

# 7

## ON ENVIRONMENTAL SOURCES OF CHILD NARCISSISM: ARE PARENTS REALLY TO BLAME?

ROBERT S. HORTON

The past 30 years have seen the development of an impressive body of empirical work that characterizes narcissism and explores its intrapersonal and interpersonal consequences (e.g., Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001; Raskin & Hall, 1979). In contrast, empirical work on the origins of narcissism has been relatively scarce. Clinical psychologists have long theorized about narcissism's origins, most often implicating parenting behavior, but empirical psychologists have just recently begun using contemporary work on parenting to translate such clinical theory into testable hypotheses. In this chapter, recent assessments of the parenting–child narcissism link are reviewed and summarized in hopes of clarifying what we currently know about this link and what methodological strides research in this area needs to make.

This chapter starts by describing recent research into the nature of narcissism and its components. The clinical theory and developmental concepts that provide the structure for contemporary investigations of parenting and child narcissism are then reviewed. Next, the chapter reviews and summarizes the findings of these investigations and then offers a blueprint for how future work can improve on what has already been done and, thus, meet the strict demands of a scientific community that is skeptical of the influence of parenting. Finally, the chapter describes environmental influences other than

parents that are likely to contribute to narcissism and that future research would do well to explore.

## ON MULTIDIMENSIONAL NARCISSISM

Social and personality psychologists define *narcissism* as a normally distributed personality trait that is characterized by a fundamental need to maintain feelings of self-worth (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). The pattern of grandiosity that emerges to meet this need manifests cognitively in beliefs in one's superiority and one's entitlement to special treatment, emotionally in hostility and high but unstable self-esteem, and behaviorally in showing off and seeking attention (see Akhtar & Thompson, 1982). It is important that narcissism, as assessed by social and personality psychologists, exists on a continuum that includes pathological and nonpathological levels that are qualitatively similar (Foster & Campbell, 2007). Indeed, recent empirical efforts have confirmed that, like their pathological counterparts, adults and children who score high on measures of nonpathological narcissism such as the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Hall, 1979) have overly positive self-views (Gabriel, Critelli, & Ee, 1994); disregard the feelings and concerns of other people while manipulating them for their own gain (Sedikides, Campbell, Reeder, Elliot, & Gregg, 2002); are predisposed to conduct problems (Barry, Frick, & Killian, 2003) generally, and violence in particular, especially when confronted with unfavorable feedback (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998); and go to great lengths to protect their inflated sense of self-worth (see Campbell, Reeder, Sedikides, & Elliot, 2000).

Recent research has also suggested that narcissism is a multidimensional construct, the dimensions of which vary in their functionality. There are a number of ways to characterize the different dimensions of narcissism (e.g., overt vs. covert) and the relative adaptiveness of each dimension (e.g., interpersonal vs. intrapersonal), and one straightforward and empirically consistent way to do so is by considering the link between narcissism dimensions and self-esteem (i.e., chronic feelings of self-worth). In general, narcissism that is characterized by high self-esteem tends to be functional. For instance, narcissists' chronically high self-esteem translates into relatively low depression, anxiety, and loneliness and high ratings of interpersonal relationships (Sedikides, Rudich, Gregg, Kumashiro, & Rusbult, 2004). Relatedly, the three dimensions of narcissism derived from the NPI that correlate positively with self-esteem—Leadership, Self-Absorption, and Superiority (see Emmons, 1987)—are also associated negatively with depression and anxiety (Watson & Biderman, 1993). On the other hand, narcissism without high self-esteem is dysfunctional. For example, narcissists' self-protective efforts, including

their violent outbursts in the face of insult, are most obvious after controlling for variance associated with self-esteem (see Horton & Sedikides, 2009). Also, the Entitlement dimension (Emmons, 1987) of narcissism, which correlates negatively or not at all with self-esteem (Watson & Biderman, 1993; Watson, Hickman, Morris, Milliron, & Whiting, 1995), correlates negatively with interpersonal forgiveness (Exline, Baumeister, Bushman, Campbell, & Finkel, 2004) and empathy (Watson, Grisham, Trotter, & Biderman, 1984) but positively with depression, anxiety (Watson & Biderman, 1993), and pathological narcissism scores (scores to which other subscales are uncorrelated; Watson et al., 1984). Recent studies on child participants (Barry et al., 2003; Barry, Frick, Adler, & Grafeman, 2007) have revealed similar findings for adaptive and maladaptive components of a child version of the NPI (Narcissistic Personality Inventory for Children [NPIC]; Barry et al., 2003). Given the unique natures and correlates of adaptive and maladaptive narcissism, it is worth considering whether these components also have different environmental antecedents.

## ENVIRONMENTAL SOURCES OF NARCISSISM

Multiple sources point to the environment as playing an important role in the development of narcissism. First, behavioral genetic analysis, which commonly finds a heritability ratio of .50 to .60 for narcissism, also indicates that approximately 40% of the variability in both pathological and nonpathological narcissism scores is due to environmental sources (Jang, Livesley, & Vernon, 1996; Jang, Livesley, Vernon, & Jackson, 1996; Vernon, Villani, Vickers, & Harris, 2008). Also, a recent meta-analysis of NPI scores in college students found that narcissism has risen substantially in the past 30 years (Twenge, Konrath, Foster, Campbell, & Bushman, 2008); such an increase is likely to be a result of cultural (i.e., environmental) shifts. Finally, classic clinical theories of the origins of narcissism (e.g., Kernberg, 1975; Kohut, 1971) have emphasized the potent role of the environment, particularly parenting behavior. It is such theorizing that has been the catalyst for recent empirical inquiry.

### **Clinical Theorizing About the Origins of Narcissism**

Clinical theorizing about the origins of narcissism dates to Freud in the early 20th century (e.g., Freud, 1914/1957), and the most influential contemporary thoughts come from object relations theorists, like Kohut and Kernberg, and social learning theorists, like Millon. Although there are disagreements among theorists on a variety of important details, clinicians agree that a child's interactions with parents (or primary caregivers, more

generally) are fundamentally important to the functional or dysfunctional development of that child's self-concept and, more specifically, to whether and to what extent a child manifests narcissism. Indeed, when it comes to the source of narcissistic self-regard, clinicians focus sharply on the parents.

### *Object Relations Theory*

Although object relations theorists, and psychodynamic theorists more generally, disagree about the nature of narcissism, when it arises, and the specific types of parenting behavior that may be at fault, there seems to be agreement on at least two points. To start, such theorists agree that early interactions between parent (particularly the mother) and child are critical to determining the nature and level of a child's narcissism. In fact, many object relations theories have suggested that the 1st year or 2 years of life are most critical to this developmental process, even though more recent discussions have acknowledged the dynamic and ongoing nature of narcissism development (Auerbach, 1993). Second, theorists seem to agree that a parent's motives vis-à-vis a child are highly predictive of the type of parenting used and the nature and level of narcissism that the child will manifest. Rothstein (1979) summarized the motivational object relations perspective in noting that parental behavior is driven by two, sometimes competing motive systems: one that is self-focused (i.e., How is my child meeting my needs?) and one that is child focused (i.e., How am I meeting my child's needs?). According to Rothstein (1979), effective parenting represents a mixture of the two systems that is tipped toward the child-focused or "empathic" system. In contrast, dysfunctional parenting, the type that can lead to a narcissistic child, is guided too much by self-focus. How then does this self-focus translate into dysfunctional parental behavior?

Object relations theorists diverge strikingly on this question, indicting highly different behaviors as those that can facilitate child narcissism. Kohut (1971, 1977) argued that self-focused parenting is characterized as either neglectful or enmeshed and that either type of parenting can lead to narcissism. On the other hand, Kernberg (1975) argued that selfish parents place the child on a vicarious pedestal, as the family or parent's hope for glory or success. As such, the parenting tends to be hyperdemanding with little display of affection or support. Finally, Rothstein (1979) focused on parents' contingent displays of affection as a source of child narcissism. He argued that selfish parenting tethers parental displays of affection to child behavior that meets the parents' standards of success (for a review, see Horton et al., 2006). Overall, object relations theorists regard child narcissism as a defensive response or fixation to parenting that treats the child too much as an object meant to satisfy the emotional needs of the parent rather than of the child. The specific parenting that results from such narcissistic parenting is debatable, with different theorists focusing on excessive control, neglect, and/or inconsistent expressions of affection.

## *Social Learning Theory*

Millon (1981) and other social learning theorists (e.g., Imbesi, 1999) argued that childhood narcissism is learned, either modeled after or reinforced by parental behavior. Specifically, these theorists have suggested that parents who indulge their children by caving into their every whim and lavishing them with affection regardless of their behavior are facilitating the their children's sense of superiority and entitlement, critical ingredients in narcissism. Such parental leniency and noncontingent affection effectively model for the child a disconnect between self-evaluation and performance such that the positive view of the self exists independent of behavior (i.e., "I am great no matter what I do").

As one can see, the predictions of Millon's (1981) social learning theory are diametrically opposed to those of the object relations theorists, especially those of Kernberg (1975) and Rothstein (1979). After all, Kernberg suggested that a lack of parental affection and excessive demands for performance create narcissism, whereas Millon posited the opposite. Rothstein indicted parenting that creates a contingent link between behavior and affection, whereas Millon indicted parenting that does not create such a link. Fortunately, developmental psychologists have provided literature on parenting that allows empirical assessment of these contrasting perspectives.

### **Empirical Work on Parenting**

The empirical work on parenting has identified three general parenting dimensions—parental warmth, monitoring, and psychological control—that allow one to operationalize the ideas of clinical theorists as previously described. These dimensions effectively summarize the multitude of more specific parenting components (e.g., restrictiveness, demandingness, overprotection) that are linked to child functioning. The three dimensions are also the building blocks for typologies of parenting styles (e.g., Baumrind, 1971; Maccoby & Martin, 1983). In this review, attention is focused on the individual parenting dimensions rather than on parenting styles because the dimensions tend to predict unique variance in child outcomes. Such predictive influence is easily interpreted, post hoc, in light of parenting styles (for an example, see Steinberg, Elmen, & Mounds, 1989).

#### *Warmth*

Parental warmth has been investigated under numerous names, including *involvement*, *acceptance*, *child centeredness*, and *responsiveness*. Each of these terms refers to the extent to which parents "provide emotional and material resources" for their child (Grolnick, 2003, p. 2). In general, the impact of parental warmth

on child functioning is favorable; high levels of parental warmth are associated with high levels of self-esteem (Loeb, Horst, & Horton, 1980), sociability (Clarke-Stewart, 1973), self-regulation (Stayton, Hogan, & Ainsworth, 1971), and social maturity (Steinberg et al., 1989).

### *Monitoring*

*Monitoring* refers to a parent's attempts to keep track of where a child is and what he or she is doing, and it is a fundamental component of a parent's attempts to establish and enforce rules (i.e., behavioral control; Cummings, Davies, & Campbell, 2000). High levels of monitoring are linked concurrently and prospectively to low levels of delinquency, drug use, truancy, and fighting (Barber, Olsen, & Shagle, 1994; Herman, Dornbusch, Herron, & Herting, 1997) and high levels of social maturity and academic performance (Steinberg et al., 1989; Steinberg, Lamborn, Darling, Mounts, & Dornbusch, 1994).

### *Psychological Control*

*Psychological control* refers to "control attempts that intrude into the psychological and emotional development of the child" (Barber, 1996, p. 3296) and includes, among other things, manipulation of a child via guilt induction or withdrawal of love, personal control of a child (via possessiveness), and expressions of disappointment and shame in a child. Psychological control has been associated positively with depression and behavioral delinquency (Barber, 1996; Barber et al., 1994) but negatively with self-esteem (Barber, 1996) and academic performance (Steinberg et al., 1989).

### *Parenting Styles*

As mentioned previously, *parenting styles* are unique combinations of parental warmth, monitoring, and psychological control and have been used widely to investigate the influence of parenting on child outcomes. The most popular of these style typologies describe three or four parenting styles. By Baumrind's (1971) classification, parents can be classified by levels of authoritativeness, authoritarianism, and permissiveness. Authoritative parenting involves high levels of warmth and monitoring and low levels of psychological control. Authoritarian parenting involves relatively low levels of warmth and high levels of monitoring and psychological control. Permissiveness involves high levels of warmth and low levels of both monitoring and psychological control. Alternatively, some theorists have added a fourth parenting style, neglectful, to the Baumrind typology. This style involves low levels of all three parenting dimensions and reflects, more or less, absentee parenting. Though these parenting typologies are popular empirically and useful conceptually, the links between these parenting styles and child functioning are rep-

resented accurately by the combinatory effects of their components (e.g., the effects of authoritarian parenting are represented accurately by the unique influences of low warmth, high monitoring, and high psychological control). Thus, those effects are not elaborated on here.

### **Applying Parenting Dimensions to Clinical Theories of Narcissism**

Parenting dimensions and styles provide logical means by which to test the clinical theories on narcissism development. For instance, Kernberg (1975) suggested that parenting that is high in monitoring and psychological control but low in warmth (i.e., authoritarian parenting) will predict childhood narcissism. In contrast, Rothstein's (1979) theory suggests that parents who are high in warmth and psychological control (i.e., who express affection but do so in a contingent manner) will produce a narcissistic child. On the social learning side, Millon's (1981) view predicts that indulgent parents, those who are affectionate but low in monitoring (i.e., do not provide boundaries and standards), will facilitate narcissism. As one can see, the predictions are wildly different but nevertheless imminently testable.

## EMPIRICAL TESTS OF THE PARENTING–CHILD NARCISSISM LINK

As noted at the outset of this chapter, empirical investigations of the origins of narcissism are scarce. Fortunately, the existing studies have made effective use of the parenting variables described previously, have been guided by the clinical theories, and have been sensitive to the multidimensionality of narcissism. The review of this literature summarizes what is currently known about the parenting–child narcissism link while still noting methodological differences among the studies, and offers insight into what future research can do to provide a clearer picture of the extent to which parenting facilitates or buffers against narcissism.

### **Methodological Differences in the Literature**

Empirical investigations of the parenting–narcissism link vary in methodological ways that make comparison and synthesis more challenging. I review two of the most important differences here.

#### *Operationalizations of Parenting*

One important way that projects in this literature have differed is in their operational definitions of *parenting*. Each of the studies assessed, one way

or another, parental warmth or involvement and parental control (or monitoring); however, the projects have differed in whether they assess these components uniquely or as parts of parenting styles. As an example, Watson and colleagues (Ramsey, Watson, Biderman, & Reeves, 1996; Watson, Little, & Biderman, 1992) assessed participants' reports of parenting styles (parental authoritativeness, authoritarianism, and permissiveness), but Otway & Vignoles (2006) developed their own assessments of parental coldness and parental overvaluation in hopes of assessing Kernberg's and Kohut's theories, respectively. Capron (2004) relied on Grunwald and McAbee's (1985) four types of pampering by measuring overindulgence, overpermissiveness (both of which map relatively well onto Baumrind's permissive parenting), overdomineering, and overprotectiveness (these last two reflect differing types of overcontrol), but Barry and colleagues (2007) operationalized parenting in terms of parental nurturance (i.e., positive parenting) and inconsistent discipline or monitoring (i.e., negative parenting). Finally, Horton, Bleau, and Drwecki (2006) and Miller and Campbell (2008) assessed three dimensions of parenting (warmth, monitoring, and psychological control) and assessed the unique association of each with narcissism. Despite these different parenting measures, research on the parenting–narcissism link converges relatively well. This research is discussed while noting the different ways that these studies have measured adaptive and maladaptive narcissism.

#### *Adaptive and Maladaptive Narcissism*

As discussed previously, the adaptiveness of different narcissism components can be characterized by the link with self-esteem. Thus, for the purpose of this review, *adaptive narcissism* refers to scales or subscales that tend to correlate positively with self-esteem (and would thus correlate with the variety of intrapersonal benefits discussed previously). *Maladaptive narcissism* refers to scales or subscales that tend to correlate negatively or not at all with self-esteem. It is important to note that many of the studies reviewed here (e.g., Barry et al., 2007; Horton et al., 2006) are explicit in their differentiation of adaptive and maladaptive narcissism, whereas others are not (e.g., Capron, 2004).

Among the studies of parenting and child narcissism, adaptive narcissism is measured as either the total score on the NPI (Horton et al., 2006; Miller & Campbell, 2008; Otway & Vignoles, 2006) or as scores on the more adaptive NPI (or NPIC) subscales (Leadership, Self-Absorption, Self-Sufficiency; Barry et al., 2007; Capron, 2004; Watson et al., 1992, 1995). Alternatively, maladaptive narcissism measures include clinical measures of narcissistic personality disorder, like the Personal Diagnostic Questionnaire–4 (Hyler, 1994, as used by Miller & Campbell, 2008) and the Hypersensitive Narcissism Scale (Hendin & Cheek, 1997, as used by Otway & Vignoles, 2006), the less adaptive subscales of the NPI or NPIC (e.g., Entitlement; Barry et al., 2007;



Capron, 2004; Watson et al., 1992, 1995), and total NPI score after partialing variance associated with trait self-esteem (Horton et al., 2006). As we will see, the links between parenting and narcissism are, indeed, different depending on the adaptiveness of the narcissism under investigation.

### **Evidence for Links Between Parenting and Child Narcissism**

Investigations of the parenting–child narcissism link offer consistent support to both social learning and object relations viewpoints. Consistent with Millon’s (1981) social learning theory, multiple studies have found a link between parental indulgence (or its components) and both adaptive and maladaptive forms of narcissism. For instance, Watson and colleagues found (a) parental permissiveness to be positively associated with maladaptive narcissism (see Ramsey et al., 1996; Watson et al., 1992) and (b) parental nurturance (a component of indulgence) to be positively associated with adaptive narcissism (Watson et al., 1992). Similarly, Otway and Vignoles’s (2006) measure of parental overvaluation was positively linked to both adaptive and maladaptive narcissism, and Horton et al. (2006) found that (a) parental warmth was associated positively with both adaptive and maladaptive narcissism and (b) parental monitoring correlated negatively with adaptive narcissism in males. This negative link between monitoring and adaptive narcissism was replicated by Miller and Campbell (2008) for both male and female participants. Barry and colleagues’ (2007) parental nurturance measure correlated positively with the adaptive subscale of the NPIC, and Capron (2004) found that overindulgence correlated positively with both adaptive (total NPI score) and maladaptive (NPI Entitlement and Exhibitionism subscale scores) narcissism for both males and females. Overall, parental indulgence and its components (i.e., parental warmth with little monitoring) are consistently linked to measures of both adaptive and maladaptive narcissism.

There is also substantial evidence supporting the object relations viewpoint that child narcissism comes from a parent’s selfish use of the child that is manifest in excessive or inconsistent parental control. For example, both Horton and colleagues (2006) and Miller and Campbell (2008) found that psychological control correlated positively with maladaptive narcissism (but not adaptive narcissism) when controlling for other parenting dimensions, and Watson and colleagues (Ramsey et al., 1996; Watson et al., 1992) found a link between authoritarianism and two different measures of maladaptive narcissism. Barry and colleagues’ (2007) negative parenting composite, aspects of which resemble clinical descriptions of excessive or inconsistent control, was positively associated with NPIC maladaptive (but not adaptive) narcissism, and Capron (2004) found that overdomination, which combines monitoring and psychological control, correlated positively with males’ scores

on the NPI's maladaptive subscales (e.g., Entitlement). Finally, Otway and Vignoles (2006) found that memories of parental coldness predicted both adaptive and maladaptive narcissism. Overall, then, the object relations viewpoint indicting narcissistic control of a child garners impressive support, especially as such control is linked to maladaptive, rather than adaptive, components of narcissism.

It is worth noting that a number of the projects reviewed here (e.g., Horton et al., 2006; Ramsey et al., 1996; Watson et al., 1992) have observed moderating effects of child and/or parent sex. With regard to the latter, the evidence for differential influence of maternal and paternal behavior is somewhat inconclusive. Where such differences exist (Horton, 2009; Watson et al., 1992), maternal behavior seems to be more strongly associated with child narcissism. Evidence for differential effects of parenting on male and female children is more convincing. Three studies (Horton et al., 2006, Study 2; Ramsey et al., 1996; Watson et al., 1992) have observed such differential effects, and in all three studies excessive, self-focused control was positively associated with narcissism only in females. Parental indulgence, on the other hand, seems to be linked to narcissism for both male and female participants. Future research should, wherever possible, investigate statistical interactions of parenting with child sex and differentiate between maternal and paternal behavior.

### **Methodological Limitations of Current Work**

Despite the support that empirical investigations give to the social learning and object relations viewpoints, it is important to note that the conclusions one can draw from the existing work are tentative. Each of the projects described previously assessed only the perspective of the child participant and assessed parenting behavior and child narcissism at the same time point, most often relying on retrospective reports of parenting (e.g., Capron, 2004; Horton et al., 2006, Study 1; Otway & Vignoles, 2006) and, at other times, assessing perceptions of current parenting (Horton et al., 2006, Study 2). Such methodology is fraught with interpretational ambiguities, with some of the main problems discussed next.

#### *Identifying Direction of Influence*

To start, none of the studies previously reported can differentiate the influence of parenting behavior on child narcissism from the influence of child narcissism on parenting. A link between current narcissism and reports of current parenting behavior (as observed in Horton et al., 2006, Study 2) could result from the influence of child narcissism on the parents. Even a link between current narcissism and retrospective reports of parental behavior (i.e., parenting that happened prior to current narcissism; see Horton et al.,

2006, Study 1; Otway & Vignoles, 2006) could be a result of the influence of early levels of narcissism on (a) parental behavior and (b) later narcissism. As such, one of the primary challenges for future work is to design a large-scale study that can tease apart the influences of parents on children and children on parents.

With this goal in mind, I have conducted a small-scale investigation of the prospective links between parenting and narcissism (Horton, 2009). This study included 26 middle school children who completed assessments of narcissism (NPIC; Barry et al., 2003) and parental behavior (parental warmth, monitoring, and psychological control) twice, 12 months apart. A differentiation was made between adaptive and maladaptive narcissism and between maternal and paternal levels of warmth and psychological control.

The results, though tentative because of sample size, are telling. Parenting was not associated with a change in adaptive narcissism over time. On the other hand, maternal psychological control and warmth were associated positively and paternal psychological control was associated negatively with a change in maladaptive narcissism over time. Further, monitoring was associated positively (rather than negatively, as in past research) with change in maladaptive narcissism for boys. These data converge with previous work to support the object relations viewpoint that parental affection that is combined with excessive attempts at control can facilitate narcissism, possibly by encouraging a contingent sense of self-worth. The project also assessed the extent to which early child narcissism predicted a change in parenting over time. Adaptive narcissism predicted a decrease in maternal warmth, and both adaptive and maladaptive narcissism predicted increases in maternal psychological control. These are the first data to show a prospective and bivariate link between child narcissism and parenting. However, this project still falls short of the rigorous investigation that is needed before confident conclusions can be drawn.

#### *Valid Assessment of Parenting*

Most notably, the prospective study, like concurrent investigations, measured parenting behavior via child reports. Such a procedure has been used successfully and has theoretical backing (Morris et al., 2002); however, it is at least possible that child narcissism is related to systematic biases in the perception or memory of parenting. Indeed, one can reason that narcissistic and nonnarcissistic children may view, interpret, and remember the same parent behavior very differently. A study that assesses parenting from multiple perspectives (e.g., parent and child) and with both more and less objective means (e.g., coding of interaction vs. self-report) would speak to the extent to which the parenting–narcissism link, whichever way the causal river flows,

is fundamentally tied to the phenomenological experience of the individuals rather than to the more objective reality of the parenting.

### **An Unsubtle Call to Action**

Those of us exploring the origins of narcissism, and particularly the links with parenting, would do well to keep in mind recent skepticism regarding the role of parenting in child outcomes. As an example, in his book *The Blank Slate*, Steven Pinker (2002) unleashed a potent attack on the merit of empirical work on parenting and leaves no doubt that he is unconvinced that parenting has anything to do with child outcomes. It is important that Pinker's challenge is not based on trivial evidence or personal opinion; it is based on recent behavioral genetic analyses (e.g., Vernon et al., 2008) of twins and adopted siblings that often uncover nonsignificant effects of shared environment, the piece of the analytic puzzle into which theorists suggest parenting is likely to fall. Thus, the burden of proof falls on those of us who continue to think about and investigate the role of parenting.

Fortunately, however, Pinker (2000) provided effective guidance for our efforts. In the context of his position, he wrote that

to show that parents shape their children, then, a study would have to control for genes (by testing twins or adoptees), distinguish between parents affecting children and children affecting parents, measure the parents and the children independently, look at how children behave outside the home as well as inside the home, and test older children and young adults to see whether any effects are transient or permanent. (Pinker, 2000, p. 385)

Though some of Pinker's skepticism seems unfounded given the quality of much empirical work on parenting (see Baumrind, 1991) and recent discussions of contemporary work (Collins, Maccoby, Steinberg, Hetherington, & Bornstein, 2000), his challenge has provided an effective description of the standard to which the scientific community will hold future work in this area.

### ADDITIONAL EMPIRICAL DIRECTIONS

In addition to the recommendations for methodological improvement previously described, there a number of ways in which future work can contribute mightily to our understanding of the origins of narcissism. To start, future studies of the link between parenting behavior and child narcissism would do well to consider the interaction between child personality and parenting. As observed in other parenting research (see Collins et al., 2000), it

is likely that children who are differentially narcissistic will respond differently to parenting behavior. As an example, a child who is already high in narcissism (or who is predisposed to narcissism) may see low levels of parental monitoring as evidence of his superiority (i.e., “I’m so good, I don’t need anyone watching over me”), an interpretation that could bolster adaptive narcissism. On the other hand, a child who is low in narcissism may regard low levels of monitoring as evidence of parental disinterest (i.e., “They don’t care enough about me to even wonder what I’m doing”), which could decrease adaptive narcissism. Whether or not this particular example has merit, it will be important for future work to consider such Personality  $\times$  Environment interactions in order to investigate fully the complex way in which parent–child dynamics influence narcissism.

In addition to continued explorations of the influence of parenting on narcissism, there are additional, somewhat related empirical questions that have yet to be addressed. For example, clinical theories regarding the role of parent characteristics in predicting different patterns of parenting and spousal interactions have yet to be tested. As an example, Michell’s (1988) object relations viewpoint on childhood narcissism, one that sees the immediate cause of child narcissism as a mother’s narcissistic use of her children for vicarious fulfillment of her own needs, also suggests that the mother’s parenting arises from a narcissistic husband who cares too much about himself to meet the needs of the mother. As such, the mother must look to the children for emotional fulfillment. Relatedly, Rothstein (1979) suggested that parental satisfaction with their own lives, independent of their children, is critical in order for those parents to engage in functional parenting that avoids the emotional manipulation that can lead to a narcissistic child. Empirical tests of these notions of how and why parents engage in different parenting behavior are of compelling interest, especially if future work identifies with confidence an influence of parenting on child narcissism.

Future work should also consider that clinical theories of the development of narcissism can apply beyond parental influence. Indeed, the theories describe a particular type of environmental stimulus (e.g., one that supports a child, controls a child), and it seems safe to say that parents are not the only environmental stimuli that can activate the processes described in these theories. As one example of an alternative, Harris (1995) suggested that one’s peers may account for a lion’s share of the variance in child outcomes that is currently attributed to environmental sources. It would be interesting to assess the extent to which child narcissism is a function of peer groups that create the different types of reinforcement or control contexts that are implicated by clinical theories. Could child narcissism be a function of the extent to which a child receives excessive praise from peers? Could narcissism come from a social context that subjects a child to excessive demands to conformity

at the risk of alienation? Could the influence of peers on child narcissism be more potent than the influence of parents? Peer influence is unmistakable, and to the extent that narcissism continues to change into adolescence, it seems likely that peer interactions play a role. As yet, that role remains untested.

New media are another environmental factor that may contribute to child narcissism in a way that is consistent with clinical theory. In her book, *Generation Me*, Jean Twenge (2006) argued that increases in narcissism over the past 30 years (Twenge et al., 2008) are due to a culture that works actively to reinforce every individual's illusion of superiority, entitlement, and uniqueness. Reality television shows, with their "anyone can be a star" premise, and social networking websites (e.g., MySpace), with their focus on self-promotion and superficial interpersonal relationships, may contribute to such illusions. A recent study on narcissism and new media (Horton, Moss, Green, & Barber, 2010) found positive correlations between narcissism and a variety of measures of new media use, including number of reality TV shows watched, how narcissistic those reality shows are, and time spent on social networking websites. Though follow-up studies have yet to determine conclusively to what extent such associations are due to narcissists being drawn to new media versus new media fostering narcissism, it seems clear that the self-promotional nature of many new media reflects a culture that grows more self-absorbed and entitled each day. Such a culture may, by making normative the narcissism it displays, give its members free license to express their own narcissistic tendencies without fear of social penalty.

## CONCLUSION

Empirical work on the parenting–narcissism link has made recent strides in understanding if and how parental behavior encourages narcissism. Such work has provided support for both social learning and object relations' viewpoints, depending on the adaptiveness of the narcissism one considers, but it leaves unanswered questions about the direction of influence and the dependence of links on the phenomenological experience of children. The challenge for future research is to design methodologically rigorous studies that can draw confident conclusions and assuage the skepticism of vehement critics. To that end, it seems clear that the next step for work on parenting and child narcissism is a large-scale, prospective investigation that includes multiple assessments of both parenting and child narcissism. Such a study would speak conclusively to the extent to which parents are really to blame (or credit) for their child's narcissism, information that is increasingly important for generations of parents who feel ultimately responsible for their children's achievements and failures.

Insofar as narcissism is associated with intrapersonal benefits and interpersonal costs, it seems wise to understand its origins as a way of thinking about how best to change (and maybe decrease) narcissism on an individual and cultural level. Indeed, empirical evidence about the origins of narcissism can be a guide to what parts of one's culture have the elements needed to facilitate or impede the adaptive and maladaptive components of narcissism.

As an example, to the extent that data continue to support Millon's social learning theory, society must consider that school programs and parenting movements that encourage lavish affection and a concern for self-esteem may also encourage narcissism and its associated benefits and detriments (see Twenge, 2006). The empirical jury is still out on such a claim, but it is important that society heed the evidence when it becomes available and consider it carefully when crafting programs, including parenting programs, that involve children. In the absence of such consideration of scientific evidence, these programs can have unfortunate and unintended consequences, and our society is likely to continue its spiral into a culture of "me-ness."

## REFERENCES

- Akhtar, S., & Thompson, J. A. (1982). Overview of narcissistic personality disorder. *The American Journal of Psychiatry*, *139*, 12–20.
- Auerbach, J. S. (1993). The origins of narcissism and narcissistic personality disorder: A theoretical and empirical reformulation. In J. M. Masling & R. F. Bornstein (Eds.), *Psychoanalytic perspectives on psychopathology* (pp. 43–110). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association. doi:10.1037/10138-002
- Barber, B. K. (1996). Parental psychological control: Revisiting a neglected construct. *Child Development*, *67*, 3296–3319. doi:10.2307/1131780
- Barber, B. K., Olsen, J. E., & Shagle, S. C. (1994). Associations between parental psychological control and behavioral control and youth internalized and externalized behaviors. *Child Development*, *65*, 1120–1136. doi:10.2307/1131309
- Barry, C. T., Frick, P. J., Adler, K. K., & Grafeman, S. J. (2007). The predictive utility of narcissism among children and adolescents: Evidence for a distinction between adaptive and maladaptive narcissism. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, *16*, 508–521. doi:10.1007/s10826-006-9102-5
- Barry, C. T., Frick, P. J., & Killian, A. L. (2003). The relation of narcissism and self-esteem to conduct problems in children: A preliminary investigation. *Journal of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology*, *32*, 139–152.
- Baumrind, D. (1971). Current patterns in parental authority. *Developmental Psychology Monograph*, *4*(1, Pt. 2), 101–103. doi:10.1037/h0030372
- Baumrind, D. (1991). The influence of parenting style on adolescent competence and substance use. *The Journal of Early Adolescence*, *11*, 56–95. doi:10.1177/02724316911111004

- Bushman, B. J., & Baumeister, R. F. (1998). Threatened egotism, narcissism, self-esteem, and direct and displaced aggression: Does self-love or self-hate lead to violence? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *75*, 219–229. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.75.1.219
- Campbell, W. K., Reeder, G. D., Sedikides, C., & Elliot, A. J. (2000). Narcissism and comparative self-enhancement strategies. *Journal of Research in Personality*, *34*, 329–347. doi:10.1006/jrpe.2000.2282
- Capron, E. W. (2004). Types of pampering and the narcissistic personality trait. *Journal of Individual Psychology*, *60*, 77–93.
- Clarke-Stewart, K. A. (1973). Interactions between mothers and their young children: Characteristics and consequences. *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development*, *38* (5–6, Serial No. 153).
- Collins, W. A., Maccoby, E. E., Steinberg, L., Hetherington, E. M., & Bornstein, M. H. (2000). Contemporary research on parenting: The case for nature and nurture. *American Psychologist*, *55*, 218–232. doi:10.1037/0003-066X.55.2.218
- Cummings, E. M., Davies, P. T., & Campbell, S. B. (2000). *Developmental psychopathology and family process: Theory, research, and clinical implications*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Emmons, R. A. (1987). Narcissism: Theory and measurement. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *52*, 11–17. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.52.1.11
- Exline, J. J., Baumeister, R. F., Bushman, B. J., Campbell, W. K., & Finkel, E. J. (2004). Too proud to let go: Narcissistic entitlement as a barrier to forgiveness. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *87*, 894–912. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.87.6.894
- Foster, J. D., & Campbell, W. K. (2007). Are there such things as “narcissists” in social psychology? A taxometric analysis of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory. *Personality and Individual Differences*, *43*, 1321–1332. doi:10.1016/j.paid.2007.04.003
- Freud, S. (1957). On narcissism: An introduction. In J. Strachey (Ed. & Trans.), *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud* (Vol. 14, pp. 73–102). London: Hogarth Press. (Original work published 1914)
- Gabriel, M. T., Critelli, J. W., & Ee, J. S. (1994). Narcissistic illusions in self-evaluations of intelligence and attractiveness. *Journal of Personality*, *62*, 143–155. doi:10.1111/j.1467-6494.1994.tb00798.x
- Grolnick, W. S. (2003). *The psychology of parental control: How well-meant parenting backfires*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Grunwald, B. B., & McAbee, H. V. (1985). *Guiding the family: Practical counseling techniques*. Muncie, IN: Accelerated Development.
- Harris, J. R. (1995). Where is the child’s environment? A group socialization theory of development. *Psychological Review*, *102*, 458–489. doi:10.1037/0033-295X.102.3.458
- Hendin, H. M., & Cheek, J. M. (1997). Assessing hypersensitive narcissism: A reexamination of Murray’s Narcissism Scale. *Journal of Research in Personality*, *31*, 588–599. doi:10.1006/jrpe.1997.2204



- Herman, M. R., Dornbusch, S. M., Herron, M. C., & Herting, J. R. (1997). The influence of family regulation, connection, and psychological autonomy on six measures of adolescent functioning. *Journal of Adolescent Research, 12*, 34–67. doi:10.1177/0743554897121004
- Horton, R. S. (2009). [A prospective investigation of parenting and child narcissism]. Unpublished data.
- Horton, R. S., Bleau, G., & Drwecki, B. (2006). Parenting narcissus: What are the links between parenting and narcissism? *Journal of Personality, 74*, 345–376. doi:10.1111/j.1467-6494.2005.00378.x
- Horton, R. S., Moss, D., Green, J. D., & Barber, J. (2010, January). *Culture of narcissism: Does reality TV create narcissists or vice versa?* Talk given at the annual meeting of the Society of Personality and Social Psychologists, Las Vegas, NV.
- Horton, R. S., & Sedikides, C. (2009). Narcissistic responding to ego threat: When status of the evaluator matters. *Journal of Personality, 77*, 1493–1525.
- Hyder, S. E. (1994). *Personality Diagnostic Questionnaire–4 (PDQ-4)*. Unpublished test. New York, NY: New York State Psychiatric Institute.
- Imbesi, L. (1999). The making of a narcissist. *Clinical Social Work Journal, 27*, 41–54. doi:10.1023/A:1022809314267
- Jang, K. L., Livesley, W. J., & Vernon, P. A. (1996). The genetic basis of personality at different ages: A cross sectional twin study. *Personality and Individual Differences, 21*, 299–301. doi:10.1016/0191-8869(96)00039-6
- Jang, K. L., Livesley, W. J., Vernon, P. A., & Jackson, D. N. (1996). Heritability of personality disorder traits: A twin study. *Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica, 94*, 438–444. doi:10.1111/j.1600-0447.1996.tb09887.x
- Kernberg, O. F. (1975). *Borderline conditions and pathological narcissism*. New York, NY: Jason Aronson.
- Kohut, H. (1971). *The analysis of the self*. New York, NY: International Universities Press.
- Kohut, H. (1977). *The restoration of self*. New York, NY: International Universities Press.
- Loeb, R. C., Horst, L., & Horton, P. J. (1980). Family interaction patterns associated with self-esteem in pre-adolescent girls and boys. *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly, 26*, 203–217.
- Maccoby, E., & Martin, J. (1983). Socialization in the context of the family: Parent–child interaction. In P. H. Mussen (Series Ed.) & E. M. Hetherington (Vol. Ed.), *Handbook of psychology: Vol. 4. Socialization, personality, and social development* (4th ed., pp. 1–101). New York, NY: Wiley.
- Miller, J. D., & Campbell, W. K. (2008). Comparing clinical and social-personality conceptualizations of narcissism. *Journal of Personality, 76*, 449–476. doi:10.1111/j.1467-6494.2008.00492.x
- Millon, T. (1981). *Disorders of personality*. New York, NY: Wiley.
- Michell, G. (1988). The reproduction of narcissism. *Women & Therapy, 7*, 35–52. doi:10.1300/J015V07N04\_04

- Morf, C. C., & Rhodewalt, F. (2001). Unraveling the paradoxes of narcissism: A dynamic self-regulatory processing model. *Psychological Inquiry*, *12*, 177–196. doi:10.1207/S15327965PLI1204\_1
- Morris, A. S., Steinberg, L., Sessa, F. M., Avenevoli, S., Silk, J. S., & Essex, M. J. (2002). Measuring children's perceptions of psychological control: Developmental and conceptual considerations. In B. S. Barber (Ed.), *Intrusive parenting: How psychological control affects children and adolescents* (pp. 125–159). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association. doi:10.1037/10422-005
- Otway, L. J., & Vignoles, V. L. (2006). Narcissism and childhood recollections: A qualitative test of psychoanalytic predictions. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *32*, 104–116. doi:10.1177/0146167205279907
- Pinker, S. (2002). *The blank slate: The modern denial of human nature*. New York, NY: Penguin Books.
- Ramsey, A., Watson, P. J., Biderman, M. D., & Reeves, A. L. (1996). Self-reported narcissism and perceived parental permissiveness and authoritarianism. *The Journal of Genetic Psychology*, *157*, 227–238.
- Raskin, R. N., & Hall, C. S. (1979). A narcissistic personality inventory. *Psychological Reports*, *45*, 590.
- Rothstein, A. (1979). The theory of narcissism: An object-relations perspective. *Psychoanalytic Review*, *66*, 35–47.
- Sedikides, C., Campbell, W. K., Reeder, G. D., Elliot, A. J., & Gregg, A. P. (2002). Do others bring out the worst in narcissists? The “others exist for me” illusion. In Y. Kashima, M. Foddy, & M. Platow (Eds.), *Self and identity: Personal, social, and symbolic* (pp. 103–124). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Sedikides, C., Rudich, E. A., Gregg, A. P., Kumashiro, M., & Rusbult, C. (2004). Are normal narcissists psychologically healthy? Self-esteem matters. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *87*, 400–416. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.87.3.400
- Stayton, D. J., Hogan, R., & Ainsworth, M. D. (1971). Infant obedience and maternal behavior: The origins of socialization considered. *Child Development*, *42*, 1057–1069. doi:10.2307/1127792
- Steinberg, L., Elmen, J. D., & Mounts, N. S. (1989). Authoritative parenting, psychosocial maturity, and academic success among adolescents. *Child Development*, *60*, 1424–1436. doi:10.2307/1130932
- Steinberg, L., Lamborn, S. D., Darling, N., Mounts, N. S., & Dornbusch, S. M. (1994). Over-time changes in adjustment and competence among adolescents from authoritative, authoritarian, indulgent, and neglectful families. *Child Development*, *65*, 754–770. doi:10.2307/1131416
- Twenge, J. M. (2006). *Generation me: Why today's young Americans are more confident, assertive, entitled—and more miserable than ever before*. New York, NY: Free Press.
- Twenge, J. M., Konrath, S., Foster, J. D., Campbell, W. K., & Bushman, B. J. (2008). Egos inflating over time: A cross-temporal meta-analysis of the Narcissistic Per-

- sonality Inventory. *Journal of Personality*, 76, 875–902. doi:10.1111/j.1467-6494.2008.00507.x
- Vernon, P. A., Villani, V. C., Vickers, L. C., & Harris, J. A. (2008). A behavioral genetic investigation of the Dark Triad and the Big 5. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 44, 445–452. doi:10.1016/j.paid.2007.09.007
- Watson, P. J., & Biderman, M. D. (1993). Narcissistic personality inventory factors, splitting, and self-consciousness. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 61, 41–57. doi:10.1207/s15327752jpa6101\_4
- Watson, P. J., Grisham, S. O., Trotter, M. V., & Biderman, M. D. (1984). Narcissism and empathy: Validity evidence for the narcissistic personality inventory. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 48, 301–305.
- Watson, P. J., Hickman, S. E., Morris, R. J., Milliron, J. T., & Whiting, L. (1995). Narcissism, self-esteem, and parental nurturance. *The Journal of Psychology*, 129, 61–73.
- Watson, P. J., Little, T., & Biderman, M. D. (1992). Narcissism and parenting styles. *Psychoanalytic Psychology*, 9, 231–244. doi:10.1037/h0079344