The loneliness of narcissistic vulnerability

Examining self- and interpersonal impairment

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• Book: Contemporary Psychodynamic Psychotherapy
Loneliness

subjective experience of insufficient or unsatisfactory social relations that produces distress
• Loneliness ≠ being alone

• One can experience loneliness among others - even in close relationships
**Loneliness is a health hazard**

- Associated with various mental health problems:
  - Depression
  - Social anxiety
  - Alcoholism
  - Suicidality
- And physical health problems
  - Functional disability
  - Increased mortality risk

*Park et al., 2020*
Personality and loneliness

• Associated with neuroticism and introversion at trait level

• Studies indicate patients with PDs are more likely to report loneliness, with themes such as:
  • Profound alienation
  • Thwarted desires for closeness
  • Perceived rejection by others

Ikhtabi et al., 2022
Reinhard et al., 2022
Pathological narcissism

Narcissistic grandiosity: self-enhancing behaviour, grandiose fantasies

Narcissistic vulnerability: contingent self-esteem, hypersensitivity, self-concealment

Loneliness
To what extent could pathological narcissism be a factor in loneliness?

• Interpersonally aversive attitudes and behaviours that may keep others away and maintain social isolation

AND...

• Subjective experience / appraisals of other people and interactions that diminish the potential rewards of social connections

Previous research:

• Loneliness positively associated with vulnerability and grandiosity/rivalry (antagonism)

• Negatively associated with grandiosity/admiration

Brailovskaia et al., 2021
Rogoza et al., 2018
Gąsiorowska et al., 2021
Study 1

• Examine linear relationship between PN and loneliness

• Examine unique relationship of PN after controlling for five factor personality domains

• Examine if loneliness accounts for the association between pathological narcissism and satisfaction with life

Sample:
• 120 young adults (18-25 years, \( M=20 \)) recruited for study on identity
• 73% female, 25% male; 30% Caucasian, 43% Asian

Measures:
• 12-item Super Brief Pathological Narcissism Inventory
• 3-item revised UCLA Loneliness Scale
• Big Five Inventory
• Temporal Satisfaction With Life Scale

Procedures & Analyses:
• Cross-sectional, self-report questionnaires
• Zero-order correlations + regression predicting loneliness, with significant five factor traits and pathological narcissism dimensions as predictors
• Mediation model: PN \( \rightarrow \) loneliness \( \rightarrow \) satisfaction with life
Final model of regression analysis examining pathological narcissism and loneliness, with covariates and five-factor personality dimensions

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<th>$\Delta R^2$</th>
<th>$\beta$</th>
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<td><strong>Five-factor personality</strong></td>
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Final model of regression analysis examining pathological narcissism and loneliness, with covariates and five-factor personality dimensions

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(Notes: ΔR² represents the change in R², β is the standardized regression coefficient, t is the t-statistic, and p is the p-value.)
Standardized coefficients regarding the indirect effect of narcissistic vulnerability on satisfaction with life, through loneliness as a mediator.

**Indirect effect** = -0.09, 95% CI[-.19, -.01]
Standardized coefficients regarding the indirect effect of narcissistic vulnerability on satisfaction with life, through loneliness as a mediator

Indirect effect = -0.09, 95% CI[-0.19, -0.01]
Study 1 Conclusion

Narcissistic vulnerability was robustly associated with loneliness, after accounting for the effects of grandiosity and five-factor personality traits.

Loneliness accounted for (mediated) the negative association between pathological narcissism and satisfaction with life.

Findings point to narcissistic vulnerability as an important risk for loneliness, and associated diminished satisfaction with life.
Study 2

Further investigate the link between pathological narcissism and loneliness

- Help-seeking sample
- Examine a more antagonistic form of grandiosity
- Measure loneliness at a 2nd time point
- Examine domains of dysfunction (AMPD Criterion A) that could account for the PN-loneliness relation

AMPD difficulties in:

- Identity
- Self-direction
- Empathy
- Intimacy
Sample:
• 298 UK adults, sampled online by Prolific for having sought NHS mental health care; M age=33 years; 63% female, 33% male; 84% Caucasian

Measures:
• Hypersensitive Narcissism Scale (vulnerability)
• Narcissistic Admiration & Rivalry Questionnaire-6 (grandiosity)
• 3-item UCLA Loneliness Scale
• Self- and Interpersonal Functioning Scale (AMPD Criterion A domains)
• Neuroticism scale from mini-IPIP

Procedures & Analyses:
• Self-report questionnaires; all measures at T1 & loneliness 2 months later
• Correlations + mediation model: PN → AMPD domains → loneliness T2 (controlling for loneliness T1, neuroticism, relationship status)
Zero-order correlations:

• Admiration & Rivalry (agentic & antagonistic grandiosity) were not significantly associated with loneliness

• Vulnerability and all Criterion A domains were positively associated with loneliness at both time points

• Partial correlation of vulnerability and loneliness at time 2 was significant after controlling for time 1, $r=.16$, $p=.006$

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<td>Vulnerability</td>
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<td>Admiration (grandiosity)</td>
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<td>Rivalry (grandiosity)</td>
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<td>Self Direction</td>
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*bold text refers to $p<.001$*
Domains of personality dysfunction as mediators of the relationship between narcissistic vulnerability and loneliness

Loneliness, time 1  
Neuroticism  
Relationship status

Identity

Self Direction

Empathy

Intimacy

Narcissistic vulnerability

Loneliness, time 2
Domains of personality dysfunction as mediators of the relationship between narcissistic vulnerability and loneliness

\[ \text{Indirect effect} = .05, 95\% \text{ CI}[.01, .08] \]
Study 2 Conclusion

While grandiosity was not associated with loneliness, narcissistic vulnerability predicted loneliness 2 months downstream, controlling for baseline loneliness.

Intimacy dysfunction significantly mediated the relationship between narcissistic vulnerability and loneliness, accounting for other AMPD domains, neuroticism, and relationship status.

Further evidence for narcissistic vulnerability as a risk for loneliness --- prospectively --- and perhaps largely through impaired capacity for intimacy (replication needed).
• Limitations of these studies:
  • Cross-sectional (study 1) and limited temporality (study 2)
  • Exclusive use of self-report assessment
  • Did not examine other PD types such as BPD
  • Limited sample diversity → needs replication

• Future directions:
  • Examine contexts and dynamics surrounding loneliness
  • Consider fluctuations in narcissistic and personality functioning
  • Investigate particular components of narcissistic vulnerability
What is it about narcissistic vulnerability that limits capacity for intimacy?

• Attribution bias: seeing the other as ill-intentioned

• Sensitivity to rejection makes it hard to get close to others

• Perhaps a core sense of being bad and undeserving of love
• Loneliness and intimacy functioning may be important targets when working with patients high in PN

• Underscores the suffering experienced by individuals with PN, and potentially a component of suicidality risk

• Consider assessing for narcissistic vulnerability in patients with severe or persistent loneliness
Thank you!

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Please contact me for copies of the presentation, references, or if you have any questions or comments.