



The associations of adolescent invulnerability and narcissism with problem behaviors

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the correlations between invulnerability, narcissism, self-esteem, delinquency, and aggression in a sample of at-risk adolescents. Participants were 213, 16–18 year-olds (169 male, 44 female). As expected, narcissism and invulnerability were related to delinquency and aggression. However, maladaptive narcissism predicted unique variance in delinquency and relational aggression. A negative effect for self-esteem emerged for predicting delinquency when controlling for narcissism and perceived invulnerability. The distributions of narcissism and invulnerability indicated that these constructs may not, as a rule, be elevated in such youth. Some preliminary implications for the role of these variables in adolescent problem behaviors are presented.

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1. Introduction

Elkind's (1967) theory of adolescent egocentrism describes adolescence as a time of perceived invulnerability to risk and danger. This perceived invulnerability is thought to be related to the adolescent's tendency to view him/herself as unique—known as the “personal fable”—which includes being uniquely immune to the consequences that might befall others (see Millstein & Halpern-Felsher, 2002a). However, some research has disputed the notion that perceived invulnerability is confined to adolescence or that adolescence is a period of particularly strong beliefs in one's invulnerability (e.g., Millstein & Halpern-Felsher, 2002a).

As with invulnerability, narcissism—including grandiosity and concern for one's social status (Raskin, Novacek, & Hogan, 1991)—could be considered descriptive of adolescence partly based on the concept of imaginary audience, wherein one perceives that others are closely observing him/her (Elkind, 1967). Another view is that narcissism comprises personality characteristics that develop prior to adolescence from early experiences with caretakers and that persist into adulthood (e.g., Kohut, 1971).

Narcissism and invulnerability were positively correlated in one study (Aalsma, Lapsley, & Flannery, 2006), but their association has not been extensively investigated. The current study empirically investigated the relations between invulnerability, narcissism, and problem behaviors in at-risk adolescents, a sample selected because of the expected wide variability on the constructs of interest compared to what might occur in a community or detained sample. The distributions of invulnerability and narcissism were

also examined. Some theories might suggest that the distributions are negatively skewed among adolescents (Elkind, 1967; Waddell, 2006); however, a study with invulnerability found no evidence for this position (Millstein & Halpern-Felsher, 2002a), and another study found meaningful individual differences at low, moderate, and high levels of adolescent narcissism (Lapsley & Aalsma, 2006). Therefore, the central question of the present study was, “Are there identifiable and meaningful individual differences in invulnerability and narcissism during adolescence?”

Research suggests that perceptions of invulnerability are not endemic to adolescents as a group (see Steinberg, 2007); instead, individual differences and the cognitive processes involved in perceived invulnerability may help explain how invulnerability might be relevant for delinquency and aggression for some adolescents. Perceived invulnerability has been associated with delinquency (Greene, Krcmar, Walters, Rubin, & Hale, 2000) and risk behaviors presumably because some adolescents' sense of uniqueness and desire for independence make such behaviors appealing (Aalsma et al., 2006). However, some adolescents, although still developing their personalities and abilities to evaluate risks, may demonstrate sound judgment regarding the likelihood of negative consequences following risky behaviors (Millstein & Halpern-Felsher, 2002a).

Recent approaches toward defining and measuring invulnerability have considered invulnerability multidimensional—including domains of general, danger, and interpersonal invulnerability—and as indicative of the adolescent developmental process of separation–individuation (see Aalsma et al., 2006). Such a conceptualization may shed light on whether or not particular thoughts of invulnerability translate to delinquent/aggressive actions, yet this possibility has not been extensively examined. A general sense of invulnerability may be inadequate for explaining why adolescents

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might engage in risk-taking behavior (Goldberg, Halpern-Felsher, & Millstein, 2002). Instead, perceived invulnerability to danger may elucidate a link between invulnerability and delinquent activity (e.g., drug use, property crime) because of a lack of inhibition against acts that would typically fit societal notions of dangerous or problematic behavior.

Interpersonal invulnerability (e.g., feeling immune one's feelings being hurt) has been the target of much less research than danger invulnerability and does not directly indicate beliefs that would be related to delinquency or aggression. A tenuous link is that portraying oneself as immune to criticism may actually be associated with heightened sensitivity to criticism and aggression in the face of such incidents, not unlike previous findings regarding narcissism and responses to negative feedback from others (e.g., Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Thomaes, Stegge, Bushman, & Olthof, 2008). Overall, based on previous research (see Millstein & Halpern-Felsher, 2002b) as well as conceptual differences in facets of invulnerability, the most likely area in which invulnerability is tied to adolescent problem behaviors is in perceived invulnerability to danger which is perhaps indicative of one's beliefs of power over the probability of facing harm after risky actions.

Beliefs of power over, and admiration by, others exemplified by narcissism may also be related to delinquency and aggression. Indeed, decades of research has indicated that at least some facets of narcissism in adults are related to aggression toward others and other antagonistic social behaviors (e.g., Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Raskin & Terry, 1988), presumably because of the narcissist's attempt to restore his/her desired self-image (Thomaes et al., 2008) or obtain admiration from others (Raskin et al., 1991). Initial adolescent research has also shown a link between narcissism and delinquency and aggression (e.g., Barry, Grafeman, Adler, & Piccard, 2007; Thomaes et al., 2008; Washburn, McMahon, King, Reinecke, & Silver, 2004). Furthermore, there appear to be meaningful differences between different domains of narcissism, with so-called maladaptive narcissism (Barry, Frick, Adler, & Grafeman, 2007; Washburn et al., 2004) being particularly associated with behavioral problems. On the other hand, some "adaptive" aspects of narcissism may be positively regarded and encouraged in adolescence, particularly in more individualistic societies (see Twenge & Foster, 2008). Adaptive narcissism (e.g., leadership, self-sufficiency) has been related to self-confidence and assertiveness (e.g., Emmons, 1984), whereas maladaptive narcissism (i.e., entitlement, exhibitionism, and exploitativeness) has been associated with behavioral and social maladjustment in adults (see Emmons, 1984; Raskin & Terry, 1988). Initial evidence suggests that this distinction between adaptive and maladaptive narcissism is meaningful in youth (e.g., Barry, Frick, & Killian, 2003; Barry, Frick et al., 2007; Washburn et al., 2004).

Previous research has not directly considered the relation between narcissism and perceived invulnerability. However, other elements of self-perception such as grandiosity/beliefs of power or self-esteem may offer some insights into this issue. Although narcissism and invulnerability would be presumably associated with high, perhaps exaggerated, self-esteem, the correlation between narcissism and self-esteem has generally been non-significant in early adolescents (e.g., Barry et al., 2003; Thomaes et al., 2008) or positive in middle to older adolescents (e.g., Barry, Grafeman et al., 2007). In addition, adaptive narcissism has been consistently positively correlated with self-esteem, yet maladaptive narcissism has demonstrated negative or no relations with self-esteem in youth (Barry et al., 2003; Barry, Grafeman et al., 2007).

The importance of self-esteem is not necessarily in its convergence with, or divergence from, narcissism or invulnerability; rather, self-esteem may help explain the connection between these constructs and behavioral problems. Research (Barry et al., 2003; Washburn et al., 2004) suggests that a combination of narcissism

and low self-esteem may be most indicative of youth behavioral problems; however, with older adolescent samples such as the sample in this study, a combination of high narcissism and high self-esteem may be associated with relatively high levels of aggression (Bushman et al., 2009). The associations between self-esteem and dimensions of invulnerability, as well as the interaction between self-esteem and invulnerability in the prediction of problem behaviors, have not yet been investigated.

It was hypothesized that overall narcissism and maladaptive narcissism would be related to delinquency, overt (i.e., direct physical or verbal acts toward a victim), and relational (i.e., covert gossip, rumors, manipulation of others' social status), aggression (Hypothesis 1). Danger invulnerability was expected to be correlated with delinquency and aggression (Hypothesis 2). All dimensions of invulnerability as well as adaptive and overall narcissism were hypothesized to be positively related to self-esteem (Hypothesis 3). It was also hypothesized (Hypothesis 4) that the combination of high self-esteem and high narcissism would correspond to the highest levels of aggression and delinquency based on findings with older adolescents (Bushman et al., 2009). Another, more theoretical issue involved the distributions of invulnerability and narcissism as individual difference variables in adolescents. The distributions were not expected to be skewed based on empirical evidence regarding individual differences in adolescent invulnerability and narcissism to date (Hypothesis 5). If individual differences are identifiable, their meaning will rest in their ability to predict variance in adolescent behavioral problems.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were 213 adolescents (169 males, 44 females), ages 16–18 (mean = 16.77 years, *sd* = .69 years) enrolled in a voluntary 22-week military-style intervention program for youth who have dropped out of school. Participation in this study did not affect the intervention provided in the program, which provides academic remediation and life skills training in a structured environment. The sample was 67% Caucasian, 32% African American, and 1% "other," all residing in the southeastern United States. Information regarding parents'/guardians' occupation was obtained to calculate a socioeconomic index score (SEI) (Hauser & Featherman, 1977), with the sample having a mean SEI of 38.1 (*sd* = 21.89, range 0–92). The SEI was not correlated with aggression, delinquency, invulnerability, or narcissism and was therefore not used as a control variable in subsequent analyses.

2.2. Materials

2.2.1. Adolescent invulnerability scale (AIS; Duggan, Lapsley, & Norman, 2000)

The AIS contains 21 statements to which respondents indicate their level of agreement. Although psychometric evidence is limited, the AIS has demonstrated good construct validity in adolescent community samples (Duggan et al., 2000). The AIS consists of six items assessing danger invulnerability (e.g., "I'm unlikely to get hurt if I did a dangerous thing."), six items assessing interpersonal invulnerability (e.g., "It is just impossible for people to hurt my feelings."), and nine items assessing general invulnerability (e.g., "Nothing bad will happen if I go to a place by myself."). The possible range of scores for both danger and interpersonal invulnerability is 0–24, whereas responses can range from 0 to 36 for general invulnerability. The internal consistencies were $\alpha = .73$ (danger invulnerability), $\alpha = .76$ (interpersonal invulnerability), and $\alpha = .82$ (general invulnerability).

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