Comparing the construct validity of scales derived from the Narcissistic Personality Inventory: A reply to Rosenthal and Hooley (2010)

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1. Introduction

Narcissism can be generally viewed as “one’s capacity to maintain a relatively positive self-image through a variety of self-, affect- and field-regulatory processes, and it underlies individuals’ need for validation and affirmation as well as the motivation to overtly and covertly seek out self-enhancement experiences from the social environment (Pincus et al., 2009, p. 365).” This construct has been conceptualized and operationalized as both a general personality trait and a personality disorder (i.e., narcissistic personality disorder; NPD). The former conceptualization and operationalization can be most readily found in the empirical literature generated by social-personality psychologists, whereas the latter (i.e., pathological narcissism or NPD) is typically found in the clinical and psychiatric literatures. These literatures may also differ in the degree to which they focus on the grandiose versus vulnerable types or states (depending on one’s conceptualization) of narcissism, with social-personality psychologists focusing primarily on the grandiose variant and clinical psychologists and psychiatrists focusing, at least to a greater degree than social-personality psychologists, on the vulnerable variant or a variant that combines grandiosity and vulnerability.

Due to these different bodies of literature, the study of narcissism has suffered from the lack of a unified conceptualization of the construct, which has impeded the development of a consistent and coherent theoretical and empirical account of narcissism.

Given that narcissism has been linked to a host of psychopathological constructs and maladaptive behaviors, including psychopathy (Paulhus & Williams, 2002), interpersonal dysfunction (e.g., Miller, Campbell, & Pilkonis, 2007; Rhodewalt & Morf, 1995), aggression (e.g., Bushman & Baumeister, 1998), and externalizing behaviors such as alcohol use, crime, and pathological gambling (Lakey, Rose, Campbell, & Goodie, 2008; Luhtanen & Crocker, 2005; Miller, Dir, et al., 2010), it is important that the field strive for greater consensus regarding the construct(s) of narcissism.

Some have argued that the advancement of our knowledge regarding narcissism has been obstructed by the reliance on a single, potentially inappropriate measure of narcissism: the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; e.g., Raskin & Terry, 1988; see critiques by Brown, Budzcek, & Tamborski, 2009; Cain, Pincus, & Ansell, 2008; Rosenthal & Hooley, 2010). For instance, in a literature search spanning from 1985 to 2006, Cain and colleagues (2008) found that the NPI was the primary or only measure of narcissism in approximately 77% of all social/personality research on narcissism. The NPI was designed to assess narcissism in a manner consistent with how it was operationalized as a personality disorder (i.e., NPD) in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders – 3rd Edition (DSM-III; APA, 1980). In this sense the NPI has succeeded, as it appears to manifest the strongest correlations with a semi-structured interview of NPD of all relevant self-report measures (Miller, Gaughan, Pryor, Kamen, & Campbell, 2009). Despite this, some fear that the nearly exclusive reliance on the NPI in the social-personality literature has resulted in a situation in which “the tail wags the dog” – that is, the construct of narcissism is determined by its assessment via the NPI, rather than the conceptualization of narcissism determining its assessment (Rosenthal & Hooley, 2010, p. 463).
The widespread use of the NPI has resulted in, particularly of late, a variety of critiques of its validity (e.g., Brown et al., 2009; Cain et al., 2008; Pincus & Lukowitsky, 2010; Rosenthal & Hooley, 2010). These critiques have raised a number of different concerns with the NPI including its overlap with self-esteem, its inclusion of content tangential to narcissism (e.g., leadership), questions regarding its structural validity and unidimensionality, whether it measures a healthy or pathological variant of narcissism, and its convergent validity with other measure of narcissism and NPD.

Rosenthal and Hooley (2010) recently put forth a specific critique of the NPI and its relation with self-esteem and psychological health. These authors suggest that the positive relations found between narcissism and self-esteem and other adaptive outcomes (e.g., psychological health and well-being) are due to a confound in the measurement of narcissism. Rosenthal and Hooley argue that a number of items included in the NPI are more relevant to the assessment of self-esteem than to narcissism and that is these items, not the truer narcissistic items, which account for the relations between NPI narcissism and psychological health. They argue that these NPI items should be excluded as they "bear little resemblance in their content or relationships with third variables to the DSM-III description of narcissism on which the NPI was purportedly based" (p. 461).

Rosenthal and Hooley use a variety of methods, including expert ratings (EXP), Item-Response Theory (IRT) analyses, and Exploratory Factor Analyses (EFA), to determine which NPI items should be included (e.g., "I insist upon getting the respect that is due me") versus excluded ("I like to be the center of attention") markers of narcissism. They used these three strategies to create three different sets of NPI scales: NPI-N scales, which include only those NPI items deemed representative of narcissism, were created using expert ratings (25 of 37 items included), IRT (18 items included), and EFA (28 items included), whereas NPI-X scales were generated by including only those NPI items deemed unrepresentative of narcissism (and thus excluded from the NPI-N scales). Rosenthal and Hooley then compared the three NPI-N scales (1: NPI-Nexp; 2: NPI-Nirt; 3: NPI-Nefa) and the three NPI-X scales (1: NPI-Xexp; 2: NPI-Xirt; 3: NPI-Xefa) to other narcissism measures and concluded that this putative confound (i.e., the inclusion of problematic items in the NPI) explains the relation between narcissism and psychological health. As a result of these findings, Rosenthal and Hooley "suggest caution in making broad assertions regarding NPI-based findings" (p. 462).

In the current study, we address Rosenthal and Hooley’s (2010) criticisms of the NPI using a variety of data analytic strategies. To this end, we use measures that both replicate Rosenthal and Hooley’s analyses (e.g., examine relations between NPI-N and NPI-X scales with scales related to self-esteem, distress, and DSM-IV NPD) and also go beyond these variables in order to provide a broader test of components of narcissism’s nomological net (e.g., examine relations between NPI-N and NPI-X scales and a measure of the Five-Factor Model). First, we examine the correlations between the included versions of the NPI (NPI-N) and the excluded versions (NPI-X). Second, we compare the correlations generated by the NPI-N and NPI-X scales across a wide range of empirical markers associated with narcissism: self-esteem, entitlement, psychological distress, symptoms of NPD, and general personality traits associated with the Five-Factor Model (FFM). Correlations generated by the corresponding NPI-N and NPI-X scales are compared to test whether they differ significantly (test of dependent rs).

We also examine the overall similarities of the pattern of correlations manifested by the NPI-N and NPI-X scales using intraclass correlations (ICCrs; double-entry q-correlation; see McCrae, 2008 for a review). ICCrs are used as they are more conservative than zero-order correlations as they consider absolute similarity of profiles (rather than relative similarity). In previous work of ours of a similar nature, ICCrs comparing patterns of correlations have ranged from −.36 (Miller, Dir, et al., 2010) to .94 (Miller, Maples, et al., 2010). For instance, Miller, Dir, et al. (2010) compared the ICCrs, on the basis of 65 correlations, generated by measures of vulnerable narcissism, grandiose narcissism, borderline PD, and factor 1 and 2 psychopathy; the ICCrs ranged from −.36 (vulnerable and grandiose narcissism) to .93 (vulnerable narcissism and borderline PD) with a median of .52.

Across analyses, distinct patterns of correlations, examined using ICCrs, for the NPI-N and NPI-X would be consistent with Rosenthal and Hooley’s argument; alternatively, similar patterns of data would be consistent with the existence of a more unified narcissism construct assessed across the NPI items. The current analyses are conducted in two relatively large data sets that have been used previously to examine narcissism (Sample 1: Miller & Campbell, 2008; Sample 2: Miller et al., in press).²

2. Method

2.1. Procedure and participants

2.1.1. Sample 1

Participants were 271 undergraduates recruited from the research participant pool at the University of Georgia (56% women; mean age = 19.3; SD = 1.26; 86% Caucasian). Upon signing informed consent, participants completed a packet of questionnaires containing demographic information and a variety of self-report questionnaires. More information about this sample and procedures can be found in Miller and Campbell (2008).

2.1.2. Sample 2

Participants were 238 undergraduates recruited from the research participant pool from the same university (60% women; mean age = 19.13; SD = 1.26; 83% Caucasian). Upon signing informed consent, participants completed a packet of questionnaires containing demographic information, and a variety of self-report questionnaires and laboratory tasks. More information can be found in Miller et al. (in press).

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Terry, 1988)

The NPI is a 40-item self-report assessment of trait narcissism. The NPI total score manifests good internal consistency and significant correlations with expert ratings of NPD (Miller & Campbell, 2008). In the current study, we used six alternative NPI-based scales derived from those put forth by Rosenthal and Hooley (2010). First, we created three scales from the NPI items deemed appropriate for inclusion in a revised NPI measure on the basis of one of the following methods: Expert ratings [NPI-Nexp; Sample 1: \( r = .77 \); Sample 2: \( r = .79 \)], Item-Response Theory [NPI-Nirt; Sample 1: \( r = .75 \); Sample 2: \( r = .77 \)], and Exploratory Factor Analysis [NPI-Nefa; Sample 1: \( r = .77 \); Sample 2: \( r = .79 \)]. Second, we

² Both of these studies included variables not included in the current manuscript as they are less relevant to the questions at hand (i.e., Miller & Campbell, 2008: DSM-IV PDs other than NPD, informant reports of the FFM, and reports of quality of parenting received [e.g., warmth, monitoring]; Miller et al., in press: vulnerable narcissism, attachment styles, social cognition, decision making, “thin slice” ratings of the FFM; positive and negative affect, and DSM-IV PDs other than NPD).
created three scales from the NPI items suggested for exclusion in a revised NPI measures. These “NPI-X” scales contain the items not included in each of the three scales above. Thus, we created an Expert version (NPI-Xexp; Sample 1: $\alpha = .76$; Sample 2: $\alpha = .69$), Item-Response Theory version (NPI-Xirt; Sample 1: $\alpha = .73$; Sample 2: $\alpha = .75$), and Exploratory Factor Analysis version (NPI-Xefa; Sample 1: $\alpha = .78$; Sample 2: $\alpha = .72$).

It is important to note that Rosenthal and Hooley’s (2010) study used the 37-item version of the NPI (Emmons, 1987), whereas we utilized the more commonly used 40-item version of the NPI (Raskin & Terry, 1988). There is substantial overlap between these measures, though; only six of the items used in the 37-item measure of the NPI are not available for use in the 40-item variant used in the current study. These six items are as follows: (1) Superiority is something you are born with. (2) People can learn a great deal from me. (3) I am envious of other people’s good fortunes. (4) I usually dominate any conversation. (5) I have good taste when it comes to beauty. (6) I would be willing to describe myself as a strong personality. Although the 40-item variant includes some items not used in the 37-item measure, these additional items were not included in the current study in order to most closely replicate Rosenthal and Hooley’s analyses.

2.2.2. Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES)

The RSES (Rosenberg, 1965) is a 10-item global measure of self-esteem in which the items are scored on a 1 (Disagree strongly) to 4 (Agree strongly) scale. The alphas in Samples 1 and 2 were .87 and .90, respectively.

2.2.3. Psychological Entitlement Scale (PES)

The PES (Campbell, Bonacci, Shelton, Exline, & Bushman, 2004) is a 9-item self-report measure of the extent to which individuals believe that they deserve and are entitled to more than others. Items are scored on a scale of 1 (“strong disagreement”) to 7 (“strong agreement”). The alpha in Samples 1 and 2 were .87 and .66, respectively.

2.2.4. Personality Diagnostic Questionnaire-4 (PDQ-4)

The PDQ-4 (Hyler, 1994) is 99-item self-report measure of DSM-IV PDs on which items are answered using a Yes/No response format. PD symptom counts are computed by summing the items endorsed for each PD. Nine items were used to create the NPI symptom count; alphas in Samples 1 and 2 were .56 and .59, respectively.

2.2.5. Brief Symptom Inventory (BSI)

The BSI (Derogatis & Melisaratos, 1983) is a 53-item measure of psychological symptoms experienced during the past week that includes specific symptom scales and a global severity index (GSI). In the current study we report on the GSI only; the alphas in Samples 1 and 2 were .96 and .97, respectively.

2.2.6. Revised NEO Personality Inventory (NEO PI-R)

The NEO PI-R (Costa & McCrae, 1992) is a 240-item self-report measure of the FFM. The higher-order domains of the inventory include Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness. In Sample 1, the alphas for the domains ranged from .88 to .91 and the facets ranged from .56 to .85 (median $\alpha = .77$). In Sample 2, the alphas for the domains ranged from .89 to .91 and the facets ranged from .56 to .85 (median $\alpha = .74$).

3. Results

3.1. Correlations among six NPI-derived narcissism scales

We first compared the correlations among the six NPI-derived narcissism scales (see Table 1). In both samples, the three NPI-N scales manifested strong correlations with their NPI-X counterparts (Exp: Samples 1 and 2 – $r = .65$ and .68; IRT: Samples 1 and 2 – $r = .67$ and .69; EFA: Samples 1 and 2 – $r = .59$ and .64).3 The convergent correlations between the respective NPI-N and NPI-X scales are important as they demonstrate the substantial overlap between the two sets of items (i.e., included vs. excluded) and contribute to the following tests of dependent rs, which take into account the degree of correlation between these variables. To control for Type I error, alpha was set at $p < .01$ for the bivariate correlations, whereas $p < .05$ was used for the tests of dependent correlations (e.g., NPI-N vs. NPI-X in relation to external criteria). The use of a less conservative p-value for these latter tests provides a very fair test of Rosenthal and Hooley’s hypothesis that the NPI-N and X scales are measuring substantially different constructs.

3.2. Correlations among six NPI-derived narcissism scales and self-esteem, entitlement, symptoms of NPD, and psychological distress

Next, we examined the correlations among the six NPI-derived narcissism scales and four variables: self-esteem, entitlement, symptoms of NPD, and psychological distress (see Table 2). Of the 24 pairs of correlations compared in the two samples, there were 17 significant differences ($p < .05$). In two of the six comparisons, the NPI-X scales were more strongly positively related to self-esteem than the NPI-N scales. With regard to entitlement, in five of six cases the NPI-X scales were more strongly positively related than were the NPI-X scales. In all six cases, the NPI-N scales more strongly related to self-report symptoms of NPD. Finally, of six comparisons between the NPI scales and psychological distress, four of the pairs of correlations were significantly different for the NPI-N and NPI-X scales, although none of the NPI-N or NPI-X scales was significantly positively or negatively related to distress. Although the majority of the correlations generated by the NPI-N and NPI-X scales were significantly different, these differences were relatively small (NPI-N vs. NPI-X mean rs: self-esteem [.30, .40]; entitlement [.37, .25], NPD [.49, .29], and distress [.00, .07]), suggesting that the differences between the NPI-N and NPI-X scales are differences in degree rather than kind.

3.3. Correlations among six NPI-derived narcissism scales and the NEO PI-R

We next examined the correlations between the NPI-derived scales and the five domains and 30 facets of the FFM, as assessed by the NEO PI-R (see Table 3). Again, we tested whether the correlations significantly differed across the NPI-N and NPI-X scales (e.g., NPI-Nexp vs. Neuroticism and NPI-Xexp vs. Neuroticism). Of the 210 pairs of correlations examined, there were 97 significant differences. Of these differences, 32 (33%) occurred in reference to the domain of Extraversion, whereas 31 (32%) occurred in reference to the domain of Agreeableness. In general, the NPI-X scales manifested stronger correlations with the domain of Extraversion and its related facets such as Gregariousness, Assertiveness, and Activity. Conversely, the NPI-N scales manifested stronger negative correlations with the domain of Agreeableness and its facets such as Trust, Straightforwardness, and Altruism. It is important to note

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3 The correlations between the NPI-N and NPI-X scales in Sample 1 of Rosenthal and Hooley (2010) ranged from .42 (Nefa and Xefa) to .54 (Nirt and Xirt). These correlations were not reported for their second sample.
that, for both Extraversion and Agreeableness, both the NPI-N and NPI-X scales manifested largely significant correlations with both of these domains – the differences were again a matter of degree not kind. There were also 13 (13%) significant differences with regard to Neuroticism such that the NPI-X scales manifested larger negative correlations with facets such as Depression and Self-consciousness. Finally, there were also 17 (18%) significant differences in relation to the domain of Conscientiousness such that the NPI-N scales, particularly the Nirt scale, were more strongly (negatively) related to facets such as Dutifulness and Deliberation.

The differences in the mean correlations generated by the NPI-N and NPI-X with the FFM domains, despite a large number of significant differences in relation to the domain of Conscientiousness such that the NPI-N scales, particularly the Nirt scale, were more strongly (negatively) related to facets such as Dutifulness and Deliberation.

Following this pattern, group differences were also significantly related to facets such as Depression and Self-consciousness. Finally, there were also 17 (18%) significant differences with respect to Neuroticism such that the NPI-X scales manifested larger negative correlations with facets such as Depression and Self-consciousness.

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4. Discussion

A growing number of researchers from a variety of perspectives have offered cogent critiques of the use and overreliance on the NPI as a measure of narcissism (e.g., Brown et al., 2009; Cain et al., 2008; Pincus & Lukowitsky, 2010; Rosenthal & Hooley, 2010). These critiques include a number of points, including the fact that NPI-assessed narcissism often manifests significant negative relations with psychological distress and certain forms of impairment, positive relations with self-esteem and well-being, questionable convergent validity with certain measures of narcissism, inconsistent factor structure, and divergent relations among the NPI subscales. Most recently, Rosenthal and Hooley (2010) have argued that the NPI is confounded with self-esteem and that it includes a number of items that “bear little resemblance in their content or relationships with third variables to the DSM-III description on which the NPI was purportedly based” (p. 461). As a result, Rosenthal and Hooley suggest that caution is needed in interpreting the literature on narcissism that is derived from the NPI. It is this latter claim that, in our opinion, the most in need of examination as it casts doubt on the validity of the majority of empirical work on narcissism, since most of this research has used the NPI (e.g., Cain et al., 2008).

In the current study we address Rosenthal and Hooley’s first points by examining NPI scales created via their own analyses with scales measuring self-esteem and psychological distress. The current analyses suggest that both the NPI-N and NPI-X scales are significantly positively related to self-esteem, suggesting that this relation is not simply due to the inclusion of items that Rosenthal and Hooley suggest should be excluded from a measure of narcissism as significant positive relations remain even after these items were removed (although the correlations were sometimes higher for the NPI-X items). In addition, neither the NPI-N nor NPI-X
Table 4
Intraclass correlations between NPI-N and NPI-X empirical correlates.

<table>
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<tr>
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<th>NPI-Nexp</th>
<th>NPI-Nirt</th>
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<tr>
<td>Agreableness</td>
<td>.76</td>
<td>.75</td>
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<td>Trust</td>
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<td>.71</td>
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<td>Straightforwardness</td>
<td>.69</td>
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<td>Altruism</td>
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<td>Compliance</td>
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<td>.65</td>
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<td>Modesty</td>
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<td>.63</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tenderness</td>
<td>.61</td>
<td>.60</td>
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Table 3 correlates (e.g., self-esteem; entitlement)
NPI-Xexp: .71
NPI-Nexp: .70
NPI-Xefa: .68

Table 3 correlates (i.e., FM domains and traits)
NPI-Xexp: .90
NPI-Nexp: .88
NPI-Xefa: .90

Aggregate correlations (Table 2 and 3)
NPI-Xexp: .90
NPI-Nirt: .88
NPI-Nefa: .90

Note. NPI: Narcissistic Personality Inventory; N = items included in Rosenthal and Hooley (2010); X = items included in Rosenthal and Hooley; Exp: Expert ratings; IRT: Item-Response Theory; EFA: Exploratory Factor Analyses. Bolded correlations indicate that the correlations in Sample 1 are significantly different for the respective NPI-N and NPI-X scales (p < .05). Italics indicates that the correlations in Sample 2 are significantly different for the respective NPI-N and NPI-X scales (p < .05).

4.1 Is NPI narcissism confounded by self-esteem?

The first assertion made by Rosenthal and Hooley (2010) is that NPI-assessed narcissism is confounded by self-esteem, which explains the NPI’s positive relation with psychological health and negative relation with distress. The current results suggest that removing these items still leaves scales that are positively correlated with self-esteem. In addition, even the putative NPI markers of self-esteem were not significantly negatively related to reports of distress. Rosenthal and Hooley suggest that researchers either control for self-esteem when examining the relations between narcissism and other important constructs (e.g., partial out self-esteem) or use a revised version of the NPI. It is our personal belief, scales were significantly negatively related to psychological distress, although the findings were larger for the NPI-X scales, which is consistent with Rosenthal and Hooley’s argument that certain NPI items may be responsible for the negative relation between NPI scores and psychological distress. In addition, these analyses demonstrated that both sets of items were significantly positively related to psychological entitlement and symptoms of NPD. In many of these cases, particularly with regard to NPD, the relations were significantly stronger when using the NPI-X scales than when using the NPI-N scales. It is important to note that the NPI-N scales did not manifest significantly larger correlations with NPD (r ranged from .45 to .51) than did the total NPI scores that use both NPI-N and X items (r ranged from .43 to .45). The same was true when examining the relations among the NPI-N scales, the total NPI scores, and entitlement (NPI-X scales; r ranged from .32 to .41; total NPI scores: r ranged from .30 to .41). Although the NPI-N items are more strongly related to measures of these two constructs than are the NPI-X scales, there appears to be little cost to excluding the NPI-X items in the total NPI score as their deletion does not significantly strengthen the NPI’s relations with these constructs.
one that may not be shared by all narcissism researchers (see Horvath & Morf, 2010, for a more detailed discussion), that it is hard to conceive of a valid self-report measure of grandiose narcissism that would fail to manifest positive correlations with a valid self-report measure of self-esteem. That is, how does one endorse symptoms such as grandiosity, superiority, and other aspects of self-enhancement and narcissism but fail to endorse signs of high self-esteem on a self-report measure (e.g., “I feel I have a number of good qualities.” Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, Rosenberg, 1965)? A positive correlation between self-reported narcissism and self-esteem does not, of course, mean that narcissism will be linked positively to implicit self-esteem, indirectly assessed self-esteem, or stable self-esteem (for a review, see Bosson et al., 2008). It simply suggests that individuals are likely to respond to self-reports of grandiose narcissism and self-esteem in a consistent manner. We should also note that there is evidence to suggest that these relations are affected by the type of self-esteem measure used. Self-esteem measures that assess “communal” traits will be less strongly linked to measures of grandiose narcissism than measures of self-esteem that focus more on “agentic” traits (Brown & Zeigler-Hill, 2004).

We do have some significant concerns regarding these authors’ suggestion that researchers use partial correlations controlling for self-esteem when examining the relations between the NPI and relevant outcomes. Partialling the variance shared by these constructs, as suggested by Rosenthal and Hooley (2010), in effect creates hypothetical individuals who self-report grandiosity but not high self-esteem — individuals who may look quite different than individuals who are high on both. Lynam and colleagues (2006) explicitly warn researchers of the “perils of partialling” in that “partialled variables are abstractions, existing only in the statistical ether” (Miller & Lynam, 2006, p. 1472). We think the approach of using self-esteem and narcissism as separate predictor variables in a study, including analyses that involve “partialling” and interaction effects, can certainly lead to interesting results. For example, Barry and colleagues (2003) reported that youth with relatively higher narcissism scores but relatively lower self-esteem manifested the highest rates of conduct problems. However, describing narcissism as “narcissism with self-esteem partialled out” is problematic as it may result in a construct that differs in fundamental ways from the construct as it is actually measured.

4.2. Do certain NPI items bear little resemblance to the narcissism construct?

We found little evidence to support Rosenthal and Hooley’s (2010) suggestion that certain NPI items (i.e., NPI-X items) “bear little resemblance” to the narcissism construct. First, the NPI-N and NPI-X scales were strongly positively correlated to one another (median $r = .66$), suggesting that the items that Rosenthal and Hooley suggest excluding from the NPI are substantially correlated irrespective of whether one examines the variables directed linked to Rosenthal and Hooley’s critique (median $r = .70$) or personality traits in general (median $r = .90$), despite some differences in the size of some correlations. Finally, of the 234 pairs of correlations examined, 114 were significantly different using a liberal $p$-value of .05. These differences were primarily differences in degree rather than kind and operated such that the NPI scales that used only items deemed acceptable for inclusion (i.e., NPI-N) resulted in a construct that was more heavily laden with interpersonal antagonism but less laden with aspects of extraversion such as interpersonal dominance and excitement seeking. In general, the two sets of NPI scales appear to operate in a similar manner and both were significantly correlated with symptoms of DSM-IV NPD. We believe the current data are inconsistent with Rosenthal and Hooley’s assertion that certain NPI items “bear little resemblance” to the construct of narcissism/NPD as it was intended or that “many of the items on the NPI do not appear to reflect narcissism at all” (Brown et al., 2009, p. 952).

The differences in trait Extraversion raise the following question: should the NPI-X items be included in a measure of narcissism? As noted earlier, one set of the NPI-N vs. NPI-X scales were determined by having 19 expert raters rate each NPI item for whether it is “indicative of the construct of narcissism” (Rosenthal & Hooley, 2010, p. 455). Items such as “I like to be the center of attention,” “I see myself as a good leader,” and “I am assertive” were rated by less than 50% of the experts used by Rosenthal and Hooley (2010) as being indicative of narcissism. Are these items, in fact, inconsistent with the traits associated with narcissism?

There is a plethora of empirical data from a variety of perspectives that may help answer these questions about the role of Extraversion in narcissism. When a sample of clinicians ($N = 22$; Samuel & Widiger, 2004) rated the prototypical individual with NPD using the 30 facets of the FFM, they rated these individuals as being high in Extraversion, particularly the facets of assertiveness, activity level, and excitement seeking. When researchers who had published at least one paper on NPD ($N = 12$; Lynam & Widiger, 2001) rated the prototypical individual with NPD using the 30 facets of the FFM, they rated these individuals as being high in Extraversion, particularly the facets of assertiveness and excitement seeking. Finally, meta-analytic reviews of the relations between the PDs and the FFM suggested a relation, albeit a smaller one than that indicated by either set of expert ratings. Between NPD and Extraversion, particularly the facet of assertiveness (Samuel & Widiger, 2008; Saulsman & Page, 2004). We have noted before that there appears to be substantial heterogeneity in these meta-analytically derived effect sizes; although there was a significant effect size between NPD and Extraversion in the Saulsman and Page meta-analysis, 39% of the individual correlations were significantly positive, whereas 61% were nonsignificant. This speaks, we believe, to the confounding of grandiose and vulnerable forms of narcissism. Grandiose narcissism, of which we believe the NPI is a good measure, is typically significantly related to Extraversion, whereas measures of vulnerable narcissism are typically negatively related to this personality domain (e.g., Hendin & Cheek, 1997; Miller, Dir, et al., 2010; Miller et al., in press). The fact that the NPI includes items that are good markers of the agentic aspects of Extraversion (e.g., dominance) appears to be consistent with both academicians and clinicians’ notions of grandiose narcissism.

In sum, we find little evidence to suggest that removal of certain items fundamentally affects the narcissism construct assessed by the NPI. To the contrary, we would argue that the elevated levels of agentic aspects of Extraversion in the NPI-X scales, such as dominance, reward/novelty seeking, and activity, are actually vital aspects of the grandiose forms of narcissism and help explain why individuals high on this form of narcissism (e.g., celebrities, politicians) often engage in risky and/or antisocial behaviors (Foster & Trimm, 2008; Miller, Campbell, et al., 2009). Researchers may choose to use these revised NPI scales, however, if their conceptualization of narcissism/NPD does not involve particularly high levels of these agentic traits. Researchers will simply need to note their conceptualization of narcissism and explain how they have chosen to revise the NPI in order to assess this slightly different variant.

5. Conclusions

Ultimately, we have no objections to individuals modifying the NPI if these modifications result in a scale that demonstrates greater validity. For instance, individuals who believe that narcissism is
less strongly related to the domain of Extraversion may want to remove the NPI-N items as suggested by Rosenthal and Hooley (2010) in order to de-emphasize these traits. Nor do we object to individuals calling for the creation of new and improved measures of narcissism, as there are certainly a number of valid complaints that can be and have been lodged against the NPI. We believe, however, that Rosenthal and Hooley’s critiques are overstated in that the items set aside for exclusion clearly do bear substantial resemblance to those set for inclusion in a revised NPI. In addition, both sets of items were significantly negatively related to Agreeableness and positively related to self-esteem, entitlement, and Extraversion. As such, there is insufficient evidence to support Rosenthal and Hooley’s suggestion that “caution in making broad assertions regarding NPI-based findings” (p. 462) is warranted.

We also disagree with Rosenthal and Hooley when they suggest that constructs such as “self-esteem and assertiveness” are “at best tangential” to narcissism. This claim may depend on one’s conceptualization of narcissism. For instance, the belief that self-esteem and assertiveness are tangential to narcissism is more in-line with certain psychodynamic conceptualizations of narcissism in which the grandiosity and high self-esteem that characterizes grandiose narcissism is believed to be a relatively fragile mask that hides an underlying lack of self-esteem. Although this may very well be the case for individuals best described as vulnerably narcissistic (e.g., Miller, Dir, et al., 2010; Pincus & Lukowitsky, 2010; Wink, 1991), we do not believe it is an apt description for some or all grandiosely narcissistic individuals (Bosson et al., 2008; Campbell, Bosson, Goheen, Lakey, & Kernis, 2007). Indeed, we believe that the commingling of these two narcissism variants is the source of much of the trouble integrating “social-personality and clinical narcissism research” (p. 38), not the use of the NPI. We also strongly support the practice of research employing measures of both grandiose and vulnerable narcissism to clarify these issues. The putative confounding of narcissism and self-esteem seems to be another sub-issue in that much broader discussion.

We finish by pointing out an area of agreement between our own stance and that put forth by Rosenthal and Hooley (2010). We concur with these authors that NPI scores should not be reified as a perfect measure of the latent trait of narcissism. Rosenthal and Hooley suggest that it may be the case that “narcissism is no longer understood as a latent personality trait estimated by scores on the NPI…” Instead, narcissism has become increasingly redefined as “that which the aggregated NPI measures” (p. 463). Like Rosenthal and Hooley, we believe that the field will benefit from the development and use of multiple measures of narcissism, including the NPI, in research on this fascinating and important construct.

References


