

## **Examining the simple and multiple relationship of parenting styles and early life trauma with narcissistic personality in university students**

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### **ABSTRACT**

According to the high prevalence of narcissistic personality among normal populations, this study was conducted to find out the simple and multiple relationships of parenting styles and early traumas with narcissism personality in university students. The statistical society of current research included all students of Shahid Chamran University of Ahwaz. To perform this research, 314 students (159 female, 155 male) were selected by multistage randomly sampling method and complete narcissism personality inventory 16 items (Ames et al, 2006), parenting styles (Bumrind, 1990) and early trauma inventory. The data of questionnaire were analyzed by multiple regressions in stepwise and entry methods. The results of multiple regression analysis indicated that 66 percent narcissism personality variance in students was explained by parenting styles and traumas in early life. Also, early life trauma, avoidant and secure attachment emerged as the strongest predictors of narcissism personality in students. Given the role of parenting styles and early life trauma on the making of narcissistic personality in students, recommended that a set of training program will be used by specialist to prevent the narcissistic personality tendency.

**Keywords:** Narcissistic personality; Parenting style; Early life trauma; University student.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The term narcissism is taken from Greek legend (Narcissus), a young man who fell in love with his own image in the water and his attempt to embrace his own picture led to his death [1]. The concept of narcissism or unhealthy self-love, although was raised for the first time in Freud's writings, but the consistent theorizing in this field goes back to psychoanalysts works such as Kohut (1977) and Kernberg (1970). According to Kohut's theory, narcissism is the transformational process of "self" that continues from birth to death. In other words, each person in his life tries to move, from primitive and infantile narcissism, which is located at the beginning of the evolutionary spectrum and has features such as jealousy, arrogance, exploitation and has a feeling of being right, toward the healthy self-value which is located at the end of spectrum [2]. Narcissistic personality with symptoms feel of megalomaniac (superiority

complex), preoccupation with fantasies of success, power, talent, beauty and the belief that the individual is unique and special, feels all potentials, being colonizer in interpersonal relationships, lack of empathy and need for excessive praise is characterized [3]. Narcissism is accompanied with positive and negative and some positive outcomes including reducing depression, extraversion, initial satisfaction, better performance among people [4]. On the other hand, thirst for attention, excessive self-confidence, lack of empathy, aggression, and less adaptability make up some negative outcomes of narcissism [1]. Recent epidemiologic cognitive data suggest that narcissistic personality among the general population, the prevalence rate of 6.2% during the lifetime is much more common than clinical cases and also among younger people, age range 20 to 29 years old, has 9.4% prevalence rate during lifetime [5]. Preliminary studies on narcissism have been focused on this concept as a

personality disorder, but currently narcissism both as a disorder in clinical level and as a personality traits in non-clinical level is the subject of the research literature. During the past few decades, attention to the narcissistic has increased among the normal population. In the meantime attitudes, beliefs and behaviors of the parents that can be seen in the family structure or parenting style, is considered as a very important factor in the development of children individuality and identity. As growing in a warm and friendly family environment is positively associated with the healthy psychological growth during adolescence. Based on studies and theories of personality, narcissism is rooted in childhood and specifically influenced by the parenting practices and early family life [6, 7, 8, 9 and 10]. Many theorists argue that narcissism is the result of bad parenting, and cold, aggressive and without empathy environments or the lack of proper control and discipline and Spoiling the child. Based on the results of conducted research in the field of the relationship between narcissism and parenting practices, despotic parenting and permissive styles have positive relation with narcissism and the authoritative style has negative relation with narcissism [11, 12, 13, and 14]. Other factors affecting narcissistic personality can be named severe traumatic childhood factors (early life trauma), such as being abused and torture, sexual abuse and exploitation that these factors also cause traumatic stress disorder and create narcissistic personality [15].

Based on the narcissism of Zamostny, Slyter, & Rios (1993), early life trauma can lead to psychological trauma and narcissism and as a result, effect on compatibility of person negatively. In a study was carried out by Simon [15] in the field of relationship between trauma in early life and narcissism, reported that the occurrence of a traumatic event in early life can cause several problems, such as emotional, behavioral and personality problems. Simon believed that when a person experience a noticeable traumatic event that is followed by public humiliation, talented to Blurt narcissistic symptoms. He also recalls that the traumatic events that arise by man's destructive effects are more than natural traumatic events (floods, earthquakes, etc.) Courtesies (1988) in a research stated that trauma that is the result of child

chronic exploitation leads to damages to self and makes the person prone to narcissism, which leads to problems in compatibility and relations with others. Considering the role of coherent and independent self-existence which affect the person performance, and also due to the structural role of narcissism in today's life that some are considered the best way to deal with stress and anxiety of modern life [16, 17 and 18]. Purpose of this study was the investigate simple and multiple relationships between parenting styles and early life traumas with narcissistic character formation of the students.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study samples including all students of Shahid Chamran University of Ahwaz in the second semester of 89-90. The numbers of 320 students have been participated in the study using the multistage random sampling method. Initially, among the 10 schools, 5 schools were randomly selected and then from each faculty 5 classes selected randomly. Finally, among the students in the classes half of students were randomly selected. 51 percent of them were girls and 49% boys, age range from 18 to 27 years with a mean of 23.07 and standard deviation 1.22, respectively.

The current project is correlation study. The study was conducted through coordination with the education department and selected schools and then questionnaires were distributed to the selected classes. From 320 distributed questionnaires, 314 questionnaires were completed and returned by students.

### Research Tools

The following tools were used in this study.

**1. Narcissistic Personality Inventory 16 items (NPI-16):** Shortened version of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory of 40-item that in order to measure features related to narcissistic personality in nonclinical populations was made by Ames, Day and Anderson (2006) [19].

This questionnaire for the first time has been translated by Zargar et al (1389). Each matter this questionnaire consists of two opposite propositions that every person should choose one of them. The answer score to the first item is 1 and the response to the second item is 0 for person. Total score of this questionnaire includes ranging from 0 to 16. Higher scores on this questionnaire are more

narcissistic symptoms [20]. According to Ames et al (2006) during the 5-week test-retest reliability, 0.89, and the Cronbach's alpha of narcissistic personality inventory 0.85 have been reported. Zargar et al (1389) the reliability of this questionnaire in Cronbach's alpha method 0.67 have been reported. Ames et al (2006) convergent validity coefficient for this questionnaire by calculating the correlation coefficient between scores of the NPI-16 and extroversion scores indicators and openness to new experiences scale, five big personality factors (BFI) have calculated and this coefficients for the indicators of extroversion 0.32 and for the openness towards new experiences, 0.41 have been calculated. In the present study, the construct validity of this questionnaire using correlation between the scores of the questionnaire with a copy of the a single question that the introduction of the concept of narcissism in a range of 7 degrees from 1 (very low) to 7 (very much), were calculated and their correlation was 0.78, which at the level ( $p < 0.001$ ) was significant.

**2. Parenting Styles Questionnaire:** This questionnaire is designed by Bum rind that measures three parenting styles including permissive, despotic and authoritative styles [21]. The questionnaire has been translated into Persian by Esfandiari (1374). This questionnaire includes 30 items that 10 items measure permissive style (1,6,10,13,17,19,21,24, & 28), 10 items despotic style (2,3,7,9,12,16,18,25,26 & 29) and 10 items authoritative style (4,5,8,11,15,20,22,23,27 & 30). Scoring of the questionnaire is done based on Likert scale in five degrees, absolutely disagree (0), disagree (1), almost agree (2) agree (3) and absolutely agree (4). By summing the scores of questions relating to each style obtained three scores separately and a score that is superior as a parenting style is characterized. The minimum and maximum scores were 0 and 40 for each style of parenting style. Bum rind reported the reliability of this questionnaire using Test-retest with interval of one week, 0.81 for permissive style, 0.85 for despotic and 0.92 for authoritative style. As well as, in Esfandiari's research (1374) the reliability of this questionnaire using Test-retest with interval of one week, 0.69 for permissive style, 0.77 for despotic style and 0.73 for authoritative and reassuring style were obtained.

Also, in the present study for estimate the reliability of this questionnaire in the separate sample, Cronbach's alpha was used which is range from 0.71 (permissive parenting) and 0.83 (authoritative parenting). Therefore, the reliability of the three styles of parenting is in the satisfactory level. Also, the validity of this questionnaire through correlate and integrate each subscale with one of the questions that seem to be representative of the desired subscales, was evaluated. The results indicated that a significant correlation between authoritative parenting styles with desired questions was (0.75) at the significant level ( $p = 0.001$ ), despotic parenting style with desired question (0.71) at the significant level ( $p = 0.001$ ) and permissive parenting style with desired question (0.66) at the significant level ( $p = 0.001$ ), respectively.

**3. Early life trauma scale:** This scale have been made by Mehrabizade, Zargar and Ahmadi (1389, unpublished) and includes 23 items that would assess the traumas before the age of 18. In this scale each item consisted of two YES & NO options, if answer is YES the score is 1 and if answer is NO the score is 0 [22].

Mehrabizade et al (1389) have reported internal consistency of this scale 0.89, using Cronbach's alpha. ]. Mehrabizade et al (1389) has used a single item version to determine the validity of this scale which response is on the scale of 7 degrees from 1 (very low) to 7 (very much) is characterized and obtained correlation coefficient is 0.90. In the present study, Cronbach's alpha reliability of this scale bisection 0.89 and 0.91, respectively.

## RESULTS

Table 1 indicates the mean and standard deviation of the subjects' scores in the research variables. As shown in Table 1 the mean and standard deviation of subjects' scores of narcissism variable is 6.32 and 3.24, respectively. Also, the mean and standard deviation scores of the subjects in the other variables are also observed. Table 2 shows the correlation coefficients between the different variables of the study. To determine prediction rate of study variables were used multivariate regressions in stepwise and entry methods.

**Table 1.** Mean, standard deviation, minimum and maximum scores on the variables of the study subjects

variable	mean	SD	minimum score	maximum score
Narcissistic	6.32	3.24	1	15
Despotic parenting style	9.91	4.14	2	37
Permissive parenting style	11.21	4.46	5	35
Authoritative parenting style	15.47	4.54	6	35
Early life trauma	5.1	3.09	0	13

**Table 2.** Correlation coefficients between study variables in all subjects

Row	Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1	Narcissistic	-	*0.53	0.04	*-0.63	*0.44
2	Despotic parenting style	-	-	-0.30	*-0.62	*0.32
3	Permissive parenting style	-	-	-	*0.17	*0.12
4	Authoritative parenting style	-	-	-	-	*-0.39
5	Early life traumas	-	-	-	-	-

All relations between study variables except relationship between permissive parenting style and narcissistic in the  $p < 0.01$  level are significant.

**Table 3.** Results of multivariate regression analysis using stepwise and entry method between parenting styles and early life traumas as predictor variables narcissistic personality formation as the criterion variable

Method	predictor variables	Standardized coefficients	T	Sig.	R	R <sup>2</sup>
		Beta				
Entry	Despotic parenting style	0.27	5.06	0.001	0.70	0.50
	Authoritative parenting style	-0.43	-8.15	0.001		
	Permissive parenting style	0.18	4.20	0.001		
	Early life traumas	0.1	3.53	0.001		
Stepwise	Authoritative parenting style	-0.63	-14.46	0.001	0.434	0.401
	Authoritative parenting style	-0.54	-11.86	0.001	0.667	0.445
	Early life traumas	0.22	4.93	0.001		
	Authoritative parenting style	-0.42	-7.74	0.001	0.687	0.471
	Early life traumas	0.207	4.59	0.001		
	Despotic parenting style	0.209	3.95	0.001		
	Authoritative parenting style	-0.43	-8.15	0.001	0.707	0.50
	Early life traumas	0.16	3.53	0.001		
Despotic parenting style	0.27	5.06	0.001			
Permissive parenting style	0.18	4.20	0.001			

As shown in Table 3 there are significant multiple relationships between parenting styles and early life traumas with narcissistic character formation in students. Results suggest that parenting styles and early life trauma can generally predict 50% of the variance of narcissistic personality. With more detailed analysis on parenting styles and early life trauma during stepwise regression, as shown in Table 3, authoritative parenting style, early life trauma, despotic parenting and permissive styles are the best predictors of narcissistic personality in students. Authoritative parenting style can explain 40% and authoritative, permissive and

despotic parenting styles and early life traumas together 50% of narcissistic personality changes.

## DISCUSSION

As mentioned above, the aim of current study was examining the simple and multiple relationship of parenting styles and early life trauma with narcissistic personality formation in students. Results of the present study indicate significant positive relationship between despotic parenting styles and early life traumas with narcissistic personality formation and negative

relationship between authoritative parenting styles and with narcissistic personality formation in students. Results indicate that the main research hypothesis stating that parenting styles and early life traumas are accepted as a predicting power in students. Results of the relationship of parenting styles with narcissistic personality formation are consistent with earlier research studies [11, 12, 13 and 14]. In explaining these results it can be stated that individuals who grew up in families with authoritative parenting style both in terms of the monitoring and care and in terms of compassion and kindness in relationships between parents and child, completely become enriched and needless and will have no deficiency in these respects. These individuals understand the atmosphere of the family as a safe and appropriate environment for development of self-confidence and gain a real self-esteem and suitable parent's feedback prevent the formation of a self-inflated in the one's personality that seeks compensate for inattention or neglect by parents[13]. As well as, due to the rules of the family atmosphere and certain framework in type of parents' behavior with child, nothing remain for appearing symptoms of narcissism such as the hauteur feeling, the feeling of being right and also exploitation in relationships and one does not need to be biased toward them. In contrast, narcissism with negative parenting style including inconsistent rules and corporal punishment has positive relation so that whatever parents apply for bad parenting for foster child, the child will show higher levels of narcissism. Therefore, it is likely that poor parenting practices may play an important role in the formation of narcissism which then leads to features such as intense self-absorbed, feeling of being right, lack of empathy and a sense of exploitation that has narcissistic personality features; grow in person to compensate for his/her past that is full of deprivations and restrictions. In addition, present study results regarding the positive relation between early life traumas and

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narcissistic personality formation is consistent with several studies [15, 16, and 17]. In explaining these findings, it can be noted that the person is exposed to a traumatic event, consider him/her feeling of self-confidence and self-esteem in danger and in terms of personality and core of "self" feel threatened.

Therefore, person shows the features such as exploitation and feeling of being right which are narcissistic personality features, in response to the threat. Thus, can be expected that narcissistic individuals than normal subjects experienced more traumatic events significantly that this issue with previous studies which claim that early life trauma increases the risk of developing narcissism, is consistent [15].

At the end of the current research offer recommendations for researchers, practitioners and consultants that is hoped we see a change in attitudes and perspectives in the field of narcissism. It is suggested that in order to conduct future researches in the field of examining of parenting styles, will be used the special questionnaire of Iranian culture. Of limitations of current study should also be noted that was conducted only on students of Shahid Chamran University of Ahwaz, therefore, generalize the results to other populations should be done cautiously and taking into account the cultural considerations.

## CONCLUSION

Given the importance of appropriate parenting practices, some measures must adopted to necessary training be given to the parents on parenting practices. Workshops should be held to teach positive parenting practices and explain the role of this variable in the formation and growth of individuals by education officials and mental health experts. Given the harmful consequences of narcissism such as aggression and incompatibility, measures in order to prevent narcissism and factors causing this issue must be taken into consideration.

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