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Assessing Narcissism in At-risk Adolescents with a Single Item: The Importance of Multidimensionality

Christopher T. Barry
Shari R. Reiter
Chloe L. Sidoti
Washington State University

Research on narcissism in adolescents has established the validity and utility of inventories such as the 40-item Narcissistic Personality Inventory for Children (NPIC; Barry, Frick, & Killian, 2003) and the 52-item Pathological Narcissism Inventory (PNI; Pincus et al., 2009). However, a series of studies with adults has reported the psychometrics of the Single Item Narcissism Scale (SINS; Konrath, Meier, & Bushman, 2014). The present study examined the SINS in 158 at-risk adolescents (122 males, 36 females) ages 16-18. Ratings on the SINS were not significantly correlated with total scores on the NPIC or PNI, with self-esteem, or with aggression. Potential explanations for the general lack of convergence of the SINS with broader narcissism scales and assessment implications are discussed.

Keywords: narcissism, adolescents, personality assessment

Correspondence to:
Christopher T. Barry, Ph.D., Department of Psychology, Washington State University, Pullman, WA
Phone: (509) 335-4906, e-mail: chris.barry@wsu.edu

A trade-off between comprehensive, yet lengthy, assessment tools and shorter measures has been described in personality research. Shorter measures tend to provide a less rich assessment of constructs but yield indications of personality in a time-efficient manner. The psychometric principle of aggregation posits that "the sum of a set of multiple measurements is a more stable and unbiased estimator than any single measurement from the set" (Rushton, Brainerd, & Pressley, 1983, p.18). This principle of Classical Test Theory is illustrated by the increased internal consistency of personality measures as the number of items included increases (Rushton et al., 1983). However, longer measures are not necessarily better conceptual or psychometric representations of the constructs they purport to assess, as some weaker or less relevant items serve to lower the validity of the scale as a whole (Gardner, Cummings, Dunham, & Pierce, 1998). Further, one "good" item may be more valid than an aggregate of "bad" items, despite a longer measure's apparent internal consistency (Gardner et al., 1998). Moreover, lengthier scales may include quite specific traits that are not central to the personality construct being assessed, thus adding unnecessary or superfluous content. Because of the potential of participant fatigue and due to concerns regarding time and cost effectiveness, it may be that "brevity is of paramount importance to minimizing the demands on participants' time and thereby maximizing response rates" (Dolinger & Malmquist, 2009; p. 231). In clinical settings, single-items may be used at intake as screeners for treatment referrals or to identify individuals for further assessment (Dolinger & Malmquist, 2009).

The present study investigated the association between a single-item measure of narcissism and more lengthy tools that have been used in research on narcissism in adolescents. Specifically, this study focused on a sample of at-risk adolescents, because much of the foundational research in this area has been conducted with similar samples of youth who appear to exhibit a wide range of scores on various narcissism measures (e.g., Barry, Pickard, & Ansel, 2009; Barry & Wallace, 2010). Furthermore, this type of sample allows for consideration of constructs such as aggression that have been linked to narcissism in adolescents (e.g., Barry, Grafeman, Pickard, & Adler, 2007; Barry & Kauten, 2014; Golmaryami & Barry, 2010; Washburn, McMahon, King, Reinecke, & Silver, 2004) and that are likely more variably distributed in an at-risk sample than would be the case in community samples.

From the notion that narcissism involves an inflated, self-centered, and vane sense of oneself, a Single-Item Narcissism Scale (SINS) was developed in a series of previous studies with college students and with adults who completed on-line surveys (Konrath et al., 2014). The SINS is intended to provide a time efficient assessment of narcissism that might be particularly useful in repeated measures contexts. The single item states "*To what extent do you agree with this statement: I am a narcissist (Note: the word 'narcissist' means egotistical, self-focused, and vain)?*" Clearly, the item has face validity regarding a grandiose or self-aggrandizing aspect of narcissism. However, it also requires the respondent to accurately reflect on and acknowledge the extent to which he or she possesses and exhibits narcissism. Among other results, SINS ratings were significantly, moderately correlated with scores on the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI), negatively related to self-reported empathy, unrelated to self-esteem overall, and relatively stable over an average span of 11 days (Konrath et al.,

2014). Thus, the SINS converged with a well-established measure of narcissism, but the inconsistent relation between the SINS and self-esteem suggests heterogeneity in terms of how favorably people scoring higher on the SINS evaluate themselves (Konrath et al., 2014). Based on the initial series of studies using the SINS, it would be expected that SINS ratings would similarly be associated with scores on longer, more established measures of narcissism in adolescents.

The emerging research on narcissism during adolescence emphasizes the relevance of unidimensional, or total, scores on scales, as well as of specific dimensions from those scales based on their differential correlations with indices of behavioral, emotional, and interpersonal adjustment. Specifically, overall scores on the Narcissistic Personality Inventory for Children (NPIC; Barry et al., 2003) are associated with self-reported aggression (e.g., Barry, Grafeman et al., 2007; Barry & Wallace, 2010) and with peer-nominated relational aggression (Golmaryami & Barry, 2010) in samples of at-risk adolescents, whereas adaptive and maladaptive dimensions from this measure have shown divergent associations with aggression and self-esteem (Barry, Grafeman et al., 2007; Barry & Wallace, 2010). Moreover, narcissism, especially maladaptive narcissism, has demonstrated unique variance in the prediction of disciplinary problems in residential settings, even when considering an adolescent's behavioral history (Herrington, Barry, & Loflin, 2014).

Overall scores on the Pathological Narcissism Inventory (PNI; Pincus et al., 2009) relate to aggression during adolescence, as well as indicators of internalizing problems and distress (Barry & Kauten, 2014). The grandiose and vulnerable dimensions from this measure are differentially associated with such constructs in similar samples (Barry, Loflin, & Doucette, 2015). More specifically, vulnerable narcissism (e.g., contingent self-esteem, concerns about demonstrating weakness to others) was associated with maladjustment in the form of internalizing problems and aggression, whereas grandiose narcissism (e.g., fantasies regarding one's superiority) was not. Thus, the existing research points to the psychosocial relevance of self-reported narcissism in at-risk adolescents using relatively lengthy inventories, yet the utility of the SINS for such youth is not known. Based on this literature, the present study investigated whether ratings on the SINS (Konrath et al., 2014) would more closely correspond to specific dimensions from the more-established and lengthy measures and whether these ratings would be associated with constructs (e.g., self-reported aggression) that have been consistently correlated with narcissism in at-risk samples of adolescents.

Based on previous research with adults (Konrath et al., 2014), it was hypothesized that a positive correlation would be evident between the SINS and other measures of narcissism (i.e., NPIC, PNI). Ratings on the SINS were also hypothesized to be positively correlated with both self-reported aggression and peer-nominated relational aggression based on the overall evidence pertaining to longer scales of narcissism in samples of adolescents. We did not make a hypothesis regarding the correlation between the SINS and self-esteem given the inconsistent findings concerning self-esteem in previous research with the SINS (Konrath et al., 2014) and the inconsistency in findings on the association between self-esteem and dimensions of narcissism from the NPIC and PNI in adolescents. Further, the relation between SINS ratings and socially desirable response tendencies, particularly impression management, was examined to determine if such concerns were tied to lower SINS ratings (i.e., a tendency to underreport narcissism as a function of impression management).

Method

Participants

Participants were 158 adolescents (122 males, 36 females), ranging in age from 16-18 years (M = 16.74, SD = .73). Participants were attending a residential program for youth who have dropped out of school. The majority of participants (52.5%) identified as White, with 41.3% identifying as Black, and 6.2% identifying being from a different racial/ethnic background. The program at which data were collected is voluntary, and adolescents attending the program do not have current legal system involvement. Youth attending this program have dropped out of school for a variety of behavioral, financial, academic, or personal reasons. The residential program is organized into platoons, consisting of approximately 20-30 individuals who live, attend class, and participate in service activities together. Thus, this sample also provides a unique opportunity to obtain peer-referenced assessments such as that used for relational aggression (see below) given the close proximity in which adolescents in this program interact.

Measures

Single-item Narcissism Scale *(SINS; Konrath et al. 2014).* Participants completed the SINS described above. A 5-point response scale was used, ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Konrath and colleagues suggested a 5-point or 7-point response scale, with preference for a 7-point scale. We opted for a 5-point scale to provide a somewhat more simplistic option for the adolescent participants and one which was more consistent with the other instruments completed in this study.

Narcissistic Personality Inventory for Children *(NPIC; Barry et al., 2003).* The NPIC is a 40-item inventory that is a downward extension of the adult Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI) which consists of seven subscales (see Raskin & Terry, 1988). The NPIC has been used extensively in research with adolescents. On this measure, participants choose one of a pair of statements (e.g., "It scares me to think about me ruling the world" vs. "If I ruled the world, it would be a better place") and then select the chosen statement as "sort of true" or "really true" for them. Items are scored on a 0 to 3 scale and are summed for the total score and subscale scores. The NPIC also consists of Adaptive and Maladaptive narcissism composites with the Adaptive Composite consisting of Authority and Self-Sufficiency subscales that were derived directly from the NPI, and the Maladaptive Composite being composed of Exhibitionism, Entitlement, and Exploitativeness subscales analogous to those from the NPI. The remaining two subscales (i.e., Vanity and Superiority) are not included in either of these composites (see Barry et al., 2003). In the present sample, the NPIC had an internal consistency of α = .86 for the total score, α = .67 for the Adaptive Composite, and α = .70 for the Maladaptive Composite. The internal consistencies of the 7 subscales ranged from α = .45 (Entitlement) to α = .76 (Vanity). The Entitlement subscale was not considered individually given its low internal consistency.

Pathological Narcissism Inventory *(PNI; Pincus et al., 2009).* The PNI consists of 52 items using a 5-point scale ranging from not at all like me to very much like me with scale scores consisting of mean item ratings. The PNI includes two broad dimensions:

Grandiose (e.g., "I can read people like a book") and Vulnerable (e.g., "I typically get very angry when I don't get what I want from people"). The internal consistencies were α = .91 for Grandiose Narcissism and α = .96 for Vulnerable Narcissism in the present sample. The PNI also consists of three subscales within the Grandiose dimension (i.e., Self-Sacrificing Self-Enhancement, Grandiose Fantasy, Exploitativeness) and four within the Vulnerable dimension. (i.e., Contingent Self-Esteem, Devaluing Others/Need for Others, Entitlement Rage, Hiding the Self). Although initially developed for use with adults, research in adolescents has shown good internal consistency fo PNI scales and subscales, as well as divergent correlations for Grandiose Narcissism and Vulnerable Narcissism in patterns that are similar to those demonstrated with adults (see Barry & Kauten, 2014; Barry et al., 2015). Internal consistencies for these subscales ranged from α = .77 to .92.

Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale *(RSES; Rosenberg, 1965).* The RSES is a widely used 10-item measure of global self-esteem for adolescents and adults. Responses are made on a 4-pont scale indicating one's level of disagreement or agreement with each statement (e.g., "On the whole, I am satisfied with myself") with items summed for a total scale score. The internal consistency of the RSES in the present sample was α = .79.

Peer Conflict Scale *(PCS; Marsee et al., 2011).* The PCS consists of 40 items and assesses self-reported aggression. Responses to items (e.g., "I start fights to get what I want") are made on a 4-point Likert scale from 0 (*not at all true*) to 3 (*definitely true*) and are summed for the total PCS score as a measure of overall aggression. The internal consistency of the total PCS score was α = .96 in the present sample.

Peer Nominations of Relational Aggression *(Crick & Grotpeter, 1995).* Peer-nominated relational aggression was assessed in light of prior evidence of its relation to narcissism assessed via the NPIC (Golmaryami & Barry, 2010). Adopted from the peer nomination procedure described by Crick and Grotpeter (1995), participants were asked to nominate up to 3 members of their platoon (see above) on each of 15 items. Four items assess relational aggression (e.g., "When mad at a person, ignores them or stops talking to them"). Nominations on item scores for relational aggression were summed and z-scored within platoon. The internal consistency for the four items comprising peer-nominated relational aggression was α = .89.

Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding *(BIDR; Paulhus, 1998).* The BIDR consists of 40 items that capture socially desirable response tendencies, through two subscales, Self-Deceptive Enhancement (e.g., "I never regret my decisions"), which involves presumably unintentional, but inflated, positively biased self-views, and Impression Management (e.g., "I don't gossip about other people's business"), which assesses a self-presentation that is intentional in trying to positively influence the perceptions of others (Paulhus, 1998). Responses are made on a 7-point scale from 1 (*not true*) to 7 (*very true*), with socially desirable responding indicated for responses of a 6 or 7 on an item (Paulhus, 1998). The internal consistency of the full BIDR scale in the present sample was α = .74, whereas internal consistency of scores on Self-Deceptive Enhancement and Impression Management were α = .58 and .70, respectively. Therefore, Self-Deceptive Enhancement was not considered separately in the present study.

Procedure

This study was approved by the relevant university Institutional Review Board prior to data collection. The residential program director, who serves as guardian ad litem for adolescents during their enrollment in the program, provided consent for youth to be approached about potential participation. Written assent/consent was then obtained from the adolescents, and their decision to participate did not affect their program status. Approximately 73% of the adolescents enrolled in the program agreed to participate and provided complete self-report data. Participants accessed questionnaires for this study and a larger research project through a secure on-line survey program. Self-report data collection occurred in 3-4 sessions in a classroom setting approximately 6 weeks after program enrollment. Sessions were approximately 30-45 minutes over the course of 2 weeks for this study and a larger project. This approach was used to minimize problems with fatigue or inattention. The SINS was the initial survey administered. Finally, the peer nomination procedure was administed approximately 20 weeks into the 22-week program.

Results

Descriptive statistics for the SINS and the other main study variables are shown in Table 1. A principal components analysis of the SINS, PNI Grandiose scale, PNI Vulnerable scale, and the NPIC Adaptive and Maladaptive composites was conducted and supported a two-factor solution (eigenvalue of first factor = 2.18, eigenvalue of second factor = 1.37), which accounted for 71.1% of variance in overall scores. Importantly, the first factor consisted of the two PNI dimensions, and the second factor consisted of the NPIC composites, consistent with other research on these measures in adolescents (Barry & Kauten, 2014). However, the SINS loaded poorly on each factor (i.e., loadings of .09 and .21). This analysis was repeated constraining the solution to equal one factor. This single

Table 1. *Descriptive Statistics for Variables of Interest*

Variable (possible range)	*M*	*SD*	*Range*	*Skew*
SINS (1-5)	3.23	1.09	1-5	-.23
NPIC Total (0-120)	53.09	19.54	14-120	.29
NPIC Adaptive (0-42)	20.39	7.93	3-42	.36
NPIC Maladaptive (0-54)	20.36	8.83	1-54	.54
Grandiose Narcissism (0-5)	2.23	1.12	0-5	.10
Vulnerable Narcissism (0-5)	1.66	1.09	0-5	.75
Self-esteem (0-30)	19.63	5.14	7-30	-.05
Self-reported Aggression (0-120)	17.93	19.41	0-120	2.22
Peer-nominated Relational Aggression	.02	1.03	-1.61-3.79	1.38

Note: Statistics for grandiose narcissism and vulnerable narcissism are mean item scores. Peer-nominated relational aggression scores are z-scores within participants' platoons (groups).

Table 2. *Correlations among main study variables*

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.
1. SINS	-								
2. NPIC total	.13	-							
3. NPIC Adaptive	.10	.63***	-						
4. NPIC Maladaptive	.04	.61***	.72***	-					
5. Grandiose Narcissism	.06	.26**	.22**	.31***	-				
6. Vulnerable Narcissism	.08	.08	.08	.21**	.80***	-			
7. Self-esteem.	.09	.35***	.39***	.16*	.05	-.14	-		
8. Aggression (Self-report)	.04	.21**	.21**	.27**	.48***	.57***	.09	-	
9. Relational Aggression (Peer-report)	.02	.20*	.19*	.21**	.06	.08	.09	.10	-

** $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$*

factor accounted for 40.4% of variance in overall scores. The SINS again loaded poorly onto this single factor (i.e., .17), whereas the PNI and NPIC component scores had loadings from .55 to .84.

Correlations among narcissism ratings and measures of aggression are shown in Table 2. Ratings on the SINS were not significantly correlated with PNI Grandiose Narcissism, PNI Vulnerable Narcissism, total scores on the NPIC, or with self-esteem. The SINS was also unrelated to the Adaptive and Maladaptive composites of NPIC. Furthermore, although PNI Grandiose, PNI Vulnerable, and NPIC total scores were all significantly correlated with self-reported aggression (*rs* = .20-.55), the SINS was not. Peer-nominated relational aggression was not related to SINS ratings, but it was related to scores on the NPIC and its two composites. There were no gender differences on SINS ratings, $t(158) = .23$, $p = .82$, females: $m = 3.19$, $SD = 1.17$, males: $m = 3.24$, $SD = 1.06$. Finally, SINS ratings were not significantly correlated with overall social desirability from the BIDR, $r = .12$, $p = .14$, or with the Impression Management, $r = .07$, $p = .35$, subscale.

Additional correlational analyses were conducted between SINS ratings and subscales from the NPIC and PNI. These correlations are shown in Table 3. At the subscale level, the

Table 3. *Correlations of SINS ratings with NPIC and PNI subscales*

	SINS ratings
NPIC Authority	.05
NPIC Exhibitionism	.03
NPIC Exploitatitiveness	-.02
NPIC Self-Sufficiency	.16¥
NPIC Superiority	.21**
NPIC Vanity	.16*
PNI Contingent Self-Esteem	.14
PNI Devaluing Need for Self/Others	.09
PNI Entitlement Rage	.14
PNI Exploitativeness	.05
PNI Grandiose Fantasy	.00
PNI Hiding the Self	-.03
PNI Self-Sacrificing Self-Enhancement	.09

**p < .05; **p < .01*

SINS was correlated with two of the NPIC subscales: Superiority (sample statements: "I am an outstanding person" "I know I am good because everyone keeps telling me so"), and Vanity (sample statements: "I like to show off how good I look" "I like to look at myself in the mirror"). SINS ratings were not significantly related with scores on any PNI subscale.

Lastly, a multiple regression analysis was conducted to determine if any of the broad narcissism dimensions (i.e., PNI Vulnerable, PNI Grandiose, NPIC Adaptive Composite, NPIC Maladaptive Composite) predicted unique variance in SINS ratings. None of these dimensions demonstrated a unique main effect, and the model explained only 3% of variance in SINS scores.

Discussion

In the present study, adolescents' ratings on the SINS were not significantly

correlated with scores on any of the commonly used, lengthier narcissism scales. A number of potential factors, beyond error variance, may explain these findings. For instance, it is possible that adolescents who have narcissistic characteristics may intentionally obscure their narcissism because it is viewed undesirably; however, evidence from the present study does not support this possibility in light of the lack of an association between SINS ratings and the measure of socially desirable response tendencies. In addition, narcissism on the SINS is presented with wording (i.e., vain, egotistical) that may be perceived as having a negative connotation. It is possible that this wording affected the way in which adolescents rated themselves that was inconsistent with how they responded to the longer scales that include a mix of both desirable and undesirable content.

It should be noted that some constructs have been successfully assessed with one item in adults (e.g., interpersonal rejection sensitivity; Bianchi, Schonfeld, & Laurent, 2015; state anxiety, Davey, Barratt, Butow, & Deeks, 2007; need to belong, Nichols & Webster, 2013). Self-reported behavior has also been successfully indexed with a single item in adults (e.g., alcohol use; Dollinger & Malmquist, 2009) and adolescents (e.g., physical activity; Scott, Morgan, Plotnikoff, & Lubans, 2015). Moreover, research on the Big Five model of personality using an array of questionnaires of varied lengths concluded that validity is not systematically compromised in briefer measures (Thalmayer et al., 2011). Further work is needed to explore the utility of assessing constructs, such as narcissism, in adolescents, including whether adolescents have the insight necessary regarding their self-perception to report on such direct inventory items. Therefore, until more evidence is obtained, we would stop short of yet claiming that the single-item inventory model is inappropriate for evaluating individual differences, including on narcissism, prior to adulthood.

The significant, albeit small, positive correlations between the SINS and the Vanity and Superiority subscales of the NPIC may point to the specific aspects of narcissistic self-perception accessed by respondents on the SINS. That is, individuals who endorse physical vanity or being outstanding or special may also be more likely to endorse the simple statement that they are narcissistic. Wink (1991) described the inclusion of both grandiose and vulnerable characteristics in traidtional theories of narcissism, and he empirically examined the convergent and divergent correlates of a Grandiosity/Exhibitionism and a Vulnerability/Sensitivity form of narcissism. The definition of narcissism provided in the SINS seems to pull for self-perceptions involving vanity, self-centeredness, and arrogance which are more consistent with Wink's grandiose-exhibitionistic "face" of narcissism. Furthermore, whereas adolescent participants may not have endorsed being a "narcissist" in concert with their self-report of various narcissistic features on the longer inventories, they might more readily endorse a single item labeled differently (e.g., without descriptions of the construct) or that takes the perspective of others (e.g., "Other people think that I am a narcissist").

Importantly, evidence in adolescents (e.g., Barry & Kauten, 2014; Barry & Wallace, 2010) points to narcissism being multidimensional, a notion described clearly in the seminal paper by Wink (1991), whereas single-item scales may be best utilized for unidimensional constructs (Gardner et al., 1998). In short, the SINS may not fully assess the range of characteristics tied to narcissism and thus may show weak convergence with longer scales at least for younger respondents. Specifically, it does not seem to distinguish between adaptive and maldaptive, or grandiose and vulnerable, aspects of narcissism in adolescents. The present findings also indicate a need to replicate the findings of Konrath and colleagues (2014) in other samples of adults.

The aim of the present study was to consider the convergent validity of the SINS in a sample of at-risk youth, similar to adolescents who have been the focus of other research on narcissism. However, there are a number of limitations that must be noted. First, because the sample constituted an at-risk group, the relevance of the present findings to broader samples of adolescents from the community is unknown. Moreover, the sample was predominantly White and male, further restricting the generalizability of the findings. Still, this sample has its benefits, including the use of peer reports of relational aggression in the context of a residential setting where the participants had a great deal of contact with each other. Furthermore, research has demonstrated the utility of narcissism in terms of predicting disciplinary problems in such settings (Herrington et al., 2014); thus, the present study suggests that, at least presently, a single-item inventory may be insufficient for evaluating this important construct.

It should also be noted that at the subscale level, the NPIC had poor to moderate internal consistency; thus, even with the significant correlations between the SINS and the Vanity and Superiority subscales of the NPIC, caution is needed in interpreting how well those subscales capture vanity or clear beliefs in one's superiority, respectively. Of course, the significant correlations with NPIC Vanity and NPIC Superiority observed in the present study may also be a case of Type I error. Lastly, relative to adults, adolescents may have difficulty understanding the description of narcissism provided in the SINS. It would be preferable to include a measure of verbal reasoning abilities to account for such a possibility in future studies in this area. However, the convergence among other measures in the present study was consistent with what might be expected and suggests that item comprehension was not a substantial problem for this sample.

In general, individuals with narcissistic tendencies tend to accurately self-reflect on their own narcissism and how others perceive them (Carlson, Vazire, & Oltmanns, 2011). A growing body of research (e.g., Barry & Kauten, 2014; Barry et al., 2015; Barry, et al., 2009; Thomaes, Bushman, Stegge, & Olthof, 2008; Washburn et al., 2004) indicates that meaningful individual differences can also be assessed at least by later adolescence and that there is convergence in self-reported and peer-rated narcissism in this developmental period (Grafeman, Barry, Marcus, & Leachman, 2015). The patterns of correlations in the present study indicate that adolescents' self-reports on lengthier inventories are connected to aggression and self-esteem in the manner suggested by previous research. Still, the stability of personality constructs from late adolescence into adulthood is neither definitive nor uniform (Donnellan, Conger, & Burzette, 2007). Thus, the lack of convergence between SINS ratings and the lengthier narcissism scales in the present study may have been, at least in part, an artifact of an ongoing developmental process. Shorter, or even single-item, inventories may still prove useful for providing a quick snapshot of developmental changes. However, the present study was not able to address this issue.

In addition to investigating the utility of the SINS longitudinally and in more diverse samples of adolescents, future research might also consider alternative wording or formats for assessing narcissism among adolescents in a single-item or brief format. Furthermore, the literature on youth narcissism has, to date, mostly been devoted to the use of relatively long self-report inventories. The use of alternative formats, such as that attempted through the SINS, may provide further understanding of this construct. Refinement in the assessment of youth narcissism is needed given its interpersonal orientation and the evidence of its connection to a number of indicators of adolescent behavioral and emotional adjustment.

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