Personality and Individual Differences 85 (2015) 172–175

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Personality and Individual Differences

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

The effect of overt and covert narcissism on self-esteem and self-efficacy beyond self-esteem

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 23 March 2015
Received in revised form 6 May 2015
Accepted 7 May 2015
Available online 19 May 2015

Keywords:
Narcissism
Overt narcissism
Covert narcissism
Self-esteem
Self-efficacy

ABSTRACT

Past literature has suggested a dual nature of trait based narcissism, comprising overt and covert forms. While several studies have examined the two subtypes in relation to self-esteem, very few studies have examined narcissistic subtypes and self-efficacy. 115 Psychology undergraduates filled in self-report measures of overt narcissism, covert narcissism, self-esteem and self-efficacy. Results demonstrated no significant relationship between overt and covert narcissism, suggesting two distinct subtypes. Overt and covert forms of narcissism were found to significantly contribute to self-efficacy beyond self-esteem. Further, overt narcissism positively predicted both self-esteem and self-efficacy beyond self-esteem. Conversely, covert narcissism was found to negatively predict self-esteem and self-efficacy beyond self-esteem. Overt narcissism subscale associations were also computed, with Power being associated with higher self-efficacy but not self-esteem, suggesting Power to be a more adaptive subscale. The Special Person subscale was associated with higher self-esteem but not self-efficacy, suggesting it forms the maladaptive core of overt narcissism. Exhibitionism was not associated with either self-esteem or self-efficacy. Results appear congruent with past literature, and have given an additional insight into the implications of trait based narcissism regarding self-efficacy. Findings appear to suggest trait based overt narcissism is a more adaptive construct to individual self-concept than covert narcissism.

1. Introduction

It has been suggested that there are two distinct forms of pathological (Kernberg, 1975; Kohut, 1971, 1977) and more recently non-pathological narcissism (Wink, 1991). Several studies have explored the associations of overt and covert narcissism and self-esteem (Miller et al., 2011; Pincus et al., 2009; Rohmann, Neumann, Herner, & Bierhoff, 2012; Rose, 2002). However, narcissism and its subtypes have not been considered in relation to the associated domain of self-efficacy. Exploring associations between narcissistic subtypes and self-efficacy may further highlight adaptive and maladaptive elements of these multifaceted personality constructs. Moreover, differences in self-efficacy may have implications for associated behavioural distinctions between overt and covert subtypes of narcissism, such as aggression (Okada, 2010).

It has been conceptualised that there are two forms of trait based narcissism, overt and covert (Wink, 1991). The overt form, described as Grandiosity–Exhibitionism consists of exhibitionism, an exaggerated sense of self-importance, grandiosity and desire for attention (Wink, 1991). Conversely, the covert or Vulnerability–Sensitivity form of narcissism is characterised by hypersensitivity to criticism, a lack of self-confidence, being socially withdrawn, but similar to the overt form, an element of grandiosity (Wink, 1991). Whilst covert narcissism is comprised of grandiosity as a constituent part, there is an element of insecurity in grandiosity (Miller, Gentile, Wilson, & Campbell, 2013).

Since the binary conceptualisation of trait based narcissism, growing empirical attention has examined the overt and covert constructs. Research has affirmed the independence of these subtypes (Rathvon & Holmstrom, 1996). Findings have additionally suggested fundamental differences in terms of expression, with covert narcissism being characterised by greater distress (Dickinson & Pincus, 2003). However, differences in reported distress may be partially attributed to overt narcissists' tendency to deny problems (Dickinson & Pincus, 2003). Nonetheless, the lack of a significant relationship between overt and covert measures of narcissism (Smolewska & Dion, 2005) appears to affirm the suggestion of their independence.

Research has identified a variety of factor structures corresponding to the Narcissistic Personality Inventory, with two/three

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2015.05.013
0191-8869/

(Kubarych, Deary, & Austin, 2004), four (Emmons, 1984) and even seven (Raskin & Terry, 1988) factors being suggested. The four and seven factor solutions have been derived exclusively through Principal Components Analysis (Emmons, 1984; Raskin & Terry, 1988). Conversely, the two and three factor solutions were additionally explored using Confirmatory Factor Analysis, with the three factor solution demonstrating the best fit (Kubarych et al., 2004). Therefore, the present research will consider the three subscales of Power, Exhibitionism and Special Person identified in Kubarych et al. (2004).

Psychoanalytic perspectives have identified pathological narcissism as a defensive grandiosity in compensation for underlying feelings of inferiority (Kernberg, 1975). Alternatively, social learning perspectives have suggested that narcissism consists of genuine underlying beliefs of superiority (Millon, 1981). Given these alternate suggestions of self-concept regarding pathological narcissism, it is unsurprising that research has extended to trait based narcissism and self-esteem. Self-esteem can be defined as the view people have of themselves; whether they view themselves to be a good and valuable person or not (Kernis, 2003). Higher overt narcissism has been associated with higher self-esteem, with covert narcissism being conversely associated with lower self-esteem (Miller et al., 2011; Pincus et al., 2009; Rohmann et al., 2012; Rose, 2002). Thus, findings may be interpreted as suggesting that regarding individual self-concept, overt narcissism is a more adaptive construct than covert narcissism. Equally, subscale level associations with self-esteem have been explored, with the Special Person and Power subscales being associated with increased self-esteem (Brunell, Staats, Barden, & Hupp, 2011). Conversely, no significant association has been found between Exhibitionism and self-esteem (Brunell et al., 2011). This demonstrates differing subscale effects which may be suppressed if total scale scores are exclusively considered.

Another element within the domain of self-concept is self-efficacy. Self-efficacy can be defined as how people judge their ability to both organise and carry out tasks (Bandura, 1986). Moreover, as a concept it has implications for feelings, thoughts, motivation and in turn, behaviour (Bandura, 1994). Self-efficacy can be influenced by whether or not success in tasks is achieved, hence may vary depending on recent events (Andersson, Moore, Hensing, Krantz, & Staland-Nyman, 2014). In this respect, self-efficacy bears similarity to self-esteem which is liable to fluctuation in response to life events, especially in narcissistic individuals (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). It has been identified that self-esteem and self-efficacy are distinct, but related concepts which are moderately correlated (Brown, Hoye, & Nicholson, 2012). The similarity between self-efficacy and self-esteem may suggest that self-efficacy is likely to differ between narcissistic subtypes. Despite there having been several studies examining narcissistic subtypes and self-esteem, research has not considered narcissism in relation to self-efficacy. Exploring self-efficacy in relation to narcissism may further expand understandings of differences between narcissistic subtypes and shed more light on the variation in self-concept associated with the differing presentations of narcissism.

This study examined overt narcissism, covert narcissism, self-esteem and self-efficacy. Due to self-esteem being moderately correlated to self-efficacy, it appeared appropriate to consider the impact of overt and covert narcissism on self-efficacy, beyond the variance accounted for by self-esteem. The aims for the study were to (i) assess the relationship between overt and covert narcissism, (ii) assess overt and covert narcissism's link to self-esteem, and (iii) assess whether overt and covert narcissism independently predicted self-efficacy, beyond self-esteem. To further explore specific facets of overt narcissism, Narcissistic Personality Inventory subscale analyses were also computed.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

A total of 115 participants (27 males and 88 females) were recruited from an in-house research participation system at a British University. Although age demographics were not directly collected, all participants were Psychology undergraduates and therefore primarily aged between 18 and 21 years.

2.2. Materials

2.2.1. Overt narcissism

The Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI) (Raskin & Terry, 1988) was used to gain a measure of overt narcissism. While a number of scales have been used to assess narcissism, the NPI has been suggested to be a strong measure of overt narcissism, with good internal reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .80$) respectively (Hendin & Cheek, 1997). The NPI consisted of 40 questions, with a choice between two statements for each question. Statements which were characteristic of overt narcissism were counted as a score of one, with opposing statements scored as zero.

2.2.2. Covert narcissism

The Hypersensitive Narcissism Scale (HSNS) (Hendin & Cheek, 1997) has been suggested to be an adept measure of covert narcissism, and has been found to have good internal reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .72$). The scale consisted of a ten question likert scale, with responses ranging from 1 (very uncharacteristic or untrue, strongly disagree) to 5 (very characteristic or true, strongly agree).

2.2.3. Self-esteem

To obtain an overall score for self-esteem, the Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965) was used. Previous findings have indicated good internal reliability of the scale (Cronbach's $\alpha = .87$ found by Brown et al. (2012)). The scale used a four point likert scale, which ranged from 0 (strongly disagree) to 3 (strongly agree). Questions (2, 5, 6, 8 and 9) were negatively phrased, hence were reverse coded.

2.2.4. Self-efficacy

The Generalized Self-Efficacy Scale (Schwarzer & Jerusalem, 1995) has been found to have good internal reliability, ranging from $\alpha = .75$ to $\alpha = .91$ (Scholz, Doña, Sud, & Schwarzer, 2002). Hence the Generalized Self-Efficacy scale was administered to acquire an overall measure of self-efficacy. The scale employed a four point likert scale, ranging from 1 (not at all true) to 4 (exactly true).

2.3. Procedure

The study was advertised on an in-house internet accessible board. A questionnaire comprising several scales was administered to gather self-report measures of overt narcissism, covert narcissism, self-esteem and self-efficacy. Following informed consent, the four overall scales (Narcissistic Personality Inventory, Hypersensitive Narcissism scale, Rosenberg Self-Esteem scale and Generalized Self-Efficacy scale) were administered in a computer randomised order. Participants viewed the debrief form which identified the aims of the study. Research was conducted in line with the code of ethics set out by the British Psychological Society.

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive statistics

An exploration of the descriptive statistics revealed that Overt Narcissism and its subscales (Power, Exhibitionism and Special Person) were all positively skewed. These variables were square root transformed, which brought skewness into tolerance for all variables except Exhibitionism. Hence, a more cautious significance level of $P \leqslant .01$ was employed for Exhibitionism (Kirk, 1982).

3.2. Correlation of overt and covert narcissism

Using a Pearson's correlation, a very weak positive but non-significant correlation was found between overt narcissism and covert narcissism ($r = .103$, $p = .274$).

3.3. Multiple regression analyses predicting self-esteem

A summary of multiple regression analyses predicting self-esteem is presented in Table 1. The first model, comprising overt and covert narcissism significantly predicted self-esteem. Overt narcissism independently predicted increased self-esteem, with covert narcissism independently predicting lower self-esteem. The second model explored subscale level associations with self-esteem. Results revealed that NPI Special Person was significantly linked to higher self-esteem. NPI Power and NPI Exhibitionism subscales demonstrated no significant association with self-esteem, whilst controlling for other variables in the model.

3.4. Multiple regression analyses predicting self-efficacy

A summary of multiple regression analyses predicting self-efficacy is presented in Table 2. The first model, which considered self-esteem, overt and covert narcissism significantly predicted self-efficacy. Whilst controlling for self-esteem, overt narcissism significantly predicted higher self-efficacy, with covert narcissism significantly predicting lower self-efficacy. The second model considered self-esteem, NPI subscales and covert narcissism, and significantly predicted self-efficacy. Whilst controlling for other variables in the model, NPI Power predicted higher self-efficacy. NPI Exhibitionism and NPI Special Person did not significantly predict self-efficacy.

4. Discussion

Findings appeared congruent with past literature, suggesting no significant association between the two forms of narcissism. Further, overt narcissism was associated with higher self-esteem and covert narcissism with lower self-esteem, congruent with past findings (Rohmann et al., 2012; Rose, 2002). NPI subscale analyses were partially consistent previous findings (Brunell et al., 2011), however the Power subscale failed to reach significance when predicting self-esteem in the present study. The primary additional findings of the present research are the exclusive associations between overt narcissism, covert narcissism, NPI subscales and self-efficacy.

Table 1
Summary of multiple regression analyses predicting self-esteem.

Predictor	*B*	*β*	R^2	*p*
Model 1 – Narcissism			.328	<.001
Overt narcissism	2.005	.345		<.001
Covert narcissism	−.502	−.494		<.001
Model 2 – Subscales			.351	<.001
NPI power	1.411	.188		.052
NPI exhibitionism	−.272	−.032		.703
NPI special person	1.969	.251		.009
Covert narcissism	−.496	−.489		<.001

Table 2
Summary of multiple regression analyses predicting self-efficacy.

Predictor	*B*	*β*	R^2	*p*
Model 1 – Narcissism			.477	<.001
Self-esteem	.331	.408		<.001
Overt narcissism	1.540	.326		<.001
Covert narcissism	−.192	−.233		.005
Model 2 – Subscales			.471	<.001
Self-esteem	.350	.432		<.001
NPI power	1.725	.283		.002
NPI exhibitionism	.473	.069		.367
NPI special person	−.097	−.015		.864
Covert narcissism	−.164	−.199		.017

Results identified no significant relationship between overt and covert narcissism, with only a very slight correlation being found between the two measures. Hence the results sit in line with both the original suggestion (Wink, 1991), and subsequent research which has suggested the independence of narcissistic subtypes (Dickinson & Pincus, 2003; Rathvon & Holmstrom, 1996). Indeed, results directly support past findings demonstrating no significant relationship between overt and covert narcissism (Smolewska & Dion, 2005).

Results indicated that overt and covert narcissism were significant predictors of self-esteem. Overt narcissism was positively related to self-esteem, congruent with past literature (Miller et al., 2011; Rohmann et al., 2012; Rose, 2002). Covert narcissism was found to negatively predict self-esteem, similarly in line with past research (Miller et al., 2011; Rohmann et al., 2012; Rose, 2002). Since the overt form of narcissism relates to a more positive self-concept, results may be interpreted as suggesting overt narcissism is a more adaptive construct on an individual basis than covert narcissism, consistent with previous suggestions within the literature (Rose, 2002). However, this assertion is only made with regard to the personal adaptive properties of each trait; the impact on others has not been assessed. Certainly, higher levels of either form of narcissism may have a negative impact on interpersonal functioning, with problems in interpersonal functioning being commonplace among pathologically narcissistic individuals (Miller, Campbell, & Pilkonis, 2007). It is worthy of note however, that self-report findings regarding those at the higher end of overt narcissism may need to be treated with caution, since previous literature has highlighted the propensity of overtly narcissistic individuals to deny and minimise problems (Dickinson & Pincus, 2003). Moreover, since narcissism is characterised by the inability to distinguish between the ideal and real self (Rhodewalt & Morf, 1995), the discord between individuals' self-views in comparison to objective measures may provide a more valid assessment of narcissism. Nonetheless, the sample in the present study were drawn from a non-clinical population, potentially minimising this concern.

Since overt narcissism does not present a unitary construct (Kubarych et al., 2004), subscale level analyses were also computed. NPI Special Person was the only subscale which significantly predicted self-esteem. The significant positive association suggests the Special Person facet relates to the most inflated self-view. The NPI Power subscale failed to reach statistical significance in association with self-esteem, contrary to previous findings (Brunell et al., 2011). This may be due to the multiple regression in the present study controlling for potential spurious associations, perhaps stemming from NPI subscale intercorrelations (Kubarych et al., 2004), contrary to previous explorations which exclusively performed zero-order correlations (Brunell et al., 2011).

Alternatively, it is conceivable that the NPI Power subscale is weakly positively associated with self-esteem, however failed to reach significance in the present study due to lack of statistical power. Hence, findings may warrant further explorations of the NPI Power subscale in relation to self-esteem utilising another larger sample. NPI Exhibitionism was not significantly associated with self-esteem, which may position the Exhibitionism facet between the Power and Special Person subscales.

Despite the aims of the present study not being to assess the impact of self-esteem on self-efficacy, results were congruent with past findings of self-esteem and self-efficacy being positively associated (Brown et al., 2012). Findings demonstrated that overt narcissism made a unique positive contribution to individual self-efficacy, beyond both self-esteem and covert narcissism. Therefore, individuals higher in overt narcissism tend to have a greater level of belief in their own ability to attain their goals, which suggests a generally more positive outlook on life, especially when considered in addition to the aforementioned increased self-esteem. Covert narcissism was found to negatively predict self-efficacy, beyond self-esteem and overt narcissism. Hence, findings regarding self-efficacy appear congruent with the earlier suggestion that overt narcissism is a reasonably adaptive trait within non-pathological individuals, compared to the more maladaptive covert form of narcissism (Rose, 2002).

Findings revealed that NPI Power was the only overt narcissism subscale to significantly predict self-efficacy. The positive link between NPI Power and self-efficacy may suggest it presents a more adaptive element of overt narcissism, especially due to either a weak (Brunell et al., 2011) or no significant link to self-esteem. Certainly, a stronger belief regarding goal attainment without such an inflated self-image may present the most adaptive element of overt narcissism. NPI Exhibitionism and NPI Special Person were not significantly linked to self-efficacy. Hence, despite NPI Special Person being linked to higher self-esteem, it was not related to self-efficacy. This may suggest the Special Person facet is characterised by magical thinking due to an enhanced self-image, without higher self-efficacy to inform a greater belief of actions facilitating goal attainment. Therefore, NPI Special Person may represent the maladaptive core of overt narcissism. Since NPI Exhibitionism is not associated with either self-esteem or self-efficacy, the Exhibitionism facet may be located between the more adaptive NPI Power and more maladaptive NPI Special Person subscale. Moreover, the present exploration has highlighted the importance of distinction between Power and Special Person subscales within the NPI, since they demonstrate differing relationships with external correlates. These differences would not have been observed utilising the alternative two factor structure (Kubarych et al., 2004).

Future research may consider additional external correlates of the three NPI components to further validate their adaptive and maladaptive natures. These explorations may shed further light on whether NPI Special Person forms the maladaptive core of overt narcissism. Research may consider NPI subscale associations in relation to both self-esteem and self-efficacy in another, larger sample. This may clarify whether NPI Power reaches significance in relation to self-esteem, while controlling for other NPI subscales. Further studies may include an exploration of possible gender differences.

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