

COMMENTARIES

In Defense of Narcissistic Personality Traits

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Miller and Campbell (pp. 180–191, this issue) provide an informative discussion of the importance of considering narcissistic personality trait research when attempting to understand narcissistic personality disorder. Their arguments might seem so straightforward and compelling that they are hardly worth presenting. However, it does seem that this considerable body of literature is at times neglected, if not ignored.

Although authors of some review papers and chapters on narcissistic personality disorder do represent well the narcissistic personality trait research (e.g., Pincus & Lukowitsky, in press; Ronningstam, 2005), others have focused less on this research (e.g., Levy, Reynoso, Wasserman, & Clarkin, 2007; Millon et al., 1996; Millon, Grossman, Millon, Meagher, & Ramnath, 2004). The lack of recognition of this literature can have dire complications. Narcissistic personality disorder has been proposed for deletion from the American Psychiatric Association's (APA) diagnostic manual, whereas the avoidant and obsessive–compulsive personality disorders would be retained (Skodol, 2009; Skodol & Bender, 2009). One must presume that this proposal is based largely on the relative amount of empirical support (Regier, Narrow, Kuhl, & Kupfer, 2009), but this is difficult to understand if the review of the literature concerning narcissistic personality disorder included the many

empirical studies that have been conducted on trait narcissism.

What would be the reason for ignoring research on narcissism when constructing a systematic and comprehensive review of the scientific research on narcissistic personality disorder? It couldn't be that the constructs are not comparable. Narcissistic personality traits are typically assessed using the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI). As indicated by Cain, Pincus, and Ansell (2008), "since 1985, the NPI was used as the main or only measure of narcissistic traits in approximately 77% of social/personality research on narcissism" (pp. 642–643). The NPI will provide a reasonably valid assessment of narcissistic personality disorder because, like most other personality disorder measures, the authors of the NPI constructed the instrument explicitly on the basis of the diagnostic criterion set for narcissistic personality disorder (Raskin & Hall, 1979, 1981). The NPI even has scales to assess such narcissistic personality disorder symptoms as exploitativeness, entitlement, superiority, exhibitionism, and vanity. Not surprisingly, the NPI correlates as highly (if not higher) with measures of narcissistic personality disorder as any two measures of narcissistic personality disorder correlate with one another (e.g., Miller et al., 2009; Samuel & Widiger, 2008). Cain et al. are critical of the construct of narcissism as assessed by the NPI but they are equally critical of the APA criterion set for precisely the same reasons. In sum, it is apparent that the NPI is providing an assessment of narcissism that is very close to narcissistic personality disorder as defined within the current APA diagnostic manual. A computer search via PsychInfo for peer-reviewed articles that have used the NPI yields at least 165 publications, the vast majority of which are empirical. This is a considerable body of research that would help buttress the scientific foundation for narcissistic personality disorder.

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Another potential reason for ignoring the research on narcissism is the assumption that studies conducted within college student and/or community populations do not provide useful information concerning a personality disorder. Editors will at times reject manuscripts primarily because there was insufficient evidence that the participants in the study had the disorder that was purportedly the focus of investigation. It would indeed seem rather odd to attempt to understand the etiology, pathology, or associated features of schizophrenia within a sample of normal college students, none of whom met diagnostic criteria. Should not the same principle apply to the study of narcissistic personality disorder?

There is little support for the notion that narcissistic personality disorder is qualitatively distinct from normal psychological functioning (Pincus & Lukowitzky, in press). However, even if a construct is best understood dimensionally, that does not mean it will necessarily be usefully or optimally studied within a typical college student sample. Although intelligence is clearly a dimensional construct and comparable correlates of intelligence can exist along much of the continuum (e.g., level of skills in mathematics), understanding the dysfunction or cognitive pathology of mild mental retardation (which typically does not appear to be qualitatively distinct in etiology or pathology from normatively low levels of intelligence) would not be usefully studied within a college student sample. Height is a continuum, yet the correlates of being very tall (e.g., bumping one's head against doorway or ceiling beams) will not necessarily be evident within a sample of persons within normative levels of height.

However, unlike some mental disorders, clinically significant and meaningful narcissistic pathology is likely to be seen within college student samples (Twenge, Konrath, Foster, Campbell, & Bushman, 2008). Frankly, many persons reading this sentence have probably known someone within academia and/or the professions of clinical psychology or psychiatry whom they would consider to be significantly narcissistic. All of these narcissistic persons were at one time undergraduate college students. It probably isn't that difficult to find clinically significant narcissism within a college student sample. As suggested by Ronningstam (2005), who played a key role in the develop-

ment of the APA criterion set for narcissistic personality disorder (Gunderson, Ronningstam, & Smith, 1991), "Despite that research with the NPI was conducted on nonclinical samples, the results, especially in regard to self-esteem and affect regulation, have proved increasingly relevant and applicable to pathological narcissism" (p. 289). As she noted in particular, this research has contributed to the development of the compelling self-regulatory processing model for narcissistic functioning developed by Morf and Rhodewalt (2001).

In sum, much has been and will continue to be learned about narcissistic personality disorder through studies of narcissistic personality traits, even within college student samples. Nevertheless, a cautionary note is perhaps warranted with respect to college student samples. It is useful, if not important, for studies on narcissism (and other maladaptive personality traits) to document that the sample contains a sufficient representation of a clinically meaningful range of the relevant pathology, or at least provide a compelling argument for why the results would likely generalize to a sample of persons with clinically significant levels of the respective disorder. For instance, first screening a college student sample to get the persons at the very highest levels of narcissism would be useful, as well as documenting the presence of clinically significant levels of narcissism within the student sample.

In conclusion, there does not appear to be a compelling reason for neglecting to consider the considerable body of empirical literature on narcissistic personality traits when attempting to understand the etiology, pathology, or correlates of narcissistic personality disorder. Many of the APA personality disorders suffer from a lack of empirical attention (Blashfield & Intoccia, 2000), but narcissistic personality disorder is not one of them.

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