



Narcissism and recollections of early life experiences

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ABSTRACT

Recent studies have found associations between narcissistic personality features and retrospective accounts of early experiences. The current study sought to extend these previous findings by examining whether adaptive and maladaptive features of narcissism were associated with recollections of early life experiences in a non-clinical sample of undergraduate students ($N = 334$). Results revealed that the Entitlement/Exploitativeness feature of narcissism was associated with low security, high parental discipline, and high threats of separation. Narcissistic Grandiosity was positively associated with peer affectional support and parental discipline, whereas Narcissistic Vulnerability was not uniquely associated with memories of early life experiences. The results provide partial support for models of narcissism in which parents are recalled as failing to provide a secure base while inducing threats of separation and discipline.

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1. Introduction

There has been a recent resurgence in research focused on understanding the developmental origins of narcissism. It has often been suggested that the roots of narcissism lie in dysfunctional interactions between children and their primary caregivers during the earliest years of life. For example, Freud (1914/1957) posited that the foundation of narcissism was an inward focus of love that was either the result of parental overvaluation or the perception of parents as distant, cold, and rejecting. According to Freud, narcissistic personality features were the product of parents failing to moderate the praise and admiration devoted to their children by either lavishing the child with too much positive attention or failing to provide enough.

Following the work of Freud (1914/1957), theorists have often argued that narcissism is the result of one of these two extreme forms of dysfunctional parenting. Both Kernberg (1975) and Kohut (1977) suggest that narcissism is the result of cold, indifferent parenting that is inadequate for meeting the needs of the developing child. Although there are a number of important differences in their models of narcissistic development, Kernberg and Kohut share a belief that narcissism results from parental deficiencies that lead narcissistic individuals to strive to meet their unfulfilled early needs during adulthood. The inadequate and insensitive parenting that narcissists received during childhood is believed to result in feelings of inferiority and low self-esteem which is disguised by the development of a grandiose façade. The speculation that the overtly positive

self-views of narcissists serve to hide their deep-seated negative feelings about themselves is often referred to as the *psychodynamic mask model* of narcissism (see Bosson et al., 2008, for a review). This view of the origin of narcissism has been widely shared in clinical descriptions of Narcissistic Personality Disorder (e.g., Akhtar & Thompson, 1982) and has been incorporated into many models of narcissism (e.g., Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001).

In contrast to the work of Kernberg (1975), Kohut (1977) and Millon (1981) focused on the other extreme of dysfunctional parenting by suggesting that narcissism may be the result of parents being overly indulgent and admiring of their children. In so doing, parents may unintentionally foster the development of an overinflated sense of self-worth in their children that is nearly impossible for the child to sustain over time. As a result of their inflated sense of self-worth, narcissistic individuals are forced to engage in strategies that are intended to maintain and enhance their grandiose feelings of self-worth because these inflated self-views are not likely to be supported by the sort of feedback that is generally provided by the social environment.

These speculations concerning the origin of narcissism are similar in that each suggests that adult narcissism may have its roots in early dysfunctional interactions with caregivers but there are important differences between these accounts. As suggested by Otway and Vignoles (2006), one of the most important issues to be resolved in this area of inquiry is whether narcissistic personality features are the result of parenting that was cold and indifferent (Kernberg, 1975; Kohut, 1977), overly indulgent (Millon, 1981), or some combination of the two (Freud, 1914/1957). Empirical studies that have examined the early experiences of narcissists have provided mixed results. Some of these studies have found narcissism to be associated with indulgent aspects of parenting such as warmth (Horton, Bleau, & Drwecki, 2006) and excessive parental admiration

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(Otway & Vignoles, 2006). However, narcissism has also been shown to be associated with cold and rejecting aspects of parenting such as a lack of warmth (Otway & Vignoles, 2006; Watson, Hickman, Morris, Milliron, & Whiting, 1995), a lack of supervision (Miller & Campbell, 2008), psychological control (Horton et al., 2006), and inadequate parenting (i.e., more permissive, more authoritarian, and less authoritative; Watson, Little, & Biderman, 1992; Wink, 1992). These early experiences with caregivers are thought to be important for narcissists because they shape the cognitive schemas that these individuals use to navigate their social environments later in life (Zeigler-Hill, Green, Arnau, Sisemore, & Myers, 2011). That is, these problematic early life experiences may contribute to the development of narcissistic tendencies by interfering with the appropriate development of feelings of self-worth, and realistic expectations concerning their own abilities and achievements.

2. Overview and predictions

The purpose of the present study was to examine the associations between narcissistic personality features and retrospective accounts of early life experiences. That is, we were interested in determining whether narcissistic personality features in adults were associated with the memories these individuals had about their interactions with parents and peers during childhood. Previous work concerning the developmental origins of narcissism has focused primarily on the narcissistic features that are captured by the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Hall, 1979). This reliance on the NPI is not surprising given that the NPI is the most popular measure of narcissism. It is important to note, however, that narcissism is a multifaceted construct that is defined and assessed in more than one way (e.g., Miller & Campbell, 2008). The NPI, for example, was designed using diagnostic criteria but it captures a relatively extraverted and emotionally resilient form of narcissism with its maladaptive features being limited for the most part to feelings of entitlement and the tendency to exploit others (Miller & Campbell, 2008). In an attempt to capture additional facets of narcissism that are not assessed by the NPI, we assessed narcissistic personality features using the NPI as well as the Pathological Narcissism Inventory (PNI; Pincus et al., 2009). The PNI is a recently developed measure that was intended to capture the less adaptive features of narcissism that are often relevant to clinical outcomes (see Pincus & Lukowitsky, 2010, for a review).

Our prediction was that the primarily maladaptive features of narcissism – such as a willingness to exploit others – would be associated with recollections of negative early life experiences such as poor family interactions and concerns about abandonment. This prediction was derived in large part from the influential perspectives on narcissism offered by Kernberg (1975) and Kohut (1977) that suggest that narcissism is the result of early experiences with cold and rejecting parents. We speculated that the more adaptive features of narcissism – such as self-enhancement – may be associated with seemingly positive experiences in early life such as parental adoration. The rationale for this prediction was based on the work of Millon (1981), which suggests that narcissism may result from the sort of overindulgent parenting that encourages an overinflated sense of self-worth. In essence, we believed that the conflicting views concerning the origins of narcissism may be resolved by determining which narcissistic features are associated with particular patterns of early experiences.

3. Method

3.1. Participants and procedure

Participants were 330 students (53 men and 277 women) enrolled in undergraduate psychology courses who participated

voluntarily in return for partial fulfillment of a research participation requirement. The mean age of participants was 21.57 years ($SD = 6.24$). The racial/ethnic composition was 63% White, 30% Black, 3% Hispanic, and 4% other. Participants completed measures of narcissism and early life experiences via a secure website.

3.2. Measures

3.2.1. NPI

The first measure of narcissism that we used was the NPI (Raskin & Hall, 1979, 1981). The form of narcissism captured by the NPI appears to be largely adaptive with its maladaptive features being limited for the most part to feelings of entitlement and the tendency to exploit others. The version of the NPI used in the present study consisted of 40 items and employed a forced-choice format such that participants were asked to decide between a narcissistic alternative and a non-narcissistic alternative for each item (e.g., “I really like to be the center of attention” vs. “It makes me uncomfortable to be the center of attention”). There has been considerable debate about the factor structure of the 40-item NPI over the years (see Brown, Budzek, & Tamborski, 2009, for a review) but Ackerman et al. (2010) recently suggested the following three factors: Leadership/Authority (11 items; e.g., “If I ruled the world it would be a much better place”; $\alpha = .75$), Grandiose Exhibitionism (10 items; e.g., “I know that I am good because everybody keeps telling me so”; $\alpha = .76$), and Entitlement/Exploitativeness (4 items; e.g., “I find it easy to manipulate people”; $\alpha = .54$). The low level of internal consistency observed for the Entitlement/Exploitativeness subscale is not unusual for this particular subscale (e.g., Ackerman et al., 2010). Based on previous research concerning the subscales of the NPI (see Brown et al., 2009), we considered the Entitlement/Exploitativeness subscale to be maladaptive whereas the Leadership/Authority and Grandiose Exhibitionism subscales were considered relatively adaptive.

3.2.2. PNI

The second measure of narcissism that we used was the PNI (Pincus et al., 2009). As outlined in recent studies (Tritt, Ryder, Ring, & Pincus, 2010; Wright, Lukowitsky, Pincus, & Conroy, 2010), the PNI captures two features of pathological narcissism: Narcissistic Grandiosity (18 items; e.g., “I can make anyone believe anything I want them to”; $\alpha = .90$) and Narcissistic Vulnerability (34 items; e.g., “It’s hard for me to feel good about myself unless I know other people like me”; $\alpha = .95$). Grandiose narcissism is the most easily recognized feature of pathological narcissism because of its similarity to Narcissistic Personality Disorder with one common characteristic being the use of maladaptive self-enhancement strategies (e.g., holding an overly positive self-image). Vulnerable narcissism, in contrast, is characterized by dysregulation across various areas including the self (e.g., negative self-image), emotionality (e.g., negative affective experiences including anger, shame, and dysphoria), and interpersonal relationship functioning (e.g., interpersonal sensitivity). Responses for the 52 items of the PNI are made on scales ranging from 0 (*not at all like me*) to 5 (*very much like me*). Initial information concerning the reliability and validity of the PNI has shown that it has an appropriate pattern of convergent and divergent correlations with other measures of narcissism (e.g., NPI) as well as related constructs such as self-esteem level and clinical outcomes (Pincus et al., 2009). We considered both the Narcissistic Grandiosity and Narcissistic Vulnerability subscales of the PNI to capture relatively maladaptive features of narcissism.

3.2.3. Attachment History Questionnaire

Early life experiences were measured using the Attachment History Questionnaire (AHQ; Pottharst, 1990). The AHQ is a 51-item

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