

ASSERTIVENESS AND NARCISSISM

P. J. WATSON, JENNIFER MCKINNEY, CHRISTY HAWKINS,
AND RONALD J. MORRIS

University of Tennessee at Chattanooga

Scores on the Rathus Assertiveness Schedule (RAS) were positively related to measures of healthy narcissism and inversely related to empathic distress, anxiety, and depression. Partial correlational procedures controlled for the tendency of healthy and unhealthy forms of narcissism to be linked together and revealed the RAS to be inversely associated with maladaptive narcissism. This same basic pattern was observed following a more specific examination of RAS items previously identified as predictive of individuals who create an impression of not being "nice." These results do not support arguments that a psychotherapeutic emphasis on assertiveness promotes an antisocial egocentrism and instead are consistent with a suggested connection between individualism and interdependence.

Values espoused by psychotherapists as appropriate goals for personality and behavioral development have attracted considerable recent criticism. While some arguments have emerged within psychology itself (e.g., Bergin 1980, 1983), more widely influential critiques have also been articulated in other disciplines such as moral philosophy (MacIntyre, 1981) and sociology (Bellah et al., 1985). Indeed, the idea that clinical psychological

values can exert a detrimental effect on contemporary social life is a theme receiving increasingly favorable responses within at least some quarters of the general population (Foster & Ledbetter, 1987, esp. pp. 29-30).

Complaints against psychotherapy vary from theorist to theorist, but a common element may be usefully captured in the recent attempt to clarify the "communitarian" position (e.g., Lasch, 1986). One aspect of communitarian thought is to lament an excessive individualism that undermines the ideal of community, and the psychotherapeutic enterprise theoretically supports this process because it "denies all forms of obligation and commitment in relationships, replacing them only with the ideal of full, open, honest communication among self-actualized individuals" (Bellah et al., 1985, p. 101). Furthermore, the therapeutic attitude putatively "distrusts 'morality'" and instead encourages clients "to develop values on the basis of wishes and wants, what they're willing to give and to get and what they're not willing to give and to get" (p. 129). Consequently, the question arises as to whether "psychological sophistication has not been bought at the price of moral impoverishment" (p. 139).

One specific target of communitarian criticism is the therapeutic promotion of self-assertiveness. Lasch (1979), for example, identifies assertiveness training as one aspect of the "culture of narcissism" and argues that it rests upon "the perception that success depends on psychological manipulation and that all of life, even the ostensibly achievement-oriented realm of work, centers on the struggle for interpersonal advantage, the deadly game of intimidating friends and seducing people" (p. 66). While admitting appropriate contexts for assertiveness training, Bergin (1983) nevertheless warns that the correlative emphasis on self-liberation can undermine the interpersonal aspects of social life. The "typical clinical philosophy," he suggests,

Reprints may be ordered from P. J. Watson, Department of Psychology, University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, 615 McCallie Avenue, Chattanooga, TN 37403.

tends to be "more pragmatic, oriented toward immediate results, self-focused, and sometimes hedonistic." Needed instead are approaches that promote empathy and that foster sensitivity to others through a nonneurotic guilt response for wrongdoings. Bergin's ultimate recommendation is a shift to a "socially moral philosophy," one "more spiritual, societal, long-range, other-focused and self-denying" (p. 14).

Wallach & Wallach (1983) also present assertiveness as an illustration of psychology's sanction for selfishness while Vitz (1977) claims that assertion training "frequently involves devaluing love" and compassion (p. 31) and that "a high degree of assertive autonomy is impossible in any serious long-term human relationship" (p. 36). Indeed, a number of critics have tied assertiveness and related self-values to a disciplinary faith in autonomy when resolution of contemporary problems requires a strengthening of community commitments (Fox, 1985; Kanfer, 1979).

Of course, many of these contentions are argumentative (see, e.g., Wallwork, 1986), but a noteworthy aspect about such critiques is that they lend themselves to empirical analysis (Waterman, 1981). Assertiveness, for example, has been operationalized in the Rathus Assertiveness Schedule, and interestingly, high scorers on this instrument create the impression of not being "nice" (Rathus, 1973). The present study sought to determine if assertiveness as measured by this instrument is associated with exploitive narcissism as suggested by Lasch and with deficient empathic responsiveness as implied by Bergin.

Method

Subjects

Undergraduate student volunteers from introductory psychology courses served as participants. These 64 males and 102 females were 21.6 years old on the average with the standard deviation equal to 5.53. All received extra course credit for their cooperation.

Although not clinically "pathological," such students have previously been identified as appropriate for investigations into maladjusted narcissism for three basic reasons (Watson et al., 1984). First, normality can be viewed as continuous with abnormality, and therefore, maladaptive narcissism should be apparent at least to some degree

in nonclinical samples (see Raskin & Hall, 1981). Second, the claim that contemporary culture is permeated with narcissistic interpersonal styles (e.g., Lasch, 1979) suggests that the trait should be evident in members of the general population. Finally, theoretical analyses of maladaptive narcissism have emphasized its emergence within the context of normal developmental processes (e.g., Kohut, 1977), and consequently, examination of younger adults should help in understanding relatively immature styles of self-functioning.

Procedure

In addition to the Rathus Assertiveness Schedule (RAS), all participants responded to the Raskin & Hall (1981) Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI), the Robbins & Patton (1985) Superiority and Goal Instability Scales, the Davis (1983) Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI), and the Costello & Comrey (1967) Depression and Anxiety Scales.

Optical scanning equipment requiring standardized answer sheets was employed to read all data into a computer file; to enable use of these sheets, students responded to the 30-item RAS on a 4-point rather than a 6-point rating scale. In addition to the total RAS, the six items identified by Rathus as significantly correlated with the appearance of not being "nice" were combined into a "Not Nice" subscale (RAS-NN). Examination of this subscale was deemed important because maladaptive features might be evident only with these apparently more problematic attitudes.

The NPI consists of 54 items and utilizes a forced-choice format. Consistent with Kohut's (1971, 1977) speculations, research with this inventory has uncovered both adaptive and maladaptive aspects of narcissistic self-concern. The factor analysis of Emmons (1984) uncovered three largely adjusted dimensions: Superiority/Arrogance (S/A), Leadership/Authority (L/A), and Self-absorption/Self-admiration (S/S). The Exploiteness/Entitlement (E/E) factor, however, was most consistently and strongly associated with poorer psychological functioning. Overall, Emmons (1987) recently concluded that "the exploitiveness/entitlement interpersonal style causes individuals some difficulty" because of its relationships with "neuroticism, social anxiety, and the interpersonal styles aggressive/sadistic and rebellious/distrustful" (p. 16).

Investigations into empathy (Watson et al., 1984) and into religious values (Watson et al., 1987)

have underscored the importance of looking at the NPI factors, and their use in combination with partial correlations may be even more effective in obtaining conceptually purer empirical measures. Watson et al. (1987), for example, found that E/E correlations were more indicative of maladjustment when variance associated with the other three factors had been partialled out. They argued that the partialing procedure effectively controlled for the tendency of the E/E subscale to covary with healthy narcissism and therefore yielded a more valid index of inappropriate self-functioning. In the present study, partial correlations were again examined.

Superiority and Goal Instability Scales supplemented the NPI as additional indices of narcissism. Robbins & Patton (1985) interpret Superiority as "related to one's opinion of self as better than others and as such reflects immature self-expression" while Goal Instability reveals the absence of "goal-setting ideals" (p. 229). Both were developed as attempts to formally operationalize some of Kohut's (1971, 1977) theorizing, and use of these scales helped ensure a more comprehensive measurement of the complex narcissism variable. Again, respondents rated all items on a 4-point rather than a 6-point scale.

Davis's (1983) IRI measures empathy while remaining sensitive to the multidimensional nature of the construct. Three IRI subscales appear to record positive attributes. Empathic Concern (EC) theoretically reflects "other-oriented" feelings of sympathy and concern for unfortunate others" while Perspective-Taking (PT) monitors cognitive skill in assuming another person's point of view. Directly related to these two is a Fantasy Scale (FS) which measures imaginative abilities to identify with fictional characters. A fourth Personal Distress (PD) Scale represents maladaptive, "self-oriented" feelings of personal anxiety and unease in tense interpersonal settings" (Davis, 1983, p. 114).

Finally, the Costello & Comrey (1967) Depression and Anxiety measures were included to document the validity of the various instruments and of the partial correlation procedure. Responses to these items were also made on a 4-point scale.

Results

Intercorrelations among all personality measures except the RAS-NN are reviewed in Table 1, and three most important preliminary observations were supported by these data. First, the E/E and

Goal Instability Scales were largely reconfirmed as indices of maladaptive functioning. This was evident in the associations of Goal Instability with depression, anxiety, and empathic distress while E/E scores were predictive of greater anxiety and of a deficit in perspective taking. In general, the Goal Instability scale appeared to monitor the more problematic trait since, unlike the E/E factor, it was inversely rather than directly related to measures of healthy narcissism. Second, the underlying nature of the Superiority Scale seemed to be ambiguous, at least at the level of zero-order correlations. While linked to higher E/E values, the Superiority Scale was also associated with healthy narcissism and unrelated to either anxiety or depression. Third, negative relationships with Goal Instability, empathic distress, depression, and/or anxiety strengthened interpretations of the S/A, L/A, and S/S factors as reflecting largely adaptive forms of narcissism.

Of greatest importance for the present study were the RAS relationships, and these data predominantly revealed assertiveness to promote adjustment. Specifically, the RAS was positively related to healthy narcissism while being inversely associated with Goal Instability, empathic distress, anxiety, and depression. The direct linkage between the RAS and exploitiveness was the only exception to this generally optimistic outcome. Again, however, the zero-order RAS relationship with E/E could have been mediated by a correlated healthy narcissism, and the partialing procedure controlled for this possibility.

That partial correlations uncovered purer measures of maladaptive self concern was supported by three aspects of the findings presented in Table 2. First, positive relationships between E/E, Goal Instability, and Superiority all became statistically significant; and second, direct E/E relationships with depression and empathic distress were uncovered while the exploitiveness tie with anxiety became stronger. Finally, direct Superiority relationships were also discovered with empathic distress and with anxiety. In summary, controlling for the variance associated with the three NPI factors demonstrated that putative indices of unhealthy narcissism were in fact directly interrelated and were strongly predictive of other dimensions of poor self-functioning; and as a consequence, partial correlations apparently yielded the clearer test of the hypothesis that assertiveness promotes narcissistic exploitiveness. Particularly noteworthy,

TABLE 1. Intercorrelations among Measures of Assertiveness, Narcissism, Empathy, Depression, and Anxiety

Measures	Narcissism							Empathy				Other	
	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
<i>Assertiveness</i>													
1. RAS	.51 ^c	.17 ^a	.40 ^c	.60 ^c	.35 ^c	.17 ^a	-.25 ^b	.07	.06	.02	-.25 ^b	-.27 ^c	-.28 ^a
<i>Narcissism</i>													
2. NPI—Total	.70 ^c	.74 ^c	.74 ^c	.77 ^c	.66 ^c	.53 ^c	-.15	-.04	-.09	-.03	-.13	-.11	-.10
3. E/E	—	.34 ^c	.34 ^c	.47 ^c	.22 ^b	.44 ^c	.08	-.08	-.21 ^b	-.09	.04	.15	.19 ^a
4. S/A	—	—	—	.60 ^c	.46 ^c	.35 ^c	-.23 ^b	-.09	-.04	-.04	-.26 ^b	-.04	-.21 ^b
5. L/A	—	—	—	—	.38 ^c	.40 ^c	-.17 ^a	.03	.02	.03	-.21 ^b	-.14	-.16 ^a
6. S/S	—	—	—	—	—	.36 ^c	-.16 ^a	-.02	.03	-.03	-.16 ^a	-.25 ^b	-.23 ^b
7. Superiority	—	—	—	—	—	—	.08	.05	-.05	.18 ^a	.06	-.09	.10
8. Goal instability	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	.03	-.06	.01	.22 ^b	.37 ^c	.35 ^c
<i>Empathy</i>													
9. Empathic concern	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	.47 ^c	.21 ^b	.01	-.08	.09
10. Perspective taking	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	.23 ^b	-.19 ^a	.03	-.19 ^a
11. Fantasy scale	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	.07	-.08	.05
12. Personal distress	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	.08	.41 ^c
<i>Other</i>													
13. Depression	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	.48 ^c
14. Anxiety	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—

^ap < .05.

^bp < .01.

^cp < .001.

TABLE 2. Partial Correlations among Measures of Assertiveness, Maladaptive Narcissism, Empathy, Depression, and Anxiety Controlling for S/A, L/A, and S/S

Measures	Maladaptive Narcissism			Empathy				Other	
	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
<i>Assertiveness</i>									
1. RAS	-.17 ^a	-.14	-.17 ^a	.08	.07	.01	-.14	-.21 ^b	-.21 ^b
<i>Maladaptive Narcissism</i>									
2. E/E	—	.31 ^c	.21 ^b	-.09	-.25 ^b	-.11	.18 ^a	.26 ^b	.33 ^c
3. Superiority		—	.22 ^b	.06	-.06	.21 ^b	.21 ^b	.00	.25 ^b
4. Goal instability			—	.01	-.07	.00	.17 ^a	.37 ^c	.31 ^c
<i>Empathy</i>									
5. Empathic concern				—	.47 ^c	.20 ^b	.00	-.06	.08
6. Perspective taking					—	.23 ^b	-.21 ^b	.05	-.20 ^a
7. Fantasy scale						—	.06	-.08	.04
8. Personal distress							—	.06	.37 ^c
<i>Other</i>									
9. Depression								—	.46 ^c
10. Anxiety									—

^a*p* < .05.

^b*p* < .01.

^c*p* < .001.

therefore, was the observation that the positive zero-order relationship between the RAS and exploitiveness ($r = .17, p < .05$) was converted into a negative one by the partialing procedure ($r = -.17, p < .05$). In addition, an inverse partial correlation between the RAS and the Superiority Scale approached conventional levels of significance ($r = -.14, p = .08$).

Finally the RAS-NN was analyzed to determine if these apparently more negative specific items would yield greater evidence of maladjustment. Zero-order correlations revealed no such tendency with the NN subscale associated with less empathic distress ($r = -.29$), goal instability ($r = -.27$), depression ($r = -.25$), and anxiety ($r = -.36$) and with increased levels of healthy narcissism as recorded by the three adaptive factors and by the total NPI (all $r_s \geq .28$, all $p_s < .001$). The partial correlational procedure added inverse relationships with Superiority ($r = -.17, p < .05$) and with exploitiveness ($r = -.33, p < .001$). The relationship between the RAS and the NN items was .77 ($p < .001$).

Discussion

Assertiveness, at least as operationalized in the RAS, apparently remains a defensible criterion

of adaptive functioning. The idea that assertiveness might encourage an exploitive orientation toward others was not confirmed; and partial correlations in particular suggested the opposite influence. Furthermore, no evidence at all was obtained to support the contention that assertiveness is necessarily incompatible with an empathic concern for others. Of course, the problematic dimensions of assertiveness may not have been measured. Yet, the RAS-NN focused on items empirically identified as potentially relevant to inappropriate interpersonal styles, and these data also failed to uncover any evidence of adverse effects. Indeed, the RAS-NN and other findings were generally consistent with arguments that individualism is congruent with a prosocial interdependence (Waterman, 1981).

Interpretation of partial correlations would seem particularly important in coming to such a conclusion. The zero order relationship between assertiveness and exploitiveness was significantly positive, but the partial correlation was significantly negative. Attempts to understand this outcome should be framed within the context of other partial correlational results which were more successful than the zero order relationships in demonstrating consistent measures of maladaptive self concern.

The best explanation of the zero order RAS effect therefore would seem to be in terms of a mediation by healthy narcissism; and the need to utilize partialing procedures may be evident in future research efforts.

The present study once again demonstrated the potential for subjecting value issues in clinical psychology to empirical scrutiny (Waterman, 1981). Many of the significant correlations failed to explain a lot of the variance, but it is crucial to emphasize the level at which these data assume a conceptual importance. Their meaningfulness is *not* primarily in terms of an ability to document psychological scales as valid assessment devices. Instead, this investigation sought to examine more fundamental questions concerning value issues implicit in psychotherapeutic objectives. When the suggestion is that assertiveness promotes exploitiveness, then a significant partial correlation in the opposite direction definitively undermines any notion that an unhealthy connection *must* exist between these two variables.

Logical arguments, of course, can supplement empirical evidence in refuting the charges against assertiveness. In developing the RAS, Rathus was careful to differentiate between "demanding that one be treated with fairness and justice" on the one hand and "the gratuitous expression of nastiness" on the other (p. 404). Whether the process of behaving assertively turns out to be inappropriate is undoubtedly dependent on the content of what is being asserted. Ensuring that one receives justice need not be incompatible with an ongoing sensitivity to the rights of others. In fact, a negative partial correlation between assertiveness and exploitiveness suggests that individuals confident in their own rights effectively meet their needs without resorting to antisocial relationship patterns.

In this investigation, at least, communitarian criticisms of the psychotherapeutic perspective were not supported. Subjects sampled from populations with more maladjusted traits might exhibit a direct linkage between assertiveness and exploitiveness; yet, the present data indicate that any such outcome could not be explained in terms of a necessary causal relationship between these two personality characteristics. Additional analyses should prove useful in generating even greater assurance in assertiveness as a clinical objective without undesirable side effects. More generally, other research may demonstrate shortcomings in the viewpoints of psychologists (see, e.g., Watson et al., in press; Watson et al., 1987), but continued empirical

examination of the values inherent in psychotherapy promises to introduce greater precision into the ongoing debate over a presumed antisocial, individualistic bias in contemporary psychology.

References

- BELLAH, R. N., MADSEN, R., SULLIVAN, W. M., SWIDLER, A. & TIPTON, S. M. (1985). *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. New York: Harper & Row.
- BERGIN, A. E. (1980). Psychotherapy and religious values. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, **48**, 95-105.
- BERGIN, A. E. (1983). Values and evaluating therapeutic change. In N. J. Helm and A. E. Bergin (Eds.), *Therapeutic Behavior Modification* (pp. 9-14). Berlin, DRG: VEB Deutscher Verlag der Wissenschaften.
- COSTELLO, C. G. & COMREY, A. L. (1967). Scales for measuring depression and anxiety. *Journal of Psychology*, **66**, 303-313.
- DAVIS, M. H. (1983). Measuring individual differences in empathy: Evidence for a multidimensional approach. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, **44**, 113-126.
- EMMONS, R. A. (1984). Factor analysis and construct validity of the narcissistic personality inventory. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, **48**, 291-300.
- EMMONS, R. A. (1987). Narcissism: Theory and measurement. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, **52**, 11-17.
- FOSTER, J. D. & LEDBETTER, M. F. (1987). Christian anti-psychology and the scientific method. *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, **15**, 10-18.
- FOX, D. (1985). Psychology, ideology, utopia, and the commons. *American Psychologist*, **40**, 48-58.
- KANFER, R. H. (1979). Personal control, social control, and altruism: Can society survive the age of individualism? *American Psychologist*, **34**, 231-239.
- KOHUT, H. (1971). *The Analysis of the Self*. New York: International Universities Press.
- KOHUT, H. (1977). *The Restoration of the Self*. New York: International Universities Press.
- LASCH, C. (1979). *The Culture of Narcissism*. New York: Warner Books.
- LASCH, C. (1986). The communitarian critique of liberalism. *Soundings*, **69**, 60-76.
- MACINTYRE, A. (1981). *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*. Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press.
- RASKIN, R. & HALL, C. S. (1981). The narcissistic personality inventory: Alternate form reliability and further evidence of construct validity. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, **45**, 159-162.
- RATHUS, S. A. (1973). A 30-item schedule for assessing assertive behavior. *Behavior Therapy*, **4**, 398-406.
- ROBBINS, S. B. & PATTON, M. J. (1985). Self-psychology and career development: Construction of the superiority and goal instability scales. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, **32**, 221-231.
- VITZ, P. C. (1977). *Psychology as Religion: The Cult of Self Worship*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans.
- WALLACH, M. A. & WALLACH, L. (1983). *Psychology's Sanction for Selfishness: The Error of Egoism in Theory and Therapy*. San Francisco: W. H. Freeman.
- WALLWORK, E. (1986). A constructive Freudian alternative to psychotherapeutic egoism. *Soundings*, **69**, 145-164.

Assertiveness and Narcissism

- WATERMAN, A. S. (1981). Individualism and interdependence. *American Psychologist*, **36**, 762-773.
- WATSON, P. J., GRISHAM, S. O., TROTTER, M. V. & BIDERMAN, M. D. (1984). Narcissism and empathy: Validity evidence for the narcissistic personality inventory. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, **48**, 301-305.
- WATSON, P. J., HOOD, R. W., JR., FOSTER, S. G. & MORRIS, R. J. (in press). Sin, depression, and narcissism. *Review of Religious Research*.
- WATSON, P. J., HOOD, R. W., JR., MORRIS, R. J. & HALL, J. R. (1987). The relationship between religiosity and narcissism. *Counseling and Values*, **31**, 179-184.
- WATSON, P. J., MORRIS, R. J. & HOOD, R. W., JR. (1987). Antireligious humanistic values, guilt, and self esteem. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, **26**, 535-546.
- WATSON, P. J., TAYLOR, D. & MORRIS, R. J. (1987). Narcissism, sex roles, and self functioning. *Sex Roles*, **16**, 335-350.