

Understanding the relationship between parental praise and narcissism in children: An overview and study proposal

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AUTHOR BIO

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ABSTRACT

Narcissism is on the rise, especially in individualistic societies. To explore the reasons behind narcissism in children, this paper reviews the overarching concept of narcissism. It considers dimensions of parenting styles, the way parental praise shapes children's beliefs and personalities, and past literature on the relationship between praise and children's narcissistic levels. In addition, the paper proposes a longitudinal study that aims to investigate the relationship between parental praise given in toddlerhood and the development of narcissism in children when they enter elementary school. The study will examine the interactions between 80 children and their primary caregivers in home settings through 8 visits over two years. The child participants will complete the Childhood Narcissism Scale when they reach the age of 7 or 8. This study will shed light on the long-lasting effects of parental praise in shaping the personality of children, thus potentially validating past and current research and leading to new directions in studying the origin of narcissism.

Keywords: *narcissism, children, parental praise, overvaluation, inflated praise, early childhood, parenting, child development, longitudinal study*

Narcissism is marked by an inflated sense of superiority and entitlement (Brummelman & Sedikides, 2020). While it is a common belief that narcissism is an extreme expression of high self-esteem, increasing research has shown that narcissists differ in terms of phenotype, origin, development, and consequence. For example, individuals with high self-esteem feel satisfaction in themselves but not superiority, unlike narcissists, and they do not tend to crave admiration from others and dominating positions (Brummelman et al., 2016).

While narcissism is often considered a trait displayed by adults, children starting around 7 years old can also develop narcissistic mindsets and behaviors (Thomaes & Brummelman, 2018). Researchers associated this phenomenon with the inflated praise given by overvaluing parents, who cultivated an unreal and grandiose view of the children (Brummelman et al., 2015). This suggests a relatedness between parenting style and the development of narcissism in children, and conveys the power of praise in shaping a child's view of themselves and their peers.

To further investigate the relationship between different types of praise and narcissism in children, this paper suggests a longitudinal study that will indicate the long-term impact of parental praise in early childhood on narcissism. The study will also demonstrate the effects of different types of praise on children's personalities and worldviews, hence giving potential guides for optimum parenting that will foster the well-being of children and lower narcissism levels.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There are two types of narcissism: grandiose narcissism and vulnerable narcissism. People tend to naturally associate narcissism with grandiose narcissism, which is characterized by an inflated feeling of superiority and specialness (Brummelman & Sedikides, 2020). However, vulnerable narcissism is expressed in a considerable

number of narcissists. People with vulnerable narcissism are sensitive to social evaluation and feedback, and thus are more prone to be distressed and to have low self-esteem (Freis et al., 2015).

NARCISSISM IN CHILDREN

Narcissism develops in children around 7 or 8 years old, since this when they are able to form global views of themselves and use social comparisons to evaluate themselves and others (Thomaes & Brummelman, 2018). Narcissism is impacted by both genetics and the environment. According to researchers who studied 304 pairs of twins in Beijing, China, narcissism (more specifically grandiosity and entitlement) is moderately heritable, even with a considerable amount of nonshared experience between the twins (Luo et al., 2014). In terms of environmental contributors to narcissism, scientists have pointed to parental overvaluation. This phenomenon occurs when some parents view their children as entitled, exceptional, even perfect; this positive illusion often translates to inflated praise, and the children who internalize this lavished praise tend to develop a narcissistic personality. Narcissism in children often manifests into seeking validation and aggressive behavior if they receive rejection instead of recognition, thus increasing the risk of teen violence (Brummelman et al., 2014; Brummelman et al., 2015).

PARENTING METHODS

Parents are essential in shaping the cognitive function, social interactions, emotional regulation, and other aspects of children in the developmental stage. Parenting styles can be categorized into authoritarian, authoritative, and permissive. Authoritarian parents set strict rules, hold high expectations, punish their children if they fail to meet their expectations, and emphasize obedience of the children. While authoritative parents also have expectations for their children, they express their expectations as a way to motivate and encourage their children; authoritative parents also express care and maintain a nurturing relationship with their

children. Despite the warmth of permissive parents, they often overlook children's behaviors and hold few rules; this can lead to the development of unhealthy habits due to the lack of parental monitoring (Mendez, 2022).

Authoritative parenting has been considered to be the most optimal parenting among the three types of parenting styles. Children of authoritative parents usually emerge to be emotionally stable, self-reliant and confident, and better at social interactions. In comparison, the children who experience nonoptimal parenting have been associated with having low social ability and poor academic performance (Hart et al., 2017).

In addition, Horton et al. (2006) identified three fundamental components of parenting: 1) warmth, 2) monitoring, and 3) psychological control. Parental warmth is connected to the involvement and responsiveness of the parents, who provide emotional and material support for their children. As a favorable parenting component, parental warmth often predicts good self-esteem, self-regulation, and positive academic outcomes of the children. Monitoring is a means for parents to establish rules by tracking their children's location and actions, and it is correlated to decreased illegal actions, drug use, and fighting of the children. In contrast to monitoring that predicts the external behavior of the children, psychological control impacts the emotional state of the children through manipulation. This often undermines children's self-esteem and self-reliance (Horton et al., 2006).

A prominent feature of parenting is praise, since many parents believe that giving their children praise will motivate them in learning and help build self-esteem (Lee et al., 2017). Parental praise is defined as the verbal affirmation by the parents towards their children to show the satisfaction and recognition of the parents. In response, children use parental praise to be aware of and understand the beliefs of their parents. The appropriate use of praise refers to the accuracy in describing reality (Lee et al.,

2017), appropriate time and context, and sincerity of the parents; it is critical in developing the well-being of the children (Karadeniz, 2023).

In addition, praise can be separated into process praise and person praise. While process praise focuses on the effort of the children ("You worked really hard!"), person praise emphasizes their fixed ability ("You're really smart!"). A study by Gunderson et al. (2013) has demonstrated that parental praise given to the children when they were very little can influence their motivational frameworks (incremental or entity) five years later. Incremental framework refers to the growth mindset in learning and emphasizes efforts, while entity framework is the belief that the ability of an individual is fixed. The result of the study suggests that parental praise can shape the perspective and values of their children.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PARENTAL PRAISE AND NARCISSISM IN CHILDREN

Besides process and person praise, inflated praise is another type of praise that constitutes a considerable amount of parental praise. Defined as containing adverbs or adjectives that signal extremely positive feedback ("You're incredibly smart!"), inflated praise can make the children internalize the idea that they are superior and that they deserve admiration, thus developing narcissistic personalities. Moreover, inflated praise is a common manifestation of parental overvaluation, a concept introduced by Sigmund Freud that the parents are compelled to describe their children in perfect terms and neglect their weaknesses (Brummelman & Grapsas, 2020). Although parental warmth and monitoring are important components of parenting, research by Brummelman et al. (2015) has demonstrated that parental overvaluation is largely unrelated to those components.

Brummelman et al. (2015) conducted a longitudinal study that involved 565 children and four 6-month waves, in which children completed questionnaires that assessed

narcissism. The study showed that parental overvaluation predicts narcissism, while lack of parental warmth does not. This suggests a causal relationship between parental overvaluation, or inflated praise, and the development of narcissism in children. This phenomenon can be partly explained by the fact that overvaluing parents overclaim the qualities of their children, oftentimes through inflated praise; this leads to children having lofty views about themselves. In addition, overvaluing parents also foster narcissistic children by pushing their children to strive for superiority and offering conditional regard according to whether the children fulfilled their narcissistic standard or not, which makes them more fragile emotionally (Brummelman & Sedikides, 2020).

This paper proposes a longitudinal study that tests the relationship between praise and the narcissistic level of children when they are in elementary school (7 to 8 years old). There will be five types of praise measured: 1) inflated person praise, 2) inflated process praise, 3) non-inflated person praise, 4) non-inflated process praise, and 5) other praise. The study will investigate the relationships between the amount of each type of praise and children's narcissistic levels. In addition, the study will test the relationship between parental overvaluation and narcissism in children to verify the relationship between parental overvaluation and narcissism in children.

HYPOTHESIS

In this study, there are 5 categories of praise: 1) inflated person praise, 2) inflated process praise, 3) non-inflated person praise, 4) non-inflated process praise, and 5) other praise. Hence, there is one primary hypothesis for every category of praise.

If more inflated person praise is occurring, then it should lead to higher narcissistic levels. Narcissism in children is associated with dominance, exaggeration, and low ability to empathize (Brummelman & Thomaes, 2018). Since person praise is associated with a fixed view of one's and others'

ability, the addition of inflated praise to person praise would likely cultivate the highest level of narcissism in this study.

If more inflated process praise is present, then it should lead to higher narcissistic levels, but lower levels than when inflated process praise is occurring. This is because, although both types of praise are inflated, process praise is related to the incremental framework of motivation and belief in the room for improvement, while person praise is related to the entity framework (Gunderson et al., 2013). Therefore, it is likely that inflated process praise will lead to a high narcissistic level but lower than inflated person praise.

The more non-inflated person praise found, the more it should lead to a relatively high narcissistic level, but lower than both types of inflated praise. This is because non-inflated praise refers to real and honest feedback instead of exaggerated positive feedback.

If more non-inflated process praise is occurring, then it should lead to the lowest narcissistic levels in the five types of praise. Since process praise highlights children's efforts and leads to higher resiliency and an open mindset, children who are exposed to process praise will likely develop lower narcissistic tendencies.

More "other" praise should not be related to narcissistic levels. This is because other praise is ambiguous and implicit about children's actions or abilities, or because other praise is targeted towards children's actions. Therefore, it is likely that other praise is not related to children's narcissistic levels.

METHOD

Participants

The participants of this study are 80 children and their primary caregivers from Our Future Learning Center in Belmont, MA (40 girls, 40 boys). The number of children is significant and manageable because this

longitudinal study involves visits of experimenters to each family periodically. Additionally, the number of participants is slightly over but comparable to the participant number of another longitudinal study conducted by Gunderson et al. (2013) on parent praise and motivational framework. This shows that the sample size is executable and large enough to yield a significant result.

Material

Childhood Narcissism Scale (CNS).

This is a 10-item self-assessment of narcissism as a personality trait.

Items:

1. I think it's important to stand out.
2. Kids like me deserve something extra.
3. Without me, our class would be much less fun.
4. It often happens that other kids get the compliments that I actually deserve.
5. I love showing all the things I can do.
6. I am very good at making other people believe what I want them to believe.
7. I am a very special person.
8. I am a great example for other kids to follow.
9. I often succeed in getting admiration.
10. I like to think about how incredibly nice I am.

Each item will be rated on a 4-point scale, with 0 being *not at all true* and 3 being *completely true*. Participants will respond to all 10 items (Thomaes et al., 2008).

Parental Overvaluation Scale (POS).

This is a 7-item scale filled out by the parents to assess the extent of parental overvaluation.

Items:

1. Without my child, his/her class would be much less fun.
2. My child deserves special treatment.

3. I would not be surprised to learn that my child has extraordinary talents and abilities.

4. I would find it disappointing if my child was just a "regular" child.

5. My child is more special than other children.

6. My child deserves something extra in life.

7. My child is a great example for other children to follow.

Responses to this assessment are scored on a 4-point scale (Brummelman et al., 2014).

PROCEDURE

Starting at the age of 2, researchers will visit each family every three months, and the visits will continue until the children are 4 years old (8 visits in total). The starting age is similar to the age of the participants (1-3 year olds) in a study conducted by Gunderson et al. (2013) on the impact of praise on children's motivational framework. Before the visit begins, the families sign up to participate in a local early childhood education program that aims to collect samples of parent-children interactions in everyday life. They consent to be audiotaped for one hour by joining the program. Importantly, the parents are not aware that praise is studied in the parent-child interactions. During the visits, parents are not instructed to do any particular activities; instead, they are told to perform daily activities such as dining, playing with their children, dressing up, and so on. The research assistants are responsible for audiotaping the interactions between the parents/primary caregivers and the children. Like the parents, they also do not know that praise is studied through this program. Audiotaping the conversations between parents and children allows the researchers to capture detailed utterances, which facilitates the study on parental praise.

After each visit, the research assistants will separate the transcript into utterances. An utterance is an instance of speech that expresses an idea, sometimes preceded or followed by silence (Duignan, n.d.).

When the participants are 7 to 8 years old, the researchers will visit them and have them complete the Childhood Narcissism Scale. Children around this age start to use social comparison to form global views of themselves and self-evaluation, which leads to individual differences in narcissism (Brummelman & Thomaes, 2018). The researchers will also give the Parental Overvaluation Scale (POS) for the parents to complete.

MEASURE

Researchers will read the transcript and determine all the praise utterances. Then, the praises will be put into the five categories of praise: 1) inflated person praise, 2) inflated process praise, 3) non-inflated person praise, 4) non-inflated process praise, and 5) other praise.

Below are the definitions of person, process, inflated, and other praise.

Person praise: This refers to praise that highlights a child's fixed quality. Examples of person praise are "You're so smart!" and "Good girl/boy."

Process praise: This type of praise refers to the effort and action of a child (e.g., "Good job drawing," "You must have worked really hard to dress up").

Other praise: This category includes all the praise that does not belong to person and process praise. Other praise can be separated into three types: firstly, when it is ambiguous whether the praise targets a child's effort or ability (e.g., "Very good"); secondly, when the praise implicitly recognizes a child's action (e.g., "You got it); and thirdly, when the praise targets the end result of a child's effort (e.g., "Beautiful drawing") (Gunderson et al., 2013).

Inflated praise: This type of praise is characterized by containing adverbs (e.g., "brilliantly," "remarkably") or adjectives (e.g., "amazing," "incredible") that express extremely positive feedback. Inflated praise can overlap with person or process praise (e.g., "You did an

amazing drawing," "You're incredibly smart") (Brummelman & Grapsas, 2020). Therefore, when running statistical analysis, the relationship between inflated praise and narcissism will be assessed separately from person, process, and other praise.

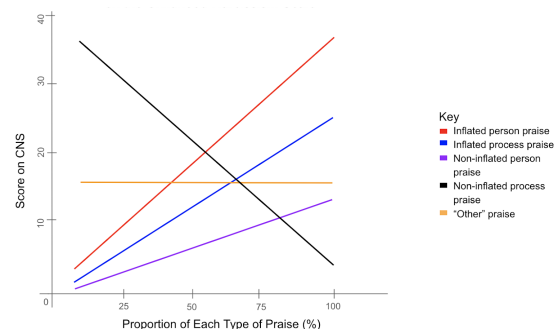
The response to the Childhood Narcissism Scale will be scored by the researchers. This allows the researchers to measure the level of narcissism of the child participants and to make correlations between narcissism and different categories of praise.

The response to the Parental Overvaluation Scale will also be scored. This will facilitate the investigation on the relationship between inflated praise and narcissism since inflated praise is a prominent manifestation of parental overvaluation.

PREDICTION

This line graph is the prediction for the result of the main hypotheses.

Figure 1
Relationship between different types of praise and score on the Childhood Narcissism Scale



Note: The x-axis represents the proportion of each type of praise in the total praise given by the parent participants. The y-axis represents children's scores on the Childhood Narcissism Scale.

Proportions of inflated person/process praise and non-inflated person praise received by children should be positively related to the score on the CNS. This is because inflated praise

will cultivate a feeling of superiority in the children, and person praise will also contribute to a fixed mindset of the children about themselves and other people. Therefore, the combination of inflated and person praise will likely be most positively correlated to the children's score on CNS, and inflated process praise and non-inflated person praise will be less strongly related to the score on CNS than inflated person praise.

Non-inflated process praise should be negatively related to the children's score on CNS. This is because non-inflated praise tends to give children feedback close to reality, and process praise contributes to the development of an incremental mindset in the children. Therefore, the more non-inflated process praise, the less narcissistic the children will likely be.

"Other" praise should not correlate to the children's score on CNS.

LIMITATIONS

This study proposal has two main limitations. First, the sample population of this study is relatively homogenous. The demographic makeup of Belmont is predominantly white (69.6%), with a median income of \$178,188 (*QuickFacts: Belmont Town, Middlesex County, Massachusetts*, 2024). As a result, the outcome of the study may not encompass many ethnicities and various financial levels. Therefore, other investigations into more diverse populations are needed to lead to a more universal conclusion. In addition, due to the observational nature of this study, no causal relationship could be drawn from the potential results; there could be confounding factors, such as parenting methods, that explain the relationships between parental praise and children's narcissism.

CONCLUSION

This paper has proposed a necessary new experiment for investigating narcissism in children in light of a critical literature review of the topic. According to the hypothesis, the

potential result of this experiment is that children who received more inflated and person praise will develop a more narcissistic personality compared to children who received non-inflated and process praise when they were around 2 to 4 years old. This result has implications for the topic of children's narcissism, because it suggests how parental praise given to children when they were young could shape their personality as they grew older. Different from the longitudinal study conducted by Brummelman et al. (2015), this study focuses on the impact of parental praise in early childhood on the children. As a result, it can demonstrate how toddlers receive and internalize parental praise. This study will allow for reviewing the impact of parental praise given during early child development and its effect on the narcissistic tendency of children. The results should provide new insights into ways of parenting that can prevent narcissism in children.

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