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Are there such things as “Narcissists” in social psychology? A taxometric analysis of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory

Joshua D. Foster ^{a,*}, W. Keith Campbell ^b

^a *Psychology Department, LSCB 320, University of South Alabama, Mobile, AL 36688-3052, USA*

^b *Psychology Department, University of Georgia, USA*

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Abstract

Narcissism is typically viewed as a dimensional construct in social psychology. Direct evidence supporting this position is lacking, however, and recent research suggests that clinical measures of narcissism exhibit categorical properties. It is therefore unclear whether social psychological researchers should conceptualize narcissism as a category or continuum. To help remedy this, the latent structure of narcissism—measured by the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI)—was examined using 3895 participants and three taxometric procedures. Results suggest that NPI scores are distributed dimensionally. There is no apparent shift from “normal” to “narcissist” observed across the NPI continuum. This is consistent with the prevailing view of narcissism in social psychology and suggests that narcissism is structured similar to other aspects of general personality. This also suggests a difference in how narcissism is structured in clinical versus social psychology (134 words).

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* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 251 460 6548.

E-mail address: foster@usouthal.edu (J.D. Foster).

0. Introduction

Narcissism has an extensive history as both a clinical and social psychological construct (see Campbell & Foster, 2007; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). As a clinical construct, narcissism grew to prominence with the writings of Freud (1914/1957). Kernberg (1974, 1975) and Kohut (1977) continued this clinical tradition, which ultimately led to the inclusion of narcissistic personality disorder (NPD) in the DSM-III (American Psychiatric Association, 1980).

Freud's (1931) essay on libidinal types and Murray's (1938) work on "narcism" or egophilia mark classic examples of narcissism conceptualized as a component of normal personality. A recent surge in narcissism research by social psychologists was prompted by the development of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Hall, 1979). The development of the NPI was based on the clinical criteria for NPD, with the idea being that non-disordered persons often exhibit cognitive/behavioral patterns similar to those with NPD. The NPI has now been used in well over 100 investigations, has proven to be a reliable and valid assessment of narcissism as it occurs in the general population (del Rosario & White, 2005; Raskin & Terry, 1988), and is the primary measure of narcissism in the social psychological literature.

The clinical and social psychology concepts of narcissism share many similarities, but differ on one important aspect. In clinical psychology, narcissism is specified as a personality disorder. Based upon a set of diagnostic criteria individuals either have NPD or they do not. Put differently, the structure of clinical narcissism is *taxonic*. In contrast, social psychologists generally view narcissism as a *dimension*. According to this view, there is no categorical property to the structure of narcissism. There exists no point along the narcissism continuum where one shifts from "normal" to "narcissist."

The view that NPD, and personality disorders in general, have underlying taxa is controversial in the clinical domain. Many argue that personality disorders are extensions of normal personality continua and thus dimensional (e.g., Livesley, Schroeder, Jackson, & Jang, 1994; Markon, Krueger, & Watson, 2005; Widiger & Costa, 1994; Widiger, Simonson, Krueger, Livesley, & Verheul, 2005). The taxonic orientation remains prominent, however, and has received empirical support (e.g., Haslam, 2003). Indeed, with specific respect to NPD, the current evidence favors a taxonic view (Fossati et al., 2005). That is, NPD appears to be a qualitatively distinct personality syndrome.

In social psychology, there has been far less debate over the dimensional/taxonic structure of personality traits. The general assumption is that personality is dimensional and the research generally supports this position. There are examples of proposed taxonic personality traits (e.g., self-monitoring, Gangestad & Snyder, 1985; type-A personality, Strube, 1989), but more often than not, personality exhibits dimensional properties (e.g., five-factor model of personality, Arnau, Green, & Tubre, 1999; Green, Arnau, & Gleaves, 1999). Although the dimensional/taxonic properties of narcissism have not been investigated in the social psychology literature, the assumption seems to be that it too should be conceptualized as a dimension.

In summary, the taxonic view of narcissism has received empirical support in the clinical literature (Fossati et al., 2005). Little is known, however, about the structure of narcissism as it pertains to social psychology. The assumption then perhaps should be that narcissism is categorical, which would fit with the clinical evidence. This assumption is at odds, however, with how narcis-

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