The multidimensionality of pathological narcissism from the perspective of social ostracism: A study in a sample of Italian University students

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A B S T R A C T

Social ostracism paradigm may represent a challenging task for subjects with pathological narcissism. In order to evaluate the associations between pathological narcissism and social ostracism, 1063 Italian University students were administered the Italian translation of the Five Factor Narcissism Inventory-Short Form (FFNI-SF). Participants who scored in the upper 97.5th percentile of the FFNI-SF Grandiose Narcissism (n = 27) and Vulnerable Narcissism (n = 27) scale score distributions, as well as a group of participants (n = 28) who were randomly selected from students scoring in the 33rd-66th percentile of FFNI-SF total score distribution were administered the Social Media Ostracism Paradigm (SMOP), a laboratory task designed to simulate social exclusion in social network interaction. FFNI-SF Vulnerable Narcissism scale showed almost none significant relationship with participants’ experience on the SMOP task. Rather, Grandiose Narcissism seemed to protect participants from threats to self-esteem and to give them a sense of being in control of the situation when they had to face social exclusion. FFNI-SF Antagonism, Agentic Extraversion, and Neuroticism scales yielded meaningful, significant correlations with self-reports of participants’ subjective states after the SMOP task. The current study expands our understanding of narcissism by exploring participants’ hypersensitivity to social exclusion.

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1. Introduction

The construct of narcissism has received increased scientific interest in recent years, leading to a rapidly expanding theoretical, empirical, and clinical literature (e.g., Campbell & Miller, 2011; Ogrudniczuk, 2013; Pincus & Lukowitsky, 2010). This renewed interest lead to evidence of multidimensionality within the realm of pathological narcissism. Existing literature suggests broad variation in the phenotypic expression of narcissism (Cain, Pincus, & Ansell, 2008), highlighting the existence of grandiose and vulnerable dimensions in the phenotypic description of narcissism (e.g., Miller, Gentile, Wilson, & Campbell, 2013; Pincus & Roche, 2011). Grandiose narcissism refers to individuals who are explicitly and outwardly immodest, self-promotional, self-enhancing, and entitled, whereas vulnerable narcissism describes individuals who are self-absorbed, entitled, and distrustful of others while presenting substantial, overt psychological distress and fragility (Miller, Lynam, Hyatt, & Campbell, 2017).

A growing body of empirical research demonstrates that the two phenotypic expressions of narcissistic pathology have divergent relationships with a variety of constructs, supporting the validity of this distinction (e.g., Dickinson & Pincus, 2003; Miller et al., 2013; Zeigler-Hill & Besser, 2013). However, there are a number of active debates in the narcissism literature (see, for a review Miller et al., 2017), including the question of whether there is any consensus in what is meant by the term (e.g., Ackerman et al., 2011; Cain et al., 2008; Miller, Gaughan, Pryor, Kamen, & Campbell, 2009; Pincus, Roche, & Good, 2014).

From a basic personality trait perspective, narcissism is conceptualized as collections of basic, elemental traits (Miller et al., 2017). Miller et al. (2017) put forth a three-factor, unified model of narcissism in which they suggest that antagonism represents the core, shared component of narcissism, whereas grandiose narcissism and vulnerable narcissism, can be differentiated by their relative emphases on Neuroticism and agentic Extraversion. The Five Factor Narcissism Inventory (FFNI; Glover, Miller, Lynam, Crego, & Widiger, 2012) represents a reliable and valid measure of grandiose and vulnerable variants of pathological narcissism (e.g., Glover et al., 2012; Sherman et al., 2015). Recently, Miller et al. (2016) proposed and alternative structure of FFNI scales based on three factors, which were named Antagonism (sum of Manipulativeness, Exploitativeness, Entitlement, Lack of Empathy, Arrogance, Reactive Anger, Distrust, and Thrill Seeking), Extraversion (sum of Acclaim Seeking, Authoritativeness, Grandiose Fantasies, and...
Exhibitionism), and Neuroticism (sum of Shame, Indifference [reversed], and Need for Admiration).

Social ostracism - i.e., the experience of being ignored and excluded - it is known to elicit an intense negative psychological experience (e.g., Williams, 2007) which are nearly universally experienced (e.g., Zadro, Williams, & Richardson, 2004). However, this does not rule out the possibility that some people are more susceptible to its negative effects. Participants who reported high levels of pathological narcissism seem to be overly sensitive others’ evaluations (e.g., Edelstein, Yim, & Quas, 2010; Kelsey, Ornduff, Reiff, & Arthur, 2002; Twenge & Campbell, 2003).

Thus, social ostracism paradigm may represent a challenging task for subjects with pathological narcissism, since their attention seeking behaviour, grandiose sense of self, and sense of entitlement may be strained in social ostracism tasks, giving rise to negative emotional outbursts. The Social Media Ostracism Paradigm (SMOP; Wolf et al., 2015) represents a novel, social media-based ostracism paradigm designed to (1) keep social interaction experimentally controlled, (2) provide researchers with the flexibility to manipulate the properties of the social situation to fit their research purposes, and (3) be ecologically valid (Wolf et al., 2015). Wolf et al. (2015) reported that SMOP is a cost-effective, easy to use, and ecologically valid research tool for studying the psychological and behavioural effects of ostracism.

To the best of our knowledge, no study examined the relationships between grandiose and vulnerable narcissism and social ostracism paradigm. Starting from these premises, the present study aimed at assessing the associations between FFNI-SF second-order scale scores and laboratory measures of social ostracism. In particular, we hypothesized that FFNI-SF Narcissistic Grandiosity scores were positively related to self-esteem measures during SMOP task.

2. Material and methods

2.1. Participants

Since it was unfeasible to administer the SMOP to a large number of participants, in the present study we administered the ostracism task only to a sub-sample of participants (n = 82) that were selected from a larger sample of participants drawn from a previous study (Fossati, Somma, Borroni, & Miller, 2017). The initial sample was composed by 1063 university students attending courses at nine state and private Universities in the North of Italy; 674 participants (63.4%) were female and 389 participants (36.6%) were male; participants’ mean age was 21.71 years, SD = 2.51. The demographics for this sample have been reported extensively in Fossati et al. (2017) study; however, those previous reports did not concern any data from the SMOP task and the current results represent a novel use of the data.

In order to evaluate if FFNI-SF second-order scale scores were significantly associated to SMOP measures, three sub-groups of University students were obtained: a) participants scoring in the upper 97.5th percentile (n = 27) of the FFNI-SF Grandiose Narcissism scale score distribution in our full sample; b) participants scoring in the upper 2.5th percentile (n = 27) of the FFNI-SF Vulnerable Narcissism scale score distribution in our full sample; and c) participants (n = 28) who were randomly selected from University students scoring in the 33rd-66th percentile of FFNI-SF total score distribution in our full sample. Since a significant multivariate effect of participants’ gender on the FFNI-SF scales was observed in the full sample, Pillai V = 0.20, p < 0.001, in this study separate norms were used to male participants and female participants, respectively. This sampling procedure was thought to yield an over-representation of participants at risk for grandiose and vulnerable dimensions of pathological narcissism, respectively. This sampling procedure was designed to study the link between social ostracism effects and pathological narcissism in a sample of participants who obtained both “extreme” and “normal range” scores on the FFNI-SF second-order scales.

Thus, SMOP sub-sample was composed of 82 participants; 41 participants (50.0%) were male and 41 participants (50.0%) were female. Participants’ mean age was 23.53 years, SD = 3.07 years. The larger proportion of male participants that was observed in the SMOP sub-sample with respect to the full sample was a consequence of the significant association between participant’s male gender and the risk for pathological narcissism, t(1061) = 9.37, p < 0.001, d = 0.20.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Five Factor Narcissism Inventory-Short Form (FFNI-SF; Sherman et al., 2015)

The FFNI-SF is a 60-item, self-report measure of 15 traits related to vulnerable and grandiose narcissism. Vulnerable narcissism is the sum of Cynicism/distrust, Need for Admiration, Reactive Anger, and Shame. Grandiose narcissism is the sum of the remaining scales.

2.2.2. Social Media Ostracism Paradigm (SMOP; Wolf et al., 2015)

In the SMOP task, participants are told they will engage in an online group task. In fact, only one person participates at a time, and pre-programmed computer scripts determine the behaviour of the other group members. Participants are told that, in order for the group members to get acquainted, each of them has to create a personal profile consisting of an avatar and a short description of themselves. Next, participants engage in an introductory phase in which the group members can view each other’s personal profiles. During this phase, group members can communicate social attention to one another in the form of a ‘like’ (similar to a Facebook ‘like’). The level of ostracism is manipulated by the number of ‘like’ a participant’s personal profile receives. Given that we were interested in studying the links between pathological narcissism dimensions and ostracism, we administered the SMOP only in the exclusion mode. In the present study, participant’s personal profile was allowed to receive only one like (Wolf et al., 2015). A detailed description of the SMOP is available at following URL: http://smopo.github.io/socialmedia/.

2.2.3. Reflexive need questionnaire

After the SMOP procedure, we administered the Reflexive Need Questionnaire (Van Beest & Williams, 2006), in order to measure participants’ need to belong (NB; five items), the extent to which their self-esteem was threatened (TS-E; five items), the extent to which they felt their life was meaningful (LM; five items), and the extent to which they felt in control of their lives (C; five items). Wolf et al. (2015) reported adequate Cronbach α values for these scales, ranging from 0.71 to 0.90. In our study, Cronbach α values were 0.73 (average inter-item r = 0.35), 0.80 (average inter-item r = 0.45), 0.74 (average inter-item r = 0.37), and 0.65 (average inter-item r = 0.27) for Reflective Need Questionnaire NB, T-SE, LM, and C scales, respectively.

2.2.4. Mood questionnaire

Next, we asked participants to assess their emotional state (Van Beest & Williams, 2006). In particular, participants are asked to what extent they felt good, bad, friendly, unfriendly, angry, pleasant, happy, sad, excluded, and ignored. In our study, we conducted preliminary principal component analysis (PCA) on mood questionnaire items. PCA was intended to reduce the number of variables and the risk of capitalizing on chance in testing associations between mood items and FFNI-SF second-order scales. PCA yielded evidence for three distinct dimensions underlying mood questionnaire items. Principal component (PC) 1 clustered “good” (λ = 0.73), “friendly” (λ = 0.76), “pleasant” (λ = 0.83), and “happy” (λ = 0.81) items; PC 2 clustered “bad” (λ = 0.75), “hostile” (λ = 0.86), “angry” (λ = 0.79), and “sad” (λ = 0.62) items; PC 3 clustered “ignored” (λ = 0.89) and “excluded” (λ = 0.83) items. Thus, we summed (actually, averaged) “good”, “friendly”, “pleasant”, and “happy” items to yield a Positive Emotions scale total score (Cronbach α = 0.81, average inter-item r = 0.52). A similar procedure was
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