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Are parenting practices associated with the development of narcissism? Findings from a longitudinal study of Mexican-origin youth ☆

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ABSTRACT

Narcissism is an important and consequential aspect of personality, yet we know little about its developmental origins. Using data from a longitudinal study of 674 Mexican-origin families, we examined cross-lagged relations between parenting behaviors (warmth, hostility, monitoring) and narcissism (superiority, exploitativeness). Parental hostility at age 12 was associated with higher levels of exploitativeness at age 14, whereas parental monitoring at age 12 was associated with lower levels of exploitativeness at age 14. These effects replicated across three different parenting measures: child reports, spouse reports, and behavioral coding of parent-child interactions. None of the parenting dimensions was related to superiority, suggesting that parenting practices are more strongly related to the maladaptive than the adaptive component of narcissism.

1. Introduction

Narcissism encompasses a wide range of characteristics, including feelings of superiority, a sense of grandiosity, exhibitionism, exploitative behaviors in the interpersonal domain, feelings of entitlement, fantasies of unlimited power, success, or beauty, and a lack of empathy. Despite the abiding, and even growing, interest in narcissism, we know little about its developmental origins and childhood correlates. Given the link between narcissism and adjustment problems during childhood and adolescence (Barry, Frick, Adler, & Grafeman, 2007; Barry, Frick, & Killian, 2003; Washburn, McMahon, King, Reinecke, & Silver, 2004), it is important to understand the socialization processes that contribute to the development of narcissism. A large body of theoretical and empirical work suggests that parent socialization practices play a central role in shaping children's developmental trajectories (Bornstein, 2006; Parke & Buriel, 2006).

The present study uses longitudinal data from 674 Mexican-origin families to examine prospective effects of parenting on the development of narcissism. There are strong theoretical reasons to expect that parenting practices play an important role in shaping narcissistic tendencies. The first influential theory linking parenting to narcissism is based on psychodynamic theory and was articulated by Kohut (1971, 1977) and Kernberg (1975), although it can be traced back to Freud (1914). According to Kohut and Kernberg, parental hostility and excessive criticism, along with a lack of warmth and responsiveness, lead to feelings of inadequacy in children and impede the development of positive self-regard. Children try to compensate for these feelings of inadequacy by inflating their self-worth and constantly seeking approval and admiration from others. Narcissism can thus be seen as a defensive reaction to parenting behaviors that convey disapproval and lack of acceptance and support. The second influential theory, social learning theory, also posits that parenting practices shape the development of child narcissism. In contrast to psychodynamic theory, this perspective based on work by Millon (1969, 1981) posits that extremely permissive parenting behavior, and in particular excessive parental indulgence and approval, are responsible for the development of narcissistic tendencies. According to social learning theory, children directly learn the behavior modeled by their parents and internalize their parents' beliefs that they are superior to others and entitled to special treatment and therefore develop increased narcissism.

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Despite the rich theoretical literature on parenting and narcissism, we know of only two longitudinal studies on the topic. Cramer (2011) showed that children raised by *authoritative* and *permissive* parents (high responsiveness) exhibited more adaptive narcissistic tendencies, such as superiority and grandiosity, whereas children raised by *authoritarian* parents (low responsiveness) were less likely to exhibit such traits. In contrast, Cramer did not find any main effects of parenting on the more maladaptive components of narcissism, such as exploitativeness and entitlement. However, this study relied on self-reports of parenting and involved a very small sample (e.g., 89 mothers reported on their parenting).

In a more recent longitudinal study, Brummelman et al. (2015) examined the influence of parental indulgence (termed "parental overvaluation" in their study) and parental warmth on the development of narcissism in late childhood. Parental indulgence (assessed via parent self-report) predicted increases in narcissism from age 10 to 12, whereas parental warmth (assessed via child-report and parent self-report) was not related to narcissism. No reciprocal effects of child narcissism on parenting were found, suggesting the association is unidirectional, going from parenting to narcissism rather than vice versa. Note, however, that Brummelman et al. examined overall narcissism levels and did not differentiate between facets of narcissism. An emerging body of research suggests that different facets of narcissism have highly divergent antecedents and consequences. Facets encompassing feelings of superiority and having a grandiose self-concept appear to be at least partially adaptive since they have been linked to positive outcomes such as high self-esteem and emotional stability and low loneliness and depression (Rhodewalt & Morf, 1995; Sedikides, Rudich, Gregg, Kumashiro, & Rusbult, 2004; Trzesniewski, Donnellan, & Robins, 2008). In contrast, facets encompassing a sense of entitlement and exploitativeness appear to be maladaptive since they have been linked to negative outcomes such as trait anger, aggression, counterproductive work behaviors, and dysfunctional interpersonal relationships (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Campbell & Campbell, 2009; Campbell, Foster, & Finkel, 2002; Miller et al., 2009). These findings highlight the need to distinguish the facets of narcissism.

In addition to examining facets of narcissism, it is also important to consider self-esteem when studying narcissism. Narcissism and self-esteem are conceptually related but distinct traits. Although both entail a positive evaluation of the self, individuals with high self-esteem are assumed to generally like and accept themselves, whereas narcissists are assumed to have inflated views of their worth, and a compulsive need to be better than others, presumably as a defense against underlying feelings of inadequacy. Consequently, whereas high self-esteem involves seeing oneself as "a person of worth, at least on an equal basis with others" (sample item from the Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale; Rosenberg, 1979), narcissism involves feeling superior to others, and carries with it a pattern of interpersonally toxic tendencies such as exploitativeness and contempt toward others. Not surprisingly, although measures of the two constructs tend to be moderately correlated (e.g., Brown & Zeigler-Hill, 2004; Paulhus, Robins, Trzesniewski, & Tracy, 2004), they have quite different relations with other constructs; for example, antisocial behavior, aggression, and hostility are positively related to narcissism, but negatively related to self-esteem (Tracy, Cheng, Robins, & Trzesniewski, 2009). The conceptual and empirical overlap between narcissism and self-esteem raises the possibility that prior findings concerning the association between parenting and narcissism may have been confounded by self-esteem. Neither Cramer (2011) nor Brummelman et al. (2015) controlled for self-esteem when they examined associations between parenting and narcissism, raising the possibility that their findings were driven by the variance in narcissism that reflects genuine self-esteem rather than narcissistic tendencies.[1] Narcissism with self-esteem partialed out can be conceptualized as a more pure measure of narcissistic tendencies, with any aspects of genuine self-esteem removed. Thus, in our models investigating parenting practices and narcissism, we will include self-esteem as a control variable. By doing so, we will ensure that any observed associations with narcissism are due to narcissism itself, and not its overlap with self-esteem.

The present study extends previous research on the development of narcissism by investigating longitudinal relations between parenting practices and narcissism, using data from a sample of 674 Mexican-origin youth followed from age 12 to 16. We extend previous research in several important ways. First, we examined a more comprehensive set of parenting dimensions, including the three most commonly studied components of parenting (hostility, warmth, monitoring). Second, we assessed parenting using three different methods: child report, spouse report, and behavioral coding of parent-child interactions. Third, we examined effects separately for two important components of narcissism, exploitativeness and superiority, as well as for overall narcissism levels. Fourth, we analyzed data collected in a cohort-sequential longitudinal design with three waves of data spanning five years. Fifth, we applied latent variable modeling techniques to investigate reciprocal relations between parenting practices and narcissism, thereby controlling for measurement error. Sixth, we examined the effects of narcissism while controlling for its overlap with self-esteem. Finally, we investigated the association between parenting and narcissism in an important but understudied ethnic minority group, Mexican-origin families.

1.1. Hypotheses

We hypothesized that higher levels of parental hostility would be related to higher levels of narcissism in adolescents, based on psychodynamic theories about the origins of narcissism (Kernberg, 1975; Kohut, 1977). Although we know no empirical studies (longitudinal or cross-sectional) that have investigated the effects of parental hostility, a study on parental coldness, which is conceptually similar to parental hostility, found a positive association with narcissism (Otway & Vignoles, 2006). Note, however, that if parental hostility is assumed to be simply the converse of overvaluing a child, then we might expect hostility to be related to lower levels of narcissism, based on Brummelman et al.'s (2015) finding that overvaluation is related to higher narcissism. This is a situation where the social learning perspective conflicts with the psychodynamic perspective. The former assumes a relatively direct translation of feedback from one's parents ("my parents think I'm perfect therefore I think I'm perfect"; "my parents think I'm terrible therefore I think I'm terrible"), whereas the latter assumes a defensive reaction ("my parents think I'm terrible, and that makes me feel worthless so I am going to try to convince myself and others that I'm perfect"). Thus, our hypothesis of a positive relationship between parental hostility and narcissism is derived from the psychodynamic perspective.

We also hypothesized that higher levels of parental monitoring would be related to lower levels of narcissism. This hypothesis is based on concurrent studies documenting this association (Barry et al., 2007; Horton, Bleau, & Drwecki, 2006; Miller & Campbell, 2008). Furthermore, a lack of monitoring can be understood as part of a permissive, indulgent parenting style (Horton, 2011). Thus, a negative relationship between parental monitoring and narcissism

[1] Although Brummelman et al. (2015) did not control for self-esteem when they examined the association between parenting and narcissism, they did examine relations between parenting and self-esteem, and found that child-reported (but not parent-reported) parental warmth was reciprocally related to self-esteem.