



## The relation between adolescent narcissism and internalizing problems depends on the conceptualization of narcissism

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### ABSTRACT

Recent research has reported an association between narcissism in youth and a variety of externalizing behavior problems. The extent to which narcissism, conceptualized in two ways (i.e., as part of psychopathy; as a constellation of maladaptive and adaptive features), was related to internalizing problems in adolescents was examined in this study. Participants were 534 at-risk adolescents ages 16–19, attending a military-style residential program. Psychopathy-linked narcissism was positively associated with self-reported internalizing problems; however, narcissism assessed from the Narcissistic Personality Inventory for Children (NPIC; Barry, Frick, & Killian, 2003) was negatively associated with such symptoms. Perceptions of peer relationships appeared to play a role in this latter association. The implications for the understanding of youth narcissism are discussed.

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### 1. Introduction

“When I get sad, I stop being sad and be awesome instead. True story.” Barney Stinson, *How I Met Your Mother*.

Despite the confident, even grandiose, presentations of individuals with high levels of narcissism, theories concerning the construct have posited that a narcissistic presentation conceals an underlying self-doubting, insecure, and anxious self-perception (e.g., Kernberg, 1975). The theoretical groundwork for a relation between narcissism and internalizing problems dates at least to Kernberg (1975) but has garnered further support through more recent work. For example, narcissism has been linked to increased anxiety after perceived failure (Rhodewalt & Morf, 1998). Morf and Rhodewalt (2001) recognized that narcissists could be described as “emotionally labile and prone to extremes of euphoria, despair, and rage” (p. 177).

This picture, however, is complex. Narcissism is associated both with a tendency to engage in self-enhancement in a way that appears consistent with self-assuredness and inconsistent with anxiety but to also engage in self-protection strategies (e.g., seeking positive feedback) that are actually suggestive of anxiety and insecurity (Hepper, Gramzow, & Sedikides, 2010). Empirical evidence with adults has further suggested that narcissism is indicative of underlying, relatively automatic negative self-views (Jordan,

Spencer, Zanna, Hoshino-Browne, & Correll, 2003) or self-esteem that is fragile and susceptible to environmental events such as feedback from others (Rhodewalt, Madrian, & Cheney, 1998). Thus, some association between narcissism and internalizing problems, although counterintuitive at first glance, is suggested from both theory and empirical evidence. Internalizing problems (e.g., symptoms of anxiety and depression) as associated features of narcissism have received minimal attention in comparison to externalizing (e.g., aggression) correlates of narcissism, particularly in youth. The primary goal of the present study was to investigate whether an association between narcissism and internalizing problems in an at-risk adolescent sample depends on the type of narcissism being evaluated. In addition, it was posited that peer problems might help explain the connection between narcissism and internalizing problems.

Some initial evidence suggests a positive association between certain features of narcissism and internalizing problems in early adolescents (Washburn, McMahon, King, Reinecke, & Silver, 2004). As demonstrated by Washburn and colleagues (2004), in their study of 10–15 year-olds, some aspects of narcissism (e.g., exhibitionism) may be particularly related to internalizing problems. Washburn and colleagues note that the interpersonal strategies employed by individuals with these characteristics may be designed to gain admiration from others. However, consistent with Morf and Rhodewalt (2001), they speculate that the strategies may backfire and promote the development of internalizing problems in the face of social disapproval. Very little additional research exists concerning a connection between youth narcissism and internalizing problems. It is important to consider the possibility that youth with narcissistic tendencies may either experience a

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marked lack of internalizing problems or, in contrast, may experience higher levels of sadness and anxiety, presumably due to their fragile self-views (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001) and the social problems that may result from their interpersonal styles (Twenge & Campbell, 2003). In short, the role of narcissism in youth internalizing problems is unclear, partly because of the very nature of narcissistic presentations.

Another layer of complexity is added by the emergence of different approaches to the conceptualization and assessment of youth narcissism. Barry and Wallace (in press) found that self-report inventories of adolescent narcissism were only moderately interrelated and had somewhat divergent correlates in terms of behavioral, emotional, and social functioning. However, internalizing problems were not examined in that study. Thus, it was important to consider different measures of narcissism in the present study to further inform how different conceptualizations of narcissism might relate differently to internalizing problems.

One approach of evaluating narcissism in youth has considered narcissism itself as a multidimensional construct (e.g., Barry, Frick, Adler, & Grafeman, 2007; Barry et al., 2003), whereas another has conceptualized narcissism as one domain within the broader multidimensional construct of psychopathy (e.g., Frick, Bodin, & Barry, 2000). The former approach is based on the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Hall, 1979) and a downwardly extended youth version of the NPI (Barry et al., 2003). It includes characteristics such as grandiosity, vanity, and an overt sense of entitlement. Psychopathy-linked narcissism, on the other hand, tends to focus on one's actions (e.g., bragging about accomplishments, becoming angry when corrected or punished) as indicators of narcissism.

### 1.1. NPI-based narcissism

In adult research, the NPI has been considered primarily a measure of "grandiose narcissism" (e.g., arrogance, sense of entitlement) rather than a form of "vulnerable narcissism" (e.g., a sense of entitlement that is hidden by a presentation of inhibition and modesty; see Zeigler-Hill, Clark, & Pickard, 2008). From this perspective, individuals with high levels of narcissism tend to be quick to take credit for successes and to blame failure on external causes, rather than to internalize blame (Rhodewalt & Morf, 1995). NPI-based narcissism has also been inversely related to feelings of sadness in adults (Sedikides, Rudich, Gregg, Kumashiro, & Rusbult, 2004). Thus, overall, the arrogance and grandiose self-assuredness captured by the NPI would be expected to inversely relate to internalizing problems.

However, numerous studies have found evidence that NPI-based narcissism is itself multidimensional (e.g., Emmons, 1984; Raskin & Terry, 1988; Watson & Biderman, 1993) which may have further implications for how narcissism relates to internalizing problems. More specifically, dimensions of the NPI assessing one's sense of authority or leadership as well as one's sense of self-sufficiency are thought of as relatively adaptive based on their association with qualities such as assertiveness and self-confidence (e.g., Emmons, 1984; Raskin & Terry, 1988) and thus are not likely to be associated with self-reported internalizing problems. In contrast, the exploitativeness, entitlement, and exhibitionism scales of the NPI are considered indicators of maladaptive narcissism based on their associations with indicators of social maladjustment such as hostility and difficulty delaying gratification (Raskin & Terry, 1988). As noted above, applying this maladaptive/adaptive distinction to youth, Washburn and colleagues (2004) found that exhibitionistic features of narcissism were related to internalizing symptoms. Thus, maladaptive narcissism may demonstrate the paradoxical picture of entitled, attention-seeking individuals who actually feel sad and afraid.

### 1.2. Psychopathy-linked narcissism

The characteristics (e.g., thinking of oneself as more important than others, bragging) descriptive of psychopathy-linked narcissism—along with the callous indifference toward others that is part of the psychopathy construct—might suggest that this form of narcissism would correspond to lower concurrent feelings of depression and anxiety. Although narcissism is but one component of psychopathy, research suggests that psychopathy-linked narcissism is uniquely associated with aggression, delinquency, and conduct problem symptoms (Barry et al., 2007; Frick, Barry, & Bodin, 2000) relative to other domains of psychopathy. Similarly, it appears to be associated with unique variance in externalizing problems when considered along with other measures of adolescent narcissism (Barry & Wallace, in press). The narcissistic features tied to psychopathy on the Antisocial Process Screening Device, or APSD, (e.g., "You brag about your accomplishments, abilities, or possessions;" "You acting charming and nice to get things you want;" "You think you are better or more important than other people;" Frick et al., 2000) are suggestive of someone who is self-assured to the point of being impervious to day-to-day worries, the social consequences of his/her actions, or the prospects of his/her social status being challenged by others. Nevertheless, the existing empirical evidence paints an unclear picture, with psychopathic tendencies in general having been associated with higher neuroticism (Salekin, Leistico, Trobst, Schrum, & Lochman, 2005) but also with low anxiety (Frick, Lilienfeld, Ellis, Loney, & Silverthorn, 1999) in youth. However, empirical investigations as to the specific relation between psychopathy-linked narcissism and internalizing problems in adolescents are non-existent to date.

As research in this area continues, the theoretical foundations upon which narcissism is conceptualized will be a necessary consideration. Such work has the potential to further our understanding of not only the associated problematic behaviors but also the emotional sequelae that appear to be central to the narcissism construct (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). Both the NPI-based and psychopathy-linked conceptualizations have enjoyed a vast amount of attention in the adult literature. Consequently, they provide a useful springboard for examining youth narcissism in a broader context of behavioral, emotional, and social functioning.

### 1.3. The role of peer problems in a narcissism-internalizing problems relation

As noted above, at face value, grandiose self-perceptions would be expected to indicate low levels of anxiety and depression; however, narcissism has also been described as denoting a fragile self-perception. For the latter scenario, peer rejection may help explain how someone who presents an inflated self-view may also, seemingly in direct contradiction, report feelings of worry, fear, or sadness, as negative social feedback appears to elicit strong emotional and behavioral responses for narcissistic individuals (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Papps & O'Carroll, 1998). This rejection may set in turn a vicious cycle whereby the narcissistic individual blames others for his/her misfortune (Campbell, Reeder, Sedikides, & Elliot, 2000; Stucke, 2002), engages in aggression and other socially disdained behaviors in an attempt to restore one's damaged self-esteem and sense of power (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Bushman et al., 2009; Raskin, Novacek, & Hogan, 1991), and thus increases the likelihood of continued peer difficulties and subsequent internalizing issues.

For the present study, peer problems were thought to perhaps partially explain feelings of depression and anxiety for individuals who present with a strong sense of entitlement and need for attention. This particular issue is most relevant to the maladaptive facets of NPI-based narcissism and not to the adaptive forms of

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