



Psychopathic boldness: Narcissism, self-esteem, or something in between?

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ABSTRACT

Although psychopathy is one of the most studied and well-validated personality disorders, debate remains regarding the necessity and sufficiency of fearless dominance/boldness. This debate revolves around the robust relations boldness shares with adaptive outcomes (e.g., self-esteem) and the limited relations it evinces with psychopathy's other features and outcomes. Although boldness exhibits moderate to large relations with grandiose narcissism, these relations are less frequently examined at the factor level. The present study examines the relations between psychopathic boldness, narcissism, and other adaptive features in a large, MTurk sample ($N = 591$). While boldness exhibited moderate to large relations with grandiose narcissism, the use of a three-factor model of narcissism revealed this relation was driven by the agentic extraversion component of narcissism not the antagonistic or neuroticism components. Boldness similarly evinced large, positive relations with self-esteem, and shared nearly identical trait profiles with self-esteem.

1. Introduction

Psychopathy is a multidimensional personality disorder described by traits related to interpersonal antagonism (e.g., callousness; deceitfulness) and disinhibition (e.g., impulsivity) that are associated with problematic interpersonal relationships (e.g., Weiss, Lavner & Miller, 2018) and maladaptive behavior (e.g., antisocial behavior; Hare & Neumann, 2008). Although psychopathy is one of the most studied and well-validated personality disorders, debate remains regarding how to optimally define its nature and scope. Specifically, there is debate regarding the necessity and sufficiency of its components (e.g., Lilienfeld et al., 2012; Lynam & Miller, 2012; Miller & Lynam, 2012). While theorists generally agree that features of interpersonal antagonism and disinhibition are necessary, the role of fearless dominance/boldness¹ (e.g., stress immunity, social potency, and thrill/adventure seeking; Patrick, Fowles & Krueger, 2009), remains contested (see Lilienfeld et al., 2012, Miller & Lynam, 2012). Proponents argue that it has been included in numerous classical descriptions of psychopathy (e.g., Cleckley, 1941), may serve as a mask for maladaptive features, and/or may bear curvilinear or interactive relations to externalizing outcomes (Blonigen, 2013; Lilienfeld et al., 2012). Others, however, contend that it has not been included in all classic conceptions (i.e., Karpman, 1941; McCord & McCord, 1964), that its necessity is

questionable due to the limited relations it bears to important outcomes (i.e., externalizing outcomes; Miller & Lynam, 2012; Sleep, Weiss, Lynam & Miller, 2019), either in curvilinear or interactive fashion (Weiss et al., 2019), and absence of evidence it works to mask other maladaptive traits.

1.1. Psychopathic Boldness

From a basic trait perspective, psychopathic boldness is a blend of high extraversion and low neuroticism (Miller, Lamkin, Maples-Keller & Lynam, 2016; Poy, Segarra, Esteller, López & Moltó, 2014). Theoretically, its origins can be traced to Cleckley (1941), as well as Lykken (1957). Although boldness has been included in some classic descriptions of psychopathy, it has not been well-represented in some modern models (e.g., Hare, 1980; 1991, 2003), and evinces small to moderate relations with PCL-R-based measures of psychopathy (Lilienfeld et al., 2016; Sleep et al., 2019). However, it is represented in other models (e.g., Psychopathic Personality Inventory [PPI-R], Lilienfeld & Widows, 2005; Triarchic Model of Psychopathy [TMP], Patrick et al., 2009; Elemental Psychopathy Assessment [EPA], Lynam, Gaughan, Miller, Mullins-Sweatt & Widiger, 2011).

In terms of its criterion relations, Boldness bears limited empirical relations with externalizing behavior (e.g., antisocial behavior,

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¹ Due to the theoretical and empirical overlap, it has been argued that boldness and fearless dominance can be used interchangeably (Lilienfeld et al., 2016). Therefore, boldness will be used to refer to the underlying construct.

aggression) and other consensual features of psychopathy (e.g., antagonism), and demonstrates its largest relations with markers of adaptive functioning. In a recent meta-analytic investigation, boldness evinced its most robust empirical relations with PPI Fearless Dominance, EPA Emotional Stability, (low) Neuroticism, Extraversion, Grandiose Narcissism, Narcissistic Personality Inventory - Leadership/Authority (Raskin & Terry, 1988), MPQ Social Potency, PPI total psychopathy, self-esteem, and EPA Narcissism (Sleep et al., 2019). In fact, the personality profile for boldness is quite similar to experts' conceptualizations of a prototypically "healthy" personality (Bleidorn et al., in press).

1.2. Psychopathic Boldness and its relation to narcissism

Proponents of boldness' inclusion argue that it does, in fact, have some relation to maladaptive outcomes—namely, narcissism. Several studies have noted meaningful relations between boldness and measures of grandiose narcissism (Brislin, Drislane, Smith, Edens & Patrick, 2015; Donnellan & Burt, 2016; Sellbom & Phillips, 2013); however, many of these studies do not examine narcissism at the level of its lower order factors which makes the true nature of the relation difficult discern (e.g., Crowe, Lynam, Campbell & Miller, 2019).

Although moderate to large relations have been found between boldness and narcissism, these relations are likely driven by both constructs' strong convergence with extraversion and (low) neuroticism (e.g., O'Boyle, Forsyth, Banks, Story & White, 2015). This means the relations are driven by the more adaptive, extraversion-related components of narcissism (e.g., leadership; assertiveness), rather than the maladaptive component of interpersonal antagonism (Krusemark, Campbell, Crowe & Miller, 2018). Indeed, Sleep et al. (2019) found a significant relation between boldness and grandiose narcissism ($r = .56$); however, analyses at the factor level revealed that these relations were larger for more adaptive, extraversion-related features than with more maladaptive, antagonism-based features. In fact, boldness manifested an equally large relation with self-esteem ($r = .54$) suggesting a need to further disentangle boldness' relations with both narcissism and self-esteem.

1.3. The current study

In the current study, we compare the associations between boldness, self-esteem, and narcissism in terms of their convergent and discriminant relations both at the scale level and with regard to their basic personality trait profiles. We do this using both the 2-factor (grandiose vs. vulnerable) and more recently developed Trifurcated Model of narcissism (Miller, Lynam, Hyatt & Campbell, 2017; see also Krizan & Herlache, 2018).

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

The sample consisted of 707 adults recruited from Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) website. Participants were required to be 18 years of age or older and to reside in the United States. Participants were excluded for invalid responding on the EPA validity scales ($n = 86$), for finishing the study in a time deemed invalid ($n = 26$), and for invariant responding on the IPIP-NEO-120 ($n = 4$). The final sample consisted of 591 individuals (62% women; $M_{\text{age}} = 37.0$ years, $SD_{\text{age}} = 11.8$ years; 79% white). All measures were presented in a random order. Some data from this sample have been published previously (Crowe, Edershile, et al., 2018, Crowe et al., 2019; Crowe, Sleep, Carter, Campbell & Miller, 2018; Miller, Lynam, Siedor, et al., 2018; Miller, Lynam, Vize, et al., 2018).

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Triarchic psychopathy measure (TriPM; Patrick, 2010)

The TriPM is a 58-item self-report measure that assesses boldness, meanness, and disinhibition. In the current study, we focus only on boldness ($\alpha = .87$) but all 58-items were given. Boldness was unrelated to Meanness ($r = .06$) and negatively related to Disinhibition ($r = -.26$).

2.2.2. Rosenberg self-esteem scale (RSE; Rosenberg, 1965)

The RSE is a 10-item, global measure of self-esteem ($\alpha = .92$).

2.2.3. Narcissism factors: 2- and 3-factor models

Grandiose and vulnerable narcissism, along with the three factors of the Trifurcated Model (i.e., Agentic Extraversion, Neuroticism, and Antagonism) were derived from a series of back-wards factor analyses as described in Crowe et al. (2019). Factors from the two-factor solution represented grandiose and vulnerable narcissism. Factors from the three-factor solution represented the elements of the Trifurcated model. Items were taken from the following scales: the Five Factor Narcissism Inventory Short Form (FFNI-SF; Sherman et al., 2015), the Grandiose Narcissism Scale (GNS; Foster, McCain, Hibberts, Brunell & Johnson, 2015), the Hypersensitive Narcissism Scale (HSNS; Hendin & Cheek, 1997), the Narcissistic Admiration and Rivalry Questionnaire (NARQ; Back et al., 2013), Narcissistic Grandiosity Scale (NGS; Rosenthal, Hooley & Steshenko, 2007), the Likert version of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Miller et al., 2018; Raskin & Terry, 1988), the Personality Diagnostic Questionnaire-4 Narcissistic Personality Disorder Scale (PDQ-4+; Hyler, 1994), the Psychological Entitlement Scale (PES; Campbell, Bonacci, Shelton, Exline & Bushman, 2004), the Personality Inventory for the DSM-5 (PID-5; Krueger, Derringer, Markon, Watson & Skodol, 2012) – NPD Scale, the Pathological Narcissism Inventory (PNI; Pincus et al., 2009), the Short Dark Triad (SD3; Jones & Paulhus, 2014) – Narcissism Scale, and the Structured Clinical Interview for the DSM-IV Personality Disorders Personality Questionnaire – NPD Scale (SCID-II; First, Gibbon, Spitzer, Williams & Benjamin, 1997) – NPD Scale. All narcissism items were intermixed into one large pool and given together using the same Likert scale, along with the 16 items from the EPA validity scales (see below).

2.2.4. International personality item pool representation of the revised NEO personality inventory – 120 item version (IPIP-NEO-120; Maples, Guan, Carter & Miller, 2014)

The IPIP-NEO-120 is a 120-item measure of the five domains and 30 facets of the five-factor model of personality. Facet level reliabilities ranged from $\alpha = .65$ (Morality) to $\alpha = .93$ (Depression). Domain level reliabilities ranged from $\alpha = .83$ (Openness) to $.94$ (Neuroticism).

2.2.5. Elemental psychopathy assessment-validity items (EPA; Lynam et al., 2011)

The EPA is 178-item self-report measure of psychopathy. Here only the 16 items that comprise two validity scales – Infrequency and Unlikely Virtue – were given. Participants' data were omitted if they received a score of 4 or more on the Infrequency Scale or a score of 3 or more on the Too Good to Be True Scale consistent with Lynam and colleagues' recommendations. The 16 items from these 2 scales were embedded within the pool of narcissism items.

3. Results

3.1. Zero-order correlations

Boldness and self-esteem were correlated at $.62$ in the present study. Table 1 presents the correlations between boldness and self-esteem with grandiose and vulnerable narcissism, as well as with agentic extraversion, neuroticism, and antagonism. Boldness manifested strong

Table 1
Relations between boldness, self-esteem and 2 and 3-factor models of narcissism.

	Boldness	Self-esteem
2-factor narcissism (Crowe et al., 2019)		
Grandiose	.58*	.31*
Vulnerable	-.27*	-.53*
3-factor narcissism (Crowe et al., 2019)		
Agentic Extraversion	.60*	.33*
Neuroticism	-.36*	-.59*
Antagonism	.09	-.13*

Note. * = $p \leq .01$. All effect sizes manifested by boldness and self-esteem with narcissism factors are significantly different, $p \leq .01$.

relations with grandiose narcissism and agentic extraversion and moderate negative correlations with vulnerable narcissism and neuroticism. It was not significantly related to the antagonism component of narcissism, which is the aspect that is shared across grandiose and vulnerable narcissism. These findings were generally mirrored by self-esteem, although the relations were smaller for self-esteem and in a different direction (i.e., negative) with the narcissistic antagonism factor.

3.2. Criterion validity

Next, we compared the basic trait profiles of boldness and self-esteem with those previously reported for grandiose narcissism, vulnerable narcissism, the three-factor model of narcissism, as well as expert prototypes of narcissistic personality disorder (NPD; Lynam & Widiger, 2001) and a “healthy personality” (Bleidorn et al., in press). Both prototypes were created by having experts in each construct (i.e., NPD and a “healthy personality”) rate prototypical cases of the construct on the facets of the Five Factor Model, ratings were then summed across raters within each facet for each construct to yield a prototypical FFM profile (see last two columns of Table 2). The domain and facet relations are documented in Table 2, followed by relative profile similarity analyses in Table 3.² Both boldness and self-esteem demonstrate large negative correlations with neuroticism and large positive correlations with extraversion, which are generally stronger than the correlations observed for the narcissism scores. Boldness and self-esteem diverge dramatically from the narcissism scores in relation to agreeableness and conscientiousness. Boldness and self-esteem are generally unrelated to agreeableness and positively related to conscientiousness, whereas the narcissism scores are substantially negatively related to agreeableness and manifest mixed relations with conscientiousness.

We next quantified the relative similarity of these FFM trait profiles across constructs, testing the similarities involving the boldness profile against one another using tests of dependent r s. The boldness profile was nearly identical to the profiles for self-esteem and agentic extraversion, similar to profiles for grandiose narcissism and the profile for a healthy personality, and nearly opposite the profiles for vulnerable narcissism and Neuroticism. The boldness profile was unrelated to the Antagonism profile.

4. Discussion

There is substantial debate surrounding the nature of psychopathic boldness in terms of what it measures and how it fits in the broader psychopathy construct. Critics of boldness argue that it manifests null to small relations with the externalizing behaviors which are associated

² Because the FFM profiles for boldness, narcissism, and self-esteem are on a different metric than that used for the two expert-rated profiles, only relative (rather than absolute) similarity indices can be computed.

with psychopathy, driving much of the lay and scientific interest in the construct. The lone consistent maladaptive correlate of boldness has been narcissism (Lilienfeld et al., 2012), although many of the studies examining this relation have not employed measures of narcissism that allow the construct to be decomposed into its narrower components – be they 2-factor (grandiose vs. vulnerable) or newer, 3-factor models (trifurcated model of narcissism; Miller et al., 2017; narcissistic spectrum model; Krizan & Herlache, 2018).

In the current study, we examined boldness in relation to narcissism scores derived from a comprehensive battery of narcissism scales that allowed examination of boldness’ relations with both grandiose and vulnerable content, as well as a newer, more articulated three factor approach that breaks narcissism into components: antagonism (e.g., entitlement, callous self-regard, arrogance), agentic extraversion (e.g., assertiveness, exhibitionism), and narcissistic neuroticism (e.g., shame; embarrassment, distress). The current results demonstrate that boldness manifests varied relations with narcissism depending upon the dimension under study (i.e., two-factor models: grandiose versus vulnerable; three-factor models: agentic extraversion versus neuroticism versus antagonism).

The trifurcated models of narcissism provide the most nuanced, and we believe useful, description of the relation between boldness and narcissism. Within this model, it is obvious that boldness is primarily related to the agentic extraversion aspects of narcissism, with little relation to the antagonistic components of narcissism. Boldness is moderately negatively related to neuroticism in the Trifurcated model. These relations explain the correlations seen between boldness with grandiose narcissism as it is composed of both agentic extraversion and antagonism, whereas vulnerable narcissism is a blend of neuroticism and antagonism. Thus, antagonism is “glue” that binds different narcissism presentations together (Krizan & Herlache, 2018; Miller et al., 2017). The results from the three-factor level also help to explain why boldness is generally unrelated to externalizing behaviors. FFM antagonism is the most robust correlate of antisocial behavior, whereas FFM extraversion is unrelated (Vize et al., 2019a,b). Additionally, it is the antagonism aspect not the agentic extraversion aspect of narcissism that accounts for its relation to aggression (Vize et al., 2019a,b). These findings were largely replicated when comparing boldness’ relations with the FFM domains and facets to the relations observed for the two and three-factor models of narcissism. Here, boldness manifested null correlations with most aspects of FFM agreeableness with the exception of modesty whereas both grandiose narcissism from the two-factor model, and agentic extraversion and antagonism factors from three-factor models (i.e., Crowe et al., 2019) manifest negative correlations with a number of facets including modesty, morality, and cooperation.

4.1. Limitations and conclusions

Despite the strengths of the current study (e.g., a large, well-powered sample, a broad set of narcissism items), several limitations should be noted. First, the current study used data collected from MTurk, and although reviews of this sampling strategy have generally found it to be a reasonable approach (Chandler & Shapiro, 2016), some caution must be used regarding the generalizability of the current results. Additionally, in the current analyses only self-report data were collected; thus, the magnitude of the relations between variables may be increased due to shared method variance.

The current analyses demonstrate that boldness is a rough proxy for the agentic extraversion components of narcissism consistent with both Krizan and Herlache’s (2018) narcissism spectrum model and Miller and colleagues’ (2016, 2017) trifurcated model of narcissism. That being said, these results also demonstrate that boldness may be an even better proxy for self-esteem given its robust correlation with self-esteem at the scale level ($r = .62$) and nearly identical trait profile ($r = .94$). The near equality between boldness and self-esteem observed in the present study is consistent with the largely adaptive correlates of boldness

Table 2.
Personality correlates of boldness, self-esteem, and narcissism.

	Boldness	Self-esteem	Narcissism; 2 and 3 factor levels			N	A	Expert NPD	Expert Health
			G	V	AE				
Neuroticism	-.70	-.79	-.24	.61	-.26	.66	.19	2.74	2.25
Anxiety	-.65	-.65	-.23	.52	-.22	.60	.09	2.33	2.34
Anger	-.32	-.40	.05	.49	.01	.44	.34	4.08	1.77
Depression	-.60	-.85	-.27	.52	-.27	.59	.10	2.42	2.01
Self-consciousness	-.73	-.61	-.37	.42	-.38	.50	.04	1.50	2.72
Immoderation	-.26	-.42	-.05	.40	-.05	.42	.15	3.17	2.47
Vulnerability	-.66	-.69	-.26	.47	-.29	.50	.15	2.92	2.21
Extraversion	.74	.52	.55	-.17	.63	-.17	-.02	3.52	3.57
Friendliness	.58	.46	.33	-.25	.41	-.21	-.15	1.42	3.95
Gregariousness	.48	.26	.41	-.05	.44	-.07	.07	3.83	3.60
Assertiveness	.72	.43	.54	-.13	.60	-.15	.04	4.67	3.26
Activity	.44	.41	.33	-.15	.38	-.15	-.04	3.67	3.67
Excitement Seeking	.40	.11	.40	.13	.44	.10	.16	4.17	3.01
Cheerfulness	.52	.58	.32	-.28	.40	-.24	-.18	3.33	3.91
Openness	.11	-.04	.04	.01	.12	.09	-.14	3.10	3.38
Imagination	.03	-.12	.10	.18	.17	.25	-.02	3.75	3.03
Artistic Interests	.12	.10	.01	-.11	.09	-.01	-.23	3.25	3.39
Emotionality	-.32	-.33	-.16	.24	-.08	.38	-.14	1.92	4.00
Adventurousness	.40	.21	.17	-.21	.18	-.23	-.04	4.08	3.01
Intellect	.23	.11	.07	-.13	.13	-.08	-.15	2.92	3.21
Liberalism	-.06	-.08	-.03	.06	-.05	.04	.06	2.67	3.66
Agreeableness	-.09	.09	-.51	-.50	-.35	-.24	-.78	1.40	3.48
Trust	.21	.31	-.03	-.28	.05	-.19	-.29	1.42	3.24
Morality	-.17	.08	-.53	-.52	-.45	-.36	-.63	1.83	3.9
Altruism	.21	.25	-.05	-.33	.13	-.11	-.56	1.00	3.75
Cooperation	-.03	.16	-.39	-.47	-.30	-.31	-.57	1.58	3.22
Modesty	-.50	-.43	-.73	-.18	-.69	-.02	-.48	1.08	3.13
Sympathy	-.05	-.01	-.23	-.18	-.08	.04	-.51	1.50	3.66
Conscientiousness	.42	.55	.08	-.48	.16	-.42	-.35	2.81	3.59
Self-efficacy	.53	.57	.32	-.30	.39	-.27	-.15	3.25	3.77
Orderliness	.17	.27	.01	-.22	.06	-.18	-.20	2.92	3.56
Dutifulness	.15	.32	-.18	-.47	-.07	-.33	-.53	2.42	3.64
Achievement striving	.42	.41	.30	-.18	.39	-.13	-.14	3.92	3.53
Self-discipline	.38	.47	.10	-.44	.13	-.44	-.22	2.08	3.59
Cautiousness	.17	.34	-.14	-.44	-.11	-.41	-.30	2.25	3.42

Note. G = Grandiose; V = Vulnerable; AE = Agentic Extraversion; N = Neuroticism; A = Antagonism; Expert NPD ratings – Lynam & Widiger, 2001; Expert ratings of a healthy personality – Bleidorn et al., in press. Correlations of $|\cdot| \geq .40$ are bolded. The FFM correlates of G, V, AE, N, and A were originally reported in Crowe et al., 2019.

Table 3.
Profile similarity .

	2-factor model of narcissism			3-factor model of narcissism			Expert NPD
	Boldness	Self-esteem	Grandiose Narcissism	Vulnerable Narcissism	Agentic Extraversion	Neuroticism	
Self-esteem	.94 ^a						
GN	.80 ^b	.60					
VN	-.66 ^c	-.84	-.08				
AE	.86 ^{ad}	.68	.99	-.19			
N	-.76 ^e	-.91	-.25	.97	-.34		
A	-.15 ^f	-.40	.45	.80	.31	.65	
Expert - NPD	.40 ^g	.18	.72	.24	.65	.07	.64
Expert - Health	.65 ^{bdg}	.77	.26	-.78	.37	-.76	-.60

Note. Profile similarity was measured via a second-order correlation of their criterion correlations with the FFM traits. GN = Grandiose Narcissism; VN = Vulnerable Narcissism; Three-factor model of narcissism: AE = Agentic Extraversion; N = Neuroticism; A = Antagonism; Expert NPD ratings – Lynam & Widiger, 2001; Expert ratings of a healthy personality – Bleidorn et al., in press. Effects sizes for boldness were compared against one another via tests of dependent *r*s. Significant differences in this column ($p \leq .01$) are identified via different superscripts.

demonstrated in meta-analytic reviews (Sleep et al., 2019) and recent work demonstrating the alignment of boldness with ratings of the healthy personality. The extent to which boldness is considered central to psychopathy and necessary in the assessment of psychopathy is still up for debate. Although we consider the traits measured as part of boldness to be akin to a diagnostic specifier that is neither necessary nor sufficient, others disagree and believe these traits are critical to descriptions of Cleckly-ian psychopathy. We believe the present results bolster our view. As noted earlier, previous work has shown that boldness is virtually unrelated to various externalizing behavior (e.g., antisocial behavior, aggression) or to other consensual features of

psychopathy (e.g., antagonism). The current work shows that boldness is unrelated to the maladaptive aspects of grandiose narcissism—removing another maladaptive correlate from the list of potentially maladaptive correlates of boldness.

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