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Raising Children With High Self-Esteem (But Not Narcissism)

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ABSTRACT—*With the rise of individualism since the 1960s, Western parents have become increasingly concerned with raising their children's self-esteem. This is understandable, given the benefits of self-esteem for children's psychological health. However, parents' well-intentioned attempts to raise self-esteem, such as through inflated praise, may inadvertently breed narcissism. How can parents raise self-esteem without breeding narcissism? In this article, we propose a tripartite model of self-regard, which holds that the development of self-esteem without narcissism can be cultivated through realistic feedback (rather than inflated praise), a focus on growth (rather than on outperforming others), and unconditional regard (rather than regard that is conditional). We review evidence in support of these practices and outline promising directions for research. Our model integrates existing research, stimulates the development of theory, and identifies leverage points for intervention to raise self-esteem and curtail narcissism from a young age.*

KEYWORDS—*narcissism; self-esteem; development; socialization*

In the late 20th century, with the rise of individualism, self-esteem became a touchstone of Western parenting. Most Western parents believe that children need self-esteem to achieve success and happiness in life, and that parents play a crucial role in building their children's self-esteem (Miller & Cho, 2018). Although parents are right that self-esteem is important (Orth & Robins, 2014), their ideas about how to instill it may be misguided. In particular, parents' well-intentioned attempts to raise self-esteem, such as lavishing children with praise, may inadvertently cultivate narcissism (Brummelman, Thomaes, & Sedikides, 2016). Narcissism is a subclinical personality trait that predicts considerable maladjustment in children, ranging from anxiety and depression to rage and aggression (Thomaes & Brummelman, 2016). In 4%–15% of children, narcissism develops into Narcissistic Personality Disorder (Bernstein et al., 1993).

How can parents raise children's self-esteem without breeding narcissism? Building on a burgeoning literature, we propose a tripartite model, which holds that self-esteem without narcissism is cultivated through realistic feedback, a focus on growth, and unconditional regard. We review evidence in support of this model and discuss implications.

PILLARS OF NARCISSISM AND SELF-ESTEEM

Self-esteem is defined as a sense of one's worth as a person (Orth & Robins, 2014), whereas narcissism is defined as an inflated sense of one's importance and deservingness (Krizan & Herlache, 2018). From childhood, narcissism can manifest as grandiose (characterized by boldness, extraversion, and boastfulness) or vulnerable (characterized by neuroticism, shyness, and withdrawal; Derry, Ohan, & Bayliss, 2019). Here, we focus on grandiose narcissism.

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A common belief is that narcissism is simply an extreme form of self-esteem. Psychologists have characterized narcissism as inflated, exaggerated, or excessive self-esteem, or even as “the dark side of high self-esteem” (Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996, p. 5). These labels suggest that self-esteem represents a continuum, with narcissism at its end. If this is so, narcissism and self-esteem should correlate highly and there should be no narcissists with low self-esteem. However, narcissism and self-esteem are only weakly positively correlated, and about as many narcissists have high self-esteem as low self-esteem (Brummelman et al., 2016). Thus, narcissism and self-esteem are independent dimensions of the self.

How do narcissism and self-esteem differ? Researchers have begun to identify differences in terms of underlying components and the socialization experiences that give rise to them (Brummelman et al., 2016; Donnellan, Trzesniewski, Robins, Moffitt, & Caspi, 2005; Hyatt et al., 2018; Tracy, Cheng, Robins, & Trzesniewski, 2009). Here, we propose the first developmental model that integrates these findings. The model describes the distinct components, or pillars, that underlie narcissism and self-esteem, and identifies the socialization practices that cultivate the development of these pillars. Our model seeks to explain how narcissism and self-esteem differ in their underlying components and socialization so it can address how parents can raise self-esteem without breeding narcissism.

We theorize that narcissism and self-esteem are each based on three distinct pillars (see Figure 1). In particular, we theorize that narcissistic children have unrealistically positive views of themselves (*illusion*), strive for superiority (*superiority*), and oscillate between hubris and shame (*fragility*). By contrast, children with high self-esteem have positive but realistic views of themselves (*realism*), strive for self-improvement (*growth*), and feel intrinsically worthy, even in the face of setbacks (*robustness*). Our model describes general patterns rather than universal laws. For example, most children with high self-esteem strive for self-improvement, but some do not (Waschull & Kernis, 1996).

Realism

Narcissistic children hold exalted views of themselves. An 11-year-old narcissistic boy “unhesitatingly shared his certainty of becoming president of the United States as soon as he graduated from college with degrees in nuclear physics and brain surgery” (Bleiberg, 1984, p. 508). Narcissistic children uphold such views, even in the face of disconfirming evidence. For example, after failing to complete challenging puzzles, narcissistic children still believe that they performed extraordinarily well (Derry et al., 2019). Such grandiose self-views persist into adulthood. Adult narcissists see themselves as geniuses, even if their IQ scores are average; they think they are superb leaders, even if they disrupt group performance; and they believe they are attractive, even if others disagree (Grijalva & Zhang, 2016). By contrast, children with high self-esteem have positive self-views,

but those views tend to be more grounded in reality. For example, they do not overestimate their performance as much as narcissistic children do (Derry et al., 2019). Thus, narcissism is marked by *illusion*, whereas self-esteem is marked by *realism*.

Growth

Narcissistic children strive for superiority. Narcissism is rooted in the desire to stand out from and get ahead of others (Grapsas, Brummelman, Back, & Denissen, 2020). In the service of superiority, narcissistic children may look down on others and compare themselves favorably to others (Thomaes & Brummelman, 2016). As narcissistic children look down on others, they may feel little care, concern, or empathy for them (Thomaes, Stegge, Bushman, Olthof, & Denissen, 2008). By contrast, children with high self-esteem are more interested in improving themselves than in outperforming others. For example, they believe they can hone their abilities through effort and education (Robins & Pals, 2002). Consequently, they are curious, interested, and ready to assume challenging tasks to better themselves (Waschull & Kernis, 1996). Children with high self-esteem may not habitually compare themselves to others, but instead tend to reflect on how they have improved over time (cf. Gürel, Brummelman, Sedikides, & Overbeek, 2020). Thus, narcissism is marked by a striving for *superiority*, whereas self-esteem is marked by a striving for *growth*.

Robustness

Narcissistic children have fragile feelings about themselves. According to attribution theory, narcissistic children are inclined to make stable and global self-attributions of both successes and failures, causing them to oscillate between hubris and shame (Lewis, 1992; Tracy et al., 2009). For example, when narcissistic children receive negative feedback, they feel disappointed in themselves and may even blush—a hallmark of shame (Brummelman, Nikolić, & Bögels, 2018). In response to shame, narcissistic children may lash out angrily or aggressively (Donnellan et al., 2005). Over time, shame may spiral into anxiety and depression (Barry & Malkin, 2010). By contrast, children with high self-esteem have relatively robust feelings about themselves. They feel worthy, even in the face of failure (Kernis, Brown, & Brody, 2000; Tracy et al., 2009). Consequently, they are unlikely to feel ashamed, and hence to become angry or aggressive (Donnellan et al., 2005). These children are at reduced risk of developing anxiety and depression (Orth & Robins, 2014). Thus, narcissism is marked by *fragility*, whereas self-esteem is marked by *robustness*.

Discussion

Our model holds that narcissism and self-esteem are built on distinct pillars. Why then are narcissism and self-esteem weakly but positively correlated? First, they share an agentic core—a tendency to focus on oneself and the pursuit of one’s goals (Hyatt et al., 2018). Like their counterparts with high self-

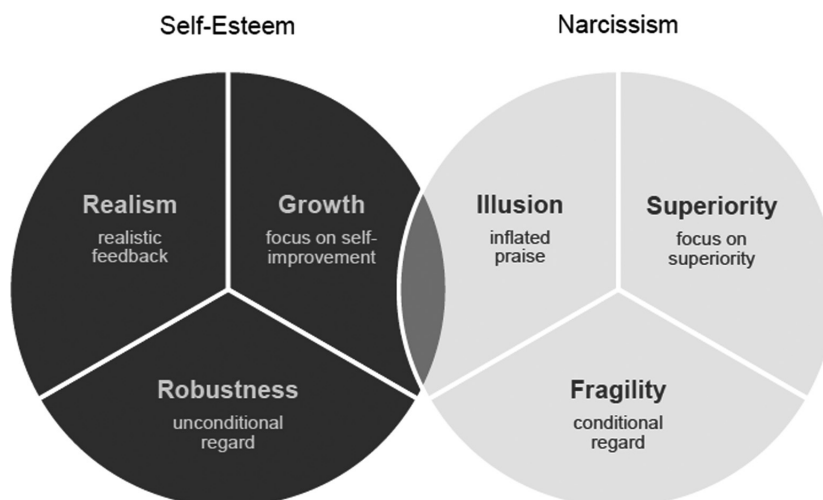


Figure 1. The hypothesized pillars of self-esteem (left) and narcissism (right), and the socialization experiences hypothesized to cultivate them. The circles' overlap reflects the weak but positive correlation between self-esteem and narcissism.

esteem, narcissists value competence and achievement (Hyatt et al., 2018). Second, the pillars of narcissism and self-esteem are not mutually exclusive. For example, some children might strive for both growth and superiority, and others might strive for neither. Thus, narcissism and self-esteem are not opposites and can fluctuate independently of one another. Our thesis is that pillars are foundational, that is, they precede the development of narcissism and self-esteem. Of course, given the recursive character of developmental processes, pillars may also appear to simply co-occur with narcissism and self-esteem.

SOCIALIZATION OF NARCISSISM AND SELF-ESTEEM

By delineating the distinct pillars underlying narcissism and self-esteem, our model opens the possibility of identifying socialization experiences that cultivate self-esteem without breeding narcissism. Psychologists have focused mostly on the reverse—the socialization experiences that breed narcissism. According to some psychoanalytic theories, narcissism develops in response to lack of parental warmth (Kernberg, 1975). Children raised this way are thought to develop deep-seated, unconscious shame and self-loathing, and to engage in narcissistic ideation to ward off these discomforting states (Lewis, 1987). However, there is no evidence that narcissism is cultivated by lack of parental warmth (Brummelman, Thomaes, Nelemans, Orobio de Castro, Overbeek, et al., 2015; Wetzel & Robins, 2016) or that narcissists harbor unconscious shame or self-loathing (Bosson et al., 2008).

Recent studies indicate that narcissism is cultivated, in part, by parental overvaluation. In longitudinal research, 7- to 11-year olds and their parents were studied prospectively over four measurement waves (Brummelman, Thomaes, Nelemans, Orobio de Castro, Overbeek, et al., 2015). Narcissism was predicted by

parental overvaluation—how much parents saw their child as a special individual entitled to privileges. Cross-sectional research has replicated these findings (Derry, 2018; Nguyen & Shaw, 2020).

How exactly do overvaluing parents cultivate narcissism in children? Conversely, how can parents raise children's self-esteem without breeding narcissism? Our model suggests that narcissism and self-esteem are cultivated by three classes of socialization practices, corresponding to the three pillars (see Figure 1). The model applies to children ages 7 and older, who are aware that others, such as parents, evaluate them from an external perspective (Harter, 2012). These evaluations can be internalized and develop into stable self-evaluations. Indeed, stable individual differences in narcissism and self-esteem can be assessed reliably from age 7 (Thomaes & Brummelman, 2016).

Realistic Feedback

Overvaluing parents may foster narcissism by cultivating *illusion*. These parents overestimate, overclaim, and overpraise their children's qualities (Brummelman, Thomaes, Nelemans, Orobio de Castro, & Bushman, 2015). For example, they believe that their children are smarter than others, even when their children's IQ scores are average. They claim that their children know about a wide range of topics, even ones that do not exist (e.g., the fictional book, *The Tale of Benson Bunny*). Also, they praise their children more often than other parents do, even when the children do not perform well.

Overvaluing parents may express their overestimation through inflated praise. Praise is inflated when it contains an adverb (e.g., *incredibly*) or adjective (e.g., *amazing*) signaling an extremely positive evaluation, such as "You did *incredibly* well!" In a longitudinal observational study (Brummelman, Nelemans,

Thomaes, & Orobio de Castro, 2017), parents' inflated praise was coded from parent-child interactions; in a subgroup of children, parents' inflated praise predicted higher narcissism 6, 12, and 18 months after the observations.

By contrast, parents may foster self-esteem by cultivating *realism*. They can do so by providing children with realistic feedback (i.e., feedback that is relatively close to objective benchmarks), which can help children understand themselves more accurately. Because children prefer positive over negative feedback, they may be inclined to dismiss negative feedback, even if is diagnostic, because such feedback hurts (Sedikides, 2018). Yet, children may benefit more from moderately positive feedback than from inflated praise. Although researchers have not examined the causal link between realistic feedback and the development of self-esteem, correlational evidence supports this link. For example, when parents gave children realistic praise (rather than overpraised or underpraised them), children earned higher grade point averages and had fewer symptoms of depression (Lee, Kim, Kesebir, & Han, 2017). When children felt that their parents' praise was slightly but not greatly overstated, they benefited as much as they did from realistic praise. Such findings tentatively suggest that positive feedback helps children if it closely matches reality.

Focus on Growth

Overvaluing parents may foster narcissism by cultivating children's *striving for superiority*. Such parents may pressure children to stand out from others. For example, overvaluing parents are likely to give their children uncommon first names (Brummelman, Thomaes, Nelemans, Orobio de Castro, & Bushman, 2015). Also, these parents are emotionally invested in their children's social status (Grapsas, Brummelman, et al., 2020). For example, while monitoring children's status on social media, overvaluing parents smiled when their child gained status, but frowned when their child lost status, as revealed by their facial muscle activity (Grapsas, Denissen, Lee, Bos, & Brummelman, 2020). Encouraging children to think they are better than others triggers their narcissistic desire to be superior to others at the expense of their desire to grow and learn (Gürel et al., 2020).

By contrast, parents may foster self-esteem by cultivating children's *striving for growth*. For example, when children succeed at a task, parents may praise children's effort and strategies (e.g., "You found a good way to do it!") to acknowledge the success but highlight that it was the result of hard work and efficient strategies. When children receive such praise, they are more likely to embrace challenges and persist in the face of setbacks (Mueller & Dweck, 1998). Similarly, when children fail, parents may talk to them about what they can learn from the experience, how they can study their mistakes to improve, and how they might ask for help. Over time, these practices can help children embrace learning and growth rather than superiority (Haimovitz & Dweck, 2016). Encouraging children to reflect on their growth (e.g., how their skills have improved) raises their

self-esteem and sparks their desire for self-improvement without triggering narcissistic strivings for superiority (Gürel et al., 2020).

Unconditional Regard

Overvaluing parents may foster narcissism by cultivating *fragility*. They can do so by making their regard conditional on the child living up to their narcissistic standards. Overvaluing parents state, "I would find it disappointing if my child was just a 'regular' child" (Brummelman, Thomaes, Nelemans, Orobio de Castro, & Bushman, 2015, p. 678). Indeed, when the child stands out from others, overvaluing parents may feel proud, basking in the child's reflected glory. However, when the child is just "regular," overvaluing parents may become disappointed or even hostile (see Wetzel & Robins, 2016). Consequently, narcissistic children may infer that their worth hinges on them meeting their parents' standards (Tracy et al., 2009), leading them to attribute successes and failures to their whole selves (Lewis, 1992). Although causal evidence on the link between conditional regard and the development of narcissism is lacking, correlational research shows that children who experienced conditional regard from their parents displayed more narcissistic traits, such as self-aggrandizement after success and self-devaluation after failure (Assor & Tal, 2012).

By contrast, parents may foster self-esteem by cultivating *robustness*. They can do so by giving children unconditional regard. This does not mean that parents lavish their children with praise no matter what they do; rather, it means that parents accept children for who they are, even when the children fail (Harter, Marold, Whitesell, & Cobbs, 1996). For example, when children misbehave, parents may express unconditional regard by correcting children's behavior while continuing to be warm and accepting toward them as a person (Kernis et al., 2000). Similarly, when children work toward an achievement, parents may express unconditional regard by valuing children regardless of the outcome of their efforts. When parents express such unconditional regard, children feel more connected to their true selves (Harter et al., 1996) and have higher as well as more stable self-esteem (Kernis et al., 2000). Extending these findings, in a randomized intervention, children were invited to reflect on times when they were accepted and valued by others unconditionally (Brummelman et al., 2014). Three weeks later, children received their first report card of the school year. Without the intervention, children who received low grades felt ashamed; with it, these painful feelings faded. Thus, unconditional regard made children's feelings about themselves more robust.

Discussion

The tripartite model posits that parents can raise self-esteem without breeding narcissism by providing children with realistic feedback (rather than inflated praise), focusing on growth (rather than on outperforming others), and giving unconditional regard

(rather than regard that is conditional). The model focuses on the independent effects of these practices, but joint effects are certainly possible. For example, parents' realistic feedback may be most effective in raising self-esteem when paired with unconditional regard, teaching children that critical feedback on their *behavior* does not signal lack of regard for them as a *person*.

Although evidence for these three classes of socialization experiences has been accumulating, the field faces three major challenges. First, the bulk of the literature has relied on subjective reports of socialization experiences. We call for observational and experience sampling methods to track socialization experiences in children's everyday lives. Second, most research is cross-sectional or longitudinal. We call for experiments that examine causal effects of socialization experiences. Third, no interventions have sought to change socialization practices to raise children's self-esteem without breeding narcissism. We call for research into the effectiveness of parenting interventions that teach realistic feedback, a focus on growth, and unconditional regard. By addressing these challenges, the field can build a more precise understanding of what does—and does not—contribute to children's development of healthy self-esteem.

LOOKING AHEAD

The tripartite model generates new directions for research on self-esteem interventions, the heterogeneity of narcissism and self-esteem, and the sociocultural foundations of narcissism and self-esteem.

Interventions

Our model can be used to rethink self-esteem interventions and better understand their effectiveness. Our model suggests that interventions can raise self-esteem by targeting its pillars—realism, growth, and robustness. A challenge is that parents of narcissistic children, who are most in need of such interventions, are often narcissistic themselves (Brummelman, Thomaes, Nelemans, Orobio de Castro, & Bushman, 2015; Miller & Campbell, 2008). Given their inflated views of themselves and their children, narcissistic parents may believe they do not need intervention. Interventions can circumvent these concerns by changing parenting through nudges, such as text messages suggesting short, simple, specific activities for parents to do with their children (York, Loeb, & Doss, 2019). These nudges, even as they change how parents behave, may not be seen as interventions and therefore may engage even narcissistic parents.

Heterogeneity

Our model can unravel the heterogeneity of narcissism and self-esteem. For example, narcissism can be manifested in both grandiose and vulnerable ways (Derry et al., 2019). From the perspective of the tripartite model, both manifestations are marked by striving for superiority, but may differ in terms of illusion and fragility. Would vulnerable narcissism be

characterized less by illusion and more by fragility than its grandiose counterpart, as initial evidence indicates (Derry et al., 2019)? If so, would inflated praise be more likely to predict grandiose narcissism and conditional regard be more likely to predict vulnerable narcissism? Addressing these questions will help us understand why grandiose and vulnerable narcissism, despite their shared foundation, manifest differently.

Sociocultural Foundations

Our model can examine the sociocultural foundations of narcissism and self-esteem. Narcissism is more common in Western cultures than in other cultures because these cultures embrace individualism (Thomaes & Brummelman, 2016). Parents' understanding of individualism reflects the specific needs, values, beliefs, and concerns of their local worlds (Kusserow, 1999). Working-class and low-income parents often adopt *hard individualism*, teaching their children to be tough and resilient in a world of scarcity. Middle- and upper-class parents often adopt *soft individualism*, helping children cultivate their unique talents and abilities in a world of opportunity—a process known as *concerted cultivation* (Lareau, 2011). Unsurprisingly, middle- and upper-class parents are more likely to cultivate narcissism in their children than are working-class or low-income parents (Martin, Côté, & Woodruff, 2016). Do these parents do so by lavishing children with praise, comparing them favorably to others who are less well-off, or making approval conditional on worldly successes? Also, are these class-based practices more common in unequal societies, where parents are more concerned about their children's relative standing? To address these questions, researchers need to expand their methodological repertoire because most studies are monocultural and include predominantly Western middle-class participants.

CONCLUSION

Raising children's self-esteem has become an important goal for parents throughout Western society. Scholars and policymakers have long feared that, in raising children's self-esteem excessively, parents may have risked turning them into narcissists (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003). However, evidence indicates that narcissism and self-esteem are more distinct than previously thought. Our model shows that narcissism and self-esteem are built on distinct pillars and that it is possible to raise children's self-esteem without breeding narcissism. We hope our model not only provides researchers with a framework to study the origins and nature of narcissism and self-esteem but also helps parents build a strong foundation for their children's self-esteem.

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