

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Employee narcissism and promotability prospects

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**Abstract**

**Introduction:** Narcissistic individuals often rise to positions of influence, but how so? Upward mobility in formal hierarchies is frequently contingent upon supervisory evaluations. We examined the relation between employee narcissism and supervisor promotability ratings, testing predictions from the display of power perspective (narcissism will positively predict promotability due to higher perceived power) and impression management perspective (narcissism will positively predict promotability due to self-promotion).

**Method:** In two multisource studies involving employees and their supervisors from diverse organizations (S1:  $N_{\text{employees}} = 166$ ;  $N_{\text{supervisors}} = 93$ ; S2:  $N_{\text{employees}} = 128$ ;  $N_{\text{supervisors}} = 85$ ), we measured employee narcissism (S1, S2), employee sense of power, employee impression management tactics toward the supervisor (S2), and employee promotability as rated by supervisors (S1–S2). Further, in an experiment (S3:  $N = 181$ ), we tested the causal effect of employee sense of power on promotability.

**Results:** Results favored the display of power perspective. Although narcissism predicted both higher self-promotion toward the supervisor and greater sense of power, it was the latter that explained the positive relation between employee narcissism and promotability ratings.

**Conclusion:** Employees high on narcissism act as if they have more power in organizations, and thus, demonstrate behavior that would be expected in higher level positions. The findings help to explain narcissistic individuals' rise through the ranks.

**KEYWORDS**

impression management, narcissism, power, promotability

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

“If it looks like a duck, swims like a duck, and quacks like a duck, then it probably is a duck.”

This idiom is an example of deductive reasoning that people often use when making categorizations: If something has distinguishing features of a particular category, they assume it to be an instance of that category. People apply similar reasoning

when deciding who should be elevated to positions of influence (Lord et al., 1984). If someone exhibits prototypical characteristics expected of those in a high-influence position, such as confidence, dominance, Extraversion, and self-efficacy (Judge et al., 2002), this person is more likely to be chosen for such a position. This practice may explain why individuals scoring higher on the agentic/grandiose narcissism spectrum (Aslinger et al., 2018; Foster & Campbell, 2007)—those with an unduly and highly exaggerated self-image who exude

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the abovementioned characteristics—are often found at upper echelons of organizations (Sedikides & Campbell, 2017; Watts et al., 2013). Unfortunately, narcissistic individuals also possess undesirable attributes, such as exploitativeness, lack of empathy, aggression toward critics, and disregard of expert advice (Sedikides, 2021; Thomaes et al., 2018). Their rise to influential positions can thus pose problems for employees, organizations, and society at large. It is critical, then, to understand *how* narcissistic individuals may ascend formal hierarchies.

## 1.1 | Evaluations of narcissistic employees

Narcissistic individuals are strongly characterized by motives for status and power, and so are attracted to hierarchies that offer them such opportunities and that they feel confident they can scale (Grapsas et al., 2020; Zitek & Jordan, 2016). In addition to their own active pursuit of hierarchical ascension, narcissistic individuals need the involvement of other members in the hierarchy to help them pave their way. One pathway that would facilitate narcissistic individuals' climb to the top is the support of their short-term peer groups, in which they are consistently chosen as leaders (Brunell et al., 2008; Grijalva et al., 2015). A second pathway enabling narcissistic individuals' strivings for status and power would be through job selection processes, where they could capitalize on their assertive demeanor, charm, and overconfidence to convey positive first impressions (Back et al., 2010; Paulhus, 1998), thus, potentially biasing raters' evaluations (Barrick et al., 2010) in their favor and enhancing their chances of being hired. Indeed, individuals high on narcissism perform well in selection contexts that rely on subjective ratings, such as interviews (Campbell et al., 2011; Paulhus et al., 2013) and leaderless group discussions (Brunell et al., 2008). However, being elected by one's peers following short-term group interactions, or being hired during job selection, are not the only routes to attain higher level positions. Most organizations have formal hierarchical structures, where employees get promoted to higher level functions based on supervisory evaluations of employees over the long-term (De Pater et al., 2009; Thacker & Wayne, 1995).

If a supervisor perceives an employee as promotable (i.e., as having capacities and willingness to perform effectively at higher job levels; De Pater et al., 2009), this employee will likely receive the necessary support for upward mobility, resulting in promotions, and career success (Wayne et al., 1999). We note that supervisor ratings of employee promotability differ from their ratings of employee performance. Promotability evaluations are not primarily based on how the employee is currently performing, but rather on how they are expected to perform in a different, higher level role (De Pater et al., 2009), and justifiably so: Performance in one's current job does not guarantee success in another

role at a higher organizational level (Conger & Fulmer, 2003; Pluchino et al., 2010). Thus, promotability evaluations would be based much more on imperfect information and signals or cues of an employees' future potential rather than simply on their current performance. Consistent with this claim, employee performance ratings show only a modest relation with their promotability ratings (De Pater et al., 2009; Rubin et al., 2010).

Although obtaining higher level positions through peer nominations or in a selection context might occur after short-term interactions, supervisory evaluations of employees' promotability are often based on longer term observations of employee functionality. Interestingly, narcissists may be initially evaluated positively, both on popularity and leadership capabilities, but these positive impressions diminish over time as others become aware of narcissistic individuals' undesirable characteristics (Leckelt et al., 2015; Ong et al., 2016; Paulhus, 1998). This phenomenon poses a crucial question. Are narcissistic individuals successful in convincing their supervisors of their potential, when evaluations are based on longer term impressions? Prior research does show that narcissistic employees are more successful at securing higher salaries (Spurk et al., 2016), an objective indicator of career success, which could be indicative of being seen as promotable by their supervisors.

On the basis of previous research on the association between power cues and promotability, and between impression management and promotability, we offer competing theoretical perspectives (Platt, 1964; Sedikides et al., 2013) as to the underlying mechanism that would explain narcissistic individuals' favorable promotability evaluations. These are the display of power perspective and the impression management perspective.

## 1.2 | Display of power perspective

The motivation of narcissistic individuals to get ahead and their personal sense of power may serve as cues for managerial potential (Sedikides & Campbell, 2017). This, in turn, might be linked with higher promotability perceptions (Blickle et al., 2011; Paustian-Underdahl et al., 2016).

In particular, individuals high on narcissism believe that they make superior leaders (Grijalva & Zhang, 2016), and this, along with their desire for status and power, drives them to ascend formal hierarchies (Grapsas et al., 2020; Zitek & Jordan, 2016). They also behave as if they have influence over group members (Sedikides & Campbell, 2017). The literature indicates that people with high perceptions of their power exhibit similar behavior to those with structurally high power (e.g., control over resources), such as being more outspoken and assertive or less likely to show concessions (Anderson & Galinsky, 2006; Galinsky et al., 2015). Thus,

even when they do not possess formal power, narcissistic employees would perceive to have power and, as such, would exhibit the behavior of someone who belongs higher up the hierarchical ladder.

How do narcissistic individuals' subjective beliefs in their power translate into promotability ratings? Signaling theory (Spence, 1973) suggests that, in making promotability evaluations, supervisors rely on available signals (i.e., observable personal attributes) of employee's future potential of being successful in higher level functions (Rubin et al., 2010). Given that interpersonal influence and politics become more relevant with increasing job complexity at higher organizational levels, supervisors will need to take into account employees' ability to gain power (so that they exert influence and be effective in politics) in their jobs when evaluating employees' career growth potential (Liu et al., 2010). Therefore, if employees perceive that they have power in their work and start to exercise discretionary power in their work roles, then, their soaring presence in the team and visible influence would likely serve as a positive signal for their supervisor concerning their future potential. Additionally, exercising influence over others may help such employees compete better against their rival peers, which, according to the contest-mobility model of career success, would likewise improve their chances for career mobility (Liu et al., 2010). Finally, power may also serve as a cue for competence (Anderson & Kilduff, 2009), further signaling narcissistic individuals' future potential in a higher level function. Indeed, as we mentioned before, beliefs in one's own power, irrespective of the actual sociostructural position, lead one to behave in more effective ways so as to increase eventually their actual power (Anderson et al., 2012; Galinsky et al., 2015). Taken together, this literature advocates that, due to their greater personal sense of power, narcissistic employees will be perceived as more promotable.

### 1.3 | Impression management perspective

Narcissistic individuals' need to impress high-status others (Giacomin et al., 2018), coupled with their desire to ascend formal hierarchies (Zitek & Jordan, 2016), implies that narcissistic employees will be particularly motivated to use impression management tactics to present themselves favorably to their supervisors. One such tactic, self-promotion, is aimed at highlighting one's competencies and involves taking credit for positive events, making others aware of one's accomplishments, and emphasizing one's performances (Bolino et al., 2014). Another tactic, ingratiation, is aimed at increasing likeability through the use of flattery and agreeable or helping behavior (Jones, 1964).

Although self-promotion can be effective during job interviews (Barrick et al., 2009; Melchers et al., 2020), it may

backfire in obtaining favorable performance ratings from supervisors in work-settings (Higgins et al., 2003) where supervisors can more readily verify exaggerated claims of competence (Steinmetz et al., 2017). Ingratiation, by contrast, has been linked to higher supervisory ratings of employee likeability (Wayne et al., 1997) and performance (Higgins et al., 2003). Nonetheless, the success of both of these impression management tactics in soliciting favorable ratings from the target hinges on the social astuteness of the actor (Harris et al., 2007; Turnley & Bolino, 2001). According to social influence theory (Levy et al., 1998), individuals who are more skilled at impression management tactics will also be more successful in conveying a particular image to the target person. For instance, a socially skilled employee using self-promotion and ingratiation may convey an image of competence and likeability, whereas an employee with low social skills may convey an image of conceit and sycophancy to their supervisors (Turnley & Bolino, 2001). Thus, social skills enable the actor to engage in subtler forms of impression management so that the behavior appears genuine rather than instrumental (Harris et al., 2007). Narcissistic individuals are known to be strategic in changing their behavior as means of achieving their goals (e.g., being prosocial in front of an audience; Konrath et al., 2016), and their manipulateness makes them highly attuned to social contexts (Rauthmann, 2011) in which they perceive opportunities for furthering their interests. Moreover, individuals who score high on narcissism possess charm and enthusiasm, which helps them persuade others that the idea they are pitching is creative, despite lack of objective evidence (Goncalo et al., 2010). Hence, given narcissistic individuals' ability to adjust their behavior in social contexts in line with their interests as well as their charisma and verbal persuasion skills, we expect them to be able to use impression management tactics skillfully.

Although narcissistic individuals implement both types of impression management tactics in their general social interactions (Hart et al., 2016; Sedikides & Campbell, 2017), we expect that self-promotion will be their preferred tactic in work-related settings. Self-promotion is more consistent with narcissistic individuals' need to boost their image and flaunt their talent (Hart et al., 2016), and their need to be seen as competent is especially triggered in performance-settings (Wallace & Baumeister, 2002; Woodman et al., 2011).

### 1.4 | Overview

We assessed the relation between narcissism and promotability (Studies 1 and 2) and gauged the relative plausibility of the power and impression management perspectives (Study 2), with data obtained from supervisors and employees across several industries. We also conducted an experiment (Study 3) to test the causal effect of the underlying

mechanism (i.e., sense of power) on promotability. By examining the relation between employees' narcissism and supervisors' evaluations of promotability—a key predictor of actual promotions and career success (De Pater et al., 2009)—we extend substantially the literature on the rise of narcissistic leaders and expand understanding of how narcissistic individuals attain higher level positions. Also, by focusing on power and impression management tactics, we identify the type of behavior that influences supervisors' perceptions of narcissistic individuals' potential to rise in organizations. The protocol for all studies was approved by the Faculty of Social and Behavioral Sciences Ethics Review Board at University of Amsterdam. Our data<sup>1</sup> are available on OSF [https://osf.io/d9njf/?view\\_only=cb4aa1b356664c1a80efe920a9ebd585](https://osf.io/d9njf/?view_only=cb4aa1b356664c1a80efe920a9ebd585).

## 2 | STUDY 1

Study 1 constitutes a foray into the link between narcissism and promotability.

### 2.1 | Method

#### 2.1.1 | Sample and procedure

We recruited participants by asking administrative personnel within different industries (e.g., business services, education, and health care) in The Netherlands to distribute a study invitation to employees. By doing so, we obtained email addresses of employees at different organizations and requested their participation. Further, we asked participants who had already completed the online survey to nominate additional employees and provide their email addresses. All surveys were in Dutch. The stimulus materials (in this study and also in Study 2) were translated and back-translated by a committee of bilinguals (Brislin, 1980).

Participants completed the online supervisor or employee survey. When we approached the supervisor first, we asked them to nominate up to 10 employees who they directly supervised, and subsequently we randomly selected three of these for the supervisors to evaluate. In this manner, we aimed to minimize selection bias. We then invited these selected employees to complete the employee survey. When we approached the employee first, we asked them to provide an email address of their direct supervisor, whom we subsequently invited to complete the supervisor survey. To encourage study involvement, we offered participants the opportunity to receive a summary of the results; in addition, six dyads (i.e., supervisor-employee pairs) could win vouchers in a raffle. Participation was voluntary and confidential, and all participants gave informed consent.

We determined the sample size for testing a general linear model via a G\*Power analysis (Faul et al., 2007), using the following parameters: power = .80,  $\alpha$  = .05, number of predictors = 3, number of tested predictors = 1 (narcissism). We set the expected effect size to small-to-medium ( $f^2$  = 0.085), which required a minimum sample of 95 employees. With respect to the multilevel nature of our data, with employees being nested in supervisors, we checked our sample size against Monte Carlo simulations for estimating two-level models with various specifications (Arend & Schäfer, 2019). Based on these simulations, a sample size of 80 at level 2 (i.e., number of supervisors) and a cluster size of 3 (i.e., number of employees per supervisor) can provide sufficient power  $\geq 0.80$  for detecting small to medium effect sizes (minimum detectable standard effect size = 0.21) testing level 1 predictors (i.e., narcissism).

Out of 61 supervisors who were nominated for participation by their employees, 48 (78.6%) completed the survey. An additional 62 supervisors completed the survey after being directly invited via other recruitment modes listed above, resulting in a total of 110 completed supervisor surveys. Out of 210 employees who were nominated by their supervisor to participate, 120 (57.1%) completed the online survey. An additional 75 employees completed the survey after being directly invited via recruitment modes mentioned above, resulting in 195 employees who completed the survey. We determined the final sample size by the number of completed employee surveys that we could match with supervisor ratings of these employees. We matched supervisors and employees using email addresses, with the final sample size consisting of 166 employees rated by 93 supervisors. Employees ( $M_{\text{age}} = 39.20$  years,  $SD = 13.16$ ; 72.3% women) had an average tenure of 6.06 ( $SD = 7.16$ ) years, had worked with their supervisor for 3.01 ( $SD = 3.67$ ) years, and 81.4% completed higher education. Supervisors ( $M_{\text{age}} = 43.70$  years,  $SD = 11.97$ ; 51.6% women) had an average tenure of 5.77 ( $SD = 6.58$ ) years, had 24.44<sup>2</sup> ( $SD = 38.27$ ) employees reporting to them on average, and 89.2% completed higher education. On average, the sample featured 1.78 employees per supervisor (range = 1–5).

#### 2.1.2 | Measures

Employees completed measures of narcissism, and supervisors evaluated the employees' promotability.

##### *Narcissism*

Employees filled out the 40-item Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Terry, 1988). Participants responded to the narcissism option from each of the original forced-choice items (e.g., “I want to amount to something in the eyes of the world,” “If I ruled the world it would be

**TABLE 1** Means ( $M$ ), standard deviations ( $SD$ ), and correlations among employee level variables (study 1 and study 2)

| Variables                     | $M_{S1}$ | $SD_{S1}$ | 1                  | 2      | 3       | 4       | 5                  | 6     | $M_{S2}$ | $SD_{S2}$ |
|-------------------------------|----------|-----------|--------------------|--------|---------|---------|--------------------|-------|----------|-----------|
| 1. Gender <sup>a</sup>        | 0.72     | 0.45      | —                  | 0.23** | -0.22** | -0.07   |                    |       | 0.60     | 0.49      |
| 2. Tenure (years)             | 6.06     | 7.16      | -0.01              | —      | -0.24** | -0.21** |                    |       | 5.79     | 7.70      |
| 3. Narcissism                 | 13.84    | 6.09      | -0.30**            | -0.09  | —       | 0.24*   |                    |       | 4.91     | 2.89      |
| 4. Promotability <sup>b</sup> | 4.61     | 1.50      | -0.04              | -0.12  | 0.20*   | —       |                    |       | 5.22     | 1.28      |
| 5. Ingratiation               |          |           | -0.17 <sup>†</sup> | -0.19* | 0.14    | 0.05    | —                  |       | 1.95     | 0.73      |
| 6. Self-promotion             |          |           | -0.24**            | -0.21* | 0.29**  | 0.20*   | 0.47**             | —     | 2.19     | 0.82      |
| 7. Sense of power             |          |           | 0.15 <sup>†</sup>  | 0.04   | 0.27**  | 0.31**  | -0.17 <sup>†</sup> | -0.10 | 5.25     | 0.71      |

Note: Study 1 ( $N = 157$ – $166$ ) correlations are presented above the diagonal and Study 2 ( $N = 128$ ) correlations are presented below the diagonal.

<sup>a</sup>0 = man; 1 = woman.

<sup>b</sup>Rated by the supervisor.

<sup>†</sup> $p < .10$ ; \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ .

a much better place,” “I am an extraordinary person”) as either true or false (1 = true, 0 = false; possible range = 0–40; Nevicka et al., 2011). We then summed the “true” responses to calculate the total score ( $\alpha = .83$ ; ICC[1] = .10).

We explored how the three NPI subscales, as established by prior research (Ackerman et al., 2011), related to promotability. The subscales were: Leadership/Authority (LA: 11 items;  $\alpha = .70$ ), Grandiose Exhibitionism (GE: 10 items;  $\alpha = .63$ ), and Entitlement/Exploitativeness (EE: 4 items;  $\alpha = .24$ ). Additionally, given the close conceptual link between Leadership/Authority (i.e., seeing oneself as a good leader, being assertive, and having authority) and promotability, we also checked whether removing Leadership/Authority items from the scale affected the findings (GE and EE collapsed: 14 items;  $\alpha = .63$ ). To facilitate comparison of the subscales, we computed average instead of sum scores (possible range = 0–1).

### Promotability

Supervisors rated each of their employees' promotion prospects on two items: (a) “This employee has a good chance of climbing the organizational ladder” and (b) “I would recommend this employee for a promotion” (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree;  $\alpha = .94$ ; ICC[1] = .07). This brief measure corresponds closely to establish promotability measures (Blickle et al., 2011; Paustian-Underdahl et al., 2016; Thacker & Wayne, 1995). Nevertheless, we proceeded to validate it in a sample of 50 American working MTurkers ( $M_{\text{age}} = 32.68$ ,  $SD = 9.09$ ; 70% men;  $M_{\text{tenure}} = 5.81$ ,  $SD = 3.65$ ; 96% completed higher education) who were selected on the premise that they supervised employees ( $M = 11.56$  employees,  $SD = 13.92$ ). First, we randomly presented participants with a letter and asked them to answer the questions for an employee whose last name started with, or was closest to, that letter (thus, minimizing potential selection bias). Participants indicated that they had worked with their selected employee

on average 2.95 years ( $SD = 2.02$ ). Sixty-four percent of the employees were men. Next, participants completed our 2-item promotability measure ( $\alpha = .88$ ), the 3-item promotability measure of Thacker and Wayne (1995; e.g., “I believe that this employee will have a successful career;”  $\alpha = .76$ ), and the 4-item promotability measure of Blickle et al. (2011; e.g., “This employee can be considered for higher jobs”). We removed the last item from the Blickle et al. (2011) measure, improving internal consistency (from  $\alpha = .63$  to  $\alpha = .83$ ). Our measure of promotability correlated significantly with both the Thacker and Wayne (1995) measure,  $r = .84$ ,  $p < .001$ , and the Blickle et al. (2011) measure,  $r = .86$ ,  $p < .001$ .<sup>3</sup> Finally, a factor-analysis (oblique rotation) showed that all eight items loaded onto one component, the KMO statistic was .91, and both our promotability items had a factor loading of  $>.85$ . Thus, the results supported the validity of our promotability measure.

### Control variables

We included employee gender as a control variable, given that men score higher on narcissism than women (Grijalva, Newman, et al., 2015) and seem to have a relative advantage in terms of promotability (Roth et al., 2012). Organizational tenure can influence promotability ratings (De Pater et al., 2009; Thacker & Wayne, 1995), and so we also included it as a control.

### 2.1.3 | Data analytic strategy

Due to the hierarchical data structure, with employees (level 1) nested in supervisors (level 2), we ran the analyses using a random coefficient model. We calculated the total variance explained by the models with the conditional  $R^2$ , and the total variance explained by the fixed effects with the marginal  $R^2$  (Nakagawa & Schielzeth, 2013).

## 2.2 | Results

We present in Table 1 means, standard deviations, and bivariate correlations among variables. As expected (Grijalva, Newman, et al., 2015), women employees scored lower on narcissism than men employees ( $r = -.22, p = .005$ ), but gender was not significantly correlated with promotability ( $r = -.07, p = .390$ ). Tenure, on the contrary, correlated negatively both with narcissism ( $r = -.24, p = .002$ ) and promotability ( $r = -.21, p = .009$ ). Thus, it seems that more narcissistic employees with more seniority have a lower chance of being seen as promotable.

To test the relation between employee narcissism and promotability as rated by the supervisor, we entered the control variables (i.e., employee gender and tenure) and employee narcissism into the random coefficient model. As shown in Table 2, employee narcissism was positively related to promotability ratings given by the supervisor,  $B = 0.05, t(148.36) = 2.72, p = .007, r = .22, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.014, 0.092]$ . Moreover, Akaike Information Criteria (AIC) of model fit indicated that the model which included employee narcissism as a predictor showed a superior fit to the model which only included the control variables as predictors,  $\Delta\text{AIC} = 5.17$ , with the former being 13.29 times more likely (based on the relative AIC weights; Wagenmakers & Farrell, 2004) to be the best fitting model in comparison to the latter. In all, the results illustrate that narcissistic employees were more likely to be perceived as promotable by their supervisors.<sup>4,5</sup>

### 2.2.1 | Components of narcissism

We further explored whether the components of narcissism differentially related to promotability. We obtained a significant relation between Leadership/Authority and promotability,  $B = 1.85, t(143.23) = 3.27, p = .001, r = .26, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.730, 2.962]$ , a somewhat weaker relation between Grandiose Exhibitionism and promotability,  $B = 1.35, t(150.87) = 2.17, p = .032, r = .17, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.118, 0.2579]$ , and a null relation between Entitlement/Exploitativeness and promotability,  $B = 0.85, t(151.50) = 1.80, p = .073, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.081, 1.786]$ . When including all three dimensions in one analysis, Leadership/Authority remained the only significant predictor,  $B = 1.49, t(141.49) = 2.28, p = .024, r = .19, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.195, 2.788]$ . These auxiliary analyses suggest that promotability perceptions were driven mainly by the narcissism component that reflects leadership (i.e., social potency, assertiveness, self-efficacy; Liu et al., 2017), and are thus consistent with the power perspective. We note, however, that the alpha for Entitlement/Exploitativeness was very low.

### 2.2.2 | Sensitivity analysis

Given the conceptual closeness between the Leadership/Authority component of narcissism and being seen as promotable, we ran a sensitivity analysis to examine the predictive power of narcissism without the Leadership/Authority

|                     | Study 1         |                             | Study 2         |                 |
|---------------------|-----------------|-----------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|
|                     | Model 1         | Model 2                     | Model 1         | Model 2         |
| Intercept           | 4.919 (0.193)** | 4.153 (0.344)**             | 5.368 (0.172)** | 4.885 (0.229)** |
| Controls            |                 |                             |                 |                 |
| Gender <sup>a</sup> | -0.007 (0.268)  | 0.105 (0.266)               | -0.135 (0.207)  | 0.051 (0.206)   |
| Tenure              | -0.004 (0.001)* | -0.003 (0.001) <sup>†</sup> | -0.019 (0.014)  | -0.015 (0.013)  |
| Predictor           |                 |                             |                 |                 |
| Narcissism          |                 | 0.053 (0.020)**             |                 | 0.111 (0.035)** |
| Conditional $R^2$   | 0.178           | 0.256                       | 0.490           | 0.572           |
| Marginal $R^2$      | 0.041           | 0.086                       | 0.017           | 0.072           |
| AIC                 | 567.971         | 562.797                     | 415.505         | 408.188         |
| $w_i$ (AIC)         | 0.070           | 0.930                       | 0.025           | 0.975           |

**TABLE 2** Relation between employee narcissism and promotability as rated by the supervisor (study 1 and study 2)

Note: Values can be interpreted as unstandardized regression coefficients with standard errors given in parentheses.

<sup>a</sup>0 = man; 1 = woman. Akaike Information Criteria (AIC) of model fit were based on ML estimation.  $w_i$  (AIC) is the AIC weight.

<sup>†</sup> $p < .10$ ; \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ .

items. When including narcissism as consisting of only Grandiose Exhibitionism and Entitlement/Exploitativeness items in the analysis, the results still show a positive relation between employee narcissism and promotability,  $B = 1.73$ ,  $t(150.87) = 2.51$ ,  $p = .013$ ,  $r = .20$ , 95% CI [0.369, 3.099], with a similar effect size (Table 3).

### 3 | STUDY 2

In Study 2, we provided a conceptual replication of Study 1 and, importantly, tested the two perspectives. In addition to obtaining promotability ratings from supervisors, employees reported their sense of power in the workplace and their impression management behavior when in contact with their supervisor.

#### 3.1 | Method

##### 3.1.1 | Sample and procedure

We first approached supervisors via email and social network websites. We determined the sample size for testing a general linear model via a G\*Power analysis (Faul et al., 2007), using the following parameters: power = .80,  $\alpha = .05$ , number of predictors = 5, number of tested predictors = 3 (i.e., narcissism, sense of power, self-promotion). The expected effect size was set to small-to-medium ( $f^2 = 0.085$ ), which required a minimum sample of 133 employees. As stated in Study 1, Arend and Schäfer's (2019) Monte Carlo simulations for

estimating two-level models with various specifications showed that a sample size of 80 at level 2 (i.e., number of supervisors) and a cluster size of 3 (i.e., number of employees per supervisor) can provide sufficient power  $\geq 0.80$  for detecting small to medium effect sizes (minimum detectable standard effect size = 0.21) testing level 1 predictors (i.e., narcissism, sense of power, and self-promotion). We invited 128 supervisors working in various organizations and industries (e.g., business, healthcare, and hospitality) to take part in the study. Once the supervisors agreed to participate, we sent them online survey links. Ninety-seven supervisors (75.8%) completed the survey. Also, we asked supervisors to nominate up to three employees and supply their email addresses. Once the supervisors filled out the survey, we sent the nominated employees a separate survey link. Out of 203 employees invited to participate, 128 (63.1%) completed the survey. Participation was voluntary and confidential, with all participants providing informed consent.

Surveys could be completed either in English (74% of all participants) or in Dutch (26% of all participants). Similar to Study 1, we determined the final sample size by the number of completed employee surveys that could be matched with supervisor ratings of these employees. We matched the supervisors with employees using unique codes and employees' email addresses. The final sample comprised 128 employees rated by 85 supervisors. Employees ( $M_{\text{age}} = 35.48$  years,  $SD = 12.28$ ; 60.2% women) had an average tenure of 5.79 ( $SD = 7.70$ ) years, had worked with their supervisor for 2.53 ( $SD = 2.83$ ) years, and 64.9% completed higher level education. Supervisors ( $M_{\text{age}} = 38.38$  years,  $SD = 11.09$ ; 69.4% men) had an average tenure of 5.53 ( $SD = 6.69$ ) years, had

**TABLE 3** Relation between employee narcissism (without leadership/authority items) and promotability (study 1 and study 2)

|                         | Study 1         |                 | Study 2         |                 |
|-------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
|                         | Model 1         | Model 2         | Model 1         | Model 2         |
| Intercept               | 4.919 (0.193)** | 4.293 (0.316)** | 5.368 (0.172)** | 4.913 (0.223)** |
| Controls                |                 |                 |                 |                 |
| Gender <sup>a</sup>     | -0.007 (0.268)  | 0.011 (0.263)   | -0.135 (0.207)  | 0.056 (0.207)   |
| Tenure                  | -0.004 (0.001)* | -0.002 (0.001)* | -0.019 (0.014)  | -0.013 (0.014)  |
| Predictor               |                 |                 |                 |                 |
| Narcissism <sup>b</sup> |                 | 1.734 (0.691)*  |                 | 0.148 (0.048)** |
| Conditional $R^2$       | 0.178           | 0.234           | 0.490           | 0.562           |
| Marginal $R^2$          | 0.041           | 0.080           | 0.017           | 0.073           |
| AIC                     | 567.971         | 563.729         | 415.505         | 408.153         |
| $w_i$ (AIC)             | 0.107           | 0.893           | 0.025           | 0.975           |

Note: Values can be interpreted as unstandardized regression coefficients with standard errors given in parentheses.

<sup>a</sup>0 = man; 1 = woman.

<sup>b</sup>Narcissism includes GE and EE components (Study 1), and all except for leadership and authority items (Study 2). Akaike Information Criteria (AIC) of model fit were based on ML estimation.  $w_i$  (AIC) is the AIC weight.

<sup>†</sup> $p < .10$ ; \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ .

37.38<sup>6</sup> ( $SD = 77.67$ ) employees on average who reported to them, and 74% completed higher education. The sample contained on average 1.51 employees per supervisor (range = 1–3).

### 3.1.2 | Measures

Employees responded to measures of narcissism, power, self-promotion, and ingratiation. Supervisors evaluated the employees' promotability and likeability.

#### *Narcissism*

Employees completed the 16-item version of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI-16; Ames et al., 2006). This scale is based on the 40-item NPI (Raskin & Terry, 1988) and is similarly used to assess narcissism in normal populations (Liu et al., 2017). The scale has a forced-choice format, with a sample item being "I think I am a special person" (narcissistic option = 1) versus "I am no better or worse than most people" (non-narcissistic option = 0). We computed the NPI score as the sum of the narcissistic options selected (possible range = 0–16;  $\alpha = .65$ ;  $ICC[1] = .06$ ).

Due to the limited number of items, the NPI-16 is not customarily broken down in separate components (i.e., Leadership/Authority, Grandiose Exhibitionism, Entitlement/Exploitativeness; Ackerman et al., 2011), and so we refrained from doing so. Nonetheless, similar to Study 1, we checked whether removing items from the NPI scale which pertained to leadership and authority affected the findings ( $\alpha = .56$ ).

#### *Self-promotion*

We measured self-promotion of competencies in organizational settings based on Kumar and Beyerlein's (1991) self-presentation scale (Bolino et al., 2014). We excluded one item from the original 4-item scale, because it pertains to likeability, rather than self-promotion<sup>7</sup> (with the latter defined in terms of trumpeting one's competencies; Bolino et al., 2014). Employees indicated how often they manifested each behavior when in contact with their supervisor (e.g., "Try to make a positive event that you are responsible for appear greater than it actually is," "Make your supervisor aware of your accomplishments;" 1 = *almost never*, 5 = *almost always*;  $\alpha = .72$ ;  $ICC[1] = .30$ ).

#### *Ingratiation*

We measured ingratiation with a 6-item subset (see also Wayne et al., 1997) from Kumar and Beyerlein's (1991) measure of ingratiating behavior in organizational contexts. Employees indicated how often they enacted each behavior when in contact with their supervisor (e.g., "Spend time listening to your supervisor's personal problems even if you

have no interest in them," "Give frequent smiles to express enthusiasm/interest about something he/she is interested in even if you do not like it;" 1 = *almost never*, 5 = *almost always*;  $\alpha = .75$ ;  $ICC[1] = .49$ ).

#### *Sense of power*

We measured employees' sense of power using the 8-item power scale (Anderson & Galinsky, 2006) adapted for the context of work. Employees indicated the extent to which they felt they had or enacted power in their work team (e.g., "In my work team if I want to, I get to make the decisions," "In my work team I think I have a great deal of power;" 1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*;  $\alpha = .77$ ;  $ICC[1] = .26$ ).

#### *Promotability*

We measured promotability as in Study 1 ( $\alpha = .90$ ;  $ICC[1] = .47$ ).

#### *Control variables*

Similar to Study 1, we included employee gender and organizational tenure as control variables.

### 3.1.3 | Data analytic strategy

Due to the hierarchical structure of the data, with employees (level 1) nested in supervisors (level 2), we carried out the analyses via a random coefficient model, as in Study 1. We calculated the variance explained by the models with the conditional  $R^2$  and the marginal  $R^2$  (Nakagawa & Schielzeth, 2013). Given the data's nested properties, we tested the explanatory role of sense of power and self-promotion in accounting for the relation between employee narcissism and supervisor-rated promotability using the  $TYPE = COMPLEX$  function in Mplus version 7 (Muthén & Muthén, 2012), which takes into consideration clustering by adjusting standard errors (McNeish et al., 2017).

## 3.2 | Results

We present, in Table 1, means, standard deviations, and bivariate correlations among variables. Women employees scored lower on narcissism than men employees ( $r = -.31$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and reported less self-promotion behavior toward their supervisor ( $r = -.24$ ,  $p = .006$ ), with gender not being significantly correlated with promotability ( $r = -.04$ ,  $p = .659$ ). Tenure correlated negatively with self-promotion ( $r = -.21$ ,  $p = .018$ ) and ingratiation ( $r = -.19$ ,  $p = .036$ ) behavior, while not significantly correlating with promotability ( $r = -.12$ ,  $p = .191$ ). It appears as if both women employees



and those who have worked at the organization longer are less engaged in impression management behavior toward the supervisor, which could indirectly affect their promotability evaluations.

To test the association between employee narcissism and promotability, we entered employee gender, employee tenure, and narcissism into the random coefficient model. As depicted in Table 2, employee narcissism was positively related to promotability ratings provided by the supervisor,  $B = 0.11$ ,  $t(104.24) = 3.13$ ,  $p = .002$ ,  $r = .29$ , 95% CI [0.040, 0.181].<sup>8,9</sup> The model that included employee narcissism as a predictor showed a superior fit to the model that only included the control variables as predictors,  $\Delta AIC = 7.32$ , with the former being 38.80 times more likely (based on the relative AIC weights; Wagenmakers & Farrell, 2004) to be the best model in comparison to the latter.

Employee narcissism was positively related to employee sense of power in the workplace,  $B = 0.08$ ,  $t(122.71) = 3.83$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $r = .33$ , 95% CI [0.040, 0.124]. With respect to impression management tactics, whereas employee narcissism positively predicted employees' self-promotion behavior toward their supervisor,  $B = 0.06$ ,  $t(123.64) = 2.55$ ,  $p = .012$ ,  $r = .22$ , 95% CI [0.014, 0.113], it did not predict ingratiation,  $B = 0.02$ ,  $t(108.05) = 0.63$ ,  $p = .467$ , 95% CI [-0.028, 0.061].<sup>10</sup>

### 3.2.1 | Explanatory role of sense of power and self-promotion

Given that employees' perceived sense of power in the workplace and self-promotion were associated with their narcissism, we simultaneously tested these variables as possibly accounting for the relation between employee narcissism and promotability. Employee sense of power showed a significant indirect effect,  $B_{\text{indirect}} = 0.05$ ,  $t(122) = 2.17$ ,  $p = .030$ , 95% CI [0.005, 0.096]. With respect to self-promotion, the indirect effect was not significant,  $B_{\text{indirect}} = 0.02$ ,  $t(122) = 1.70$ ,  $p = .090$ , 95% CI [-0.003, 0.040] (Figure 1). Thus, supervisors with employees higher in narcissism, on average, have employees with a higher sense of power. This accounts for the effect of employee narcissism on employee promotability.

### 3.2.2 | Sensitivity analyses

Given the conceptual closeness between the Leadership/Authority component of narcissism and the other variables in the model, we ran a sensitivity analyses to examine the predictive power of narcissism after excluding the Leadership/Authority items. The results indicated that employee narcissism remained positively related to promotability ratings provided by the supervisor,  $B = 0.15$ ,  $t(109.79) = 3.11$ ,  $p = .002$ ,  $r = .28$ , 95% CI [0.053, 0.244], with a similar effect size (Table 3).

We also checked for the explanatory role of sense of power and self-promotion while using the narcissism scale without Leadership/Authority items as the predictor. The results similarly indicated that the indirect effect of sense of power was significant,  $B_{\text{indirect}} = 0.06$ ,  $t(122) = 2.06$ ,  $p = .039$ , 95% CI [0.003, 0.117], whereas the indirect effect of self-promotion was not significant,  $B_{\text{indirect}} = 0.02$ ,  $t(122) = 1.53$ ,  $p = .126$ , 95% CI [-0.006, 0.048].

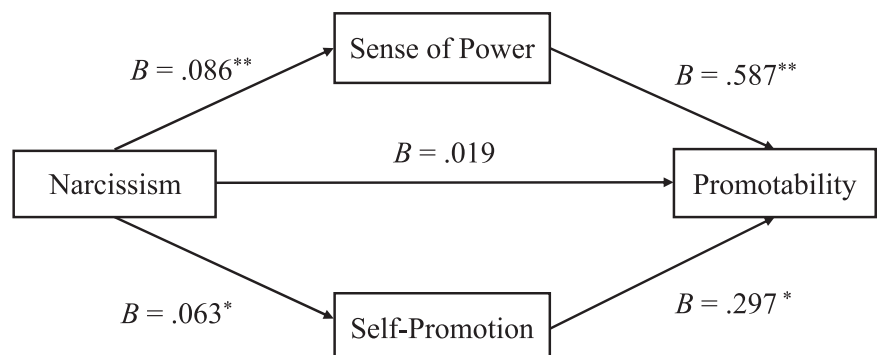
## 4 | STUDY 3

Employees higher on narcissism were perceived by their supervisors as more promotable, due to employees' sense of power in the work team rather than their self-promotion impression management tactics toward the supervisor. Given that individuals who perceive themselves to have high power show similar behavior to those with structurally high power (e.g., assertiveness; Anderson & Galinsky, 2006; Galinsky et al., 2015), the Study 2 findings reinforce the display of power perspective. In Study 3, we manipulated the putative mediator. We hypothesized that exhibiting higher (vs. lower power) would help high narcissistic employees to be perceived as more promotable by their supervisors.

### 4.1 | Method

#### 4.1.1 | Participants and design

The sample comprised 181 British participants recruited via Prolific. We recruited them under the proviso that



**FIGURE 1** Effect of employee narcissism on promotability, as rated by the supervisor, accounted for by employee sense of power and self-promotion toward the supervisor (study 2). <sup>†</sup> $p < .10$ ,  $*p < .05$ ,  $**p < .01$

they all held supervisory positions, in an effort to enhance the ecological validity of the study. Participants ( $M_{\text{age}} = 38.07$  years,  $SD = 11.20$ ; 54.7% women) supervised on average 10.39 employees ( $SD = 32.68$ ). Also, 91.7% of them had a higher level education, and 90.6% were Caucasian. We randomly assigned them either to a high or low employee power condition. We determined the sample size via a G\*Power analysis (Faul et al., 2007), using the following parameters: power = .80,  $\alpha = .05$ . The expected effect size was set to medium ( $f^2 = 0.15$ ), which required a minimum sample of 128 participants.

#### 4.1.2 | Pilot study

We conducted a pilot study to validate our manipulation of narcissism and sense of power (see below under Procedure and Materials for more details). In particular, we tested 71 British Prolific workers ( $M_{\text{age}} = 37.91$ ,  $SD = 13.25$ ; 67.6% women; 81.7% completed higher education). We included the same manipulation check items as in the main study (see below under Procedure and Materials). Results of a 2 (employee narcissism: high vs. low) by 2 (employee sense of power: high vs. low) Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) revealed that the high narcissistic employee was perceived as more narcissistic ( $M = 5.69$ ,  $SD = 1.41$ ) than the low narcissistic employee ( $M = 1.49$ ,  $SD = 1.17$ ),  $F(1, 67) = 216.32$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .76$ . Additionally, the high power employee was perceived as more narcissistic ( $M = 4.31$ ,  $SD = 2.56$ ) than the low power employee ( $M = 2.94$ ,  $SD = 2.23$ ),  $F(1, 67) = 14.52$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .18$ , although this effect was much weaker. For the perception of the employee's power, we obtained an interaction effect,  $F(1, 67) = 7.25$ ,  $p = .009$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .10$ . Simple effects analyses indicated that the power manipulation was effective for the high narcissistic employee: Participants perceived him/her as having higher power in the team in the high power ( $M = 4.00$ ,  $SD = 1.11$ ) rather the low power ( $M = 2.65$ ,  $SD = 0.86$ ) condition,  $F(1, 67) = 22.04$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .25$ . However, the power manipulation was ineffective for the low narcissistic employee: Participants perceived this person to have similar power in the team in the high power ( $M = 2.56$ ,  $SD = 0.81$ ) and low power ( $M = 2.32$ ,  $SD = 0.58$ ) conditions,  $F(1, 67) = 0.71$ ,  $p = .403$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .01$ . Given that our focus was specifically on high narcissistic employees and on finding out how their sense of power influenced their perceived promotability, we limited the main study manipulation (high vs. low power) to the narcissistic employee.

#### 4.1.3 | Procedure and materials

After answering demographic questions, participants were instructed to imagine that they were working as a manager

in an organization and that several of their employees had applied for a promotion. As supervisors, they needed to make promotion recommendations to higher level management. They were also informed that all candidates met the minimum criteria. Participants first read a description of an employee with narcissistic characteristics, and then, viewed this employee's answers on a short questionnaire. The answers reflected either a high or low power employee profile. Finally, participants completed the promotability measure and manipulation checks.

##### *Employee narcissism manipulation*

We used the 16-item version of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI-16; Ames et al., 2006), as in Study 2, to create a description of a narcissistic employee. We removed items that referred to having authority, as these were closely related to power. To enhance text readability, we used gender pronouns ensuring that male participants received a description of a male employee and female participants of a female employee (see Supporting Information for full description).

##### *Employee sense of power manipulation*

Participants learned that the just-described employee had also filled out a short questionnaire on their experience at work. We used the same sense of power scale as in Study 2 (Anderson & Galinsky, 2006) to create either a high or low employee power profile. Both profiles were balanced; for example, where a high-power employee scored 6 on the item, a low-power employee would score a 2 (Supporting Information).

##### *Promotability*

We used the 4-item Blickle et al. (2011) measure of promotability (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*;  $\alpha = .83$ ). Sample items include: "This employee can be considered for higher jobs," "This employee is immediately able to pass to the next hierarchical level or expert position."

##### *Manipulation check for employee narcissism*

We adapted the single-item narcissism scale (Konrath et al., 2014) to serve as a manipulation check. After reading a definition of a narcissistic individual—as someone who is egotistical, self-focused, and vain—participants indicated their agreement with the following statement concerning the employee: "This employee is a narcissist" (1 = *not very true of this employee*, 7 = *very true of this employee*).

##### *Manipulation check for employee sense of power*

Participants indicated how much power they thought this employee would be likely to display in the team (1 = *no power*, 2 = *very little power*, 3 = *some power*, 4 = *moderate amount of power*, 5 = *a lot of power*).

## 5 | RESULTS

Results of an independent *t*-test revealed that participants perceived the high power employee as having more power in a team ( $M = 3.90$ ,  $SD = 1.08$ ) than the low power employee ( $M = 2.88$ ,  $SD = 1.13$ ),  $t(179) = -6.17$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.92$ . Participants also perceived the employee as narcissistic ( $M = 6.07$ ,  $SD = 1.07$ ) compared to the scale midpoint,  $t(180) = 26.04$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 3.88$ .

Testing the main hypothesis, an independent *t*-test indicated that participants perceived the narcissistic employee who had high power in the team ( $M = 3.32$ ,  $SD = 1.17$ ) as more promotable than the one who had low power ( $M = 2.53$ ,  $SD = 0.98$ ),  $t(179) = -4.84$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.72$ . When controlling for gender, the ANOVA revealed only a main effect of power on promotability,  $F(1, 177) = 21.43$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .11$  and no significant effect of gender,  $F(1, 177) = 0.37$ ,  $p = .545$ , or an interaction between gender and the power condition,  $F(1, 177) = 0.01$ ,  $p = .921$ .<sup>11</sup> In all, display of higher power by narcissistic employees helps them obtain higher promotability ratings.

## 6 | GENERAL DISCUSSION

We examined the link between employee narcissism and supervisory promotability perceptions to address how narcissistic employees ascend formal hierarchies. We tested two theoretical perspectives that offer competing explanations about the mechanisms through which this happens. The display of power perspective, which advocates that power serves as a cue for potential to function in more complex higher level positions, predicted a positive relation between employee narcissism and promotability, due to personal sense of power. The impression management perspective predicted a positive relation between employee narcissism and promotability due to self-promotion tactics. The results from two multisource studies, using data across many organizations, converged in supporting the first perspective. Although narcissistic employees used self-promotion as an impression management tactic toward their supervisors, it was their perceived sense of power and commensurate enacted power-related behavior that emerged as the more likely mechanism accounting for the link between employee narcissism and promotability. Further, an experiment illustrated that high power exhibited by a narcissistic employee did increase promotability ratings.

The present work extends literature on the rise of narcissistic individuals to leadership positions in short-term groups (Brunell et al., 2008), and provides a potential explanation for the prevalence of such individuals in more enduring high-influence positions (Watts et al., 2013). The work demonstrated that one route to the top is perceiving and exercising power in groups, which conduces to supervisors considering

narcissistic individuals as promotable and capable of functioning in higher level positions. These findings augur with implicit theory of leadership (Lord et al., 1984) positing that, if someone manifests behaviors associated with prototypical leader characteristics, this person will be perceived as leader. The findings could also be interpreted through leadership identity theory positing that leadership develops through a series of claiming and granting behaviors in which a person asserts oneself as either a leader or a follower in the course of social interactions (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). By acting as if they have more power in the group, narcissistic employees can be seen as staking their claim to leadership, which appears to get noticed by their supervisors who may later grant them formal leadership through a promotion. This claim is in line with research illustrating that individuals who believe that they have high power are more likely to be successful at accruing actual power and influence (Anderson et al., 2012; Galinsky et al., 2015). Consistent with this interpretation, the component of narcissism that is indicative of having self-perceived authority, social potency, and dominance (Ackerman et al., 2011) most strongly predicted promotability in Study 1. Nonetheless, removal of items pertaining to authority and leadership still showed that employee narcissism predicted higher promotability ratings by supervisors, as explained by employees' higher sense of power. Therefore, even more maladaptive aspects of narcissism, such as exploitativeness, sense of entitlement, superiority, grandiosity, and exhibitionism can help engender a positive image of the narcissistic employee in the eyes of the supervisor, in terms of their ability to function successfully at higher levels. For instance, narcissistic individuals' sense of entitlement, exhibitionism, and superiority might propel them to exhibit proactive behavior in claiming leadership in the organization, such as by speaking out during meetings or requesting being assigned to higher level tasks that would allow them to showcase their self-professed superior leadership skills.

Our findings indicate that individuals high in narcissism differentiate their behavior depending on observer status. Although narcissistic individuals may lose their appeal to peers over time (Leckelt et al., 2015; Paulhus, 1998), appeal loss is not evident when supervisors rate narcissistic employees in longer term work contexts. The discrepancy could be explained by status differences between employees and their supervisors, and suggests that narcissistic employees are more motivated to hide their negative side from their supervisor than their peers. Narcissistic individuals' sensitivity to the status of others (Giacomin et al., 2018; Horton & Sedikides, 2009) leads them to seek social alliances with people that they perceive as having high status (Buss & Chido, 1991; Jonason & Schmitt, 2012) and to solicit their approval (Ashton-James & Levordashka, 2013). As such, peers may be better positioned to detect the negative aspects of narcissistic employees than the supervisor. Indeed, when

hierarchical distance increases, others' perceptions of narcissistic individuals improve (Nevicka et al., 2018). Pitting these explanations against each other is a fruitful research direction. Additionally, as narcissistic individuals self-enhance in the agentic domain (Campbell et al., 2002; Grijalva & Zhang, 2016), it would be interesting to examine the accuracy of their perceptions of power by asking supervisors to rate how powerful the employees were.

Our research has certain strengths, such as multisource data from various organizations, as well as a combination of field studies and an experiment showing robust and consistent findings. Yet, our research also has limitations. In Study 3, in order to ensure adequate construct validity of employee narcissism, we presented participants with a description using items directly from the NPI, which provided a rather blatant depiction of a narcissistic employee. The manifestation of a narcissistic employee's behavior in organizational contexts would probably be more subtle. As stated above, the negative aspects of narcissistic individuals, such as their manipulateness, would most likely be tamed toward higher status individuals such as their supervisors. Future research could examine alternative ways of enhancing psychological realism of narcissistic employees in an experimental design (e.g., use of videos).

Although our findings indicated that narcissistic individuals were generally perceived as more promotable by their supervisors, future investigations could also explore the role of the work environment. Displays of power may be appreciated in organizations that place a higher value on agentic employee characteristics (e.g., power, dominance, intelligence; Grijalva & Zhang, 2016), but they may be seen as undesirable in organizations that value more communal characteristics (e.g., agreeableness, warmth, honesty). Indeed, prior research showed that, when narcissistic individuals worked in a context where concern for others would be important (i.e., as a member of a beach patrol), they were rated unfavorably on their leadership skills by their supervisors (Judge et al., 2006).

Interestingly, self-promotion was not negatively related to promotability, a result seemingly inconsistent with meta-analytic findings on the link between self-promotion tactics and supervisor performance evaluations (Higgins et al., 2003). However, this meta-analysis combined ratings of promotability with ratings of task performance. As we point out in the Introduction, although performance evaluations are modestly related to promotability ratings, these two constructs are distinct. Whereas performance evaluations assess the status quo and an employee's past behavior, promotability evaluations are concerned with how an employee may perform in a different higher order function in the future (De Pater et al., 2009). As such, supervisors make promotability evaluations based much more on imperfect information and signals or cues of an employees' future potential (e.g., how

much power they seem to exert) rather than simply on their current performance. Consequently, without taking into account the social skills of the employee, self-promotion may be particularly detrimental for task performance rather than promotability evaluations, as the discrepancy between the self-promoting statements and actual performance is easily verifiable by supervisors using objective assessments. With good social skills, self-promotion might even be helpful for crafting a favorable picture of the employee in a future higher level function, similarly, to interview contexts.

The distinction between performance and promotability ratings may also inform whether employee sense of power could similarly serve as a potential explanatory variable in accounting for the relationship between employee narcissism and performance ratings. Given that supervisors would have access to ample direct examples of how their employees are currently performing, they would need to resort less to the use of various cues, such as exhibition of power, in informing their performance evaluations, in contrast to needing such cues to help them predict how employees might function in a different role in the future. Consistent with this argument, construal level theory (Trope & Liberman, 2010) would argue that future evaluations of an employee's aptitude to function well in a new role may lead to more abstract and global assessments of that employee (e.g., how assertive they are), whereas evaluations of current and past performance would probably lead to assessments of more concrete and narrow instances of an employee's task performance. As such, sense of power would probably be less influential in mediating performance evaluations. Nonetheless, this remains an interesting empirical question for future research.

Recent research distinguished between two narcissism dimensions (Back et al., 2013). The admiration dimension is characterized by assertive and self-enhancing orientations directed at attaining social potency (e.g., charming and self-assured behaviors) and is related to favorable evaluations from others. The rivalry dimension is characterized by antagonistic and self-protective orientations directed toward social conflict (e.g., aggressive behaviors, devaluing others) and is related to unfavorable evaluations by others. Future work could examine whether and how admiration and rivalry predict promotability. Although both dimensions include aspects of power and dominance, power, as conceptualized in the rivalry dimension, assumes a malevolent form that could contribute to decreases in promotability ratings. For example, workplace deviance, which may include hostile and aggressive conduct, is negatively linked to performance appraisals by supervisors (Dunlop & Lee, 2004).

Individuals high on narcissism are attracted to hierarchies, because they believe they can rise to the top (Grapsas et al., 2020). Our findings indicate that narcissistic individuals are successful in engendering a positive image of their

potential to function in higher echelons. As subordinates, they act as if they have more power in the organization, and thus, demonstrate behavior that would be expected in higher level functions. Given that career progression within formal hierarchies is strongly dependent on supervisors' evaluations and endorsement, this may help explain why narcissistic individuals enjoy promising prospects of rising through the ranks.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors report no conflict of interest.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> We omitted demographic information to ensure anonymity of participants and prevent inferential identification, in accordance with general data protection regulations.
- <sup>2</sup> Seven supervisors indicated that they directly supervised only one employee. Controlling for span of control (i.e., number of employees the supervisor supervised) did not alter the findings.
- <sup>3</sup> The correlation between the complete 4-item Blickle et al. (2011) measure and our promotability measure was  $r = .81, p < .001$ .
- <sup>4</sup> Given suggestions that age may also be a (modest) correlate of narcissism (Foster et al., 2003), we conducted the analyses with age as a control variable. Narcissism remained a positive predictor of employee promotability,  $B = 0.04, t(141.62) = 2.01, p = .046, r = .17, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.001, 0.083]$ .
- <sup>5</sup> We checked for the possible relation between supervisor narcissism (using the same measure as for employee narcissism;  $\alpha = .80$ ) and employee promotability. Controlling for supervisor narcissism, the positive relation between employee narcissism and promotability remained similar,  $B = 0.06, t(148.16) = 2.86, p = .005, r = .23, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.017, 0.094]$ , whereas supervisor narcissism negatively predicted promotability,  $B = -0.04, t(95.21) = -2.04, p = .044, r = .21, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.086, -0.001]$ . We also checked the possibility of a similarity-attraction effect (Den Hartog et al., 2020) by testing the interaction between supervisor and employee narcissism on promotability; this effect, however, was not significant,  $B = 0.00, t(149.94) = 0.23, p = .822, r = 0.02, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.006, 0.007]$ .
- <sup>6</sup> Seven supervisors indicated that they directly supervised only one employee. Again, controlling for span of control (i.e., number of employees the supervisor supervised) produced findings similar to the reported ones.
- <sup>7</sup> The excluded original item was: "Try to let your supervisor know that you have a reputation for being liked."
- <sup>8</sup> As in Study 1, we checked the results with age as a control variable. Narcissism remained a positive predictor of employee promotability,  $B = 0.08, t(110.55) = 2.11, p = .037, r = .20, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.005, 0.148]$ , and employee sense of power,  $B = 0.09, t(122.71) = 4.17, p < .001, r = .35, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.048, 0.135]$ ; its relation to self-promotion was not significant,  $B = 0.05, t(123.00) = 1.88, p = .062, r = .17, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.002, 0.097]$ .

<sup>9</sup> We again checked for the possible relation between supervisor narcissism (using the same measure as for employee narcissism;  $\alpha = .57$ ) and employee promotability. When controlling for supervisor narcissism, the positive relation between employee narcissism and promotability remained the same,  $B = 0.11, t(103.50) = 3.13, p = .002, r = .23, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.041, 0.181]$ , and supervisor narcissism did not relate to promotability,  $B = 0.02, t(92.87) = 0.50, p = .621, r = .05, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.067, 0.112]$ . The interaction between supervisor and employee narcissism on promotability was not significant,  $B = -0.02, t(112.70) = -1.49, p = .139, r = .14, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.046, 0.006]$ . One possibility for why narcissistic supervisors did not give higher promotability ratings to narcissistic employees is that, despite the similarity, they may have simultaneously perceived such employees as a potential future threat to their own position, as per the dominance-complementarity theory (Grijalva & Harms, 2014).

<sup>10</sup> It is possible that narcissism and impression management tactics show a curvilinear relation with promotability. We found no evidence of quadratic effects across either of Study 1 or Study 2.

<sup>11</sup> Checking the results with age as a control variable showed that power remained a significant predictor of promotability,  $F(1, 178) = 22.54, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .11$ .

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional Supporting Information may be found online in the Supporting Information section.

**How to cite this article:** Nevicka B, Sedikides C. Employee narcissism and promotability prospects. *J Pers*. 2021;89:847–862. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jopy.12619>