Interpersonal Consequences of Insecure High Self-Esteem

Craig Nathanson, Aliye Kurt, & Delroy L. Paulhus

University of British Columbia

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A recent comprehensive review of the self-esteem literature by Baumeister and colleagues has highlighted the contradictory consequences of high self-esteem (HSE) (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003). On the one hand, HSE appears to be adaptive given that, for example, those high in self-esteem have positive, well-anchored, and secure feelings of self-worth and are satisfied with themselves (e.g., Kernis, 2000). On the other hand, HSE also appears to be harmful, reflecting an aggressively self-enhancing presentational style characterized by self-aggrandizing and self-promotion (Baumeister, Tice, & Hutton, 1989).
A useful reconciliation of this contradiction is to divide those high in self-esteem into two groups: secure vs. insecure HSE. Although different researchers have argued for different ways of best accomplishing this (e.g., stable vs. unstable, implicit vs. explicit), we feel that a particularly promising operationalization is to examine the joint effects of narcissism and self-esteem. Although these constructs are notably different from each other, they (1) are consistently positively intercorrelated (Campbell, 2001), (2) reliably demonstrate a suppressor relationship such that it is imperative to consider them simultaneously (e.g., Paulhus, Robins, Trzesniewski, & Tracy, 2004), and (3) each possess adaptive and maladaptive elements (Baumeister et al., 2003; Paulhus, 1998).

Conceptually, the combination of narcissism and HSE seems to best capture the notion of insecure high self-esteem; that is, a vulnerable individual who reacts to self-relevant negative information defensively. In this case, the interaction between the two should strongly predict maladaptive outcomes.

The current research involved two similar studies that explored the joint effects of narcissism and self-esteem on peer-rated measures of maladjustment in personal and interpersonal domains. By including measures of both predictors we were able to explore the interaction of narcissism and self-esteem along with their unique main effects on maladjustment, which we hypothesized to be positive for narcissism and negative for self-esteem. More importantly, we hypothesized that compared to secure high self-esteem, insecure high self-esteem – the combination of narcissism and self-esteem – would be particularly detrimental to personal and interpersonal adjustment.
METHOD

Participants

Participants in Study 1 were 79 undergraduates (74% women, 55% European heritage, 24% East Asian heritage) at a large northwestern university. Study 2 had 123 undergraduates (73% women, 53% East Asian heritage, 36% European heritage) from the same university. All participants received course credit for participation.

Procedure

The procedure for each study was identical. Participants initially completed a questionnaire package that included our measures of narcissism and self-esteem. At the conclusion of this package participants were asked to nominate and provide contact information for up to three peers who could “provide some additional insight into your personality;” most participants nominated two peers. These peers were later contacted via email and asked to complete a brief rating measure as it pertained to the participant who had nominated them. In Study 1 the rating measure only included items pertaining to interpersonal maladjustment. To expand and replicate the findings from Study 1, Study 2 included an additional measure pertaining to personal maladjustment.

Materials

Narcissism. In each study, we employed the gold-standard measure of subclinical narcissism (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2000), namely Raskin and Hall’s (1979) Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI). This forced-choice measure requires participants to indicate their agreement with one of two statements presented for each of the 40 items where one statement is the narcissistic option, e.g., “I am an extraordinary person.” The alpha reliabilities were .81 and .84.
Self-esteem. In each study, self-esteem was measured using the 10-item Rosenberg self-esteem scale (Rosenberg, 1965). Items were rated on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Extensive support for the reliability and the validity of the scale is available (e.g., Blascovich & Tomaka, 1991). Among the items is “I take a positive attitude toward myself”. The alpha reliabilities were .89 and .80.

Peer-rated interpersonal maladjustment. Items on the interpersonal maladjustment measure consisted of nine items (e.g., “Can’t take criticism”, “Tells lies about others”, “Gets hostile when challenged”) taken from past research (e.g., Paulhus, 1998; Salmivalli, Kaukiainen, Kaistaniemi, & Lagerspetz, 1999). Items were rated on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The alpha reliabilities of this measure were each .82.

Peer-rated personal maladjustment. In Study 2, peers also rated the participants on six traits related to personal maladjustment (e.g., "is not secure about himself/herself", "is happy" [reversed]). These items were used successfully by Paulhus (1998) in his studies of self-enhancement. Items were rated on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The alpha reliability for this measure was .81.

RESULTS

Study 1. All reported significance levels are one-tailed. We observed a strong main effect for narcissism on peer-rated interpersonal maladjustment, $r = .37, p < .01$, but a null effect of self-esteem, $r = -.02$. However, the strong intercorrelation between the predictors, $r = .30, p < .01$, along with the different validities suggested a suppressor relationship (e.g., Paulhus et al., 2004). In addition, given this significant overlap, we felt justified in computing an interaction term.

To account for the suppression and examine the impact of insecure HSE, we simultaneously regressed peer-rated interpersonal maladjustment onto narcissism, self-esteem, and insecure HSE. As
seen in Table 1, the presence of a suppressor relationship was confirmed, given that the betas for narcissism and self-esteem became more distant from each other. More interestingly, the beta for insecure HSE was strong, $\beta = .29, p < .01$. Upon examining this significant interaction further via simple slope analysis, we found that those in the insecure HSE group was rated as more maladjusted than their secure HSE counterparts, as seen in Figure 1.

Study 2. Results for Study 2 were highly similar to those from Study 1. The suppressor relationship between narcissism was replicated, given a moderate intercorrelation, $r = .25, p < .05$, with different validities with rated personal maladjustment (self-esteem: $r = -.32, p < .01$; narcissism: $r = .02$) and interpersonal maladjustment (self-esteem: $r = -.30, p < .01$; narcissism: $r = .12$). The pattern of results observed in the regressions of each measure of maladjustment on narcissism, self-esteem, and insecure HSE matched that from Study 1. Moreover, in addition to replicating the findings with interpersonal adjustment, simple slope analyses also pointed to higher ratings of personal maladjustment among insecure HSE individuals compared to those with secure HSE, as seen in Figure 2.

**DISCUSSION**

These studies explored the usefulness of operationalizing insecure high self-esteem as the combination of narcissism and self-esteem. Not only were we able to successfully and consistently obtain a significant interaction of these constructs but we also found that across multiple samples and separate domains insecure HSE individuals were rated as more maladjusted than secure HSE individuals. Subsequent analyses using self-report data further confirmed this pattern of results.

Note that the novel operationalization of insecure HSE used in the present research may be seen as a parallel to the notion of “threatened-egotism” (Baumeister, Boden, & Smart, 1996). Baumeister and his colleagues argued that antisocial outcomes can result when positive self-views are threatened.
Because narcissists are chronically sensitive to ego threat (Rhodewalt & Morf, 1998), those who also have HSE are continually in a state of threatened egotism. Their chronic maladjustment is then understandable. Thus the current results dovetail with previous research in supporting the conclusion that insecure HSE individuals experience more problems with others in personal and interpersonal domains.

We were also able to replicate the suppressor relationship between self-esteem and narcissism (Paulhus et al., 2004). This consistent finding underscores the vital importance of always examining the effects of these constructs together given their “mutual repulsion effect” (Paulhus et al., 2004, p. 321).

In sum, present findings replicated previous research in underlining the importance of controlling for narcissism when investigating the correlates of self-esteem and further suggest that the interaction between these two forms of positive self-evaluation represents a valid approach to the studying the heterogeneity of high self-esteem.
REFERENCES


Table 1

Regression of peer-rated interpersonal maladjustment on narcissism, self-esteem, and insecure high self-esteem (Study 1)

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<tr>
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<td>.45**</td>
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<td>Self-esteem</td>
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<td>-.20*</td>
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<td>Insecure self-esteem</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.29*</td>
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Notes. N = 79. * p < .05  ** p < .01 (both one-tailed).

$R^2 = .26, F (3, 75) = 9.00, p < .001$. 
Figure 1. Peer-report interpersonal maladjustment as a function of self-esteem and narcissism (Study 1). IM = interpersonal maladjustment. LSE = low self-esteem; HSE = high self-esteem.

Note: Values shown are predicted scores calculated at ± 1 SD from the mean on self-esteem and narcissism.
Figure 2. Peer-report personal maladjustment as a function of self-esteem and narcissism (Study 2). LSE = low self-esteem; HSE = high self-esteem.

Note: Values shown are predicted scores calculated at \( \pm 1 \ SD \) from the mean on self-esteem and narcissism.