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## Trouble ahead, trouble behind: Narcissism and early maladaptive schemas<sup>☆</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

Narcissism is a multifaceted construct that is inconsistently defined and assessed between clinical psychology and social-personality psychology. The purpose of the present study was to examine the similarities and differences in the cognitive schemas underlying various forms of narcissism. This was accomplished by examining the associations of normal and pathological forms of narcissism with the early maladaptive schemas. The results showed important similarities in these associations (e.g., all of the narcissism scales were positively associated with the entitlement schema) as well as differences (e.g., vulnerable narcissism was the only form of narcissism that was positively associated with subjugation). Discussion focuses on the implications of these results for the ways in which individuals with these forms of narcissism perceive and navigate their social environments.

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The personality construct of narcissism – which takes its name from the ancient Greek myth of Narcissus (Ellis, 1898) – refers to a pervasive pattern of grandiosity and self-importance. Narcissism is a construct that has been of considerable interest to both clinical and social-personality psychology in recent years. Attempts to integrate these bodies of literature, however, have been hampered by inconsistencies in the definition and measurement of narcissism between these disciplines (Cain, Pincus, & Ansell, 2008; Miller & Campbell, 2008; Pincus et al., 2009). Clinical psychologists tend to conceptualize narcissism as a personality disorder characterized by arrogant or haughty behaviors, feelings of entitlement, a lack of empathy, and a willingness to exploit other individuals (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). The form of narcissism studied by clinical psychologists is often associated with emotional instability and the tendency to experience negative emotions. In contrast, social-personality psychologists often consider subclinical levels of narcissism as a normally distributed personality feature. This form of narcissism tends to be more emotionally resilient and extraverted than the form of narcissism that is generally considered by clinical psychologists (Miller & Campbell, 2008). These differences lead clinical psychologists to emphasize the pathological elements of narcissism, whereas social-personality psychologists focus more of their attention on the somewhat “normal” aspects of narcissism (see Miller & Campbell, 2008 or Pincus & Lukowitsky, 2010, for extended

discussions). Consistent with the previous literature (e.g., Pincus & Lukowitsky, 2010), we will refer to these types of narcissism as pathological narcissism and normal narcissism, respectively. It is important to note that normal narcissism consists of both adaptive and maladaptive elements, so it is certainly not a completely “healthy” form of narcissism. That is, both normal and pathological forms of narcissism have maladaptive elements but they differ in terms of the emphasis that each places on these features.

The distinction between pathological and normal forms of narcissism is further complicated by the possibility that pathological narcissism may be a heterogeneous construct consisting of both a grandiose and a vulnerable form (e.g., Akhtar & Thompson, 1982; Cooper, 1998; Dickinson & Pincus, 2003; Gabbard, 1989, 1998; Gersten, 1991; Hendin & Cheek, 1997; Kohut, 1971; Pincus & Lukowitsky, 2010; Rathvon & Holmstrom, 1996; Rose, 2002; Rovik, 2001; Wink, 1991, 1996). Grandiose narcissism is the most easily recognized form of pathological narcissism because it is characterized by maladaptive self-enhancement strategies such as holding an overly positive self-image, exploiting others, and engaging in exhibitionistic behaviors (Pincus & Lukowitsky, 2010). This form of narcissism is clearly represented by the diagnostic criteria for Narcissistic Personality Disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). Vulnerable narcissism is the second phenotypic expression of pathological narcissism and it may either be the primary form of expressed narcissism or displayed in alternation with the grandiose form of narcissism. The vulnerable form of pathological narcissism is characterized by self and emotional dysregulation including a negative self-image, self-criticism, negative affective experiences (e.g., anger, shame, dysphoria), interpersonal sensitivity, and social withdrawal (Pincus &

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Lukowitsky, 2010). The existence of grandiose and vulnerable phenotypic expressions of pathological narcissism has been supported by a number of studies using various measures of pathological narcissism (e.g., Rathvon & Holmstrom, 1996; Wink, 1991; see Pincus & Lukowitsky, 2010, for a review).

The development and maintenance of narcissistic personality features may be due, at least in part, to the cognitive schemas that individuals rely on to organize and make sense of the events that occur during the course of their lives (Beck, Freeman, & Davis, 2003). Along these lines, Young (1990) proposed a model in which circumstances that interfere with the development of autonomy, connectedness, worthiness, or realistic expectations and limits (e.g., markedly traumatic interactions or repeated negative interactions with caregivers) may lead individuals to develop schemas that support maladaptive styles of perceiving themselves, others, and relationships. For example, individuals may find relationships threatening (connectedness), become overly dependent on others (autonomy), feel defective (worthiness), or feel superior to others (unrealistic expectations and limits). Young developed the concept of *early maladaptive schemas* in an attempt to better understand the relationships between negative interactions early in life and the various manifestations of personality pathology that are expressed in adulthood. Early maladaptive schemas refer to deeply rooted negative beliefs about oneself, others, and the world that may develop during the earliest years of life and result in erroneous and dysfunctional perceptions, emotions, thoughts, and behaviors. Early maladaptive schemas influence the interpretation of subsequent events as these experiences are viewed through the negative lenses of schemas which serve to selectively incorporate corroborating information and discount conflicting information (McGinn & Young, 1996; Schmidt, Joiner, Young, & Telch, 1995). Once these schemas are formed, they are extended and elaborated throughout the course of the individual's life and often result in negative automatic thoughts and subjective distress because of their maladaptive nature. The concept of early maladaptive schemas retains the information-processing component that was central to earlier definitions of cognitive schemas (e.g., Beck, 1967) but places more focus on thematic content and early development (Young, 1990).

Young (1990) originally identified 16 early maladaptive schemas but more recent research has suggested that there may actually be only 15 schemas (e.g., Lee, Taylor, & Dunn, 1999; Schmidt et al., 1995). Further analyses suggested that these early maladaptive schemas cluster within the following higher-order schema domains (Hoffart et al., 2005): *disconnection* (emotional deprivation, emotional inhibition, mistrust, social isolation, and defectiveness), *impaired autonomy* (subjugation, dependence, failure to achieve, vulnerability to harm, abandonment, and enmeshment), *impaired limits* (insufficient self-control and entitlement), and *exaggerated standards* (self-sacrifice and unrelenting standards). Table 1 presents a description of each domain and its associated schemas.

Young and his colleagues (Young & Flanagan, 1998; Young, Klosko, & Weishaar, 2003) have proposed that the core early maladaptive schemas underlying narcissism are entitlement, emotional deprivation, and defectiveness. The entitlement schema is located within the impaired limits domain and is believed to manifest in behaviors such as insisting that one should be able to do or have whatever one wants with little regard for the welfare of other individuals. These feelings of entitlement are thought to develop as a result of overly indulgent parents setting too few limits for their children or, perhaps, as overcompensation for feelings of defectiveness stemming from cold and rejecting parenting. The emotional deprivation and defectiveness schemas both fall within the disconnection domain. Schemas in the disconnection domain

**Table 1**  
Early maladaptive schema domains.

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| <p><i>Disconnection</i>: The expectation that needs for security, safety, stability, nurturance, and acceptance will not be met.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>Emotional deprivation</i>: The belief that minimal levels of emotional support will not be received.</li> <li>2. <i>Emotional inhibition</i>: The belief that the expression of emotions will result in negative consequences such as embarrassment or harm to others.</li> <li>3. <i>Mistrust</i>: The belief that others will be abusive and manipulative.</li> <li>4. <i>Social isolation</i>: The belief that one is alienated and somehow different from other people.</li> <li>5. <i>Defectiveness</i>: The belief that one is defective and unlovable at some fundamental level.</li> </ol> <p><i>Impaired Autonomy</i>: Beliefs regarding one's ability to be separate from others and function independently.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>6. <i>Subjugation</i>: Believing that the preferences of others are more important than personal desires.</li> <li>7. <i>Dependence</i>: The belief that one needs considerable help from others to manage everyday responsibilities.</li> <li>8. <i>Failure to achieve</i>: The belief that one is destined to fail in areas of achievement because of fundamental inadequacies.</li> <li>9. <i>Vulnerability to harm</i>: Exaggerated fears concerning one's ability to prevent "random" catastrophes.</li> <li>10. <i>Abandonment</i>: The belief that other individuals will be unable to provide emotional support because they are emotionally unstable or because these individuals will die or abandon the person.</li> <li>11. <i>Enmeshment</i>: Excessive emotional involvement and closeness with one or more significant others at the expense of full individuation and normal social development.</li> </ol> <p><i>Impaired Limits</i>: Deficiencies in self-discipline and in setting emotional and interpersonal limits.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>12. <i>Insufficient self-control</i>: The belief that self-discipline is unimportant and that little restraint is required for emotions and impulses.</li> <li>13. <i>Entitlement</i>: The belief that one should be able to do or have whatever one wants, regardless of what others consider reasonable or the cost to others.</li> </ol> <p><i>Exaggerated Standards</i>: Beliefs concerning self-deprivation and perfectionism.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>14. <i>Self-sacrifice</i>: Exaggerated beliefs of duty and responsibility to other individuals.</li> <li>15. <i>Unrelenting standards</i>: The belief that one must meet unrealistically high standards.</li> </ol> |
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Note. The descriptions of the early maladaptive schemas and domains are based on those presented in Young (1990), Hoffart et al. (2005), and Schmidt et al. (1995).

are thought to interfere with individuals developing the capacity to experience intimacy, love, and acceptance in their relationships with others. The emotional deprivation schema is thought to result from a lack of parental nurturance, empathy, and protection. This schema often results in individuals yearning for an emotional connection with others but, at the same time, being uncomfortable with closeness due to a fear that others will be unable or unwilling to meet their needs for continued emotional support. The defectiveness schema, in turn, concerns feelings of shame that stem from the individual believing that he or she is flawed in some fundamental manner. It is believed that this schema results from parenting that is severely critical or rejecting. Young et al. (2003) proposed a state of tension between emotional deprivation (craving contact) and defectiveness (withdrawing from contact) for narcissists which hinders their ability to form stable intimate relationships. Instead, narcissists may often try to fill their emotional needs through self-aggrandizing demanding of attention (entitlement). These speculations concerning which early maladaptive schemas may be associated with narcissism are interesting and may provide additional insight into the cognitive structures underlying narcissistic tendencies. To our knowledge, the present study is the first attempt to empirically examine these predictions.

## 1. Overview and predictions

The purpose of the present study was to examine how normal and pathological forms of narcissism would compare in their associations with the early maladaptive schema domains. Our

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