

*Research Paper*

## Explaining the Symptoms of Narcissism Based on the Dimensions of Childhood Trauma and Cognitive Distortion

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### Abstract

Narcissism is a complex trait with negative social consequences. The aim of this study was to investigate narcissism regarding the predictive role of childhood trauma and cognitive distortion. The research design was descriptive correlation. Researchers conducted the study during the first semester of the academic year 2020-2021 in Urmia University, in which 285 students completed a questionnaire regarding narcissism, child abuse, and cognitive distortions, including the short measure of narcissism (NPI-16), Noorbakhsh and Abdullahzadeh and Salar. The results showed that narcissism was positively associated with childhood trauma and cognitive distortion. In multiple regression analysis, childhood trauma and cognitive distortion are also significant contributors to narcissism, with cognitive distortion having the most predictive power. There was evidence that childhood trauma and cognitive distortion play an important role in narcissistic behavior.

**Keywords:** Child trauma; Cognitive distortion; Narcissism

### Introduction

Narcissism is characterized by exaggerated superiority, authoritarianism, and the use of great secretary role models (Gruda, et al., 2021). Meanwhile, childhood trauma has been linked to mental disorders. Violence, abuse, and neglect constitute child trauma (Hardy, et al., 2020). Based on the findings of Bertel, et al. (2020), childhood misbehavior plays a role in the development of vulnerable narcissism and grandiose narcissism. In contrast, cognitive distortion can cause narcissism. A cognitive distortion is a systematic misperception or distortion of information that reflects fundamental misconceptions about the subject, the world, and the future (Delpozo, et al., 2018). According to Jonason, et al. (2019), people with dark personalities have an external psychological bias toward issues. Regardless of its subclinical stage, narcissism is associated with a host of interpersonal problems, and given the relatively limited perspective of narcissism that has been explored in research to date, this study examines the distinctive role of childhood trauma and cognitive distortion in predicting narcissism in order to identify the most important factors. Thus, the main hypothesis in this study is that: Child trauma components and cognitive distortion components are positively correlated with narcissism.

### Method

A descriptive correlational study was performed for the current study. In the first semester of the academic year 2020-2021, all students at Urmia universities were targeted for this study. The

research questionnaires were completed online by 285 students chosen by using available sampling methods. SPSS-22 software was used to analyze the data based on descriptive indices, Pearson correlation coefficient tests, and multiple regression analyses.

The following scales were used in the current study:

**Ames Narcissistic Personality inventory (NPI-16):** The questionnaire is a 16-item questionnaire developed by Ames et al. (2006) to measure narcissism. There is an average retest reliability coefficient of 0.85 reported by the main test manufacturers. In the current study, the internal consistency of the whole scale was 0.70.

**Child Abuse Questionnaire (self-report scale):** The questionnaire is a 25-item questionnaire designed by Nourbakhsh in 2012 to assess child abuse. The content validity of the questionnaire was evaluated by two clinical psychologists and a general psychologist in Nourbakhsh's (2012) study. Also, in Nourbakhsh (2012), Cronbach's alpha internal consistency was 0.69 for physical child abuse, 0.72 for child sexual abuse, 0.70 for neglect, 0.82 for malnutrition, and 0.77 for emotional abuse. In the current study, the internal consistency for the total score of the scale was 0.82.

**Standard questionnaire for measuring cognitive distortions of Abdullahzadeh and Salar:** This 20-item questionnaire was developed by Abdullahzadeh and Salar in 2010 to measure ten dimensions of cognitive distortion. The scale is internally valid and has been validated by Abdullahzadeh and Salar in 2010 on 151 females and 146 males in the Iranian population. It was determined that the internal consistency of the whole scale was 0.80 for males (mean age 25.8) (Kianipour, et al., 2020). In the present study, the internal consistency was 0.84.

## Results

Analyzing the statistics revealed that out of the 285 study participants, the most were between the ages of 20-21 (33.3) and the fewest were between the ages of 24-25 (10.2). There were 249 females and 36 males in this study (87.4% and 12.6%, respectively). There were also 215 people studying for bachelor's degrees (73.4%), 58 people studying for master's degrees (19.8%) and 12 people studying for doctoral degrees (4.1%). Furthermore, 251 (88.1%) of the respondents were single, while 34 (11.9%) were married.

In Table 1, the correlations between study variables are presented. The Pearson correlation coefficient showed that Physical abuse and neglect components were positively correlated with narcissism. Additionally, the relationship between narcissism and cognitive distortion, as well as the components of overgeneralization, mental filtering, and emotional reasoning, should be better, personalization understood.

**Table 1. Correlation coefficients of research variables and its components**

|                            | Narcissism |                       | Narcissism |
|----------------------------|------------|-----------------------|------------|
| Child trauma (total score) | *0.13      | Mental filter         | **0.33     |
| Physical abuse             | **0.15     | Discounting positives | -0.05      |
| Emotional abuse            | 0.09       | Fortune telling       | 0.07       |
| Sexual abuse               | 0.10       | Catastrophizing       | 0.08       |
| neglect                    | *0.12      | Emotional reasoning   | *0.13      |
| Malnutrition               | 0.08       | should be better      | 0.22**     |

|                                    |        |                 |        |
|------------------------------------|--------|-----------------|--------|
| Cognitive distortion (total score) | **0.24 | Labeling        | 0.06   |
| All-or-nothing thinking            | 0.07   | Personalization | **0.36 |
| Overgeneralization                 | **0.22 |                 |        |

\*\* The relationship is significant at the 99% level.

\* The relationship is significant at the 95% level

Multiple regression in the form of Table 2 indicates that narcissistic regression is significant and predictable when based on childhood trauma and cognitive distortion.

**Table 2. Multiple regression results for predicting narcissism based on childhood trauma and cognitive distortion**

| Model | R    | R Square | F    | Sig         |
|-------|------|----------|------|-------------|
| 1     | 0.54 | 0.29     | 7.50 | <b>0.00</b> |

Results also show that variables associated with child trauma (i.e. beta 0.13, t = 2.19), Physical abuse component (i.e. beta 0.15, t = 2.62), and neglect component (i.e. beta 0.12, t = 1.98) can significantly predict narcissism. Also 0.28% of the variance of narcissism can be explained by cognitive distortion subcomponents at the significant level of  $p < 0.005$ . Therefore, the components of overgeneralization with beta 0.22 (t = 3.87), mental filter with beta 0.33 (t = 5.80), and emotional reasoning with beta 0.13 (t = 2.28), Personalization and should be better has a beta of 0.36 (t = 6.51) and a beta of 0.22 (t = 3.87) in predicting narcissism.

## Discussion and Conclusion

Results of the study support the prediction of narcissism based on childhood trauma and agree with the research of (Bertel, et al. (2020); Sar, et al. (2021)). The study also pointed out that cognitive distortions play a role in predicting narcissism, and in line with other findings (Jonason, et al. (2019); Kwiatkowska, et al. (2019)). As an explanation, childhood trauma and cognitive distortions may cause negative effects like empathy and exploitation, as well as provide the basis for narcissism. Narcissism usually occurs in individuals who have experienced childhood trauma and have a high level of cognitive distortion. The current study has limitations, including non-clinical sampling, a cross-sectional design, and the use of self-assessment tools. Psychologists are suggested to provide psychological services to people with a history of childhood trauma and cognitive distortion to prevent and improve narcissism.

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## Conflicts of interest

The authors did not have any conflict of interest.

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