



## 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 foretell 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.

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### 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., Fiscalini, 1993; Kernberg, 1975, 1986b; Raskin, Novacek, & 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 committed 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

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stretching back all the way to preschool. In the personality development literature, there is increasing consensus that not only can children be reliably assessed as early as at age 3, but also that personality 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 onset 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 culminate into a relatively stable narcissistic orientation.

Previous research has identified three core qualities of narcissism: 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., Rhodewalt, Madrian, & Cheney, 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; Paulhus & 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-integration. For example, emerging evidence suggests that such organizational 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 narcissism.

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, however, suggests that hostility is not merely a result of challenged self-esteem but also reflects issues related to the narcissist's fragmented 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 laboratory, have rarely (if ever) been studied; thus the actual real-life manifestations of narcissism are not well understood. Theoretically, aggressive behavior that provokes emotional or submissive reactions might reinforce the inflated self. Such reactions might reaffirm the narcissists' sense of superiority. For example, emotional reactions might reinforce narcissists' view of others as emotional and therefore weak and vulnerable, whereas they see themselves as rational and logical. Thus, a vicious cycle is maintained across time and context. This cycle may promote the continuity of narcissism (Raskin et al., 1991).

Impulsivity is the third main quality detected in narcissists. Based on their meta-analysis, Vazire and Funder (2006) argued convincingly that this characteristic has consistently been observed 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 narcissistic personality dynamics. Vazire and Funder (2006), furthermore, suggested that the centrality of impulsiveness in narcissists signifies 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 defenses 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-evaluation, and the limited behavioral repertoire likely to characterize narcissists might explain their hostility – especially when their inflated 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 interlinked components: an inflated sense of self, hostility, and impulsivity. 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 continuity 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 generations (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 standard 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 detail, 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 sample, 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 recent 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, offered 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, compared to the adolescent and young adult samples, potentially leading 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-sectional 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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