



Global and contingent self-esteem as moderators in the relations between adolescent narcissism, callous-unemotional traits, and aggression



Christopher T. Barry*, Katrina H. McDougall, Alexandra C. Anderson, Andelyn L. Bindon

Washington State University, United States

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ABSTRACT

Research on the association between self-esteem and aggression yields mixed, even contradictory, conclusions. This study investigated the potential interactions of global (i.e., overall self-evaluation) and contingent (i.e., tendency for self-evaluation to change based on feedback) self-esteem with narcissism and callous-unemotional traits in relation to adolescent proactive and reactive aggression. Participants were 156 adolescents, ages 16–19, who were attending a residential program for youth who have dropped out of school. Global self-esteem (GSE) was positively correlated with peer-nominated aggression, whereas contingent self-esteem (CSE) was positively related to self-reported proactive and reactive aggression. In addition, individuals with relatively high narcissism or callous-unemotional traits reportedly engaged in more aggression if they also reported high CSE. The implications of the findings, including that adolescents with CSE may benefit from efforts aimed at providing alternatives to aggression following social feedback, are discussed.

1. Introduction

1.1. Self-esteem and aggression

Global self-esteem (GSE) is conceptualized as an individual's overall self-evaluation (e.g., Barry, Frick, & Killian, 2003). Based on mixed findings, it is unclear how GSE relates to aggression. For example, low GSE has been associated with aggression in adolescent community samples (Donnellan, Trzesniewski, Robins, Moffitt, & Caspi, 2005). Similar results were evident longitudinally in that low self-esteem during adolescence predicted criminal activity at age 26 (Trzesniewski et al., 2006). However, in community (Barry, Thompson et al., 2007; Thomaes, Bushman, Stegge, & Olthof, 2008) and residential (Golmaryami & Barry, 2010) adolescent samples, high self-esteem was related to aggression. Furthermore, Bushman et al. (2009) conclude that self-esteem is not independently related to aggression, based on their series of studies with undergraduates.

Because findings vary regarding aggression in relation to GSE, additional constructs such as narcissism and fluctuations in self-esteem have been offered as important factors to consider (Baumeister, Bushman, & Campbell, 2000; Falkenbach, Howe, & Falki, 2013). For example, beyond one's overall self-esteem level, contingent self-esteem (CSE; self-worth based on perceived evaluations of others; Crocker & Wolfe, 2001) may be characteristic of individuals who respond to perceived threats or seek social goals through aggression. This

possibility has not yet been examined in youth samples.

Because of self-esteem's complexity and the mixed findings from prior research, additional factors may help explain an association between self-esteem and different functions of youth aggression. For example, personality dimensions such as narcissism (e.g., a grandiose self-presentation with preoccupation with one's status relative to others; Barry et al., 2003) and callous-unemotional (CU) traits (e.g., low empathy, shallow affect, and remorselessness; Frick, Bodin, & Barry, 2000) have been identified as correlates of youth aggression. Aggression is often conceptualized as proactive (i.e., aggression toward others for personal gain or reward; Fite, Rathert, Colder, Lochman, & Wells, 2012) or reactive (i.e., aggression in response to a real or perceived threat; Berkowitz, 1993). In adolescents, CU traits have been associated with both functions of aggression (Fanti, Frick, & Georgiou, 2009), as has narcissism (e.g., Barry & Kauten, 2014; Fossati, Borroni, Eisenberg, & Maffei, 2010). Therefore, although the relations of narcissism (e.g., Barry, Grafeman, Adler, & Pickard, 2007; Lee-Rowland, Barry, Gillen, & Hansen, 2017; Thomaes et al., 2008) and CU traits (e.g., Stellwagen & Kerig, 2010) with youth aggression have been well-established, it still remains unclear how self-esteem is related to adolescent aggression.

The primary purpose of this study was to examine GSE and CSE as correlates of adolescent aggression and as possible moderators in the established relations of CU traits and narcissism with aggression. The present study was the first known examination of such a model in

* Corresponding author at: Department of Psychology, Washington State University, PO Box 644820, Pullman, WA 99164-4820, United States.
E-mail address: chris.barry@wsu.edu (C.T. Barry).

adolescents, despite growing literature on youth intrapersonal factors and aggression. Furthermore, this study was novel in its simultaneous consideration of CU traits and narcissism, different functions of aggression, and in the use of peer reports rather than relying solely on self-reports.

1.2. Self-esteem as a moderator

Previous research in youth indicated that the association between narcissism and conduct problems was particularly high for youth with low GSE (Barry et al., 2003), whereas the combination of narcissism and high GSE has shown a correspondence to higher adolescent relational aggression (i.e., acts targeted at others' social status; Golmaryami & Barry, 2010). However, such moderations have not been replicated (e.g., Barry, Grafeman et al., 2007), and it has been suggested that a self-esteem-narcissism interaction may be partly based on development (Barry et al., 2003). Comparatively little research has examined self-esteem and CU traits together in youth samples, with the available evidence indicating no relation (Barry et al., 2003) or a negative relation (Fanti, 2013). Low self-esteem has also mediated the effect between personality features of psychopathy (akin to CU traits) and aggression in young adults (Falkenbach et al., 2013). Therefore, similar to narcissism, it is unclear whether, or how, GSE might moderate the connection between CU traits and aggression.

Alternatively, the ego threat hypothesis suggests a moderational effect for CSE. According to this model, individuals high in narcissism react more aggressively when faced with an ego threat, an effect that has been demonstrated with adults (e.g., Bushman & Baumeister, 1998) and youth (Thomaes et al., 2008) in experimental paradigms. Because of their unstable and inflated sense of self (Geukes et al., 2017), individuals high in narcissism are perhaps particularly vulnerable to ego threats and may respond aggressively to such threats. CSE may exacerbate this effect. Cale and Lilienfeld (2006) extended the ego threat hypothesis to psychopathy. They described psychopathy as characterized by ego-enhancing behaviors and overreaction to insults, and in their sample of incarcerated adults, the affective/interpersonal characteristics of psychopathy (again, similar to CU traits) were related to staff-reported aggression in ego threat situations. However, this pattern did not apply to aggression from prison disciplinary reports or in non-ego threatening situations. Thus, individuals with CU traits who also have CSE may be prone to reactive aggression, a possibility that has not been examined with adolescents.

The ego threat hypothesis appears relevant for reactive aggression, but there may still be a connection between GSE or CSE and proactive aggression. The desire for power and status that are prominent features of narcissism (Krizan & Bushman, 2011; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001) may translate to proactive aggression for individuals who are sensitive to perceived barriers to attaining social goals. Thus, CSE might also exacerbate the association between narcissism and proactive aggression. Likewise, youth with CU traits appear particularly reward-driven (e.g., Pardini & Byrd, 2012) and thus may utilize proactive aggression for personal gain. This relation may be pronounced for individuals whose self-perception is contingent on environmental feedback and thus are attuned to situations where aggression may be effective, a possibility examined for the first time in the present study.

1.3. Hypotheses

It was hypothesized that all measures of aggression would be correlated with CSE (Hypothesis 1), as well as with narcissism and CU traits (Hypothesis 2). In addition, it was hypothesized that CSE would exhibit a significant moderation effect in the relations of CU traits and narcissism with self- and peer-reported aggression. That is, it was expected that the highest levels of aggression would be evident for individuals with high levels of narcissism and CSE (Hypothesis 3) and similarly for individuals with high levels of CU traits and CSE

(Hypothesis 4). No a priori hypotheses were made concerning GSE as a moderator in light of mixed findings concerning its interaction with narcissism and the limited research on the association between GSE and CU traits in youth.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were 156 adolescents (126 males, 29 females, 1 unreported; 81% males, 19% females) aged 16–19 ($M = 16.81$, $SD = 0.77$), enrolled in a voluntary military-style program for at-risk youth who have dropped out of school. The racial/ethnic composition was as follows: 52.6% White, 29.5% Black, 0.6% Hispanic, 0.6% Other, and 16.7% unreported. This program is designed to provide a structured environment for gaining academic, self-care, and coping skills. Thus, participants in this study are considered “at-risk” for a variety of negative economic, behavioral, or legal outcomes based on having dropped out of school. Such risk samples have been the focus of much research on correlates of adolescent narcissism and aggression (e.g., Barry, Thompson et al., 2007; Marsee et al., 2011) given that they likely demonstrate greater variability on constructs such as narcissism, aggression, or CU traits than community samples. Furthermore, individuals enrolled in this residential program attend all activities and live with approximately 20–30 others (i.e., in “platoons”), providing a useful context in which to utilize peer-referenced assessment.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPIC; Barry et al., 2003)

The NPIC is a 40-item self-report questionnaire developed for youth from the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Terry, 1988). The NPIC is a forced-choice questionnaire, with each item posing two statements (e.g., “I am just like everybody else” vs. “I am an outstanding person”). The participant must choose one and then rate how true the selected statement is for him/her (i.e., *sort of true* or *really true*). In the present study, the internal consistency of NPIC scores was $\alpha = 0.87$.

2.2.2. Inventory of Callous and Unemotional Traits (ICU; Essau, Sasagawa, & Frick, 2006)

The ICU is a 24-item self-report measure of CU traits. Items (e.g., “I do not care who I hurt to get what I want”) are rated on a 4-point Likert scale from *not at all true* to *definitely true*. Scores on the ICU had an internal consistency of $\alpha = 0.74$ in this sample.

2.2.3. Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale (RSES; Rosenberg, 1965)

The RSES consists of 10 items and has been used in a wealth of studies on GSE in the past several decades. Items (e.g., “On the whole, I am satisfied with my life”) are rated on a 4-point scale from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. The internal consistency was $\alpha = 0.81$ in the present sample.

2.2.4. Pathological Narcissism Inventory (PNI; Pincus et al., 2009)

The CSE subscale of the PNI was used as the measure of CSE. This scale consists of 12 items (e.g., “I sometimes need important others in my life to reassure me of my self-worth”) that are rated on a 6-point scale from *not at all like me* to *very much like me*. In the present sample, the internal consistency was $\alpha = 0.89$ for this subscale.

2.2.5. Peer Conflict Scale (PCS; Marsee et al., 2011)

The PCS is a 40-item self-report inventory that assesses proactive and reactive aggression. Items are rated on a 4-point scale from *Not all True* to *Definitely True*. The Proactive Aggression (e.g., “I start fights to get what I want”) and Reactive Aggression (e.g., “When somebody threatens me, I usually end up getting in a fight”) scales each consist of

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