



Is research using the narcissistic personality inventory relevant for understanding narcissistic personality disorder?

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ABSTRACT

Most research on narcissism has been conducted using the narcissistic personality inventory (NPI). However, the generalizability of findings from the NPI to narcissistic personality disorder (NPD) is unknown. The current study uses two samples (48 clinical outpatients; 49 undergraduates) to address this question by examining the correlations between the NPI and interview ratings of NPD. The profiles generated by both assessments in relation to measures of general personality traits are compared to expert and meta-analytically derived profiles of NPD. The NPI and NPD assess overlapping constructs as they are significantly correlated and generate similar personality profiles. The measures diverge primarily in that NPI narcissism includes traits related to certain facets of Extraversion, which is consistent with expert conceptualizations of NPD.

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1. Introduction

Substantial disagreement surrounds the conceptualization and assessment of narcissism and narcissistic personality disorder (NPD). One of the major causes of this disagreement relates to the approaches used by the two primary research fields that study narcissism. Clinical psychologists and psychiatrists tend to conceive of narcissism as a categorical diagnostic entity (i.e., NPD), are more apt to use clinical samples to study the construct, favor interview based assessments, and focus, to varying degrees, on both grandiose and vulnerable forms of narcissism (Cain, Pincus, & Ansell, 2008; Miller & Campbell, 2008). Social-personality psychologists, on the other hand, study narcissism as a dimensional trait primarily using undergraduate samples, tend to use self-report assessments (primarily the narcissistic personality inventory [NPI]; Raskin & Hall, 1979), and focus primarily on the grandiose form of narcissism. The vast majority of work on narcissism is conducted using the NPI in the context of social-personality research (Cain et al., 2008; Miller & Campbell, 2008). Unfortunately, the utility of the NPI for understanding NPD is unknown and significant concerns have been expressed about the usefulness of NPI based research for understanding NPD (e.g., Cain et al., 2008; Trull & McCrae, 2002).

The goal of the present research is to examine the utility of the NPI for understanding and assessing NPD. We do this by comparing

self-reported NPI scores to ratings derived from semi-structured interviews of NPD as conceptualized in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV-TR; American Psychiatric Association, 2000). We also compare the personality profiles produced by these two narcissism measures on two general personality inventories and to three existing profiles of narcissism – ratings of the prototypical individual with NPD by academicians, clinicians, and a meta-analytically derived profile. Importantly, we perform these comparisons in both a clinical sample and an undergraduate sample, which allows us to examine whether the relations between the narcissism assessments hold across contexts. Before describing our study in detail, we briefly review the literature on the NPI.

1.1. The NPI and assessments of NPD

While there is quite a small, limited empirical body of work on NPD, there is a large and growing empirical literature on narcissism studied as a dimensional trait using the NPI by social-personality psychologists. Cain et al. (2008) report that “since 1985, the NPI was used as the main or only measure of narcissistic traits in approximately 77% of social/personality research on narcissism” (p. 643). The reliance on the NPI to assess narcissism, which is based on the NPD construct as it was articulated in the DSM-III (1980), has been the subject of controversy as some question its validity. More specifically, it has been suggested that NPI scores overlap too substantially with constructs such as self-esteem and interpersonal dominance, which are sometimes referred to as the “adaptive” aspects of narcissism,

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at the cost of more pathological traits measured in the current DSM (i.e., grandiose fantasies, lack of empathy; Cain et al., 2008). Others have focused on psychometric concerns regarding the internal consistency of the NPI subscales, as well as the underlying factor structure (del Rosario & White, 2005; Kubarych, Deary, & Austin, 2004).

Many of these critiques suggest that the NPI may not be measuring pathological or clinical narcissism/NPD and thus may be limited in informing our understanding of more clinically-relevant forms of narcissism. Despite the importance of establishing the external validity of the NPI data to the study of NPD, there are surprisingly few data available that directly address the degree of construct overlap between NPI narcissism and DSM-IV NPD. This overlap could be examined in two ways. First, one could examine the strength of the relation between the NPI with DSM-IV measures of NPD. Unfortunately, a limited number of studies exist that use this approach. Prifitera and Ryan (1984) correlated NPI scores with narcissism scores on the self-report personality disorder scales from the Millon Clinical Multiaxial Inventory (Millon, 1977) and found a substantial correlation ($r = .66$). Chatham, Tibbals, and Harrington (1993) formed narcissistic and non-narcissistic groups of patients on the basis of clinical judgment and NPI scores and compared them on the Millon Clinical Multiaxial Inventory; the narcissistic group scored substantially higher on the NPD scale ($d = 1.88$). Dickinson and Pincus (2003) found that individuals who scored highly on all aspects of the NPI were rated as being significantly higher on NPD than a control group. More recently, Miller and Campbell (2008) examined the relations between the NPI and a self-reported DSM-IV NPD scale, assessed using the Personality Diagnostic Questionnaire-4 (Hyler, 1994), and found small to moderate correlations between the two in a sample of college students ($r = .43$) and their parents ($r = .20$). Similarly, Samuel and Widiger (2008a) compared the NPI with four self-report measures of NPD and found a median correlation of .55. There are limitations to these studies, however, in that most used self-report measures of NPD that may not converge strongly with interview ratings of NPD. For example, the Personality Diagnostic Questionnaire-4 NPD scale demonstrates only small to moderate correlations ranging from .27 (Wilberg, Dammen, & Friis, 2000) to .46 (Miller, Campbell, Pilkonis, & Morse, 2008) with NPD scores from a semi-structured interview. This is problematic as most experts in the assessment of personality pathology suggest that ratings based on interviews are the gold standard for the assessment of personality pathology (e.g., Rogers, 2001).

A second means of assessing the overlap of a construct (e.g., NPI narcissism and DSM-IV NPD) is to examine the similarity of their nomological networks, particularly as they pertain to general personality traits. For example, Miller and colleagues (Miller & Campbell, 2008; Miller, Campbell, et al., 2008; see also Samuel and Widiger, 2008a, 2008b) have compared various assessments of narcissism and NPD on Costa and McCrae's measure of the Five Factor Model, the revised NEO personality inventory (NEO PI-R; 1992), and Cloninger's seven-factor Temperament and Character Inventory (Cloninger, Przybeck, Svrakic, & Wetzell, 1994). Miller, Campbell, et al. (2008) argue that this two pronged examination is a "fruitful way to examine the similarity of two measures of the same construct in that one can examine narrow or specific convergence" (i.e., correlations between the two measures) and "broad or general convergence" (i.e., do the two narcissism measures create a similar pattern of relations with relevant constructs such as basic personality traits (p. 491)). As such, a study comparing the relations between NPI and a gold standard measure of NPD such as a semi-structured interview might provide important data regarding the validity and utility of the narcissism construct as measured by the NPI.

1.2. Conceptualizing NPD

An important limitation of the aforementioned methodology warrants discussion. The previous strategy is predicated on the notion that the DSM-IV NPD construct itself should be considered the gold standard by which all other conceptualizations of narcissism should be judged. There are obvious problems and limitations to this as the DSM-IV personality disorders have been criticized for a host of issues related to reliability and validity. There are other strategies that one could enlist in attempting to define the construct of narcissism. In the present research, we use two of these promising strategies: profiles derived from (a) expert ratings and (b) meta-analysis.

The first approach involves having experts describe a prototypical case of NPD using a general trait framework. Lynam and Widiger (2001) had 12 experts who had published at least one article on NPD rate a prototypical case of NPD on the thirty facets of the Five Factor Model. Samuel and Widiger (2004) utilized the same methodology but used practicing clinicians as raters. Ultimately, the two ratings were very similar ($r = .94$) and emphasized high scores on the agentic facets of Extraversion (e.g., assertiveness, excitement seeking), very low scores on Agreeableness (e.g., straightforwardness, compliance, modesty), high levels of externally-directed negative affect (i.e., angry hostility), and low levels of internally-directed negative affect (i.e., self-consciousness). Interestingly, Miller and Campbell (2008) and Samuel and Widiger (2008a) both presented data showing that NPI scores create a Five Factor Model personality profile that is largely consistent with these expert ratings of prototypical NPD (e.g., $r_s = .64-.72$; Miller & Campbell). In fact, Samuel and Widiger found evidence that the Five Factor Model correlates of the NPI were the most consistent with the clinician ratings of prototypical NPD of all five self-report narcissism assessments included in their study.

A second approach involves establishing the nature of the current DSM-IV NPD construct by examining the empirical trait correlates of measures of NPD. Meta-analytic reviews of the relations between the DSM-IV personality disorders and the Five Factor Model by Saulsman and Page (2004) and Samuel and Widiger (2008b) found that the largest correlation for NPD was with Agreeableness ($r_s = -.27$ and $-.37$, respectively). The primary differences between the two sets of expert ratings of prototypical NPD and the empirical derived correlates found in the meta-analytic review were the lack of substantial correlations between NPD and some specific facets of Extraversion (see Table 1 for these profiles).

1.3. The present research

The current study was designed to test the relation between the NPI and clinical conceptions of NPD in a way that addresses the limitations of past research. Using two samples (sample 1: clinical; sample 2: undergraduates) we examine the convergence between NPI narcissism and NPD ratings derived from a semi-structured interview. *First*, we compare the correlations between self-report NPI scores and ratings of DSM-IV NPD derived from a semi-structured interview. *Second*, we compare the correlations generated by the NPI and DSM-IV NPD with a measure of the Five Factor Model, the NEO PI-R (Costa & McCrae, 1992). *Third*, in sample 2, we compare the personality profiles using an alternative measure of personality, the HEXACO-personality inventory-revised (HEXACO-PI-R; Lee & Ashton, 2007). *Fourth*, we compare these overall personality profiles with those generated by the three aforementioned perspectives of NPD: expert prototypicality ratings from (a) academicians publishing on NPD (Lynam & Widiger, 2001) and (b) clinicians (Samuel & Widiger, 2004), as well as (c) meta-analytic relations between NPD and the NEO PI-R (Samuel & Widiger, 2008b).

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