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# The children of narcissus: Insights into narcissists' parenting styles

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ABSTRACT

Individuals scoring high on trait narcissism are characterised by grandiosity, self-centredness, and lack of empathy, resulting in troubled interpersonal relationships (e.g., with acquaintances and relationship partners). Do these troubled relationships extend to their own children? In this online study of 368 parents, we examined whether grandiose narcissists are less likely to adopt optimal parenting styles (authoritative) and more likely to adopt non-optimal parenting styles (authoritarian and permissive) and began to explore underlying mechanisms in terms of low empathy and unresponsive-caregiving. Narcissism was negatively associated with optimal parenting, and positively associated with non-optimal parenting, controlling for Big Five personality and attachment dimensions. Sequential mediation revealed that narcissists' low empathy predicts unresponsive-caregiving towards their child(ren), which in turn predicts low optimal and high non-optimal parenting practices. These effects are driven by narcissists' maladaptive traits. Exploring links between parental personality and parenting allows researchers to identify individuals at risk of poor parenting. Understanding the mechanisms that explain this relationship will assist in the development of effective interventions.



## 1. Introduction

Parents play a critical role in a child's cognitive, emotional, physical, and social development (Lamborn, Mounts, Steinberg, & Dornbusch, 1991). Much work has focused on delineating parenting styles and their consequences (Baumrind, 1971). There is surprisingly less understanding of the individual differences that lead a parent to develop these styles, and the underlying motivations. This article examines the contribution of subclinical narcissism—a personality trait that is known to undermine interpersonal relationships (Campbell & Foster, 2002). In so doing, it aims to inform ways to support optimal parenting.

Parenting has been conceived in terms of three primary styles (Baumrind, 1971). Authoritative parents exude warmth and encourage their children to freely express themselves. They impose rules as a means to meet their children's needs and explain reasons for these rules. Authoritarian parents value obedience and respect for authority. They are directive, verbally hostile, use physical punishment, and expect children to accept parental authority unquestioningly. Permissive parents fail to monitor, or ignore, their children's activities and lack follow-through behaviours. These parenting dimensions are typically portrayed as trait-like and stable across time (Baumrind, 1989).

Research has consistently shown that parenting styles differentially influence child outcomes. Authoritative parenting emerges as the most optimal form (Baumrind, 1971), with children of authoritative parents reporting higher self-confidence, self-reliance, better socio-emotional and academic outcomes, and fewer externalising problems (Lamborn et al., 1991). Authoritarian and permissive parenting (hereafter "non-optimal" parenting) have been identified as risk factors for antisocial behaviour, low social competence, and poor academic performance (Steinberg, Mounts, Lambourn, & Dornbusch, 1991). Long-term maladaptive consequences of exposure to non-optimal parenting underscore the need for improved understanding of predictors of such parenting. Identifying individuals likely to experience parenting difficulties, and understanding their motivations for adopting differing parenting styles, allows researchers to develop more effective preventative measures or interventions.

Although widely acknowledged that parenting is multiply determined, parental personality has been at the forefront of this research: Extensive correlational evidence links personality to parenting styles (Prinzie, Stams, Deković, Reijntjes, & Belsky, 2009). In the literature on the Big Five, parents high in extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability, and openness display more optimal and less non-optimal parenting (Prinzie et al., 2009). In the attachment literature, a secure attachment style has been related to optimal parenting, and insecure attachment to non-optimal parenting (Jones, Cassidy, & Shaver, 2015). These literatures support the value of considering personality in parenting research.

Despite the volume of research examining parent personality on parenting practices, little has explored the underlying mechanisms, which are crucial to informing effective interventions (for an exception;

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Millings, Walsh, Hepper, & O'Brien, 2013). A key personality variable that shapes interpersonal motivation and warrants exploration in the parenting context is narcissism. Subclinical grandiose narcissism is a normally-distributed personality trait associated with high agency (reflecting dominance and superiority) and low communion (reflecting lack of caring for others; Campbell & Foster, 2007). Narcissism entails inflated self-views and diverse self-enhancement and self-protection efforts, including attention-seeking, and taking credit for success but blaming others for failure (Hepper, Gramzow, & Sedikides, 2010). Narcissists react aggressively to criticism, game-play in romantic relationships, and lack empathy for others (Baumeister, Bushman, & Campbell, 2000; Campbell & Foster, 2002; Hepper, Hart, & Sedikides, 2014a). Thus, the costs of their poor interpersonal functioning are borne by those around them, including friends and romantic partners. Empirical research examining subclinical narcissism in a family context is scant, with only one article exploring effects of narcissistic parenting on their own children (Dentale et al., 2015).

Understanding narcissism in relation to parenting is a timely venture. Grandiose narcissism is on the rise in Western cultures (Twenge, Konrath, Foster, Campbell, & Bushman, 2008). These narcissistic millennials are the parents of the future. Extant literature has examined only whether certain parenting practices (i.e., being neglectful vs. overly attentive) creates narcissism in offspring (Brummelman et al., 2015). Little research has been devoted to how narcissistic parents rear their children. This is the focus of the present study.

Are narcissistic parents more likely to engage in non-optimal than optimal parenting? Because of narcissists' lack of warmth towards others (Campbell & Foster, 2002) we predicted a negative relationship between narcissism and authoritative parenting. Based on narcissists' ego-involvement and defensiveness (Baumeister et al., 2000) we predicted a positive relationship between narcissism and authoritarian parenting. Finally, given that narcissists admit to not caring about others (Sedikides, Campbell, Reeder, Elliot, & Gregg, 2002) we predicted a positive relationship between narcissism and permissive parenting.

In the only existing study to have examined parental narcissism and parenting (Dentale et al., 2015), parental narcissism positively predicted child's depression and anxiety, which was mediated by reduced parental care, elevated parental shaming, overprotection, and favouritism. This study provided initial evidence that narcissists may adopt non-optimal parenting which may have damaging consequences for their children. However, rearing style was reported retrospectively by the child and not the parent. This introduces potential recall bias; Mechanic and Barry (2015) have shown that adolescents' retrospective reports of parenting behaviours do not match parent-reports because they are based on perceptions and not necessarily on what the parents actually do. The use of child-reports also prevents the exploration of underlying mechanisms or motivations.

The current study builds on prior evidence in four ways. First, we used parental self-report measures that directly assess (non-) optimal parenting (Baumrind, 1971). Second, we examined the influence of different aspects of narcissism. It is well-established that grandiose narcissism entails both relatively adaptive (i.e., authority, self-sufficiency) and more maladaptive (i.e., entitlement, exploitativeness, exhibitionism) aspects. Different subscales of the commonly-used Narcissistic Personality Inventory (Raskin & Terry, 1988) can capture each dimension (Barry, Frick, Adler, & Grafeman, 2007). Theoretically, the most maladaptive ingredients of narcissism should relate most closely to non-optimal parenting. Third, we controlled for established personality predictors of parenting (i.e., Big Five, attachment) to test the unique contribution of narcissism. Fourth, we examined two psychological mechanisms that underlie these parenting styles: empathy and caregiving-responsiveness.

Empathy comprises a cognitive (i.e., understanding others' perspectives) and emotional (i.e., sharing others' emotions, feeling compassion) component (Davis, 1983). It has a profound impact on interpersonal relationships. In a parenting context, absence of empathy is associated with abusive parental behaviours (Wiehe, 2003). Research consistently shows that narcissists lack empathy (Hepper et al., 2014a). Thus, we examined whether low empathy underscores narcissists' non-optimal parenting practices. Caregiving quality impacts parenting: Millings et al. (2013) showed that responsive-caregiving towards a partner predicted increased use of authoritative parenting styles, and unresponsive-caregiving towards a partner increased use of authoritarian and permissive parenting styles. Although research has not directly explored narcissists' caregiving quality, Feeney and Collins (2001) showed that egoistic motivation correlated negatively, albeit non-significantly, with responsive-caregiving. Moreover, empathy might be a critical precursor to caregiving quality. Theoretically, the caregiving system is activated by an empathic situation, such as an individual in distress (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Although direct tests are scant, Feeney and Collins (2001) reported positive correlations between prosocial orientations and responsive-caregiving. We thus tested the mediating pathways between narcissism and parenting styles via (a) empathy, (b) caregiving-responsiveness, and (c) a sequential pattern from empathy to caregiving-responsiveness (Fig. 1).

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

Participants ($N = 408$) were recruited online via Amazon's Mechanical Turk. Data were excluded from participants who were not parents ($n = 10$), did not complete the narcissism measure ($n = 6$), or failed instructional manipulation checks ($n = 24$). The remaining 368 participants (235 female, 131 male, 2 undisclosed) were aged 18–75 years ($M = 37.99$, $SD = 10.84$), and were predominantly (75%) White Americans (6% Mixed race, 7% Other White, 7% Black, 4% Other, 1% undisclosed). Most (98.9%) resided in America.

### 2.2. Procedure

After providing consent, participants completed measures of personality in a randomised order, followed by caregiving, and finally parenting. Each participant received $1.50 upon study completion and written debriefing.

### 2.3. Materials

#### 2.3.1. Narcissism

The Narcissistic Personality Inventory (Raskin & Terry, 1988) contains 40 forced-choice items. Participants choose between pairs of statements, one indicating high narcissism (e.g., "I find it easy to manipulate people"), the other low (e.g., "I don't like it when I find myself manipulating people"). The number of narcissistic choices is summed ($\alpha = 0.90$, $M = 11.82$, $SD = 7.92$, range = 0–35). Following Barry et al. (2007), we computed mean scores for adaptive narcissism (i.e., authority and self-sufficiency items; $\alpha = 0.82$, $M = 0.41$, $SD = 0.26$) and maladaptive narcissism (i.e., entitlement, exploitativeness, and exhibitionism items; $\alpha = 0.79$, $M = 0.21$, $SD = 0.19$). Adaptive and maladaptive narcissism correlated positively, $r(366) = 0.66$, $p < 0.001$.

#### 2.3.2. Empathy

We used two 7-item subscales from The Interpersonal Reactivity Index (Davis, 1983): Perspective-taking (e.g., "Before criticising somebody, I try to imagine how I would feel if I were in their place"; $\alpha = 0.85$), and Empathic-Concern (e.g., "I often have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me"; $\alpha = 0.90$) from 1 = *not at all* to 8 = *extremely*. As narcissists lack both aspects of empathy (Hepper, Hart, Meek, Cisek, & Sedikides, 2014b; Hepper et al., 2014a), and the subscales correlated moderately, $r(128) = 0.50$, $p < 0.001$, we combined them into an empathy index ($\alpha = 0.91$, $M = 5.97$, $SD = 1.19$).