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Nationalism as collective narcissism

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Abstract

Traditional conceptualisations of nationalism focus on the need for intergroup domination. We argue that current politics are rather driven by the need for recognition of the greatness of one's nation. In psychological literature, the need for the nation's appreciation is captured by the concept of collective narcissism—a belief in in-group greatness contingent on external recognition. We demonstrate that collective narcissism is associated with support for national populist parties and policies. We also review the empirical evidence for the intergroup and intragroup concomitants of collective narcissism. We demonstrate that collective narcissism benefits neither out-group nor in-group members. Instead, it helps manage psychological needs of the individual. We conclude that collective narcissism might undermine social cohesion both within and between groups.

Keywords: collective narcissism; nationalism; in-group identification; intergroup relations; intragroup relations

Highlights

- Modern-day nationalism is characterised by a need for the external recognition.
- The need for recognition of in-group's worth is typical for collective narcissism.
- Collective narcissism predicts undesirable inter- and intragroup outcomes.
- Collective narcissism serves the self, more than other in-group members.

Nationalism as collective narcissism

“Demand for recognition of one’s identity is a master concept that unifies much of what is going on in world politics today” (Fukuyama, 2018; p. XV).

The way people relate to their ethnic and national groups seems vital for understanding political tensions. Identity dynamics play an increasingly important role in shaping world politics. We observe rising dissatisfaction with supranational organizations such as the European Union or United Nations, and attempts to undermine the intergroup status quo in the Catalanian or Scottish referenda. Political leaders pledge strong allegiance to protecting their national groups from others. In line with Fukuyama’s (2018) insight, one way to understand current politics is to shift focus from political ideologies, understood as socially shared systems of beliefs about desired order of society in general (e.g., Jost, 2017), to people’s beliefs about their national and ethnic identities in particular.

As a vivid example, US President Donald Trump rarely refers to himself as a conservative, although he proudly (and unexpectedly for a Western politician) declares himself a nationalist. In political psychology, nationalism has usually been conceptualized as “a perception of national superiority and an orientation toward national dominance” (Kosterman & Feshbach, 1989, p. 271). Yet, Trump’s nationalism seems less focused on asserting US dominance over other nations, and more focused on ensuring the nation gains the recognition it is allegedly entitled to. “All I want for our country is to be treated (...) with respect,” Trump said. “For many years other countries that are allies of ours (...) have not treated our country fairly, so in that sense I am absolutely a nationalist and I’m proud of it.” (Samuels, 2018). Such nationalistic tendencies might be better captured by the concept of collective narcissism: a grandiose in-group image that is contingent upon external recognition of the in-group’s worth (Golec de Zavala, Cichocka, Eidelson, & Jayawickreme, 2009). Although the concept of collective narcissism can be used with reference to any social group,

be it ethnicity, religion, sports teams, or college peers (Golec de Zavala, Cichocka, & Iskra-Golec, 2013; Larkin & Fink, 2019; Marchlewska, Cichocka, Łozowski, Górska, & Winiewski, 2019), it seems to be especially relevant to understanding national identities.

We argue that collective narcissism can be perceived as an underlying attitudinal orientation that captures a defensive need for in-group recognition which, depending on context, can further manifest via more dominating or more aggrandising forms of excessive in-group commitment. Indeed, national collective narcissism tends to show moderate to strong associations with the dominating nationalism (Golec de Zavala, Peker, Guerra, & Baran, 2016; Lyons, Kenworthy, & Popan, 2010), as well as variables capturing group aggrandisement, such as blind patriotism (Schatz, Staub, & Lavine, 1999) or national glorification (Roccas, Klar, & Liviatan, 2006; for a review see Cichocka, 2016). This dynamic has parallels in individual narcissism—a feeling of entitlement and superiority combined with a craving for recognition, which is pursued either via self-promotion or other-derogation pathways (Grapsas, Brummelman, Back, & Denissen, 2019). In the case of collective narcissism, however, it is one's social group, rather than the self, that requires recognition.

Collective narcissism and politics

When studied in the context of national identity, collective narcissism emerges as a robust predictor of political attitudes and decisions, even over and above factors such as partisanship, ideology or authoritarianism (e.g., Federico & Golec de Zavala, 2018).

Collective narcissism has been consistently related to support for leaders and parties which can be characterised as national populist. In line with our argument that the need to acknowledge in-group's greatness characteristic for collective narcissism is visible in Trump's flavour of nationalism, several studies found that American collective narcissism

was associated with Trump support and ultimately casting a vote for him in the 2016 election (Federico & Golec de Zavala, 2018; Marchlewska, Cichocka, Panayiotou, Castellanos, & Batayneh, 2018). Collective narcissism was also associated with support for other national populist parties and leaders (e.g., the ruling right-wing Law and Justice party in Poland, Marchlewska et al., 2018; Fidesz party in Hungary; Forgas & Lantos, 2019) and voting Leave in the Brexit referendum or a potential “Polexit” referendum (Cislak, Pyrczak, Mikewicz, Cichocka, in press; Golec de Zavala, Guerra, & Simão, 2017; Marchlewska et al., 2018).

In fact, just to spite powerful out-groups, collective narcissists seem to be even willing to support policies that might hurt their in-group in the long run. In three studies conducted in Poland, national collective narcissism was found to be associated with support for harmful anti-conservation policies, such as subsidizing the coal industry and logging a protected forest listed by UNESCO. This support was partially driven by the need to resist external pro-environmental pressures of the EU (Cislak, Wojcik, & Cichocka, 2018). Apart from its strictly political implications, collective narcissism as a way of viewing one’s in-group has also important consequences for social cohesiveness.

Collective narcissism and intergroup relations

Collective narcissism can be seen as a defensive type of in-group commitment. Thus, it has been associated with an array of undesirable intergroup outcomes, such as exaggerated perceptions of threat to the in-group and a propensity for hostile responses to those threats (Golec de Zavala, Cichocka, & Iskra-Golec, 2013). Collective narcissists tend to be convinced not only that others undervalue the in-group, but also that they purposefully seek to undermine it. They are especially sensitive to any signs of disrespect or criticism. For example, collective narcissism was linked to insult hypersensitivity even if the alleged insult was “debatable, not perceived by others and not intended by the other group (Golec de

Zavala, et., al., 2016; p. 533)”. The relationship with hypersensitivity was even stronger for collective narcissism than for nationalism (measured as intergroup dominance).

The increased threat sensitivity explains why collective narcissism is related to belief in intergroup conspiracy theories (Biddlestone, Cichocka, Žeželj, & Bilewicz, in press). In the Polish context, national collective narcissism was linked to belief in a Jewish conspiracy (Golec de Zavala & Cichocka, 2012) or conspiracy theories surrounding the Smolensk plane crash (Cichocka, Marchlewska, Golec de Zavala, & Olechowski, 2016). In the US, it was associated with general beliefs in foreign (but not own) governments engaging in conspiracies (Cichocka et al., 2016) as well as with a more specific tendency to view political events in terms of group-based conspiracies around the 2016 presidential election (Golec de Zavala & Federico, 2018). Conspiracy beliefs seem to provide collective narcissists with an accessible explanation for the alleged disadvantage of their in-group, thereby enabling them to maintain a positive in-group image.

Because of the hypersensitivity to threat, collective narcissism is also linked to prejudice, especially towards groups which are perceived as chronically hostile or have a history of conflict with the in-group. For example, national collective narcissism was associated with mutual prejudice among Americans and Chinese (Cai & Gries, 2013; Gries, Sanders, Stroup, & Cai, 2015). In Poland, it was associated with prejudice towards ethnic minorities and refugees (Cichocka, Dhont, & Makwana, 2017; Golec de Zavala, Cichocka, & Bilewicz, 2013) and lower willingness to forgive past harms done to the in-group (Golec de Zavala et al., 2009; Hamer, Penczek, & Bilewicz, 2018).

Similarly to nationalism, national collective narcissism has also been linked to support for extreme intergroup violence and aggression, for instance military aggression in the US (Golec de Zavala et al., 2009). In Sri Lanka, Morocco and Indonesia, collective narcissism

was also associated with support for ideological extremism and political violence, especially in radical social contexts (e.g., when participants belonged to known terrorist organisations; Jasko et al., 2019; Yustisia, Putra, Kavanagh, Whitehouse, & Rufaedah, 2019). Support for such actions seems to be especially likely when in-group members feel somehow threatened. Just as individual narcissists react aggressively to real or imaginary criticisms and insults (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998), collective narcissism is associated with hostile and aggressive responses to perceived criticisms or insults to the in-group image. In a series of experiments, both national and university collective narcissism was associated with increased hostility towards out-groups criticising the in-group (manifested in willingness to hurt, humiliate and openly attack out-group members or to allocate them fewer resources; Golec de Zavala, Cichocka, & Iskra-Golec, 2013). The associations between collective narcissism and intergroup hostility are observed even controlling for other factors typically associated with negative out-group attitudes, such as blind patriotism, social dominance orientation or right-wing authoritarianism (see Golec de Zavala et al., 2009; Golec de Zavala, Cichocka, & Iskra-Golec, 2013; Golec de Zavala, Cichocka, & Bilewicz, 2013).

Collective narcissism and intragroup relations

A cynic could argue that even if collective narcissism is associated with hostile out-group attitudes, it might still be beneficial for in-group members. Indeed, some studies show links between strong in-group identity and extreme sacrifice for the in-group (Swann Jr., Gómez, Huici, Morales, & Hixon, 2010; Whitehouse, 2018). However, most recent findings suggest that collective narcissism might also ultimately harm the in-group (for instance, via support for anti-conservation policies, as we outlined above). Because collective narcissism is associated with individual shortcomings, it is likely to foster greater concern with how the in-group image reflects on the individual and a lesser concern with benefiting other in-group

members (Cichocka, 2016). Thus, it might not only be associated with undesirable out-group attitudes, but also potentially problematic relations within the group itself.

Collective narcissists seek to maintain a positive image of their in-group at all cost. Thus, they not only react aggressively to threats to in-group image, but also distance themselves from any accusations of in-group atrocities and deny historical accounts that challenge the positive image of the in-group (Klar & Bilewicz, 2017). At the same time, they tend to overestimate in-group members' heroic deeds (Bilewicz, Bulska, Babińska, Haska, & Winiewski, 2018) and their in-group's general contribution to world history (Putnam, Ross, Soter, & Roediger, 2018; Zaromb et al., 2018).

Yet, this concern for the image of the group does not necessarily translate into in-group loyalty or a concern for the well-being of in-group members. In one representative survey, national collective narcissism was associated with greater willingness to leave the motherland if one could be better off financially abroad (Marchlewska, Cichocka, Jaworska, Golec de Zavala, & Bilewicz, 2019). Evidence from the organizational context suggests that organisational collective narcissism predicts treating co-workers instrumentally for personal benefits (Cichocka, Cislak, Gronfeldt, Wojcik, & Winiewski, 2019). Finally, national collective narcissism was also associated with readiness to support and engage in government conspiracies that could potentially harm fellow citizens (such as spying on them or concealing information from the public; Biddlestone, Cichocka, & Cislak, 2019). For national collective narcissists the way the in-group is perceived by others seems to matter even more than the actual well-being of in-group members.

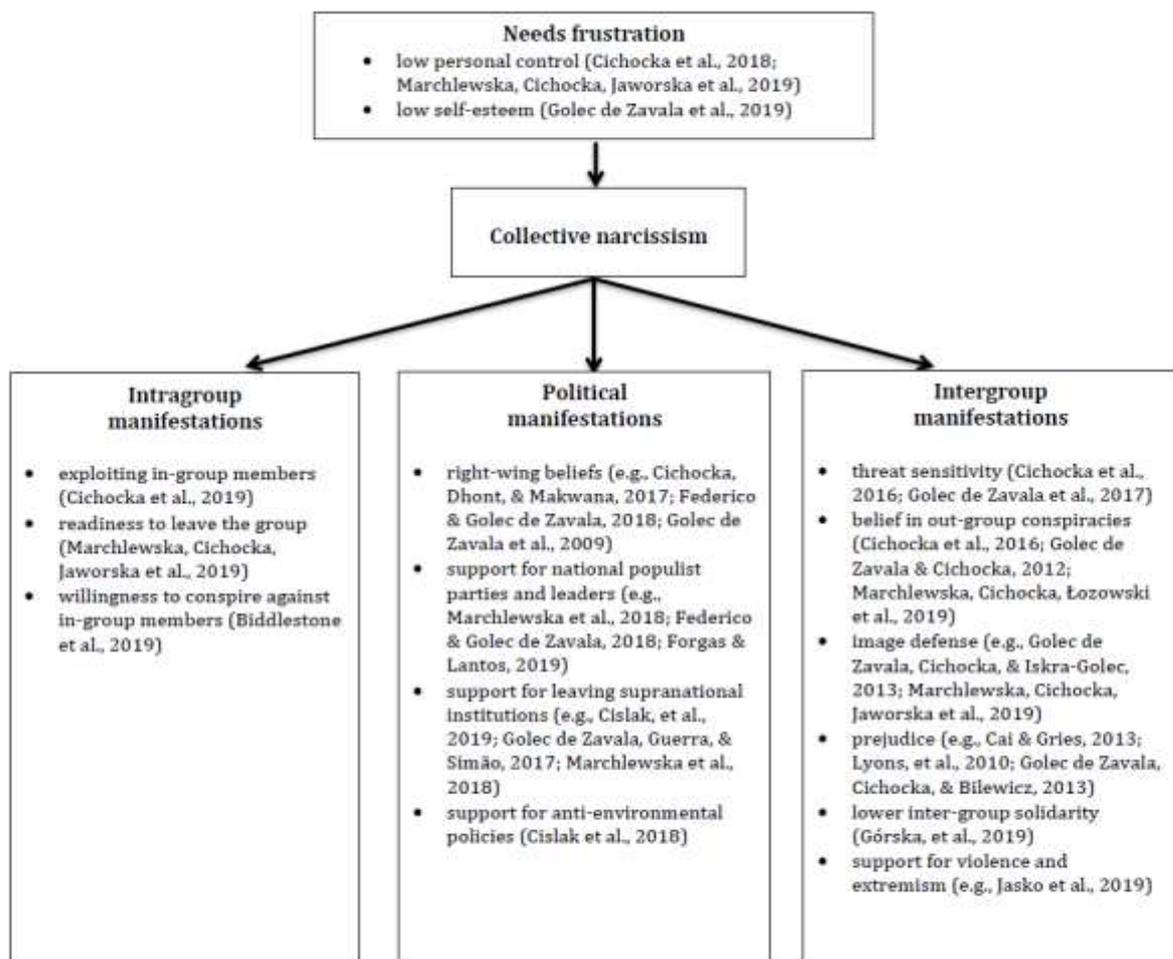


Figure 1. *Collective Narcissism: Antecedents and Manifestations*

The roots of collective narcissism

The concept of collective narcissism first appeared in the writings of Adorno (1963/1998) and Fromm (1973), who viewed it as an idealization of one's in-group that aims to compensate individual shortcomings. In line with this original theorizing, empirical research demonstrated that collective narcissism increases in response to frustrated individual needs. In a series of experimental and longitudinal studies, Cichocka and colleagues (2018) found that collective narcissism was higher when people felt they did not have control over their lives. Collective narcissism is also associated with generally low feelings of self-worth (Golec de Zavala et al., 2019). Despite a debate around the specific underlying motive (Golec de Zavala et al., 2019), researchers seem to agree that collective narcissism serves to

compensate frustrated individual needs. These findings suggest that when basic individual needs are not satisfied, people might turn to the in-group to derive their feelings of autonomy and self-worth from its image. As a result, they might be focused on how the group reflects on them and, thus, be especially motivated to maintain the image of an in-group as strong and respected by others.

In fact, collective narcissism might also increase as a result of one's resentment about the status of the in-group relative to other groups. Collective narcissism was shown to increase in response to in-group exclusion (Golec de Zavala et al., 2019). This can be the case even if the group is not objectively disadvantaged. For example, national collective narcissism was higher among those Americans who perceived they are being worse off than immigrants (Marchlewska et al., 2018; see also Sengupta, Osborne, & Sibley, 2019). Collective narcissism also mediated between feelings of group relative deprivation and support for Trump. Further, experimental research in the UK showed that manipulations enhancing perceptions that the UK has long been disadvantaged by the EU increased British collective narcissism, which was further linked to Brexit support (Marchlewska et al., 2018).

Is love for one's nation always problematic?

Most of the studies we discussed so far accounted for conventional forms of national identification (including centrality of this identity to the self, satisfaction with group membership, or ties with other group members; Cameron, 2004; Leach et al., 2008) or patriotism (pride in and attachment to one's nation, Kosterman & Feshbach, 1989). Because collective narcissism assumes a positive in-group evaluation, it is usually moderately positively correlated with these measures. Yet, after we co-vary out the variance shared between collective narcissism and conventional measures of national identification, we tend to observe more positive effects of the remaining secure in-group identification without the

defensive narcissistic component (Cichocka, 2016). For example, after the overlap with collective narcissism is accounted for, in-group identification does not predict hostile responses to threats or criticisms (Golec de Zavala, Cichocka, & Iskra-Golec, 2013; Marchlewska, Cichocka, Jaworska et al., 2019), and is generally associated with lower sensitivity to threat, lower endorsement of conspiracy theories (Cichocka et al., 2016), as well as greater tolerance of out-groups (Golec de Zavala, Cichocka, & Bilewicz, 2013). Secure in-group identification also predicts lower readiness to exploit in-group members for personal benefits (Cichocka et al., 2019). Instead, it seems to be positively associated with constructive commitment to the in-group and its members (manifest e.g., as greater political engagement; Huddy & Khatib, 2007).

Conclusions

Recent advances in research and theorizing on collective narcissism shed light on the nature and concomitants of modern-day nationalism. It seems that collective narcissism is compensatory, serving neither out-group nor in-group members in general. Instead, it serves individuals' own psychological needs by providing an accessible group-based ego-enhancement strategy. Future work should examine specific factors that facilitate the development of collective narcissism, as well as the contexts in which it leads to more aggrandising versus more dominating strategies in the struggle for in-group recognition. Such work would hopefully help elucidate ways one can manage recognition needs in more constructive ways. For now, recognizing that the current nationalisms and national populisms might be underlined by collective narcissism helps us understand the popularity of often problematic policies and social attitudes. When the in-group image becomes the main focus of national identity, we can expect further disregard for fellow in-group members and erosion of social cohesion. Building a great great wall or wearing a MAGA hat might not be enough to make the life of an average American great (again).

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This review introduces a motivational model of defensive and secure forms of in-group identification. In contrast to secure in-group identification, collective narcissism develops as a response to frustrated individual needs. As a consequence, both its out-group and in-group manifestations are socially undesirable.

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**Cislak, A., Wojcik, A. D., & Cichocka, A. (2018). Cutting the forest down to save your face: Narcissistic national identification predicts support for anti-conservation policies. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, *59*, 65–73.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvp.2018.08.009>

This paper reports three studies (one representative sample) investigating national collective narcissism, national identification, and support for anti-environmental policies. National collective narcissism, but not national identification, predicted support for policies that in the long-term may harm fellow in-group members and the national environmental heritage.

*Federico, C., & Golec de Zavala, A. (2018). Collective narcissism and the 2016 us presidential vote. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, *82*, 110–121.
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**Golec de Zavala, A., Cichocka, A., & Bilewicz, M. (2013). The paradox of in-group love: Differentiating collective narcissism advances understanding of the relationship between in-group and out-group attitudes. *Journal of Personality*, *81*, 16–28.

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This paper reports 5 studies from 2 countries investigating collective narcissism, identification, and out-group attitudes. Collective narcissism predicted out-group derogation, while in-group identification without the narcissistic component predicted greater out-group tolerance.

**Golec de Zavala, A., Cichocka, A., Eidelson, R., & Jayawickreme, N. (2009). Collective narcissism and its social consequences. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *97*, 1074–1096. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0016904>

In this paper a measure of collective narcissism is developed and validated. In five studies, authors showed that inter-group hostility is predicted by collective, but not individual, narcissism. Intergroup hostility was associated with collective narcissism over and above social dominance orientation, right-wing authoritarianism, and blind patriotism.

*Golec de Zavala, A., Cichocka, A., & Iskra-Golec, I. (2013). Collective narcissism moderates the effect of in-group image threat on intergroup hostility. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *104*, 1019–1039.

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We made history: Citizens of 35 countries overestimate their nation's role in world history. *Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition*, 7, 521–528.

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A survey of 6,185 students from 35 countries illustrates national narcissism. Participants were asked to estimate contributions of their own country into the world history. The summative estimation of the contribution of these 35 countries was 1156%, thus showing an egocentric bias in perceptions of their nations' roles in history.

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