

Personality Correlates of the Hypercompetitive Attitude Scale: Validity Tests of Horney's Theory of Neurosis

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This study focused on assessing the concurrent validity of Horney's ideas about the personalities of hypercompetitive individuals based on her theory of neurosis. One hundred and sixty university men and women provided data by responding to a test battery of personality inventories containing measures of hypercompetitive attitudes and several theoretically relevant constructs. The results strongly support Horney's contentions. Stepwise multiple regression analysis indicated that hypercompetitive individuals were high in narcissism, Type E orientation, and several aspects of sensation seeking. The discussion centered on hypercompetitiveness as a mental health problem in American society and on the scale's utility in the diagnosis of the problem and in the assessment of therapeutic change in clients.

Karen Horney defined hypercompetitiveness as an indiscriminate need by individuals to compete and win (and to avoid losing) at any cost as a means of maintaining or enhancing feelings of self-worth, with an attendant orientation of manipulation and denigration of others across a myriad of situa-

tions. In her view, such an exaggerated competitive attitude was the “unfailing center of neurosis” and had a detrimental impact on the individual’s development and personality functioning (Horney, 1936, p. 221).

Ryckman, Hammer, Kaczor, and Gold (1990) developed a psychometric instrument to measure individual differences in hypercompetitive attitudes based on Horney’s (1937, chap. 10) theory of neurosis and provided initial support for her theorizing. Hypercompetitive individuals were not only high in neuroticism, dogmatism, and mistrust, but also low in self-esteem and optimal psychological health. Furthermore, hypercompetitive men were also more macho (hypermasculine) and believed very strongly that women were sexual objects undeserving of respect and considerate treatment. Consistent with these findings, Kaczor, Ryckman, Thornton, and Kuehnel (1991) found that hypercompetitive men (and women) tended to blame rape victims for their own victimization more than did individuals with non-hypercompetitive attitudes.

Our investigation was designed to test the concurrent validity of the Hypercompetitive Attitude Scale (HCA; Ryckman et al., 1990) by focusing on other aspects of Horney’s theorizing about the personality characteristics of hypercompetitive people. For instance, Horney believed that hypercompetitive individuals were very likely to be narcissistic (Horney, 1939, pp. 88–100; Horney, 1950, p. 192). She argued that on a largely unconscious level they feel powerless and insignificant, usually because of the harsh disciplinary practices and treatment used by parents to train them early in life. To overcome their self-perceptions of inadequacy and inferiority, they begin to fantasize about attaining unlimited success and power, to seek self-aggrandizement through indiscriminate competition against others, with a single-minded focus on being successful at any cost, coupled with the denigration of others. They gradually convince themselves that they are superior to others and that they are entitled to constant attention and admiration. A grandiose sense of self-importance, coupled with a strong preoccupation with fantasies of unlimited success, and an exhibitionism designed to obtain attention, recognition, and admiration from others are the major criteria for diagnosing narcissistic personality disorder (*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 3rd ed., rev.; American Psychiatric Association, 1987, p. 351). Thus, it was expected that hypercompetitiveness would be correlated positively with narcissism.

Acting in exhibitionistic and unconventional ways in various situations could at least temporarily bring hypercompetitive individuals the attention, recognition, and admiration they crave (Horney, 1950, p. 287). Such behavior is compatible with findings describing high sensation-seeking individuals as engaging in disinhibiting activities and as being exhibitionistic (Zuckerman, 1972; Zuckerman & Link, 1968). We predicted, therefore, that hypercompetitiveness would be associated with sensation seeking and especially with the Disinhibition component of Zuckerman, Eysenck, and Eysenck’s (1978) Sensation-Seeking (SS) scale. This subscale measures

people's preferences for taking part in disinhibiting and unconventional activities like "wild parties," "swinging," and "smoking marijuana."

Horney also believed that hypercompetitive people, in their relentless pursuit of recognition and success, want to be the best in virtually all fields. Because their excessive ambition leads them to expect too much, they inevitably fall short of their goals and are thus perpetually disappointed and dissatisfied with themselves (Horney, 1937, pp. 190–191). People who strive to be everything to everybody (Type E people) have much in common with hypercompetitive individuals. They too strive incessantly to achieve in multiple roles and experience role overload and conflict, with a variety of negative consequences. Such individuals are commonly characterized by anxiety, hostility, and a general dissatisfaction with their lives (Braiker, 1986; McBride, 1990). Thus, we expected hypercompetitive individuals to be more Type E in their orientations.

Horney also thought there was a direct link between hypercompetitiveness and Machiavellianism. Machiavellians generally dislike others and use lying and deceit to successfully manipulate them (Christie & Geis, 1970, p. 3). Horney similarly noted that hypercompetitive individuals fundamentally dislike others but may present a "front" of fellowship at times and act expediently as a means of achieving their goals. According to her, such individuals have a relentless need to exert control over others, and when the direct exercise of power is precluded, they may try to indirectly manipulate others through oversolicitation or by putting them under obligation (Horney, 1945, p. 63). Thus, we expected hypercompetitiveness and Machiavellianism to be related positively.

Finally, we attempted to replicate the finding in Ryckman and colleagues (1990) that individuals higher in hypercompetitiveness tend to have lower self-esteem. The use of Helmreich and Stapp's (1974) measure of social self-esteem rather than Rosenberg's (1965) global measure allowed us to test more directly Horney's notion that the low self-esteem of hypercompetitive individuals was based on experiences in interpersonal relationships that simply do not work.

METHOD

Subjects and Procedure

The research participants were 160 undergraduates (58 men and 102 women) enrolled in introductory psychology classes at the University of Maine. Their mean age was 17.40 ($SD = 8.55$). All subjects volunteered to participate in order to earn extra credit in their courses.

Subjects assembled in a large lecture room and were informed that their assistance was needed in completing a variety of personality instruments for normative scaling purposes. The test battery of personality inventories con-

sisted of the HCA Scale, the California Psychological Inventory Narcissism (CPI-NAR) Scale, the SS Scale, the Type E (E) Scale, the Machiavellianism (MACH) Scale, the Social Self-Esteem (SSE) scale as assessed by the Texas Social Behavior Inventory, the Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability (SD) Scale, and the Enjoyment of Mathematics (EM) Scale.

Instruments

HCA Scale. The HCA Scale is a 26-item measure that assesses individual differences in hypercompetitive attitudes (Ryckman et al., 1990). Subjects respond along a 5-point continuum, as follows: *never true of me* (1), *seldom true of me* (2), *sometimes true of me* (3), *often true of me* (4), and *always true of me* (5). Scores can range from 26 to 130, with higher scores indicating a stronger HCA. Sample items include "Winning in competition makes me feel more powerful as a person" and "It's a dog-eat-dog world. If you don't get the better of others, they will surely get the better of you." For our study, coefficient alpha is .85.

CPI-NAR Scale. The CPI-NAR Scale is a relatively new 49-item instrument based on a rational selection of items from Gough's (1987) 462-item California Psychological Inventory (Wink & Gough, 1990). Participants respond either *true* (1) or *false* (2) to each item; scores can range from 49 to 98, with higher scores being reflective of greater narcissism. The CPI-NAR Scale contains such items as "I have often met people who were supposed to be experts who were no better than I" (scoring reversed) and "A person needs to 'show off' a little now and then" (scoring reversed). Coefficient alpha is .78.

SS Scale. This instrument consists of 40 forced-choice items designed to measure sensation seeking by individuals in a variety of settings (Zuckerman, Eysenck, & Eysenck, 1978). Factor analyses of scale data have revealed the presence of four reliable subscales, each consisting of 10 items. Choices by subjects of the non-sensation-seeking alternatives receive scores of 0; choices of sensation-seeking alternatives receive scores of 1. Thus, scores can range between 0 and 10 for each subscale, with higher scores indicating greater sensation-seeking preferences. The Thrill and Adventure Seeking (TAS) subscale contains items expressing a desire to engage in sports or other activities involving speed or danger. Sample items are "I often wish I could be a mountain climber" and "I would like to try parachute jumping." The second subscale, Experience Seeking (ES), measures the seeking of experiences primarily through the mind and senses. It has items such as "I like some of the earthy body smells" and "I like to try new foods that I have never tasted before." The Disinhibition (DIS) subscale represents

the desire for social and sexual disinhibitory experiences as expressed in social drinking, partying, and variety in sexual partners. Two items are "I like wild, uninhibited parties" and "I enjoy the company of real 'swingers.'" The fourth subscale, Boredom Susceptibility (BS), represents an aversion to repetition, routine, and dull people, and restlessness when things are unchanging. Items include "I get bored seeing the same old faces" and "I have no patience with dull or boring persons." Coefficient alpha is .80 for the total scale, .67 for TAS, .59 for ES, .73 for DIS, and .57 for BS.

E Scale. This inventory consists of a set of 58 items measuring individual differences in the experiencing of role overload and conflict (Braiker, 1986). Thornton (1992) revised some of the items to allow both women and men to respond and to provide all subjects with an opportunity to respond in terms of multiple references where they are indicated (e.g., work or school; spouse or children). Also, the response format was standardized in terms of a 5-point Likert scale, as follows: *strongly disagree* (1), *disagree* (2), *neither agree nor disagree* (3), *agree* (4), and *strongly agree* (5). Scores can range from 58 to 290, with higher scores reflecting a stronger E orientation. Sample items include "I feel rushed, pressured, or hassled during the day" and "I feel resentful that so many people make demands on my time." Coefficient alpha is .87.

MACH Scale. This scale (MACH IV) has 20 items designed to assess individual differences in Machiavellianism, a personality style that involves acting in expedient ways by lying and manipulating others to secure one's own ends (Christie & Geis, 1970). A 6-point Likert format is used, as follows: *strongly disagree* (1), *disagree somewhat* (2), *disagree slightly* (3), *agree slightly* (4), *agree somewhat* (5), and *agree strongly* (6). Scores can range from 20 to 120, with higher scores indicating a stronger Machiavellian orientation. Sample items include "It is hard to get ahead without cutting corners here and there" and "The best way to handle people is to tell them what they want to hear." Coefficient alpha is .67.

Texas Social Behavior Inventory. This inventory contains an SSE scale of 16 items that measure differences in social self-esteem based on interpersonal competence (Helmreich & Stapp, 1974). The 5-point response format required subjects to describe the extent to which each statement is characteristic of them, as follows: *not at all characteristic of me* (1), *not very characteristic of me* (2), *slightly characteristic of me* (3), *fairly characteristic of me* (4), and *very much characteristic of me* (5). Scores can range from 16 to 80, with higher scores reflecting a great sense of social self-esteem. Items include "I am a good mixer" and "I have no doubts about my social competence." Coefficient alpha is .83.

Marlowe–Crowne SD Scale. This is a 13-item, true–false instrument that measures individual differences in approval seeking by endorsing statements that are socially desirable (Crowne & Marlowe, 1964; Reynolds, 1982). Scores can range from 0 to 13, with scoring arranged so that higher scores reflect a higher need for social approval. Sample items are “I’m always willing to admit it when I make a mistake” and “I am always courteous, even to people who are disagreeable.” This measure was included to provide us with an opportunity to account for subjects’ self-presentation biases when filling out the various personality measures. Coefficient alpha is .48.

EM Scale. This 11-item instrument was designed to assess subjects’ enjoyment of mathematics (Aiken, 1974). It utilizes a 5-point Likert format: *disagree strongly* (1), *disagree* (2), *neither agree nor disagree* (3), *agree* (4), and *agree strongly* (5). Scores can range from 11 to 55, with higher scores indicating greater EM. Some sample items are “Mathematics is enjoyable and stimulating to me” and “I have always enjoyed studying mathematics in school.” Coefficient alpha is .95.

This instrument was included only to establish, at least partially, the discriminant validity of the various personality measures, given that no theoretical rationale was readily available for expecting significant associations between it and the other variables. Indeed, the scale correlated no higher than .09 with any of the other measures, so it is not discussed further.

RESULTS

Analyses for Sex Differences

Correlational analyses between hypercompetitiveness and the other personality variables were first performed separately for each sex. Fisher’s z tests were then conducted on these data to determine if the correlations for men and women between HCA and each personality dimension were significantly different from one another (Howell, 1982). All z s were less than 1.96, $ps > .05$, indicating that the correlations for the sexes were essentially the same, so all subsequent analyses are based on combined data.

Relations Between Social Desirability Bias and Personality Measures

Correlational analyses revealed that subjects with stronger needs to present themselves to others in an SD manner were lower in HCA ($r = -.18, p < .05$), NAR ($r = -.33, p < .001$), overall SS ($r = -.16, p < .05$), E ($r = -.19, p < .01$), and MACH ($r = -.18, p < .01$), and higher in SSE ($r = .15, p < .05$).

Consequently, first-order partial correlation analyses were conducted to control for this source of self-presentational bias in the data.

Partial Correlational Analyses for Hypercompetitiveness and Other Personality Variables

Table 1 presents the adjusted correlations for these data. As expected, subjects higher in HCA were higher in NAR, MACH, and E. They were also higher in SS overall ($r = .18, p < .05$) and, as predicted, preferred to engage in DIS activities. Although not predicted, the data indicated that people higher in HCA were higher in BS and lower in ES. Also, there was no relationship observed between HCA and preferences for engaging in TAS activities.

Contrary to prediction, there was no link between HCA and SSE. However, the presence of direct associations between NAR and HCA ($r = .34, p < .001$) and NAR and SSE ($r = .30, p < .001$) suggested that the self-esteem of hypercompetitive people may be partially inflated by a grandiose sense of their own self-importance. If this argument is correct, then partialing out the variance associated with NAR might produce the hypothesized relationship between HCA and SSE. As anticipated, hypercompetitive subjects did indeed have lower SSE ($r = -.16, p < .05$) when NAR was partialled out.

Finally, although not predicted, NAR was related positively to both E ($r = .19, p < .01$) and MACH ($r = .33, p < .001$). The latter association essentially replicates work by Mullins and Kopelman (1988), who employed several other measures of narcissism. NAR also correlated positively with SS overall ($r = .26, p < .001$) replicating work by Emmons (1981).

TABLE 1
Intercorrelations Between Personality Measures Adjusted for Social Desirability Bias

Personality Measure	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. HCA	—	.34***	.06	-.23**	.28***	.29***	.31***	.26***	-.04
2. CPI-NAR		—	.15*	.09	.17*	.26***	.18*	.34***	.30***
3. TAS			—	.28***	.40***	.08	.06	.11	.25**
4. ES				—	.23**	.17	-.06	.06	.16
5. DIS					—	.43***	.03	.27***	.14
6. BS						—	.02	.31***	.01
7. E							—	.25**	-.35***
8. MACH								—	-.13
9. SSE									—

Note. Scale abbreviations are as follows: Hypercompetitive Attitude (HCA), California Psychological Inventory-Narcissism (CPI-NAR), Thrill and Adventure Seeking (TAS), Experience Seeking (ES), Disinhibition (DIS), Boredom Susceptibility (BS), Type E (E), Machiavellianism (MACH), and Social Self-Esteem (SSE).

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

TABLE 2
Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analysis of HCA on Personality Variables

Personality Measure	HCA			F
	Multiple R	R ²	R ² Change	
CPI-NAR	.38	.15	.11	20.99**
E	.46	.21	.06	12.70**
ES	.51	.26	.05	11.62**
DIS	.58	.34	.08	18.64**
BS	.61	.37	.03	6.00*

Note. Scale abbreviations are as follows: California Psychological Inventory-Narcissism (CPI-NAR), Type E (E), Experience Seeking (ES), Disinhibition (DIS), and Boredom Susceptibility (BS).

* $p < .01$. ** $p < .001$.

Regression Analysis of HCA on Personality Measures

To better understand the relations among the personality measures in relation to HCA, a hierarchical multiple regression analysis was conducted (Nie, Hull, Jenkins, Steinbrenner, & Bent, 1975). SD scores were entered first into the prediction equation in order to determine whether the eight personality scales accounted for a significant amount of variance in the criterion measure beyond that explained by SD scores. Then the remaining predictor variables were entered stepwise into the regression equation in terms of the magnitude of their unique contribution to the explanation of the criterion variable. The results for this analysis are presented in Table 2.

Five of the eight personality variables entered into the prediction equation to a significant degree. The weighted linear combination for these five variables was significant, $F(5, 154) = 17.79$, $p < .001$. The primary contributor to the prediction of HCA was NAR, $\beta = .36$; followed by E, $\beta = .26$; ES, $\beta = -.24$; DIS, $\beta = .30$; and BS, $\beta = .18$.

DISCUSSION

Horney proposed that hypercompetitiveness was maladaptive. Previous research (Kaczor et al., 1991; Ryckman et al., 1990) offered initial evidence that hypercompetitiveness was indeed associated with certain negative personality characteristics, as she originally speculated. Our research provides further support for her clinical interpretations. Specifically, hypercompetitive individuals were found to be highly narcissistic, having an inflated conception of their own worth. At base, however, they were found to have low self-esteem. Apparently, to bolster their self-esteem they must engage in a ceaseless round of social activities, including ones that are a little unconventional or illegal. Such activities seem designed to elicit the recognition

and admiration that they believe they deserve from others. However, it appears that praise from the same people may quickly grow stale, perhaps accounting for the continual need they have for variety in their social experiences. Similar to many Type E individuals (Braiker, 1986; Thornton, 1992), hypercompetitive people have been found to be indiscriminate in their pursuit of success, often taking on so many roles and tasks that they inevitably fall short of their goals and feel perpetually dissatisfied (Horney, 1937, p. 191). Such efforts, resulting in an overexpenditure of time and energy, also may contribute further to their experience of anxiety and depression (cf. McBride, 1990).

In conclusion, the findings in this study substantiate Horney's unflattering portrait of the personalities of hypercompetitive individuals. She believed that our society was a spawning ground for individuals with such exaggerated competitive attitudes (Horney, 1937, pp. 284-287). Although her words were written in the 1930s, prominent writers on the topic are convinced that hypercompetitiveness continues to be an integral feature of American life and an important mental health problem (Aronson, 1980; Kohn, 1986). For example, Striegel-Moore, Silberstein, Grunberg, and Rodin (1990) have found that women who are intensely competitive in their orientations tend to exhibit disordered eating behavior. Other researchers have noted that intense competitive attitudes between dating and marriage partners generate high levels of conflict, hostility, stress, physical abuse, and dissatisfaction in relationships (James & D. W. Johnson, 1988; Laner, 1989a, 1989b). Also, numerous research studies of children and adults have compared the effectiveness of competitive versus cooperative efforts on individuals' self-esteem and interpersonal relationships and have found that, in comparison to subjects performing under cooperative conditions, intensely competitive subjects have poorer self-concepts and more negative interpersonal relationships (Aronson & Bridgeman, 1979; Aronson, Stephan, Sikes, Blaney, & Snapp, 1978; D. W. Johnson & R. T. Johnson, 1983, 1987, 1989; D. W. Johnson, Maruyama, R. Johnson, Nelson, & Skon, 1981; Mesch, D. W. Johnson, & R. Johnson, 1988; Slavin, 1980).

Given the clear links between hypercompetitiveness and various forms of psychopathology, the HCA could serve therapists as an important diagnostic and change assessment tool in their efforts to reduce such harmful orientations in their clients.

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