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## Brief Report

# Narcissism and the non-equivalence of self-esteem measures: A matter of dominance?☆

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### Abstract

Previous research reveals a substantial degree of variability in the extent to which narcissism (as measured by the Narcissistic Personality Inventory or NPI; Emmons, 1987) and self-esteem (measured using a variety of self-report scales) are associated. Data from 329 college students provided support for the hypothesis that the variability in associations between narcissism and different measures of self-esteem may be explained in part by the degree to which a given self-esteem measure is related to dominance. These results have important implications for research on narcissism and self-esteem, as well as the broader issue of how self-esteem is conceptualized and measured in psychological research.

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### 1. Introduction

Narcissism has attracted an impressive amount of empirical attention from social and personality psychologists during the last decade. Both theory and data suggest that one of the central features of narcissism is self-aggrandizement. Indeed, previous research has shown that narcissists often go to great lengths to glorify themselves even when doing so undermines their relationships with others (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). Given the centrality of self-aggrandizement within the narcissist's arsenal (Campbell, Reeder, Sedikides, & Elliot, 2000), and the relatively low cost involved

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in proclaiming one's merits on a self-esteem questionnaire, it is surprising that the zero-order correlation between narcissism and self-reported, global self-esteem is not consistently high.

For example, when we surveyed the empirical literature on narcissism, we found that the most commonly used self-report measure of self-esteem—Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale (or RSES; Rosenberg, 1965)—correlates between .09 and .41 with scores on the NPI, with a mean correlation of only .26 (a finding that is consistent with an unpublished meta-analysis by Campbell (2001)). This association is much lower than one would expect if narcissists are as arrogant and self-inflating as theoretical accounts make them out to be. In contrast, the Texas Social Behavior Inventory (TSBI; Helmreich, Stapp, & Ervin, 1974) had a mean correlation of .56 with the NPI (Morf & Rhodewalt, 1993; Rhodewalt & Morf, 1995, 1998), whereas the average correlations between the NPI and the Janis-Field Feelings of Inadequacy scale (FIS; Fleming & Courtney, 1984; Janis & Field, 1959) and the Tennessee Self-Concept Scale (Fitts, 1991) were both below .35 (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Raskin, Novacek, & Hogan, 1991; Rhodewalt & Morf, 1995; Wallace & Baumeister, 2002). The purpose of the present investigation is to provide an explanation for this pattern of findings.

A careful examination of the various self-esteem scales that appear in empirical investigations of narcissism reveals that these measures do not treat self-esteem in exactly the same way. Whereas some measures assess the belief that one is *as good as* most other people (e.g., the RSES) or simply *not inferior* to other people (e.g., the FIS), other measures capture the extent to which one sees oneself as *better than* others (e.g., the Self-Attributes Questionnaire—SAQ—Pelham & Swann, 1989) and capable of asserting social control (e.g., the TSBI). Although these orientations appear similar, we suspect that they can lead to important differences in the correlates of self-esteem measures. Not only do these orientations lead to different degrees of positive and negative skew in their distributions of scores (Tafarodi & Swann, 2001), but they may also tap into fundamentally different self-presentation and self-evaluation motives, such as the desire to “approach” high self-regard as opposed to the desire to “avoid” low self-regard. Given that individuals have been shown to be differentially oriented toward such approach and avoidance motives in socially evaluative contexts (e.g., Tice, 1991), the different motivational sets created by these self-esteem scales might have important implications for how individuals respond to them. To what extent, for instance, will narcissists find alluring the opportunity to proclaim that they are simply “as good as most other people,” as on the RSES? Based on past theory and research on narcissism, we suspect that narcissists will find most appealing the opportunity that certain measures afford them to indicate their social dominance, influence, and control over circumstances and people (e.g., Bradlee & Emmons, 1992; Raskin et al., 1991), as they can readily do on measures such as the TSBI and the SAQ. In the present study, we examined the hypothesis that narcissism would be more strongly related to self-esteem measures that are saturated with dominance (such as the TSBI and the SAQ) than measures that are not as heavily dominance-related (such as the RSES). Thus, not only should controlling for dominance in the relationship between narcissism and self-esteem dramatically

reduce this relationship, but it should account for more of the narcissism variance explained by some self-esteem measures than for others.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants and procedure

Three hundred twenty-nine undergraduates (99 males and 230 females) participated in groups of up to 25 in exchange for course credit. Participants completed measures of self-esteem, narcissism, and dominance—as well as several other personality variables that are not relevant to the current investigation—in multiple, randomized orders. Due to concerns about the number of self-esteem scales and the overlap between them, all participants did not receive the same set of measures. Hence, degrees of freedom differ among the self-esteem measures that we included. Data from three participants were discarded because of a failure to follow directions.

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. Narcissism

Narcissism was measured using the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Hall, 1979). The version of the NPI used in the present research contains 37 true–false statements that Morf and Rhodewalt (1993) adapted from a psychometric analysis of the NPI by Emmons (1987). Because the 37-item NPI consists only of items with factor loadings higher than .35 (Emmons, 1987) and eliminates most duplicate items, this version is assumed to be a better measure of narcissism than the original, 54-item, forced-choice instrument from which it is derived.

#### 2.2.2. Dominance

The revised Interpersonal Adjective Scales (IAS-R; Wiggins, Trapnell, & Phillips, 1988) measures interpersonal styles. The IAS-R consists of 64 adjectives (e.g., self-assured, dominant) that participants rate in terms of their self-descriptive accuracy on a scale from 1 (*extremely inaccurate*) to 8 (*extremely accurate*).

#### 2.2.3. Self-esteem measures

The self-esteem measures we selected were either measures that had consistently appeared in published studies that also administered the NPI (such as the TSBI, the RSES, and the FIS), or measures that we had administered in our own studies of narcissism (the SAQ, and the SLCS-R). Although not an exhaustive list of the self-esteem scales used by psychologists, these well-validated measures were selected in part to capture the wide array of approaches to the concept of self-esteem found among some of the most commonly used scales.

Rosenberg's (1965) Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) is a frequently used 10-item measure of global self-esteem. Responses are made on scales from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

The Texas Social Behavior Inventory (TSBI; Helmreich et al., 1974) is a 16-item measure of social self-confidence. The TSBI items address the respondent's degree of self-confidence in groups of people, ability to deal with strangers, and sense of comfort in social situations. Responses are made on scales ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

The revised Self-Liking and Competence Scale (SLCS-R; Tatarodi & Swann, 2001) is a 16-item instrument designed to measure two dimensions of global self-regard: self-liking (SL; a generalized sense of one's worth) and self-competence (SC; a generalized sense of one's efficacy). Items are rated using scales ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

The Self-Attributes Questionnaire (SAQ; Pelham & Swann, 1989) measures respondents' beliefs about themselves *relative to other people their same age and sex* on eight self-concept dimensions: intelligence, social skills, artistic ability, musical ability, athletic ability, physical attractiveness, leadership ability, and common sense. Participants rated themselves, relative to their peers, using 10-point scales ranging from 10% (*way below average*) to 100% (*way above average*).

The Janis–Field Feelings of Inadequacy scale (FIS; Fleming & Courtney, 1984; Janis & Field, 1959) is a 26-item measure of self-esteem. Responses were made on scales from 1 (*never/not at all*) to 7 (*always/very much*).

### 3. Results

Table 1 contains each measure's descriptive statistics. As in previous research, all measures demonstrated adequate internal reliability ( $\alpha > .80$ ).

As Table 2 shows, the NPI was significantly correlated with each of the measures of self-esteem, with correlations ranging from  $r = .22$  (NPI and FIS) to  $r = .55$  (NPI and SAQ). As these correlations indicate, we replicated the substantial variability in associations between narcissism and self-evaluation found in previous studies. Likewise, dominance was also correlated with self-esteem, with correlations ranging from  $r = .29$  (DOM and SC) to  $r = .69$  (DOM and TSBI).

Table 1  
Descriptive statistics

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>	$\alpha$
NPI	18.76	6.91	2.00	37.00	.87
DOM	0.18	1.05	-3.26	3.18	.89
RSES	39.82	7.60	15.00	50.00	.89
SL	29.99	7.49	8.00	40.00	.92
SC	28.53	5.26	10.00	40.00	.81
TSBI	55.67	9.47	31.00	76.00	.85
SAQ	5.23	1.35	0.50	8.00	.80
FIS	4.14	1.00	1.67	6.56	.93

*Note.* NPI, Narcissistic Personality Inventory; DOM, Dominance; RSES, Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale; SL, Self-Liking; SC, Self-Competence; TSBI, Texas Social Behavior Inventory; SAQ, Self-Attributes Questionnaire; FIS, Janis–Field Feelings of Inadequacy Scale.

Table 2  
Correlations between measures of self-esteem, the NPI, and dominance

Self-esteem measure	<i>N</i>	NPI	DOM	<i>pr</i>	$\Delta$ in Var. (%)
SAQ	157	.55**	.44***	.41***	13.4
TSBI	326	.47***	.69***	.15**	19.8
SL	167	.31***	.43***	.08	9.0
SC	167	.29***	.29***	.15*	6.2
RSES	326	.26***	.39***	.06	6.4
FIS	157	.22**	.44***	-.04	4.7

Note. NPI, Narcissistic Personality Inventory; DOM, Dominance; TSBI, Texas Social Behavior Inventory; SAQ, Self-Attributes Questionnaire; FIS, Janis–Field Feelings of Inadequacy Scale; SL, Self-Liking; RSES, Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale; SC, Self-Competence; *pr*, partial correlation between self-esteem and narcissism controlling for dominance;  $\Delta$  in var., reduction in NPI variance explained by each self-esteem scale after controlling for dominance.

\*  $p < .05$ .

\*\*  $p < .01$ .

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

In general, the correlations shown in Table 2 also reveal that self-esteem scales that were more highly correlated with the NPI also were more highly correlated with dominance. To investigate the possibility that the degree of dominance tapped by each self-esteem measure can explain the variable associations between self-esteem and narcissism, we examined the correlations between the NPI and the six self-esteem measures controlling for dominance. As expected, controlling for dominance substantially reduced the correlations between the NPI and each self-esteem measure. In fact, three of these correlations were reduced to non-significance and two others to a relatively trivial size. The only self-esteem measure that was still substantially correlated with the NPI after controlling for dominance was the SAQ ( $pr = .41$ ). Furthermore, the degree to which controlling for dominance changed the amount of variance in narcissism that was explained by each self-esteem measure was generally predicted by the extent to which each self-esteem measure was related to dominance, with the exception of the FIS.

Although these self-esteem scales can be classified by their *gestalt* levels of association with dominance, a closer inspection also reveals a fair degree of within-scale variability in item-level associations with dominance. Thus, some items within each scale were more dominance-oriented than others within the same scale. An item-level analysis across all items on these scales revealed additional support for our dominance hypothesis by showing that the more a particular item correlated with dominance, the more it was also correlated with narcissism,  $r = .75$ ,  $p < .001$ .

#### 4. Discussion

The results of the present study suggest that the dominance hypothesis does a reasonably good job explaining the substantial variability in associations between self-esteem measures and narcissism. Scale-level analyses revealed that the more a

self-esteem scale was correlated with narcissism, the more that scale tended to correlate with dominance and the more that controlling for dominance reduced the variance in narcissism scores accounted for by each self-esteem scale. Item-level analyses revealed an even stronger relationship between scale items' associations with dominance and their associations with narcissism. But what are the implications of this evidence for research and theory? We propose that there are at least two important implications, which we explore briefly here.

First, this evidence has implications for research on narcissism. Although narcissism researchers do not always control for "healthy self-esteem" in their analyses (see Paulhus, 2001, for a relevant commentary on this problem), many researchers do (e.g., Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Rhodewalt & Morf, 1995, 1998; Wallace & Baumeister, 2002). In other studies, researchers simply compare the results obtained with narcissism to the results obtained with non-narcissistic measures of self-esteem (e.g., Campbell, Rudich, & Sedikides, 2002; Kernis & Sun, 1994). What is clear from the present study is that exactly *which* self-esteem measure researchers use as a statistical control or conceptual foil might make an enormous difference. If the outcome variable of interest is highly related to dominance, then controlling statistically for a self-esteem measure such as the TSBI might be problematic because of its strong dominance component. Thus, using certain measures of self-esteem (e.g., RSES) would enhance the researcher's ability to find an effect of narcissism that is independent of "healthy self-esteem," relative to a more dominance-loaded self-esteem measure (e.g., the SAQ).

Second, the broader implications of the present study may have little to do with dominance or narcissism, *per se*. Indeed, the most important implication may be simply that all self-esteem measures are not interchangeable, in large part because they were not all created with the same aspect of self-esteem in mind, although they seem to be treated indiscriminately by many researchers who use them (for a related point, see Bosson & Swann, 1999). For example, when Janis and Field created the FIS, their goal was to determine whether people who feel socially inferior are more persuadable than people who do not. In contrast, when the TSBI was created, the primary goal was to develop an instrument that "could be used reliably to categorize individuals as a function of perceived level of social competence" (Helmreich et al., 1974, p. 1). Use of the TSBI as a measure of global self-esteem appears to be secondary to its use as a measure of social competence (see also Blascovich & Tomaka, 1991). The goals that motivated the development of the FIS and the TSBI are clearly distinct, as are the resulting measures.

We suspect, then, that dominance and narcissism are not the only variables that are differentially related to these self-esteem scales. Depression, neuroticism, happiness, aggression, and achievement motivation seem to us to be reasonable candidates for variables that could show substantial variability in their associations with these measures. Thus, what might be called for is a general taxonomy of self-esteem measures to determine the nomological locations of (at least) the most common scales. Such a taxonomy would have the potential to clarify what is meant by "self-esteem," both consensually (for the field of psychology) and idiosyncratically (for individual investigators). It would also benefit researchers by giving them a clearer

understanding of which self-esteem measure provides the best fit for their model building, theory testing, or criterion predicting. The result, we suspect, would be better models and improved predictive power whenever self-esteem is involved.

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