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NARCISSISTIC MOTHERHOOD AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SELF IN CHILDREN

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ABSTRACT

Background: Maternal narcissism has been increasingly recognized as a significant factor influencing the psychological development of children. Early exposure to narcissistic parenting may disrupt attachment processes, emotional regulation, and the formation of a coherent sense of self. Children may face inconsistent caregiving, emotional invalidation, and conditional acceptance, which create a challenging developmental environment.

Methods: This narrative review synthesizes current empirical and theoretical research examining the effects of narcissistic maternal behaviors on child development. Key mechanisms were analyzed, including insecure attachment, development of a “false self,” parentification, and intergenerational transmission of maladaptive patterns.

Results: Children raised in environments characterized by maternal narcissism are more likely to develop insecure attachment styles, heightened reliance on external validation, and difficulties in regulating emotions. Adaptive strategies such as the formation of a “false self” may allow short-term coping but often limit authentic self-expression and long-term psychological well-being. Parentification adds additional emotional burden, as children assume caregiving roles prematurely, affecting autonomy and identity formation. Evidence also indicates that maladaptive relational patterns may be transmitted across generations, perpetuating vulnerabilities in self-concept and interpersonal functioning.

Conclusions: Maternal narcissistic traits exert multifaceted and lasting effects on the development of identity, emotional regulation, and relational competence. Early relational experiences play a central role in shaping these outcomes, highlighting the importance of interventions that promote autonomy, emotional resilience, and a coherent sense of self. Future longitudinal research is needed to clarify developmental trajectories and identify protective factors that mitigate the impact of narcissistic parenting.

KEYWORDS

Narcissistic Motherhood, Self-Development, Attachment, Child Psychology, Parentification, Emotional Regulation

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Introduction

Narcissism as a psychological construct has long been a subject of interest in both clinical and personality research. Contemporary approaches emphasize its complexity, describing it as a continuum that includes both adaptive and maladaptive traits, such as an excessive focus on the self, a strong need for admiration, and limited empathy (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Campbell & Miller, 2011). While much of the research has focused on individual functioning, increasing attention is being paid to the interpersonal consequences of narcissistic traits, particularly within family relationships.

The parent–child relationship, and especially the role of the mother as the primary attachment figure, is central to a child’s psychological development. Classical theories of attachment and psychoanalytic perspectives highlight the importance of early interactions in shaping emotional regulation, a sense of security, and the development of the self (Bowlby, 1969; Winnicott, 1965; Kohut, 1971). Consistent, responsive, and empathetic caregiving supports the development of a coherent and authentic sense of self, whereas disruptions in this relationship may lead to significant developmental difficulties.

In this context, narcissistic motherhood emerges as a particularly relevant phenomenon. Mothers with pronounced narcissistic traits may struggle to recognize and respond adequately to their child’s emotional needs, often engaging in relationships characterized by control, conditional acceptance, and emotional inconsistency. Such dynamics can significantly influence how the child develops a sense of identity and autonomy (Ronningstam, 2005; Lamkin & Miller, 2015).

One of the most critical areas affected is the development of the self. Under conditions of insufficient emotional attunement, children may develop a “false self” that conforms to the expectations of the caregiver at the expense of authentic self-expression (Winnicott, 1965). Furthermore, insecure attachment patterns may result in emotional dysregulation, unstable self-esteem, and difficulties in interpersonal relationships later in life (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007; Schore, 2003). In some cases, role reversal or parentification occurs, with the child assuming emotional responsibilities typically associated with the parent (Chase, 1999; Jurkovic, 1997).

Despite growing interest in narcissistic parenting, there remains a lack of integrative analyses focusing specifically on its impact on the development of the self in children. Existing studies often address isolated aspects of psychological functioning without considering the broader developmental context.

The aim of this article is to review the existing literature on narcissistic motherhood and its impact on the development of the self in children, with particular attention to underlying psychological mechanisms and long-term consequences.

Methodology

This article adopts a narrative review approach, focusing on the analysis of scientific literature related to narcissistic parenting and the development of the self in children. The aim was to identify and synthesize key theoretical perspectives and empirical findings relevant to the impact of maternal narcissistic traits on child psychological functioning.

The literature search was conducted using publicly available databases, including Google Scholar and PsycINFO. The review included publications in English from 1965 to 2025, allowing for the integration of both classical theoretical works and contemporary empirical studies. The search was based on keywords such as *narcissistic parenting*, *maternal narcissism*, *development of the self*, *attachment*, *parent–child relationship*, and *emotional development*.

Included sources consisted of peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, and edited volumes directly addressing narcissism in the context of parent–child relationships or child psychological development. Popular science publications and studies lacking methodological rigor were excluded.

The selected literature was analyzed qualitatively, focusing on recurring themes, psychological mechanisms, and relationships between maternal narcissistic traits and the development of the self in children. The narrative synthesis approach allowed for the integration of multiple theoretical frameworks, including psychoanalytic theory, attachment theory, and contemporary developmental psychology.

It should be noted that this approach involves certain limitations, including potential subjectivity in interpretation and the absence of a fully systematic selection procedure.

Results

5.1 Characteristics of Narcissistic Mothers

Research shows that women with pronounced narcissistic traits often struggle with empathy and have a heightened need for validation. Their interactions with children tend to revolve around the parent's own emotional goals, frequently treating the child as an extension of the self or as a tool for maintaining self-esteem. Such dynamics are further complicated by emotional unpredictability, with patterns of alternating idealization and devaluation, creating an unstable and inconsistent environment that can affect the child's emotional and psychological development (Ronningstam, 2005; Lamkin & Miller, 2015; Horton, 2011).

5.2 Development of the Self

Parental behaviors characterized by limited emotional attunement can profoundly influence the formation of identity. When consistent responsiveness is lacking, children may develop a fragmented or externally oriented sense of self. The notion of a "false self" captures an adaptive strategy in response to unmet emotional needs and environmental pressures (Winnicott, 1965). Similarly, deficiencies in early mirroring interactions can hinder the development of a stable and cohesive identity (Kohut, 1971). Contemporary approaches highlight the importance of mentalization and affect regulation as key processes supporting healthy self-organization (Fonagy et al., 2002; Stern, 1985).

5.3 Attachment Patterns

Children exposed to maternal behaviors marked by emotional inconsistency and conditional responsiveness are at increased risk of developing insecure attachment patterns. When a caregiver prioritizes their own emotional needs over the child's cues, the child struggles to form stable expectations regarding support and reliability, which undermines the development of a secure base. This early relational instability can have far-reaching effects on emotional development and the capacity to form healthy interpersonal connections.

Insecure attachment can manifest in several ways, most notably as anxious or avoidant styles. Children with anxious attachment tend to display heightened sensitivity to perceived rejection and a strong need for reassurance, reflecting persistent uncertainty about the availability and responsiveness of their caregiver. Avoidantly attached children, in contrast, may suppress emotional expression and cultivate self-reliance as a defensive strategy, downplaying their attachment needs in response to inconsistent emotional support. These adaptations, while functional in the short term, often carry long-term costs for emotional health and relational functioning.

The implications extend beyond childhood. Individuals with insecure attachment histories frequently face challenges in forming stable, satisfying relationships in adolescence and adulthood, including difficulties establishing trust, managing intimacy, and maintaining personal boundaries. They may also exhibit heightened emotional reactivity or difficulty regulating internal states, reflecting the lingering impact of early relational stress. Importantly, these outcomes are often intertwined with other developmental consequences of disrupted parenting, such as the emergence of a "false self" or premature assumption of caregiving roles, creating a complex pattern of vulnerabilities (Bowlby, 1969; Ainsworth, 1978; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).

Overall, the evidence underscores the central role of early relational experiences in shaping both the capacity for secure attachment and the broader development of self-regulation and relational competence. Understanding these dynamics is essential for interpreting the long-term effects of maternal narcissism on psychological development.

5.4 Emotional and Psychological Outcomes

Exposure to parenting characterized by emotional inconsistency and conditional acceptance is consistently linked to a broad range of emotional and psychological difficulties. Children raised in such environments frequently experience chronic anxiety, pervasive feelings of shame, and unstable self-esteem. These outcomes arise from the lack of consistent emotional attunement, which undermines the development of a coherent sense of self and internal security. As a result, individuals often become highly reliant on external validation while simultaneously grappling with internalized feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt (Barry et al., 2003; Brummelman et al., 2016).

Early disruptions in affect regulation are another common consequence. Children may develop maladaptive coping strategies, including emotional suppression, hypervigilance to the moods of caregivers, or overcompensation through achievement, compliance, or perfectionistic behaviors. Over time, these adaptive

strategies can become ingrained patterns, contributing to persistent difficulties in regulating emotions, establishing healthy relationships, and maintaining a stable self-concept (Schoe, 2003).

These psychological outcomes are closely intertwined with other developmental effects of narcissistic parenting. The emergence of a “false self,” for example, enables the child to meet parental expectations and maintain conditional acceptance, yet it simultaneously constrains authentic self-expression and emotional awareness. Similarly, experiences of parentification intensify these challenges, as the child assumes responsibility for managing the parent’s emotional states, which can delay the development of autonomy, self-directed emotional regulation, and independent decision-making (Chase, 1999; Jurkovic, 1997).

Taken together, the evidence indicates that the emotional and psychological consequences of these parenting patterns are complex and far-reaching. They affect not only the internal organization of the self but also the capacity to form and maintain emotionally healthy interpersonal relationships, often extending into adolescence and adulthood. Understanding these dynamics is essential for both clinical intervention and preventive strategies aimed at mitigating the long-term impact of early relational disruptions.

5.5 Transmission of Narcissistic Traits

Research indicates that certain maladaptive personality traits may be passed from one generation to the next, with children internalizing patterns of thought, behavior, and relational strategies observed in their caregivers. One pathway for this transmission is modeling, in which the child unconsciously adopts ways of interacting and coping demonstrated by the parent. Another mechanism is compensatory adaptation: the child may develop heightened self-focus, perfectionism, or an increased sensitivity to approval as strategies for navigating emotional deprivation or securing conditional acceptance (Eberly-Lewis et al., 2018; Longobardi et al., 2016; Cui, 2023).

These internalized patterns can shape emerging identity and social functioning. For instance, the child may come to rely heavily on external validation, prioritizing others’ expectations over authentic self-expression, which reinforces dependence on interpersonal feedback for emotional regulation. When combined with other developmental outcomes of dysfunctional parenting—such as insecure attachment, the emergence of a “false self,” and premature caregiving responsibilities—these tendencies can contribute to persistent cycles of relational difficulties and identity disturbances.

Importantly, intergenerational transmission is not inevitable. Protective factors, such as supportive relationships with other adults, positive peer influences, or early therapeutic interventions, can buffer against these patterns and promote the development of a more cohesive, resilient, and autonomous sense of self. Recognizing both the risks and potential moderating factors is essential for understanding how maladaptive traits may persist or be mitigated across generations.

5.6 Parentification and Role Reversal

Parentification constitutes a profound disruption of the typical parent–child relationship, especially in families where maternal behaviors are dominated by self-focus and emotional inconsistency. In these settings, children may assume caregiving responsibilities, attending to the emotional needs of the parent and managing their moods. This role reversal accelerates psychological maturity and often comes at the expense of developmentally appropriate emotional, social, and cognitive growth (Chase, 1999; Jurkovic, 1997).

The underlying psychological mechanisms include heightened vigilance to the parent’s emotional state, suppression of personal needs, and the cultivation of excessive responsibility. Over time, these patterns can hinder the formation of a coherent, autonomous sense of self, as children learn to prioritize others’ needs over their own. Parentification frequently interacts with other outcomes of maladaptive parenting, such as insecure attachment, the development of a “false self,” and reliance on external validation, amplifying the impact on identity formation and relational functioning.

The effects of parentification often extend well into adulthood. Individuals may struggle with establishing healthy boundaries, experience chronic over-responsibility, encounter emotional exhaustion, or face difficulties in forming and maintaining intimate relationships. While some adaptive capacities—such as empathy and caregiving skills—may develop, the overall imbalance and sustained emotional burden characteristic of these family dynamics tend to produce more detrimental outcomes.

Discussion

The findings indicate that maternal narcissistic traits profoundly influence multiple aspects of child development, particularly the formation and organization of identity. A central mechanism appears to be the disruption of early attachment relationships, arising from limited emotional availability and inconsistent responsiveness. These early relational disturbances can shape long-term patterns of emotional regulation and interpersonal functioning.

From an attachment perspective, inconsistent caregiving fosters insecure relational patterns that may persist into adolescence and adulthood. Psychoanalytic frameworks further highlight the role of inadequate emotional mirroring in the emergence of a “false self,” a strategy that allows children to navigate conditional acceptance but constrains authentic self-expression. Together, these perspectives illustrate how maladaptive parenting can simultaneously affect emotional functioning and the structural development of the self.

Parentification adds another layer of complexity, reflecting asymmetrical relationships in which children assume caregiving responsibilities. Such dynamics can impede autonomy, compromise boundary-setting, and contribute to chronic over-responsibility. Additionally, the potential intergenerational transmission of maladaptive traits underscores how these patterns can be reproduced across generations through modeling or compensatory adaptations.

Clinically, these findings emphasize the importance of addressing early relational experiences in therapeutic settings. Interventions that promote emotional regulation, foster autonomy, and support the development of a coherent sense of self may mitigate some of the long-term consequences of exposure to maladaptive maternal behaviors.

Limitations of this review include its narrative approach and the absence of systematic selection criteria. Future research should employ longitudinal designs, examine cultural and contextual moderators, and explore protective factors that may buffer the negative impact of maladaptive parenting.

Conclusions

This review highlights maternal narcissistic traits as a significant risk factor for disruptions in identity formation and emotional development. Relationships characterized by inconsistency, conditional acceptance, and limited empathy can give rise to insecure attachment, emotional dysregulation, and identity disturbances.

Adaptive strategies such as the emergence of a “false self” may enable short-term coping but restrict authentic self-expression and long-term psychological well-being. Additional mechanisms, including parentification and intergenerational transmission of maladaptive patterns, further complicate developmental trajectories.

These findings underscore the critical role of early relational experiences in shaping the self and suggest important considerations for clinical practice. Supporting the development of autonomy, healthy emotional regulation, and a coherent sense of self is essential. Further research, particularly longitudinal studies, is needed to clarify the processes involved and identify protective factors that may mitigate the impact of maladaptive maternal behaviors.

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