



The relationship between vulnerable narcissism and aggression in Japanese undergraduate students

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ABSTRACT

The links between narcissism and aggression have been documented in various studies. Researchers have distinguished between grandiose narcissism and vulnerable narcissism and suggested that grandiose narcissism may predict aggression. The purpose of this study was to examine the relationships between vulnerable narcissism and aggression in sample groups of Japanese undergraduate students. In Study 1, vulnerable narcissism predicted anger and hostility but did not predict physical and verbal aggression, after controlling for grandiose narcissism and self-esteem. In Study 2, when individuals with higher levels of vulnerable narcissism recalled their own experience of social rejection, they gave more aggressive evaluations of the person who provoked them. These results suggest that vulnerable narcissism could increase specific facets of aggression and increase aggression in specific situations. This study discusses the implications for personality research and clinical practice.

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1. Introduction

Over the past few decades, increased attention has been paid to narcissism among individuals in normal populations. Narcissism is a complex personality trait that includes a positive and inflated view of the self, a relative lack of intimacy, and an arsenal of self-regulatory strategies that maintain and enhance the self (Campbell & Green, 2008). Researchers have examined the trait of narcissism as a predictor of psychological health, interpersonal behavior, and emotional reactivity to daily events (Campbell & Green, 2008; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001).

Current research on narcissism in normal populations frequently relies on the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI) as a study tool. Raskin and Hall (1979) developed the NPI on the basis of the criteria for narcissistic personality disorder as described in the third edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-III; American Psychiatric Association, 1980). These criteria include (a) a grandiose sense of self-importance and uniqueness; (b) a preoccupation with fantasies of unlimited success, power, beauty, or ideal love; (c) exhibitionistic – requires constant attention and admiration; (d) entitlement or expectation of special favors without reciprocation; and (e) interpersonal exploitativeness. Although it is based on the DSM-III criteria, the NPI was designed specifically for use in normal populations, for which it has

been validated extensively (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). The vast majority of research has used the total scale score as the primary predictor variable (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Twenge & Campbell, 2003).

Although the NPI is the measure most commonly used by researchers to assess narcissism in normal populations, it focuses mainly on the grandiose type of narcissism rather than on vulnerable type of narcissism. The subtypes of narcissism have been examined extensively in narcissism literature (Gabbard, 1989; Kohut, 1977; Wink, 1991), and recently, there has been an increase in the studies distinguishing between grandiose and vulnerable narcissism (Lapsley & Aalsma, 2006; Rose, 2002; Zeigler-Hill, Clark, & Pickard, 2008). Grandiose narcissism is characterized by arrogance, self-absorption, a sense of entitlement, and reactivity to criticism. These characteristics are reflected in the DSM-III criteria. Grandiose narcissism is also referred to as overt narcissism and oblivious narcissism (Dickinson & Pincus, 2003). Vulnerable narcissism, on the other hand, is characterized by a lack of self-confidence and initiative, vague feelings of depression, and hypersensitivity to others' evaluations. Vulnerable narcissism is also referred to as covert narcissism, hypersensitive narcissism, and hypervigilant narcissism (Dickinson & Pincus, 2003). These two types of narcissism share certain diagnostic features. Individuals with either type are prone to grandiose fantasies and expectations about the self, a sense of entitlement, and a willingness to exploit other individuals for their own gain. Wink (1991) performed a principal component analysis on six self-reported measures of narcissism and extracted two orthogonal components:

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grandiosity-exhibitionism and vulnerability-sensitivity. The NPI was loaded on the grandiosity-exhibitionism component.

Previous studies have revealed that narcissism can be predictive of various outcomes. For example, the link between narcissism measured by the NPI and aggression has been extensively documented (Bradlee & Emmons, 1992; Emmons, 1984; Rhodewalt & Morf, 1995). Raskin and Terry (1988) examined the relationships between self-reported NPI scores and observational impression ratings. The results showed that individuals with high NPI scores tend to be rated as aggressive, autocratic, and assertive. Further, Wink (1991) revealed that the grandiosity-exhibitionism component of narcissism was significantly related to spouses' ratings of aggression, whereas the vulnerability-sensitivity component was not. From these results, researchers concluded that aggression is mainly associated with grandiose narcissism (Bushman, Baumeister, Thomaes, Begeer, & West, 2009; Wink, 1991). Individuals with higher levels of grandiose narcissism hold unrealistically high expectations of their acceptance by others and do not hesitate to act aggressively in order to maintain their inflated view of the self.

However, few studies have examined the relationship between vulnerable narcissism and aggression. Given that grandiose and vulnerable narcissism share some characteristics, for example, a sense of entitlement and the tendency to disregard others (Wink, 1991), it was anticipated that vulnerable narcissism would predict aggression just as grandiose narcissism had been shown to do. The present research examined the relationships between vulnerable narcissism and aggression in consideration of the two points described below.

First, aggression has multiple facets. Buss and Perry (1992) developed the Buss-Perry Aggression Questionnaire and found four facets of aggression – physical aggression, verbal aggression, anger, and hostility. Physical aggression and verbal aggression represent the tendency to respond to provocation with direct forms of aggressive behavior. Anger and hostility represent the affective and cognitive components of aggression. Previous studies have revealed that NPI scores predicted physical aggression, verbal aggression, and anger but not hostility (Ruiz, Smith, & Rhodewalt, 2001). No study has examined the relationship between vulnerable narcissism and the four facets of aggression. Because individuals with higher levels of vulnerable narcissism are sensitive to others' evaluations, it seems logical that they would not easily express their aggressive tendencies overtly. However, because they have a sense of entitlement and tend to disregard others (Wink, 1991), they would feel internal anger and hostility when people do not treat them with the special attention they believe they deserve. For these reasons, it was hypothesized that vulnerable narcissism would predict anger and hostility but not physical and verbal aggression. This hypothesis was tested in Study 1.

Second, the link between narcissism and aggression would be stronger in certain situations (Barry, Chaplin, & Grafeman, 2006; Bushman & Baumeister, 1998). In a series of studies, Twenge and Campbell (2003) examined the relationship between narcissism measured with the NPI and aggression in situations involving social rejection. Social rejection conditions were manipulated by having the participants write about a time when they were socially rejected or by telling the participants that no other participants chose them as a member of their group. Across four studies, it was shown that narcissism increased aggression or anger in the social rejection conditions but not in the control or social acceptance conditions in which they were informed that all the other participants chose them as a member. These results suggest that the combination of grandiose narcissism and social rejection increases aggression. However, no studies have examined whether vulnerable narcissism would increase aggression in situations of social rejection. Because individuals with higher levels of vulnerable narcissism are sensitive to others' evaluations, it seems logical that

they would be easily affected by social rejection and consequently, increase aggression in order to defend their self-worth. The hypothesis that vulnerable narcissism would predict more aggression under a social rejection condition was tested in Study 2.

In other research, an association has been found between self-esteem and aggression, although the direction of the relationship (i.e., positive or negative) has been controversial (Bushman et al., 2009; Donnellan, Trzesniewski, Robins, Moffitt, & Caspi, 2005). In the present research, the relationship between the two types of narcissism and aggression were examined after controlling for the effect of self-esteem.

In summary, the purpose of this research was to examine the relationship between vulnerable narcissism and aggression in greater detail. In Study 1, the relationship between the two types of narcissism and the four facets of aggression (physical aggression, verbal aggression, anger, and hostility) were examined. In Study 2, the relationship between the two types of narcissism and aggression were examined under a social rejection condition. The research focused primarily on the links between vulnerable narcissism and aggression.

2. Study 1

In Study 1, the relationships between vulnerable narcissism and the four facets of aggression (physical aggression, verbal aggression, anger, and hostility) were examined. It was hypothesized that vulnerable narcissism would predict anger and hostility but not physical and verbal aggression.

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Participants and procedure

The participants comprised 262 Japanese undergraduate students (101 men and 161 women) with a mean age of 20.09 years ($SD = 1.05$). All the participants were volunteers who were informed at the start that neither their participation nor the outcome would affect their course grades. After the orientation, they were asked to fill out a questionnaire.

2.1.2. Measures

The Hypersensitive-Grandiose Narcissism Scale was used to measure the two types of narcissism (Nakayama & Nakaya, 2006). This scale was developed on the basis of Gabbard's (1989) clinical definition of narcissistic personality disorder and Raskin and Hall's (1979) NPI items (see Appendix). It consists of two subscales of hypersensitive narcissism with eight items and grandiose narcissism with 10 items. Participants were asked to rate each item on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*not true*) to 5 (*true*). The reliability of each subscale was verified in a sample of Japanese university students, with a Cronbach alpha of .85 for vulnerable narcissism and .80 for grandiose narcissism (Nakayama & Nakaya, 2006). In this study, the alphas for the subscales were .87 for hypersensitive narcissism and .81 for grandiose narcissism. The validity of the scale was verified through confirmatory factor analysis in a sample of Japanese university students (Nakayama & Nakaya, 2006). The descriptive scores of the subscales were calculated by averaging the item scores and were labeled as vulnerable narcissism or grandiose narcissism following Wink (1991) and Zeigler-Hill et al. (2008).

Self-esteem was measured with the Japanese version of Rosenberg's (1965) Self-Esteem Scale (10 items) developed by Yamamoto, Matsui, and Yamanari (1982). The Japanese version of the scale was carefully translated from the original version. The participants were asked to rate each item on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*not true*) to 5 (*true*). The Cronbach alpha was .84 in this study.

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