

Addiction and "Generation Me":

Narcissistic and Prosocial Behaviors of Youth with Substance Dependency Disorder in Comparison to Normative Youth

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MEASURES

Narcissistic Behaviors

The Narcissistic Personality Inventory (9) is a 40-item self-report measure designed to measure subclinical individual differences in narcissism. The NPI has 7 subscales: authority, exhibitionism, superiority, entitlement, exploitativeness, self-sufficiency, and vanity (9).

MEASURES

Prosocial Behaviors

Prosocial behaviors were assessed using the five items from the General Social Survey: giving food or money to a homeless person, doing volunteer work for a charity, giving money to a charity, looking after a person's home while they are away, and carrying a stranger's belongings (10).

BACKGROUND

The nation's most commonly sought out treatment modality for substance abuse problems, Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), claims egocentrism as a root cause of addiction. Synonyms for ego-centrism in AA literature are: narcissistic behaviors, self-centeredness, extreme self-absorption, and grandiosity. In tandem with AA's theory, clinicians have often noted narcissistic behaviors among individuals with substance abuse problems. AA's solution to treat the narcissistic root cause of addiction is to continually get out of self by helping others (1).

One of the inherent challenges to understanding the link between narcissistic behaviors and addiction lies in the confusion with the terms ego-centrism and ego development during adolescence. (2). Normative developmental processes in adolescence are characterized by heightened sensitivity, self-absorption, and preoccupation with self (3). In contrast, the defining characteristics of narcissism include a grandiose sense of self-importance, a tendency to exaggerate accomplishments and talents, and an expectation to be noticed as "special" even without appropriate achievement (4, 5). Another inherent challenge addiction research scientists face pertains to a 21st century cohort effect referred to as the "Me Generation," observed among today's youths. This effect results in a generation of youths who lack empathy, react aggressively to criticism and favor self-promotion over helping others (6).

This study uses a large, representative sample of adolescents who have developed substance dependency disorder (SDD) to test AA's theory of the link between elevated narcissistic behaviors and addiction.

OBJECTIVE

The purpose of this study is to explore narcissistic and prosocial behaviors as reported by adolescents with SDD in comparison to large scale adolescent reports collected in the past decade.

METHOD

Using a quasi-experimental design, this study compares narcissistic and prosocial behaviors of adolescents with SDD to normative controls, matched by age and gender. This design was selected over the standard randomized, controlled field experiment design given the ethical issues of assigning adolescents to a disease condition.

Detailed information regarding the research designs of the two survey samples selected as normative controls is explicated elsewhere (7, 8). The current study was approved by the University Hospitals/Case Medical Center Institutional Review Board.

STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

Random effect regression analyses were performed using a nested pair cluster to absorb pair-specific effects. Our dependent variables were two types of other-oriented behaviors: narcissistic behaviors measured with 7 NPI subscales, and prosocial behaviors measured with 5 GSS items. We reported all two-tailed tests with an alpha level of $p < 0.05$. Analyses were performed using SAS version 9.1.3.

RESULTS

Table 1. Demographic and Clinical Characteristics of ND Sample

Variable	Category	Total (N = 115, 100%)
Gender	Male	60 (52%)
Race	Minority	34 (30%)
Ethnicity	Hispanic	10 (9%)
	Yes	53 (46%)
Single-parent household	Yes	12 (10%)
Learning disability	Less than 8 years	2 (2%)
Grade	Middle school	20 (17%)
	Partial high school	88 (77%)
	High School	5 (4%)
Age	M (SD)	16.23 (1.71)
Parental History of SDD	Yes	60 (52%)
Legal Problems (past 2 yrs)	No. of Arrests (M, SD)	2.77 (2.73)
	No. of Felonies* (M, SD)	0.53 (1.17)
	History of Assault (Yes)	34 (30%)
	History of Robbery (Yes)	20 (17%)
	History of Burglary (Yes)	19 (17%)
	Ever on Parole/Probation (100%)	87%
	Ever Jailed/Incarcerated	77 (67%)
History of Abuse	Sexual (Yes)	30 (26%)
	Physical (Yes)	27 (23%)
History of Suicide Attempts (Yes)		28 (24%)
History of Self-Mutilation (Yes)		38 (33%)

A total of 115 substance dependent youth (14-18 years old) were enrolled in this study. Approximately half were female (48%), came from a single parent home (46%), and had a parent with a substance use disorder (52%). This sample included a considerable minority group (30%).

Table 2. Narcissistic Personality Inventory Scores: Comparison Between Youths With and Without SD

NPI Subscale Score	Total (N, %)	Youths (Normative)	Youths with SD
	230 (100%)	115 (50%)	115 (50%)
Authority (M, SD)	4.34 (2.11)	3.87 (2.22)	4.81 (1.88)**
Entitlement (M, SD)	2.17 (1.54)	1.97 (1.61)	2.37 (1.43)*
Exhibitionism (M, SD)	2.35 (1.79)	1.97 (1.61)	2.37 (1.43)***
Exploitativeness (M, SD)	1.85 (1.40)	1.50 (1.38)	2.20 (1.33)***
Superiority (M, SD)	2.48 (1.40)	2.35 (1.42)	2.61 (1.39)
Self-Sufficiency (M, SD)	2.37 (1.37)	2.36 (1.52)	2.39 (1.21)
Vanity (M, SD)	1.25 (1.11)	1.02 (1.12)	1.49 (1.07)**

NOTES: * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .0001$

In comparison to adolescent controls, SDD youth scored significantly higher in the areas of entitlement ($F=2.37, p<.05$), exhibitionism ($F=2.37, p<.0001$), exploitativeness ($F=2.20, p<.0001$), and vanity ($F=1.49, p<.001$).

Table 3. General Social Survey Scores: Comparison Between Youths With and Without Substance Dependency

General Social Survey (GSS) Item	Youths (Normative)	Youths with Substance Dependency
	N=131	N=115
Gives money to charity (M, SD)	4.66 (1.31)	5.06 (1.15)***
Gives food/money to homeless (M, SD)	4.45 (1.44)	4.80 (1.17)***
Looks after neighbor's plants/mail/pets (M, SD)	4.88 (1.33)	4.67 (1.36)
Volunteers (M, SD)	4.98 (1.34)	4.84 (1.38)
Carries belongings for stranger (M, SD)	4.95 (1.23)	4.46 (1.20)*
GSS Total Score	23.93 (3.98)	23.82 (4.30)

NOTES: * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .0001$

GSS items are rated: 1 = "more than once a week", 2 = "once a week", 3 = "once a month";

When GSS items were compared for addicted youth and non-addicted youth, adolescents with SDD were less likely to give money to charity ($F=5.06, p<.0001$) or give to the homeless ($F=4.80, p<.0001$) in comparison to adolescent controls.

DISCUSSION

The other-oriented behaviors that distinguished youths with SDD were overt narcissistic behaviors and reduced monetary donations.

The matched-pair design of the current study, and same decade in which all youth were interviewed, address the potential confounds of age, gender, and cohort influences to study results.

This study was cross-sectional; therefore the significant differences found are associations rather than causations.

Considering the ethical concerns of randomizing youth to develop addiction, a longitudinal within-subjects design whereby each subject serves as his/her own control is warranted to demonstrate causation.

Moving out of self towards others may be particularly relevant towards adolescents with substance abuse problems. Results may inform professionals interested in youth development and youth treatment.

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