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 ScienceDirect

Personality and Individual Differences 44 (2008) 865–875

PERSONALITY AND
INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES

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Effects of narcissistic entitlement and exploitativeness on human physical aggression

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Received 20 August 2007; received in revised form 10 October 2007; accepted 15 October 2007

Available online 26 November 2007

Abstract

Research has demonstrated that narcissism is related to the perpetration of aggression. Despite being commonly considered a pathological form of personality, theorists have argued that narcissism represents a mix of adaptive (e.g., Self-Sufficiency) and maladaptive (e.g., Entitlement and Exploitativeness) traits. The current study sought to examine the relationship between narcissistic traits and aggression. Ninety-one men completed a laboratory aggression task in which participants had the opportunity to administer electric shocks to a confederate or to refrain from doing so. General aggression as well as initial and extreme aggression were measured. Results indicated that narcissistic entitlement and exploitativeness were the narcissistic subtraits that best predicted all measures of aggression. The findings support existing research that identifies these traits as particularly maladaptive traits of narcissism, and are discussed in terms of the linkage between narcissism and perpetration of violence and victimization.

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Keywords: Narcissism; Entitlement; Exploitativeness; Aggression

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1. Introduction

Narcissism has been described as a “mixed-blessing” (Paulhus, 1998) because it comprises adaptive and maladaptive features. On the one hand, narcissists can be outgoing (Bradlee & Emmons, 1992), confident (Emmons, 1984), perform well under pressure (Wallace & Baumeister, 2002), and implement self-regulatory tactics that preserve self-esteem (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). On the other hand, narcissists tend to be impulsive (Vazire & Funder, 2006), fail to learn from their mistakes (Campbell, Goodie & Foster, 2004), and—perhaps most concerning—are prone to many forms of aggression including verbal, physical, and violence (Baumeister, Smart & Boden, 1996; Bushman & Baumeister, 1998).

There is an increasing focus on the multidimensionality of narcissism (i.e., how unique narcissism factors relate to different propensities, such as aggression). For example, Wink (1991) argued that two underlying factors, namely, overt and covert narcissism, exist within this personality construct. Wink described overt narcissists as displaying “...self-assuredness, aggressiveness, exhibitionism, self-indulgence, and disrespect for the needs of others” (p. 596). In contrast, he conceptualized covert narcissism in individuals who are, “...defensive, hypersensitive, anxious, and socially reticent individuals with personal relations marked by self-indulgence, conceit and arrogance, and an insistence on having their own way” (p. 596). While both subtypes are linked to various forms of maladjustment, overt narcissism seems to be more interpersonally disruptive. For example, overt narcissists are described by their partners as “bossy,” “intolerant,” and “cruel” (Wink, 1991; p. 596). Moreover, overt narcissism has been linked to MMPI and MMPI-II profiles (Rathvon & Holstrom, 1996; Wink & Gough, 1990) that reflect serious psychopathology (e.g., depression/anxiety, hostility/irritability) in individuals who are “unpredictable and prone to act out unexpectedly” (Greene, 1991; p. 283).

Robert Raskin’s (Raskin & Hall, 1979; Raskin & Terry, 1988) seminal work on the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI)—the most widely used measure of narcissism in social psychology—emphasized the existence of seven narcissism subfactors that map roughly onto the DSM-III criteria for Narcissistic Personality Disorder (i.e., Authority, Self-sufficiency, Entitlement, Exploitativeness, Vanity, Exhibitionism, and Superiority). Importantly, these subfactors of narcissism comprise a continuum of psychological maladjustment (Raskin & Novacek, 1989). These authors found that narcissistic Entitlement and Exploitativeness, in particular, represent extreme psychological maladjustment, whereas Self-sufficiency and Authority represent milder maladjustment. Notably, Entitlement and Exploitativeness scores correlate most strongly with DSM-III-referenced Antisocial, Passive-Aggressive, and Paranoid personality disorders.

Apart from being obnoxious, narcissistic maladjustment also harbors danger to others. Narcissism has been linked to aggression in response to an external threat to one’s self-esteem (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998) and, more recently, to aggressive responding even in the absence of ego-threat (Martinez, Zeichner, Reidy & Miller, 2008). Narcissists defend themselves aggressively, but also aggress against others when unprovoked. Perhaps most disturbing is that laboratory-controlled studies of the narcissistic personality and aggression have an ecological parallel in some of the most severe forms of aggression. For example, Bushman, Baumeister, Phillips and Gilligan (1999, cited in Baumeister, Bushman & Campbell, 2000) found that incarcerated violent offenders endorsed significantly elevated levels of narcissism. Critically, however, their highest scores were on the NPI subscales of Entitlement and Superiority. This suggests that the dangerous aspects of

narcissism are not vanity and self-admiration but, rather, the inflated sense of superiority and sense of entitlement to special privileges (Baumeister et al., 2000).

Further evidence of ecological validity comes from the study of rape. In a recent literature review, Ryan (2004) describes the rapist as a “sexual narcissist” who believes that he is entitled to the sexual favors of his victim: “They believe sexual force is acceptable and sometimes necessary in the service of their own sexual needs” (p. 583). Similarly, Bushman, Bonacci, Van Dijk, and Baumeister (2003) argue that the narcissist’s inflated sense of entitlement may be linked to his belief that women “owe” him sex. As such, when a woman refuses to comply, the narcissist feels entitled to take what is “rightfully” his by force. Bushman and colleagues devised a laboratory analogue of a sexual interaction in which a female confederate either read or refused to read a pornographic passage to the male participant. Narcissists were found to be more punitive (i.e., providing less monetary reward) toward the female confederate after she refused to read a pornographic passage.

There has been an increase in recent years in the number of studies that have focused on narcissistic aggression. Many of these studies have employed valid laboratory analogues of aggression (e.g., administration of electric shock, noise blasts). The present study examined the link between narcissism and direct aggression under conditions where the narcissist, while provoked in the context of competition, is not compelled by demand characteristics to exercise an aggressive option. Therefore, aggression, defined as administration of electric shock to an opponent, was an option participants had but were not required to use. This “non-response option” represents a more valid conceptualization of aggression based on the participant’s entirely volitional responses.

The purpose of this investigation was to determine which underlying dimensions of narcissism are most closely tied to aggression. Based on the collective research, it was proposed that the underlying narcissism dimensions of Entitlement and Exploitativeness should most strongly tie to aggression. That is, the combined belief that one is entitled to things and ability to exploit others to gain things is especially likely to result in aggression such as in the instance of rape. Consequently, remaining subtraits (i.e., Superiority, Vanity, Self-Sufficiency, Authority, Exhibitionism) were predicted to be statistically unassociated with aggression when controlling for covariance among all factors. While research offers some indication that Superiority might be linked to aggression (Bushman et al., 1999), the evidence for this association is inconsistent, in particular, as it pertains to aggression in non-forensic populations. Therefore, direct relation regarding Superiority was not predicted.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Ninety-one undergraduate men ($M_{\text{age}} = 20$ years; 86% White; $M_{\text{education}} = 15$ years) participated in this study. To provide external validity, participants were told that they would be competing against a male peer in a series of reaction time trials. To maintain the ecological validity of the study, women were excluded based on meta-analyses of aggression in real world settings that found that women demonstrate significantly less direct physical aggression (Archer, 2004).

Table 1

Means, standard deviations, and internal consistencies of narcissism subscales for the current and normative samples

# of items		Current sample			Normative sample		
		<i>M</i>	SD	α	<i>M</i>	SD	α
1	8	4.9	2.3	.79	4.2	2.2	.73
2	7	2.2	1.9	.56	2.2	1.7	.63
3	5	3.0	1.5	.41	2.5	1.4	.54
4	6	2.2	1.6	.56	1.7	1.4	.50
5	5	2.2	1.5	.60	1.5	1.7	.52
6	6	2.1	1.2	.30	2.1	1.5	.50
7	3	1.2	1.1	.46	1.4	1.1	.64

Note. 1 = Authority, 2 = Exhibitionism, 3 = Superiority, 4 = Entitlement, 5 = Exploitativeness, 6 = Self-sufficiency, and 7 = Vanity.

2.2. Materials

Demographic Form: Participants completed a brief form assessing age, race, and education level to confirm that groups were equivalent on these variables.

Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Terry, 1988): Narcissism was measured using the NPI (standardization sample: $M = 15.5$, $SD = 6.7$; Cronbach $\alpha = .83$), which comprises 40 pairs of self-relevant statements. In the present sample ($M = 17.85$, $SD = 7.6$; Range 3–39, Cronbach $\alpha = .86$), results of a one-sample t -test indicated that participants endorsed significantly more narcissistic traits $t(85) = 2.83$, $p < .01$ than the standardization sample. This is likely due to the exclusion of women in the present study. Participants were asked to select the statement that best reflected them. One-point was given each time participants selected a statement of narcissistic tone (e.g., “I am an extraordinary person.”) rather than a statement of less narcissistic tone (e.g., “I am much like everybody else.”). The NPI comprises seven component subscales based upon Raskin and Terry’s (1988) recommended factor solution. This resulted in narcissism subscales thought to most likely relate to aggression (i.e., Entitlement, Exploitativeness, and Superiority), as well as four that were predicted to be unrelated to aggression (i.e., Self-sufficiency, Exhibitionism, Vanity, and Authority). A comparison of means, standard deviations, and Cronbach alphas of the present sample and the normative sample are presented in Table 1. Generally, descriptive statistics and internal reliabilities are consistent with the normative sample.

Response Choice Aggression Paradigm (RCAP). This aggression paradigm (Zeichner, Frey, Parrott & Butryn, 1999), an adaptation of the Taylor (1967) TAP task, measures direct physical aggression under laboratory conditions, wherein participants are allowed to retaliate or to refrain from responding to provocation by a confederate.¹ The option to refrain from aggression is a true non-aggressive option unavailable in other commonly-used tasks and, as such, it better approximates volitional aggression in naturalistic settings (Netter, Hennig, Rohrmann, Wyhidal & Hain-Hermann, 1998). In this paradigm, participants are placed in a competitive reaction time task

¹ This paradigm has been used successfully in studies of laboratory-based aggression of gender differences (Zeichner, Parrott, & Frey, 2003), psychopathy (Reidy, Zeichner, Miller, & Martinez, 2007), gender-role stress (Cohn & Zeichner, 2006), sexual prejudice (Parrott & Zeichner, 2005) and alcohol-mediated aggression (Parrott & Zeichner, 2002).

where electrical shocks are received from and administered to a fictitious opponent following “won” or “lost” trials. The aggression console is a white metal box mounted with electrical switches and light emitting diodes (LEDs). Ten shock push buttons labeled “1” through “10” are arranged horizontally on the console. Shocks are generated by a Precision Regulated Animal Shocker (Coulbourn Instruments, Allentown, Pa). A reaction time switch is located at the center of the console.

The task is presented as a reaction time (RT) competition, in which participants compete against a fictitious opponent who is ostensibly seated in an adjacent chamber. Participants are told that they have the choice to deliver shocks to the opponent as punishment following trials that are either “won” or “lost” and are at liberty to do so as often as they desire throughout the task or to refrain from responding. Participants are informed that the 10 shock intensities available for administration represent levels between 55% and 100% of their pain tolerance determined prior to the task (described below). This procedure is followed to ensure that participants know that the shocks they choose to administer would be experienced by the opponent as ranging between moderate and high. Likewise, participants are informed that the opponent can make similar choices. Shocks administered to participants are accompanied by visual feedback via LEDs paralleling the level of each given shock. The task comprises a series of 24 trials with 12 “win” and 12 “lose” rounds administered at an identical random order to all participants. Participants are shocked independent of whether they “win” or “lose” a given trial.

Aggressive behavior is measured via six indices: (1) *Shock Intensity* (SI) is the average intensity of shocks for trials in which the participant administers a shock; (2) *Shock Duration* (SD) is the average duration of shocks for trials during which the participant administers a shock; (3) *Proportion of Highest Shock* (P10) is the number of times the participant uses the highest shock available for trials in which a shock is administered relative to all shock trials, and is a measure of ‘extreme aggression;’ (4) *Flashpoint Intensity* (FPI) defines the intensity of the first shock administered; (5) *Flashpoint duration* (FPD) is the duration of the first shock administered; and (6) *Shock Frequency* (SF), is the number of trials during which the participant chose to administer a shock. Similar aggression paradigms have been used in previous studies and demonstrated good external validity.¹

2.3. Procedure

Following provision of informed consent and completion of questionnaires, participants were told that they would be competing in a reaction time task against a male opponent who was in the adjacent chamber, and that they would have the opportunity to punish him following each trial through the administration of an electric shock. Participants were told that their opponent could also punish them with shocks. Following each trial, participants were informed whether they “won” or “lost” and were given an opportunity to administer a shock, regardless of the trial outcome. To provide participants with a true non-aggression option, they were informed that they were permitted to refrain entirely from administering shocks. To administer a shock, participants pressed 1 of 10 shock buttons that, ostensibly, incrementally increased the shock intensity from 55% to 100% of the opponent’s predetermined pain tolerance level. Subjective pain tolerance was determined via administration of shocks (0.5 s) in an incremental fashion from the lowest available shock setting, which is imperceptible, until the shocks reach a reported pain tolerance

level. Participants were instructed that their “opponent” will have access to the identical range of shock levels. LEDs provided feedback as to the level of shock participants received from the “opponent.” Trials were presented in a single random win-loss sequence administered to all participants.

3. Results

3.1. Data Reduction

Several of the six aggression indices captured by the RCAP were combined to form three distinct measures. First, as prior research has suggested that shock intensity, duration, and frequency reflect a similar underlying phenomenon (i.e., general aggression [GA]; Carlson, Marcus-Newhall & Miller, 1989), a GA index was created by summing the standardized values of these measures. A second composite index, Initial Aggression (IA), was created by summing the standardized values of first shock intensity and duration to indicate the level at which individuals initiated aggression. Third, extreme aggression (P10) was analyzed individually. The three aggression variables were significantly intercorrelated (all r 's $\geq .48$; all p 's $< .001$). Four participants were excluded from data analyses due to their answers to the manipulation check indicating they did not believe that they were administering shocks to another person during the task. One participant was excluded because he did not complete the NPI. Thus, a final sample of 86 participants was analyzed.

3.2. Narcissism subfactors and aggression

The narcissism subfactors of Entitlement and Exploitativeness were expected to show the strongest links to aggression. As can be seen in Table 2 several narcissism subfactors were significantly positively correlated with multiple indices of aggression. Four subfactors, Entitlement, Exploitativeness, Authority, and Exhibitionism, appeared to have the most consistent and strongest associations with aggression. While each significantly related to the three indices of aggression,

Table 2
Correlation coefficients for narcissism components and aggression

Measure	GA	IA	P10
1. Authority	.21*	.20*	.33**
2. Self-sufficiency	.17	.11	.34***
3. Superiority	.29**	.26*	.19
4. Exhibitionism	.27**	.35*	.34**
5. Vanity	.12	.08	.24*
6. Exploitativeness	.40***	.34***	.45***
7. Entitlement	.40***	.38***	.45***

Note. GA = general aggression; IA = initial aggression and P10 = extreme aggression.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

Entitlement and Exploitativeness exhibited the strongest links. The magnitudes of effect sizes were moderate (Cohen, 1988).

To the extent that narcissism subfactors tap overlapping content, it is possible that bivariate correlations could obscure the true nature of relationships between narcissism subfactors and aggression. To control for subfactor intercorrelation, we next performed three simultaneous regression analyses whereby each aggression index was regressed on the six narcissism subfactors. Examination of all Cook's *D* values revealed that values for all participants on each of the regression equations were below a cutoff of 1 and, as suggested by Cook and Weisberg (1982), indicating that no individual had undue influence on the outcome variables. Multicollinearity was tested by means of variance inflation factors (VIF). VIF values of 1 indicate the model terms are not linearly related, while a value in excess of 10 suggests that multicollinearity may be unduly influencing the least squares estimates. Maximum VIF values in the regression for all regression analyses were < 2. The correlations among the subfactors of the NPI can be seen in Table 3.

As expected, the full model regression equation containing GA as the outcome variable was significant $F(7, 78) = 3.62; p < .01; R^2 = .25$. Congruent with the hypotheses, only Entitlement ($b = .25; r_{\text{partial}} = .23; p < .05$) and Exploitativeness ($b = .28; r_{\text{partial}} = .26; p < .05$) manifested a significant unique relation with the GA score. A similar pattern of results was found for IA, $F(7, 78) = 3.00; p < .01; R^2 = .21$; Entitlement, $b = .26; r_{\text{partial}} = .23; p < .05$; Exploitativeness, $b = .24; r_{\text{partial}} = .22; p = .05$, and P10, $F(7, 78) = 5.07; p < .001; R^2 = .31$; Entitlement, $b = .27; r_{\text{partial}} = .25; p < .05$; Exploitativeness, $b = .23; r_{\text{partial}} = .22; p < .05$, indicating that Entitlement and Exploitativeness were the components most strongly linking narcissism to all three measures of aggression. In fact, Entitlement and Exploitativeness were the only narcissism subfactors related to aggression in the present sample (see Table 4).

4. Discussion

The present study sought to identify factors of narcissism positively associated with direct, volitional aggression. We hypothesized that the relationship between narcissism and aggression would be strongest for the Entitlement and Exploitativeness subfactors. Results supported the hypotheses for all aggression indices. Entitlement and Exploitativeness were the strongest predictors of the three outcome variables and, indeed, the only significant predictors of aggression when

Table 3
Correlation coefficients for NPI subscales

Measure	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Authority	–	.47**	.42**	.44**	.40**	.21*	.43**
2. Self-sufficiency			.29**	.28**	.43**	.17	.35**
3. Superiority				.35**	.28**	.20 ^a	.42**
4. Exhibitionism					.35**	.30**	.37**
5. Exploitativeness						.30**	.45**
6. Vanity							.29**
7. Entitlement							–

Note. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$ and ^a marginal.

Table 4
Coefficients for regression analyses

Measure	<i>b</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>r</i> _{partial}
<i>General aggression</i>			
1. Authority	−.07	−0.53	−.06
2. Self-sufficiency	−.06	−0.48	−.06
3. Superiority	.13	1.15	.13
4. Exhibitionism	.10	0.85	.10
5. Vanity	−.07	−0.66	−.08
6. Exploitativeness	.28*	2.34	.26
7. Entitlement	.25*	2.04	.23
<i>Initial aggression</i>			
1. Authority	−.03	−0.20	−.02
2. Self-sufficiency	−.12	−0.97	−.11
3. Superiority	.11	0.90	.10
4. Exhibitionism	.11	0.91	.10
5. Vanity	−.10	−0.93	−.10
6. Exploitativeness	.24*	1.98	.22
7. Entitlement	.26*	2.11	.23
<i>Extreme aggression</i>			
1. Authority	.05	0.40	.05
2. Self-sufficiency	.11	1.02	.12
3. Superiority	−.10	−0.85	−.10
4. Exhibitionism	.13	1.12	.13
5. Vanity	.04	0.42	.05
6. Exploitativeness	.23*	2.00	.22
7. Entitlement	.27*	2.29	.25

Note. * $p < .05$.

all narcissism factors were entered in the regression equations. The findings for the general aggression index indicate that entitled and exploitative narcissists may be at increased risk to use aggression more frequently across different interpersonal contexts, in various forms (e.g., direct, indirect, physical, verbal), and to do so at greater levels within each of those contexts (Bushman & Anderson, 1998).

The data also indicated that Entitlement and Exploitativeness were the only narcissism subtraits that contributed to the prediction of initial aggression. This index reflects a tendency to initiate aggression in an explosive manner with greater intensity and duration rather than “testing the waters” by using initial low levels of aggression and increasing the level of aggression as the provoking interaction progresses. From an ecological perspective on aggressive interactions, it is not uncommon to observe an escalation from verbal aggression to a shoving match and, ultimately, to a physical fight where two or more individuals strike and kick one another, if not worse. However, the highly entitled and exploitative individual may forego the verbally aggressive statements and relatively innocuous shoving for the immediate engagement in intense aggressive acts. This argument is further supported by the third simultaneous regression analysis which demonstrated that participants who endorsed high levels of these component traits evinced maximal aggression frequently.

Measures of initial and extreme aggression may represent forms of aggression that are more affective/reactive than representing calculated manipulation, while general aggression may represent a combination of affective and instrumental motivations. The combination between these elements (i.e., hostile/reactive and instrumental motivations), in the case of the highly entitled and exploitative narcissist, is of particular concern as it may lead to some of the most severe and delinquent acts of violence. For example, in discussing rape (Felson & Krohn, 1990) and rape reactance theory (Baumeister, Cantanese & Wallace, 2002), theorists have concluded that most sexually-motivated rapists use violence as a means to an end. This form of aggression is thought to be driven by the rapist's sense of entitlement to sexual favors and his drive to exploit the victim for that purpose (Bushman et al., 2003; Ryan, 2004). Bushman and colleagues (2003) contend that entitlement increases the risk of the narcissist becoming prone to hostile and reactive aggression and, as such, violence may become extreme and exceed the level of aggression that would have accomplished attainment of the perpetrator's sexual goal. Baumeister and colleagues (2002) also suggest that rapists may be motivated by anger and a consequent intent to punish the woman. Hence, when the victim thwarts the attacker's sense of entitlement, resulting anger may speedily lead to explosive and exaggerated violence.

The present study confirms previous findings regarding the link between entitlement and laboratory aggression (Campbell, Bonacci, Shelton, Exline & Bushman, 2004; Konrath, Bushman & Campbell, 2006), and bolsters observational research indicating that violent offenders endorse similar characteristics (Bushman et al., 1999). It is noteworthy that in the current study, narcissism traits predicted aggression in the absence of ego-threat. This fact parallels other new findings demonstrating that the relationship between narcissism and displaced aggression is particularly strong when direct threat is not applied but, rather, is delayed (Martinez et al., 2008). The present study also lends support to the argument that entitlement and exploitativeness may represent the most maladaptive of the narcissistic traits (e.g., Raskin & Novacek, 1989). Interestingly, these results suggest that superiority does not play a role in aggression by narcissistic individuals. This particular finding is inconsistent with at least one prior study showing that violent prison inmates reported elevated levels of both entitlement and superiority (Bushman et al., 1999). Therefore, it is not entirely clear what role narcissistic superiority plays in aggression. It is possible that Superiority represents a predictor of aggression that is unique to the violent offender population. In this case, the present study would not be a proper test of its role. Further research on this issue is needed.

The findings of the present investigation must be interpreted with caution for several reasons. First, the obtained sample of participants was relatively homogeneous, as a majority were single, Caucasian, and all were high school graduates enrolled in a university. This study would be strengthened by inclusion of women, non-collegiate and forensic samples, and greater ethnic diversity. Second, we did not assess cognitive and affective variables that may have moderated the relationship between the narcissism subfactors and the three measures of aggressive behavior. While it was not our intention to address the question of differential motivation to aggress at this point in time, future studies addressing these questions would add significant knowledge on this subject matter. In addition, the external validity of the current results would be improved by the inclusion of multiple measures of aggression (e.g., self-report, laboratory, naturalistic). Furthermore, in reference to external validity, the findings related to two of the outcome variables have yet to be replicated consistently. While the General Aggression index has been established as

externally valid (for review see Bushman & Anderson, 1998), Extreme and Initial Aggression are relatively novel measures in this area of research.

Despite these limitations, the present study contributes to the literature by adding more resolution to our understanding of the relationship between narcissism and aggression. The present findings indicate that a particularly toxic combination of narcissistic subtraits may operate to increase the risk, not only for general aggressive behavior, but for explosive and extreme aggression in thwarted narcissistic individuals. Entitlement and exploitative tendencies in the narcissistic individual may, therefore, not only be linked to greater maladjustment and psychopathology, but represent a particularly high risk factor for aggressive behavior and violence.

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