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The relations among narcissism, self-esteem, and delinquency in a sample of at-risk adolescents

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Abstract

The present study explores the relation between narcissism and delinquency among 372 at-risk 16–18-year-olds. The study also considered the relation between narcissism and self-esteem, as well as the potential interaction between narcissism and self-esteem for predicting delinquency in this age group. Narcissism and self-esteem were positively interrelated; however, only narcissism was significantly correlated with delinquency. The results suggested that low self-esteem was actually associated with delinquency when controlling for narcissism. So-called adaptive narcissism was positively correlated with self-esteem, but maladaptive narcissism was not related to self-esteem. Limitations and directions for future research in this area are discussed.

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Introduction

Much empirical and media attention have been focused on personality and social risk factors for youth delinquency and antisocial behavior. Two constructs of interest in this research have been self-esteem and, more recently, narcissism (e.g., Barry, Frick, & Killian, 2003). Low self-esteem

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has been implicated in a variety of youth problems (Donnellan, Trzesniewski, Robins, Moffitt, & Caspi, 2005; Trzesniewski et al., 2006). However, blanket attempts to raise youth self-esteem as a remedy have met with disfavor (e.g., Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996), in part, because of the unrealistic nature of providing constant positive feedback across all situations. Another reason for this concern is the belief that constant positive feedback could foster a sense of entitlement or narcissism (Baumeister et al., 1996).

Although some theorists have considered narcissism as simply an extreme form of high self-esteem, most researchers have distinguished the two. Self-esteem can be considered one's overall self-evaluation, whereas narcissism can be defined as grandiosity with preoccupation over one's status compared to, and in the eyes of, others (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Raskin, Novacek, & Hogan, 1991). Research has delineated the positive self-views associated with each construct, with high self-esteem being associated with positive views on agentic (e.g., intellect, extraversion) and communal (e.g., agreeableness) characteristics and narcissism being confined to positive self-views on agentic features (Campbell, Rudich, & Sedikides, 2002). Thus, to the extent that positive self-views incorporate other people, narcissism seems to relate to seeking admiration from others (Raskin et al., 1991) more so than getting along with them.

The relation between narcissism and aggression has been well-documented among adults in laboratory settings (e.g., Barry, Chaplin, & Grafeman, 2006; Bushman & Baumeister, 1998). Research with youth has found that narcissism is associated with conduct problems (Barry et al., 2003) and that some features may be associated with internalizing symptoms (Washburn, McMahon, King, Reinecke, & Silver, 2004). To date, narcissism and its behavioral correlates have not been extensively investigated among adolescents.

Research on narcissism has repeatedly delineated between adaptive and maladaptive features (e.g., Barry et al., 2003; Emmons, 1984; Wink, 1991) or levels (Lapsley & Aalsma, 2006) of narcissism. Specifically, findings among adults suggest that characteristics of narcissism indicating feelings of entitlement, a willingness to exploit others, and a strong desire to be the center of attention are associated with impulsivity, sensation seeking, and other indicators of social maladjustment (e.g., Emmons, 1984; Raskin & Terry, 1988). Characteristics indicating a sense of authority/leadership and self-sufficiency have been related to variables considered socially desirable including assertiveness, independence, and self-confidence (Raskin & Terry, 1988).

Applying this maladaptive/adaptive distinction to the measurement of youth narcissism, Barry and colleagues (2003), found that maladaptive narcissism was associated with conduct problems, callous-unemotional traits, and low self-esteem. Conversely, adaptive narcissism was not significantly related to conduct problems or callous-unemotional traits and was related to high self-esteem, despite a strong correlation between maladaptive and adaptive narcissism. A more recent study (Barry, Frick, Adler, & Grafeman, *in press*) found that maladaptive narcissism was a unique predictor of delinquency in a community sample of adolescents up to three years later. Washburn and colleagues (2004) found that exhibitionistic features of narcissism were related to internalizing symptoms, exploitativeness was associated with proactive aggression, and adaptive narcissism was positively related to self-esteem. The pattern of associations between self-esteem and different aspects of narcissism in these studies is similar to that described by Brown and Zeigler-Hill (2004) who noted that dominance (e.g., feelings that one is better than, or has authority over, others) may explain some of the relations between measures of self-esteem and narcissism.

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