

Literature Review: Understanding Pathological Narcissism

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Research into pathological narcissism has advanced the understanding of narcissistic traits, interpersonal relationships, and functional impairment. Such narcissistic manifestations may have several different causes.

This review aims to evaluate the currently available literature concerning the plausible risk factors of pathological narcissism.

Review of available literature and studies from National Center for Biotechnological Information and Research Gate using the keywords: pathological narcissism, risk factors, developmental abnormalities, personality development.

We highlighted that pathological narcissism is an outcome of genetic predisposition and certain gene-environment interactions. Shrunken hippocampus and amygdala reduced grey matter in cortex, innately elevated sense of grandiosity and entitlement put some individuals at a greater risk of exhibiting narcissistic traits than others. Persistent childhood trauma at the hands of narcissistic caregivers, emotional neglect, and inability to mirror other individuals adversely affect the emergence of expression, understanding and regulation of emotions later in life.

specific phobia (27.4%), PTSD (25.7%), alcohol dependence (30.6%) and borderline personality disorder (37.0%). Mild association with schizophrenia has also been reported by psychiatrists and psychotherapists. These findings highlight the importance of controlling NPD and associated psychiatrist disorders that are highly comorbid with each other [3].

Few studies have also probed the impact on individuals sharing close ties with pathological narcissists. Grief, burden, mental health, and coping styles were analyzed in 683 participants (romantic partners (77.8%), mothers (8.5%) or other family members (10.0%)) and the findings suggested significant interpersonal impact as depression was noted in 69% and anxiety disorders in 82% of the sample. However, the need for future clinical, epidemiological, and genetically informed studies persists to better understand NPD [4].

Methods

This literature review identifies the causes of pathological narcissism in light of available studies (systemic reviews, literature reviews, narrative reviews, and meta-analysis), psychoanalytic theories, online blogs and articles by psychologist, psychiatrists, psychotherapists and victims of narcissistic abuse.

Population

Two population categories, early childhood (3-8 yrs) and early adulthood (20-40 yrs) have been addressed in this review. The primary reason for this was that early childhood is characterized by physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development of an individual; thus, experiences at this age play a significant role in personality development. On the contrary, in early adulthood relativistic thinking enables young people to acknowledge complexities of life and build relationships [5-7].

Search strategy

An extensive literature review was conducted on PubMed, Research Gate, National Center for Biotechnological Information and Psychology Today using search strings: ((“Child” OR “Pediatric”) OR “Adult”) AND (“Pathological Narcissism” OR “Narcissistic Personality Disorder”) AND (“Parental neglect” OR “Childhood neglect”) AND (“Grey Matter NPD” OR “Grey matter abnormalities in NPD”) AND (“Personality development”) AND (“psychotherapy”). All the articles were downloaded in Mendeley Reference Manager and non-duplicate articles were screened [8-10].

Selection criteria

Inclusion:

- All the articles defining pathological narcissism were included.
- All the articles addressing unhealthy parenting and NPD were included.
- All stats for association of NPD with other mental health problems were included.
- Articles and blogs generated by google search for mentioned keywords were used to increase depth of review.

Exclusion: All articles addressing pathological narcissism considering generalized mental disorders or cluster B personality disorders were excluded.

Outcomes: Causes of narcissistic personality disorder range in multiple dimensions from pathophysiological changes in brain's grey matter and genetic predisposition to emotional abuse and parental neglect from caregivers [11].

Causes of pathological narcissism: As differential psychology emphasizes the ways in which individuals differ in their behaviors and processes that underlie it, risk factors for pathological narcissism are complex and varied. However, studies have been able to link biological and psychosocial influences on the manifestation of pathological narcissism.

Pathophysiology

A study by Carz Schulez and colleagues compared Grey Matter (GM) volumes of narcissists to global brain tissue volumes. On magnetic imaging significant reduction was noted in left anterior insular regions, bilateral superior and middle frontal gyrus. The brain analysis also showed smaller GM volume in the fronto-paralimbic brain compromising the rostral and median cingulate cortex. This folded GM plays a crucial role not only in conscious awareness and empathy but also assists thinking and reasoning [12].

Maltreatment may permanently damage certain brain regions, as these broken children grow up to live devastating lives. Brain scans yielded damaged hippocampus (role in learning and memory formation) and amygdala (control of emotions). Overstimulation shrinks the hippocampus and amygdala, adversely affecting the narcissists' abilities to handle emotions, build healthy relationships and recognize their true self (The Neuroscience of Narcissism and Narcissistic Abuse | CPTSDfoundation.Org, n.d.).

Genetics

Several behavioural genetic methodologies have linked neurotransmitter pathways especially in the serotonergic and dopaminergic systems to personality disorders. A total of 304 pairs of twins in China completed the Narcissistic Grandiosity Scale and Psychological Entitlement Scale; the findings of which suggest biological vulnerability. Grandiosity (23%) and entitlement (35%) heritable. However, holistic review of other non-environmental influences encourages us to keep both the interpersonal and intrapersonal dimensions of narcissism in consideration (Figure 1).

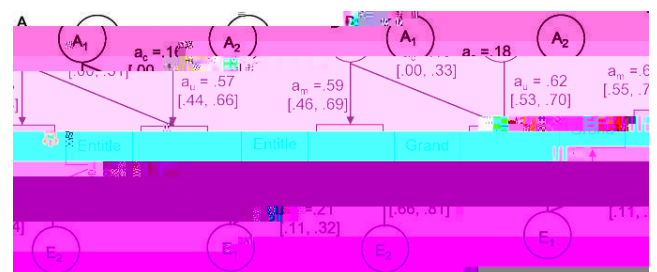


Figure 1. Path diagram illustrating the bivariate genetic model.

Psycho-social

Parental Neglect and Emotional Abuse: Neglect is the absence of support and could be categorized into 4 primary types (physical, medical, educational, and emotional) (What Are the 4 Types of Child Neglect? n.d.). Emotional regulation primary caregiver's mirroring

