



## Narcissism and recollections of early life experiences

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### ABSTRACT

Recent studies have found associations between narcissistic personality features and retrospective accounts of early experiences. The current study sought to extend these previous findings by examining whether adaptive and maladaptive features of narcissism were associated with recollections of early life experiences in a non-clinical sample of undergraduate students ( $N = 334$ ). Results revealed that the Entitlement/Exploitativeness feature of narcissism was associated with low security, high parental discipline, and high threats of separation. Narcissistic Grandiosity was positively associated with peer affectional support and parental discipline, whereas Narcissistic Vulnerability was not uniquely associated with memories of early life experiences. The results provide partial support for models of narcissism in which parents are recalled as failing to provide a secure base while inducing threats of separation and discipline.

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### 1. Introduction

There has been a recent resurgence in research focused on understanding the developmental origins of narcissism. It has often been suggested that the roots of narcissism lie in dysfunctional interactions between children and their primary caregivers during the earliest years of life. For example, Freud (1914/1957) posited that the foundation of narcissism was an inward focus of love that was either the result of parental overvaluation or the perception of parents as distant, cold, and rejecting. According to Freud, narcissistic personality features were the product of parents failing to moderate the praise and admiration devoted to their children by either lavishing the child with too much positive attention or failing to provide enough.

Following the work of Freud (1914/1957), theorists have often argued that narcissism is the result of one of these two extreme forms of dysfunctional parenting. Both Kernberg (1975) and Kohut (1977) suggest that narcissism is the result of cold, indifferent parenting that is inadequate for meeting the needs of the developing child. Although there are a number of important differences in their models of narcissistic development, Kernberg and Kohut share a belief that narcissism results from parental deficiencies that lead narcissistic individuals to strive to meet their unfulfilled early needs during adulthood. The inadequate and insensitive parenting that narcissists received during childhood is believed to result in feelings of inferiority and low self-esteem which is disguised by the development of a grandiose façade. The speculation that the overtly positive

self-views of narcissists serve to hide their deep-seated negative feelings about themselves is often referred to as the *psychodynamic mask model* of narcissism (see Bosson et al., 2008, for a review). This view of the origin of narcissism has been widely shared in clinical descriptions of Narcissistic Personality Disorder (e.g., Akhtar & Thompson, 1982) and has been incorporated into many models of narcissism (e.g., Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001).

In contrast to the work of Kernberg (1975), Kohut (1977) and Millon (1981) focused on the other extreme of dysfunctional parenting by suggesting that narcissism may be the result of parents being overly indulgent and admiring of their children. In so doing, parents may unintentionally foster the development of an overinflated sense of self-worth in their children that is nearly impossible for the child to sustain over time. As a result of their inflated sense of self-worth, narcissistic individuals are forced to engage in strategies that are intended to maintain and enhance their grandiose feelings of self-worth because these inflated self-views are not likely to be supported by the sort of feedback that is generally provided by the social environment.

These speculations concerning the origin of narcissism are similar in that each suggests that adult narcissism may have its roots in early dysfunctional interactions with caregivers but there are important differences between these accounts. As suggested by Otway and Vignoles (2006), one of the most important issues to be resolved in this area of inquiry is whether narcissistic personality features are the result of parenting that was cold and indifferent (Kernberg, 1975; Kohut, 1977), overly indulgent (Millon, 1981), or some combination of the two (Freud, 1914/1957). Empirical studies that have examined the early experiences of narcissists have provided mixed results. Some of these studies have found narcissism to be associated with indulgent aspects of parenting such as warmth (Horton, Bleau, & Drwecki, 2006) and excessive parental admiration

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(Otway & Vignoles, 2006). However, narcissism has also been shown to be associated with cold and rejecting aspects of parenting such as a lack of warmth (Otway & Vignoles, 2006; Watson, Hickman, Morris, Milliron, & Whiting, 1995), a lack of supervision (Miller & Campbell, 2008), psychological control (Horton et al., 2006), and inadequate parenting (i.e., more permissive, more authoritarian, and less authoritative; Watson, Little, & Biderman, 1992; Wink, 1992). These early experiences with caregivers are thought to be important for narcissists because they shape the cognitive schemas that these individuals use to navigate their social environments later in life (Zeigler-Hill, Green, Arnau, Sisemore, & Myers, 2011). That is, these problematic early life experiences may contribute to the development of narcissistic tendencies by interfering with the appropriate development of feelings of self-worth, and realistic expectations concerning their own abilities and achievements.

## 2. Overview and predictions

The purpose of the present study was to examine the associations between narcissistic personality features and retrospective accounts of early life experiences. That is, we were interested in determining whether narcissistic personality features in adults were associated with the memories these individuals had about their interactions with parents and peers during childhood. Previous work concerning the developmental origins of narcissism has focused primarily on the narcissistic features that are captured by the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Hall, 1979). This reliance on the NPI is not surprising given that the NPI is the most popular measure of narcissism. It is important to note, however, that narcissism is a multifaceted construct that is defined and assessed in more than one way (e.g., Miller & Campbell, 2008). The NPI, for example, was designed using diagnostic criteria but it captures a relatively extraverted and emotionally resilient form of narcissism with its maladaptive features being limited for the most part to feelings of entitlement and the tendency to exploit others (Miller & Campbell, 2008). In an attempt to capture additional facets of narcissism that are not assessed by the NPI, we assessed narcissistic personality features using the NPI as well as the Pathological Narcissism Inventory (PNI; Pincus et al., 2009). The PNI is a recently developed measure that was intended to capture the less adaptive features of narcissism that are often relevant to clinical outcomes (see Pincus & Lukowitsky, 2010, for a review).

Our prediction was that the primarily maladaptive features of narcissism – such as a willingness to exploit others – would be associated with recollections of negative early life experiences such as poor family interactions and concerns about abandonment. This prediction was derived in large part from the influential perspectives on narcissism offered by Kernberg (1975) and Kohut (1977) that suggest that narcissism is the result of early experiences with cold and rejecting parents. We speculated that the more adaptive features of narcissism – such as self-enhancement – may be associated with seemingly positive experiences in early life such as parental adoration. The rationale for this prediction was based on the work of Millon (1981), which suggests that narcissism may result from the sort of overindulgent parenting that encourages an overinflated sense of self-worth. In essence, we believed that the conflicting views concerning the origins of narcissism may be resolved by determining which narcissistic features are associated with particular patterns of early experiences.

## 3. Method

### 3.1. Participants and procedure

Participants were 330 students (53 men and 277 women) enrolled in undergraduate psychology courses who participated

voluntarily in return for partial fulfillment of a research participation requirement. The mean age of participants was 21.57 years ( $SD = 6.24$ ). The racial/ethnic composition was 63% White, 30% Black, 3% Hispanic, and 4% other. Participants completed measures of narcissism and early life experiences via a secure website.

### 3.2. Measures

#### 3.2.1. NPI

The first measure of narcissism that we used was the NPI (Raskin & Hall, 1979, 1981). The form of narcissism captured by the NPI appears to be largely adaptive with its maladaptive features being limited for the most part to feelings of entitlement and the tendency to exploit others. The version of the NPI used in the present study consisted of 40 items and employed a forced-choice format such that participants were asked to decide between a narcissistic alternative and a non-narcissistic alternative for each item (e.g., “I really like to be the center of attention” vs. “It makes me uncomfortable to be the center of attention”). There has been considerable debate about the factor structure of the 40-item NPI over the years (see Brown, Budzek, & Tamborski, 2009, for a review) but Ackerman et al. (2010) recently suggested the following three factors: Leadership/Authority (11 items; e.g., “If I ruled the world it would be a much better place”;  $\alpha = .75$ ), Grandiose Exhibitionism (10 items; e.g., “I know that I am good because everybody keeps telling me so”;  $\alpha = .76$ ), and Entitlement/Exploitativeness (4 items; e.g., “I find it easy to manipulate people”;  $\alpha = .54$ ). The low level of internal consistency observed for the Entitlement/Exploitativeness subscale is not unusual for this particular subscale (e.g., Ackerman et al., 2010). Based on previous research concerning the subscales of the NPI (see Brown et al., 2009), we considered the Entitlement/Exploitativeness subscale to be maladaptive whereas the Leadership/Authority and Grandiose Exhibitionism subscales were considered relatively adaptive.

#### 3.2.2. PNI

The second measure of narcissism that we used was the PNI (Pincus et al., 2009). As outlined in recent studies (Tritt, Ryder, Ring, & Pincus, 2010; Wright, Lukowitsky, Pincus, & Conroy, 2010), the PNI captures two features of pathological narcissism: Narcissistic Grandiosity (18 items; e.g., “I can make anyone believe anything I want them to”;  $\alpha = .90$ ) and Narcissistic Vulnerability (34 items; e.g., “It’s hard for me to feel good about myself unless I know other people like me”;  $\alpha = .95$ ). Grandiose narcissism is the most easily recognized feature of pathological narcissism because of its similarity to Narcissistic Personality Disorder with one common characteristic being the use of maladaptive self-enhancement strategies (e.g., holding an overly positive self-image). Vulnerable narcissism, in contrast, is characterized by dysregulation across various areas including the self (e.g., negative self-image), emotionality (e.g., negative affective experiences including anger, shame, and dysphoria), and interpersonal relationship functioning (e.g., interpersonal sensitivity). Responses for the 52 items of the PNI are made on scales ranging from 0 (*not at all like me*) to 5 (*very much like me*). Initial information concerning the reliability and validity of the PNI has shown that it has an appropriate pattern of convergent and divergent correlations with other measures of narcissism (e.g., NPI) as well as related constructs such as self-esteem level and clinical outcomes (Pincus et al., 2009). We considered both the Narcissistic Grandiosity and Narcissistic Vulnerability subscales of the PNI to capture relatively maladaptive features of narcissism.

#### 3.2.3. Attachment History Questionnaire

Early life experiences were measured using the Attachment History Questionnaire (AHQ; Pottharst, 1990). The AHQ is a 51-item

measure that assesses representations of childhood relationships during the time when the respondent was living at home with his or her parents. Unlike many of the more commonly employed measures of attachment that are used with adults, the AHQ assesses retrospective accounts of attachment bonds with parents and peers during childhood rather than focusing on current relationships with romantic partners. The items that constitute the AHQ address issues such as family interactions, family discipline, and support systems. Responses were made on scales ranging from 1 (*never/not at all*) to 7 (*always/very much*). This instrument captures four aspects of early life experiences: secure attachment base (24 items; e.g., “How often did you feel you could trust your parents?”;  $\alpha = .73$ ), peer affectional support (8 items; e.g., “Did you find it easy to form new relationships with other people?”;  $\alpha = .69$ ), parental discipline (10 items; e.g., “How often did your parents hit or physically hurt you?”;  $\alpha = .91$ ), and threats of separation (9 items; e.g., “How often did your parents tell you they would leave you some place if you did not behave?”;  $\alpha = .81$ ).

#### 4. Results

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations for the measures in the present study. The subscales of the NPI were correlated with each other ( $r_s > .19$ ,  $p_s < .001$ ) as were the subscales of the PNI ( $r = .65$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The only subscale of the NPI that was associated with recollections of early life experiences was NPI Entitlement/Exploitativeness which was negatively correlated with secure attachment base ( $r = -.11$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and positively correlated with both parental discipline ( $r = .16$ ,  $p < .01$ ) as well as threats of separation ( $r = .22$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Both subscales of the PNI were positively associated with parental discipline ( $r_s > .12$ ,  $p_s < .05$ ) and threats of separation ( $r_s > .11$ ,  $p_s < .05$ ). In addition, PNI Narcissistic Grandiosity was positively associated with peer affectional support ( $r = .14$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

A series of multiple regression analyses were used to examine the associations between narcissistic personality features and early life experiences. These analyses allowed us to determine the unique associations between the various aspects of narcissism and recollections of early experiences. The measures of early life experience were examined in separate regression models with the subscales of the NPI and PNI serving as predictors. The main effects for the features of narcissism were entered simultaneously so that any observed effects would reflect the unique association between that particular feature of narcissism and early life experiences. Preliminary analyses included gender and race as potential moderators because these factors have been shown to be associated with narcissistic personality features (e.g., Foster, Campbell, & Twenge,

2003; Zeigler-Hill & Wallace, *in press*). The results of these initial analyses showed no significant main effects or interactions involving gender or race so these terms were trimmed from the final analyses in the interest of parsimony. The results of these analyses are presented in Table 2.

##### 4.1. Secure attachment base

NPI Entitlement/Exploitativeness was negatively associated with secure attachment base ( $\beta = -.12$ ,  $t = 2.02$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $d = .22$ ) such that individuals who reported higher scores on Entitlement/Exploitativeness remembered being less securely attached to their caregivers as children. None of the other features of narcissism had unique associations with secure attachment base.

##### 4.2. Peer affectional support

The only feature of narcissism that was uniquely associated with peer affectional support was PNI Narcissistic Grandiosity ( $\beta = .23$ ,  $t = 2.93$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = .33$ ). That is, individuals who reported higher levels of the grandiose feature of pathological narcissism recalled being liked and supported by their friends early in life. No other feature of narcissism was a significant predictor of peer affectional support.

##### 4.3. Parental discipline

Both NPI Entitlement/Exploitativeness ( $\beta = .20$ ,  $t = 2.80$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $d = .31$ ) and PNI Narcissistic Grandiosity ( $\beta = .18$ ,  $t = 2.32$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $d = .26$ ) were positively associated with parental discipline such that individuals reporting higher levels of these features of narcissism recalled being punished more severely by their parents early in life. The other features of narcissism failed to emerge as significant predictors of recollections of parental discipline.

##### 4.4. Threats of separation

The only feature of narcissism that was uniquely associated with threats of separation was NPI Entitlement/Exploitativeness ( $\beta = .25$ ,  $t = 3.41$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = .38$ ) such that individuals who reported higher scores on Entitlement/Exploitativeness remembered being more concerned about being abandoned by their caregivers. No other feature of narcissism had a unique association with threats of separation.

**Table 1**  
Correlations and Descriptive Statistics for narcissism and early life experiences.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. NPI Leadership/Authority	–								
2. NPI Grandiose Exhibitionism	.47***	–							
3. NPI Entitlement/Exploitativeness	.19***	.27***	–						
4. PNI Narcissistic Grandiosity	.18***	.24***	.22***	–					
5. PNI Narcissistic Vulnerability	–.09	.15**	.35***	.65***	–				
6. Secure attachment base	.01	.04	–.11*	–.05	–.06	–			
7. Peer affectional support	.02	–.01	–.09	.14**	.00	.07	–		
8. Parental discipline	–.02	.01	.16**	.16**	.12*	–.59***	.05	–	
9. Threats of separation	.00	.02	.22***	.11*	.17**	–.43***	–.09	.67***	–
Mean	5.44	3.64	0.77	3.58	3.02	4.18	4.43	3.28	2.57
Standard deviation	2.77	2.56	0.91	0.90	0.95	0.43	0.90	1.37	1.09
Minimum score	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	2.79	1.00	1.00	1.00
Maximum score	11.00	10.00	4.00	5.00	5.00	5.24	7.00	7.00	7.00

\*  $p < .05$ .

\*\*  $p < .01$ .

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

**Table 2**  
Hierarchical multiple regression analysis of early life experiences onto the features of narcissism.

Predictors	Secure attachment base		Peer affectional support		Parental discipline		Threats of separation	
	R <sup>2</sup>	$\beta$	R <sup>2</sup>	$\beta$	R <sup>2</sup>	$\beta$	R <sup>2</sup>	$\beta$
Predictors	.03*		.04*		.05**		.06***	
NPI Leadership/Authority		.01		.00		-.06		-.02
NPI Grandiose Exhibitionism		.08		-.03		-.05		-.06
NPI Entitlement/Exploitativeness		-.12*		-.10		.20**		.25***
PNI Grandiosity		-.09		.23***		.18**		.05
PNI Vulnerability		-.04		-.10		-.05		.07

\*  $p < .05$ .

\*\*  $p < .01$ .

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

## 5. Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to extend what is currently known about the connection between narcissistic personality features and early life experiences. We were interested in these associations because of their potential to help us gain a better understanding of the developmental origins of narcissism. In partial support of our hypotheses, two of the three maladaptive features of narcissism were associated with negative early experiences (i.e., NPI Entitlement/Exploitativeness and PNI Narcissistic Grandiosity). The form of maladaptive narcissism captured by NPI Entitlement/Exploitativeness was associated with low security, high parental discipline, and high threats of separation. This was the form of maladaptive narcissism that was most clearly associated with negative early experiences despite its relatively poor internal consistency which is likely to weaken its association with early experiences. PNI Narcissistic Grandiosity was associated with parental discipline but it was also associated with peer affectional support. This suggests that individuals with high levels of the grandiose feature of pathological narcissism may have mixed recollections of childhood such that they remember their parents utilizing harsh disciplinary techniques but they also remember being popular with other children. In contrast to our predictions, PNI Narcissistic Vulnerability was not uniquely associated with memories of early life experiences. That is, vulnerable narcissism was associated with negative life experiences in the zero-order correlations but it failed to emerge as a unique predictor of these experiences when entered along with the other features of narcissism. The more adaptive narcissistic personality features (i.e., NPI Leadership/Authority and NPI Grandiose Exhibitionism) were not associated with recollections of early life experiences. It is important to note that many of the associations that were observed between narcissistic personality features and early experiences were relatively small (i.e.,  $d$ s less than .38).

These results provide partial support for models of narcissism in which parents are recalled as failing to provide a secure base while inducing threats of separation and discipline (e.g., Kernberg, 1975; Kohut, 1977). It is possible that these negative experiences may occur alongside overindulgence which would be consistent with Freud's (1914/1957) characterization of conflicted parenting with caregivers shifting between overindulgent and rejecting styles. This model of the early experiences of narcissistic individuals has received support in previous studies (e.g., Cassidy & Berlin, 1994; Otway & Vignoles, 2006).

Although not explicitly tested here, our underlying process model was that early life experiences contribute to the development of narcissistic personality features. The present data, however, merely examines the association between features of narcissism and early life experiences. This correlational data, of course, cannot rule out the possibility that the direction of causality may be either bidirectional or reversed. It is possible that the retrospective abilities of narcissistic individuals may be biased

(e.g., McCullough, Emmons, Kilpatrick, & Mooney, 2003) and, as a result, the early life experiences reported by these individuals may reflect this bias rather than their actual experiences. That is, narcissistic individuals may be especially likely to recall early experiences from a particular frame of reference in which their own needs and sense of self are central with others being framed as relatively peripheral characters who serve to meet their needs. For example, the link between the grandiose feature of pathological narcissism and higher levels of peer affectional support early in life may have been the result of memory bias reflecting an imagined life history that is consistent with their inflated self-views rather than reflecting a realistic state of affairs.

The present results extend the existing literature concerning the early experiences of narcissistic individuals by showing that the various features of narcissism have different patterns of association with recollections of early life experiences. This is further support for the importance of distinguishing between the various features of narcissism which provides a richer and more comprehensive view of this construct. Despite the strengths of the present study (e.g., large sample, assessment of multiple features of narcissism), this research also had a number of limitations. One limitation is that the present study relied exclusively on self-report measures. It may be informative for future research to extend these findings by including data from multiple responders (e.g., caregivers). The inclusion of data from other individuals may offset the potential biases in the recollections of narcissistic individuals. For example, narcissistic individuals may frame unpleasant memories as the failures of others to meet their needs rather than viewing these events as reflecting personal failings. This may result in parents being perceived as having been more critical, punitive, and distant than they actually were. Alternatively, it is possible that narcissistic individuals may have an overly positive recollection of their childhood experiences that serves to bolster and maintain their currently inflated sense of self-worth. That is, they may remember being especially loved and valued by their parents because they were such special children. As with any type of retrospective self-report, the responses of the individuals in the present study may have been distorted. This is especially likely given that narcissistic individuals tend to have distorted perceptions of themselves and others (e.g., Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). Thus, the use of parental reports may provide an interesting complement to the recollections of the narcissistic individuals in future studies.

A second limitation of the present study is that it is quite possible that the features of narcissism may be associated with early life experiences that were not adequately captured by the measure that was used in the present study. The early life experiences that are assessed by the Attachment History Questionnaire are clearly not exhaustive and these experiences are more closely associated with cold and rejecting parenting than parental overvaluation. One potential direction for future research would be to examine the degree to which these features of narcissism are associated with early life experiences that were not assessed in this study.



This would be especially useful for early life experiences that more clearly reflect the sort of parental overvaluation that may result in the development of exaggerated feelings of self-worth. For example, the more adaptive features of narcissism (i.e., NPI Leadership/Authority and NPI Grandiose Exhibitionism) may have failed to emerge as predictors of early life experiences because our study did not adequately capture these sorts of early experiences. By extending the range of early life experiences that are examined, future researchers may gain an even better understanding of the sorts of events that are recalled by individuals with narcissistic personality features.

A third limitation of this research was that the participants constituted a convenience sample that was composed of relatively young individuals (the average age was less than 22 years). Young adults are likely to display some narcissistic tendencies which may dissipate later in life as they assume more adult responsibilities such as child rearing and taking care of aging parents. This is an important limitation because the extent to which these findings should be extended beyond young adults is unclear. It would be of considerable interest to extend these findings to a broader range of ages in order to determine whether recent increases in narcissistic tendencies are associated with shifts in parenting styles (Munich & Munich, 2009). Also, future research should attempt to include a more demographically diverse sample that would include approximately equal numbers of men and women.

A fourth limitation is that the present research did not take into account other factors that may contribute to the etiology of narcissism such as genetic inheritance (e.g., Livesley, Jang, & Vernon, 1998; Vernon, Villani, Vickers, & Harris, 2008) and early maltreatment experiences (e.g., Grover et al., 2007). This leaves open the possibility that early interactions with parents may be serving as a proxy for these other factors. Although this is certainly possible, the present results extend the existing literature by presenting a more nuanced perspective of the connections between narcissistic features and early life experiences. Future research should try to account for these other factors in the early experiences of narcissistic individuals.

## 6. Conclusion

The results of the present study found that certain maladaptive features of narcissism (i.e., NPI Entitlement/Exploitativeness and PNI Narcissistic Grandiosity) were associated with negative early life experiences. These results provide partial support for models of narcissism that suggest negative early experiences that occur either in isolation or in alternation with overindulgent parenting may contribute to the development of narcissistic personality features. This study also provided additional support for the distinction between various features of narcissism by showing the differences that emerge in their associations with recollections of early life experiences.

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