



# Narcissistic self-esteem or optimal self-esteem? A Latent Profile Analysis of self-esteem and psychological entitlement <sup>☆</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

Research into the relationship between self-esteem and narcissism has produced conflicting results, potentially caused by hidden subpopulations that exhibit distinct positive or negative associations. This research uses Latent Profile Analysis to identify profiles within a national panel study ( $N = 6471$ ) with differing relationships between psychological entitlement and self-esteem. We identified a narcissistic self-esteem profile (9%) characterised by high entitlement and high self-esteem, an optimal self-esteem (38.4%) profile characterised by high self-esteem but low entitlement, and three profiles that reported low entitlement but different levels of self-esteem. We additionally predicted profile membership using Big-Five traits. Results indicate that self-esteem is a necessary but not sufficient condition for high entitlement, and entitlement is not highly prevalent in New Zealand.

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## 1. Introduction

Narcissists are defined by their extremely positive self-image, grandiosity, and sense of entitlement (e.g., Ackerman et al., 2011; Bosson et al., 2008; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). Both the psychological literature and popular conceptions of narcissism are concerned with whether this inflated self-view is a reflection of genuine confidence and excessive self-esteem, or whether the self-aggrandizing behaviour exists in order to bolster a sense of self that is in fact, quite fragile (e.g., Bosson et al., 2008; Brummelman, Thomaes, & Sedikides, 2016). Put another way: does narcissism mean you don't like yourself? Extant research shows a positive relationship between narcissism and self-esteem (Bosson et al., 2008), but differing conceptions of narcissism and entitlement make this association more complicated than first appears. Given this positive relationship, a related question then arises: is it possible to have high self-esteem without being narcissistic? Rising concerns about the 'narcissism epidemic' and 'culture of entitlement' (e.g., Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003;

Twenge, 2013) have been attributed to the 'self-esteem movement' – the idea that everyone is special and deserves a trophy (Beck, 2013). This research employs a Latent Profile Analysis and analyses data from a national probability sample within New Zealand in 2009, in order to investigate whether those with high entitlement necessarily have high self-esteem, and whether high self-esteem are sufficient to display high entitlement.

The concepts of self-esteem and narcissism share some clear overlap, as both involve positive self-evaluation (Brummelman et al., 2016; Orth & Luciano, 2015). The narcissist's self-view, however, is inflated and unrealistically positive (Campbell & Foster, 2007). Morf and Rhodewalt (2001) describe the narcissistic self-view as grandiose, but unable to stand on its own. Narcissists therefore require constant external support, attention, and admiration for their self-esteem to be maintained, often at the expense of their interpersonal relationships (Byrne & O'Brien, 2014; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001; Sedikides, Rudich, Gregg, Kumashiro, & Rusbult, 2004). In fact, it has been argued that narcissists are 'addicted to self-esteem' (Baumeister & Vohs, 2001). In particular, narcissists display high entitlement – a global tendency towards feelings of superiority and deservingness (Bosson et al., 2008; Campbell, Bonacci, Shelton, Exline, & Bushman, 2004). In contrast, the positive self-view of someone with high self-esteem is more realistic (Brummelman et al., 2016; Horvath & Morf, 2010; Mruk, 2013). High self-esteem is not associated with interpersonal problems, entitlement, or superiority, and those with high self-esteem are not so dependent on others to regulate their self-view

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(Horvath & Morf, 2010; Kernis, 2003; Mruk, 2013; Rosenberg, 1965). One important avenue for research assessing the links between self-esteem and narcissism, then, is to identify and disentangle potential subpopulations who may show high narcissism and high self-esteem from those who show low narcissism and high self-esteem. Latent Profile Analysis (LPA) provides a method for doing precisely this.

### 1.1. Latent Profile Analysis

LPA allows us to group participants together into probability-based profiles where individuals grouped within a profile score similarly across measures. Rather than examining the relationships between variables, and assuming this relationship holds for everyone, LPA focuses on the relationships between individuals and their different patterns of responses (Collins & Lanza, 2009). It does so by modelling a latent categorical factor, consisting of a set of latent profiles, underlying the variation in individual responses to the continuous observed variables. The aim of a Latent Profile Analysis is to identify the number of profiles that best fits the data while still maintaining parsimony (Collins & Lanza, 2009).

This analysis is particularly suited to self-esteem and psychological entitlement as we do not expect there to be only a simple linear relationship; rather, we might expect some participants to score highly across both measures, others low across both measures, and still others to measure high on one measure but low on another. That is, it seems likely that one could be a narcissist who reports high self-esteem, but we do not necessarily expect everyone with high self-esteem to be a narcissist (e.g., Brummelman et al., 2016). Additionally, previous research shows an overall positive relationship between self-esteem and narcissism (Bosson et al., 2008), so some people may score very low on both measures while others may score very high on both measures. As research into the relationship between self-esteem and narcissism has shown some conflicting results (e.g., Bosson et al., 2008), an LPA can identify the different combinations of high or low entitlement and self-esteem participants might have, answering questions about the structure of self-concept. LPA provides a novel approach to the research area and can provide new insights into correlational relationship between self-esteem and entitlement by unpacking it into separate, perhaps contrasting, patterns.

### 1.2. Self-esteem and narcissism

Our first question considers whether or not high self-esteem is a necessary condition for high entitlement. The relationship between explicit self-esteem and narcissism has been found to have a small to moderate positive relationship in meta-analysis (Bosson et al., 2008), reviews (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001; Sedikides et al., 2004), and recent research (Ackerman et al., 2011; Brown, Budzek, & Tamborski, 2009). Narcissists are often outgoing, have a good opinion of themselves, and enjoy leadership positions (e.g., Ackerman et al., 2011; O'Boyle, Forsyth, Banks, Story, & White, 2015). Yet, their dependence on validation from others and high entitlement suggests that narcissists might not be psychologically healthy (e.g., Campbell & Foster, 2007; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001; Vazire & Funder, 2006; Zeigler-Hill & Besser, 2012).

One concern raised regarding the positive relationship between narcissism and self-esteem is that measures of narcissism tend to tap into a blend of maladaptive and adaptive traits, and the adaptive traits overlap considerably with self-esteem measures (e.g., Zeigler-Hill & Besser, 2012). Some argue that by defining adaptive traits as part of narcissism, measures of narcissism such as the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI) are also directly measuring self-esteem which therefore accounts for narcissism's relationship with positive psychosocial outcomes (Brown et al., 2009;

Rosenthal & Hooley, 2010). When separating out maladaptive elements of narcissism such as Entitlement/Exploitativeness, research shows weak or even negative relationships with self-esteem (Ackerman et al., 2011; Clarke, Karlov, & Neale, 2015; Zeigler-Hill & Besser, 2012). Thus, the moderate positive relationship found between narcissism and self-esteem (Bosson et al., 2008) may be concealing some of the negative consequences of narcissism.

One study found that narcissism is beneficial to mental health, but only as long as it is associated with high self-esteem (which may not always be the case; Sedikides et al., 2004). Recently, researchers have been calling for a move towards using individual facets of narcissism rather than thinking of narcissism as a single overarching factor (Clarke et al., 2015; Zeigler-Hill & Besser, 2012). Narcissism can be conceptualised as two distinct dimensions, with contrasting relationships with self-esteem: grandiose/overt narcissism which is largely adaptive and measured using the NPI, and vulnerable/covert narcissism, which is largely maladaptive and measured using the Pathological Narcissism Inventory (PNI; Cain, Pincus, & Ansell, 2008; Miller et al., 2011; Pincus et al., 2009; Rose, 2002; Wink, 1991). These dimensions have been identified in both clinical and social areas of research (Cain et al., 2008), and form separate factors consistently across measures (Clarke et al., 2015).

The grandiose or overt narcissist is characterised by an overall sense of superiority, accompanied by arrogance and self-absorption (Bosson et al., 2008), and as such is expected to have high self-esteem. Meanwhile, the vulnerable or covert narcissist is characterised by low self-esteem and self-reported inferiority. Yet, the vulnerable narcissist still has grandiose fantasies, a tendency towards being exploitative and high feelings of entitlement (Bosson et al., 2008; Wink, 1991). Correlational research supports this conception of narcissism, finding a positive link between self-esteem and grandiose narcissism, and a negative link between self-esteem and vulnerable narcissism (Brookes, 2015; Cain et al., 2008; Miller et al., 2011; Pincus et al., 2009; Rose, 2002). However despite accounting for these distinct dimensions, there are still some inconsistencies in the literature. Some research has found a negative relationship between vulnerable narcissism, but no relationship between grandiose narcissism and self-esteem (Zeigler-Hill & Besser, 2012) and other research has found negative correlations with both types of narcissism and self-esteem (Barnett & Womack, 2015).

We argue that it is therefore important to use LPA to examine this relationship as it may identify profiles with differing associations between entitlement and self-esteem, and potential additional profiles not yet considered. Based on the dimensions of narcissism, which share a common core of entitlement (Brown et al., 2009; Horvath & Morf, 2010; Maxwell, Donnellan, Hopwood, & Ackerman, 2011; Miller et al., 2011; Pincus et al., 2009; Pryor, Miller, & Gaughan, 2008) but report divergent explicit levels of self-esteem, we can expect to identify two different narcissistic profiles within this research. We hypothesise that we will find one profile that is high on both entitlement and explicit self-esteem (representing grandiose narcissism), and another profile that is high on entitlement but low on explicit self-esteem (representing vulnerable narcissism). Overall, this would suggest that having high self-esteem is not a necessary condition for being high in entitlement.

### 1.3. Optimal versus narcissistic self-esteem

Our second question then asks if high self-esteem is a sufficient condition for high entitlement. Self-esteem and entitlement are only weakly positively correlated (Brown et al., 2009; Campbell et al., 2004), and this relationship may differ when considering optimal, genuine or authentic self-esteem (Kernis, 2003). Optimal

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