

When Narcissus Was a Boy: Origins, Nature, and Consequences of Childhood Narcissism

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ABSTRACT—*Not all positive self-views are alike. Developmental researchers increasingly recognize that it is important to distinguish between accurate, well-balanced positive self-views and inflated, narcissistic positive self-views. Narcissism refers to a sense of grandiosity and a strong need to be seen and admired by others. This article reviews current empirical knowledge of narcissistic traits in youths and discusses future challenges and opportunities for this rapidly developing field. Narcissism can be identified from late childhood and has similar manifestations and consequences among youths as it has among adults. Future research will need to uncover the origins and early development of narcissism. The study of childhood narcissism promises to contribute to a more accurate and comprehensive understanding of the development of the self and the consequences of the self.*

KEYWORDS—*narcissism; inflated self-views; self-esteem; development; children*

Tom and Bob are 12-year-old boys who generally feel good about themselves. One day, they participate in psychological research at their school and complete a standard measure of self-esteem. They both obtain a high score on this measure and the researcher concludes that they both have high self-esteem.

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Does the researcher have a reasonably complete understanding of how these boys view themselves? Unfortunately not. In fact, Tom and Bob's self-views are very different in important respects. Tom holds accurate, well-balanced positive self-views, whereas Bob holds unrealistically positive self-views. Tom is not really interested in how his competencies stack up to those of others, whereas Bob sees himself as superior to others. Tom likes to receive compliments but can well do without them, whereas Bob craves compliments. These differences are not reflected in their level of self-esteem.

Over the past years, developmental researchers have increasingly tried to operationalize “overly positive,” “defensive,” or “grandiose yet fragile” self-views. In particular, the trait of *narcissism* has gained increasing attention in the developmental literature. Narcissism refers to a sense of grandiosity, coupled with a strong need to obtain attention and admiration from others. In this article, we review current research on childhood narcissism and discuss the future challenges and opportunities for this rapidly developing field.

NARCISSISM IN ADULTS AND CHILDREN

Narcissism is well known in its extreme form as narcissistic personality disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 1994), but many approaches (including ours) cast narcissism as a dimensional trait on which people in the general population differ rather than as a disorder that people have or do not have. Narcissistic individuals feel superior to others, fantasize about personal successes, and believe that they are special people who deserve special treatment. They tend to value other people instrumentally—as a means to achieve their own goals. At the same time, narcissistic individuals are greatly concerned about others' evaluations. Consequently, their feelings of worth wax and wane according to how favorably others view them (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001; Thomaes et al., 2010). Thus, they hold grandiose yet ultimately fragile self-views.

The most elaborate theoretical model of narcissism is the *dynamic self-regulatory processing model* (Morf & Rhodewalt,

2001). This model describes narcissism as a personality process organized around the goal of creating and maintaining grandiose self-views. Because the grandiose self-views of narcissistic individuals are fragile, such individuals go to great lengths to obtain external validation of their grandiosity. In their social interactions, they seek continuous attention and admiration and reject negative feedback. Moreover, narcissistic individuals typically perceive their talents and achievements in overly positive ways. They take credit for positive outcomes, but deny responsibility for negative outcomes, and also reconstruct their past in self-flattering ways. However, because they tend to use others instrumentally, their efforts to maximize self-esteem often prove counterproductive in the long run. This leads to a continuous cycle of seeking validation, being criticized or rejected, and pursuing renewed validation. Thus, key narcissistic traits such as self-aggrandizing behavior, a preoccupation with success, and hypervigilance for receiving negative evaluations can be understood as manifestations of an ongoing self-regulatory process to create and maintain grandiose self-views (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001).

Up until recently, narcissism was studied virtually exclusively among adults. Little was known about narcissism in children. However, there is widespread consensus that narcissism typically emerges well before adulthood (American Psychiatric Association, 1994; Bardenstein, 2009; Barry, Frick, & Killian, 2003; Thomaes, Bushman, Orobio de Castro, & Stegge, 2009). Indeed, research has shown that individual differences in narcissism can be reliably measured in children about age 8 and older. From this age, the manifestations and consequences of narcissism among children are similar to those among adults (Barry et al., 2003; Thomaes, Stegge, Bushman, et al., 2008).

How can narcissism be measured among children? Two reliable and valid self-report measures exist: the Narcissistic Personality Inventory for Children (NPIC; Barry et al., 2003) and the Childhood Narcissism Scale (CNS; Thomaes et al., 2008). These measures are similar in that they aim to measure narcissistic traits in the general child population (i.e., among children about age 8 and older) and have been well validated in multiple cultures. The main difference between the two measures is their breadth of measurement and length. The NPIC has 40 items and is recommended when researchers want to distinguish between different aspects of narcissism (e.g., entitlement, authority). The CNS has 10 items and is recommended when researchers need a short measure that comprehensively assesses narcissism as a single dimension. For both measures, the data show that narcissistic traits are normally distributed in population samples of children and adolescents (Barry, Pickard, & Ansel, 2009; Thomaes et al., 2008). Boys tend to be more narcissistic than girls, but gender differences are small (Thomaes et al., 2008).

DEVELOPMENTAL ORIGINS OF NARCISSISM

Some of the most pressing questions one can ask about narcissism are developmental ones: At what age does narcissism

typically emerge? How do early emerging individual differences in narcissism develop over the life span? Is narcissism more normative in some developmental stages than in others? How stable is narcissism over time? And, perhaps most pressing, what factors make some individuals more narcissistic than others? Questions such as these have been badly understudied thus far. In fact, no longitudinal studies have followed up on narcissistic development from childhood through later ages. This is unfortunate, not only from a basic research perspective but also from an applied perspective. An improved understanding of the developmental origins of narcissism would help practitioners determine what developmental stages are best suited to curtailing initial narcissistic development. We believe that developmental psychology has strong potential to further our understanding of narcissism and its effective treatment.

Childhood narcissism may emerge as a derailment of normative self-developmental processes. When children enter late childhood, they have acquired the cognitive abilities to anticipate how they are viewed by others and to form global evaluations of their worth as a person (Harter, 1999, 2006)—abilities that are critical for narcissism to emerge. Crucially, from this developmental stage onward, children also have a strong desire to feel valuable and well esteemed by others (Harter, 1999, 2006). Narcissism presumably is an excessive manifestation of that normative self-motivation, and so narcissistic children may differ from others mainly in the *degree* to which they pursue value and worth. This implies that individual differences in narcissism should manifest themselves from late childhood on, a view that is supported by empirical data (Barry et al., 2003; Thomaes et al., 2008; Thomaes et al., 2009). Of course, this does not mean that the causes of narcissism operate only from late childhood. On the contrary, most theorists believe that the foundation for narcissistic development is laid in the earliest stages of life.

Classical psychological theory has focused on early dysfunctional socialization patterns as causes of narcissistic development. One theory holds that narcissism is cultivated by parents who overly indulge and excessively praise their children (Imbesi, 1999; Millon, 1981). These practices might teach children that they are superior to others and might make them dependent upon external validation. Another theory holds that narcissism is cultivated by parental coldness and indifference (Kernberg, 1975; Kohut, 1977). In such a context, children might put themselves on a pedestal to obtain the validation their parents fail to provide. Thus, in line with the dynamic self-regulatory processing model (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001), these theoretical perspectives suggest that narcissistic individuals' need to obtain external validation results from dysfunctional early socialization experiences.

Both perspectives have preliminary empirical support. Retrospective research has found that narcissistic adults report that their parents used to put them on a pedestal, believed that they had exceptional talents but also were indifferent (Otway &

Vignoles, 2006). Cross-sectional research has found that narcissistic high school and college students report that their parents are warm but also controlling and manipulative (Horton, Bleau, & Drwecki, 2006). Prospective research involving children has found that in mothers, both indulgent and authoritarian parenting styles might increase the likelihood that individuals develop narcissistic traits in adulthood (Cramer, 2011).

Besides parental influences, there could be sociocultural influences as well. In particular, it has been argued that the self-esteem movement in schools, with its emphasis on teaching children to feel “competent,” “unique,” and “special,” has increased narcissism levels among today’s youths. This effect may have been exacerbated by the advent of social networking technology that facilitates self-promotion and offers even young children a stage to communicate information about themselves (Twenge & Campbell, 2009; Twenge, Konrath, Foster, Campbell, & Bushman, 2008; but also see Trzesniewski, Donnellan, & Robins, 2008). These explanations fail to take into account, however, that some children are more likely to develop narcissistic traits than others. If all children exposed to some level of parental overvaluation or coldness (let alone the opportunity for self-promotion) became narcissists, there would be far more narcissists in the world today.

Instead, we propose a diathesis-stress model for the development of narcissism. Maladaptive socialization or sociocultural experiences (i.e., stress) may function to activate latent temperamental or genetic vulnerabilities to develop narcissistic traits (i.e., the diathesis). For example, children high in approach temperament—an early emerging sensitivity to rewards—are more likely than others to become dependent on rewarding stimuli (Elliot & Thrash, 2002). In the maladaptive, stressful context of parents who are overvaluing, children high in approach temperament may easily become overly dependent on receiving praise and positive attention (Thomaes et al., 2009). Similarly, a number of genetic polymorphisms, such as the serotonin transporter promoter polymorphism, are known to increase children’s susceptibility to socialization experiences (Belsky, 2005; Taylor et al., 2006). Such polymorphisms may also influence the likelihood that children will develop narcissistic traits in response to maladaptive socialization. We have recently started a longitudinal investigation of the temperamental and genetic factors that might interact with environmental influences to jointly shape children’s narcissistic personality over time. There is much to be explored in this area of research, and we encourage colleagues in the field to join forces in unravelling the origins of narcissism.

CONSEQUENCES OF NARCISSISM

The self-views of narcissistic individuals are highly contingent upon external validation (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001; Thomaes et al., 2010). When their self-views are threatened, they are prone to respond emotionally and aggressively. Most research

has focused on the link between narcissism among youths and aggressive, antisocial behavior. Cross-sectional research has found consistent links between narcissism and physical, verbal, and relational aggression (i.e., excluding others, spreading rumors; Golmaryami & Barry, 2010; Thomaes, Bushman, et al. 2008; Thomaes, Bushman, Orobio de Castro, Cohen, et al. 2009), aggression on the Internet (Ang, Ong, Lim, & Lim, 2010; Ang, Tan, & Talib Mansor, 2011), and more broadly defined antisocial or delinquent behaviors (including stealing and lying; Barry et al., 2003; Barry, Grafeman, Adler, & Pickard, 2007). These findings were obtained in children and adolescents from community and at-risk samples, emphasizing the robustness of the link between narcissism and conduct problems. Narcissistic youths are especially likely to become aggressive when their self-views are threatened, such as when they are ridiculed or rejected (Thomaes et al., 2008; Thomaes et al., 2009). Aggression may serve to trump the negative feelings that often result from such experiences (Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996). Longitudinal research has found that narcissism also promotes the stability of aggressive behavior, such that aggressive young adolescents who are more narcissistic are more likely to remain aggressive over a 1-year period than their less narcissistic counterparts (Bukowski, Schwartzman, Santo, Bagwell, & Adams, 2009).

Another common consequence of narcissism is psychological reactivity (i.e., the tendency to respond to triggering events with intense feelings or intrusive cognitions). In our own research, we have found that narcissistic children are prone to “emotional extremes,” experiencing high levels of both positive (e.g., euphoria, pride) and negative (e.g., shame, anger) emotions in their daily lives (Thomaes et al., 2008). Narcissistic psychological reactivity may be particularly likely to manifest itself following ego-threatening events. For example, in one experiment, we found that narcissistic children’s self-esteem decreased sharply in response to negative peer feedback, supporting the view that narcissistic children hold fragile self-views (Thomaes et al., 2010). In another experiment, we had participants play a rigged competitive computer game that they lost and we manipulated the ego-threatening impact of the loss (Thomaes, Stegge, Olthof, Bushman, & Nezelek, 2011). Specifically, half of the participants were told beforehand that they were lucky to play against one of the worst players in the competition so far. After the loss, they were shown rankings on a fictitious web page with their names at the bottom of the list. The other half of the participants were not told that their opponent was bad and were not shown rankings. Narcissistic children experienced high levels of negative mood (e.g., anger), but only after the ego-threatening loss. They did not experience more negative mood than others following the nonthreatening loss. The latter finding is important because it indicates that narcissistic children’s psychological reactivity is specific to events that threaten their grandiosity.

One important lesson learned from previous work is that it often pays off to study the consequences of narcissism alongside

those of self-esteem. For example, the robust link between narcissism and aggression identified in earlier work does not tell the whole story. That is, narcissistic youths are particularly prone to behave aggressively if they also have high self-esteem. Narcissistic youths who have somewhat lower self-esteem (i.e., some narcissistic individuals are self-absorbed but not very satisfied with themselves) are not particularly aggressive (Golmaryami & Barry, 2010; Thomaes et al., 2008). Similarly, research suggests that narcissistic children may be more likely than others to suffer from symptoms of anxiety, especially social anxiety (Barry & Malkin, 2010; Thomaes et al., 2008). We recently found, however, that this link depends on children's level of self-esteem. Narcissistic children are anxious when they have relatively low self-esteem, but are not when they have high self-esteem (Nelemans et al., 2012).

What explains these interactions between narcissism and self-esteem? An important distinction can be made between so-called "grandiose" and "vulnerable" manifestations of narcissism (Cain, Pincus, & Ansell, 2008; Dickinson & Pincus, 2003). Individuals high in grandiose narcissism tend to be self-absorbed extroverts prone to suppress negative emotions, and to aggress against others when their egos are threatened (Thomaes et al., 2008). They have high self-esteem. Individuals high in vulnerable narcissism tend to be self-absorbed introverts prone to ruminate over negative emotions, and to withdraw from others when their egos are threatened. They have lower self-esteem. Thus, interactions between narcissism and self-esteem reflect the different consequences of grandiose and vulnerable narcissism.

FUTURE WORK AND IMPLICATIONS

Among the exciting topics to explore in this new field of research, three seem particularly important.

First, longitudinal research is needed to map the developmental processes that lead to narcissism. Such research should shed light on when individual differences in narcissism typically emerge, what factors influence these differences, and how stable narcissism is over time. Longitudinal research is especially promising when integrated with experimental methods to uncover the short-term psychological mechanisms that explain the early manifestations and persistence of narcissism over time. For example, experimental research should explore the strategies (e.g., externalization of blame, suppression of negative emotions) that narcissistic youths use to uphold their fragile grandiose self-images in the face of threatening events. Experimental research should also seek to explain temporary shifts in narcissistic individuals' sense of grandiosity: Under what conditions do they actually believe or come to doubt their own grandiosity?

Second, priority should be given to research that uncovers the (mal)adaptiveness of narcissism. Narcissism is often considered problematic, yet there may be a trade-off between costs and benefits. For example, it is possible that narcissistic youths

become skilled at garnering authority and at radiating an image of charm and self-reliance—skills that may be beneficial in several spheres of life. Research on the (mal)adaptiveness of narcissism should also unravel how narcissism translates into peer relationships. It is possible that narcissistic children are seen by their peers as more "popular" than "likable," and that narcissism benefits the initiation but not the continuation of friendships, but research needs to test those notions.

Third, research should explore the viability of an addiction model of narcissism. In many ways, narcissism resembles a pattern of addiction to self-esteem (Baumeister & Vohs, 2001). Narcissistic individuals crave feeling good about themselves and feel very bad when they fail to create a grandiose view of themselves. Also, similar to other addictions, narcissism may bring certain short-term benefits (e.g., the pleasure of feeling proud), but may have long-term costs (e.g., the toll of alienating others; Baumeister & Vohs, 2001). To what extent are the developmental pathways that lead to narcissism similar to the pathways that lead to more prototypical addictions (e.g., alcoholism)? Is narcissism rooted in similar genetic or temperamental predispositions, or diatheses, like more prototypical addictions? To what extent are narcissistic individuals' behavioral and neurobiological responses to rewarding stimuli (e.g., positive attention, admiration) similar to actual addictive responses to rewarding stimuli (e.g., alcoholic beverages)? The view of narcissism as an addiction may be more than just a useful metaphor, but research will need to establish how far the parallel reaches.

CONCLUSION

Developmental psychology has had a strong and long-standing fascination with the self. A new branch of this fascination revolves around the trait of childhood narcissism. The study of childhood narcissism promises to yield a more accurate and comprehensive understanding of the developing self, its nature, and its consequences. In particular, by studying childhood narcissism along with self-esteem, psychologists will be able to distinguish children's well-balanced and accurate favorable self-views from defensive and inflated favorable self-views. The researcher introduced at the outset of this article would be able to distinguish Tom's self-views from Bob's self-views. Importantly, when more becomes known about the developmental origins of narcissism, practitioners may devise developmentally tailored interventions to curtail narcissistic traits at a young age—thereby improving the well-being of at-risk children as well as the people around them.

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