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The many faces of narcissism: Narcissism factors and their predictive utility ☆

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ABSTRACT

Previous research has often portrayed narcissism as a unitary construct, however more recent research suggests it may be multidimensional. This study was conducted to examine the utility of two measures of narcissism – the Narcissistic Pathological Inventory and the Pathological Narcissism Inventory, in jointly assessing a broader range of narcissism content. The sample consisted of 220 undergraduate students. Eight factors were extracted from an exploratory analysis labeled: Contingent Self-Esteem, Grandiose Fantasy, Leadership/Authority, Devaluing the Self, Grandiose Exhibitionism, Manipulative, Entitlement, and Superiority. It was found that these narcissism factors had differing relationships with self-esteem, depression, anxiety, and stress. Although a higher-order factor structure did not have satisfactory fit, it is maintained that these eight factors reflect the two higher order dimensions of adaptive and maladaptive narcissism. It is recommended that future researchers construct their studies based on a multidimensional conceptualisation of narcissism, and use multiple narcissism measures.

1. Introduction

1.1. Conceptual dimensionality

Research into the conceptual dimensionality of narcissism is complex, with different taxonomic levels at which narcissism can be examined. There is not yet agreement regarding the number of dimensions that make up the construct. According to Ackerman et al. (2011), narcissism may be broadly conceptualized in two higher order dimensions – adaptive and maladaptive. Adaptive narcissism is related to psychological health and resilience (Sedikides, Rudich, Gregg, Kumashiro, & Rusbult, 2004) and maladaptive narcissism is related to entitlement and negative affect (Pincus et al., 2009). This may be analogous to normal versus pathological narcissism (Pincus & Lukowitsky, 2010). Normal narcissism has been associated with the ability to promote a positive self-image, seek out self-enhancing experiences in social environments, and assert dominance in achievement related contexts (Ackerman et al., 2011; Pincus & Lukowitsky, 2010). Pathological narcissism is related to problematic self-regulation processes, and can be further broken down into grandiose and vulnerable dimensions (Ackerman et al., 2011; Miller, Gentile, Wilson, & Campbell, 2013).

The grandiose dimension is associated with elements of grandiosity, aggression and entitlement, whereas the vulnerable dimension is associated with feelings of inadequacy, negative affect and incompetence (Miller et al., 2011). This grandiose/vulnerable distinction is widely supported in the clinical literature (Cain, Pincus, & Ansell, 2008; Pincus et al., 2009). This two-factor model focusses only on a maladaptive or pathological conceptualization of narcissism.

Other research has put forward models that may capture more adaptive traits associated with narcissism. Russ, Shedler, Bradley, and Westen (2008) three-factor model consists of 'Grandiose/Malignant', 'Fragile' and 'High-Functioning Exhibitionist' factors. The Grandiose/Malignant and Fragile dimensions are similar to the grandiose/vulnerable distinction. The third factor, High-Functioning Exhibitionism, appears to capture more beneficial or adaptive narcissistic traits such as leadership ability, and outgoingness, accompanied by an excessive sense of self-importance (Russ et al., 2008). Ackerman et al. (2011) also proposed a model consisting of three factors – 'Leadership/Authority', 'Grandiose Exhibitionism' and 'Entitlement/Exploitativeness'. Adaptive narcissism traits are reflected by the Leadership/Authority factor. When compared to the two-factor model, these three-factor models encompass a wider range of traits associated with both adaptive and maladaptive narcissism. However adaptive narcissism profiles are often

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uncorrelated with maladaptive profiles, thus researchers have questioned the whether an adaptive dimension should be considered in the measurement of narcissism at all (Ackerman et al., 2011).

1.2. Measuring narcissism

In personality research, trait narcissism is considered a heterogeneous construct, and its measurement should reflect this (Miller et al., 2013). However narcissism measures are often still interpreted as a global score rather than specific factor scores (Horvath & Morf, 2010; Sedikides et al., 2004). The use of global scores may lead to the loss of more nuanced relationships between narcissistic dimensions and other personality variables. Despite this, individual differences research has recognized the importance of a multidimensional approach that utilizes factor scores and a combination of measures (Maxwell, Donnellan, Hopwood, & Ackerman, 2011).

Criticisms of dominant measures of narcissism have emerged in light of dimensional approaches to narcissism. The Narcissism Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Terry, 1988) is criticized due to the poor internal reliability of its sub-scales, and the tendency for researchers to sum across the sub-scales to create a global score (Brown, Budzek, & Tamborski, 2009). Some argue that specific subscales related to grandiosity and entitlement should replace the NPI altogether (Brown et al., 2009). Others suggest that the NPI should not be replaced because it accounts for more variance in trait narcissism than these individual sub-scales (Miller, Price, & Campbell, 2012), and has strong convergence with expert ratings of narcissistic personality disorder (Miller, Gaughan, Pryor, Kamen, & Campbell, 2009).

The NPI is also criticized for its lack of a consistent factorial structure (Maxwell et al., 2011). Numerous factor solutions have been found, such as the Emmons four-factor solution (Emmons, 1984; Rhodewalt & Morf, 1995) and Raskin and Terry's (1988) seven-factor solution. More recently, Kubarych, Deary, and Austin (2004) have put forward a revised three-factor solution relating to 'Power', 'Exhibitionism' and being a 'Special Person.' The Pathological Narcissism Inventory (PNI; Pincus et al., 2009) was created to address the lack of measurement tools assessing pathological narcissism (Cain, Pincus, & Ansell, 2008). In general, the NPI assesses adaptive aspects of narcissism while the PNI assesses maladaptive aspects of narcissism (Cain et al., 2008; Pincus et al., 2009).

1.3. Dimensions of narcissism and their nomological networks

Grandiose and vulnerable narcissism have different associations with a number of personality variables including the Five Factor Model. Broadly, both converge in their association with antagonistic interpersonal style, and diverge in their relationships with neuroticism and extraversion (Miller et al., 2011). Grandiose narcissism is positively related to extraversion and negatively related to neuroticism and agreeableness; whereas vulnerable narcissism is positively related to neuroticism and negatively related to extraversion and agreeableness (Miller et al., 2011). Other research has found that vulnerable narcissism is also closely related to psychopathy and Machiavellianism, unlike grandiose narcissism (Egan, Chan, & Shorter, 2014). Grandiose and vulnerable narcissism have divergent associations with psychological distress. Grandiose narcissism has been found to have no significant relationship, or a negative relationship with symptoms of distress and negative affect (Miller et al., 2011; Sedikides et al., 2004). Vulnerable narcissism is correlated with depression, anxiety, hostility, paranoia and interpersonal sensitivity (Miller et al., 2011). Ackerman et al.'s (2011) Leadership/Authority factor related to a number of positive personality traits. This factor had no association with negative personality traits (e.g. Neuroticism) or with maladaptive aspects of narcissism such as entitlement or anti-social tendencies, with the exception of a moderate negative correlation with agreeableness (Ackerman et al., 2011).

A significant hurdle for narcissism research is its complex relationship with self-esteem. There is a fundamental difference between those high in self-esteem compared to those high in narcissism. Self-esteem is considered intra-personal e.g. feeling confident and self-assured; whereas narcissism is considered interpersonal e.g. feeling superior to others and arrogant (Rosenthal & Hooley, 2010). Evidence suggests narcissism is associated with higher reported self-esteem (Horvath & Morf, 2010), however this relationship may be only true of adaptive narcissism (Ackerman et al., 2011), whereas maladaptive narcissistic traits may have an inverse relationship with self-esteem (Pincus et al., 2009).

1.4. Aims and hypotheses

There were two broad aims of this study. The first was to clarify the dimensionality of narcissism through its measures: the NPI and PNI. It was hypothesised that both the NPI and PNI would contain a mix of adaptive and maladaptive content, and that this would be reflected in a two-higher order latent factor structure. The second aim was to examine these narcissism dimensions in their nomological network, including self-esteem, personality, depression, stress and anxiety. It was hypothesised that the dimensions would have differential relationships with self-esteem in particular. It was hypothesised that adaptive narcissism would be positively correlated with self-esteem, and maladaptive narcissism would be negatively correlated with self-esteem.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

220 first-year undergraduate psychology students at a large Australian university (156 females, M_{age} = 19.25, SD_{age} = 3.16) received course credit in exchange for participation. 70 participants (31.8%) identified as being Anglo-Celtic, and 96 (43.6%) participants identified as Asian.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Terry, 1988)

The NPI is a 40-item self-report questionnaire. The response format was modified to a six-point scale ranging from 'not at all like me', to 'very much like me'. This modification is becoming more frequent (Egan & Lewis, 2011). Reliability for the NPI was α = .92.

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

The PNI is a 52-item self-report questionnaire with the same response format as the modified NPI. The PNI was constructed with seven subscales: 'Contingent Self-Esteem', 'Exploitative', 'Self-Sacrificing Self-Enhancement', 'Hiding the Self', 'Grandiose Fantasy', 'Devaluing', and 'Entitlement Rage' (Pincus et al., 2009). Reliabilities for the subscales were α = .91, .75, .76, .77, .88, .81, and .82, respectively.

2.2.3. Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE; Rosenberg, 1965)

The RSE is a commonly used 10-item questionnaire using a four-point Likert scale. Reliability for the RSE was α = .85.