Preprint: We will rescue Italy, but we dislike the European Union:

Collective narcissism and the COVID-19 threat

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Abstract

Collective narcissists manifest an outgroup hostility, especially as a reaction toward threats against one's group. In the current study, we examined the role of the COVID-19 threat in the associations between collective narcissism and intergroup relations referring to agency-

communion model of collective narcissism ($N = 662$; general Polish sample). Given that the COVID-19 threat is agentic (i.e., related to biological and economic danger), we expected it would be unrelated to the communal aspect of collective narcissism. We also expected the way in which collective narcissists would enhance their ingroup image is to modify the effects of the COVID-19 threat on intergroup relations. The results confirmed the agency-communion model of collective narcissism. In general, collective narcissists expressed negative attitudes toward the European Union and expressed more favourable attitudes toward China and a willingness to help Italians. However, the attitudes toward outgroups were suppressed by threat only for agentic aspect. The agentic aspect of narcissism was unrelated to intergroup prosocialness, while the communal aspect of narcissism was unrelated to negative attitudes toward the European Union. The COVID threat suppressed negative attitudes toward the European Union and positive attitudes toward China among collective narcissists.

The COVID-19 pandemic evoked a sense of biological, economic, and epistemic threat for individuals and societies (Ahorsu et al., 2020; WHO, 2020). In general, threats for ingroups are by its nature agentic (Ybarra et al., 2008) because they undermine the group's sense of security, control, and access to resources (Carroll, Arkin, Seidel, & Morris, 2009; Shnabel, Nadler, Ullrich, Dovidio, & Carmi, 2009; Stollberg, Fritsche, & Bäcker, 2015). In addition, threats motivate agentic reparative actions (SimanTov-Nachlieli, Shnabel, & Nadler, 2013). In the case of the COVID-19, people may experience agentic rather than communal threats, because the main, adverse effects of the pandemic seem to be a critical challenge for health and the global economy (WHO, 2020). Regardless of the nature of the threat, according to the integrated threat theory (Stephan & Stephan, 1996), one of the possible deleterious effects of such a situation is an increase in hostile attitudes toward outgroups if the threat is linked with a specific outgroup. Collective narcissism, defined as unrealistically favourable beliefs about ingroup greatness, accompanied by collective entitlement and grievance for lack of recognition (Golec de Zavala, Cichocka, Eidelson, & Jayavickseme, 2009), is followed by outgroup derogation (Cichocka et al., 2016; Golec de Zavala, Cichocka, & Bilewicz, 2013; Golec de Zavala, Cichocka, & Iskra-Golec, 2013). Collective narcissists are prone to react aggressively in response to ingroup threats (Golec de Zavala, Cichocka, & Iskra-Golec, 2013). However, ingroup enhancement could be manifested both in the agentic (e.g., being exceptionally powerful or affluent) and the communal (e.g., being exceptionally friendly or helpful) domain [BLINDED]. Given that communal collective narcissists build their inflated ingroup image on their exceptional tolerance and friendliness, such a form of ingroup enhancement could lead to paradoxical effects for intergroup relations. Indeed, communal collective narcissists have higher levels of intergroup prosocialness and they manifest greater social distance from refugees in the same time [BLINDED].

In the current study we examined to what extent a general COVID-related threat for one's ingroup could affect attitudes toward China and the European Union (i.e., outgroup derogation) and how collective narcissism is associated with helping Italy (i.e., intergroup prosocialness) in a sample of Poles. Italy was the first European country to be strongly affected by COVID-19 (WHO, 2020). Therefore, helping this country was broadly accepted by public opinion and for this reason we expected that helping Italians might be affected by communal ingroup enhancement. Collective narcissism is related to negative attitudes toward the European Union (Golec de Zavala, Dyduch-Hazar & Lantos, 2017). However, prior research indicates that only threats for ingroup status (Golec de Zavala et al., 2017) or that attacking inflated ingroup image (Golec de Zavala et al., 2009) lead to outgroup derogation. In the case of attitudes toward China, the way people view the threat may be different, because that country was blamed for controversial decisions in reaction to the pandemic and were, thus, viewed as, at least partially, responsible for it (e.g., Kraska, 2020; Miller & Starshak, 2020).

Therefore, we focus here on two research problems: (1) to what extent does the COVID-19 threat resemble effects of typical threats examined in the context of collective narcissism in the way it leads to outgroup derogation; (2) to what extent does ingroup enhancement moderate the effects of collective narcissism on attitudes toward other countries, both unfavourably (i.e., outgroup derogation) and favourably (i.e., intergroup prosocialness). To this end we examine direct and indirect (via perceived COVID-related threat) effects of agentic and communal collective narcissism on attitudes toward outgroups in a nationally representative sample from Poland at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. Both communal and agentic collective narcissists are sensitive toward threat because of their sense of the greatness of their group, yet, only communal collective narcissists may manifest paradoxical attitudes toward outgroups [BLINDED]. For this reason, we expect that both agentic and

communal collective narcissists manifest less favourable attitudes toward the European Union, because both are perceived as competing with our sample's national identity (i.e., Poland; Golec de Zavala et al., 2009; Golec de Zavala et al., 2017), communal collective narcissists will have lower levels of prejudice than agentic narcissists toward China, because China is both a victim and blameworthy (Kraska, 2020), and only communal collective narcissists will have higher levels of prosocialness [BLINDED], in this case toward Italians, who seen as relative victims compared to the Chinese. Further, we expect that the COVID-19 threat will mediate the link between collective narcissism and attitudes toward China and the European Union, because these attitudes are relevant for the COVID-19 pandemic. Given this threat is more agentic than communal and it should evoke agentic rather than communal reactions, we expect stronger effects for agentic collective narcissism than for communal collective narcissism. In the case of prosocialness toward Italy, we expect that threat might lead to increased helping, as it is an indicator of perceiving situations as serious and help as needed.

Method

Participants and Procedure

We administered a three-wave survey[1] to a nationally representative sample of 835 Polish adults using the Ariadna Internet research panel between the 15th of March and the 7th of April 2020. We did not predetermine the sample size as we aimed to have nationally representative data and we expected some drop outs between the waves of study. Once we included only participants who participated in all three waves and took the measures we are concerned with here, our final sample was 662 participants (368 women) aged 18 to 78 years (M_{age} = 45.98 years, SD_{age} = 14.95). Despite the removal of these participants, our sample was

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[1] Data was collected in three waves—with one week in between—to reduce common method bias (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Podsakoff, 2003).

adequately powered based on recent power analyses in this area (Golec de Zavala et al., 2019) and simulations in personality psychology (Schönbrodt & Perugini, 2013). Sensitivity analyses using *G**Power (3.1.9.2) indicated that size of studied sample is adequate (i.e., $\alpha = .05$, $\beta = .80$, one-tailed test) to detect correlational effects of $\rho \geq .10$. Participants were initially informed of the nature of the study, provided tick-box consent, completed the weekly measures (randomized presentation of scales within waves), and in each wave, participants were thanked and debriefed for their participation. This study was approved by the ethics committee of first author's institution (UG1/2016).

Agentic and communal collective narcissism were measured (wave 2) with the 9-item Agentic Collective Narcissism Scale (Golec de Zavala et al., 2009) and the 7-item Collective Communal Narcissism Inventory [BLINDED]. Participants were asked how much they agreed (1 = *definitely disagree*; 7 = *definitely agree*) with statements for the former (e.g., "I wish other groups would more quickly recognize authority of my group") and the latter (e.g., "My group is extraordinarily friendly toward other groups."); we removed one item (i.e., "If my group had more to say, the world would be a better place.") from the former to reduce redundancy and potential multicollinearity with an item from the latter (i.e., "My group will make the world a better place."). Responses were averaged to create indexes of each type of collective narcissism.

COVID-related threat was measured (wave 1) by a 3-item scale (IPSOS, 2020).[2] Participants were asked how much they perceived the coronavirus as a threat to them, to her/his family, to Poland, and to World (1 = *very low*; 5 = *very high*). Responses were averaged to create an index of threat.

Attitudes toward outgroups (i.e., the European Union and China) were measured (wave 1) by three items per outgroup. Participants were asked how much they agreed (1 =

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[2] https://www.ipsos.com/en-pk/coronavirus-opinion-and-reaction-results-multi-country-poll-feb-2020

definitely disagree; 7 = *definitely agree*) with the statements. We asked about (1) general acceptance of the outgroup's policies; (2) to what extent the outgroup's values were worth following; and (3) to what extent the participant was ready to defend the outgroup's policy Responses were averaged to create indexes of each outgroup attitude.

We assessed intergroup prosocialness (wave 3) by adopting Vollhardt and Staub's (2011) helping toward tsunami victims scenario by adapting it to the Polish language and the COVID-19 situation. Participants read a short description about the current situation in Italy (see Supplementary Materials) and then they responded to four questions corresponding to four of the six items of the Vollhardt and Staub scale, but replacing "U.S." with "Poland" [BLINDED]. A sample item is: "The Polish government has the responsibility to help Italy." We excluded one item referring to helping Poles in Italy because it was irrelevant for helping outgroups.

Results

Descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations are presented in Table 1. Agentic and communal collective narcissism were correlated. Thus, their relationships with other variables in our study were similar: both were related with less favourable attitudes toward the European Union, more positive attitudes toward China, COVID-related threat, and intergroup prosocialness. COVID-related threat was correlated with attitudes toward the European Union (positively) and China (negatively).

Given the correlation between agentic and communal collective narcissism was not multicollinear (Variance Inflation Factor = 3.07), we tested their effects independently henceforth. We used multiple regression to establish the direction of the effects, and commonality analyses to decompose the regressions (Ray-Mukherjee, Nimon, Mukherjee, Morris, Slotow, & Hamer, 2014). Thus, we established the direction and magnitude of unique effects of both forms of narcissism and, to overcome the relationship between the two,

common effects of both forms of narcissism. We examined different mediation effects (see Fairchild, MacKinnon, Taborga, & Taylor, 2009) by analysing (1) common effects for agentic collective narcissism and threat, (2) common effects for communal collective narcissism and threat, and (3) common effects for both narcissism forms and threat.

First, we conducted a multiple regression where both forms of narcissism predicted COVID-related threat. Both forms of collective narcissism explained a total of 3.39% of COVID-related threat variance ($F[2, 659] = 11.56$, $p < .001$). Agentic collective narcissism was uniquely (and positively) related to COVID-related threat ($\beta = .20$, 95% CI [.06, .33], $p < .01$, 1.29% variance explained, 37.95% of total R^2), while collective communal narcissism was not ($\beta = -.02$, 95% CI [-.15, .11], $p = .805$, 0.01% variance explained, 0.26% of total R^2). Nevertheless, most of the variance explained was common to both forms of narcissism (2.09% variance explained, 61.79% of total R^2).

Then, we conducted three multiple regressions where both narcissism forms and threat predicted (1) attitudes toward the European Union, (2) attitudes toward China, and (3) intergroup prosocialness toward Italy (Table 2). The predictors explained a total of 13.43% of variance in attitudes toward the European Union, most of which was explained, commonly, by both collective forms of narcissism (negatively), which was slightly suppressed by threat (see common effect of all three predictors on attitude toward the European Union in Table 2). Moreover, we detected unique, negative effects of both narcissism forms and a unique positive effect of threat. Similar analysis conducted for attitudes toward China explained 6.20% of its variance, which was mostly explained, commonly, by both forms of narcissism (negatively). Again, this relationship was slightly suppressed by COVID-related threat (Table 3). We also detected a unique, positive effect of communal collective narcissism and a unique negative effect of COVID-related threat. In the third analysis, we explained 3.49% of intergroup prosocialness variance by both forms of narcissism (positively) and uniquely

(positively) by collective communal narcissism. The relationship between the shared portion of common both forms of narcissism and intergroup prosocialness was slightly mediated by threat (Table 2).

Discussion

We examined how collective narcissists perceive two possible threatening outgroups in the context of the COVID-threat, looking into general effects of collective narcissism, and its agentic and communal aspects. We examined also how collective narcissists express their willingness to helping the outgroup victim of the pandemic. We found that collective narcissists expressed less favourable attitudes toward the European Union, confirming former findings (Golec de Zavala et al., 2017). Collective narcissists expressed positive attitudes toward China and would like to help Italians. However, consistent with our assumption about the agentic nature of the COVID-19 threat, the communal aspect of narcissism was unrelated to higher perceived threat. People perceiving the coronavirus as a threat also perceived the European Union in more positive way, wanted to help Italians more, and perceived China in a less favourable way. Negative attitudes expressed by collective narcissists toward the European Union and positive attitudes toward China were suppressed by perceived threat, but this suppression was absent for the communal aspect of collective narcissism. Therefore, the meaning of the threat evoked by the pandemic was moderated by the domain of ingroup enhancement. In general, collective narcissists manifested both outgroup hostility and intergroup prosocialness, but the negative attitudes toward the European Union were not related to the communal aspect of collective narcissism, while intergroup prosocialness toward Italians and positive attitudes toward China were unrelated to agentic aspect of collective narcissism. Therefore, collective narcissists may be driven both by communal and agentic motives, but only agentic motives are threatened by COVID-19. This finding was in line with prior findings indicating that intergroup hostility is related to perceiving outgroups

as a threat (Golec de Zavala et al., 2013). However, direct effects of collective narcissism on attitudes toward outgroups were much stronger than indirect ones, suggesting that COVID-related threat had limited impact on how (Polish) collective narcissists perceive outgroups.

Our study revealed paradoxical effects of collective narcissism on intergroup relations, this time as a result of experiencing the COVID-19 pandemic. Collective narcissism is predominantly agentic [BLINDED], and for this reason agentic threat does not affect intergroup relations in communal domain. Collective narcissists manifest ambivalent attitudes toward the European Union, as a threat for national interest and independency (Golec de Zavala et al., 2017), yet at the same time the European Union could serve as an ally in the common battle against this global threat evoked by the pandemic. China is a distant country, not perceived as likely aggressor towards Poles, yet, collective narcissists experiencing higher levels of threat express less favourable attitudes toward China. It is possible that collective narcissists blame China for the pandemic.

Limitations and Further Directions

Our study was conducted on a homogenous sample, in a relatively affluent society, that has not been seriously affected (< .02% as of 15 April 2020) by the pandemic. While we collected data over three weeks, because the rates of infection across these weeks were rather stable (i.e., Poland experienced no surge in infection over this period), it is reasonable to assume that there was cross-weekly equivalence in our measurement. In general, attitudes toward the European Union were more favourable than toward China, confirming the ecological validity of the study. We found that even such a serious biological threat as a global pandemic has rather a negligible impact on the persistent attitudes of collective narcissists toward outgroups. Collective narcissists merely manifest less favourable attitudes toward the European Union and more favourable ones toward China, even though collective narcissists experience threat for their agentic motives. While the effects detected in our study

were low, they were not particular low when compared to effects in similar studies (Golec de Zavala et al., 2009, 2013).

In addition, our study was limited by its correlational design. Subsequent research might adopt quasi-experimental or experimental methods to better determine the causal effects of the COVID-19 threat on attitudes towards outgroups and the potential moderating/mediating role of agentic and communal collective narcissism. Further studies could elaborate more on other possible mediators and factors important for the link between collective narcissism and attitudes toward outgroups, like ingroup enhancement (i.e., communal and agentic), social desirability, or cultural distance toward outgroups.

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Table 1. *Descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations among studied variables.*

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Agentic Collective Narcissism						
2. Communal Collective Narcissism	.82**					
3. COVID-19 threat	.18**	.15**				
4. Attitudes toward the EU	-.31**	-.29**	.13**			
5. Attitudes toward China	.18**	.22**	-.09*	.08		
6. Prosocialness toward Italy	.13**	.18**	.07	.30**	.22**	
Cronbach's α	.90	.97	.82	.96	.95	.86
M	4.08	3.79	3.70	4.59	3.01	3.89
SD	1.38	1.61	0.72	1.38	1.31	1.16

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Table 2. *Correlational effects of collective narcissism forms and COVID-related threat on attitudes toward the European Union and China, and intergroup prosocialness toward Italy.*

	Attitudes toward the EU $[F_{(3,658)} = 34.02, p < .001]$			Attitudes toward China $[F_{(3,658)} = 14.49, p < .001]$			Prosocialness toward Italy $[F_{(3,658)} = 7.93, p < .001]$		
Multiple regression analyses									
Predictors	β	95% CI	*p*	β	95% CI	*p*	β	95% CI	*p*
Agentic [A] Collective Narcissism	-.24	[-37, -.12]	< .001	.03	[-.10, .16]	.630	-.05	[-.18, .08]	.463
Communal [C] Collective Narcissism	-.12	[-.25, .00]	.050	.21	[.08, .34]	.002	.21	[.08, .34]	.002
COVID-related threat	.19	[.12, .26]	< .001	-.13	[-.20, -.05]	.001	.05	[-.03, .13]	.187
Commonality analyses									
Effects	Variance explained	% of total explained variance		Variance explained	% of total explained variance		Variance explained	% of total explained variance	
Total (R^2)	.13	100%		.06	100%		.04	100%	
Direct effects									
Unique for Agentic Collective Narcissism	.02	14.11%		.00	0.53%		.00	2.27%	
Unique for Communal Collective Narcissism	.01	3.79%		.01	23.13%		.02	42.25%	
Unique for COVID-related threat	.03	25.25%		.02	24.56%		.00	7.33%	
Common for A & C Collective Narcissism	.01	70.45%		.04	63.43%		.01	40.20%	
Indirect effects (via COVID-related threat)									
Common for Agentic Collective Narcissism and COVID-related threat	-.01	-3.86%		.00	-0.51%		.00	-0.82%	
Common for Communal Collective Narcissism and COVID-related threat	.00	0.19%		.00	0.46%		.00	-0.33%	
Common for A & C Collective Narcissism and COVID-related threat	-.01	-9.94%		-.01	-11.60%		.00	9.11%	

Note. Negative coefficients in commonality analyses indicate suppression effects.