Mediation effect of narcissism on the relationship between empathy and the quality of interpersonal relationships

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Abstract

This study examined the mediatory role of narcissism on the relationship between empathy and the quality of interpersonal relationships. A sample of 609 university students (165 males, 399 females, 45 unknown) were included in this study. All participants completed the Emotional Empathy Scale (EES), the Inventory of Interpersonal Problems (IIP), and the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI). The results showed that empathy and narcissism had significant positive and negative correlation with the quality of interpersonal relationships, respectively. The results of path analysis revealed that narcissism mediated the relationship between empathy and the quality of interpersonal relationships.

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1. Introduction

Empathy is individuals' basic capacity which contributes to the management of relationships, the supporting of communal activities, and the group cohesion. This ability has an essential role in individuals' social life (Rieffe, Ketelar, & Wiefferink, 2010). and in fact empathy is the stimulating impetus of pro-social behaviors and those behaviors that lead to group cohesion (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2004; Rieffe et al., 2010) To appropriately express our empathy needs that we possess social skills (Hunter, Figueredo, Becker, & Malamuth, 2007) Empathy is an individual's vicariously emotional response to others' emotional reactions (Mehrabian & Epstein, 1972; Ali, Amorim, & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2009) On the other hand, empathy is the essential component for successful interpersonal performance (Sousa, McDonald, Rushby, Li, Dimoska, & James, 2010). Interpersonal perspectives contend that maladaptive interpersonal patterns result from online interactions between the individual and his/her social environment. Social processes begin early in life and extend through the whole life. Interpersonal relationships not only shape social behaviors but also affect an individual's sense of self and others (Alden & Taylor, 2004). One of the issues investigated in the present study is the examination of the relationship between empathy and the quality of interpersonal relationships.

However, a number of psychological constructs might have a mediatory role in the relationship among these variables. One of these constructs is narcissism; a personality construct that has been studied in social, personality, and clinical psychology (Brown & Zeigler-Hill, 2004; Cain, Pincus & Ansell, 2008; Holtzman & Strube, 2010;
Miller & Campbell, 2008). Narcissism is defined as a mixed blessing (Paulhus, 1998) because it consists of adaptive and maladaptive aspects (Foster & Campbell, 2005; Reidy, Zeichner, Foster, & Martinez, 2008). Narcissism most often is known as a complex and important personality feature that involve a grandiose, yet fragile sense of self, entitlement, preoccupation with success, and strong demands for admiration from others (Ames, Rose, & Anderson, 2006). The focus of the present study is the examination of the mediatory role of narcissism in the relationship between empathy and the quality of interpersonal relationships. In this study, the quality of interpersonal relationships is determined by the intensity of interpersonal problems. With this point in mind, the purposes of the present study are: 1) the examination of the likely relationship between empathy and the quality of interpersonal relationships; 2) the examination of the likely relationship between narcissism and the quality of interpersonal relationships; 3) the specification of the mediatory role of narcissism in the relationship between empathy and the quality of interpersonal relationships.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and Procedure

The population under investigation in the present study included all students inhabiting in University of Tehran's dormitories. A sample of 609 university students (399 females, 165 males, and 45 unknown) were included in the present study. All participants were asked to complete the Emotional Empathy Scale (EES), the Inventory of Interpersonal Problems (IIP), and the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI). After explaining the purposes of the study, the questionnaires were submitted to the participants.

2.2. Measures

Emotional Empathy Scale (EES; Mehrabian, & Epstein, 1972)- is a 33-item questionnaire which tests an individual's emotional responses to others' emotional reactions on a 9-point Likert scale from 1 (absolutely disagree) to 9 (absolutely agree). Adequate psychometric properties of the EES have been reported (Besharat, 2010; Mehrabian, & Epstein, 1972).

Inventory of Interpersonal Problems (IIP; Horowitz et al., 1988)- This is a 127-item self-report instrument designed to measure difficulties that people experience in interpersonal relationships. It consists of six subscales including hard to be assertive, hard to be sociable, hard to be intimate, hard to be submissive, too responsible, and too controlling. Items are rated on a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from 0 (not at all) to 4 (extremely). Adequate psychometric properties of the IIP have been reported (Besharat, 2008, 2009; Horowitz et al., 1988).

Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin, & Terry, 1988)- The NPI is the most used self-reporting instrument of narcissistic characteristics in the normal population. This inventory consists of 40 items and each item involves two options, with participants being required to choose one of the two options. The sum of scores is separately calculated for each of two options and the sum of the scores indicate an individual's level of narcissism. Adequate psychometric properties of the NPI have been reported (Raskin, & Terry, 1988).

3. Results

Table 1 indicates the statistics of the participants on the basis of their scores on empathy, narcissism, and interpersonal problems.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Mean (S.D.)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Empathy</td>
<td>203.50(27.96)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narcissism</td>
<td>14.84(6.47)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal Problems relation</td>
<td>1.55(0.55)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Tables 1. Mean scores and standard deviations of each scale of the empathy, narcissism, and interpersonal relationships
Table 2 indicates the Pearson product-moment correlations between measures of empathy, narcissism, and interpersonal relationships.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Empathy</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Narcissism</td>
<td>-.17</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Interpersonal Problems relation</td>
<td>-.13</td>
<td>.52</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results of path analysis revealed that empathy, with a path coefficient of -.23, could account for 23 percent of variance in interpersonal problems and, with a path coefficient of -.21 could account for 21 percent of variance in narcissism. Narcissism, with a path coefficient of .54 could account for 54 percent of variance in interpersonal problems. All these coefficients were directly significant at $p < .001$.

4. Discussion

The results of the present study indicated that empathy has a positive relationship with the quality of interpersonal relationships. This is consistent with the findings of the previous studies (e.g., Batson, 1997; Harris, 2000; Lawrence, Shaw, Baker, Baron-Cohen, & David, 2004; Pranis, 2000; Rieffe et al., 2010; Sousa et al., 2010) and can be interpreted on the basis of the following possibilities. Empathy is the essential component for successful interpersonal performance (Sousa et al., 2010). To respond others' emotional senses is the important aspect of empathy (de Wied, van Boxtel, Zaalberg, Goudena, & Matthys, 2006; Shamay-Tsoory, Aharon-Peretz, & Perry, 2008; Nummenmaa, Hirvonen, Parkkola, & Hietanen, 2008; Hoffman, 2000). Empathy is the basic process of real psychological changes (Rogers, 1959). Further, empathy, through enabling to share others' emotional conditions, to receive regular feedback from interpersonal relationships (Pranis, 2000), and to become aware of others' senses (Chlopan, McCain, Carbonell, & Hagen, 1985) which requires the process of empathizing, reduces interpersonal problems and provides the context for the improvement of social relationships. Empathy is individuals' basic capacity which contributes to the management of relationships, the supporting of communal activities, and group cohesion. This ability has an essential role in individuals' social life (Rieffe et al., 2010) and in fact empathy is the stimulating impetus of pro-social behaviors and those behaviors that lead to group cohesion (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2004; Rieffe et al., 2010) To appropriately express our empathy needs that we possess social skills (Hunter et al., 2007) Empathy allows a person to develop an effective contact with his/her surrounding social environment, connects him/her to the social environment, facilitates it for him/her to help others, and prevents him/her from harming others (Baron-Cohen & Wheel Wright, 2004). These characteristics contribute to the person to improve the quality of his/her interpersonal relationships. Empathy is a personality characteristic that is related to the quality of interpersonal relationships and, therefore, a significant correlation between empathy and human relationships is expected. For instance, a positive relationship between empathy and personality factors such as sociability which improve the quality of interpersonal relationships is expected. In contrast, it can be expected that there exist a negative relationship between empathy and personality factors such as aggression and hostility which disturb the quality of interpersonal relationships (Hoijat, Zuckerman, Magee. Mangione, Nasca, Vergare, & et al., 2005). Eisenberg and Eggum (2009) stress the importance of the management of emotions in empathetic responses (de Wied, Wied, & Boxtel, 2010) Positive social relationships require the ability to understand others' sensory emotions and experiences. Furthermore, appropriate social relationships contribute to the vicarious experience of emotions similar to those in other people. From an epistemological perspective, this experience and ability is of high importance because it provides a person with the direct evaluation of others' behaviors (Fitzgibbon, Giannarra, Karstianis, Enticott, & Bradshaw, 2010).

The results of the present study indicated that narcissism has a negative relationship with the quality of interpersonal relationships. This finding is consistent with the findings of the previous research (Campbell, Foster, & Finkel, 2002; Ogrodniczuk, Piper, Joyce, Steinberg, & Duggal, 2009; Raskin & Terry, 1988; Tanchotsrinon, Maneesri, & Campbell, 2007; Zeigler-Hill, Myers, & Clark, 2010) and can be interpreted on the basis upon the
2009). With respect to these factors, narcissism can have a negative effect on the quality of a person's interpersonal relationships with others.

The results also indicated that narcissism has a mediatory role in the relationship between empathy and the quality of interpersonal relationships. This is consistent with the findings of the previous studies (Lawrence et al., 2004; Munro, Bore, & Powis, 2005; Ogrodniczuk et al., 2009; Pranis, 2000; Rieffe et al., 2010; Sousa et al., 2010) and can be interpreted on the basis of the following possibilities. Narcissism as a personality structure (Holtzman & Strube, 2010) that consists of adaptive and maladaptive aspects (Reidy et al., 2008) involves a grandiose, yet fragile sense of self, entitlement, and preoccupation with success. For the reason of the problems that result from receiving unempathetic responses in childhood, a person utilizes narcissistic defenses in order to reduce the sense of insufficiency (Kohut, 1977). Narcissism, by developing inappropriate social responses that prevent from empathetic reactions (Lawrence et al., 2004) reduces the effects of empathy on the quality of interpersonal relationships. Appropriate social relations require a vicarious experience of the emotions similar to those in another person. This experience and ability provides a person with the direct evaluation of another person's behaviors (Fitzgibbon, et al., 2010) which is of necessity for the understanding of empathy, whereas narcissism with its egocentric approach, exploitation, lack of empathy, and hostility (Campbell et al., 2002) prevents from the development of relations. Narcissism, by reducing the ability to empathize (Watson, Grisham, Trotter, & Biderman, 1984) affects the quality of interpersonal relations and poses narcissistic people to many interpersonal problems in the daily life (Eaton, Struthers, & Santelli, 2006). The past research considers inflated self, interpersonal hostility, and impulsivity as three major characteristics of narcissism (Carlson & Gjerde, 2009). Narcissists are unable to seek dependency for the reason of their wide mistrust and devaluation of others (Kernberg, 1984). These factors reduce the capacity of empathy and affect the quality of interpersonal relationships. Studies with nonclinical samples have shown that narcissism is substantially connected to interpersonal problems (Ogrodniczuk et al., 2009). The present study needs to be replicated in different populations and needs more empirical support. Till then, the findings of the study should be interpreted with caution. Further, the cross-sectional design of the study and participants (i.e., a group of university students) exert some limitations on the generalization of the findings. Finally, the problems and limitations on the use of self-reporting instruments should not be overlooked.

References


