

**Parents' narcissism and aggression against children:  
When parents attribute misfortune to their child.**

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## Abstract

Narcissists are more likely than non-narcissists to attack a person who threatens their self-evaluation, because of the vulnerability of the self-evaluation (Baumeister, Smart, & Borden, 1996). Based on this model, it was hypothesized that those parents who are more narcissistic would more commit aggressive acts toward their children in cases where they intensely attribute to the child interference with their own ability to demonstrate their work performance (i.e., their self-esteem feels threatened). A hierarchical regression analysis of the self-report data from 626 sampled parents supported the hypothesis: among high attribution (i.e., highly blaming) parents, the more narcissistic reported more aggressive acts toward their children; in contrast, among the middle or the low attribution parents, narcissism did not significantly correlate with reported aggressive acts. The moderator effects of attribution on narcissists' aggression toward their children were discussed.

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Recently, the eyes of child specialists have focused on the aggressive behavior of parents toward their children. Although parents usually regard such aggressive behavior as purposive acts for home training (e.g., so-called “touch love”), some of them have often overdone it. Specialists now warn teachers, lawyers, and polices whenever they find extreme cases that could be called child abuse.

Information about the risk factors of child abuse has accumulated in many countries. As a result, WHO schematized a set of multilevel risk factors of child abuse (WHO, 1999). This report stressed that the different levels of risk factors, including individual, family, and community/society, overlap in complex ways. Social psychologists concerned about this topic have reported the notification or intervention methods (Christy & Voigt, 1994; Hoefnagels & Zwikker, 2001) and the attributional style of abusive parents (Graham, Weiner, Cobb, & Henderson, 2001). However, in light of widespread concern about this problem, there seem to be few papers published to date.

#### Narcissism and aggression

Narcissistic personality is currently a hot topic among aggression researchers. Although the concept of “narcissism” was developed theoretically in the field of psychoanalysis (Freud, 1911, 1914; Kohut, 1971), some researchers have tried to capture it in terms of psychometrics. Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI) (Raskin & Terry, 1984) is frequently used by many researches to examine the relationship of narcissism to aggression (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Bushman, Bonacci, van Dijk, & Baumeister, 2003; Robins & Beer, 2001; Wallace & Baumeister, 2002; Rhodewalt & Morf, 1998; Jordan, Spencer, Zanna, Hoshino-Browne, & Correll, 2003).

Baumeister et al. (1996) proposed a mechanism for the aggressive behavior of narcissists. Reviewing articles about criminal, aggressive behavior, and violence, they concluded that people whose self-esteem is highly vulnerable are more likely to commit aggressive acts toward a person who threatens their self-esteem. According to their argument, an individual’s self-esteem may be vulnerable when it is unrealistically heightened and lacks sufficient substantial evidence as a basis for the altitude. They suggested that narcissists are persons who typically have vulnerability in their high self-esteem. Findings that support this model have accumulated rapidly (e.g., Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Bushman et al., 2003).

Generally, vulnerable self-esteem is threatened easily by someone who interferes with demonstrating one’s ability, especially when the vulnerable person is in a high-performance environment. According to Baumeister et al. s’ (1996) model, narcissists in such an environment may feel anger and retaliate against the person who interferes with their vulnerable self-esteem. In this study, we assume that modern Japanese parents generally regard demonstrating one’s ability to work competently as an important part of life, and also that they would tend to feel their self-esteem is threatened if they see their children as a nuisance, interfering with their ability to work. Thus, we hypothesized that parental narcissism correlates highly with the aggression toward their children, to the extent that the

parents see their children as a negative factor affecting their attempt to prove their ability to work competently.

#### How can a child threaten a parents' self-esteem?

Parents often have to reduce their work time to care for or nurse their small child, even if they can ask help from nursery schools or kindergartens. In addition, a child may express a wide variety of desire, which can seem as if he/she is intentionally trying to annoy the parents. Although many parents think that caring for a child is one of the greatest pleasures and satisfactions in life, the child will inevitably put fetters on work management. Some of social surveys reveal parental opinion that a child adds to the burden of work. For example, when asked about the drawbacks of child rearing, parents frequently choose items such as "Decrease my own free time (21.6%)" or "I cannot work satisfactorily (12.8%)" (Cabinet Office, 2004).

A recent change in Japan's work environment may explain the social background underpinning these opinions. Companies now motivate parents to work harder, reinforcing the ties between self-worth and on-the-job achievements, as well as exacerbating the public tendency to evaluate a person strictly in terms of his/her work. For example, 55.8% of Japanese companies have introduced an achievement-based wage system and 74.3% of the big companies (i.e., more than a thousand regular workers) have introduced some form of efficiency wage (MHLW, 2004). Furthermore, the National Survey of Lifestyle Preferences (Cabinet Office, 2003) revealed that when workers were asked about the degree to which they felt satisfied that they could 'Work without worrying about losing my job,' half of them answered either "almost dissatisfied (24.3%)" or "slightly not satisfied (29.0%)." This suggests that many working parents currently feel that if they do not perform well, they will suffer a reduction in salary or even be dismissed.

Therefore, we can infer that demonstrating one's work ability seems to be a precondition for working parents in modern Japan. Thus, those parents who think that it is difficult to spare enough time for work due to their child's needs may believe that their child deprives them of the opportunity to prove their work ability. For such parents, the child becomes a threat to their self-esteem.

However, parents tend not to be accurate when assessing the degree of their child's interference. For example, parents who are considered to demonstrate their work ability sufficiently in light of their annual salaries sometimes subjectively feel that they have not shown their ability yet, and thus attribute their imagined insufficiency to the child. In any case, it is difficult to measure how much a child interferes with the parental demonstration of work ability. The degree to which parents regard their child as interference will be affected by the degree to which they think of their child as a threat to their self-esteem.

This study predicts that when parents strongly attribute to their child their lost opportunities to demonstrate their work ability, those parents who are more narcissistic are more likely to commit aggressive acts toward the child as a threat to parental self-esteem. On

the other hand, when parents weakly attribute their lost opportunities to their child, a significant correlation between parental narcissism and aggression toward one's own child will not be found.

## Method

### Participants

First, we selected 550 fathers and 550 mothers who have a child less than 12 years of age, drawn from 38 sampling areas within Iwate Prefecture by a two-stage stratified random sampling method. Then, we sent each person a survey form with a cover letter written by the manager of the Department of Health and Welfare, Iwate Prefectural Government. This letter briefly explained the purpose of the survey, requested them to complete the form, and enclosed a self-addressed stamped envelope so that they could return it to the government office. Of the 1,100 participants who received the form, 362 fathers and 367 mothers returned it. However, 320 fathers and 306 mothers (58.2% and 55.6% of the original sample, respectively) were "substantial participants" who completely answered the four scales we needed in order to test our prediction. Fathers averaged 37.6 years of age and mothers averaged 35.0 years of age. Fathers and mothers had average annual household incomes of 5,280,000 yen and 4,390,000 yen, respectively.

### Measures

NPI-40. The 40-item version of the NPI (Raskin & Terry, 1988) is a widely used measure of narcissism. We translated the original 40 items into Japanese using a back translation method. Alpha coefficient of the scale was  $\alpha = .82$ .

Parental aggression toward the child. We used a self-report measure that assesses a parent's abusive behavior toward the child. It is a 17-item scale that was previously used in a research project conducted by the Center for Child Abuse Prevention in Tokyo (CCAP, 2000). The scale includes a variety of items that can be expressions of abusive behavior (e.g., "Kicking your child," "Pinching some body part of your child," "Not giving food to your child," "Neglecting your child when he/she is crying," and "Using abusive language repeatedly at your child"). Each item was rated on a 4-point scale (1 = never, 2 = sometimes, 3 = often, and 4 = always). Alpha coefficient of the scale was  $\alpha = .76$ . Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations of each item as well as the correlations of the item-totals. The research literature shows evidence of the criterion-related validity of this scale. CCAP (2000) reported that those who were rated high in postpartum depression or dissociative symptoms scored high on this scale, and that mothers who were on probation for child abuse scored higher on this scale than the normal (control) mothers.

Parental attribution of the lost opportunities of showing the ability to the child. Participants were asked to rate the single item, "I could say that I have lost opportunities to demonstrate my ability because of having children," on a 7-point scale (ranging from 1 = I disagree very much to 7 = I agree very much).

Social desirability scale (SDS). Kitamura and Suzuki (1986) translated Crowne and Marlowe's (1960) SDS into Japanese and concluded that the 10-item translated version was sufficient for measuring social desirability. Therefore, we used this version. Alpha coefficient of the Japanese version was  $\alpha = .54$ .

## Results

### Descriptive statistics and correlation among variables

Table 2 presents the mean scale scores. NPI was significantly higher for fathers than for mothers,  $t(624) = 4.44, p < .001$ . Aggression and attribution scores were significantly lower for fathers than for mothers,  $t(624) = -3.62, p < .001, t(624) = -7.26, p < .001$ , respectively. There was no significant difference in the scores of social desirability between fathers and mothers,  $t(624) < 1, n.s.$

Table 3 presents the correlation coefficients among the four scales. Aggression toward the child correlated relatively low with both NPI and parental attribution. Parents with higher social desirability tended to report relatively low aggression and attribution.

### Hierarchical regression analysis of aggression toward child

NPI, attribution score and social desirability score were centered on each scale mean (Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003). Parental gender was dummy coded with 1 = mother and 0 = father. We then calculated first-order (NPI  $\times$  Attribution, NPI  $\times$  Parental Gender, and Attribution  $\times$  Parental Gender) and second-order (NPI  $\times$  Attribution  $\times$  Parental Gender) interaction terms. As shown in Table 4, NPI, Attribution, Social Desirability, Parental Gender were entered into the first step of the regression analysis as main effects, and all of them were significant. The increment of  $R^2$  at the second step was significant. As we expected, this increment reflected the significant interaction effect of NPI  $\times$  Attribution. The increment of  $R^2$  at the third step was not significant.

The significant interaction of NPI  $\times$  Attribution revealed that parental attribution influences the relationship of NPI vis-à-vis aggression toward the child. To determine this interaction, we divided participants into three levels of attribution, high (5 or more points,  $n = 88$ ), middle (2-4 points,  $n = 296$ ), and low (1 point or less,  $n = 242$ ), and conducted single regression analyses of their aggression scores. Figure 1 shows the slope for each attribution level. The slope of the high attribution group is the steepest and its regression coefficient is significant ( $\hat{y} = .164x + 20.7, p < .05, R^2 = .056$ ), suggesting that the more narcissistic were the members of this group the higher was their score of aggression toward their child. No significant regression effect was found for either the middle ( $\hat{y} = .050x + 21.4, n.s., R^2 = .006$ ) or low ( $\hat{y} = .004x + 20.8, n.s., R^2 = .000$ ) attribution groups.

## Discussion

If parents actually lose the opportunity to demonstrate their work ability, they would indeed suffer misfortune. Although it is not clear whether perceiving the loss of opportunity

has a factual basis, this study shows that the extent to which parents attribute “the misfortune” to their child influences the relationship of the parental NPI and aggressive behavior scores. When the attribution (i.e., blame) was high, the more narcissistic parents committed aggressive acts toward the child more frequently. However, for middle or low attribution parents, NPI was not significant in relation to the valence of the parental aggression toward the child. These findings suggest that parental narcissism may not be directly connected to aggression toward children. Rather, narcissistic parents seem to be highly aggressive toward their child only when they intensely attribute their misfortune to the child.

These results are conceptually consistent with that of the Baumeister et al.’s (1996) model. Japanese fathers and mothers today work under a tense situation of uncertain employment and variable compensation; thus, they feel heightened motivation to achieve more in their jobs in order to demonstrate superior work ability. Since the loss of opportunity to demonstrate high performance could be a threat to parental self-esteem, parents who intensely attribute such loss to their child can regard the child as a threat instead of a blessing. Among those who saw their child as a threat to their own self-esteem, the more narcissistic parents showed a higher tendency to commit aggressive acts toward their child (physically or otherwise).

Some previous studies (e.g., Bushman & Baumeister, 1998) directly threatened participants’ self-esteem through a procedure in which another person evaluated them poorly on the basis of an essay they were asked to write. In this situation, the other person was undoubtedly responsible for the poor evaluation. Participants easily identified the source of the threat to their self-esteem. Thus, it is reasonable to conclude that a narcissist’s attack against the person who evaluated them poorly was a retaliation against the source of the threat to their self-esteem.

In this study, however, the source of threat to parental self-esteem was not necessarily their child, because it is uncertain whether the child actually disrupted parental work time. If parents have to reduce their work time to care for their child, one could say that they have lost the opportunity to demonstrate their work ability. However, one cannot say for certain that these parents would have completely proven their work ability even if they had used all their time to work instead of caring for their child. In short, parents who attributed their misfortune to their child were subjective in perceiving him/her as a threat to their self-esteem.

When the source of threat to self-esteem is clear, it is no surprise that narcissistic hostility turns toward it. However, if the source of threat to a narcissist’s self-esteem depends on an attribution that he/she has made, it is possible that the hostility will turn toward any target that is attributed or blamed for the misfortune. The target could be their spouse, the company where they are employed, or the local government. The ambiguity of the situation means that a salient stimulus may easily become the target blamed by the narcissist for

his/her misfortune (Taylor & Fiske, 1978). Since a child occupies a considerable part of parental life space, he/she is naturally salient, and therefore easily perceived as the source of threat to parental self-esteem.

The limitations of the present study must be duly noted. First, it is possible that the results are biased with regard to participants' social desirability. Although we included a social desirability variable into the regression analysis to control for related biases, the 10-item Japanese version of the SDS was not reliable enough because of its low internal consistency. Second, NPI explains no more than 5.6% of the variance in parental aggression in the single regression analysis for high-attribution parents. The remaining variance should be explained by other factors.

Finally, the total score on the aggression scale was relatively low ( $M = 21.4$ ) in comparison to its theoretical range (17.0 - 68.0). Statistical analysis could be affected easily by parents who marked higher score, and thus, one may be concerned about the stability of the present findings. Nonetheless, the low scale mean suggests the possibility that the frequency of parental aggression toward their child was actually low. Many parents who participated in this study never experienced several of the abusive behaviors described in the survey items. The low mean of this aggression scale is welcome from the societal viewpoint, and the reader naturally hopes that the scale accurately reflects the actual situation between modern Japanese parents and their children.

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Table 1

Means and standard deviations for each item of the self-reported measure of aggression toward the child

Item	Mean	S.D.	Item-total correlation
1. Neglecting your child when he/she is crying	1.66	.57	.42
2. Not giving food to your child	1.02	.15	.18
3. Kicking your child	1.12	.34	.50
4. Yelling at your child	2.11	.71	.65
5. Spanking your child	1.49	.59	.57
6. Hitting your child's hand	1.31	.52	.52
7. Hitting your child's head	1.51	.58	.66
8. Hitting your child's face	1.15	.38	.51
9. Pinching some body part of your child	1.10	.32	.36
10. Hitting your child with a something hard	1.12	.32	.50
11. Throwing things at your child	1.14	.37	.56
12. Using abusive language repeatedly at your child	1.32	.53	.54
13. Locking your child in the bathroom or elsewhere	1.07	.27	.41
14. Shutting your child out of the house	1.10	.30	.44
15. Leaving your child alone in the house when you go out	1.22	.47	.33
16. Stripping your child naked for a long time	1.01	.09	.21
17. Biting your child	1.00	.06	.15
Total score	21.44	3.27	-

Table 2

Mean scale scores for father and mother

Scales	Father	Mother
Aggression	20.98(3.22)	21.92(3.25)
NPI	8.86(5.82)	6.95(4.66)
Attribution	2.23(1.45)	3.14(1.71)
Social desirability	5.03(2.19)	4.94(1.91)

Note. Numbers in parentheses are standard deviations.

Table 3

Correlation coefficients among scale scores

Scales	1	2	3	4
1. Aggression	-	.08	.17**	-.21**
2. NPI		-	.03	.02
3. Attribution			-	-.11**
4. Social desirability				-

Note. \*\*  $p < .01$ .

Table 4

## Hierarchical Regression Analysis of aggression toward child

Variable	B	SE B	$\beta$
Step 1			
NPI	.060	.024	.098*
Attribution	.214	.080	.108**
Parental gender	.827	.266	.127**
Social desirability	-.308	.061	-.194**
Step 2			
NPI	.086	.031	.141*
Attribution	.267	.126	.134*
Parental gender	.825	.265	.126*
Social desirability	-.319	.061	-.201*
NPI $\times$ Attribution	.038	.015	.108*
NPI $\times$ Parental gender	-.058	.052	-.059
Attribution $\times$ Parental gender	-.138	.167	-.051

Note. \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*  $p < .05$ .  $R^2 = .083$  for Step 1 ( $p < .001$ );  $\Delta R^2 = .013$  for Step 2 ( $p < .05$ );  $\Delta R^2 = .000$  for Step 3 (n.s.).

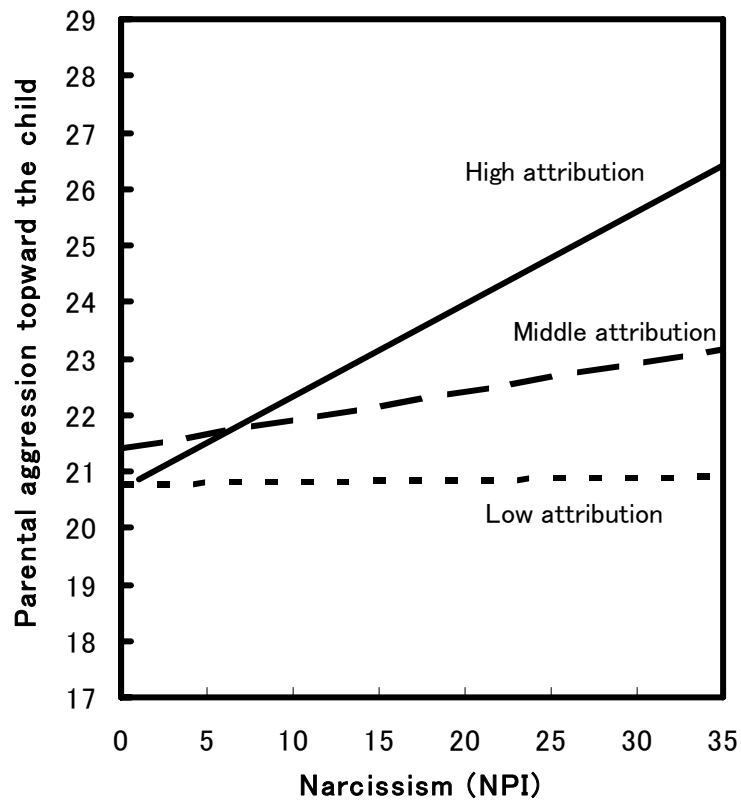


Figure 1. The influence of attribution on the relationship between parental narcissism and aggression toward the child.