

Narcissism and Empathy: Validity Evidence for the Narcissistic Personality Inventory

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Abstract: Three empathy questionnaires were correlated with scores on the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI), and the predicted negative relationship was observed in two of the three cases. In addition, the Exploiteness/Entitlement (E/E) subscale of the NPI was inversely related to all three empathy scales and directly related to another hypothesized measure of narcissism. Unexpected negative correlations between the E/E subscale and social desirability scales were interpreted as evidence of E/E subscale sensitivity to the manipulative dimension of narcissistic relationship styles. These data further support the construct validity of the NPI in general and of the Exploiteness/Entitlement subscale in particular.

Contemporary narcissism is a phenomenon of increasing and controversial concern at both theoretical (Kernberg, 1975; Kohut, 1977) and cultural (Lasch, 1979; Mazlish, 1982) levels. Formal recognition of the pathology of narcissistic self-regard is made apparent in the most recent Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM III) through inclusion of the Narcissistic Personality Disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 1980), and Akhtar and Thomson (1982) have argued that this situation within the context of such other diagnoses as the borderline, obsessional, hysterical, and antisocial personalities and of the atypical affective disorders necessitates the development of discriminative diagnostic procedures.

The Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI) developed by Raskin and Hall (1979, 1981) represents a psychometric approach to facilitating proper identification of pathological narcissism. This questionnaire uses a forced-choice format employing 54 items explicitly designed to measure the traits specified by DSM III as descriptive of the disorder, and questionnaire development has been accompanied by appropriate attempts to demonstrate its reliability and validity (Emmons, 1981, in press; Raskin, 1980; Raskin & Hall, 1979, 1981).

DSM III lists a lack of empathy as frequently associated with narcissism,

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and the purpose of this study was to further explore the construct validity of the NPI by examining correlations between it and questionnaire measures of empathy. Specifically, the hypothesis tested was that the NPI would correlate negatively with such measures; and in addition, it was argued that these correlations would be in the moderate range (.20 to .40) because DSM III suggests that poor empathic ability is not an invariant characteristic of the narcissistic personality. The plausibility of this hypothesis was further suggested by the positive association observed between the NPI and Eysenck's Psychoticism scale (Raskin & Hall, 1981) which in turn correlates negatively with empathy (Hekmat, Khajavi, & Mehryar, 1974).

Method

Subjects

The subjects employed in this investigation were 160 undergraduates in an introductory psychology course. The 100 females and 60 males ranged in age from 17 to 38 years with a mean of 20.1 years. Participation was voluntary and was rewarded with extra course credit.

Justification for use of this group of subjects rested on three arguments. First, similar to the position of Raskin and Hall (1981), it was assumed that if normality is seen as continuous with abnormality, then narcissistic characteristics should be apparent in "normal" individuals, though perhaps to a lesser de-

gree than in persons for whom the formal diagnosis is appropriate. Secondly, some critiques of contemporary American culture (e.g., Lasch) have suggested that narcissism is endemic to the current social structure, and this suggests that analyzing members of the general population should be productive in further clarifying the nature of this personality dimension. Finally, as emphasized by Mazlish, narcissism also is seen within certain perspectives (e.g., Kohut) as a stage of normal personality development through which an individual may or may not proceed at the age-appropriate time. Use of a sample with large numbers of younger adults therefore might facilitate examination of individuals with personalities more likely to display a stronger narcissistic component. Raskin and Hall (1981) failed to observe significant correlations between the NPI and age, but such a possibility was reexamined in this investigation.

Procedure

Questionnaire measurement of empathy is itself a complex issue, in part because of the multidimensional nature of the phenomenon (Deutsch & Madle, 1975; Mehrabian & Epstein, 1972). Use of more than one empathy measure therefore was deemed necessary to ensure adequate sampling of its various facets, and three separate questionnaires were chosen with each based on a different definition of empathy. The Hogan (1969) Empathy Scale (HES) was developed with an understanding of empathy as "the intellectual or imaginative apprehension of another's condition or state of mind without actually experiencing that person's feelings" (p. 308). In contrast, the Mehrabian and Epstein Scale (MEES) emphasizes the emotional component in which there is "a vicarious emotional response to the perceived emotional experiences of others" (p. 525). Finally, the Smith (1973) Empathic Personality Questionnaire (SEPQ; see p. 61) was used to identify individuals who are high in empathy, defined in a more limited sense "as the degree of similarity that one person assumes be-

tween himself and another person" (p. 56). In addition to the negative correlation between these scales and the NPI, it was hypothesized that correlations among them would be positive.

An additional attempt to demonstrate the validity of the NPI involved examining correlations between it and the Narcissistic Personality Disorder Scale (NPDS; Solomon, 1982) which was extracted from the MMPI. A positive correlation between these two narcissism scales plus additional negative correlations between the MMPI-NPDS and empathy measures would further strengthen evidence for validity. Akhtar and Thomson have suggested that males are more likely to be narcissistic, and this hypothesis was also tested. Since DSM III emphasizes exaggerated sensitivity to the opinions of others as one aspect of the Narcissistic Personality Disorder, the possibility of confounding by social desirability response sets was controlled for through use of the Crowne-Marlowe Social Desirability Scale (CMSDS; Crowne & Marlowe, 1964) and of the Edwards Social Desirability Scale (ESDS; Edwards, 1957). Finally, Emmons (in press) recently examined the factor structure of the NPI and identified four discrete subscales: Exploitativeness/Entitlement (E/E), Leadership/Authority (L/A), Superiority/Arrogance (S/A), and Self-Absorption/Self-Admiration (S/S). Subscale correlations with the other questionnaires were also examined as further tests of the empirical hypotheses.

In summary, subjects in addition to the NPI also responded to three measures of empathy, to another putative index of narcissism, and to two social desirability scales. Six specific hypotheses were examined: that the NPI and its subscales would correlate negatively with the empathy scales, that the NPI and its subscales would correlate positively with the NPDS, that the NPI and its subscales would correlate negatively with age, that males would score higher on the NPI, that the empathy scales would intercorrelate positively, and that the NPDS would correlate negatively

Table 1
Correlations Between Narcissism, Empathy, Social Desirability, Age, and Sex Variables

Variables ^a	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.
1. NPI	.05	-.20**	.04	-.37***	-.11	-.06	.14*	-.17*
2. NPDS	—	-.04	-.25**	-.13	-.36***	-.58***	.03	-.17*
3. MEES		—	.26***	.14*	-.03	.00	-.37***	.06
4. HES			—	-.31***	.13	.40***	-.03	-.05
5. SEPQ				—	.35***	-.02	-.18*	.04
6. CMSDS					—	.46***	-.04	.15
7. ESDS						—	.21**	.20*
8. SEX							—	-.08
9. AGE								—

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

^aVariables: NPI = Narcissistic Personality Inventory, NPDS = Narcissistic Personality Disorder Scale, MEES = Mehrabian-Epstein Empathy Scale, HES = Hogan Empathy Scale, SEPQ = Smith Empathic Personality Questionnaire, CMSDS = Crowne-Marlowe Social Desirability Scale, ESDS = Edwards Social Desirability Scale.

with empathy. Statistical analyses of these hypotheses involved one-tailed tests, since the directions of the relationships were specified.

Results

Results of the correlational analysis using full scale NPI scores are reviewed in Table 1. Three hypotheses supporting the validity of the NPI were confirmed. The NPI correlated negatively with two of the three empathy measures (the MEES and the SEPQ), and NPI scores were slightly though significantly higher for males and for the younger members of the sample. However, the NPI and the MMPI scale were not significantly related. The NPDS did correlate negatively with one of the empathy measures (the HES), and its relationship with the SEPQ approached conventional levels of significance ($p < .056$). All empathy scales were significantly interrelated; but surprisingly, the correlation between the HES and the SEPQ was negative. Narcissism measures apparently were not contaminated by attempts of subjects to present a socially desirable image; and in fact, a strong negative relationship was apparent between need for approval and responding on the NPDS. As in

previous research (e.g., Mehrabian & Epstein, 1972), females displayed higher levels of empathy. An association was apparent between social desirability and two of the empathy questionnaires, the sex variable, and age.

Relationships between the NPI and other variables were further examined when the variance due to age and sex were partialled out. The only meaningful change in any of the data was a reduction in the correlation between the MEES and the SEPQ to a nonsignificant level.

The most striking finding in the correlations using the NPI subscales was the pattern of the Exploiteness/Entitlement data. The E/E subscale correlated positively with the NPDS ($r = .25, p < .01$) and negatively with all three empathy questionnaires (MEES, $r = -.24, p < .01$; HES, $r = -.20, p < .01$; SEPQ, $r = -.35, p < .001$). Other observations supporting subscale validity included negative correlations between all other subscales and the SEPQ (L/A, $r = -.32, p < .001$; S/A, $r = -.22, p < .01$; S/S, $r = -.20, p < .01$), a negative correlation between Superiority/Arrogance and the MEES ($r = -.25, p < .01$), and a negative correlation between Lead-

ership/ Authority and age ($r = -.18, p < .05$). Surprisingly, the HES correlated positively with two of the NPI factors (L/A, $r = .28, p < .001$; S/S, $r = .16, p < .05$), and E/E scores were inversely associated with social desirability (CMSDS, $r = -.43, p < .001$; ESDS, $r = -.34, p < .001$). For the L/A subscale, the correlation with the ESDS was positive ($r = .21, p < .01$). No other relationships were statistically significant, and partialling out variance due to age and sex failed to produce any important changes in these data.

Discussion

The central purpose of this investigation was to further examine the construct validity of the NPI by testing the hypothesis that NPI scores would correlate moderately and negatively with questionnaire indices of empathy. Intercorrelations among the three empathy scales reaffirmed the multidimensional complexity of the empathy concept; nevertheless, the predicted NPI-empathy relationship was observed in two of the three cases. In addition, the NPI-age relationship was congruent with the idea that this inventory measures a relatively immature level of personality functioning; and the slightly higher NPI scores for males supports a suggestion made previously of an association between sex and narcissism (Akhtar & Thomson, 1982). Not all of the data were supportive, however, because the NPI failed to correlate as predicted with the HES and with the MMPI-NPDS.

In contrast to the mildly supportive results for the full scale NPI, findings for the E/E subscale served as strong evidence for its construct validity. This subscale was directly related to NPDS scores and inversely related to all three empathy measures. Based on their data, Raskin and Hall (1981) concluded that "the characteristic of interpersonal exploitiveness or social manipulation may be a particularly salient variable in narcissism"; and the results of the present study are clearly in line with such a conclusion.

Except for two positive correlations

with the HES, the other significant associations between the NPI subscales and empathy were in the predicted direction, and the SEPQ apparently was most sensitive to the dimensions of empathy relevant to understanding narcissism. The positive NPI-HES relationships were surprising and perhaps more reflective of the difficulties involved in operationalizing empathy than of any problems inherent in the NPI. The empathy questionnaire intercorrelations tend to support such an analysis.

Another unexpected finding was the negative correlation between the E/E subscale and measures of social desirability, and a parallel effect was observed with the NPDS. A clue to the meaning of this result may be apparent in the negative correlation obtained by Raskin and Hall (1981) between the NPI and the Lie Scale of the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire. Raskin and Hall suggest that if high scores on the Lie Scale are indicative of social naivete as had been previously suggested, then the negative correlation with the NPI may represent further evidence of narcissistic interpersonal exploitiveness. In addition, Francis, Pearson, and Kay (1983) have perhaps most recently pointed out that current interpretations of the Lie Scale emphasize it as a measure of a personality dimension dealing with a lack of insight or a tendency toward social acquiescence or conformity. In light of these considerations, the E/E-social desirability relationships may thus serve as further evidence for construct validity by revealing a keen insight into social relationships within the context of a disregard for social conventions that makes interpersonal exploitiveness possible.

In review, the data of this study tended to support the construct validity of the full scale NPI; however, the evidence for the E/E subscale was especially compelling. The E/E results may be of particular import because of the conclusion of Emmons (in press) that this factor is tapping the maladaptive aspects of the trait. The NPI therefore may have diagnostic potential; and in addition, it may prove useful in research at-

tempting to develop an empirical understanding of narcissism (e.g., Emmons, in press) and attempting to clarify further the operation of narcissism within the contemporary cultural environment (e.g., Watson, Hood, & Morris, in press).

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