

Narcissism and Adjustment in Preadolescence

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Narcissism—a strong need to be admired for a grandiose self—is a problematic personality trait for children as well as adults. This study of 236 preadolescents (M age = 11.3 years; 129 girls, 107 boys) evaluated 2 intrapersonal (cognitive) pathways by which narcissism might contribute to maladjustment. The first was that narcissism combines with salient self-serving gender stereotypes to encourage aggressive and selfish behavior. The second was that narcissism places children who perceive that they are failing to realize their grandiose self at risk for aggression and depression. Although concurrent-correlational, the data support the pathways, illuminate the content and dynamics of narcissistic children's minds, and suggest directions for future investigation.

Narcissistic persons—individuals with a grandiose sense of self—have long been of clinical interest and concern. In recent years, there has been a complementary interest in narcissism as a problematic personality trait in nonclinical populations of adults (e.g., Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001) and children (e.g., Barry, Frick, & Killian, 2003). In this study, we investigated narcissism as a continuous personality dimension in preadolescent children. We explored ways in which the cognitive functioning of narcissistic children might create difficulties for them and their interaction partners.

Narcissism encompasses a sense of entitlement to privileged status over others, the belief that one is special and more important than others, and a need for attention and admiration from others. It is not simply high self-esteem. Although in adulthood narcissism is usually positively correlated with self-esteem (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001), for children the association typically is negligible or even slightly negative (Barry et al., 2003; Harter & McCarley, 2004). The conceptual distinction between narcissism and self-esteem is that self-esteem is an *evalua-*

tion of the actual self—an overall appraisal of liking and respect for the self—whereas narcissism is a chronic *motivation*—a constant need to obtain social approval and admiration in order to nourish the grandiose self.

Research on the adjustment correlates of narcissism has focused primarily on the implications of narcissism for unpleasant interpersonal conduct. Adults and adolescents with narcissistic tendencies do tend to possess a number of troublesome personality characteristics including arrogance, conceit, intolerance, hostility, lack of empathy, insensitivity, and aggressiveness (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). Narcissistic children also tend to be aggressive (Barry et al., 2003; Harter & McCarley, 2004; Thomaes, Stegge, Bushman, Olthof, & Denissen, 2008). Although the focus has been on the aversive interpersonal behavior of narcissistic persons, narcissism also is sometimes associated with depression, at least for adults and adolescents (Washburn, McMahan, King, Reinecke, & Silver, 2004; Wink, 1991). To our knowledge, no study has explored a link between narcissism and depression in childhood.

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Although it is clear that narcissism is associated with problematic adjustment, a number of interesting questions remain about how narcissism exerts its ill effects. In this study, we explored the thesis that narcissism combines with certain other problematic information in the child's self-system to foster antisocial conduct and depression. We explored two pathways based on this idea.

The first pathway is the *stereotype emulation* route. This pathway was proposed (but not tested) by Morf and Rhodewalt (2001), who suggested that narcissistic persons identify attributes that bring persons of their gender prestige and admiration, and then emulate these gender-stereotyped attributes. Furthermore, the attributes that attract narcissists' attention are expected to be self-aggrandizing and self-serving ones—likely to erode empathic concern for others and thus to encourage aggressive and selfish behavior.

To explore this pathway, we assessed children's endorsement of two gender stereotypes that might loom large in narcissistic children's psyches, and we examined whether these stereotypes are indeed more strongly associated with aggression and selfishness for narcissistic children than for non-narcissistic ones. The first was a "machismo" stereotype, or the belief that it is important for persons of one's sex to exhibit attributes reflecting unmitigated agency (e.g., domination of others, inhibition of tender emotions, taking dangerous risks). The second was a physical attractiveness stereotype, or the belief that it is important for persons of one's sex to have an attractive face and body. The former belief may be more typical of boys, and the latter more typical of girls, but either belief may spawn a self-centeredness that undermines concern for others in children of either sex.

A second pathway by which narcissism might combine with other problematic information in the child's mind to create adjustment difficulties is the *self-image failure* route. Narcissistic children's efforts to sustain their grandiose self cannot always be successful—their actions will not always produce the sought-after admiration, social status, and self-esteem. Indeed, self-aggrandizing persons often are rejected by peers and acquaintances (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001), and many persons, especially girls, are unable to live up to cultural standards of physical beauty (Hyde, Mezulis, & Abramson, 2008). In the self-image failure pathway, narcissism leads children to exaggerate perceived deficiencies in the self, creating a chronic state of insecurity, frustration, inadequacy, and humiliation that is

conducive to behavior problems, including aggression and depression.

We tested our self-image failure hypothesis in both a general and a specific way. In the more general test, we examined whether narcissism acts in concert with a global negative evaluation of the self (i.e., low self-esteem) to foster adjustment problems. Low self-esteem reflects the perception that one is falling short in valued domains and that one is not accepted or respected by others (Harter, 2006). It therefore should be especially dismaying to narcissistic youngsters. In more specific tests of the hypothesis, we examined whether narcissism combines with a self-perceived inability to achieve either of the two gender stereotypes under study (machismo, physical appearance) to predict adjustment difficulties. Thus, we assessed self-efficacy for behaviors relevant to each stereotype, and we examined whether narcissism combines with low self-efficacy in either domain to predict maladjustment.

We expected that self-image failures (i.e., negative self-evaluations by narcissistic children) would be especially associated with antisocial conduct in boys and with depression in girls. Boys are more likely than girls to react to frustration and ego threat with vigilance for threat cues, hostile attributions, and endorsement of aggressive options (Crick & Dodge, 1994; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001); therefore, boys should be the more ready to defend or salvage a threatened grandiose self with aggression. In contrast, girls are the more likely to display a host of depressogenic cognitive and affective reactions to self-perceived deficiencies and failures (e.g., rumination, self-blame, hopelessness); they are particularly sensitive to self-perceived failure to fulfill a physical attractiveness ideal (Hyde et al., 2008). Thus, for girls, depression might be the more likely outcome.

Method

Participants

Participants were 236 children (129 girls, 107 boys) in the fourth through eighth grades (M age = 11.3 years) of a school serving a predominantly White and middle-class community. Parental consent and child assent were obtained. Participants represented 84% of the children in their grades. Children were tested individually at school.

Measures

Narcissism. Narcissism was assessed using the 17-item Maladaptive Narcissism scale of the Narcissistic

Personality Inventory for Children (NPIC; Barry et al., 2003). For each item, children indicated which of two statements was more true of them (e.g., "I just try to be happy" vs. "I want the world to think that I am something special"). A child's narcissism score was the proportion of items for which the child chose the narcissistic option (italicized in the sample item) and thus could range from 0 to 1. Cronbach's alpha was .72.

Gender stereotypes. Scales assessing machismo stereotype and appearance stereotype were developed by the authors. Each item required children to indicate on a 5-point scale the importance of a specified attribute for persons of their sex. Response options ranged from 0 (*not at all important*) to 4 (*very important!*). The machismo stereotype scale comprised 16 items (e.g., "How important is it for boys/girls to act tough when afraid on the inside?"). The appearance stereotype scale comprised eight items (e.g., "How important is it for boys/girls to have a perfect body?"). Scale scores were derived by averaging across items and thus could range from 0 to 4. Cronbach's alpha values for the machismo and appearance stereotypes, respectively, were .91 and .87.

Self-esteem. Children's self-esteem was assessed with Harter's (1985) six-item global self-worth scale. Scores could range from 1 to 4, with higher scores indicating greater self-esteem. Cronbach's alpha was .76.

Self-efficacy. Self-efficacy for machismo and appearance attributes was assessed by asking children to rate how hard versus easy it was for them to display the same attributes used to assess stereotypes. Thus, self-efficacy for machismo was assessed with 16 items (e.g., children rated how hard vs. easy it was for them to act tough when afraid on the inside), and appearance self-efficacy was assessed with eight items. Response options ranged from 1 (*very hard*) to 4 (*very easy*). Scale scores were item averages and could range from 1 to 4. Cronbach's alpha values for the machismo and appearance self-efficacy measures, respectively, were .84 and .85.

Adjustment. There were four measures of adjustment—aggression, prosocial behavior, internalizing problems, and depression. The first three measures came from a 16-item peer nomination inventory. This inventory contained five items tapping aggression (e.g., "He/she hits and pushes others around"; "When he/she is mad at a kid, he/she gossips or spreads rumors about the kid"), four items capturing prosocial behavior ("He/she tries to help kids who are sad or afraid"; "He/she stands up for kids

who get picked on by bullies"), and four items capturing internalizing symptoms (e.g., "He/she is afraid to do things"; "He/she seems unhappy and looks sad often"); the remaining items were fillers. Children checked off the names of same-sex peers in their grade who manifested the behavior described in each item (unlimited nominations). A child's score on each item was the proportion of same-sex grade-mates who checked the child's name for the item. Scale scores were item averages and thus could range from 0 to 1. Cronbach's alpha values for the scales measuring aggression, prosocial behavior, and internalizing were, respectively, .91, .89, and .88.

Depression was assessed with the short (10-item) version of the Children's Depression Inventory (Kovacs, 1981). Each item was scored from 1 to 3, with higher scores indicating greater depression. Scale scores were item averages and thus could range from 1 to 3. Cronbach's alpha was .74.

Results

Descriptive Results

Table 1 presents the mean and standard deviation of each measure by child sex. Correlations among the measures are given in Table 2.

Stereotype Emulation Hypothesis

The stereotype emulation pathway is that narcissism magnifies the impacts of self-focused gender

Table 1
Means and Standard Deviations of Measures by Child Sex.

Measure	Girls (n = 129)		Boys (n = 107)		F ^a
	M	SD	M	SD	
Narcissism	0.26	.18	0.21	.14	5.62*
Self-esteem	3.42	.61	3.38	.54	0.12
Machismo stereotype	1.62	.78	2.07	.84	16.06***
Appearance stereotype	2.79	.93	2.48	.88	5.75*
Machismo self-efficacy	2.34	.46	2.51	.42	9.33**
Appearance self-efficacy	2.91	.55	2.85	.53	0.45
Aggression	0.24	.19	0.22	.20	0.36
Prosocial behavior	0.47	.19	0.45	.21	1.18
Internalizing problems	0.20	.18	0.21	.21	0.15
Depression	1.30	.29	1.22	.19	8.03**

^aF_s indicate the significance of the sex difference (with age controlled).

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 2
Intercorrelations of Measures

Measure	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Narcissism	—	-.16	.28**	.28**	.43***	.30**	.33**	-.27**	-.15	-.13
2. Self-esteem	-.12	—	-.36***	-.17	-.15	.15	-.07	.14	-.01	-.29**
3. Machismo stereotype	.47***	-.18*	—	.54***	.34***	.13	.12	-.20*	-.01	.06
4. Appearance stereotype	.48***	-.18*	.73***	—	.30**	.40***	.25*	-.25*	-.11	-.07
5. Machismo self-efficacy	.40***	-.09	.41***	.28**	—	.41***	.20*	-.10	-.33**	-.26**
6. Appearance self-efficacy	.25**	.47***	.16	.23*	.12	—	.27**	-.15	-.24*	-.34***
7. Aggression	.39***	-.13	.16	.19*	.20*	.04	—	-.55***	-.25*	-.07
8. Prosocial occur,	-.35***	.15	-.29**	-.23*	-.13	.02	-.49***	—	.06	.05
9. Internalizing problems	-.09	-.08	-.12	-.07	-.32***	-.25**	-.18*	-.19*	—	.48***
10. Depression	.09	-.61***	.02	.12	-.06	-.50***	.12	-.19*	.26**	—

Note. Correlations for boys are above the diagonal; correlations for girls are below the diagonal. Entries are partial correlations with age controlled.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

stereotypes on aggression and selfish behavior. This hypothesis was tested in four hierarchical regression analyses—one for each combination of a dependent variable (aggression or prosocial behavior) and a stereotype (machismo or appearance).

The analysis in which aggression was the dependent variable and the stereotype was machismo supported the hypothesis (for boys). In this analysis, age and sex were entered on the first step; narcissism and machismo stereotype on the second step; the interaction of narcissism and machismo stereotype on the third step; the interactions of Sex \times Narcissism and Sex \times Machismo stereotype on the fourth step; and the three-way interaction of Sex \times Narcissism \times Machismo stereotype on the fifth step. (For this as well as subsequent analyses, we report significant effects only from the third and fifth steps—those involving the focal interaction.) The three-way interaction was significant on the fifth step ($\beta = .17, p < .04$). The two-way interaction of Narcissism \times Stereotype was then evaluated

separately for each sex (with age, narcissism, and stereotype in the model) and was significant for boys ($\beta = .23, p < .01$) but not girls ($\beta = -.02$). The interaction for boys is plotted in Figure 1, following procedures recommended by Aiken and West (1991). Clearly, machismo stereotype is associated with aggression only for boys high (+1 *SD*) in narcissism ($\beta = .25, p < .05$); the relation of stereotype to aggression is nonsignificant for boys low (-1 *SD*) in narcissism. For girls, only the main effect of narcissism was significant ($\beta = .41, p < .001$).

In none of the other three regression analyses evaluating this hypothesis was either the third-step or fifth-step interaction significant. Additional regression analyses (of the same general form) explored whether narcissism interacted with either stereotype to predict either of the other two adjustment indexes under study (internalizing symptoms, depression). As expected, it did not.

Self-Image Failure Hypothesis

The self-image failure hypothesis is that narcissism combines with self-perceived inadequacies (low self-esteem, low self-efficacy for machismo or appearance) to encourage aggression, selfishness, and depression. This hypothesis was tested in 12 regression analyses—one for each combination of four dependent variables (aggression, prosocial behavior, internalizing, depression) and three self-perception variables (self-esteem, machismo self-efficacy, appearance self-efficacy). The analyses were similar in form to that described above.

Results supported the hypothesis, especially when the self-perceived inadequacy took the form of low global self-worth. In the analysis examining

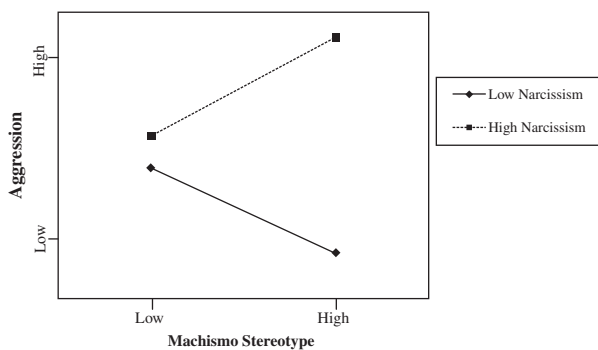


Figure 1. Boys' aggression as a function of the interaction of narcissism and machismo stereotype.

aggression as a function of narcissism and self-esteem, the three-way interaction ($\text{Sex} \times \text{Narcissism} \times \text{Self-Esteem}$) was significant on the fifth step ($\beta = .16, p < .04$). The two-way interaction of Narcissism \times Self-Esteem was close to significance for boys ($\beta = -.17, p < .07$) and nonsignificant for girls ($\beta = .06$). The interaction for boys is plotted in the upper panel of Figure 2. Consistent with prediction, self-esteem is inversely related to aggression only for narcissistic boys ($\beta = -.18$), though neither slope in the figure is individually significant. For girls, only the main effect of narcissism was significant ($\beta = .38, p < .001$).

Conceptually similar, but stronger, results were found in the analysis examining prosocial behavior as a function of narcissism and self-esteem. The fifth-step interaction of $\text{Sex} \times \text{Narcissism} \times \text{Self-Esteem}$ was significant ($\beta = .18, p < .02$), and the two-way interaction of Narcissism \times Self-Esteem proved significant for boys ($\beta = .22, p < .02$) but not girls ($\beta = -.06$). As shown in the lower panel of Figure 2, only for narcissistic boys was low self-esteem associated with reduced prosocial behavior ($\beta = .31, p < .05$). For girls, only the main effect of narcissism was significant ($\beta = -.33, p < .001$).

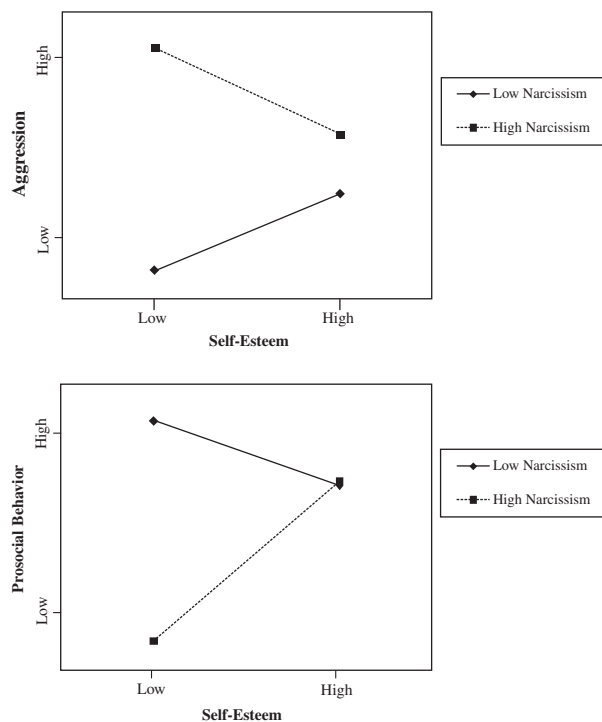


Figure 2. Boys' aggression (upper panel) and boys' prosocial behavior (lower panel) as a function of the interaction of narcissism and self-esteem.

Two analyses implicated self-image failure in depression. In the analysis predicting depression from narcissism and self-esteem, the two-way interaction of Narcissism \times Self-Esteem (tested on the third step) was significant ($\beta = -.18, p < .002$). As shown in the upper panel of Figure 3, the negative relation of self-esteem to depression was stronger for high-narcissism children ($\beta = -.62, p < .001$) than for low-narcissism children ($\beta = -.29, p < .01$). Similarly, narcissism and appearance self-efficacy interactively predicted depression ($\beta = -.25, p < .001$). As depicted in the lower panel Figure 3, the negative relation of appearance self-efficacy to depression was far stronger for high-narcissism children ($\beta = -.73, p < .001$) than for low-narcissism children ($\beta = -.25, p < .01$).

In none of the other regression analyses evaluating this hypothesis was either the third-step or the fifth-step interaction significant.

Discussion

This study was guided by the overarching thesis that narcissism combines with other problematic

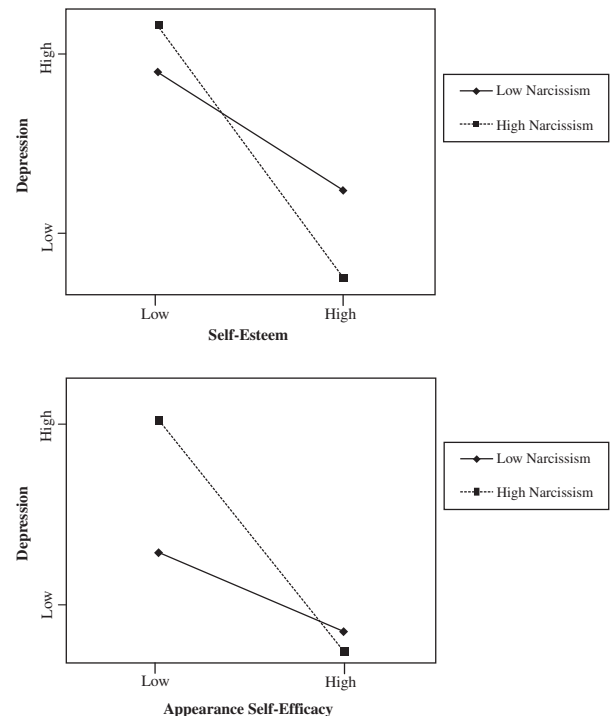


Figure 3. Depression as a function of the interaction of narcissism and self-esteem (upper panel) and as a function of the interaction of narcissism and appearance self-efficacy (lower panel).

information in the child's mind (e.g., self-serving gender stereotypes, negative self-evaluations) in ways that yield unfortunate consequences for the child and his or her interaction partners. Two hypotheses consistent with this idea received support.

First, in accord with the stereotype emulation hypothesis, it was only for narcissistic boys that endorsement of a machismo stereotype was associated with aggression. For girls, narcissism did not interact with either stereotype to predict aggression. Nonetheless, narcissism and self-serving stereotypes may be implicated in girls' antisocial conduct as well as in boys'. Girls were even more narcissistic than boys, and narcissistic girls, like their male counterparts, were certainly viewed by peers as aggressive and selfish. Moreover, for girls, narcissism was strongly associated with endorsement of both self-serving stereotypes—narcissistic girls believe it is important for girls both to dominate others and to be beautiful—and girls' endorsement of these stereotypes was associated with selfishness and (less consistently) aggression. It seems likely that narcissism and stereotypes do conjointly contribute to girls' antisocial behavior, though it remains for future research to identify the pathway(s) involved.

In accord with the self-image failure hypothesis, low global self-esteem was associated with aggressive and selfish behavior for narcissistic boys but not for non-narcissistic boys. That narcissistic girls with low self-esteem were not similarly antisocial was expected, given that girls are less likely than boys to attempt ego repair via aggression. Our finding that narcissism combines with low self-esteem to predict aggression for boys is at odds with the view, prominent in the social psychology literature, that it is the combination of narcissism with high rather than low self-esteem that disposes people to react to ego threats with aggression (e.g., Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996). The argument is that narcissists with high self-esteem experience even temporary losses of self-esteem as very painful and react swiftly to ego threats with defensive aggression to minimize such states. To our knowledge, no study has found support for this interaction pattern. Moreover, two other studies with children have also found narcissism to combine with low self-esteem to predict aggressive behavior or ideation (though these studies were not cast as tests of a self-image failure mechanism; Barry et al., 2003; Harter & McCarley, 2004). Thus, the interaction pattern we found should now probably be considered well established.

According to the self-image failure hypothesis, narcissistic children who perceive that they are failing to achieve their grandiose self are also vulnerable

to depression. This prediction was confirmed, in that low self-esteem and low self-efficacy for physical attractiveness were especially associated with depression for narcissistic children of both sexes. To our knowledge, this is the first study to implicate narcissism in preadolescents' depression. Our results accord with clinical observations that depressed persons, especially those concerned with appearances, often at first seem timid and shy but on closer contact surprise observers with grandiose fantasies; indeed, they are often hypersensitive, moody, anxious, defensive, self-pitying, and bitter, earning them the label of "vulnerable narcissists" (Wink, 1991). Though we had expected a stronger link between self-image failure and depression for girls than for boys, as early as preadolescence many boys are consumed with physique and appearance and are at risk for depression and related problems (e.g., eating disorders; Ricciardelli & McCabe, 2004). Perhaps narcissism exacerbates this risk.

Our hypotheses were tested with quite a few regression analyses. Although results confirmed our predictions, they should be considered tentative until replicated.

Our model of narcissism's role in aggression is compatible with, and supplements, existing social-cognitive models of aggression (e.g., Crick & Dodge, 1994; Huesmann & Kirwil, 2007). In these models, enduring knowledge structures (e.g., action scripts, efficacy beliefs) interact with situational cues (e.g., provocations) to stimulate online social information processing (e.g., attributions, response search, outcome expectancies) that produces aggressive behavior. These models emphasize cognitive processing as a mediator of aggressogenic environmental influences (e.g., parental abuse, media violence). In our view, certain enduring cognitive-affective systems also are aggressogenic factors that give direction to, bias, and infuse affect into the cognitive processing that mediates aggression. We identified two such systems in this study—narcissism coupled with self-serving stereotypes and narcissism coupled with a sense of a failed self. Surely, other such systems also exist. A worthwhile future research agenda is to identify the precise ways that each such cognitive-affective system affects the cognitive and affective processing that yields aggressive behavior.

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