

Self-reported Emotional and Social Intelligence and Empathy as Distinctive Predictors of Narcissism

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Abstract

In the study, we were interested in the association between narcissism and three psychological constructs, which are considered important in interpersonal relationships – emotional intelligence (EI), social intelligence (SI) and empathy. We supposed that narcissism is positively correlated with EI and with the processing of social information and social skills facets of SI. At the same time, negative correlations between narcissism and social awareness and empathy were expected. The results were gathered upon 306 participants aged from 19 to 26 years (242 females and 64 males), who completed the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI), the Emotional Skills and Competence Questionnaire (ESCQ), the Tromsø Social Intelligence Scale (TSIS) and the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI). The results supported the assumption of positive association between narcissism, EI and SI, while accompanying negative association with empathy. EI, social skills, perspective taking, emphatic concern and age together explain 28% of variance in predicting narcissism. Results support our expectation about differential relationship of EI, SI, and empathy with narcissism and thus confirming differential validity of these three constructs.

Keywords: emotional intelligence, empathy, narcissism, social intelligence

Introduction

In recent years, research on narcissism as a personality trait expanded significantly. One of the reasons for this research expansion could be the visible rise of narcissism levels over the generations. A cross-temporal meta-analysis (Twenge, Konrath, Foster, Campbell, & Bushman, 2008a, 2008b) showed that scores on narcissism questionnaires among American college students have increased over the generations in the last 25 years and these might be characteristic

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for other western cultures. What do these narcissism trends mean for our interpersonal relationships? To get what they want, narcissists should possess good interpersonal skills, encompassed in the psychological constructs of social intelligence (SI) and emotional intelligence (EI), but not necessary emphatic concern for other. We suppose that narcissism and empathy are opposite in their relation to narcissism, although empathy served in the early stage of EI construct development even as an operationalization of EI or at least of its component appraisal and recognition of emotion in others (Davies, Stankov, & Roberts, 1998).

According to The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV-TR; American Psychiatric Association, APA, 2000), a grandiose sense of self-importance is the primary element of narcissism, along with the need for the admiration from others, arrogance, entitlement, lack of empathy, envy, and the tendency to exploit others. According to some authors (Brown, Budzek, & Tamborski, 2009), these characteristics form two clusters: the first, intrapersonal, is primarily concerned with a grandiose sense of self-importance and the second, interpersonal, is concerned with an entitled, socially objectifying sense of the self in relation to others. Possible constructs, relevant for interpersonal characteristics of narcissists are of interest in this study. Regarding interpersonal characteristics of narcissists, previous studies found that they are extraverted and non-agreeable (Paulhus & Williams, 2002), more aggressive (Fossati, Borroni, Eisenberg, & Maffei, 2010; Reidy, Foster, & Zeichner, 2010), more agentic and less communally oriented (Campbell, Rudlich, & Sedikides, 2002). Moreover, they possess a strong desire for power and dominance (Bradlee & Emmons, 1992; Foster, Shrira, & Campbell, 2006). Interpersonally narcissists report inflated perceptions of their own positive input in a group (John & Robins, 1994) and like to "show off" or otherwise impress others (Buss & Chiodo, 1991). They show preferences for self-enhancement statements, in contrast to modesty and approval seeking (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). Narcissists also report enhanced levels of machiavellianism (Campbell et al., 2002), which is in accordance with their exploitative and manipulative behaviours towards others in order to promote their own interests. At this point, the question of the interpersonal skills and abilities of narcissists arises. A certain level of interpersonal skills and abilities could be expected in order to exploit or manipulate others. Three constructs related to the area of individual differences regarding abilities, competences and skills, which allow individuals to take part successfully in interpersonal relationships are EI, SI, and empathy. These three constructs are highly interrelated (Fedakova & Jelenova, 2004) and, due to very diverse definitions of EI and SI, they overlap considerably in some of their operationalizations.

Empathy is an important interpersonal construct, which improves the quality of and the satisfaction with relationships (Leith & Baumeister, 1998). Lack of empathy is a diagnostic feature of narcissism (APA, 2000), which is why a strong negative association between narcissism and empathy could be expected. More

studies supported these expectations (e.g. Banks, 2008; Ghorbani, Watson, Hamzavy, & Weathington, 2010; Watson, Grisham, Trotter, & Biderman, 1984; Zagon & Jackson, 1994; Zhou, Zhou, & Zhang; 2010), showing that narcissists indeed lack empathic concern for others. However, regarding the cognitive component of empathy, not all studies found a negative association. For example, Ghorbani and colleagues (2010) found a negative association between narcissism and empathic concern, but no association with perspective taking – cognitive aspect of empathy, indicating that some narcissists might be able to take perspective of others although they do not feel or they are not motivated to feel compassion and empathic concern for others.

Concerning the association between narcissism and EI and SI, several inconsistencies in research findings are present, supposedly due to their diverse definitions and consequently very diverse measures of EI and SI. Possible candidates of SI components or specific abilities are perceptiveness of others' internal states and moods, general ability to deal with other people, knowledge about social rules and social life, insight and sensitivity in complex social situations, use of social techniques to manipulate others, perspective taking, social adaptation (Kosmitzki & John, 1993). Silvera, Martinussen and Dahl (2001) asked experts to define SI and according to their answers authors formed a "working" definition of SI as the ability to understand other people and how they will react to different social situations and a self-reported questionnaire of SI, measuring three components of SI: ability to understand and predict other people's behaviours and feelings, social skills, which stresses the behavioural aspects of the construct by assessing the ability to enter new social situations and social adaptation, and social (un)awareness, which relates to the tendency to be unaware of or surprised by events in social situations. We found no studies concerning the association between narcissism and SI but due to largely overlapping constructs with empathy and EI, some predictions can be made upon them. The first component of SI is closely related to the cognitive aspect of empathy where previous studies found negative or no important associations (e.g. Ghorbani et al., 2010; Watson et al., 1984). Behavioural component of SI – social skills – is a facet social awareness of the Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire (TEIQue; Petrides, 2009), where positive association with narcissism was found (Petrides, Vernon, Schermer, & Veselka, 2011). These results go well with the idea that narcissists should possess some traits and abilities, which allow them to be successful in the society in spite of social undesirability of exploitativeness/entitlement component of narcissism (Watson & Morris, 1991). The third component of SI - social awareness - is maybe the most interesting regarding its association with narcissism. Narcissistic individuals often do not react regarding the context of social situation but in their own specific manner, which means that they are less sensitive to demands of social environment (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). It is not known whether narcissists do not know how to appropriately react in different situations or it is just not in their interest. However, studies found that narcissists show false beliefs on being

perceived more positively than they really are (John & Robins, 1994) thus their awareness of social environment is maybe really impaired.

SI is closely related to EI which was firstly defined as "the subset of social intelligence that involves the ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one's thinking and actions" (Salovey & Mayer, 1990; p. 185). For individuals with high levels of EI, more pro-social behaviour, perspective taking, self-control in social situation, adaptation and compromise in relationships, valuing close relationships and general advantage in social skills is characteristic (Schutte et al., 2001). High EI is generally described as beneficial to those with whom that person interacts. For example, managing the emotions of others leads to a positive outcome for both parties, such as calming a colleague's angry mood. Nevertheless, EI could relate also to negative outcomes (Austin, Farrelly, Black, & Moore, 2007). A clear example would be an individual making use of high-level capabilities to read and manage emotions of others to manipulate their behaviour to suit her/his interests. Manipulation is a characteristic of narcissists so we could expect higher EI in narcissists, which would allow them to manipulate others to get what they want. A study by Petrides and his colleagues (2011) found a positive association between general trait EI and narcissism thus supporting our expectations. Among facets of trait EI, emotion management (others) and social awareness were most strongly related to narcissism along with assertiveness and self-esteem. High social awareness in this questionnaire refers to accomplished networkers with superior social skills which is closely related to social skills as behavioural aspect of SI, but not to social awareness defined by Silvera et al. (2001) which relates to the tendency to be aware of or unsurprised by events in social situations.

The association between narcissism and three psychological constructs, important in interpersonal relationships, namely EI, SI and empathy were the interest of our study. We assume that narcissism is positively related to EI and to some aspects of SI since these abilities allow successful manipulation with others, which is characteristic for narcissists. At the same time, we expect a lower level of social awareness in narcissists, since previous studies show lower accuracy in recognizing other's perceptions about them (John & Robins, 1994). We also expect negative association between narcissism and empathy, constantly found in previous studies (Banks, 2008; Ghorbani et al., 2010; Watson et al., 1984), and thus providing evidence for discriminative validity of EI regarding empathy.

Method

Participants

The participants represented 306 Slovene students (20.9% were men) from University of Ljubljana and University of Maribor. Age of participants ranged from 19 to 26 years ($M=20.8$; $SD=1.7$).

Measures

Narcissism was assessed with the *Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI*; Raskin & Hall, 1979). This measure consists of 40 forced-choice items (range: 0-40). The items contain pairs of statements such as "*Sometimes I tell good stories*" (non-narcissistic) versus "*Everybody likes to hear my stories*" (narcissistic). For each item, participants chose one of the two statements for which they felt applied to them more. The full-scale narcissism score is well validated and has good internal and test-retest reliabilities (del Rosario & White, 2005; Raskin & Terry, 1988). The reliability of the total NPI score in our sample was $\alpha=.83$.

Emotional intelligence was assessed with *Emotional Skills and Competence Questionnaire (ESCQ*; Takšić, 2001). ESCQ is a self-report measure that consists of 45 items divided into three subscales: *Perceiving and understanding emotions*, *Expressing and labelling emotions*, *Managing and regulating emotions*. The sum of all three scales can be used as a measure of general emotional competence, due to high correlations between these three scales, which was the case in our study. The participants were asked to answer each item according to how they usually think and feel. This measure is a 5-point Likert-type ($1 = \textit{never}$, $2 = \textit{seldom}$, $3 = \textit{occasionally}$, $4 = \textit{usually}$, and $5 = \textit{always}$). A cross-cultural validation of ESCQ (Faria et al., 2006) provided evidence of its good validity and reliability. Reliability of the total score found in our study was $\alpha=.92$.

Social intelligence was assessed with *The Tromsø Social Intelligence Scale (TSIS*; Silvera et al., 2001). TSIS is a self-report measure including 21 items divided into three subscales: *Processing social information*, *Social skills* and *Social awareness*. Each of the subscales comprises of 7 items conducted as a 7-point Likert-type scale. Authors of the scale (Silvera et al., 2001) provide evidence for good internal consistency ($\alpha>.79$). Alpha coefficients for subscales were Processing social information $\alpha=.84$; Social skills $\alpha=.80$; and Social awareness $\alpha=.79$.

Empathy was assessed with the *Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI*; Davis, 1980). This measure is a 28-item, 5-point Likert-type ($0 = \textit{does not describe me well}$ to $4 = \textit{describes me very well}$) scale that assesses four dimensions of empathy: *Perspective taking*, *Fantasy*, *Empathic concern* and *Personal distress*. Each of these four subscales is comprised of 7 items, and the possible range of scores for each subscale is 0 to 28. There is evidence for IRI's subscales construct validity,

good internal reliabilities ($\alpha > .70$) and test-retest reliabilities ($\alpha > .60$) (e.g., Bernstein & Davis, 1982; Carey, Fox, & Spraggins, 1988; Davis, 1983). In our study, only Perspective taking and Empathic concern were included since they are the most related factors in predicting pro-social and antisocial outcomes and are more prototypically representative of popular conceptions of empathy (Konrath, O'Brien, & Hsing, 2011). Reliability for these two scales in our research were $\alpha = .73$ for Perspective taking and $\alpha = .71$ for Empathic concern.

Procedure

Participants responded anonymously and all scales were administered in an online setting. All participants volunteered to participate in the study. Participants were reached by e-mails circulating different student mailing groups at the University of Ljubljana and at the University of Maribor or on social networks (Face book through an "event"), where they found information about our research and could follow a link to the survey pool. When a participant concluded the survey, they were kindly asked to forward the questionnaire link to the people they knew and would be willing to take part in such a research.

Results

The correlation matrix for all variables is presented in Table 1. Narcissism is positively associated with EI and two aspects of SI, namely social skills and processing of social information, and negatively with emotional and cognitive aspect of empathy.

Table 1. *Descriptive Statistics and Inter-correlations among Study Variables*

| Scale | Variable | 1. | 2. | 3. | 4. | 5. | 6. | 7. |
|-------|-------------------------------------|--------|-------|-------|--------|-------|-------|-------|
| NPI | 1. Narcissism | | | | | | | |
| IRI | 2. Perspective taking | -.14** | | | | | | |
| | 3. Emphatic concern | -.19** | .30** | | | | | |
| ESCQ | 4. Emotional intelligence | .38** | .23** | .17** | | | | |
| | 5. Processing of social information | .27** | .29** | .22** | .68** | | | |
| TSIS | 6. Social skills | .33** | .18** | .05 | .47** | .40** | | |
| | 7. Social awareness | .01 | .35** | .12* | .22** | .28** | .29** | - |
| | <i>M</i> | 12.60 | 22.30 | 26.70 | 162.80 | 34.50 | 32.30 | 32.70 |
| | <i>SD</i> | 6.40 | 3.60 | 4.10 | 20.20 | 6.10 | 7.40 | 6.80 |

Note. NPI = Narcissistic Personality Inventory; IRI = Interpersonal Reactivity Index; ESCQ = Emotional Skills and Competence Questionnaire; TSIS = Tromsø Social Intelligence Scale.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

In order to explore the amount of variance in narcissism, which could be explained by interpersonal constructs, a hierarchical multiple regression was performed. In the first step, participants' age and gender were entered. Next, general score of EI and SI and emotional and cognitive component of empathy were entered. Results presented in Table 2 show that the mentioned predictors could reliably predict narcissism. They jointly accounted for 30% of total variance. This effect size could be considered as medium. In the first step, gender was not an important predictor, but age explained 2% of variance: older subjects reported less narcissism than younger. With respect to interpersonal constructs, both aspects of empathy, and social skills and EI were important predictors. Together they explained 30% of variance. These results are in accordance with our hypothesis about the positive association between narcissism and SI and EI.

Table 2. *Hierarchical Regression Analysis: Predicting Narcissism from Gender and Age (Step 1), Emotional Intelligence, Social Intelligence and Empathy (Step 2)*

| Predictor | ΔR^2 | β |
|----------------------------------|--------------|---------|
| Step 1 | .02* | |
| Gender | | -.03 |
| Age | | -.14** |
| Step 2 | .28** | |
| Processing of social information | | .07 |
| Social skills | | .22** |
| Social awareness | | -.04 |
| Perspective taking | | -.19** |
| Emphatic concern | | -.22** |
| Emotional intelligence | | .31** |
| Total R^2 | .30** | |

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Discussion

The results of the study support our expectations about negative association between narcissism and empathy and positive association between narcissism and SI and EI. Empathy, SI and EI are partly overlapping constructs, yet they each explained a unique part of variance in narcissism.

Lack of empathy is a diagnostic feature of narcissism (APA, 2000), which was found in many studies (e.g. Banks, 2008; Ghorbani et al., 2010; Watson et al., 1984; Zagon & Jackson, 1994; Zhou et al., 2010). Consequently, negative

association between narcissism and empathy was expected and supported by our study. In situations where people would generally feel obligated to help one in need the narcissists would refuse to help if the behaviour was not in accordance to their own selfish goals. Although some studies (e.g. Ghorbani et al., 2010) reported that narcissism was negatively related to empathic concern – the emotional component of empathy but not to perspective taking – cognitive component of empathy, our study found negative association with both components of empathy. Perspective taking relates to the individual's self-reported frequency of willingness to see situations also from the perspective of others and does not relate to the actual ability to see the situation from the perspective of others. Our results indicate that narcissists do not consider others' perspective, more likely because they are not motivated than because they were incapable of doing it.

Our results support the idea that higher SI is characteristic for narcissists. The total score on the NPI is positively correlated with the processing of social information and social skills but unrelated to social awareness. These results indicate that narcissistic individuals are capable of understanding and predicting behaviour of others. They possess good social skills, which can be confirmed by their success in making first contact, starting conversations with others, joining the social interactions and making positive first impressions. Using these skills, they can pursue their grandiose goals and assure optimal conditions for further exploitation of social situations (Morf & Rodewalt, 2001). No association between narcissism and the subscale social awareness indicate that for narcissists no systematic unawareness or awareness of their impact on others and social situations is characteristic. A negative association was expected according to previous findings (John & Robins, 1994), in which narcissists were not found to be accurate in assessing their own performance, since they overestimated it compared to non-narcissists. Low rate of awareness of narcissists' own impact on social relations could also assure optimal conditions for further exploitation of social situations (Morf & Rodewalt, 2001). However, it should be noted that the SI scale of social awareness measures a more general aspect of the awareness of others' reactions to our behaviour, thus resulting in the discrepancy between ours and previous findings.

EI was the third interpersonal construct included in our study. The results indicate that EI is the strongest predictor of narcissism; the narcissists possess abilities to perceive, express, label, understand and manage emotions of others as well as their own. It seems that EI is a necessity for individuals with highly expressed narcissism in order to exploit and manipulate their environment. In previous studies, EI was recognised as an important element in emotional manipulation when narcissists exhibited manipulative behaviours towards others (Petrides et al., 2011).

We should note the limitations of our study regarding the used questionnaires. Although the NPI is the most frequently used questionnaire of non-pathological

overt form of narcissism, its validity issues warrant a cautious use (Brown et al., 2009; Rosenthal & Hooley, 2010). The Tromsø Social Intelligence Scale (Silvera et al., 2001) that we used in our research contains a rather specific view on SI, since it contains subscales, which are not present in other questionnaires of SI. Considering the findings (John & Robins, 1994) about narcissists' twisted perception of their influence on social situations as well as about their attractiveness and intelligence (Gabriel, Critelli, & Ee, 1994), self-reported measures of SI and EI may not be optimal.

In our research, we tried to expand the understanding of the interpersonal aspect of the non-pathological narcissism construct. Our results indicate that SI, EI and empathy explain an important part of variance in narcissism, although it represents only one aspect of the complex narcissism construct. Our results support previous findings about negative association of narcissism with empathy and positive with EI and SI, except for social awareness, where no association was found. Although these three interpersonal constructs are positively interrelated with each other, our study offers further evidence of their discriminate validity regarding their association with narcissism.

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Received: September 24, 2011