

Introduction

There has been much recent interest in the investigation of psychopathic traits in youth. A growing body of literature has demonstrated that such traits are linked to serious negative behavioral outcomes in adolescents, such as violence and criminal recidivism (Edens et al., 2001). However, the interpersonal dimension of psychopathy has been investigated less thoroughly in youth (Kosson et al., 2002).

One interpersonal construct of interest in youth is an inflated sense of self-worth, or narcissism. The link between narcissistic and psychopathic traits in adults has been recognized both theoretically (Hart & Hare, 1998; Kernberg, 1998) and empirically (Benning et al., 2005; Kansi, 2003; Paulhus & Williams, 2002). There has also been some research revealing that narcissism and psychopathic traits are related in adolescent samples (Frick, Bodin, & Barry, 2000; Skeem & Cauffman, 2003). However, the relationship between narcissism and psychopathic traits in youth remains unclear. For example, in adult samples, narcissistic traits are typically associated with callous and unemotional traits (Harpur et al., 1989), whereas Frick et al. (1994) found that egocentric and narcissistic traits were most strongly associated with impulse and conduct problems in clinic-referred adolescents.

In order to further clarify the relationship between self-esteem, narcissism, and psychopathic traits, the present study examined these constructs in a sample of high-risk adolescents. We predicted that psychopathic traits would be related to narcissism, but not to levels of self-esteem. These relationships were also investigated separately for males and females in order to explore any gender differences in the pattern of associations among the traits.

Method

Participants

Participants were 93 adolescents either incarcerated (54%) or attending a residential treatment program for behaviorally disordered youth (46%). The mean age of youth was 15.5 years ($SD = 1.5$). The sample was 47% male with 68% Caucasian and 22% Aboriginal youth. Guardian and youth consent were obtained from participants and all were treated in accordance with ethical standards.

Materials and Procedure

As part of a larger protocol, youth completed several personality inventories. Self-esteem was measured using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965). Narcissism was measured with the Egotism scale of the Millon Adolescent Clinical Inventory (MACI; Millon, 1993).

Psychopathy was assessed using the Psychopathy Checklist: Youth Version (PCL:YV; Forth, Kosson, & Hare, 2003) with ratings made by experienced graduate students using interview and file information. In order to comprehensively evaluate the relationships between self-esteem, narcissism and the various dimensions of psychopathic traits, data were analyzed using the three-factor model of psychopathy (Cooke & Michie, 2001), including Arrogant and Deceitful Interpersonal Style (Factor 1), Deficient Affective Experience (Factor 2), and Impulsive and Irresponsible Behavioral Style (Factor 3).

Results

Scores on measures of self-esteem and narcissism were highly correlated, $r = .42, p < .001$. Thus, partial correlations were computed to determine (1) the relationship between self-esteem and psychopathic traits, controlling for narcissism and (2) the relationship between narcissism and psychopathic traits, controlling for self-esteem. Analysis were also conducted separately for male and female youth.

There were no significant correlations between self-esteem and psychopathic traits overall or by gender when controlling for narcissism. When controlling for self-esteem, narcissism was significantly associated with all dimensions of psychopathic traits for the sample as a whole. When this relationship was investigated by gender, it was found that narcissism was related to overall level of psychopathic traits as well as interpersonal traits for females only.

	PCL:YV Total	Factor 1 Interpersonal	Factor 2 Affective	Factor 3 Behavioral
Self-Esteem				
Overall	.01	.14	-.05	-.03
Male	-.01	.21	.00	-.16
Female	-.06	-.02	-.15	.05
Narcissism				
Overall	.33**	.27**	.21*	.22*
Male	.25	.18	.21	.12
Female	.40**	.42**	.24	.28

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Discussion

The goal of the present study was to investigate the relationship between self-esteem, narcissism, and psychopathic traits in a sample of high-risk youth. The findings suggest that self-esteem is unrelated to psychopathic traits whereas narcissism is positively related to all dimensions of psychopathy, including interpersonal, affective, and behavioral traits. Interestingly, narcissism and psychopathic traits were not significantly associated for males. However, for females, narcissism was significantly related to higher levels of overall psychopathic traits as well as an increased level of traits reflecting an arrogant and deceitful interpersonal style.

These findings are in line with previous research linking narcissism and psychopathic traits in youth. For example, using a scale measuring the core personality features of psychopathy, Skeem and Cauffman (2003) found that the Grandiose/Manipulative factor correlated with PCL:YV Total and Factor 1 (Interpersonal) scores in a sample of adolescent offenders. The present results further indicate that the relationship between narcissism and psychopathic traits may differ by gender. This is consistent with Frick et al. (2000) who found that a cluster of youth scoring highly only on the Narcissism subscale of a measure psychopathic traits had a greater proportion of girls than any other cluster.

The investigation of interpersonal aspects of psychopathy in youth is important for several reasons. Interpersonal and affective traits have been identified as core features of psychopathy in youth (Vincent, Vitacco, & Grisso, 2003). Given the empirical evidence of a link between narcissism and aggressive behavior in adolescents (Hughes, Cavell, & Grossman, 1997; Salmivalli et al., 1999), it will be important to further examine narcissism in relation to psychopathic traits as an influential mechanism in the development of violent behavior. Further, it appears that narcissism may be a unique characteristic of female youth who are at high risk for aggressive behavior (Silverthorn & Frick, 1999). Finally, the present results highlight the importance of identifying and targeting characteristics such as an inflated sense of self-worth when developing interventions, especially for female youth.

One limitation of the present study was the smaller sample sizes used to examine the relationship between self-esteem, narcissism, and psychopathic traits for males and females separately, which may have served to reduce the power to detect significant relationships, despite moderately sized correlations. Future research should continue to investigate interpersonal dimensions of psychopathic traits in order to further elucidate this aspect of the disorder in youth samples.