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Humor style mediates the association between pathological narcissism and self-esteem

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the present study was to examine whether humor styles mediated the associations between the pathological forms of narcissism (grandiose narcissism and vulnerable narcissism) and self-esteem in a sample of Israeli undergraduates ($N = 200$). Grandiose narcissism was positively associated with the use of adaptive humor (i.e., self-enhancing humor and affiliative humor), whereas vulnerable narcissism was negatively associated with the use of adaptive humor and positively associated with the use of maladaptive humor (i.e., self-defeating humor and aggressive humor). These forms of humor were found to mediate the associations between the pathological forms of narcissism and self-esteem. Findings are discussed in terms of the role that humor may play in the self-esteem regulation of individuals with pathological narcissism.

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1. Introduction

Narcissism is a complex and multifaceted construct that blends feelings of grandiosity with a heightened sensitivity to experiences that threaten their inflated feelings of self-worth (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). A number of studies have examined the link between narcissism and self-esteem and have shown that the correlation between the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Hall, 1979, 1981; Raskin & Terry, 1988) and the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE; Rosenberg, 1965) is generally around 0.26 (see Brown and Zeigler-Hill (2004), for a review). This correlation is often significant but it is surprisingly low considering how easy it would be for narcissists to claim high levels of self-esteem on a direct self-report measure such as the RSE.

The association between narcissism and self-esteem is further complicated by the fact that there is both a *normal* form of narcissism and a *pathological* form of narcissism (Miller & Campbell, 2008; Pincus et al., 2009). The normal form of narcissism has been the focus of social-personality psychologists who have conceptualized narcissism as a normally distributed personality feature that has adaptive properties (e.g., extraversion) as well as maladaptive properties (e.g., feelings of entitlement; see Miller and Campbell (2008) or Pincus and Lukowitsky (2010), for

extended discussions). This form of narcissism is most often captured by the NPI. In contrast, clinical psychologists generally consider narcissism in terms of Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) which is associated with an array of maladaptive outcomes including arrogance, lack of empathy, a willingness to exploit others, and emotional instability. New assessment tools such as the Pathological Narcissism Inventory (PNI; Pincus et al., 2009) have been developed in recent years to measure the more pathological form of narcissism which is not adequately captured by the NPI. Although the pathological form of narcissism captured by the PNI is considered to be largely maladaptive, the PNI has been used successfully in both non-clinical and clinical samples to predict outcomes related to pathological narcissism (e.g., Pincus et al., 2009).

Pathological narcissism consists of both a grandiose and a vulnerable form (Pincus & Lukowitsky, 2010). Grandiose narcissism is the most easily recognized form of pathological narcissism because its pattern of self-aggrandizement, exploitation, and exhibitionism is consistent with the diagnostic criteria for NPD (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). In contrast, the vulnerable form of pathological narcissism is characterized by poor self-regulation which results in self-criticism, negative affective experiences, and interpersonal problems. Although the NPI generally has a positive correlation with measures of self-esteem (e.g., Brown & Zeigler-Hill, 2004), the grandiose and vulnerable forms of pathological narcissism captured by the PNI have been found to have either no association (i.e., grandiose narcissism) or a negative association with self-esteem measures (i.e., vulnerable narcissism; Pincus et al., 2009). This pattern of results suggests that

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additional research is necessary to gain a better understanding of what factors may contribute to the feelings of self-worth expressed by individuals with pathological forms of narcissism.

Given recent research concerning the role of humor in outcomes associated with pathological narcissism (Besser & Zeigler-Hill, submitted for publication), we were interested in examining whether humor styles mediated the associations between the pathological forms of narcissism and self-esteem. Our interest in humor stems from the identification of humor styles that may be either beneficial for well-being (i.e., adaptive humor) or detrimental to well-being (i.e., maladaptive humor; Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray, & Weir, 2003). Four distinct humor styles have been identified with two of these styles being adaptive (i.e., affiliative humor and self-enhancing humor) and two styles being maladaptive (i.e., aggressive humor and self-defeating humor). *Affiliative humor* refers to benign humor that is used to enhance relationships by saying funny things or engaging in witty banter to amuse others. *Self-enhancing humor* concerns benign humor that is used to enhance the self through activities such as maintaining a humorous perspective in the face of adversity which may help with emotion regulation and coping. *Aggressive humor* refers to injurious humor that is used to enhance the self by means such as sarcasm, teasing, or ridiculing others. *Self-defeating humor* is a form of injurious humor that is used to enhance relationships at cost to the self through acts such as self-disparagement. A rapidly growing body of research has shown that the adaptive and maladaptive styles of humor are differentially related to emotional and psychosocial well-being in the ways that would be expected. For example, adaptive humor is often associated with positive outcomes such as positive relationships with others, whereas maladaptive humor is generally associated with negative outcomes such as interpersonal conflict (see Martin (2007), for a review).

Recent research suggests that feelings of self-worth influence how individuals use humor. For example, self-esteem has been found to be positively correlated with the adaptive styles of humor and negatively correlated with the maladaptive styles (Galloway, 2010). That is, individuals with high self-esteem tend to use adaptive forms of humor that serve affiliative or self-enhancing goals rather than those that are maladaptive. The pathological forms of narcissism have also been shown to be associated with particular humor styles. More specifically, Besser and Zeigler-Hill (submitted for publication) found that grandiose narcissism was positively associated with the use of adaptive humor whereas vulnerable narcissism was negatively associated with the use of adaptive humor and positively associated with the use of maladaptive humor. This suggests that grandiose and vulnerable narcissists may use somewhat different styles of humor in their interactions with others.

1.1. Overview and predictions

The goal of the present study was to expand what is currently known about the links between the forms of pathological narcissism and self-esteem by examining whether these associations are mediated by humor styles. That is, we believed that the humor styles adopted by individuals with high levels of grandiose or vulnerable narcissism may provide at least a partial explanation for their reported feelings of self-worth. Our hypothesis was that the use of adaptive and maladaptive humor styles – which have been shown to be associated with adjustment and interpersonal relationship functioning – may be one pathway by which pathological forms of narcissism may influence self-esteem level. More specifically, we believed that the use of adaptive humor styles which emphasize affiliation and self-enhancement would foster positive relationships with others and may indirectly serve self-esteem regulation goals (i.e., an individual may feel better about himself when he receives the respect and admiration of others; Leary &

Baumeister, 2000). In contrast, we expected that the use of maladaptive humor may be detrimental to self-esteem because of the damage that it causes to interpersonal relationships (i.e., an individual may experience rejection after belittling others which may result in lowered self-esteem). The mediational roles that we propose for adaptive and maladaptive humor styles are consistent with the results of previous studies that have examined mediational hypotheses concerning humor styles (e.g., Dozois, Martin, & Bieling, 2009; Kazarian, Moghnie, & Martin, 2010).

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

Participants were 200 undergraduates (60 men and 140 women) who took part in this study during the first week of their first semester at a university or college in the southern region of Israel. Participants were asked to provide written informed consent after the procedures had been fully explained. Although participants were reminded that they could discontinue their participation in the study at any time, none elected to do so. The mean age of the participants was 23.57 years ($SD = 2.91$). Participants completed measures of pathological narcissism, humor styles, and self-esteem. Potential order effects were controlled by presenting the questionnaires in a randomized order.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Pathological narcissism

The Pathological Narcissism Inventory (PNI; Pincus et al., 2009) was used to assess grandiose and vulnerable aspects of pathological narcissism. The PNI is a 52-item measure for which responses were made on scales ranging from 0 (*not at all like me*) to 5 (*very much like me*). This instrument captures seven dimensions of pathological narcissism: contingent self-esteem (e.g., “It’s hard for me to feel good about myself unless I know other people like me”), exploitative tendencies (e.g., “I can make anyone believe anything I want them to”), self-sacrificing self-enhancement (e.g., “I try to show what a good person I am through my sacrifices”), hiding of the self (e.g., “When others get a glimpse of my needs, I feel anxious and ashamed”), grandiose fantasy (e.g., “I often fantasize about being recognized for my accomplishments”), devaluing (e.g., “When others don’t meet my expectations, I often feel ashamed about what I wanted”), and entitlement rage (e.g., “It irritates me when people don’t notice how good a person I am”). As outlined in recent studies (Tritt, Ryder, Ring, & Pincus, 2010; Wright, Lukowitsky, Pincus, & Conroy, 2010), these seven dimensions load onto the two higher-order factors of grandiose narcissism (exploitative, self-sacrificing self-enhancement, and grandiose fantasy) and vulnerable narcissism (contingent self-esteem, hiding of the self, entitlement rage, and devaluing). Initial information concerning the reliability and validity of the PNI has shown that it is correlated in the expected direction with other measures of narcissism (e.g., NPI) as well as related constructs such as self-esteem level, interpersonal style, clinical outcomes, and contingent self-esteem (Pincus et al., 2009; Zeigler-Hill, Clark, & Pickard, 2008). The internal consistencies of the PNI grandiosity and vulnerability subscales were 0.89 and 0.90, respectively.

2.2.2. Humor styles

The Humor Styles Questionnaire (Martin et al., 2003) was used to assess adaptive and maladaptive humor styles. It is a 32-item measure that consists of four subscales that assess the following styles of humor: affiliative (e.g., “I laugh and joke a lot with my friends”; $\alpha = 0.70$), self-enhancing (e.g., “My humorous outlook

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