

## Self-esteem regulation in narcissistic personality pathology

### Abstract

**Theoretical background:** Psychoanalytic and integrative theories indicate that unstable self-esteem and attempts to regulate it play a key role in the development and maintenance of narcissistic personality pathology.

**Aim:** The aim was to develop a model of the process of self-esteem regulation in narcissistic personality pathology, to verify the hypotheses about the differences between people with narcissistic personality pathology and people without this pathology in terms of the characteristics of the proposed model (processing of emotional experience and defensive functioning), trait self-esteem and temperament characteristics, as well as describing the course of this process in individual cases with different narcissistic pathology.

**Participants:** The study involved 123 people from the general population - 109 women and 14 men aged 18 to 52 ( $M = 28.6$ ;  $SD = 8.56$ ), from whom 23 people with narcissistic personality pathology and 21 people without this pathology were selected based on the results of questionnaires. In the qualitative study 3 individual case studies were conducted. Cases were selected from the group participating in the interviews (2 people with narcissistic personality pathology and 1 person from the control group).

**Method:** The research was conducted in a mixed approach (quantitative and qualitative). The subjects completed Narcissistic Personality Inventory (grandiose narcissism), Hypersensitive Narcissism Scale (vulnerable narcissism), Borderline Personality Inventory (personality pathology), Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (trait self-esteem) and FCZ-KT(R) questionnaire (temperament), and also participated in interview (own method) examining self-esteem in social situations (failures and conflicts). Transcriptions of self-narratives collected in interviews were analyzed by judges in accordance with the developed coding system in the following areas: emotional arousal, referential activity according to Bucci, reflective activity according to McLean and Pratt and the occurrence of defense mechanisms. Based on the collected quantitative data, a statistical analysis was performed (intergroup differences). In the qualitative part, multiple case studies were carried out using data collected from various sources (questionnaires and quantitative and qualitative narrative analyses).

**Results:** The results obtained using statistical analyzes did not confirm most of the research hypotheses. The studied groups did not differ in most characteristics of the self-esteem regulation process (emotional arousal, reflective activity, intensity of defense mechanisms). Participants with narcissistic personality pathology showed a higher level of referential activity when their self-

esteem was threatened. Qualitative analysis showed that the participants presented different ways of self-esteem regulation. Participants with narcissistic personality pathology subjectively experienced the area of self-esteem as particularly significant, with a significant intensity of defense mechanisms, but a different ability to reflect in this area of functioning. The participant from the control group did not experience self-esteem as a significant area.

**Conclusions:** The results of quantitative research are partially consistent with the results obtained by other researchers (in the context of differences in referential activity between groups), and they also allow the development of new hypotheses regarding the studied area, including: functioning of defense mechanisms and the importance of reflective activity. The case studies allowed us to see the analyzed characteristics of the self-esteem regulation process as related to other aspects of mental functioning (e.g. personality pathology, temperament). Particularly significant clinical illustrations in the qualitative analysis concerned the use of defense mechanisms for the process of self-esteem regulation.

**Keywords:** personality pathology, narcissism, self-esteem, regulatory processes, psychoanalytic approach, object relations theory, clinical case study