Journal of Research in Personality 60 (2016) 36–45

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Research in Personality

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jrp

# Adolescent narcissism and its association with different indices of prosocial behavior

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ARTICLE INFO

*Article history:*
Received 16 July 2015
Revised 11 November 2015
Accepted 19 November 2015
Available online 26 November 2015

*Keywords:*
Narcissism
Adolescent
Prosocial behavior

ABSTRACT

This study sought to replicate previous findings that adolescent pathological narcissism is linked to self-reported prosocial behavior (Kauten & Barry, 2014) and further investigated the relation of self-reported narcissism with self-, parent- and peer-reported prosocial behavior, as well as prosocial intentions, in 155 at-risk adolescents (*M* age = 16.8 years, *SD* = .77; 127 males, 28 females). Non-pathological narcissism demonstrated a positive relation with parent-reported prosocial behavior, and grandiose narcissism was positively related to both self- and parent-reported prosocial behavior. Vulnerable narcissism did not demonstrate a significant relation with any variant of prosocial behavior. Thus, the relation between adolescent narcissism and prosocial behavior appears to vary based on the dimension of narcissism and the method of assessing prosocial behavior.



## 1. Introduction

The growing empirical interest in adolescent narcissism has elucidated its relations with a number of behavioral and personality constructs. Perhaps the most robust and uniform finding across conceptualizations of narcissism is its positive relation with aggression (e.g., Barry & Kauten, 2014; Barry & Wallace, 2010; Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Pincus et al., 2009). More recently, some dimensions of narcissism have demonstrated associations with attributes that are generally considered positive (e.g., prosocial behavior, empathy; Barry, Kauten, & Lui, 2014; Kauten & Barry, 2014). The further investigation of moderating variables in these associations is important for determining factors that might strengthen narcissism's connection to desirable behaviors which could then extend research on variables that mitigate its association with antisocial behaviors such as aggression.

Although the relation between adolescent narcissism and prosocial behavior has been evident only for self-reports (Kauten & Barry, 2014), the finding suggests that in some way, individuals with narcissistic traits perceive themselves as behaving positively toward others. The current study sought to explore a potential moderating factor (i.e., social intelligence) in the recently described relation between adolescent narcissism and prosocial behavior. Identification of these factors early in development may provide insight regarding means of promoting prosocial behavior. Furthermore, this study contributes to the existing literature through an examination of the relations of different dimensions of narcissism with various indicators (e.g., self-report, other-report, intent to engage in helping behavior) of prosocial behavior, thus providing further consideration as to whether the previous findings reflect consistent associations or are an artifact of impression management and desirable responding.

### 1.1. Narcissism

Narcissism is a collection of personality traits expressed through an arrogant and superior interpersonal presentation. Individuals with narcissistic traits typically maintain a grandiose attitude with an air of self-confidence (Barry, Frick, & Killian, 2003; Hill & Lapsley, 2011) that is thought to provide a buffer against potential threats to a fragile self-concept (e.g., Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001; Pincus et al., 2009). However, narcissism has been conceptualized as having different manifestations, with each form associated with varying degrees of maladjustment by virtue of their behavioral and emotional correlates (see Barry & Kauten, 2014). Wink (1991) and later, Hendin and Cheek (1997) proposed that there are at least two distinct portrayals of narcissism, one of which maps onto an overt and grandiose presentation, and the other which reflects a hypersensitive and insecure sense of self. In recent years, the terms "non-pathological" and "pathological"

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jrp.2015.11.004
0092-6566/

narcissism have been used to differentiate between approaches to defining and measuring the construct, with the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Hall, 1979) used to measure the former and the Pathological Narcissism Inventory (PNI; Pincus et al., 2009) used for the latter.

Although non-pathological narcissism includes a willingness to exploit others, feelings of superiority, and preoccupation with appraisals of worth from others, it has broadly been considered more socially and personally advantageous than grandiose or vulnerable elements of pathological narcissism. Specifically, despite its consistent correlation with delinquency and both proactive and reactive aggression, non-pathological narcissism has demonstrated a positive correlation with self-esteem in adolescents (Barry & Wallace, 2010) and has shown negative relations with anxiety, depression, and social stress, as well as associations with positive perceptions of one's relationships with others (Barry & Kauten, 2014). Therefore, non-pathological narcissism includes a positive sense of self (see Miller & Campbell, 2011; Sedikides, Rudich, Gregg, Kumashiro, & Rusbult, 2004) and does not clearly account for fragile self-views that are aspects of some classic views of narcissism (Kernberg, 1975). Based on the dynamic self-regulatory framework (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001), non-pathological narcissism might involve both antagonistic and prosocial behaviors in an attempt to achieve and maintain a desired status in the view of others.

Pathological narcissism shares elements of exploitativeness and entitlement with non-pathological narcissism but also encompasses several additional maladaptive factors (e.g., contingent self-esteem, concerted efforts to conceal personal weakness, self-ingratiation; Pincus et al., 2009). In contrast to non-pathological narcissism, the pathological aspect of narcissism is negatively associated with self-esteem, and it also demonstrates positive correlations with both proactive and reactive aggression (Barry & Kauten, 2014; Pincus et al., 2009), anxiety, depression, and social stress (Barry & Kauten, 2014). Pathological and non-pathological narcissism tend to be uncorrelated or minimally correlated with each other, further emphasizing that they measure unique variants of narcissism (Roche, Pincus, Lukowitsky, Menard, & Conroy, 2013).

Within the construct of pathological narcissism are two dimensions: grandiose and vulnerable narcissism. Grandiose narcissism consists of self-enhancing traits and tendencies to manipulate interaction partners to one's own benefit, whereas vulnerable narcissism reflects a fragile self-worth accompanied by anger and irritability when threatened (Pincus et al., 2009). Given the moderate to high interrelation between grandiose and vulnerable narcissism, these two seemingly contradictory styles of narcissism may exist simultaneously. Pincus and Roche (2011) explain that narcissistic grandiosity motivates the individual to seek out opportunities to be valued and appreciated, which in turn increases the likelihood of rejection, at which point narcissistic vulnerability is exhibited.

Although some elements of pathological narcissism (e.g., grandiosity, entitlement, sense of self-importance) may appear to present similarly to non-pathological narcissism (indeed, the NPI has been used to measure "grandiose narcissism" in some research; e.g., Besser & Priel, 2010), one noteworthy discrepancy between non-pathological and pathological narcissism concerns their associations with self-esteem. Specifically, as discussed above, non-pathological narcissism reflects the colloquial sense of narcissism that is accompanied by an apparently elevated self-esteem (Emmons, 1987). On the other hand, pathological narcissism has been linked to contingent self-esteem (e.g., Maxwell, Donnellan, Hopwood, & Ackerman, 2011; Pincus et al., 2009). In this conceptualization, the grandiose self-confidence put forth by individuals characterized by a narcissistic personality pattern appears to be a façade. The premise of self-worth, then, with regard to pathological narcissism, is a weak foundation on which the interpersonal identity is built. Still, both the fragile sense of self implicated in pathological narcissism and a heightened sense of self-importance inherent in non-pathological narcissism could be tied to similar interpersonal behaviors (e.g., aggression, prosocial behavior).

Despite the emphasis on self-involvement and egocentrism in the discussion of the various dimensions of narcissism, it is important to consider that narcissism does not necessarily preclude awareness of others. Rather, a sense of what others need or will admire may be particularly heightened, as it could be advantageous to the individual's own social standing. Therefore, individuals characterized by narcissism may use several mechanisms, including prosocial behavior, to manipulate others' perceptions.

### 1.2. Prosocial behavior

As noted above, both pathological and non-pathological narcissism are correlated with adolescent aggression (Barry & Kauten, 2014; Thomaes, Stegge, Olthof, Bushman, & Nezlek, 2011). Interestingly, however, both self- and peer-reported prosocial behavior have demonstrated associations with one particular element of the narcissistic personality: Self-Sacrificing Self-Enhancement (Kauten & Barry, 2014). This domain, which falls under the grandiose narcissism dimension, lends itself to involvement in prosocial behavior, as it is characterized by a willingness to ingratiate oneself to others to gain favor (Pincus et al., 2009). Thus, in certain contexts, prosocial behavior may be used as a social strategy, and an individual with grandiose narcissism may engage in prosocial behavior particularly to garner social rewards or admiration from others. Regardless of motive, such tendencies may be associated with certain socially desirable behaviors that are intended to earn social rewards. In contrast, because vulnerable narcissism involves a self-esteem that is contingent on external events and intense reactions when one does not receive the positive regard that he/she desires (Besser & Priel, 2010), motives to help others may be particularly low as a function of this dimension of narcissism.

The relation between narcissism and self-reported prosocial behavior is not altogether surprising. First, this association may simply be an artifact of narcissistic self-inflation. In addition, the charismatic and charming face of narcissism (Campbell, Foster, & Finkel, 2002) combined with the desperate need for admiration (Pincus et al., 2009) may drive an individual with high levels of narcissism to engage in socially beneficial behaviors in an effort to earn positive social appraisals. An association between narcissism and prosocial behavior may be based on a process by which some individuals high in narcissism may be particularly adept with the skills necessary to perceive the needs of others and to determine how to adequately meet these needs (Kauten & Barry, 2014). Thus, perhaps individuals high on narcissism engage in prosocial behavior particularly if they have greater social intelligence, which allows them to successfully manipulate the perceptions of others. However, a replication of previous results (i.e., parent- and peer-reported prosocial behavior being unrelated to narcissism; Kauten & Barry, 2014) would insinuate that such individuals are ineffective at this form of impression management.

### 1.3. Social intelligence

Social intelligence has been broadly defined as the "ability to understand and manage people" (Thorndike & Stein, 1937, as cited by Crowne, 2013, p. 105). One widely used measure of social intelligence distinguishes three separate components of the construct: social information processing, social skills, and social awareness (Silvera, Martinussen, & Dahl, 2001). In this conceptualization, social information processing involves the understanding of both implicit and explicit verbal and nonverbal messages (Doğan &