

# Self-Functioning and Perceived Parenting: Relations of Parental Empathy and Love Inconsistency With Narcissism, Depression, and Self-Esteem

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**ABSTRACT.** In Heinz Kohut's (1977, 1984) theory of the psychology of the self, good parenting provides a child with optimal frustration and just the right amount of loving empathic concern. In the present study, the authors examined the relations of perceived parental empathy and love inconsistency with measures of narcissism, self-esteem, and depression. In a sample of university undergraduates ( $N = 232$ ; 78 men, 153 women, and 1 nonresponder), perceived parental empathy predicted more adaptive self-functioning, whereas parental love inconsistency was related to psychological maladjustment. These results support the theoretical assumption that perceived parental empathy is associated with healthy self-development.

Keywords: depression, love inconsistency, narcissism, parental empathy, self-esteem

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EARLY CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF NARCISSISM or *self-love* emphasized its maladjustment (Freud, 1914/1986), and this perspective has been maintained in more recent theoretical (e.g., Kernberg, 1975) and empirical (e.g., Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Bushman, Bonacci, Van Dijk, & Baumeister, 2003) developments. However, contemporary research has revealed that narcissism can also predict psychological health. For instance, researchers have found that self-reported narcissism correlates negatively with day-to-day anxiety and dispositional depression, loneliness, and neuroticism and correlates positively with dispositional subjective well-being and couple well-being (Sedikides, Rudich, Gregg, Kumashiro,

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& Rusbult, 2004). In conformity with older conceptualizations and more recent findings, researchers examining the factor structure of narcissism scales have identified more adaptive components that record traits such as a sense of authority, self-sufficiency, and superiority and more maladaptive characteristics such as exhibitionism, exploitativeness, and entitlement (e.g., Emmons, 1984; Raskin & Terry, 1988; Watson, 2005).

The idea that narcissism might have both adaptive and maladaptive potentials is consistent with the theory of the psychology of the self developed by Heinz Kohut (1977, 1984). Kohut argued that innate narcissistic tendencies are transformed into healthy or unhealthy forms of self-functioning depending largely on the early parental environment. Parents during this time serve as *selfobjects*, or as what the child perceives as extensions of the self. Selfobjects, in other words, are neither completely within the self nor completely outside the self in the other or object. In this role, parents supply a psychological foundation on which the rudimentary self of a child can be constructed. In an ideal unfolding of this process, an empathic connection with the already established self of a parent creates the supportive and stable psychosocial matrix out of which the self of a child can develop. Parental empathy is, therefore, crucial: "The child that is to survive (psychologically) is born into an empathic-responsive human milieu (of selfobjects) just as he is born into an atmosphere that contains an optimal amount of oxygen if he is to survive physically" (Kohut, 1977, p. 85).

In serving as selfobjects, parents play several vital roles. They not only offer reassurance that the environment is in tune with such basic psychological needs as constancy, nurturance, and respect (St. Clair, 1996) but also provide the child with a sense of self-love in two ways (Mitchell, 1979). First, parents praise children as they develop their own strengths, and second, parents willingly become objects of praise when children experience personal vulnerabilities that produce a need to be accepted and protected by someone who is perceived as stronger. The internalization of these experiences of being praised and of praising promotes children's self-esteem and healthy narcissism.

As selfobjects, empathically responsive parents thus provide the child with an initial sense of self-love and shape the child's subsequent development. Both father and mother assume important roles in the self-development of a child, with the empathic sensitivity of one sometimes making up for inadequacies of the other (Kohut, 1977, 1984). However, no parent can be perfectly empathic. Temporary lapses in parental sensitivity frustrate the child but also contribute to maturation in two ways: "First, they provide mirroring that fosters a more realistic sense of self. . . . Second, parents reveal limitations in themselves, thus disappointing the child" (Rhodewaldt & Sorrow, 2003, p. 520). Parental failures thereby provide the child with a sense of nonself. This differentiation is especially important early in life, because the selective exclusion of nonself structures is as vital to self-formation as is the selective inclusion of self-conforming structures (Kohut, 1977).

Kohut (1984) called parental empathic failures that lead to healthy narcissistic development *optimal frustrations*, and he defined them as “the occasional disturbances of a basic attitude of appropriate empathic affect and pride” (p. 16). With optimal frustration, the empathic bond is never broken permanently (St. Clair, 1996). Instead, the parental empathic failure encourages the child to construct the independent psychological structures of being admired and of admiring that underlie healthy self-esteem. In other words, children learn how to do for themselves what parents had previously done for them (Sacksteder, 1990). In this process of *transmuting internalization*, the empathic shortcomings of parents prompt the child to preserve the lost quality of the selfobject (Mitchell, 1979). As those parental characteristics become increasingly incorporated into the psyche, the self can sustain its own sense of self-worth as it gradually shifts away from relying on parental selfobjects for narcissistic sustenance (Kohut, 1984). In short, healthy narcissism develops through the process of transmuting internalization via optimal frustration.

In contrast to optimal frustration, *chronic frustration* is traumatic and results in unhealthy development (Kohut, 1977). As the word *chronic* implies, such frustrations are not so much about specific events as they are about general problems within the parental personality (Kohut, 1984; Mitchell, 1979). Traumatic frustrations result from persistent empathic deprivation, which can be experienced in two ways. First, the child may experience an overt absence of parental empathy. Second, parents may provide empathy unpredictably. Either way, traumatic frustration deprives the child of the empathic merger with selfobjects that is essential to internalization. The result is an immaturity in self-development, which manifests itself in dysfunctions such as poor self-esteem, depression, and the needy exploitativeness and sense of entitlement that is associated with maladjusted narcissism (Kohut, 1977, 1984).

### *Continuum Hypothesis*

Kohut (1977, 1984) analyzed early self-development in terms that are similar to numerous other perspectives, including, for example, attachment theory (Bowlby, 1982), object relations theory (Mahler, Pine, & Bergman, 1975; Winnicott, 1971), and more recent integrative cognitive models (Guidano, 1987; Liotti, 2007). However, Kohut described development of the self as a life-long dynamic process that is useful in understanding how self-reported narcissism can predict both adjusted and maladjusted forms of psychological functioning (e.g., Watson, Little, Sawrie, & Biderman, 1992; Watson, Sawrie, Greene, & Arredondo, 2002).

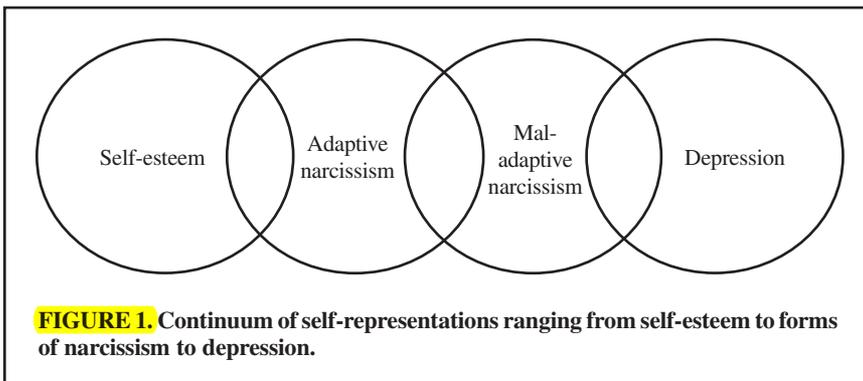
According to Kohut (1977, 1984), new potentials of self-functioning can be internalized through life-long relationships with selfobjects that supply the necessary experiences of praising and of being praised. Through the optimal frustrations of such relationships, additional structures of independent functioning can be consolidated into the self and can serve as new resources of healthy

self-esteem. Even a healthy self, however, will be vulnerable to the traumatic frustrations of destructive relationships. Such relationships can, among other things, cause the self to regress into a sense of depleted depression. A self with relatively more internalized structures will be less fragile and reactive to such interpersonal difficulties, whereas a self with fewer internalized resources will be more unstable and more likely to react with the defensive grandiosity and exploitativeness of narcissistic personality disorder.

Overall, therefore, Kohut's (1977, 1984) theoretical framework implies that the self can be conceptualized and measured in terms of a continuum of representations (Sawrie, Watson, & Biderman, 1991; Watson, 2005; Watson, Biderman, & Sawrie, 1994; Watson et al., 2002). As Figure 1 shows, this continuum ranges from self-esteem at one extreme to a sense of depleted depression at the other. Between these extremes are intermediate forms of functioning associated with more adjusted and more maladjusted forms of narcissism. Individual differences in the dynamics of the self can be defined by an average level of functioning at some point along the continuum and by a range of possible representations that reflect emerging new potentials for self-esteem in the more adaptive direction and vulnerabilities toward regression in the opposite, more maladaptive direction. Given the integrated nature of the self, a further assumption of this continuum hypothesis is that operationalizations of adjusted narcissism define variance in self-functioning that overlaps with both self-esteem and maladaptive narcissism. Measures of maladaptive narcissism can also overlap with depression (Watson).

### *Research Support*

Support for the continuum hypothesis has often appeared in studies using the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (Raskin & Hall, 1981). The Leadership/Authority, Superiority/Arrogance, and Self-Absorption/Self-Admiration factors of this instrument tend to predict adjustment, whereas the Exploitativeness/Entitlement factor correlates more consistently with maladjustment (e.g., Emmons, 1984).



Such mental health implications become even more obvious in partial correlations examining the Exploitativeness/Entitlement factor after controlling for the other three factors and vice versa (e.g., Watson & Biderman, 1993; Watson et al., 1994; Watson, Little, Sawrie, et al., 1992; Watson, Taylor, & Morris, 1987). These data support the continuum hypothesis in suggesting that an overlap in variance prevents measures of adaptive narcissism from appearing healthier and prevents maladaptive narcissism from being a clearer correlate of maladjustment. Also consistent with the continuum hypothesis are findings that the linkages of Leadership/Authority, Superiority/Arrogance, and Self-Absorption/Self-Admiration with adjustment reflect a covariance with self-esteem (e.g., Watson, Hickman, & Morris, 1996; Watson, Morris, & Miller, 1997–1998; Watson, Varnell, & Morris, 1999–2000).

In previous research testing Kohut's (1977, 1984) theory, it has been essential that researchers pay attention to the complexities of this factor structure and to the possible existence of a continuum of representations. For example, Watson, Hickman, Morris, Milliron, and Whiting (1995) used perceived parental nurturance as an indirect index of parental empathy. They found that partial correlations for the more adjusted and the more maladjusted forms of narcissism displayed the hypothesized positive and negative associations with parental nurturance, respectively.

A second set of investigations focused on perceived parenting styles and the presumed influences of optimal frustration as a hypothetical construct (Watson, Little, & Biderman, 1992; see also Ramsey, Watson, Biderman, & Reeves, 1996). On the basis of Baumrind's (1972) work, the researchers used a self-report questionnaire to evaluate undergraduates' perceptions of their parents as permissive (overindulgent and thus in theory insufficiently frustrating), authoritarian (overly controlling and thus excessively frustrating), and authoritative (warmly enforcing appropriate limits and thus optimally frustrating). Parental authoritative was linked, as expected, with healthier self-functioning, whereas parental permissiveness and authoritarianism predicted lower self-esteem and unhealthy narcissistic tendencies. The data, therefore, implied that optimal frustration promoted a more adaptive development of the self (Watson, Little, & Biderman, 1992; Ramsey et al.).

Studies of parental inconsistency are also relevant because traumatic frustration can occur through the unpredictability, and not just the overt absence, of parental empathy. Operating from a somewhat behavioral perspective, Brand, Crous, and Hanekom (1990) found that parental inconsistency accounted for 51% of the variance in the emotional development of children. More important for the present research was Schwarz and Zuroff's (1979) study. They used the Love Inconsistency scale and found that unstable expectancies of parental love, rather than stable low expectancies of love, predicted depression. Their results suggested that perceptions of one's parents as inconsistent, and thus as traumatically frustrating, are linked with maladjusted self-functioning.

### *Present Study*

Several correlational studies have previously yielded results that seem to support Kohut's (1977, 1984) understanding of empathy and optimal frustration. However, to our knowledge no researchers have examined how explicit operationalizations of perceived parental empathy or inconsistency might correlate with measures of relevance to narcissistic development. In the present investigation, we examined such relations.

We used adaptations of two subscales from the Davis (1983) Interpersonal Reactivity Index to assess perceived parental empathy. The Empathic Concern subscale measures the respondent's emotional feeling and understanding for others, whereas the Perspective Taking subscale measures the respondent's cognitive ability to see things from another's point of view. These subscales originally served as self-report measures of one's own empathic capacities. However, for this investigation we modified items to reflect how participants evaluated the empathy of their parents toward themselves. For example, one Perspective Taking item originally stated, "I try to look at everybody's side of a disagreement before I make a decision." The revised statement was, "My mother tried to look at my side of a disagreement before she made a decision." Similarly, one Empathic Concern item originally stated, "I would describe myself as a pretty soft-hearted person." The revision stated, "I would describe my mother as a pretty soft-hearted person." We created separate scales for evaluating Mother's and Father's Empathic Concern and Perspective Taking.

We recorded participants' perceptions of parental inconsistency with the Love Inconsistency scale. Use of this scale was important because the findings of Schwarz and Zuroff (1979) suggest that instability in, instead of or in addition to, low levels of parental empathy might predict deficits in self-functioning. This instrument included statements such as, "I couldn't tell from day to day how my mother would respond to certain things" and "The things that didn't seem to bother my mother one day would make her angry the next." We administered maternal and paternal versions of this instrument.

We assessed mental health implications of perceived parental characteristics with the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (Raskin & Hall, 1981), Rosenberg's (1989) Self-Esteem Scale, and Costello and Comrey's (1967) measure of dispositional depression, all of which were used to operationalize the hypothesized continuum of self-functioning. In accord with Kohut's (1977, 1984) theory and with the continuum hypothesis, we proposed the following six hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1 ( $H_1$ ): In conformity with Kohut's (1977, 1984) emphasis on the important role of parents as sustaining selfobjects, perceived Mother's and Father's Empathic Concern and Perspective Taking would correlate positively with measures of self-esteem and more adjusted forms of narcissism.

*H*<sub>2</sub>: Perceived parental empathy would correlate negatively with maladjusted narcissism and depression.

*H*<sub>3</sub>: In light of evidence suggesting the important influence of consistency in parenting (Schwartz & Zuroff, 1979), perceived Mother's and Father's Love Inconsistency would correlate negatively with measures of self-esteem and more adjusted forms of narcissism.

*H*<sub>4</sub>: Perceived parental Love Inconsistency would correlate positively with measures of maladjusted narcissism and depression.

*H*<sub>5</sub>: The perceived empathy and Love Inconsistency of both mother and father would combine, and perhaps interact, to predict variance in self-functioning. This hypothesis reflects Kohut's (1977, 1984) emphasis on the important roles played by both parents.

*H*<sub>6</sub>: In conformity with the continuum hypothesis, adaptive narcissism would be associated with more positive psychosocial characteristics after controlling for maladaptive narcissism, and Exploitativeness/Entitlement would become a more obvious correlate of maladjustment after partialing out Leadership/Authority, Superiority/Arrogance, and Self-Absorption/Self-Admiration. In addition, partial correlations controlling for self-esteem would produce relations indicating that the more adaptive narcissism factors can be associated with more maladaptive forms of self-functioning.

## Method

### *Participants*

Participants were 373 undergraduates in an introductory psychology class. All received extra credit for their voluntary contributions to the project. To permit a less ambiguous test of the empirical hypotheses, we limited final analyses to only those students whose parents were still living and married. These 232 individuals included 78 men, 153 women, and 1 person who failed to indicate gender. The mean age of this final group was 18.5 years (*SD* = 2.7 years). Most of the participants were White (78.4%), 16.8% were Black, 2.6% were Asian, 0.4% were Hispanic, and the remainder either belonged to other ethnicities or failed to indicate race.

### *Materials*

We combined all scales in a single questionnaire packet that contained a preliminary parental ratings section that we included to help evaluate the

validity of the Parental Empathy and Love Inconsistency scales. This section asked participants to offer ratings of 0 (*very negative*) to 9 (*very positive*) on four issues: their general relationship with their mother ( $M = 8.18$ ,  $SD = 1.24$ ), the dependability of their mother ( $M = 8.59$ ,  $SD = 0.92$ ), their general relationship with their father ( $M = 7.55$ ,  $SD = 1.75$ ), and the dependability of their father ( $M = 7.97$ ,  $SD = 1.87$ ).

Parental scales appeared in the questionnaire before the personality measures so that respondents could evaluate parents more independently of their own self-schemas. An opposite pattern could have maximized participants' tendencies to evaluate their parents relative to the psychological dynamics of the self and thus might have served as a less conservative test of the hypothesized relations between perceptions of parents and self-functioning. More specifically, the scales appeared in the following order: Mother's Perspective Taking and Empathic Concern, Father's Perspective Taking and Empathic Concern, Mother's Love Inconsistency, Father's Love Inconsistency, Self-Esteem, Narcissistic Personality Inventory, and Depression. We scored all instruments in terms of the average response per item. A final section obtained information about various family background variables, including whether parents were still married to each other.

*Interpersonal Reactivity Index.* We assessed perceived parental empathy using modified versions of the 7-item Empathic Concern and the 7-item Perspective Taking subscales from the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (Davis, 1983). In addition to the aforementioned items, Empathic Concern was exemplified in the reverse-scored statement, "Sometimes my mother didn't feel very sorry for me when I was having problems," whereas Perspective Taking included self-report statements such as, "Before criticizing me, my mother tried to imagine how she would feel if she were in my place." Reactions to each statement occurred along a 0 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*) Likert scale. Again, we obtained separate measures for Mother's Empathic Concern ( $\alpha = .79$ ,  $M = 3.13$ ,  $SD = 0.55$ ), Mother's Perspective Taking ( $\alpha = .84$ ,  $M = 2.07$ ,  $SD = 0.72$ ), Father's Empathic Concern ( $\alpha = .86$ ,  $M = 2.75$ ,  $SD = 0.73$ ), and Father's Perspective Taking ( $\alpha = .89$ ,  $M = 1.95$ ,  $SD = 0.88$ ).

*Love Inconsistency Scale.* The 13-item Schwarz and Zuroff (1979) Love Inconsistency Scale assessed perceived inconsistency in the affection of both mother ( $\alpha = .87$ ,  $M = 1.11$ ,  $SD = 0.60$ ) and father ( $\alpha = .89$ ,  $M = 1.17$ ,  $SD = 0.72$ ). Respondents scored each item on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (*was very untrue*) to 3 (*was very true*).

*Self-Esteem Scale.* The frequently used, 10-item Rosenberg (1989) Self-Esteem Scale served as a measure global of self-esteem ( $\alpha = .88$ ,  $M = 2.27$ ,  $SD = 0.50$ ). It included both positively (e.g., "I am able to do things as well as most

other people”) and negatively (e.g., “At times I think that I am no good at all”) worded expressions of self-esteem. Participants responded along a 4-point scale ranging from 0 (*strongly disagree*) to 3 (*strongly agree*).

*Narcissistic Personality Inventory.* We used the 54-item version of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (Raskin & Hall, 1981) to assess narcissism. For each item, participants chose between a narcissistic (1) and a nonnarcissistic (0) response. Data focused exclusively on the four previously mentioned factors (Emmons, 1984). In a preliminary analysis, we found that one statement of Superiority/Arrogance (i.e., “I would do almost anything on a dare”) was associated with a negative item-to-total correlation, and we dropped it to maximize internal reliability. The 9-item Leadership/Authority measure ( $\alpha = .77$ ,  $M = 0.52$ ,  $SD = 0.25$ ) included narcissistic statements such as, “I like having authority over people.” The 10-item Superiority/Arrogance measure ( $\alpha = .68$ ,  $M = 0.38$ ,  $SD = 0.25$ ) included self-report statements such as, “I can read people like a book.” The 9-item Self-Absorption/Self-Admiration measure ( $\alpha = .68$ ,  $M = 0.46$ ,  $SD = 0.25$ ) included statements such as, “I know that I am good because everybody keeps telling me so.” Last, the 11-item Exploitativeness/Entitlement measure ( $\alpha = .60$ ,  $M = 0.28$ ,  $SD = 0.20$ ) included statements such as, “I will never be satisfied until I get all that I deserve.”

*Depression Scale.* The 14-item Costello and Comrey (1967) Depression Scale ( $\alpha = .92$ ,  $M = 0.75$ ,  $SD = 0.52$ ) consisted of such items as, “I feel that there is more disappointment in life than satisfaction” and reverse-scored statements such as “My future looks hopeful and promising.” Respondents rated how often they would agree with each item on a 5-point scale ranging from 0 (*never*) to 4 (*always*).

### Procedure

In large classroom settings, participants completed the questionnaire booklet by entering all responses on standardized answer sheets. We eliminated answer sheets with incomplete or random responding, and the remainder were read by optical scanning equipment and entered into a computer data file.

We first evaluated internal reliabilities for all instruments and then computed descriptive statistics. We performed three sets of preliminary analyses. First, because Box's Test of Equality of Covariance Matrices revealed no significant gender difference in the pattern of observed correlations,  $F(78, 80,887.11) = 1.23$ ,  $p > .05$ , we ignored this variable in subsequent analyses. Second, we assessed the validity of all perceived parenting constructs by examining links among these measures for mothers and for fathers separately. This procedure was especially important in evaluating the Perceived Parental Perspective Taking and Empathic Concerns scales, which have not been used in previous research. Third, we inspected partial correlations of the narcissism factors with self-

esteem and depression to determine whether they produced clearer mental health implications than the zero-order relations. After these procedures, we evaluated empirical hypotheses by examining zero-order and partial correlations of the self-functioning measures with Perceived Mother's and Father's Empathy and Love Inconsistency. We then used multiple regression analyses to determine whether the perceived parenting characteristics of mothers and fathers combined and interacted to predict variance in self-functioning. We used a final set of partial correlations to examine the effects of controlling for self-esteem on relations observed for adaptive narcissism.

## Results

To support the validity of the parental scales, Parental Empathic Concern and Perspective Taking should correlate positively with each other and with the general parental relationship and dependability ratings and should correlate negatively with Love Inconsistency. Love Inconsistency, in turn, should be associated with lower levels of the two parental ratings. As Table 1 shows, we found this pattern of relations for both mothers and fathers.

As researchers have found in numerous previous investigations (e.g., Watson, Little, Sawrie, et al., 1992; Watson et al., 2002; Watson et al., 1999–2000), partial correlations yielded data for narcissism that were more consistent with theoretical expectations than were the zero-order linkages. Therefore, Table 2 shows the partial correlations rather than the zero-order data for these four factors. Exploitativeness/Entitlement did not show significant zero-order correlations with self-esteem ( $r = .07$ ,  $p > .05$ ) or depression ( $r = .07$ ,  $p > .05$ ), but correlations in the expected directions appeared after we controlled for Leadership/Authority, Superiority/Arrogance, and Self-Absorption/Self-Admiration. Relations for these three more adaptive factors also became slightly stronger after we controlled for Exploitativeness/Entitlement. None of these latter changes were conceptually noteworthy, however, because the

**TABLE 1. Relations Among Perceived Parenting Measures for Mothers (Above Diagonal) and Fathers (Below Diagonal)**

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. Empathic concern	—	.45	-.32	.36	.39
2. Perspective taking	.55	—	-.58	.52	.32
3. Love inconsistency	-.60	-.67	—	-.44	-.29
4. General relationship rating	.63	.56	-.59	—	.48
5. Dependability rating	.55	.43	-.51	.71	—

*Note.* All correlations are significant at  $p < .001$ .

**TABLE 2. Zero-Order and Partial Correlations Among Personality Variables<sup>a</sup>**

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Self-esteem	—					
2. Leadership/Authority		.39***			-.23***	-.67***
3. Superiority/Arrogance			.67***	.51***	.44***	-.35***
4. Self-Absorption/Self-Admiration				.49***	.46***	-.28**
5. Entitlement/Exploitativeness					.43***	-.37***
6. Depression						.30***

<sup>a</sup>Partial correlations involve relations of Leadership/Authority, Superiority/Arrogance, and Self-Absorption/Self-Admiration with self-esteem and depression after controlling for Exploitativeness/Entitlement and vice versa.  
 \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

zero-order data were so robust initially. The findings presented in Table 2 document that Self-Esteem, Leadership/Authority, Superiority/Arrogance, and Self-Absorption/Self-Admiration described relative adjustment, whereas depression and Exploitativeness/Entitlement described relative maladjustment.

#### *H<sub>1</sub>: Perceived Parent Empathy and Adjusted Self-Functioning*

Table 3 shows the relations between self-functioning and the perceived parenting variables. Partial correlations are presented for the narcissism factors. Our first hypothesis was that Perceived Mother's and Father's Empathic Concern and Perspective Taking would correlate positively with self-esteem and with more adjusted forms of narcissism. As Table 3 shows, all of our predicted positive correlations for self-esteem were statistically significant. Nonsignificant zero-order linkages of Mother's Perspective Taking with Leadership/Authority ( $r = .09$ ,  $p > .05$ ) and with Superiority/Arrogance ( $r = .09$ ,  $p > .05$ ) became significant in the hypothesized direction after we controlled for Exploitativeness/Entitlement. None of the other predicted relations between adaptive narcissism and perceived parental empathy were statistically significant.

#### *H<sub>2</sub>: Perceived Parental Empathy and Maladjusted Self-Functioning*

All correlations between Exploitativeness/Entitlement and the parenting characteristics became stronger after we controlled for the other three narcissism factors; however, no conceptually noteworthy changes appeared because these associations were significant in the first place.  $H_2$  was that perceived parental empathy would correlate negatively with maladjusted narcissism and depression. As Table 3 shows, we found these relations as well.

#### *H<sub>3</sub>: Love Inconsistency and Adjusted Self-Functioning*

$H_3$  was that perceived Mother's and Father's Love Inconsistency would correlate negatively with self-esteem and with more adjusted forms of narcissism. We found support for this hypothesis with significant relations between perceived Mother's and Father's Love Inconsistency and self-esteem (see Table 3). A zero-order linkage of Leadership/Authority with Father's Love Inconsistency ( $r = -.04$ ,  $p > .05$ ) became significant after we controlled for Exploitativeness/Entitlement, but none of the partial correlations for the more adaptive narcissism factors reached conventional levels of significance.

#### *H<sub>4</sub>: Love Inconsistency and Maladjusted Self-Functioning*

As Table 3 shows, the data conformed with  $H_4$  that parental Love Inconsistency would correlate positively with maladjusted narcissism and depression.

**TABLE 3. Zero-Order and Partial Correlations of Parental Scales With Personality Variables<sup>a</sup>**

Variable	Self-esteem	Leadership/ Authority	Superiority/ Arrogance	Self-Absorption/ Self-Admiration	Entitlement/ Exploitativeness	Depression
<b>Mother</b>						
Empathic concern	.16*	.05	.10	.08	-.24***	-.20**
Perspective taking	.34***	.20**	.20**	.11	-.28***	-.34***
Love inconsistency	-.24***	-.13	-.10	-.05	.20***	.30***
<b>Father</b>						
Empathic concern	.14*	.07	-.01	.04	-.25***	-.15*
Perspective taking	.27***	.13	.06	.07	-.18**	-.20**
Love inconsistency	-.26***	-.16*	.00	-.13	.23***	.26***

<sup>a</sup>Partial correlations involve relations of Leadership/Authority, Superiority/Arrogance, and Self-Absorption/Self-Admiration with the mother and father measures after controlling for Exploitativeness/Entitlement and vice versa.  
\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

We obtained significant positive correlations for perceived Love Inconsistency of both the mother and the father.

*H<sub>5</sub>: Combined Influence of Both Parents on Self-Functioning*

*H<sub>5</sub>* was that the perceived empathy and Love Inconsistency of both parents would combine, and perhaps interact, to predict variance in self-functioning. To test this possibility, we predicted each self-functioning variable simultaneously by using all six parenting scales. For the Narcissism factors, we entered Leadership/Authority, Superiority/Arrogance, and Self-Absorption/Self-Admiration in Step 1, followed by the six parenting variables in Step 2 when Exploitativeness/Entitlement was the dependent variable, and we entered Exploitativeness/Entitlement in Step 1 when each of the more adaptive factors served as the dependent variable.

When Leadership/Authority, Superiority/Arrogance, and self-esteem served as the dependent variables, a positive association appeared with Mother's Perspective Taking ( $p < .05$ ). When Self-Absorption/Self-Admiration was the dependent variable, the only significant outcome was a negative relationship with Father's Love Inconsistency ( $p < .05$ ). In the remaining two analyses, Mother's Perspective Taking was negatively associated with and Father's Love Inconsistency was positively associated with Exploitativeness/Entitlement and depression ( $ps < .05$ ).

We also used multiple regressions to examine possible interactions between the perceived characteristics of mothers and fathers. In a final step of these analyses, we simultaneously entered interactions of Mother's  $\times$  Father's Empathic Concern, Mother's  $\times$  Father's Perspective Taking, and Mother's  $\times$  Father's Love Inconsistency into the prediction equation for each dependent variable. For all but one of these analyses, interactions did not produce a significant  $R^2$  change ( $ps > .05$ ). When Exploitativeness/Entitlement was the dependent variable, however, the  $R^2$  increased by .03 ( $p < .01$ ), and this effect was explained solely by a significant Mother's  $\times$  Father's Empathic Concern interaction ( $p < .01$ ).

To understand this interaction, we first performed a median split to create two groups: (a) a low Mother's Empathic Concern group and (b) a high Mother's Empathic Concern group. We then examined the relations between Exploitativeness/Entitlement and Father's Empathic Concern with partial correlations, controlling for the other three Narcissism factors. This partial correlation was not significant in the high Mother's Empathic Concern group, ( $pr = -.09$ ,  $p > .05$ ). In the low Mother's Empathic Concern group, however, a negative relation was apparent ( $pr = -.33$ ,  $p < .001$ ). In other words, this interaction implied that Father's Empathic Concern might be a factor working against maladaptive narcissism in the absence of Mother's Empathic Concern.

### *H<sub>6</sub>: Partial Correlations Controlling for Self-Esteem and Adaptive Narcissism*

Preliminary analyses and examinations of hypotheses about perceived parental characteristics supported the continuum hypothesis in demonstrating that Leadership/Authority, Superiority/Arrogance, and Self-Absorption/Self-Admiration tended to become clearer correlates of adjustment after we controlled for Exploitativeness/Entitlement. The Exploitativeness/Entitlement factor also appeared to become more indicative of maladjustment after we partialled out the other three more adaptive factors.

In addition, controlling for self-esteem uncovered (a) partial correlations for Superiority/Arrogance that were positive with Father's Love Inconsistency ( $pr = .22, p < .01$ ) and negative with Father's Empathic Concern ( $pr = -.17, p < .01$ ) and (b) partial correlations for Self-Absorption/Self-Admiration that were positive with Mother's Love Inconsistency ( $pr = .15, p < .05$ ) and negative with Mother's Perspective Taking ( $pr = -.15, p < .05$ ), Father's Empathic Concern ( $pr = -.15, p < .05$ ), and Father's Perspective Taking ( $pr = -.13, p < .05$ ). Thus, in conformity with the continuum hypothesis, controlling for self-esteem transformed Superiority/Arrogance and Self-Absorption/Self-Admiration into correlates of more problematic forms of perceived parenting.

## Discussion

According to Kohut's (1977, 1984) theory of the psychology of the self, healthy narcissistic development rests on the care of empathic and optimally frustrating parents. Previous researchers have supported this suggestion by using indirect indexes of these perceived parental characteristics (Ramsey et al., 1996; Watson et al., 1995; Watson, Little, & Biderman, 1992). In the present study, more direct measures produced even clearer support for the claim. The perceived emotional and cognitive empathy of both parents was associated with higher levels of self-esteem and adjusted narcissism and lower levels of depression and maladjusted narcissism. We used Mother's and Father's Love Inconsistency Scales to assess more traumatic rather than optimal forms of parental frustration and, as expected, these measures correlated negatively with adaptive self-functioning and positively with maladaptive self-functioning.

We obtained evidence for the importance of parental empathy by using modified versions of scales originally designed to record personal rather than perceived parental empathy. For both parents, correlations of these measures with each other, with the Love Inconsistency Scale, and with the general relationship and dependability ratings all supported their validity. Associations with self-functioning also conformed to theoretical expectations. These modified instruments, therefore, were clearly useful in confirming the hypotheses of this project. Still, we have no reason to assume that they were ideal. Even more robust relations might appear with measures that were explicitly designed to operationalize

aspects of parental empathy that might seem even more relevant to the narcissistic development of children.

Of potential concern is the fact that we measured perceived parental characteristics rather than using parental self-reports, more objective observations of parenting behaviors, or longitudinal assessments of family dynamics. Researchers examining these additional measures would supply essential information about narcissistic self-development. Perceived parental empathy may, nevertheless, remain a critical variable. Barrett-Lennard (1981), for example, argued that empathy is a cyclical process involving three primary phases. First, a person expresses an emotion to another individual. Next, that other individual responds in a manner that seeks to communicate empathy. Last, the exchange is completed when the first individual is able to understand the communication. For the first person, the crucial aspect of the experience is the empathy as perceived. Like Kohut's (1977) theory, therefore, this perspective implies that perceptions of empathy—and not just the intentions or behaviors of parents, which might not be interpreted correctly by the child—may affect development most directly.

Numerous researchers have found support for this assumption. Gecas and Schwalbe (1986), for instance, reported that self-reported self-efficacy, self-worth, and self-esteem were more closely associated with adolescent perceptions of parental behaviors than with parental reports of their own behaviors. Buri (1989) similarly found that self-esteem was more closely related to parental nurturance and authority as assessed by adolescents than as assessed by their parents. Parallel findings have appeared with military samples (Reeder, Donohue, & Biblarz, 1960) and with married couples (Schafer & Keith, 1985). Taken together, these data suggest that perceptions of empathy might relate most importantly to self-functioning, even within the context of procedures involving behavioral observations and longitudinal assessments.

Another potential concern about our study is the possible influence of social desirability response sets on observed outcomes. Such a possibility certainly deserves further research attention, but it may also require circumspection when applied to issues related to narcissism. Socially desirable responding can reflect both egoistic and moralistic forms of defensiveness (Paulhus & John, 1998). In some respects, narcissistic immaturities are about egotistic defensiveness (e.g., Kohut, 1977). Thus, egoistic forms of socially desirable responding may be important in clarifying substantive personality processes associated with narcissism rather than in controlling for a confounding measurement problem (e.g., Westen & Gabbard, 1999). In addition, maladaptive narcissism does sometimes display a weak negative relation with moralistic defensiveness (Watson & Morris, 1991), but this result may reflect at least some tendency of such scales to record a desirable sociality (Watson, Morris, Foster, & Hood, 1986) that is incompatible with narcissistic exploitativeness.

Because our data are correlational, we cannot make any definitive inferences about causality. The logic of Kohut's (1977, 1984) theory of the psychology of the

self indicates that **parental empathy and optimal frustration should be identified as the causes of self-functioning effects in children**. Our correlational data are consistent with that possibility, but they could also reflect an opposite direction of causality. In other words, narcissistic maladjustment might have caused research participants to offer more negative and biased assessments of their parents. In addition, some unexamined third variable could have produced the observed relations. Teasing apart cause and effect relations between parenting and the self-functioning of children is an important and complicated task for future researchers. Accomplishing that task will likely require a broad array of methodological strategies, including, for example, longitudinal assessments of family dynamics.

We focused this study on participants who came from intact families so that we could evaluate the influence of both parents. Mother's and Father's Empathic Concern, Perspective Taking, and Love Inconsistency all correlated as hypothesized with self-functioning. Multiple regressions further suggested that healthy self-functioning was most critically connected with the perceived cognitive empathy of mothers and with the consistent love of fathers. One interaction appeared as well, suggesting that fathers' empathic concern might help ameliorate a lack of emotional empathy by mothers. This latter finding may support a suggestion of Kohut's (1977) theory that fathers can assume a noteworthy compensatory role in development. In short, our data reveal that variance in self-functioning was importantly explained by perceived characteristics of both parents and that all three theoretically important measures of empathy and love consistency were influential. However, a methodological focus on intact families may have constrained the range of perceived parental characteristics. Greater variability might appear if we modified procedures to include divorced families, with the result that more robust or even different relations might be observed. Future researchers should examine that possibility.

Our examination of these issues was facilitated by our efforts to evaluate the self along a continuum of functioning. According to the continuum hypothesis, a self operates both within and between individuals over a range of representations that vary in their mental health implications (e.g., Trumpeter, Watson, & O'Leary, 2006; Watson, 2005; Watson, Trumpeter, Culhane, O'Leary, & Morris, 2005–2006). Support for this idea comes from demonstrations that adaptive narcissism appears to be (a) more adjusted after controlling for maladjusted narcissism and (b) more maladjusted after controlling for self-esteem (e.g., Sedikides et al., 2004; Watson et al., 1996). Our zero-order and partial correlations of narcissism with self-esteem and depression paralleled previous investigations in supporting this suggestion (e.g., Watson & Biderman, 1993; Watson et al., 1994; Watson et al., 1996; Watson et al., 1987).

The advantages of this continuum understanding of the self became obvious in the relations we observed with perceived parenting. Exploitativeness/Entitlement became a more consistent correlate of problematic parenting after we controlled for Leadership/Authority, Superiority/Arrogance, and Self-Absorption/Self-Admiration.

These other three factors correlated more clearly with beneficial forms of parenting after we controlled for Exploitativeness/Entitlement and correlated with problematic parenting after we eliminated the variance associated with self-esteem. In short, contrasts between correlational and partial correlational data became theoretically meaningful when we interpreted them within the context of a hypothetical continuum of functioning.

In summary, we examined assumptions of Kohut's (1977, 1984) theory of the psychology of the self more directly than have a number of previous investigators (e.g., Watson & Biderman, 1993; Watson et al., 1994; Watson et al., 1996; Watson et al., 1987). We explicitly assessed perceived parental empathy and estimated the hypothetical construct of optimal frustration by evaluating its presumed lack in perceived Mother's and Father's Love Inconsistency. Although we could not draw any causal conclusions, the correlational results of this study conformed to the claims of Kohut's (1977, 1984) theory that self-development is shaped by parental processes related to empathy and optimal frustration.

#### AUTHOR NOTES

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