Preschool personality antecedents of narcissism in adolescence and young adulthood: A 20-year longitudinal study

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ABSTRACT

This prospective study examined relations between preschool personality attributes and narcissism during adolescence and emerging adulthood. We created five a priori preschool scales anticipated to forecast future narcissism. Independent assessors evaluated the participants' personality at ages 14, 18, and 23. Based upon these evaluations, we generated observer-based narcissism scales for each of these three ages. All preschool scales predicted subsequent narcissism, except Interpersonal Antagonism at age 23. According to mean scale and item scores analyses, narcissism increased significantly from age 14 to 18, followed by a slight but non-significant decline from age 18 to 23. The discussion focused on a developmental view of narcissism, the need for research on automatic processing and psychological defenses, and links between narcissism and attachment.

1. Introduction

Narcissism has increasingly attracted the attention of social, personality, and clinical psychologists; the literature on this topic spans both clinical observations and empirical research. Narcissism, conceptually related to defensive self-esteem (e.g., Kernis; 2003; Paulhus, 1998; Robins & Beer, 2001) and self-enhancement (John & Robins, 1994), has been studied both as a process model (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001) and as an individual difference model (Raskin & Terry, 1988).

The origins and developmental course of narcissism are not well understood. Although self-report narcissism scales have been developed for use with school-age children (e.g., Thomaes, Stegge, Bushman, Olthof, & Denissen, 2008), longitudinal studies are needed to examine whether narcissism later in life has precursors going back as far as preschool. The aim of this study is to begin to close this knowledge gap by tracing the preschool personality precursors (age 3–4) of narcissism in adolescence and young adulthood, using observational data of preschool children in natural settings (i.e., nursery school). In addition, we examined age-related changes in mean level narcissism scores during adolescence and emerging adulthood in order to gain a better understanding of changes in narcissism during this developmental period.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a complete overview of narcissism. Suffice to say that narcissism continues to be viewed from a variety of perspectives (see, for example, the special issue of Psychological Inquiry, 2001, 12 [4]). Furthermore, clinical and social-personality conceptualizations of narcissism often differ, although both approaches share an emphasis on interpersonal antagonism (Miller & Campbell, 2008). Nonetheless, reasonable consensus exists about the core attributes of a narcissistic personality. Narcissists tend to harbor inflated (or defensive) self-esteem, self-absorption, grandiosity, hostility, self-enhancement, inadequate impulse regulation, and an unrealistic sense of entitlement (e.g., Fiscali, 1993; Kernberg, 1975, 1986b; Raskin, Nowacek, & Hogan, 1991; Vazire & Funder, 2006). Underlying the excessive positive view of self, narcissists also appear to experience deep-rooted feelings of self-doubt. As Vazire and Funder (2006) commented, narcissists maintain “a self-concept that is both overly positive and overly negative” (p. 155). Whereas narcissism might be visible in many situations, its emotional core is most likely to appear in close relationships, in which the often outgoing and sociable facade may rupture and reveal the detached and defensive nature of the narcissist’s emotional life. For example, Campbell and Foster (2002), using self-report scales, reported that narcissists were less commitment to ongoing relationships. Kernberg (1986a), furthermore, observed, “on a deeper level they [narcissists] are completely unable really to depend on anybody because of their deep distrust and depreciation of others” (p. 214).

1.1. Does narcissism in adolescence and emergent adulthood have preschool antecedents?

Our first research question was whether narcissism in adolescence and emerging adulthood has personality antecedents...
stretching back all the way to preschool. In the personality develop-
ment literature, there is increasing consensus that not only can
children be reliably assessed as early as at age 3, but also that per-
sonality characteristics measured this early in life have long-term
implications for future adaptation (Caspi, 2000). Furthermore, the
DSM-IV (American Psychiatric Association, 2000) proposed that,
in general, personality disorders are relatively stable and their on-
set can be traced back to early childhood (Shiner, 2005). Of course,
we do not argue that narcissism per se exists as a fully developed
and distinct personality type in preschool. We only propose that
knowledge of childhood antecedents may throw light on the early
features of narcissism and how such features may over time culmi-
nate into a relatively stable narcissistic orientation.

Previous research has identified three core qualities of narcis-
sism: an inflated self, interpersonal hostility, and impulsivity. The
inflated self includes excessive self-esteem (e.g., Kernis, 2003),
fragile and unstable self-esteem (e.g., Rodewalt, Madrian, & Che-
ney, 1998), grandiosity (e.g., Raskin et al., 1991), and defensive
self-enhancement specifically related to egoistic concerns (e.g.,
Campbell, Rudich, & Sedikides, 2002; John & Robins, 1994; Paul-
hus & Williams, 2002). Furthermore, recent research suggests that
the inflated self may not be reduced to self-enhancement alone; it
also includes organizational features such as lack of self-integra-
tion. For example, emerging evidence suggests that such organi-
zational components of the narcissistic self are perhaps more
important than mere self-enhancement in explaining behavioral
outcomes related to narcissism (Stucke & Sporer, 2002). Lack of
self-integration is conceptually related to psychoanalytic views
of narcissism and to the importance of defense mechanisms, such
as splitting used to protect the vulnerable self-esteem of narciss-
sism.

Antagonistic interpersonal behavior is another defining feature
of narcissism (e.g., Raskin et al., 1991; Warren et al., 2002). For
example, hostility has been observed when the narcissist’s inflated
self-view is challenged (e.g., Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Smalley
& Stake, 1996; Twenge & Campbell, 2003). Recent research, how-
ever, suggests that hostility is not merely a result of challenged
self-esteem but also reflects issues related to the narcissist’s frag-
mented sense of self (Stucke & Sporer, 2002).

Antagonistic interpersonal behaviors are likely to be maintained
by the interpersonal consequences of these behaviors (Raskin et al.,
1991). Unfortunately, the everyday interpersonal relationships of
narcissists, observed in natural daily settings outside of the labora-
tory, have rarely (if ever) been studied; thus the actual real-life
manifestations of narcissism are not well understood. Theoreti-
cally, aggressive behavior that provokes emotional or submissive
reactions might reinforce the inflated self. Such reactions might
reaffirm the narcissists’ sense of superiority. For example, emo-
tional reactions might reinforce narcissists’ view of others as emo-
tional and therefore weak and vulnerable, whereas they see
themselves as rational and logical. Thus, a vicious cycle is main-
tained across time and context. This cycle may promote the con-
scious deliberation (Diamond & Blatt, 1994).

Impulsivity is the third major quality detected in narcissists.
Based on their meta-analysis, Vazire and Funder (2006) argued
convincingly that this characteristic has consistently been ob-
erved in studies using different measures of both narcissism and
impulsivity. Impulsivity is likely to be more than just a correlate
of narcissism; it might lie close to the conceptual core of narcissis-
tic personality dynamics. Vazire and Funder (2006), furthermore,
suggested that the centrality of impulsiveness in narcissists signi-
fies the existence of non-deliberate and automatic processing of
cognitive and affective actions. This lack of conscious reflection
may be an important aspect of the inflated self as well as the de-
fenses related to this self-view. As the automatic cognitive and
affective processing seen in these defenses becomes more domi-
nant in the narcissists’ life, their actions are likely to rely less on
conscious deliberation (Diamond & Blatt, 1994).

Automatic processing may also be implicated in the hostile
behaviors typical of narcissists. For example, aggressive behaviors
during childhood have been linked to automatic processing of
emotions and thoughts in the interpersonal domain (see Crick &
Dodge, 1994, for a review). Impulsivity, constrained cognitive-eval-
uation, and the limited behavioral repertoire likely to characterize
narcissists might explain their hostility – especially when their in-
flated self is threatened and give rise to a host of undesired and
non-integrated emotions that make deliberate processing even more
difficult (Vazire & Funder, 2006).

Thus, the narcissistic defensiveness revolves around three inter-
linked components: an inflated sense of self, hostility, and impul-
sivity. The dynamic interplay within this personality constellation
might contribute to continuity over time. The emphasis on the core
defensive nature of narcissism brings this concept back to its rich
theoretical origins (see Morrison, 1986, for a collection of classic
papers), and the implication of psychological defenses in the con-
tinuity of narcissistic traits over time. In view of the links between
some of the preschool predictors described above, we expected the
inter-item correlation to be moderately high.

1.2. Age-related changes in narcissism during adolescence and
emergent adulthood

Our second research question examined the degree of stability
in mean narcissism scores from middle adolescence and into
emerging adulthood. Recently, some researchers have argued that
young adults have become more narcissistic than earlier genera-
tions (cf., Twenge, 2006). In support of this argument, Twenge,
Konrath, Foster, Campbell, and Bushman (2008) reported that
self-reported narcissism (using the NPI) has increased by 0.33 stan-
dard deviations since the 1980s. Trzesniewski and her colleagues
(e.g., Trzesniewski, Donnellan, & Robins, 2008a; 2008b) contested
this conclusion and found no changes in self-enhancement in
youth from the 1970s and into the present. Although it is beyond
the scope of this paper to review these competing arguments de-
tail, the participants in our sample have most likely been exposed
to the cultural and environmental factors cited as responsible for
the proposed recent increase in narcissism, as outlined in the work
of Twenge and her colleagues (e.g., Twenge, 2006; Twenge et al.,
2008). Given Twenge’s (2006) arguments and the age of our sam-
ple, we tentatively hypothesize that mean level of narcissism
should increase from middle adolescence and into early adulthood.

Although it has been suggested that emerging adulthood might
be characterized by narcissism in terms of being over-confident,
selfish, yet being miserable and unfulfilled, Arnett (2007) argued
that this position is a manifestation of the century-old myth of
adolescence as a time of “storm and stress.” Few studies have
examined age-related changes in narcissism. An exception is a re-
cent cross-sectional study reporting that narcissism decreased
with age in cross-national samples ranging in age from age 8 to
83 (Foster, Campbell, & Twenge, 2003). The authors, however, of-
ered few theoretical explanations for this finding and noted that
the effect size was rather weak. Furthermore, the sample sizes
for extreme age groups (<15 and >34) were relatively small, com-
pared to the adolescent and young adult samples, potentially lead-
ing to unstable estimates for these groups. In fact, the groups with
larger sample sizes (age 15–34) showed relatively similar mean
levels of narcissism. Hence, this reported age effect might be due
to differing sample sizes and other artifacts related to cross-sec-
tional methods and cohort effects. Therefore, a longitudinal study
examining this age effect might be of interest, especially in view
of the fact that detailed analyses of changes in mean values from
middle adolescence and into emerging adulthood within the same
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