

Clarifying the Links Between Grandiose Narcissism and Parenting

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ABSTRACT. This study investigated the links between parenting and grandiose narcissism in hopes of clarifying recent empirical discrepancies. One-hundred forty-five participants completed the Narcissistic Personality Inventory and reported about their parents' support, coldness, monitoring, psychological control, and overvaluation. Psychological control was associated positively with narcissism, whereas monitoring and coldness were associated negatively. Overvaluation and parental support showed no reliable associations with narcissism. Analysis of the components of narcissism further elucidated these links. The results are interpreted in light of previous findings and as consistent with social learning and psychodynamic theories regarding the origins of narcissism.

Keywords: narcissism, parenting, personality development

THE ORIGINS OF DISPOSITIONAL NARCISSISM have received impressive empirical attention recently and have been guided, most often, by theories about the role of parents in facilitating narcissism. Unfortunately, research to date has yet to yield a consistent message about whether and/or how parents might facilitate narcissism. One reason for this lack of convergence in the literature is that researchers have measured parenting in different ways, often using different assessment methods for constructs that are conceptually similar. The current work attempts to clarify the links between parenting and child grandiose narcissism by including multiple measures of conceptually similar parenting constructs, constructs that likely overlap in their relations with narcissism.

A recent review of the existing empirical evidence linking parenting behavior to narcissism (Horton, 2011) suggests that both psychodynamic and social learning theories on the origins of narcissism have merit. That is, social learning theory's indictment of indulgent parenting (Millon, 1981) has received support in the form of empirical associations between child reports of parental affection and/or lack of monitoring and grandiose narcissism, which is characterized by arrogance and

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beliefs in superiority, as well as to vulnerable narcissism, which is characterized by emotional lability and vulnerability (see Ramsey, Watson, Biderman, & Reeves, 1996). Indeed, children who report more affection and less monitoring from their parents score higher on narcissism. On the other hand, control efforts that include emotional manipulation and contingent displays of affection (rather than specific monitoring of behavior), parenting tactics that psychodynamic theorists regard as catalysts for narcissism (see Rothstein, 1979), have been linked consistently to vulnerable narcissism (see Miller & Campbell, 2008) and to grandiose narcissism once self-esteem variance has been partialled (Horton, Bleau, & Drwecki, 2006).

Despite this seeming convergence, there is at least one important disagreement in the literature that is in need of resolution. Numerous studies (e.g., Horton et al., 2006; Watson, Hickman, Morris, Milliron, & Whiting, 1995; Watson, Little, & Biderman, 1992) have observed a positive link between parental affection and narcissism, particularly grandiose narcissism; however, Otway and Vignoles (2006) observed a positive link between parental *coldness* and grandiose narcissism. Importantly, the latter result is consistent with Kernberg's (1975) psychodynamic view that narcissism is a defensive form of self-regard, one that is catalyzed by a lack of parental affection and high parental expectations. In contrast, the former result is consistent with the social learning perspective's emphasis on affectionate, indulgent parenting. The current study hopes to shed light on this inconsistency and, in so doing, the theory of parental influence on narcissism that has more merit. To do so, the study uses multiple measures of parenting so that it can identify the unique associations between grandiose narcissism and parenting constructs that are conceptually similar. Specifically, we used the parenting measures used by both Horton et al. (2006) and Otway and Vignoles (2006), two studies that observed reliable but apparently opposing associations between parenting and grandiose narcissism but did so using different measures of parenting.

Horton and colleagues (2006) investigated the extent to which parental support (what Horton and colleagues called "warmth"), monitoring, and psychological control were associated with (a) total score on the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Terry, 1988), the most commonly used measurement of grandiose narcissism, and (b) total NPI score after partialing self-esteem variance. In these two studies support and monitoring were associated, positively and negatively, respectively, with both total NPI and the partialled NPI score. Psychological control was associated only with the partialled NPI score, and particularly for female participants.

Otway and Vignoles (2006) asked 120 adult participants to recall how they were parented and to complete the Narcissistic Personality Inventory as well as a measure of vulnerable narcissism (the Hypersensitive Narcissism Scale; Hendin & Cheek, 1997). To assess parenting, the researchers created measures of coldness (e.g., "I often felt my parents were 'cold' toward me") and overvaluation (e.g., "My parents praised me for virtually everything I did"). Coldness and overvaluation predicted total NPI scores positively, particularly when these scores and

those for vulnerable narcissism were modeled together rather than separately, and after controlling for attachment anxiety. Such results seem to contradict those of previous work, including Horton and colleagues. The findings regarding parental support (in Horton et al., 2006) and coldness (in Otway & Vignoles, 2006) are particularly noteworthy and contradictory. Given the presumption that support and coldness should be negatively correlated, one would expect these two measures to predict narcissism in different ways (i.e., one positively and the other negatively); however, support and coldness were both identified, albeit in different studies, as positive predictors of grandiose narcissism.

We reasoned that this seeming contradiction may be a function of conceptual and measurement overlap between parental coldness and psychological control. The CRPBI psychological control measure (Schaeffer, 1965; used by Horton et al., 2006) assesses the extent to which parental affection is contingently delivered. Take item #4, which reads “My mother/father was a person who was less friendly with me, if I did not see things her/his way.” Interestingly, Otway and Vignoles’ (2006) parental coldness measure includes items that seem to measure a similar contingency: reverse-scored items: “. . . My parents were always there for me” and “. . . I knew that my parents could always be depended on to provide love.” Such conceptual overlap between the constructs and measures suggests that they will be correlated positively. Such overlap could account for the unique positive link between coldness and grandiose narcissism that Otway and Vignoles observed. That is, a positive association may exist between narcissism and the perception of contingently delivered affection, with such perception being assessed by the coldness measure in the Otway and Vignoles work and by psychological control measures in other studies.

If this idea has merit, one would expect to find a positive correlation between coldness and psychological control. Further, based upon previous observations that parental affection is associated positively with narcissism (see Watson et al., 1995), one would expect a negative association between coldness and narcissism once variance associated with psychological control is partialled from coldness and a positive association between psychological control and narcissism once coldness is partialled. We tested these notions by asking participants to complete the Narcissistic Personality Inventory and the five parenting measures used by Horton et al. (2006) and Otway and Vignoles (2006) and then assessing each parenting component’s unique link to total narcissism and its components.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Ninety-eight male and 47 female students from two small Midwestern colleges participated either as non-compensated volunteers or in exchange for course credit. Participants were traditional college age (between 18 and 22 years, $M = 19.66$ years), and 79% were Caucasian.¹ They were approached in academic

buildings and were asked to complete a survey of parenting behavior and personality. Participants completed assessments by themselves in semi-private areas of the buildings (e.g., a study room or quiet corner desk in the library). We asked them to report about the parenting they experienced during the most recent year in which they lived with their guardians.² Participants were debriefed via e-mail.

Measures

Grandiose Narcissism

Participants completed a 40-item forced choice version of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Terry, 1988), which is the most frequently used, effectively validated, and often discussed measure of grandiose narcissism (see Tamborski & Brown, 2011). Each of the forty items included one narcissistic option and one non-narcissistic option. We created a single composite narcissism score by counting up the number of narcissistic options each participant endorsed ($\alpha = .85$). We also created composite scores for four NPI subscales: Leadership, Self-Absorption, Superiority, and Entitlement (see Emmons, 1987; α s > .65) by summing the number of subscale-relevant narcissistic statements that participants endorsed. We used the subscale scores to elucidate findings between the total NPI score and parenting constructs. After all, these component scores tend to correlate differently with self-esteem scores (see Emmons) and with reports of parenting (see Watson et al., 1992). For these and the parenting measures, higher scores indicate more of the construct.

Psychological Control

Participants completed the 6-item psychological control subscale of the revised Children's Report of Parental Behavior Inventory (Schaeffer, 1965), a scale that predicts effectively internalizing symptoms in children and is distinct from measures of behavioral control/monitoring (Barber, Olsen, & Shagle, 1994). Participants used a three-point scale (1 = "not at all like" to 3 = "a lot like") to indicate to what extent each statement was "like" their male or female guardian. We averaged the twelve items (six for each guardian, $\alpha = .73$) to create a composite psychological control score. In the event that participants did not spend substantial time (as interpreted by the participants) with a male or female guardian, they did not complete items about that guardian.

Parental Monitoring

Participants completed a 6-item measure of parental monitoring (Lamborn, Mounts, Steinberg, & Dornbusch, 1991). Specifically, participants reported how much their parents "tried to know" and "really knew" about (a) who their friends were, (b) what they did at night, and (c) what they did in the afternoons. We averaged the six items to create a composite monitoring score ($\alpha = .70$).

Parental Support

Participants completed 15 items that assessed parental support (Lamborn et al., 1991). The first five items asked about the male guardian, the next five asked about the female guardian, and the final five assessed parental support without specifying male or female guardian. For the first ten items, participants reported “how true” each statement was using a 1 (= not at all true) to 4 (= completely true) scale. They completed the last five items by marking how frequently different events happened (e.g., When you got a poor grade in school, how often did your parents or guardians encourage you to try harder?). We averaged the items to create a composite support score ($\alpha = .83$). In the event that participants did not spend substantial time (as interpreted by the participants) with a male or female guardian, they did not complete items about that guardian. The predictive and discriminant validity of these and the monitoring scale (reported above) are evidenced in Lamborn and colleagues’ work (Lamborn et al., 1991; Steinberg, Lamborn, Dornbusch, & Darling, 1992) on the differential roles of support and monitoring in predicting academic performance, deviant behavior, and self-confidence/self-conceptions.

Parental Coldness

Participants completed the 11 “coldness” items developed by Otway and Vignoles (2006) plus an additional item (“My parents did not express love or affection for me.”). They responded using a 1 (“not at all true”) to 7 (“completely true”) scale, and we averaged the items to create a composite coldness score ($\alpha = .80$).

Parental Overvaluation

Participants completed the four “overvaluation” items created by Otway and Vignoles (2006) and an additional item (“My parents thought I was great no matter what I did”) using a 1 (“not at all true”) to 7 (“completely true”) scale. We averaged the five items to create a composite overvaluation score ($\alpha = .74$).

Results

Correlations Among Parenting Constructs

We began by assessing the correlations among the five parenting constructs (see Table 1). As expected, coldness was correlated negatively with support but positively with psychological control. Importantly, partial correlations revealed that the strong negative correlation between coldness and support persisted when controlling for psychological control, *partial r* (140) = $-.56$, $p < .001$, and that the strong positive correlation between coldness and psychological control persisted when controlling for support, *partial r* (140) = $.47$, $p < .001$. This pattern

TABLE 1. Zero-Order Correlations Among Parenting Measures

	Psych. Control	Support	Monitoring	Overvaluation
Psych. Control	—	—	—	—
Support	-.26**	—	—	—
Monitoring	-.03	.36**	—	—
Overvaluation	-.35**	.29**	.18*	—
Coldness	.52**	-.59**	-.24**	-.35**

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

of correlations is consistent with our notion that the coldness measure assesses concepts similar to those assessed by support and psychological control.

Zero-Order Correlations Between Parenting Constructs and Narcissism

Next, we assessed the correlations between parenting constructs and total NPI score and between parenting constructs and the four NPI subscales (see Table 2). There were no statistically reliable correlations between parenting constructs and total NPI score. On the other hand, coldness was correlated negatively with two NPI subscales: Leadership and Superiority. Unlike in Otway and Vignoles (2006), the more coldness participants reported, the lower their scores on these narcissism components tended to be. Support was correlated positively with Superiority. Also, psychological control and monitoring were associated with entitlement. The more psychologically controlling a parent was reported to be but the less monitoring they did, the more entitled the participants were. These correlations replicate previous work (Horton et al., 2006).

TABLE 2. Zero-Order Correlations Between Parenting Measures and Total NPI and NPI Subscales

	Total NPI	Entitlement	Leadership	Superiority	Self-Absorption
Psych. Control	.09	.19*	.06	.05	-.02
Coldness	-.15	.10	-.21*	-.18*	-.12
Monitoring	-.01	-.21*	.08	-.01	.03
Support	.12	-.04	.09	.18*	.05
Overvaluation	.05	-.05	.03	.05	.12

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

Unique Links Between Parenting Constructs and Narcissism

To identify the unique links between narcissism and the five different parenting constructs, we regressed the total NPI score and then each NPI subscale onto the five parenting constructs simultaneously and after centering all predictors and outcomes. Participant sex and interactions among parenting components were investigated but did not reach significance. Thus, they are not discussed further.

When investigating total NPI score, coldness and psychological control both predicted narcissism reliably but did so in different ways. Higher scores on the coldness measure were associated with lower narcissism scores, $\beta = -.26$, $p = .042$, whereas higher scores on the psychological control measure were associated with higher narcissism scores, $\beta = .24$, $p = .019$. Monitoring, support, and overvaluation did not predict total NPI reliably.

Analyses of the components of narcissism were also conducted using this multiple regression procedure. As in the zero-order analyses, psychological control was associated positively and reliably with Entitlement, $\beta = .22$, $p = .025$. It was also associated positively with Superiority, $\beta = .23$, $p = .018$, and Leadership, $\beta = .22$, $p = .027$. Coldness' negative associations with Superiority, $\beta = -.28$, $p = .027$, and Leadership, $\beta = -.40$, $p = .002$, remained reliable and were actually strengthened as compared to the zero-order link. The link between monitoring and Entitlement also persisted, $\beta = -.25$, $p = .006$. Overvaluation and parental support did not predict any subscales reliably, and no parenting measures predicted Self-Absorption reliably.

Discussion

This study investigated the links between parenting and narcissism with a focus on resolving a disagreement in the literature. Participants completed assessments of trait narcissism and five parenting constructs: support, monitoring, psychological control, coldness, and overvaluation. The findings were interestingly consistent with previous work but also expounded upon that work in important ways. Psychological control was associated with both total narcissism and with three separate components of the NPI, monitoring was associated negatively with narcissistic entitlement, and coldness was associated negatively with total narcissism and with narcissistic superiority and leadership beliefs. The findings involving psychological control and coldness are particularly unique.

The links between psychological control and superiority and leadership are intriguing because they were revealed only after coldness was included in the statistical model. That is, the zero-order correlations between psychological control and these subscales were not reliable. One way to understand this pattern of findings is as an example of suppression. That is, the zero-order relation between the coldness and psychological control was positive. Further, the link between

coldness and superiority/leadership were negative. Thus, when we predicted superiority and leadership from psychological control without coldness in the model, the predictive power of psychological control was influenced by two opposing forces: (a) the positive predictive force of psychological control and (b) the negative predictive force of coldness. Once we controlled for coldness, the negative force was removed and thus, the positive link was revealed. This result and its interpretation suggest that psychological control is more closely tied to narcissism than previously thought. That is, psychological control is not often linked empirically (see Horton et al., 2006; Miller & Campbell, 2008) to those aspects of narcissism, like superiority and leadership beliefs (see Emmons, 1987), that are associated with self-esteem. However, the current results suggest that psychodynamic theorists may deserve even more credit for their ideas, which emphasize the damaging nature of emotional control (see Rothstein, 1979), than they have been given (see Horton, 2011).

The current work also has important implications for one's understanding of the role of parental warmth/coldness in narcissism. The observed links are in the direction opposite to those found by Otway and Vignoles (2006) but are consistent with other investigations (e.g., Watson et al., 1995). As such, we see the current data as support for the social learning view that parental affection can lead to grandiose narcissism. With regard to the discrepancy between these findings and the Otway and Vignoles work, Otway and Vignoles' positive link between coldness and narcissism may have at least partially been a function of suppression by the psychological control with which coldness is naturally confounded and that was not measured in their sample. Without partialing psychological control, one would expect a more positive, or at least less negative link, between the coldness measure and narcissism (because psychological control predicts narcissism positively). In support of this view, the zero-order correlation between the coldness measure and grandiose narcissism in the current study was of lesser negative magnitude than was the partial slope from the multiple regression equation. In addition, one might regard the discrepancies between the current study and the Otway and Vignoles work as a function of these authors' use of attachment anxiety as a predictor. We did not use such a predictor, and such prediction may have rendered the models and the narcissism explored therein quite different.

The current work also suggests that neither parental support nor parental overvaluation is linked to narcissism. It is possible that previously observed links between support and narcissism (e.g., Horton et al., 2006) were due to the parental affection with which support is confounded and that we assessed more directly in the current study. Once such affection is controlled, parental support may account for no unique variance in narcissism. The same argument may also apply to the overvaluation measure, though it is not clear whether its link to narcissism (observed in Otway & Vignoles, 2006 and theorized by social learning theorists) was usurped by the affection/coldness measure or by the monitoring measure, which was, as in other studies, linked negatively to narcissism.

We should acknowledge that the current work has methodological limitations that preclude it from providing answers to a number of questions. For instance, the work cannot speak to the causal direction of the identified links; it is possible that the narcissism that we assessed via the NPI was in place prior to the occurrence of the parenting behavior about which participants reported. A prospective study could investigate this possibility (see Cramer, 2011). Also, the current work solicited retrospective reports of parent behavior, a common practice in the literature (e.g., Horton et al., 2006; Otway & Vignoles, 2006; Watson et al., 1992) but one that introduces the possibility of errors in memory. That is, participants were reporting about parenting that happened during the most recent year in which they lived with parents. Such temporal distance, at least a few months and up to a number of years, between one's subjective experiences with parenting and one's recounting of those experiences could increase inaccuracies. It is encouraging, though, that the pattern of results in this study is similar to findings from studies that solicited reports of current parenting (e.g., Horton et al., 2006, study 2), rather than relying on more distant memory of parenting.

Despite these limitations, the work provides clarification of recent observations that, at first blush, appear contradictory. As such, it contributes to the growing literature on parenting and narcissism, one that continues to support both social learning and psychodynamic ideas about the origins of grandiose narcissism, especially when one differentiates effectively among related parenting components.

NOTES

1. It is worth noting that the noncompensated volunteers and those who received course credit were equally unfamiliar with the researchers who distributed the surveys. All participants were approached in the same manner and with the request to take a few minutes to complete a short survey. Participants were asked only after completing the survey whether they were enrolled in a psychology class for which they might receive course credit. If they were, they received such credit.

2. Though this retrospective reporting of parenting makes the results vulnerable to alternative explanations, such as inaccurate memory, it is a procedure that has been commonly used in studies that assess links between narcissism and parenting behavior in young adults (e.g., Horton et al., 2006; Otway & Vignoles, 2006; Watson et al., 1995). Further, such a procedure was used in the studies whose discrepant results this project is attempting to clarify.

AUTHOR NOTES

Robert S. Horton is an associate professor at Wabash College. His current research interests are (a) environmental influences on dispositional narcissism and (b) differences between grandiose and vulnerable narcissism in terms of causes and correlates. **Tanner Tritch** is a behavior technician for Indiana Applied Behavioral Analysis Institute (IABAI) in Ft. Wayne, IN. He graduated from Wabash College

in 2010. The current work began as his senior research project completed in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with a B. A. in Psychology.

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