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Brief Report

Aggression, narcissism, self-esteem, and the attribution of desirable and humanizing traits to self versus others ☆

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ABSTRACT

Undergraduates (n = 156) completed measures of aggression, self-esteem, and narcissism. In accord with previous research, self-esteem and narcissism had opposing effects on aggression and functioned as mutual suppressors: Controlling their shared variance amplified self-esteem's negative association with aggression and narcissism's positive association with aggression. Participants also rated themselves and peers on traits that were or were not (a) desirable and (b) humanizing (i.e., uniquely human or reflecting human nature). Ascribing more humanizing and less dehumanizing traits to the self than to others was associated with more narcissism and more aggression (but did not mediate the narcissism-aggression relationship); this intriguing finding should stimulate further study of the social cognition associated with entitled, exploitative, and hostile behavior.

1. Introduction

The personal and social costs of aggression make it important to understand why some people are more prone to aggression than others. Two personality variables that have been posited to predict aggression are self-esteem (a secure and stable sense of individual worth) and narcissism (an excessive and defensive assertion of status). Previous research suggests that aggression tends to relate negatively to self-esteem and positively to narcissism (Donnellan, Trzesniewski, Robins, Moffitt, & Caspi, 2005); however, the literature contains some inconsistent findings.

Perhaps one source of the inconsistencies is a moderate positive correlation between measures of self-esteem and narcissism that causes self-esteem and narcissism to function as "mutual suppressors" in reducing the association each has with aggression. In support of this hypothesis, removing the variance that self-esteem and narcissism share does tend to strengthen the negative esteem-aggression relationship and the positive narcissism-aggression relationship (Donnellan et al., 2005; Paulhus, Robins, Trzesniewski, & Tracy, 2004; Smalley & Stake, 1996). One goal of the current study was to provide another test of this hypothesis.

A second goal was to explore the types of social cognition associated with aggressive behavior. Following a recent study that found aggression to be associated with lower self-esteem and other-esteem (Bradshaw & Hazan, 2006), the current study tested if aggression was associated with conceptualizing the self and others in desirable or undesirable terms. The current study also tested if aggression was associated with describing the self or others in humanizing or dehumanizing terms.

Several theorists have suggested that the degree to which people conceptualize others in humanizing or dehumanizing terms may influence aggression (Bandura, 1999). For example, people were more likely to choose greater shock intensities to punish others' poor performance when those others were described in dehumanizing, animalistic terms (Bandura, Underwood, & Fromson, 1975). Haslam (2006) distinguished two kinds of dehumanization. Animalistic dehumanization denies people *uniquely human attributes*, and conceptualizes them as coarse, irrational, and instinctual (versus moral, sensible, and civil). Mechanistic dehumanization denies others *human nature attributes*, and conceptualizes them as cold, passive, and superficial (versus emotionally responsive, curious, and deep). Therefore, the current study tested if conceptualizing others as lacking in either uniquely human or human nature attributes—or as having less of these humanizing attributes than the self—would predict more aggression.

If the degree to which people perceive themselves and others in desirable or humanizing terms predicts aggression, and self-esteem and narcissism predict these perceptions of the self and others, then these perceptions may constitute one social cognitive process through which the traits of self-esteem and narcissism influence aggression. For example, narcissistic individuals may be more prone to aggression because they tend to believe that they have more humanizing qualities than others do. Therefore, the final goal of the current research was to test if perceptions—and

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differences in perceptions—of the self and others would at least partially mediate the associations of self-esteem and narcissism with aggression.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

University of Idaho undergraduates (102 females, 50 males, 4 unknown) ranging in age from 18 to 42 years (M = 21.1, SD = 3.8) participated for extra credit in psychology classes. They described their ethnicity as follows: 87.2% European American; 6.4% Native American, Black, or Latino; 6.4% "mixed", "other", or did not respond.

2.2. Materials

2.2.1. Aggression, self-esteem, and narcissism

I administered the most common self-report measures of aggression, self-esteem, and narcissism: the Buss–Perry Aggression Questionnaire (AQ; Buss & Perry, 1992), the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE; Rosenberg, 1965), and the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Terry, 1988). Participants responded to the 29 AQ items on 5-point scales ranging from −2 (extremely untrue of me) to +2 (extremely true of me); I averaged the responses to create an index of overall aggression (Cronbach's α = .88). Participants responded to the 10 RSE items on 6-point scales ranging from −3 (disagree strongly) to +3 (agree strongly); I averaged the responses to create an overall index of self-esteem (α = .86). Participants responded to the 40 NPI items by choosing either the narcissistic or non-narcissistic statement; I summed the number of narcissistic responses to create an index of overall narcissism (α = 0.86). (While some researchers report analyses for the subscales of the AQ and NPI, I chose not to because the subscale analyses added greatly to the length of the results without adding much useful information.)

2.2.2. Self and other-ratings

Participants rated how well each of 40 randomly-ordered traits described the self or "the average student at this university" on scales ranging from −3 (*extremely untrue of them/me*) to +3 (*extremely true of them/me*). Haslam and Bain (2007) list these 40 traits and detail how they were derived. Briefly, the traits assess 3 factors: desirability, uniquely human, and human nature (with five traits representing each combination of the high versus low poles of each factor). One (low desirability, high uniquely human, high human nature) trait, "insecure", was omitted from the analyses because it was highly correlated with self-esteem (r[155] = −0.63); no other traits had an $|r| > .5$ with either self-esteem or narcissism. Thus, there were 20 high and 19 low desirability traits, 19 high and 20 low uniquely human traits, and 19 high and 20 low human nature traits.

I computed *Self-Desirability* as the mean self-rating on the desirable and (reverse-scored) undesirable traits, and *Other-Desirability* as the mean rating of peers on the desirable and (reverse-scored) undesirable traits. I then computed a self-other (S-O) difference score by subtracting *Other-Desirability* from *Self-Desirability*; thus, *S-O Desirability* was positive when *Self-Desirability* exceeded *Other-Desirability*. I computed indices of *Self-Uniquely-Human*, *Other-Uniquely-Human*, *Self-Human-Nature*, *Other-Human-Nature*, *S-O Uniquely Human*, and *S-O Human Nature* in the same way.

2.3. Procedure

Participants completed questionnaires containing the materials described above (in one of eight different random orders) at home and then returned them to my lab either in person or by mail.

3. Results

I replaced missing data with the sample mean for that item. Since gender did not predict aggression, self-esteem, or narcissism (ps >.1), and including gender did not significantly alter the results (and required excluding four participants), I omitted gender from the analyses.

3.1. Self-other ratings and aggression

Table 1 (rows 1–3, columns 1–2) shows the regression of aggression on S-O differences. Aggression related negatively to *S-O Desirability* and positively to *S-O Uniquely Human* and *S-O Human Nature*. That is, more aggressive individuals tended to apply less flattering but more humanizing terms to the self than to their peers.

The following equations show that the preceding regressions on self-other difference scores test a model in which self-ratings and ratings of others have equal but opposite effects (Edwards, 2002). The equation for the regression of an outcome, Y, on a S-O score is:

$$Y = b_0 + b_D(S - O) + e. \quad (1)$$

Eq. (1) can be rewritten as:

Table 1
Regression of aggression, self-esteem, and narcissism on self-ratings, other-ratings, and self-other differences.

Outcome	Trait dimension	S-O		Self		Other		ΔR^2
		β	SE	B	SE	B	SE	
Aggression								
	Desirability	−0.22*	0.08	−0.42**	0.07	−0.07	0.07	0.15**
	Uniquely human	0.16*	0.08	0.18*	0.08	−0.06	0.08	0.01
	Human nature	0.18*	0.08	0.15	0.08	−0.14	0.08	0.00
Self-esteem								
	Desirability	0.26**	0.08	0.45**	0.07	0.03	0.07	0.14**
	Uniquely human	−0.02	0.08	−0.05	0.08	−0.01	0.08	0.00
	Human nature	−0.13	0.08	−0.14	0.08	0.05	0.08	0.00
Narcissism								
	Desirability	0.12	0.08	0.09	0.08	−0.10	0.08	0.00
	Uniquely human	0.23**	0.08	0.20*	0.08	−0.14	0.08	0.00
	Human nature	0.22*	0.08	0.21*	0.08	−0.13	0.08	0.00

Note: N = 156. The βs are standardized regression coefficients. The ΔR^2 is the increase in the variance explained by the unconstrained regression on self- and other-ratings relative to the variance explained by the regression on S-O ratings; the degrees of freedom for the F-tests of significance of ΔR^2 were 1 and 153.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .005$.