



# Do you think I'm as kind as I do? The relation of adolescent narcissism with self- and peer-perceptions of prosocial and aggressive behavior



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## ABSTRACT

The association between narcissism and aggression has been empirically supported in adults and adolescents, but it is unclear whether narcissism might also be related to prosocial behavior. The present study investigated this issue using self- and peer-informants. Participants were 183 adolescents ages 16–19 (159 males, 24 females; 64.5% Caucasian). Of these participants, 126 (104 males, 22 females) also had peer-reported data available. Self-reported pathological narcissism was positively correlated with self-reports of both prosocial behavior and aggression, but it was not associated with peer nominations of either type of behavior. These findings indicate that adolescents with high levels of narcissism may attempt to bolster their social status by reporting engagement in both prosocial behavior and aggression. However, it appears that such individuals are ineffective at being perceived as prosocial by peers.

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## 1. Introduction

Common notions of narcissism bring to mind an individual who is simply conceited. In reality, the concept is much more complex and is marked by specific behavioral, motivational, and cognitive tendencies. The narcissistic individual expects to be considered superior by others and may become aggressive if this recognition or admiration is not received (Brown, Budzek, & Tamborski, 2009; Raskin, Nocacek, & Hogan, 1991). Special regard is typically desired without reason, as the individual with narcissistic tendencies feels entitled to his or her wants and tends to exploit and manipulate others to achieve social goals (Emmons, 1987).

The present study examined the link between narcissism, prosocial behavior, and aggression in adolescents. This investigation expanded on research involving the behavioral correlates of narcissism by specifically examining positive behaviors. The multi-informant aspect (i.e., self and peer report) of this study was intended to help delineate the ways in which adolescents with narcissistic tendencies might behave from the vantage point of others rather than only considering their own perspective. The focus on adolescents is of particular importance, as adolescence marks a clear period of personality development and emphasis on peer relationships. Understanding the connection of adolescent self-perception and personality to the strategies used to reach social goals may inform efforts to prevent the externalizing behaviors associated with

narcissism and provide a basis to promote more positive behaviors toward others.

Recent empirical evidence has emerged regarding so-called pathological narcissism which includes a vulnerable element whereby self-esteem is contingent on others' opinions and perceptions and a grandiose element characterized by a desire to portray oneself as superior to others (Pincus et al., 2009). The clear dependency on positive feedback from others is thought to be tied to a fragile and generally low global self-esteem (Maxwell, Donnellan, Hopwood, & Ackerman, 2011). Although narcissism is associated with a gregarious and self-assured presentation, it may also be indicative of difficulty connecting to others and with questioning one's own worth. An individual characterized by pathological narcissism may exploit and devalue others to meet his or her own needs. The narcissistic individual often reports a tendency to hide one's true self for fear that others may recognize his or her faults (see Pincus et al., 2009). However, to engender favorable views from others he or she may present in a helpful, self-deprecating manner while maintaining a mindset of (desired) superiority over others (Pincus et al., 2009).

These patterns of manipulation by virtue of both gallant and avoidant behaviors are exemplified by the "self-sacrificing self-enhancement" and "hiding the self" elements of pathological narcissism, respectively (Pincus et al., 2009). Thus, some aspects of pathological narcissism may actually be associated with a tendency to engage in prosocial behavior. However, it appears that individuals with high levels of narcissism also aggress reactively to protect their fragile ego (Stucke & Sporer, 2002) and proactively to assert dominance and perceived superiority in peer groups (Fossati, Borroni, Eisenberg, & Maffei, 2010). For individuals with

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narcissistic tendencies, aggressive or prosocial behavior could be chosen to meet one's social needs (e.g., affirmation, dominance).

Prosocial and aggressive behaviors are not necessarily mutually exclusive, as an individual might carefully determine which behavior would be most self-serving in a given situation. Hawley (2003) examined the personality pattern of Machiavellianism, which employs both coercive and prosocial behavior to maximize one's personal gains. As narcissism is connected to concerns of social control and self-importance and has overlapping characteristics with Machiavellianism (e.g., Kerig & Stellwagen, 2010), it is possible that they may maintain both the aggressive and prosocial interpersonal strategies that have been described for Machiavellianism.

In interpersonal relationships, narcissism tends to be associated with charisma, as Campbell, Foster, and Finkel (2002) describe the narcissist's interpersonal style as exuding confidence and charm. The individual with high levels of narcissism is believed to use other individuals to feed his or her desires related to esteem and status and does not make an effort to reciprocate that praise and admiration. Campbell and colleagues (2002) describe this approach to interpersonal relationships as "pragmatic" and "selfish" (p. 351). Lukowitsky and Pincus (2013) note that peers are privileged only to the outward behaviors in which the narcissistic individual may engage and are not privy to the potentially undesirable motivations behind the behaviors. It follows that some aspects of narcissism act to draw others in and entice them to engage in interactions. The charm and grandiosity of individuals with narcissistic tendencies predict positive short-term relationships, but the selfish approach to relationships may lead the relationships to break down in the long-term (Carlson, Vazire, & Oltmanns, 2011).

Self-reported pathological narcissism has been associated with self-reported aggression in adolescents and adults (Barry & Kauten, 2014; Pincus et al., 2009), indicating that individuals with high levels of narcissism may not be concerned about portraying themselves as aggressive and/or do not recognize aggression as necessarily maladaptive (Ang, Tan, & Mansor, 2011). Additionally, Golmaryami and Barry (2010) concluded that adolescents who self-report relatively high levels of narcissism are more likely to be perceived as relationally or covertly aggressive by their peers. They may assert their superiority in peer groups by spreading rumors about peers who they dislike, for example. Thus, prosocial behavior may not always be viewed as the most advantageous interpersonal strategy. It is also possible that peers may not only perceive those with narcissistic tendencies as aggressive but also as less prosocial.

### 1.1. Hypotheses

Pathological narcissism was expected to be positively correlated with prosocial behavior from self-reports, given the construct's association with an intense desire to present admirably (Hypothesis 1). However, pathological narcissism was expected to be negatively correlated with peer-reported prosocial behavior, given that some of the features of pathological narcissism (e.g., exploitativeness), likely manifest mostly as negative behaviors toward others of equal status (Hypothesis 2). It was expected that, consistent with previous research on adolescent narcissism (e.g., Barry & Kauten, 2014; Golmaryami & Barry, 2010), pathological narcissism would be positively related to both self-reported and peer-reported aggression (Hypothesis 3).

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Participants

A total of 183 adolescents (159 males, 24 females) were recruited to participate in the current study. Participants ranged in

age from 16 to 19 ( $M = 16.97$ ,  $SD = .80$ ) and at the time of the study were enrolled in a residential program for youth who have dropped out of school. Reasons that participants dropped out of school vary and include academic, behavioral, familial, and economic issues. For the entire sample, 118 individuals (64.5%) identified as Caucasian, 60 individuals (32.8%) identified as African American, and 3 individuals (1.6%) identified as Other. Two individuals (1.1%) did not report their ethnicity. Peer-reported prosocial and aggressive behavior were available for 126 of the participants (104 males, 22 females; 65.9% Caucasian) based on procedures involved in randomly selecting groups for participation in that portion of this study (see below). Additionally, some individuals who completed the self-report questionnaires left the program or declined participation in the peer-nomination procedure, accounting for a smaller sample size in comparison to that for the self-report measures. Participants who completed both phases of the study did not differ from those who only completed self-report measures on pathological narcissism,  $t(171) = -.51$ ,  $p = .61$ , self-reported prosocial behavior,  $t(171) = 1.18$ ,  $p = .24$ , or self-reported aggression,  $t(171) = -.77$ ,  $p = .44$ .

### 2.2. Materials

*Pathological Narcissism Inventory* (PNI; Pincus et al., 2009). The PNI is a 52-item self-report measure that captures seven dimensions of pathological narcissism (i.e., Contingent Self-esteem, Exploitativeness, Self-sacrificing Self-enhancement, Hiding the Self, Grandiose Fantasy, Devaluing Others/Need for Others, Entitlement Rage). To complete this measure, the individual must rate each item (e.g., "I need others to acknowledge me") on a six-point scale ranging from 0 ("not at all like me") to 5 ("very much like me"). PNI scores have demonstrated significant relations with numerous indicators of social and emotional maladjustment (e.g., Roche, Pincus, Lukowitsky, Menard, & Conroy, 2013). The PNI had high internal consistency (i.e.,  $\alpha = .94$ ) in the present sample. The internal consistency for each of the subscales was also adequate (i.e., alpha values above .73).

*Prosocial Tendencies Measure* (PTM; Carlo & Randall, 2002). The PTM is a 23-item self-report measure of prosocial behavior. Three items were excluded from the current study based on their lack of relevance to an adolescent informant (e.g., "I prefer to donate money anonymously"). To complete this measure, the respondent must rate on a scale of 1 ("does not describe me at all") to 5 ("describes me greatly") the extent to which each item (e.g., "I can help others best when people are watching me") reflects his or her own behaviors or perceptions of his or her behaviors. The items for this scale were derived by Carlo and Randall (2002) from earlier prosocial cognition and behavior scales (Johnson et al., 1989; Rushton, Chrisjohn, & Fekken, 1981) and from a series of moral reasoning interviews with college-aged students (Eisenberg, Carlo, Murphy, & van Court, 1995). The current study revealed an internal consistency of  $\alpha = .85$  for the overall scale.

*Peer nominations* (see Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). The peer nomination instrument consisted of the 15 items peer nomination items assessing relational aggression, overt aggression, prosocial behavior, and isolation described by Crick and Grotpeter (1995). The five items assessing prosocial behavior and the seven items assessing aggression were of interest for the current study. Participants were organized into groups of approximately 12–15 individuals from the same platoon at the residential program. Platoons consist of approximately 30 individuals who attend all activities together and live in the same building throughout their enrollment in the program. Four male platoons were randomly selected to be included in the current study, with the sole female platoon also being invited to participate. Each platoon was divided into two groups who participated in adjacent rooms. Thus, peer nominations were

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