What makes narcissists unhappy? Subjectively assessed intelligence moderates the relationship between narcissism and psychological well-being

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ABSTRACT

We investigated the relations between narcissism, self-assessed intelligence and subjective well-being. In three studies, we aimed to replicate previous findings concerning the relationship between narcissism and both objectively and subjectively assessed intelligence (Study 1), as well as to examine whether the latter influenced narcissists' satisfaction with life (Study 2) and their mood (Study 3). The results confirmed the positive link between narcissism and self-assessed intelligence. Moreover, we demonstrated that this relationship was independent of actual abilities. In line with existing literature, we also found evidence that satisfying ego needs in this domain was a necessary precondition for narcissists' well-being. Specifically, the results of Study 2 indicated that narcissists who evaluated their intelligence as low were not satisfied with their life. Similar results were found in Study 3: narcissists evaluating their intelligence as low experienced higher tension and lower hedonic tone.

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1. Introduction

Inflated self-views are one of the defining characteristics of narcissism (Morf, Horvath, & Torchetti, 2011). These views may concern own communal qualities ("I am the most helpful person", as in the case of communal narcissists; Gebauer, Sedikides, Verplanken, & Maio, 2012), but mostly commonly they refer to agentic features ("I am the most intelligent person"). It has been well documented that narcissists positively evaluate their own cognitive abilities (Gabriel, Critelli, & Ee, 1994; Paulhus & Williams, 2002), however, empirical studies indicated a discrepancy between narcissist's beliefs about intelligence and their actual ability. In a recent meta-analytic investigation, O'Boyle, Forsyth, Banks, and Story (2013) examined the link between narcissism and other Dark Triad (DT) traits with actual intelligence. The authors tested two hypotheses. According to the 'evil genius' hypothesis, intellectually gifted individuals are more likely to display socially exploitative personality traits relative to the general population. This idea was based on the empirical findings suggesting that the DT traits were associated with success in different fields (e.g. sexual behavior) perhaps because individuals with these traits were more likely to use influence tactics for their

interpersonal advantage (Jonason, Li, Webster, & Schmitt, 2009). On the other hand, the "compensatory" hypothesis is based on results showing maladaptive aspects of DT, and suggests that individuals high on narcissism and other DT traits might engage in manipulative behavior to compensate for intellectual deficits (O'Boyle et al., 2013). O'Boyle et al. (2013) concluded that there was no significant relationship between general mental abilities and DT. Thus the data did not unequivocally support either the 'evil genius' or 'compensatory' hypothesis.

Although, there was no correlation between intelligence and DT, interesting findings emerged for the relationship between narcissism and subjectively assessed intelligence (SAI). For instance, Gabriel et al. (1994) found a positive correlation between narcissism and self-evaluated intelligence even after controlling for objectively measured cognitive ability. A similar result was reported by Paulhus and Williams (2002) who assessed self-rating of intelligence as well as an objective measure of cognitive ability. Moreover, the authors included The Over Claiming Questionnaire which is an unobtrusive measure of both cognitive ability and self-enhancement bias. The task requires rating the familiarity of persons, events, and things, some of which do not exist. Paulhus and Williams (2002) found that over-claiming correlated positively with narcissism.

Recent research settled the controversy that narcissism and self-enhancement are psychologically adaptive as they contribute

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to intra- and inter-personal adjustment (Dufner et al., 2012). Moreover, the link between both variables and intrapersonal adjustment has been shown to be mediated by self-esteem (Dufner et al., 2012; Sedikides, Rudich, Gregg, Kumashiro, & Rusbult, 2004). However, there were no studies explicitly examining the role of cognitive self-enhancement for narcissist's life. Thus, it would be interesting to see to what extent narcissists' positive illusions about intellectual abilities influence their subjective well-being, one of the most important psychological constructs determining the quality of life as well as many real life outcomes, including health and longevity (Diener & Chan, 2011).

In the current research, we investigated the relationships between narcissism, SAI and subjective well-being. Is high regard of one's own cognitive abilities not only a distinctive feature of narcissists but also a crucial and necessary condition for their wellbeing? We hypothesize that a narcissist frustrated in their egotistic needs concerning their own cognitive abilities is an unhappy narcissist. In three studies, we aimed to replicate the previous findings concerning the relationship between narcissism and both objectively and subjectively assessed intelligence (Study 1), as well as to examine whether the latter influences narcissists' satisfaction with life (Study 2) and their mood (Study 3) – the two components of subjective well-being (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999).

2. Study 1

In Study 1, we measured narcissism, SAI and various aspects of cognitive ability. We expected narcissism to be positively associated with self-evaluated intelligence, and that this relationship would be independent from actual ability. The present study was based on previous findings (Dufner et al., 2012; Gabriel et al., 1994; Paulhus & Williams, 2002), however it used a wider spectrum of cognitive abilities (fluid and verbal) and another measure of SAI.

2.1. Participants

The study involved 205 (105 female) students from various universities in Warsaw, Poland. The mean age of the sample was 23.10 years (SD = 2.66) with range 19–31.

2.2. Measures

Fluid intelligence was measured with Raven's Advanced Progressive Matrices Test (APM; Raven, Court, & Raven, 1983).

Verbal intelligence was assessed with a Polish test of verbal comprehension designed to measure crystallized abilities (Matczak, Jaworowska, & Martowska, 2013). In this test participants are asked to find a synonym for a target word among four different words. There are 30 items with increasing difficulty, which an individual has to solve within 15 min. The test has high split-half reliability and correlates positively with other IQ tests (WAIS-R, Raven).

Narcissism was assessed using the Dirty Dozen subscale (Jonason & Webster, 2010) in the Polish version (Jonason, Li, & Czarna, 2013), which also measures psychopathy and Machiavellianism. The narcissism subscale consists of the four following items: "I tend to want others to admire me", "I tend to want others to pay attention to me", "I tend to expect special favors from others", "I tend to seek prestige or status".

Subjectively assessed intelligence (SAI) was assessed by having participants first read the general characteristic of intelligence taken from a public statement known as *Mainstream Science on Intelligence* issued by a group of 52 academic researchers in fields associated with intelligence (Gottfredson, 1997):

"Intelligence is a very general mental capability that, among other things, involves the ability to reason, plan, solve problems, think abstractly, comprehend complex ideas, learn quickly, and learn from experience. It is not merely book-learning, a narrow academic skill, or test-taking smarts. Rather, it reflects a broader and deeper capability for comprehending our surroundings 'catching on,' 'making sense' of things, or 'figuring out' what to do."

Next, participants assessed their own intelligence using a table with one row and 25 columns. Five groups of five columns were labeled as very low, low, average, high or very high, respectively. Participants' SAI was indexed with the marked column counting from the first to the left; thus the score ranged from 1 to 25.

2.3. Results

The correlational analysis showed moderate positive associations between ability tests, and weaker positive, though significant, relationships between SAI and both intelligence tests and narcissism (Table 1). The latter did not correlate with objectively assessed intelligence.

Further, we tested whether there was a positive relationship between narcissism and SAI, and if this association was independent from objectively measured intelligence. The model (see Fig. 1) fitted the data well: χ^2/degree of freedom = 0.73 ($p = 0.39$), CFI = 1.0, RMSEA = .00. SAI was significantly associated with narcissism and the intelligence latent variable. The results suggested then that narcissism was positively related with SAI even after controlling for actual cognitive ability.

3. Study 2

In Study 2 we measured narcissism, SAI and satisfaction with life. Existing evidence links narcissism inversely with daily sadness and anxiety, depression and neuroticism and relates it positively to subjective well-being, and, more importantly, self-esteem fully accounts for these relations (Sedikides et al., 2004). Additionally, self-esteem, a positive view about oneself, was shown to be positively correlated with self-enhancement of cognitive ability (Dufner et al., 2012). Therefore, we hypothesized that narcissists' satisfaction with life may depend on the level of SAI.

3.1. Participants

The study included 202 (114 female) students from various universities in Warsaw, Poland. The mean age of the sample was 23.03 years (SD = 2.30) with range 18–30.

3.2. Measures

Narcissism and SAI were measured using the same methods as in Study 1. In the present research, the means for narcissism and

Table 1
Correlations and descriptive statistics for all variables from Study 1.

	Raven	Verbal ability	Narcissism	SAI
Raven		.42[**]	.03	.23[**]
Verbal ability			.09	.25[**]
Narcissism				.26[**]
M (SD)	23.67 (5.05)	18.50 (5.71)	10.24 (3.54)	17.10 (2.80)
Reliability	.84	.85	.82	

Note: Reliability = Cronbach's alpha, except for Raven, where reliability was splithalf correlation adjusted with the Spearman–Brown prophecy formula.
[*] $p < 0.05$.
[**] $p < 0.001$.