



An empirical typology of narcissism and mental health in late adolescence

Daniel K. Lapsley*, Matthew C. Aalsma

*Department of Educational Psychology, Teachers College 526, Ball State University,
Indiana University School of Medicine, Indianapolis, IN 47306, USA*

Abstract

A two-step cluster analytic strategy was used in two studies to identify an empirically derived typology of narcissism in late adolescence. In Study 1, late adolescents ($N = 204$) responded to the profile of narcissistic dispositions and measures of grandiosity (“superiority”) and idealization (“goal instability”) inspired by Kohut’s theory, along with several College Adjustment Scales and a measure of pathology of separation-individuation. Cluster analysis revealed three clusters: covert narcissists ($N = 71$), moderate narcissists ($N = 55$) and overt narcissists ($N = 74$). Moderate narcissists had significantly lower means scores on indices of anxiety, relationship problem, depression, esteem- and family problems and pathology of separation-individuation. The overt and covert clusters showed comparable levels of dysfunction on most indices of adjustment. This general pattern was replicated in Study 2 ($N = 210$). Moderate narcissists showed a uniform profile of good adjustment, whereas covert and overt narcissist clusters showed a pervasive pattern of dysfunction. Results support the claim that narcissism has “two faces” and that a moderate degree of narcissism is associated with fewer adjustment problems or psychological symptoms. Directions for future research are discussed.

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*Corresponding author.

E-mail address: dklapsley@bsu.edu (D.K. Lapsley).

Introduction

Narcissism has long been a central category for understanding important aspects of adolescent personality development. Indeed, it is widely believed in both the popular and theoretical literatures that adolescents are particularly susceptible to narcissistic tendencies, and that the management of narcissism may well differentiate normal from dysfunctional adolescent development (Bleiberg, 1994). The source of these narcissistic tendencies has been theoretically linked to the normative developmental task of separation-individuation that requires the adolescent to shed parental dependencies, exercise autonomous agency and become an individuated self but within the context of enduring relational commitments. Narcissistic reactions are said to emerge as a concomitant of this process to ward off the mourning reactions that attend the loss of childhood identifications and to fortify the adolescent against the vulnerabilities common to this developmental transition (Blos, 1962). On this interpretation narcissism serves an adaptive function as the adolescent wrestles with the twin demands of assertion and connectedness.

The possibility of adaptive and healthy narcissism is also evident in Winnicott's (1965) object relational theory and in Kohut's (1977) self-psychology. For Winnicott (1965), self-absorption and a sense of subjective omnipotence can provide the psychological aliments that support self-extension, ambition, creativity and growth. Kohut (1977) argued that normal self-development could follow either a "grandiose" line, characterized by exhibitionism, assertiveness and ambition ("I am perfect, and you admire me") or else an "idealizing" line, characterized by an idealization of figures and goals ("You are perfect, and I am part of you"). Both theorists suggest that narcissistic "illusions" can be used to creatively sustain psychological growth and self-development (Mitchell, 1988). A narcissistic stance may be particularly adaptive for meeting the developmental challenges of late adolescence and emerging adulthood (Wink, 1992a).

Of course, lurking within reach of healthy and adaptive uses of narcissism are its dysfunctional and maladaptive aspects. Kernberg (1975) argued that the grandiose self oscillates between cycles of self-admiration and devaluation of others to protect against dependency and disappointment, and tends more toward dysfunction and pathology than it does healthy adaptation. Moreover, dysfunctional narcissism can take overt and covert forms that reflect either two facets of the same individual (Rhodewalt & Morf, 1995) or else two expressive "types" of narcissism (Wink, 1996). Hence, alongside overt displays of haughty grandiosity, invulnerability and entitlement there could reside covert and hypersensitive feelings of anxiety, inferiority and worthlessness.

Recent research has attempted to document types of narcissism in community samples of emerging and young adults. Wink (1991a) subjected 6 MMPI narcissism scales to a principal components analysis that resulted in two factors, which he labelled Vulnerability-Sensitivity and grandiosity-exhibitionism. Both factors were correlated with certain core features of narcissism, such as conceit, entitlement, self-indulgence, fragile self-esteem, and exploitative interpersonal relationships. But the two factors also appeared to correspond to the distinction between overt (grandiosity-exhibitionism) and covert (vulnerability-sensitivity) narcissism. Hence, on the basis of MMPI descriptors, the overt narcissist was described as a grandiose exhibitionist who is self-indulgent, manipulative, driven by power and by a strong need to be admired. The covert narcissist was described as being insecure, hypersensitive and vulnerable to feelings of inferiority. As Wink (1996, p. 167) put it, "narcissistic fantasies of power and grandeur can equally well lurk

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