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## Short Communication

# Exploring the relationship between two forms of narcissism and competitiveness

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## ABSTRACT

This study investigated the theoretical and empirical links between narcissism and competitiveness by focusing on the multifaceted features of these individual difference variables. The present study compared measures of overt narcissism (Narcissistic Personality Inventory, NPI; Raskin & Terry, 1988) and covert narcissism (Hypersensitive Narcissism Scale, HSNS; Hendin & Cheek, 1997) with measures of competitiveness (Revised Competitiveness Index, CI-R; Houston, Harris, McIntire, & Francis, 2002) and hypercompetitiveness (Hypercompetitive Attitude Scale, HCS; Ryckman, Hammer, Kaczor, & Gold, 1990). Based on a sample of 324 undergraduates, positive relationships were found between overt narcissism and general competitiveness and hypercompetitiveness. However, covert narcissism was negatively related to general competitiveness but positively related to hypercompetitiveness. The findings highlight the similarities and distinctions between different forms of narcissism and competitiveness and provide a broader framework for understanding the relationship between narcissism and competitiveness. Implications for the interpersonal manifestation of these different forms are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

Narcissism represents an important construct in both clinical and social/personality research because it relates to both normal development and pathological personality functioning. One challenge in investigating narcissism is that it does not represent a unitary construct but consists of two separate presentations that are linked by an inability to derive satisfaction without eliciting admiration from others (Luchner, *in press*). Furthermore, narcissists are highly sensitive to perceived slights and inordinately invest in admiration from others. Although the two types of narcissism have been differentiated from each other in both clinical and interpersonal contexts (Gabbard, 2009; Given-Wilson, McIlwain, & Warburton, 2011; Luchner, *in press*; Miller & Campbell, 2008; Miller, Widiger, & Campbell, 2010; Ronningstam, 2009; Russ, Shedler, Bradley, & Westen, 2008), few studies have explored the relationship between narcissism and competitiveness. This study examines the theoretical and empirical links between narcissism and competitiveness by focusing on the multifaceted features of these individual difference variables. Researchers generally conceptualize narcissism in two distinct ways. The first focuses on narcissism as a mental health issue associated with the pathological disorder known as Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD). The second con-

ceptualization of narcissism classifies it as a normal personality characteristic studied by personality and social psychologists. Several empirical studies reported that measures assessing normal narcissistic personality characteristics are not correlated with NPD scores (Emmons, 1987; Hibbard, 1992; Watson, Grisham, Trotter, & Biderman, 1984) suggesting that these two types of narcissism are distinct constructs. Accordingly, our research examines aspects of narcissism as a normal or non-clinical individual difference variable.

Considerable evidence supports the proposition that there are two forms of narcissism (e.g. Dickinson & Pincus, 2003; Gabbard, 2009; PDM Task Force, 2006; Wink, 1991). These two types are referred to in various ways, often obscuring their meaning and making research of them less reliable (Miller & Campbell, 2008). For the purposes of this paper, these two forms will be referred to as overt narcissism (e.g. grandiose narcissism) and covert narcissism (e.g. vulnerable narcissism). In both overt and covert narcissism, self-absorption, and sensitivity to slights constitute dominant characteristics (Luchner, Mirsalimi, Moser, & Jones, 2008; Wink, 1991; Wink, 1996). Individuals with narcissistic characteristics of all forms attempt to bolster self-esteem through admiration from others (Dickinson & Pincus, 2003; Wink, 1991). However, overt narcissism is typically displayed through externalizing behaviors, arrogance, inflated self-esteem, aggressiveness and grandiosity (Ronningstam, 2009), whereas covert narcissism tends to manifest itself through internalizing behaviors, vulnerability, deflated self-esteem and hypersensitivity (Gabbard, 2009; Wink, 1991). Despite the empirical support for these two types of narcissism, a recent re-

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view of the literature by Cain, Pincus, and Ansell (2008) found that research on narcissism is dominated by the use of overt narcissism measures and generally overlooks covert narcissism scales. Accordingly, Miller and Campbell (2008) argue that in order to study the full spectrum of narcissism, research needs to include covert narcissism. Competitiveness is an individual difference variable that shares a number of characteristics with narcissism. Like narcissism, competitiveness has a long research history as a multidimensional construct that incorporates both beneficial and detrimental aspects of social behavior (Houston, McIntire, Kinnie, & Terry, 2002). Two distinct forms of competitiveness exist: general competitiveness and hypercompetitiveness. Following a theoretical framework based on achievement motivation research, Helmreich and Spence (1978) defined competitiveness as the desire to win against others in interpersonal situations. As such, general competitiveness is a potentially adaptive trait across a wide range of occupational domains, including business, law, and sports (Houston, Carter, & Smither, 1997). In contrast to general or “normal” competitiveness, hypercompetitiveness is associated with heightened self-worth fluctuating with underlying low self-esteem, decreased need for others, interest in admiration and recognition from others, and high levels of neuroticism (Ryckman, Thornton, & Butler, 1994; Ryckman et al., 1990). Despite the conceptual links between these personality traits, there is little research directly exploring the relationship between competitiveness and the two forms of narcissism. Although researchers have reported positive correlations between overt narcissism and general competitiveness (Raskin & Terry, 1988) and hypercompetitiveness (Ryckman et al., 1994; Watson et al., 1997–98), the relationship between covert narcissism and the two forms of competitiveness remains unclear. To address this gap in the research literature, this exploratory study examined the relationship between the two forms of competitiveness (hypercompetitiveness and general competitiveness) and the two forms of narcissism (covert and overt).

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

A total of 324 undergraduates (187 females and 137 males) ranging in age from 18 to 24 years ( $M = 19.72$ ,  $SD = 1.26$ ) participated in the study. The age range of participants was intentionally restricted to “traditional” aged college students to guard against potential cohort effects associated with rising narcissism scores (Twenge, Konrath, Campbell, & Bushman, 2008). Participants were recruited from introductory psychology classes at a small liberal arts college in the Southeast United States and received extra course credit for voluntarily taking part in the study.

### 2.2. Measures and procedures

All participants completed a survey packet containing demographic questions and measures of competitiveness, hypercompetitiveness, covert narcissism, and overt narcissism. While 229 participants completed the survey using a traditional paper and pencil method, 95 participants completed an electronic version of the survey packet on-line.

#### 2.2.1. Revised Competitiveness Index

To assess competitiveness, participants completed the Revised Competitiveness Index (CI-R; Houston et al., 2002), a 14-item self-report instrument designed to measure the desire to win in interpersonal situations. The measure uses a 5-point Likert-type response format anchored by 1 (*strongly disagree*) and 5 (*strongly agree*). The authors reported acceptable internal reliability

( $\alpha = .87$ ), while Harris and Houston (2010) reported a test–retest reliability of  $r = .85$ .

#### 2.2.2. Hypercompetitive Attitude Scale

Participants also completed the Hypercompetitive Attitude Scale, a 26-item measure that assesses individual differences in hypercompetitive attitudes (HCS; Ryckman et al., 1990). The scale uses a 5-point continuum that ranges from *never true of me* to *always true of me*. Ryckman et al. (1990) reported adequate internal reliability ( $\alpha = .91$ ) and test–retest reliability ( $r = .81$ ).

#### 2.2.3. Hypersensitive Narcissism Scale

Covert narcissism was measured using the Hypersensitive Narcissism Scale (HSNS; Hendin & Cheek, 1997), a 10-item scale with a 5-point response format ranging from *not at all true of me* to *very true of me*. Hendin and Cheek (1997) reported adequate internal reliability ( $\alpha = .75$ ).

#### 2.2.4. Narcissistic Personality Inventory

Overt narcissism was assessed using the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Terry, 1988), a 40-item true–false self-report measure of trait narcissism. Watson et al. (1997–98) reported adequate internal reliability ( $\alpha = .85$ ).

## 3. Results

Initial analyses were conducted to determine if personality variable scores from the two data collection procedures were different. A series of independent *t*-tests comparing general competitiveness, hypercompetitiveness, overt narcissism, and covert narcissism scores from the paper and pencil and on-line survey administrations indicated no significant differences, all *t*s were less than 1.96,  $ps > .05$ . Since the two data collection procedures yielded essentially the same results, all subsequent analyses are based on combined data.

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics and intercorrelations for the narcissism and competitiveness measures. While overt narcissism was positively related to both general competitiveness ( $r = .48$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and hypercompetitiveness ( $r = .37$ ,  $p < .01$ ), covert narcissism was positively related to hypercompetitiveness ( $r = .34$ ,  $p < .01$ ) but negatively correlated with general competitiveness ( $r = -.16$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

Finally, to better understand the relationship between the different types of competitiveness and narcissism, we used two separate multiple regression analyses with simultaneous entry of general competitiveness and hypercompetitiveness to predict overt narcissism and covert narcissism. Both general competitiveness ( $\beta = .40$ ) and hypercompetitiveness ( $\beta = .17$ ) were significant predictors of overt narcissism. The regression model predicting overt narcissism explained 25% (adjusted  $R^2$ ) of the variance,  $F(2, 321) = 55.69$ ,  $p < .01$ . In addition, the regression model predicting covert narcissism explained 24% (adjusted  $R^2$ ) of the variance,  $F$

**Table 1**  
Correlations between competitiveness and narcissism ( $n = 324$ ).

Measures	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3
1. Competitiveness (CI-R)	48.24	9.63	–		
2. Hypercompetitiveness (HCA)	74.98	14.07	.48*	–	
3. Covert Narcissism (HSNS)	28.19	6.11	–.16*	.34*	–
4. Overt Narcissism (NPI)	18.47	6.73	.48*	.37*	.04

Note: Scale abbreviations are as follows: Revised Competitiveness Index (CI-R), Hypercompetitiveness Attitude Scale (HCA), Hypersensitive Narcissism Scale (HSNS), and Narcissism Personality Inventory (NPI).

\*  $p < .01$ .

(2, 321) = 53.53,  $p < .01$ , with general competitiveness ( $\beta = -.26$ ) and hypercompetitiveness ( $\beta = .23$ ) both significant predictors at  $p < .01$ .

#### 4. Discussion

In this study, we found that both types of narcissism were significantly related to both types of competitiveness. Specifically, the findings showed a positive relationship between overt narcissism and general competitiveness. Raskin and Terry (1988) noted a similar positive relationship ( $r = .47$ ) between the two constructs using the NPI and competitive self-descriptive measures from the Interpersonal Check List. These findings reinforce the conceptual link in the construct definitions of these two personality variables and suggest that individuals high in overt narcissism enjoy competition and seek out competitive social environments. In addition, the results indicated that hypercompetitiveness was positively correlated with overt narcissism, which is consistent with previous research (Ryckman et al., 1994; Watson et al., 1997–98). While the results of multiple regression analysis indicated that both types of competitiveness were significant predictors of overt narcissism, general competitiveness accounted for more unique variance than hypercompetitiveness.

In the most exploratory component of the study, we investigated the relationship between covert narcissism and the two forms of competitiveness. The results indicated a small but significant negative correlation between general competitiveness and covert narcissism. This negative relationship fits with conceptual and theoretical notions of covert narcissism as covert narcissists do not consciously desire competitive situations since they are invested in protecting a view of themselves as empathic, responsive, selfless, and helpful (Luchner, Mirsalimi, Moser, & Jones, 2008). Despite the small zero order correlation between general competitiveness and covert narcissism, general competitiveness remained a significant predictor, along with hypercompetitiveness, when included in the multiple regression analysis using covert narcissism as the dependent variable. This result underscores the unique contributions of general competitiveness and hypercompetitiveness in predicting covert narcissism.

Although previous studies have not directly explored the relationship between covert narcissism and hypercompetitiveness, the positive correlation between covert narcissism and hypercompetitiveness found in this study is in keeping with Ryckman et al. (1990) definition of hypercompetitiveness as being associated with low self-esteem and high levels of neuroticism. Individuals with covert narcissism fear being perceived as a failure and therefore attempt to be seen as special by others (Russ et al., 2008). For example, someone who struggles with covert narcissism may believe that they must be the best helper and best listener, whereas a failing to be empathic to others leaves them lacking self-definition. The pressure to compete for others' affection is great and one must remain completely selfless in order to feel worthy and to minimize negative responses from others (Luchner et al., 2008). Instead of finding competition enjoyable and satisfying, covert narcissists tend to view competitive situations as exploitive and hostile social interactions.

An important implication of the findings is that the manifestations of hypercompetitiveness differ greatly. Overt narcissists desire competition, are aggressive and dominant, and positively compare themselves to others. In contrast, covert narcissists explicitly avoid and find competition undesirable yet covertly remain "equally preoccupied with self-enhancing fantasies and strivings and hyperreactive to oversights and unfulfilled expectations from others" (Rønningstam, 2009, p. 113). In other words, they are apt to not express their need for competition, but may implic-

itly remain preoccupied with competing for others' attention and affection (Gabbard, 2009).

Consistent with previous research reported by Hendin and Cheek (1997), HSNS and NPI scores were not related in this study. These results support Miller and Campbell's (2008) assertion that overt and covert narcissism represent distinct patterns of relating and align with Wink's (1991) finding that NPI scores were not related to covert narcissism factors from the MMPI. In addition, the findings showed a positive relationship between general competitiveness and hypercompetitiveness scores which closely matches results reported by Houston et al. (2002).

#### 5. Conclusions

Overall, the results provide a more comprehensive view of the relationship between narcissism and competitiveness by incorporating two key facets from both of these multidimensional constructs. Specifically, it addresses for the first time the relationship between covert narcissism, competitiveness, and hypercompetitiveness. Conceptually, the two types of narcissism share common traits, however, empirically this research identifies competitiveness and hypercompetitiveness as variables that differentiate the two types of narcissism as unique and distinguishable personality constructs. These findings emphasize the need for future research to incorporate the construct of covert narcissism in order to investigate the full spectrum of narcissism and more comprehensively evaluate constructs of narcissism and competitiveness.

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