

A proposed study on the role that parental discipline plays in developing narcissism in children and adolescents

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Introduction

Elevated narcissism in young people often sets up a cascade of fractured relationships and mental health challenges, giving rise to the need to understand its causes (van Schie et al., 2020). If narcissistic behaviors are not recognized and treated in time, these manifestations can become pathological and more extreme in adulthood (Ristic and Mitrovic, 2020), and ultimately lead to depression, suicide attempts, and poor relationships. In addition, people with narcissistic qualities who enter therapy often do not see themselves as having a problem, which can impede finding solutions (van Schie et al., 2020).

Previous studies have implicated parental praise and lenient parenting in creating an environment where narcissism can take root, but findings to date are mixed (van Schie, et al., 2020). Most studies on the impact of parenting on narcissism have primarily relied on self-reported and remembered childhood inventories, which could potentially be biased or inaccurate, due to issues of recall. Further, findings have been limited and mixed regarding the unique contributions of the mother and the father's parenting styles on narcissism. As the United States has the highest rate of children under the age of 18 living in single-parent households at 23%, (Kramer, 2019), understanding these unique contributions has particular relevance in the U.S.

By implementing a longitudinal study in the United States that does not rely solely upon self-reporting, both issues of memory recall and potential bias can be reduced, thereby increasing the reliability of results for this important area of research.

The Evolution of Parenting

Before the late 1960s, parenting was largely based on the concept that because suffering exists, the role of parents was to teach their children how to cope with suffering (Lewis, 2018).

A prime example of this was the traditional practice of letting babies cry until they learned to calm themselves. During this period, parental mores also dictated that it was a child's task to follow the rules as well as demonstrate common courtesy towards others to ensure the well-being of all (Lewis, 2018).

Over the years since, attachment theory came to the fore, promoting the idea that responsive parenting, rather than spoiling the child as was thought, could reduce a child's distress, and improve their coping skills (Lewis, 2018). As a result, out went any remaining semblance of the old cliché, "a child must be seen and not heard" and in came unconditional love and encouragement. The use of punishment too was overhauled because punishment and love were considered incompatible, whereas systematic praise from parents and teachers was purported to raise children's confidence and increase their motivation levels (Lewis, 2018).

Causes and Types of Narcissism in Children

However, more recent research on parenting reveals that both praise and over-valuing of the child undermine self-reliance and the formation of a unique self (Soenens et al., as cited in Eberly-Lewis, 2018), and has been associated with both seeking adult approval and being overly reliant on peer acceptance (Fulgini, et al., as cited in Eberly Lewis, 2018). In addition, increased focus on the child, and the child, in turn, on himself, gives way to a desire for authentic self-expression (of their specialness) and self-righteous truth-telling, which, ultimately, takes precedence over courtesy towards others. This presumption of self-importance and entitlement are hallmarks of narcissism in that one values one's own "authenticity" and "specialness" over the well-being of others (Lewis, 2018).

It is important to note, however, that the overuse of positive parenting alone is not expected to fully account for the presence of narcissism. Rather, the absence of discipline also was expected to uniquely contribute (Soenens et al., as quoted in Eberly-Lewis, et al., 2018). Research on parenting demonstrates that “indulgent and acquiescent” parenting reinforces a belief that others are inferior whereas the self is superior and special, and therefore, entitled (Eberly-Lewis et al., 2018).

Additional research has also theorized the different ways that mothers and fathers may imbue narcissism. It has been suggested that mothers’ excessive empathic responsiveness can lead to an immature self-structure that is reliant on others’ responsiveness, whereas fathers’ over- or under-responsivity undermines children’s ability to develop independence (Eberly-Lewis, 2018). In a relatively recent study, mothers’ parenting styles and fathers’ styles were shown to have predicted different forms of narcissism — and contributed in their own ways (Cramer, as cited in Lewis, 2018).

Researchers describe different forms of narcissism, which are considered either grandiose or vulnerable. While both are characterized by core beliefs of superiority and entitlement (and, paradoxically, poor self-esteem), each has distinct features (Cain et al., as cited in Derry & Bayliss, 2020). In adults, grandiose narcissism is associated with extraversion and antisocial interpersonal behaviors including exploitation, lack of empathy, jealousy, aggression, and pretentiousness (Imamoglu AH & Durak Batigun A., 2020). In contrast, vulnerable narcissism is characterized by defensiveness, low self-esteem, aggression, hyper-sensitivity, and shyness (Derry & Bayliss, 2020).

Measuring Narcissism in Children

As cited by Ristic and Mitrovic in their 2020 study, Thomaes et al. (2008) point out that ages seven (7) – 12 are a key developmental phase during which the first evidence of narcissism emerges. Children at this age start to develop self-views in which both positive and negative attributes emerge as they start to base their views on social comparisons (Harter, as cited in Ristic and Mitrovic, 2020).

Scales to measure narcissism in children have evolved to consider the emerging evidence of the two types of narcissism, and not just measure the more studied grandiose narcissism. As such, the original Childhood Narcissism Scale (Thomaes, et al., as cited in Derry and Bayliss, 2020) was later updated to the Narcissism Scale for Children, which became the first scale developed to measure vulnerable narcissism in children (Derry and Bayliss, 2020). All current studies, however, have not used this study, and many have only observed grandiose narcissism. Both scales comprise 10 items assessing the degree to which the child endorses narcissistic viewpoints, e.g. “I am a great example for other kids to follow” and employ a 5-point Likert-type scale with responses ranging from 1 (not at all true) to 5 (completely true).

Adolescent children were also asked to appraise their mothers’ and fathers’ parenting styles using either the Perceived Parenting Attitudes in Childhood assessment or using the Strict/Lax Discipline subscale from the Children’s Report of Parenting Behavior Inventory. Both inventories made use of a Likert-type scale to measure one or more traits including parental praise, overprotection, warmth, engaged time, and discipline, and included questions such as, “Lets me off easy when I do something wrong”. (Schludermann & Schludermann, as cited in Eberly-Lewis et al., 2018).

The scales used all showed acceptable test-retest reliability, internal consistency, and construct validity.

Research findings to-date

Overall, the findings suggest that remembered maternal parenting has a stronger association with narcissism, potentially because the mother figure may often be the primary caregiver or carry out more of the parenting function (van Schie et al., 2020). It was also universally found that the combination of paternal leniency and overvaluation was associated with grandiose narcissism and that, when studied, remembered maternal leniency was associated only with vulnerable narcissism. It is theorized that the lack of limit-setting may have consequences for developing self-discipline which may be expressed as entitlement rage, which is relevant to vulnerable narcissism. (van Schie et al., 2020).

However, the interpretation of the current literature is complicated by a large number of mixed findings. For example, a lack of parental warmth has been associated with grandiose and vulnerable narcissism traits in some studies, but not in others. Most articles reviewed called for the need for further studies as the differences in findings could stem from cultural differences in expression, whether maternal and paternal parenting styles were distinguished, and whether childhood maltreatment was considered.

Gap in studies

As we can see from varying research results and the combination of parental attributes which appear to contribute, predicting narcissism is complex. Current research studies mostly relied upon retrospective self-reporting, which can be subject to both memory recall and perceptual bias issues. It is also important to note that individuals with narcissistic traits tend to deny their weaknesses and de-emphasize stimuli that threaten their self-worth, so it might add to the challenge to get unbiased responses via self-reporting. One way to help ensure good test-

retest correlation might be to also have the parent(s) rate their child, and the parent's partner (if one exists), rate the partner on their parental attributes. Another consideration is to conduct a longitudinal study, where a follow-up survey could ensure good test-retest reliability to capture any changes in responses over the years.

Also, most studies did not call out any potential changes in parental leniency that may have occurred due to divorce or the death of a parent. It is common to hear, colloquially, how parents try to become the favorite parent after a divorce and may slack on rules and start to overvalue their child. This is where a longitudinal study with measurements of test-retest reliability could add value.

Methods

To address these shortcomings, the following research hypothesis is proposed for study: If a parent or parents are lenient in disciplining their child, then the child has an increased likelihood of demonstrating narcissistic behaviors. The dependent variable will be the child's score on the Childhood Narcissism Inventory, and the independent variable is the parent's score on the Children's Report of Parenting Behavior Inventory scale. The Parental Behavior score will also be used to identify if leniency is only correlated with narcissism when the child is also over-valued, meaning the occurrence of both is what engenders narcissism. To measure this, the score for over-valuation and leniency must be positively correlated with each other and with the child's score on the narcissism scale. If this correlation exists, yet none exists for leniency by itself, then the indication will be that leniency must act in conjunction with overvaluation for narcissism to occur.

Purpose and Study Design

Previous researchers have examined a range of parenting behaviors including maltreatment, over-valuation, and leniency, and their impact on narcissism (van Schie et al, 2020). The purpose of this study is to clarify if maternal and/or paternal leniency contributes to grandiose or vulnerable narcissism in children using the same survey instruments used in other studies but replacing self-reporting as a way to reduce bias. The study is proposed to be a quantitative design and a longitudinal study, to be able to account for any changes in the family structure over time, such as divorce, and the subsequent impact on the level of discipline maintained. A longitudinal study will also help ensure good test-retest validity.

The design proposed is to conduct surveys with 400 children, with no more than 60 percent representation by one natal sex, and to be completed at the child's ages of 10 years old, and, again at 16 years old, give or take one (1) year at each interval.

Notices for the online study are to be provided to pediatrician's offices and middle schools, representing a cross-section of the U.S. as delineated geographically, i.e., the Northeast, Southwest, West, Southeast, and Midwest. Each geographical region would receive a minimum of 10% of the surveys and a maximum of 30%. If participation does not reflect a mix reflective of U.S. racial demographics of 57.8% white, 18.7% Hispanic, and 12.1% African American, within four (4) percentage points, recruitment must continue. Those participating will be encouraged to share the survey link with their friends that have children ten years old or younger. If married, a spouse would be required to participate, as well as the child, in order for the survey feedback to be included.

Procedure

Only parents that return a signed informed consent form for all family participants, as well as a signed agreement to participate one more time in 6 (six) or 7 (seven) years, would be qualified. Incentives recommended to encourage continued participation would be a \$50 gift card for the initial completion of the first survey, and a \$75 gift card and entry into a drawing for \$500 for the timely completion of the second survey, per family. Annual emails and mailings will be sent to participants to keep up engagement, maintain changes in addresses, and reduce attrition.

Investigative Techniques and Data Collection

Participants will respond to an online survey, powered by MAXQDA.com, which will consist of questions from surveys that traditionally have been used and validated when researching narcissism in children. These surveys include the Children's Report of Parenting Behavior Inventory and The Narcissism Scale for Children. At the time of the second survey, parents will also report if there has been a change in the family structure, namely death of a parent or divorce.

To reduce both the bias inherent in self-reporting, as well as the unreliability of results due to issues with memory recall, results will be correlated with scores from another family member. To ensure inclusion in the results, at least one parent's score from either the first or second survey needs to have a positive correlation coefficient of .8 or higher with the child's independent score on the first or second survey when answering the Narcissism Scale for Children for their child. When answering the Parenting Behavior surveys, a parent must answer for themselves and separately, for their spouse, if one is present. As a means to reducing bias and increasing reliability, scores must be correlated at .8 or higher with their spouse's score to be included.

If a death or divorce occurred between parents in the second survey, a secondary correlation will be made to determine if leniency increased.

Ethical Consideration and Future Studies

Children and parents will be informed that each other's answers are not to be reviewed by the parent and that the passcode to the survey will not be shared so as to keep answers independent and avoid retaliation. Other studies have suggested that trauma may be a factor in creating an environment for narcissism to flourish, but considering this study is being conducted while the child is a minor, makes it difficult to ascertain.

How Findings will be used

While there is no definitive study on what precise combination of factors leads to narcissism in children, understanding if parental leniency plays a role can contribute to how parents consider disciplining their children. The more knowledge that is shared with those that are single parents could help them understand that the importance of continuing to uphold structure and discipline, post-death or divorce, can be beneficial for the child's future and mental health.

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