low quality, and then received satisfactory feedback from the judges. Specifically, high HSNS participants who wrote a personal essay they believed to be of low quality reported more shame after receiving satisfactory feedback rather than negative feedback, \( b = .76, \ SE = .18, t(92) = 4.23, p = .000 \). It should be noted, this level of shame is also the highest reported across the entire 4-way interaction, reaching above the mid-point on the PANAS 5-point Likert scale at 2.66. Moreover, high HSNS participants who wrote a personal essay they rated as low quality reported less shame after receiving negative feedback not only in comparison to receiving satisfactory feedback as reported above, but also in comparison to those who wrote a general essay, \( b = -.24, \ SE = .13, t(92) = -1.78, p = .08 \). In short, when vulnerable narcissists feel they wrote a low quality, personal essay, they report greater shame after receiving satisfactory feedback and less shame after receiving negative feedback.
In comparison, individuals high on the HSNS who believed their essay to be of high quality came to experience shame as a result of very different antecedents, replicating findings in Study 1. High HSNS participants who wrote a personal essay, believed their essay to be high quality, and received negative feedback from the judges reported marginally significant higher levels of shame than those who received satisfactory feedback, $b = -0.37, SE = 0.22, t(92) = -1.65, p = .10$. Thus, we see our 2-way interactions flip in Study 2 as a function of participants’ ratings of their essay quality. Once again, largely due to power issues, these effects lose marginal significance when using the residual left after regressing self-esteem and entitlement onto the HSNS, 4-way interaction: $b = -0.18, SE = 0.19, t(92) = -0.95, p = .34$.

**Anger.** Similar to shame, a multiple regression analysis of anger on the HSNS and feedback type were not significant, $b = -0.03, SE = 0.12, t(104) = -0.21, p = .83$. Using moderational analyses to regress reported levels of anger on the HSNS, essay quality ratings at Time 2, feedback type, and the relevant interaction terms revealed a non-significant 3-way interaction, $b = 0.23, SE = 0.19, t(100) = 1.16, p = .25$. Regressing reported levels of anger on the HSNS, essay quality at Time 2, feedback type, essay type, and the relevant interaction terms also revealed a nonsignificant 4-way interaction, $b = 0.07, SE = 0.21, t(92) = 0.35, p = .73$. These non-significant findings may be a result of floor effects occurring in the self-reports of anger in participants, limiting empirical support for our hypotheses in Study 2.

**Aggression.** Since reported levels of anger on the PANAS did not provide clear insight into participants’ emotional reactions to the study, we turn towards the additional
behavioral measure included in this study that assesses aggression (i.e. the CRT task). A multiple regression analysis of aggression on the HSNS and feedback type was not significant, $b = .10$, $SE = .71$, $t(101) = .15$, $p = .89$. Moderational analyses in which aggression was regressed on the HSNS, essay quality ratings at Time 2, feedback type, and the relevant interaction terms, revealed a marginally significant 3-way interaction, $b = -1.68$, $SE = 1.18$, $t(97) = -1.42$, $p = .16$ (see Figure 6). Specifically, high HSNS participants who receive negative feedback exhibit greater aggression as a function of high, versus low, essay quality ratings, $b = 1.62$, $SE = .97$, $t(97) = 1.66$, $p = .10$, just as they reported greater anger under these conditions in Study 1. Due to power issues, however, these effects again lose marginal significance when using the residual left after regressing self-esteem and entitlement onto the HSNS, 3-way interaction: $b = -1.33$, $SE = 1.18$, $t(97) = -1.13$, $p = .26$. Also, note that although Figure 6 alludes to a similar pattern of results as Study 1, we do not obtain a full replication. The other mismatched condition in which vulnerable narcissists received satisfactory feedback when they believed they wrote a low quality essay did not produce significant results, $b = -1.28$, $SE = 1.72$, $t(97) = -.75$, $p = .46$. This may be due to the unique nature of anger and aggression; these two dependent variables are not entirely substitutable. Finally, regressing reported levels of aggression on the HSNS, essay quality at Time 2, feedback type, essay type, and the relevant interaction terms revealed a nonsignificant 4-way interaction, $b = -.34$, $SE = 1.30$, $t(89) = -.26$, $p = .79$, signifying the weak influence personal relevance has in vulnerable narcissists’ aggressive behavior. In other words, vulnerable narcissists exhibited more aggression when they believed they wrote a high
quality essay but received negative feedback, regardless of self-relevancy. Whether the task was general or personal, aggression arose following negative evaluations that contradicted vulnerable narcissists’ performance beliefs.

Figure 6. Aggression as a function of vulnerable narcissism (HSNS), reported essay quality at Time 2, and feedback type. †p<.10

With the exception of ratings on anger, these results support our first hypothesis that when completing a personally relevant task, vulnerable narcissists experience greater shame and exhibit greater aggression when their self-beliefs, revealed through
their self-reported performance ratings, are contradicted by judges’ negative feedback. This supports our third hypothesis in that low levels of shame occurred for vulnerable narcissists in conditions that were not personally relevant regardless of their self-reported performance ratings. However, partially due to low power and floor effects on anger, our second, fourth, and fifth hypotheses were not supported. While the pattern of results on the aggression measure was consistent with the results for anger in Study 1, the relevant comparisons did not reach statistical significance. Anger and aggression were not heightened among vulnerable narcissists completing the personally relevant task when they received satisfactory feedback and believed they wrote a low quality essay. Instead, vulnerable narcissists who believed they performed well and received negative feedback were aggressive but not angry regardless of personal relevance. Thus, essay quality and personal relevance have helped to clarify conditions under which the negative emotions shame and anger may arise.

Overall, our results emphasize the importance of matching a vulnerable narcissist’s self-beliefs with external information and begin to find consistency with past research. When vulnerable narcissists perceive their performance as poor, they report more shame after satisfactory feedback. However, if they believe they have performed well, vulnerable narcissists report relatively more shame after negative feedback. These effects become particularly clear when working on a task that is personally relevant to the participant as the more participants care about an activity, the more emotionally invested and reactive they become. Thus, the crux of vulnerable narcissists’
vulnerability to external feedback is not entitled beliefs but by the match between any self-belief (i.e. high or low performance) and subsequent outcomes more generally.

Although we did not include process measures in this study, it seems safe to assume that participants viewed the satisfactory feedback condition more globally, taking away the subtle positivity in valence. In addition, the fact that satisfactory feedback can elicit greater shame in vulnerable narcissists is consistent with past research by Atlas & Them (2008) and Malkin and colleagues (2011) who found positive feedback was more influential in the emotional life of vulnerable narcissists. Whereas past studies used inflated positive feedback, the shame participants experienced after satisfactory feedback in our study helps clarify the conditions that elicit self-conscious emotions. Vulnerable narcissists’ self-reported performance ratings were critical in predicting the effects of external information on emotion, as was the self-relevance of the task. In fact, what may have been missing from Study 1 to produce these results was a lack of explicit self-relevance in the task. Thus, tension between low performance beliefs and high entitlement in vulnerable narcissists does not likely thwart feelings of shame as previous conclusions in Study 1 suggest. Instead, it seems that vulnerable narcissists desire consistency between their self-beliefs and other’s views of them. Consequently, we have begun to delineate the conditions under which self-conscious emotions may arise in a vulnerable narcissist’s daily life. It is not only the nature and self-relevancy of external information that is imperative, but also a vulnerable narcissist’s self-beliefs in performance and the interaction between these factors.
In essence, it is the mismatch between self-beliefs and external feedback that evokes the most emotional turmoil when a task is self-relevant. Feedback inconsistent with a vulnerable narcissist’s task-specific self-beliefs likely forces them to turn inward and become even more self-focused, almost ruminating about the experience. One interpretation is that a mismatch between self-beliefs and external information signals to the vulnerable narcissist that their self-uncertainty is valid. They therefore either feel shame over not performing in line with their own expectations, or for being so dependent on external feedback that they are able to recognize the power that others have to dramatically influence their lives. This tendency to internalize emotion in self-relevant performance and feel shame during occurrences of mismatched self-beliefs and outcomes suggests vulnerable narcissists put more trust in other’s opinions than their own.

Nonetheless, it may be surprising that a replication from Study 1 was not seen in terms of shame or anger when participants wrote a general essay on “adjustment to college.” We speculate this may be the case because the general essay condition in Study 2 was presented in a much broader set of instructions than Study 1. The essay prompt for Study 1 bordered on the line between the general and personal perspectives participants would write about. Thus, the effects on shame in the mismatched condition of receiving negative feedback but believing to have performed well in Study 1 may have been picking up the importance of the additional self-relevant dimension in Study 2. However, anger was observed in the mismatched condition of high self-beliefs and
poor outcome in Study 1 and not Study 2. We believe this to be due to floor effects on the self-reports of anger in Study 2.

Supporting our concern about floor effects for reports of anger, marginal effects of aggression emerged in Study 2 showing that negative feedback elicited greater aggression when vulnerable narcissists believed they performed well; although, this marginal effect of aggression did not depend on how self-relevant the task was. This speaks to the broader power that negative feedback seems to have in making vulnerable narcissists irritated and antagonistic. Personal relevance did not influence how much aggression vulnerable narcissists exhibited.

In summary of Study 2, evidence suggests that vulnerable narcissists desire feedback consistent with their self-beliefs, and are therefore upset after receiving contradictory feedback, both in shame and in exhibiting aggression. These reactions are a result of the mismatch between self-beliefs and outcomes.
Chapter 4: General Discussion

The studies reported here were designed to examine the antecedents and moderating conditions predictive of vulnerable narcissists’ daily emotional life. Specifically, the studies addressed when vulnerable narcissists will feel the most turmoil and negative emotions when faced with external self-relevant information, something people encounter regularly in daily life. Two overarching, but competing, hypotheses predicted that either a) negative feedback or b) satisfactory feedback on performance would lead to vulnerable narcissists reporting greater shame and anger. It was further predicted that a mismatch between feedback and self-beliefs, evidenced by high self-reported performance ratings, would increase the reporting of these emotions as well as later expressions of aggression. These hypotheses would be particularly true when the task was self-relevant. Evidence in support of these hypotheses would clarify our understanding of the nature of vulnerable narcissism and how vulnerable narcissists respond to evaluative feedback in interpersonal contexts.

Study 1 demonstrated that negative feedback left those high in vulnerable narcissism feeling angry and ashamed, particularly when they rated their own performance as high. Furthermore, the increase in shame after negative feedback was shown to be a result of a failed defense mechanism. Vulnerable narcissists who believed they performed well on a task but received negative feedback reported having low
concern for what the judges thought of them. However, instead of alleviating the emotional turmoil caused by the negative feedback, as it did for the average population, these reports of low concern lead to greater experiences of shame for vulnerable narcissists. Concern for the judges’ impressions did not, however, account for the effect of negative feedback on reported anger among vulnerable narcissists, signaling the unique qualities of shame and anger. In addition to the effects of negative feedback found in Study 1, satisfactory feedback also lead to reports of anger among vulnerable narcissists who believed they performed poorly, although this effect had no impact on reports of shame. These results provided greater support for our prediction that negative feedback would elicit the greatest emotions.

Study 2 was designed to replicate and extend the results of Study 1 by introducing a manipulation of self-relevance to the task and a measure of aggression. Study 2 tested the hypothesis that the effects of perceived performance and feedback on shame, anger, and aggression among vulnerable narcissists would be most pronounced for a highly self-relevant task. In addition, anger and aggression would continue to be affected after satisfactory feedback if vulnerable narcissists believed they performed poorly, but again only when the task was designed to be self-relevant. In comparison, low levels of shame were predicted in vulnerable narcissists who did not complete a self-relevant task regardless of their self-reported performance ratings, while anger and aggression were still expected to arise in a non-self-relevant task reliant on the existence of mismatched self-beliefs and outcomes.
The results of Study 2 provided mixed support for these predictions. When a task was personally relevant, vulnerable narcissists did report marginally greater shame and exhibited marginally greater aggression when their high performance self-beliefs were met with negative feedback from the judges. In addition, low levels of shame were observed in the non-self-relevant task. However, vulnerable narcissists exhibited marginally greater aggression, but no greater anger, after receiving negative feedback in the non-self-relevant condition and failed to exhibit anger or aggression under the mismatched condition of perceiving poor performance but receiving satisfactory feedback. Importantly, Study 2 revealed a new effect that was not previously predicted; vulnerable narcissists reported greater shame, and exhibited no greater aggression, in a self-relevant task when their low performance self-beliefs were met with satisfactory feedback.

We believe these results suggest that vulnerable narcissists feel shame after experiencing a mismatch between their self-beliefs and actual outcomes if the task at hand is personally relevant because of their hypersensitive nature towards interpersonal information. Vulnerable narcissists put more trust in other’s opinions than their own. Thus, when they receive external information it may lead them to increase commitment to their self-views but then ruminate on the inconsistency of self-beliefs and outcomes, experiencing greater self-absorption and self-uncertainty as a result. Notably, the external information must be in direct conflict with vulnerable narcissists’ specific self-beliefs about their task performance, not more globally in conflict with feelings of entitlement or self-esteem. While it was believed that high feelings of entitlement would
increase vulnerable narcissists’ desire for positive feedback, in reality, vulnerable narcissists are capable of recognizing and assessing an individual performance, building their self-beliefs around the specific task. It is thus the perceived deservingness of feedback that influences vulnerable narcissists’ emotional life.

When personally relevant information disconfirms high self-views, such as receiving negative feedback but believing to have performed well, vulnerable narcissists feel greater shame, anger, and exhibit greater aggression. However, under these circumstances anger and aggression seem to be more global reactions, independent of self-relevancy. For instance, whereas only self-relevant, negative feedback appears to bring about shame for vulnerable narcissists when they think they deserve better than the feedback they receive (Study 2), the same combination of mismatched self-beliefs and outcomes led to greater anger when the task was non-self-relevant (Study 1). Since effects of anger were not observed in Study 2, we do not know if anger solely arises in non-self-relevant tasks or if self-relevancy is inconsequential. Due to observed aggression effects, whereby self-relevancy was not influential, we can hypothesize the same to be true for anger. Similarly, satisfactory feedback that disconfirmed low perceived performance in vulnerable narcissists led to greater shame when the task was self-relevant (Study 2), but greater anger under non-self-relevant conditions (Study 1). Again, unlike the experience of anger, effects of shame only occurred under conditions when the task was self-relevant whereas anger, or aggression, appears to be independent from self-relevancy, further suggesting a distinction between these two emotions in vulnerable narcissists. Nevertheless, a major limitation of the current research includes
low power. Therefore, study replications with a greater number of participants are needed to strengthen the arguments made here.

A mediational analysis in Study 1 provided support for the possibility that negative feedback brings about shame when vulnerable narcissists thought they performed well because they are not capable of employing effective defense mechanisms or motivated reasoning to cope with the unexpected negative feedback. Because vulnerable narcissists constantly question themselves and lack the coping skills to discount negative feedback, they internalize or feel shame from the experience. Of course, future research is necessary to fully elucidate each mechanism at play during this process.

Thus, while it seems clear when shame or anger may emerge in vulnerable narcissists, research must probe further into this experience to better understand why. Why does satisfactory feedback lead to greater shame, what are vulnerable narcissists exactly ashamed of, and where is their anger being directed. These are limitations of the current research as we do not know with certainty whether vulnerable narcissists are angry at themselves or the judges. In addition, it is unknown if vulnerable narcissists’ awareness of their dependency on external feedback leads them to feel poorly about themselves. It is possible that their need for approval from others undermines their sense of self-efficacy in garnering for themselves what they feel they are entitled to. However, the present research cannot speak to these claims directly.
Entitlement

Since this research points to the importance of the perceived deservingness of external information specific to the task, and not entitlement specifically, vulnerable narcissists’ nature of entitlement comes into question. Perhaps vulnerable narcissists’ nature of entitlement does not manifest itself in the same way as for grandiose narcissists. Entitlement is typically viewed as a sense or expectation that one has rights to certain outcomes. When both grandiose and vulnerable narcissists score high on entitlement measures, we can make an initial conclusion of their similarity, but the precise entitled experience is left open to interpretation. Since each type of narcissist scores vastly differently on measures of self-esteem, it is logical that these different self-views are likely to color their experiences on dimensions which are meant to link these two narcissists together, entitlement being one such trait. In other words, when vulnerable narcissists think, “I deserve more!” what is the “more” they are focusing on? Perhaps vulnerable narcissists do not harbor entitlement in the sense of desiring enhancing feedback, but desire accurate feedback to best diagnose how well they know themselves and how well they are able to convey that to others. This brings us to our ultimate goal in learning more about how vulnerable narcissists compare with grandiose narcissists. The results reported here already provide potential avenues for better distinguishing between the two types of narcissism, but exploring other areas of narcissists’ lives, such as their connecting features like entitlement, may afford even greater insights.
Shame-Rage Cycle

We know from past literature that vulnerable narcissists are hypersensitive to external information and have low self-esteem (Cooper, 1998; Kealy & Rasmussen, 2012; Rose, 2002). They are self-absorbed and uncertain about their desired outcomes. Because vulnerable narcissists have low self-worth, they may make more global, internal attributions for failure, which can lead to shame. To cope with shame, as noted by Tracy and Robins (2004), they externalize blame and experience anger and rage instead, leading to a perpetual shame-rage cycle.

Although we did observe increased shame and aggression among vulnerable narcissists who believed they performed well but received negative feedback, the lack of effects on reported anger prevents us from drawing causal links from shame to anger to aggression. The shame-rage cycle may not universally characterize vulnerable narcissists’ daily lives. Instead, as evidenced by this research, shame and rage, or aggression, may arise under different and more complex circumstances: shame as a result of personally, relevant mismatched self-beliefs and feedback, and rage or aggression as a result of mismatched self-beliefs and external information more broadly, independent of self-relevancy. Hence, encountering negative feedback out of line with one’s self-beliefs may specifically elicit shame-rage cycles. First internalizing emotions and feeling ashamed for not receiving feedback matched to their perceived performance, vulnerable narcissists may then turn those emotions into anger, eventually leading to antagonistic behavior. The shame-rage cycle then does not become activated under
either a) conditions of matching self-views with external feedback, or b) receiving satisfactory feedback. Thus, it seems vulnerable narcissists have a much greater probability of feeling shame in their daily lives than falling into a shame-rage cycle as posited by past literature.

Nonetheless, in order to provide the strongest support for these claims, other measurements in assessing emotions as a dependent variable should be explored and incorporated into these study designs. Too often participants report little to no emotion. It may be that difficulty in obtaining explicit self-reported emotions in these studies could be a result of the order of our design. Participants complete a cognitive measure before the affective measure; they rate their essay quality after receiving feedback but before rating their current emotions. As noted by Swann et al. (1987), this could diminish responses on the subsequent affective measure. Yet, difficulty in obtaining explicit self-reports of emotions is common in psychology (Mauss & Robinson, 2009); thus, utilizing implicit measures may prove fruitful.

In sum, the current studies provide evidence toward a clearer conceptual understanding of what it means to be a vulnerable narcissist. Nonetheless, continued research should better delineate the conditions under which shame and anger are uniquely evoked. At the present moment, it seems perceived deservingness of external information is enough to produce emotional turmoil, even when that external information may provide positive feedback! With daily life full of mixed information, however, how might vulnerable narcissists ever protect themselves from such turmoil? Consequently, future work is needed to better clarify the mechanisms behind emotional
turmoil and the phenomenological experience of vulnerable narcissists; this research represents a promising beginning.

Conclusion

The present research demonstrates the role of mismatched self-beliefs and outcomes in vulnerable narcissists’ emotional life. Specifically, the research explored how vulnerable narcissists react to external information that either confirmed or disconfirmed their self-beliefs pertaining to a performance dependent on the self-relevancy of the task. Across two studies, individuals high in vulnerable narcissism showed evidence of greater emotionality after conditions of mismatched self-beliefs and outcomes (e.g. reporting greater shame and anger after receiving negative feedback when believing they performed well, and also greater shame after receiving satisfactory feedback when believing they performed poorly). The present work suggests that emphasis on the perceptions of performance and the true nature of entitlement would enhance the understanding of vulnerable narcissists’ hypersensitive nature underlying their emotional life.
References


Appendix A: Study 1 Essay Prompt

It is now your turn to write an essay on the topic of "adjustment to college life." Your essay may be used as an example for incoming students.

The program will be recording your behavior as you write so that experimenter/s can observe your progress on a separate monitor in order to deliver feedback more quickly. In other words, as you type your essay, your progress will be live-streamed to two judges so that they may begin rating your work as you go along. This will help increase how efficiently the two separate judges will be able to evaluate the final essay you write and submit. By allowing the judges to view your writing process, time will not be wasted during the study and you will receive feedback in a timely manner.

As you write about "adjustment to college life," please try to be as truthful as possible, it helps if you use specific examples. You can write as much or as little as you would like, but approximately 200-400 words are recommended.
Appendix B: Feedback Conditions

Satisfactory Feedback:

The two judges have separately rated your essay and:
Have given different reviews. One judge rated your essay positively while the other rated it negatively.
Therefore, it is concluded that you have done a sufficient job on the writing task.

Negative Feedback:

The two judges have separately rated your essay and:
Have given similar reviews. Both judges rated your essay negatively.
Therefore, it is concluded that you have done a poor job on the writing task.
Appendix C: Study 2 Essay Prompts

Personal Essay Prompt:

It is now your turn to write a personal essay on the topic of "adjustment to college life." Your essay may be used as an example for incoming students. To write a quality essay, you may choose to use specific experiences from your life as examples or talk about what characteristics/qualities you possess that helped you in adjusting to college. What advice do you have for other students based on your own experience?

The computer will be recording your behavior as you write so that experimenter/s can observe your progress on a separate monitor in order to deliver feedback more quickly. In other words, as you type your essay, your progress will be live-streamed to two judges so that they may begin rating your work as you go along. This will help increase how efficiently the two separate judges will be able to evaluate the final essay you write and submit. By allowing the judges to view your writing process, time will not be wasted during the study and you will receive feedback in a timely manner.

As you write about "adjustment to college life," please try to be as truthful as possible. Again, it helps if you use specific, personal examples. You can write as much or as little as you would like, but approximately 200-400 words are recommended (this would fill up about half of the available space below).

General Essay Prompt:

It is now your turn to write an essay on the topic of "adjustment to college life." Your essay may be used as an example for incoming students. To write a quality essay, you may choose to use general examples or talk about what characteristics/qualities that can help an average student in adjusting to college. What advice might most students benefit from?

The computer will be recording your behavior as you write so that experimenter/s can observe your progress on a separate monitor in order to deliver feedback more quickly. In other words, as you type your essay, your progress will be live-streamed to two judges so that they may begin rating your work as you go along. This will help increase how efficiently the two separate judges will be able to evaluate the final essay you write and submit. By allowing the judges to view your writing process, time will not be
wasted during the study and you will receive feedback in a timely manner.

Again, as you write about "adjustment to college life," it helps if you use general examples for the average student. You can write as much or as little as you would like, but approximately 200–400 words are recommended (this would fill up about half of the available space below).
Appendix D: Hypersensitive Narcissism Scale (HSNS)

1. I can become entirely absorbed in thinking about my personal affairs, my health, my cares or my relations to others.

2. My feelings are easily hurt by ridicule or by the slighting remarks of others.

3. When I enter a room I often become self-conscious and feel that the eyes of others are upon me.

4. I dislike sharing the credit of an achievement with others.

5. I dislike being with a group unless I know that I am appreciated by at least one of those present.

6. I feel that I am temperamentally different from most people.

7. I often interpret the remarks of others in a personal way.

8. I easily become wrapped up in my own interests and forget the existence of others.

9. I feel that I have enough on my hands without worrying about other people’s troubles.

10. I am secretly “annoyed” when other people come to me with their troubles, asking me for my time and sympathy.
Appendix E: Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES)

1. I feel that I am a person of worth, at least on an equal basis with others.
2. I feel that I have a number of good qualities.
3. All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure. (R)
4. I am able to do things as well as most other people.
5. I feel that I do not have much to be proud of. (R)
6. I take a positive attitude toward myself.
7. On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.
8. I wish I could have more respect for myself. (R)
9. I certainly feel useless at times. (R)
10. At times I think that I am no good at all. (R)
Appendix F: Psychological Entitlement Scale (PES)

1. I honestly feel I’m just more deserving than others.
2. Great things should come to me.
3. If I were on the Titanic, I would deserve to be on the first lifeboat!
4. I demand the best because I’m worth it.
5. I do not necessarily deserve special treatment. (R)
6. I deserve more things in my life.
7. People like me deserve an extra break now and then.
8. Things should go my way.
9. I feel entitled to more of everything
Appendix G: Essay Quality

1. The quality of my writing was ___.
2. The quality of my examples were ___.
3. The advice I gave was ___.
4. Compared to others I probably did ___ on the writing task.
5. I had a ___ attitude while writing the essay.
6. It would be ___ if my essay was shown to others as an example in the future.
Appendix H: Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS)

1. Surprised
2. Ambivalent/Conflicted
3. Confused
4. Anxious
5. Distracted
6. Fearful
7. Annoyed
8. Ridiculous
9. Humiliated
10. Angry
11. Happy
12. Sympathetic
13. Proud
14. Self-Loving
15. Sad
16. Foolish
17. Stupid
18. Inspired
19. Ashamed
20. Mad
21. Disgusted
22. Self-Admiration
23. Excited
24. Guilty
Appendix I: Process Measures

1. The first [second] judge who provided negative [positive] feedback was _____.
   - Helpful
   - Stupid
   - Correct
   - Insightful
   - Wrong
   - Mistaken
   - Friendly
   - Honest
   - Useless
   - Valuable

2. I think the judges would want to be my friend if we met in person.

3. I think the judges see my skill level as high.

4. I was concerned with how much the judges like me.

5. I was concerned with how smart the judges thought I was.

6. I was confused on what the writing task was asking me to do.

7. I was unsure how to write a good essay.

8. I believe the feedback matched my writing performance.

9. I think the judges were correct in the feedback they gave me.

10. I believe the feedback I received was real.