



Narcissism, variability in self-concept, and well-being

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ABSTRACT

The present research examined whether narcissism is related to higher variability in self-concept across roles and time points. Three indices of self-concept variability across roles were formulated based on the participants' self-ratings for personality attributes. A probabilistic sample in Study 1 as well as a student sample in Study 2 revealed that the narcissistic personality inventory (NPI) positively correlated with the variability indices, except for the self-concept differentiation (SCD), while well-being measures were only related to SCD. The student sample also showed a significant correlation between NPI and longitudinal variability in self-concept within a month-long interval. Implications for the instability of the narcissistic self-concept and its relationship with psychological well-being are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Some aspects of a person's self-concept are a reflection of others' views of them (Cooley, 1902; James, 1890; Mead, 1934), partly because those views are often conveyed directly or indirectly toward people in the form of social feedback. Consistent social feedback from others makes the self-concept of the person who receives feedback firm and stable, whereas inconsistent feedback brings conflict or disorder into it. The purpose of the present article is to examine the relationship between narcissism and variability in self-concept in the light of a recent theoretical development (e.g., Campbell & Buffardi, 2008; Morf, Horvath, & Torchetti, 2011). These theorists have referred to some trade-offs of narcissism, i.e., narcissists will inevitably face initial gains (e.g., a favorable impression) and later losses (e.g., a broken relationship). This pattern of gain and loss will bring inconsistent social feedback to narcissists, thus causing confusion within the narcissistic self-concept. On the basis of this argument, we predicted that narcissism would positively correlate with variability in self-concept. In addition, we examined this relationship using new indices by Baird, Le, and Lucas (2006), who proposed more appropriate measures to capture the variability in self-concept.

1.1. Background

Over the last 20 years, theories of narcissism in the fields of social and personality psychology have improved our under-

standing of how the narcissistic personality plays a unique role in a given social environment. The threatened egotism model (Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996) describes people who are vulnerable and react with hostility to ego threats because of a highly positive self-evaluation and a lack of reality concerning their supposed positive view of themselves. This theory suggests that narcissists would be representative of the threatened egotism model. Another approach, the self-regulatory processing model (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001; Rhodewalt, 2001), provides a framework for explaining the paradox of narcissism. Narcissists generally make a daily effort to manipulate the social environment in order to construct a grandiose self through the dynamic interplay among self-concept, a cognitive-affective regulatory system, an interpersonal strategy, and social relationships. However, they cannot obtain positive feedback readily from others because of their lack of concern for them.

Within a similar self-regulatory system, the agency model and its extended version (Campbell, Brunell, & Finkel, 2006; Campbell & Foster, 2007; Campbell & Green, 2008) have uniquely focused on the imbalanced characteristics of narcissists, i.e., between higher agentic traits (e.g., dominant, assertive, energetic, or active) and lower communal traits (e.g., agreeable, cooperative, generous, or friendly; Campbell, Bosson, Goheen, Lakey, & Kernis, 2007). This model posits that narcissists are fated to face trade-offs between several short-term benefits (e.g., less anxiety and depression due to a variety of self-enhancement tendencies, initial better performance than others, and initial facility in establishing relationship with others) but several long-term costs (e.g., continuous failure based on not learning from mistakes, exhausting public goods, or broken relationships).

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Whereas the short-term benefits seem to be produced by narcissists' concern for agency and their agentic behavior, their lack of concern for being communal will produce a trade-off in terms of long-term costs.

Furthermore, researchers have refined the construct of narcissism. For example, narcissism has been regarded as the combination of high explicit and low implicit self-esteem (Zeigler-Hill, 2006). Narcissism has also been divided into two classes: the vulnerable type, which generally has high self-evaluation, and the grandiose type, which has a more mixed evaluation of the self (Zeigler-Hill, Clark, & Pickard, 2008).

Despite some differences among these theories, researchers have recognized a shared assumption that the narcissistic self-concept includes an inevitable instability or bias, although it is seemingly overshadowed by high self-evaluations. Regarding features of the narcissistic self-concept, Rhodewalt and Morf (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001; Rhodewalt, 2001) presented two possible approaches. One approach is the deficit model, which posits that the self-concept of narcissists would be low in accessibility due to a lack of clarity in the representation. Because self-concept clarity (SCC; Campbell et al., 1996) has been considered a representative measure of people's subjective clarity of self-concept, the deficit model predicts that those who measured high in narcissism would measure low in SCC. However, there was no significant relationship between these variables in the reviewed literature (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). In addition, Stucke and Sporer (2002) found a negative relationship between NPI and the self-concept clarity in German students. Therefore, existing evidence reveals a difficulty in explaining the instability of the narcissistic self-concept using the deficit model.

The other approach is the structural model, which assumes that the self-concept of narcissists would differ from others in terms of the structure rather than the clarity or accessibility of the representation. Several findings in support of this model have been reported. For example, Rhodewalt and Morf (1995) found a significant negative correlation between Emmons's (1987) version of NPI (Raskin & Hall, 1979) and self-complexity. This means that a more narcissistic person maintains a simpler self-concept, because self-complexity reveals the number and diversity of categories within the self-concept (Linville, 1987). However, subsequent research has failed to replicate this relationship between narcissism and self-complexity (e.g., Rhodewalt, Madrian, & Cheney, 1998).

Rather, Rhodewalt et al. (1998) found that NPI correlated mildly with daily variability in participants' self-esteem. Additionally, they found a moderation effect of participants' evaluative integration (Showers, 1992). Narcissists whose self-aspects are divided into several distinct evaluative parts, or are low in integrity, showed high variability in self-esteem. This suggests that it is feasible to perceive a structural differentiation in the self-concept as a characteristic of narcissistic self-representation.

Furthermore, as another measure of self-concept structure, self-concept differentiation (SCD; Donahue, Robins, Roberts, & John, 1993) has been used to examine the relationship between NPI and self-concept variability. Self-concept differentiation reflects the variability in trait ratings of an individual's self-concept across several social roles and is supposed to manifest the degree of inconsistency or contradiction among differentiated self-concepts. Rhodewalt and Regalado (1996; as cited in Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001) found a positive correlation between NPI and SCD, suggesting that narcissists may maintain a differentiated self-concept. As described above, we can now refer to evidence that reveals some differences in the self-concept structure between narcissists and others. However, these studies are not consistent in explaining whether the variability of the narcissistic self-concept is due to

its simpler, and thus vulnerable, form or its more complex, and thus confused, structure.

1.2. *The present study*

The present research assumes that variability in the narcissistic self-concept should come from the complexity and confusion of its structure. Recent arguments have depicted trade-offs of narcissism (Campbell & Buffardi, 2008; Morf et al., 2011). According to the trade-off perspective, narcissists actively engage in self-regulation to gain a positive self-view in their social environment and to achieve initial success (Paulhus, 1998). However, their interpersonal attempts evidently result in a later failure, partly because of their tendencies to think little of others (Campbell, Bush, Brunell, & Shelton, 2005; Campbell, Reeder, Sedikides, & Elliot, 2000) and to retaliate for being socially threatened (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998) or rejected (Twenge & Campbell, 2003). Thus, the goal that narcissists attempt to obtain is a strikingly simple one, in which they seek grandiosity, a reputation, or positive evaluation from others; however, the endless seeking of this glorious goal produces a form of mixed social feedback. Some of this feedback is consistent with the way narcissists' perceive themselves or with narcissists' expectations, while some feedback is inconsistent. This pattern of social feedback can cause confusion within the narcissistic self-concept because a person's self-concept is a reflection of how others view that person (Cooley, 1902; James, 1890; Mead, 1934).

This line of reasoning led us to use SCD rather than self-complexity to capture variability in the narcissistic self-concept. SCD has been supposed to manifest the degree of inconsistency or contradiction among differentiated self-concepts that are relevant to social roles or relationships (Donahue et al., 1993). We regarded SCD as a more appropriate index than self-complexity for measuring variability of the self-concept, which seems to issue from confused social relationships that may often be accompanied by psychological maladjustment. Indeed, in focusing on confusion about self-knowledge, researchers anticipated and discovered a relationship between SCD and various psychological health problems (e.g., Diehl, Hastings, & Stanton, 2001; Sheldon, Ryan, Rawsthorne, & Ilardi, 1997).

1.3. *Baird et al.'s (2006) new measure*

Recent research has cast doubt on the validity of SCD as an index of variability in a self-concept. Baird et al. (2006) pointed out that SCD depends not only on cross-role variance but also on cross-item variance, which is irrelevant to the psychometric concept of SCD. This index is usually created by conducting a principal component analysis (PCA) on participants' ratings of the self-concept across several social roles. The first component extracted from PCA reflects the amount of variance that is shared across each role. Subtraction of the explained variance for the first component from 100 yields SCD. However, according to this method of computing SCD, it is problematic that PCA produces a larger amount of variance for the first component when the correlations among roles are relatively high. Even if any two persons have equal variance of ratings across roles, the variance across items could differ. The individual who has higher cross-item variance always reveals greater correlations among roles, and consequently a lower SCD. Cross-item variance is clearly irrelevant to a theoretical definition of SCD. Nevertheless, PCA reflects such variance. Thus, because of this irrelevant feature, SCD always faces the risk of bias.

Baird et al. (2006) therefore suggested that the simple cross-role standard deviation of attribute ratings, named cross-role SD, was better than the SCD as an index of cross-role variability in

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