

Comparative Study

Narcissistic Personality Traits Among Young Adults with Siblings and Without Siblings: A Comparative Study

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore and compare narcissistic personality traits among young adults (18-25 years) with siblings and those without siblings. A widely believed stereotype suggests that individuals without siblings tend to develop more narcissistic tendencies compared to those who have grown up with one or more siblings. This belief leads to biases against them. This study examined the credibility of this long-held stereotype. A sample of 100 young adults (56 females, 44 males) completed the Narcissistic Admiration and Rivalry Questionnaire, a self-report measure of narcissistic traits. Data analysis was conducted using an independent samples t-test. The results revealed that presence or absence of a sibling did not significantly impact narcissistic personality traits among young adults. Furthermore, no significant gender differences were found, although males scored slightly higher than females. These results provide valuable insights into the understanding of narcissism in young adults, while also challenging the commonly held societal assumptions. Further research with a more extensive and diverse sample is necessary to establish the consensus of these results across different populations.

Keywords: *Narcissistic Traits, Siblings, Comparative Study*

Inquiries into how individuals without siblings differed from those who grew up with siblings stemmed from the initial studies that were conducted on birth order, following Adler's theory in the 20th century, which unanimously yielded the result that only children (& the first born, in some cases) are more narcissistic than the those who had siblings. Such results contributed to the prevalence of the stereotype that 'only children are more narcissistic.' While the more recent researches have yielded no such differences. Amidst these conflicting findings, a discernible gap in current research persists, leading to uncertainty and a lack of consensus. Therefore, there is a need for more thorough and targeted research to address this ambiguity.

According to American Psychological Association, narcissism is 'excessive self-love or egocentrism.' It is characterized by excessive self-absorption, self-centeredness, and a tendency to inflate one's own importance. Individuals with narcissistic traits often harbor an

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inflated sense of grandiosity, wherein they perceive themselves as superior to others. They have an overarching goal of maintaining this grandiose self-image. Those with narcissistic traits are also inclined towards a dominant and manipulative orientation, often treating others with indifference, and exploiting them for personal gains.

A key feature of narcissism is a high focus on self-agency but a diminished sense of communion, which manifests as soaring grandiosity, entitlement, and lack of empathy. (Campbell, Rudich, & Sedikides, 2002). Furthermore, they display a preoccupation with thoughts and fantasies concerning success, power, brilliance, ideal love, or beauty, as well as a tendency to self-aggrandize, which is mirrored in behaviors like boasting and bragging about their own accomplishments.

The concept of narcissism as a personality or character was first articulated by Walder (1925). He suggested that people with narcissistic personality display condescension, superiority, preoccupation with themselves and with admiration, and a marked lack of empathy. In his prior works, Freud did not categorize narcissism as a distinct personality trait. However, in his 1931 essay “Libidinal Types,” he expanded on Walder’s concepts, introducing the concept of a narcissistic libidinal or character type. He described a narcissist as someone who is independent, not easily intimidated, outgoing, highly active, and incapable of forming deep emotional bonds in relationships.

In 1939, Karen Horney expanded upon the concept of narcissism as a personality characteristic by describing its various manifestations. She differentiated between pathological narcissism and a healthy self-esteem. Horney also proposed that narcissists do not struggle with excessive self-love but with an inability to express affection towards others, including the authentic aspects of their own self, thereby emphasizing the protective nature of pathological grandiosity in narcissism.

Following a similar line of research, Reich (1960) suggested that in order to seek refuge from their fluctuating self-worth, they retreat into an elaborate fantasy world where they perceive themselves as secure, powerful, and superior, rather than vulnerable and powerless. She also noticed that narcissists have little to no tolerance for ambiguity, mediocrity, or failure, i.e., they either see themselves as perfect or as total failures.

While Narcissistic Personality Disorder is its extreme form; normal, healthy levels of narcissism also exist in the general population. Social personality psychologists view narcissism as a continuous trait, ranging continuously from very low to very high. This dimensional approach serves a bridge between regular individual variations and dysfunctional construct. The widely used Narcissistic Personality Inventory, developed in 1979 by Ruskin & Hall, also measures narcissism across a spectrum.

Role of parenting in development of narcissism

The views on how parenting leads to the development of narcissism are varied, some researchers hold the view that it develops as a consequence of parental overvaluation, while others believe that it develops due to the child’s attempts to deal with lack of parental regard.

According to Kernberg (1967, 1970, 1975, 1992), narcissism can stem from parental rejection, devaluation, and an emotionally invalidating environment. His theory suggests

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that to deal with such experiences, child defensively withdraws and forms a pathologically grandiose self-image. Consequently, leading to a continual craving for admiration and stimulation.

According to Kohut (1971, 1977) childhood grandiosity is considered normal during a specific developmental phase, as children aim to mirror idealized parental figures for admiration. This early grandiose self contributes towards a balanced self-concept. But if it is not modulated and integrated properly into one's self-concept, due to parental indifference and rejection, it can result in pathological narcissism. Such individuals seek external validation and support to manage their self-esteem and identity concerns in adulthood.

The object relations viewpoint suggests that narcissism can arise when parents use their children to fulfil personal experiences. Rothstein (1979) notes that parental behavior is driven by two competitive motives: a self-focused one and the other that is child-focused or empathic system. A self-centered parenting approach may result in children striving for approval and affection based on meeting their parents' unrealistic expectations, thus fostering the development of a narcissistic self.

Millon's social learning perspective suggests that children learn about themselves and others by observing their parents' actions. He proposed that narcissism results from parental overvaluation, where excessive affection is given and boundaries imposed on children are scarce. Consequently, the child internalizes the belief that they are entitled to special treatment, akin to what they received from their parents, leading to higher likelihood of developing narcissistic traits.

Only Child Syndrome

In a study titled "Peculiar and Exceptional Children" conducted by E.W. Bohannon, under the supervision of G. Stanley Hall, in the year 1896; the researchers aimed to categorize school children into advantageous, neutral, and disadvantageous categories. They found out that only children, were more likely to exhibit peculiarities and were put into the "disadvantageous category." These children were reported to have poorer health, irregular school attendance, and difficulties in social interaction. They were often perceived as being spoiled, indulged and precocious. Hall has widely quoted that being an only child was a "disease in itself...because of the undue attention he/she demands and usually receives, we commonly find the only child jealous, selfish, egotistical, dependent, aggressive, domineering, or quarrelsome." (Fenton, 1928).

The only-child syndrome theory states that the only child is highly pampered as they have the sole attention of their parents. As a result, they get accustomed to getting all their needs and wants fulfilled and, in the future, this makes them insensitive towards other people. It is also believed that, due to the absence of interaction with a sibling while growing up, they are generally hypersensitive to criticism, lonely and antisocial. Such claims are also made in the birth order theories.

Consequently, they have been subjected to many stereotypes over the years, including being labelled as spoiled, selfish, aggressive, maladjusted, bossy, lonely & bratty. Following the implementation of one-child policy in China in the year 1979, they were assigned a distinctive label: "Little Emperors" or "Xiao Huangdi". It is also believed that they are overly-dependent on their parents and are typically excessively sheltered.

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These stereotypes persist, despite evidence indicating that only children often display well-behaved, independent, mature, perfectionist, composed, intelligent, and highly motivated characteristics (T. Falbo, 1986). Recent studies have emphasized the favorable attributes of an only child, indicating that despite some distinctions, they share similar traits with children who have siblings. Nonetheless, there remains a prevailing belief among parents that having a second child is necessary to guarantee their holistic growth. A comparison between the two groups can allow us to assess the credibility of the prevalent stereotypes.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Research on the impact of sibling presence or absence on the development of narcissistic personality traits has yielded divergent findings. Early studies posit that individuals without siblings may be more susceptible to developing narcissistic traits, while contemporary research argues that such differences are inconclusive, emphasizing the need to consider various interconnected factors.

Adler (1946, 1927) proposed the theory of birth order, which was an entirely different concept from his initial realm of psychoanalysis. He stated that a child's birth order in the family constellation influences their overall development; as a child enters a family, the entire family dynamic and behavioral patterns undergo a transformation. He coined the term 'ordinal birth order,' where he described five basic ordinal birth order positions: the only child, the oldest child, the second child of only two children, the middle child, and the youngest child. In context of only children, he believed that due to the absence of any sibling, they are strongly influenced by their parents, are typically spoiled by their parents, and never learn to cooperate with others, which can cause interpersonal difficulties in the future if the person is not universally liked or admired.

While studying the psychological effects of World War-II on the "baby boomer generation" Forer (1976) concluded that the effect of birth order can also be seen on the exhibitionistic, self-indulgent, attention-seeking, and nonconformist behaviors.

Millon & Everly (1985) in their book 'Personality and its disorders', have theorized that 'only children' are more prone to developing narcissistic characteristics. Many other researches have also stated that first-borns and the only children are more aggressive, dominant, low on measures of affiliation and less empathetic. (Perlin & Crater, 1983; Stotland & Dunn, 1963)

John M. Curtis & Donald R. Cowell (1993) conducted a study in which they used Narcissistic Personality Inventory & Millon Clinical Multiaxial Inventory; two standardized and highly used measures of narcissism, to find a relationship between birth order and narcissism, it was noted that first-borns and only children had higher narcissism scores on both the measures, as compared to all the later born counterparts.

To ensure a better implementation of one-child family planning policy in China, Jiao, Ji & Jing (1986) investigated the socialization processes of only and "sibling children. The results, based on 180 matched pairs of only and sibling children, revealed that only children are more egocentric, whereas sibling children possess the positive qualities of persistence, cooperation, and peer prestige.

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Cai, Kwan & Sedikides (2012) in their research paper titled, “A sociocultural approach to narcissism”, made an attempt to find out how the changing sociodemographic factors (e.g., size of a family, socioeconomic status, rural-urban lifestyle etc.) have led the youth to be more self-centered. The study was conducted on a sample of 10,655 from China by using an online measure of data collection. The findings confirmed that narcissism increased with decreases in family size and increases in financial wealth, as well as geographical mobility.

Brummelman et al. (2015) conducted a longitudinal study to determine the origins of narcissism. They compared the psychoanalytic view (narcissism originates due to lack of parental warmth) and social learning view (narcissism originates due to parental overvaluation). Results support social learning theory and contradict psychoanalytic theory, i.e., narcissism can be predicted by parental overvaluation and not by lack of parental warmth. Based on this, they concluded that children acquire narcissism by internalizing their parents' inflated views of them.

In 2019, Dufner and colleagues conducted an influential study to investigate the prevalence and validity of the belief that ‘only children are more narcissistic.’ The study determined that while this stereotype is widespread, it is not accurate. In the investigation of the stereotype's prevalence, laypeople rated a typical only child and a typical person with siblings using a scale of narcissistic admiration and rivalry. The people ascribed higher ratings to ‘only children’ on both the measures. For checking the accuracy of the stereotype, a large and representative sample of 1,810 participants rated themselves on the same scale, revealing that the scores of only children did not surpass those of individuals with siblings.

While Dufner's research limited to the German population; Foster, Raley, and Isen (2020) undertook a comparable examination involving 8,6889 American college students. Their findings indicated that only children do not exhibit higher levels of narcissism, compared to those with siblings. Instead, the results supported that notion that they are equivalent in terms of narcissism.

Watson & Biderman (1989) investigated Millon's (1981) arguments that “permissiveness and an overvaluation of children by parents promotes the narcissistic personality disorder. They conducted the study using narcissistic personality inventory, narcissistic superiority scale and an instrument measuring perception of parents as permissive. The results indicated no clear inclination for only children to display higher levels of narcissism. However, a weak but significant direct relationship was found between the numbers of siblings and subjects' perceptions of their mothers and their fathers as permissive.

Studies on birth order have also addressed these concerns. Narayan (1990) conducted a study on undergraduate students (297 men and 349 women) at University of Wisconsin, where the students completed the Narcissistic Personality Inventory and a family information questionnaire. However, differences in narcissism were noticed as a function of sex, men were more narcissistic than women. No significant relationship was found between narcissistic personality and birth order. In a further investigation, Eyring and Sobelman (1996) reported similar findings. In a research that was focused upon studying the prevalence of narcissism and dominance in the adult only child, no significant results were found that supported the view that narcissism is related to or influenced by birth order (Vogt, 1991).

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In a paper titled “Birth-order, personality, and performance at the Air Force Academy,” Payne (1971) found no distinction in affiliation and achievement needs between only children and those with siblings among over 1,000 freshmen.

Studies have also investigated how the interpersonal interactions of an individual are affected by whether they have grown up with siblings or not. Trent and Spitz (2011) conducted a comprehensive analysis of studies exploring the sociability behaviors of only children, revealing diverse findings. Some studies found only children to be more sociable, actively participation in extracurricular activities, and enjoying higher levels of peer acceptance (Claudy et al., 1979). Furthermore, evidence suggests that only children tend to be more socially popular. For example, teachers reported they were more likely to be picked when children chose sides (Blake, 1989). Conversely, other studies reported no sociability differences, as both groups displayed a similar number of close friendships and comparable friendship quality (Polit & Falbo, 1987). Yet, some research suggested that only children faced challenges in navigating relationships, being more susceptible to both victimization and aggression (Kitzmann et al., 2002). Additionally, Feiring and Lewis (1984) noted that only children cultivated unique social networks, characterized by smaller circles with fewer friends.

Falbo & Polit (1993, 1987, 1986) have quantitatively reviewed hundreds of studies conducted since 1928. They have reported that only children are significantly better than other groups in achievement motivation and personal adjustment. Overall, however, the review indicated that only children were comparable in most respects to their counterparts who had siblings. In a follow-up study conducted in 1993 by Falbo & Poston, they studied academic, personality and physical aspects of only children in China, where they concluded that although they were judged by their peers and cohorts less favorably, there is no necessary connection between lacking siblings and abnormal development.

MTHODOLOGY

Objectives

- To assess narcissistic traits in young adults with and without siblings.
- To compare narcissistic traits between young adults with siblings and those without siblings.
- To investigate potential gender differences in narcissistic personality traits among young adults.

Hypotheses

- H₁: There is no significant difference in narcissistic traits between young adults with and without siblings.
- H₂: Young adults without siblings exhibit a higher levels of narcissistic traits compared to those with siblings.
- H₃: The level of narcissistic traits is higher in males compared to females.

Research Design

The present study followed a cross-sectional research design.

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Participants

The sample for the study comprised of 100 young adults aged 18-25 years, with 44 males and 56 females; from different colleges/institutions of Delhi-NCR and Uttar Pradesh. The participants were selected using the snowball sampling method.

Inclusion criteria

- Young adults without any siblings.
- Young adults having at least one sibling.
- Must be under the age range 18-25
- Individuals who are fluent in the English language.

Exclusion criteria

- Children, adolescents, and adults above the age of 25.
- Individuals from outside Delhi-NCR and Uttar Pradesh.
- Individuals who are not fluent in the English language.

Instrument

The Narcissistic Admiration and Rivalry Questionnaire (NARQ) developed by Back and his colleagues in 2013 was used in the present study. The NARQ is based on the idea that narcissism can be decomposed into two positively correlated dimensions: *Admiration* and *Rivalry*. The questionnaire consists of 18 items, bifurcated into admiration domain and rivalry domain, with each domain consisting of 9 items. It uses a response format ranging from “1 = not agree at all” to “6 = agree completely”. These dimensions each encompass different cognitive, affective-motivational, and behavioral facets. These dimensions stem from two distinct interpersonal strategies: the inclination to seek social admiration by means of self-promotion (*assertive self-enhancement*) and the tendency to avoid social failure through self-defense (*antagonistic self-protection*). Both dimensions are aimed at maintaining an inflated self-image. Differentiating narcissistic admiration and rivalry promises to improve our understanding of the determinants, processes, and consequences associated with narcissism.

RESULTS

Table 1: Comparison of narcissistic traits between young adults with and without siblings

Variables	Groups	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	t	df	Significance (2-tailed)
Narcissistic Admiration	With siblings	50	34.660	6.678	0.000	98	1.000
	Without Siblings	50	34.660	7.081			
Narcissistic Rivalry	With Siblings	50	23.920	7.417	0.313	98	0.755
	Without Siblings	50	23.460	7.290			
Total Score	With siblings	50	58.780	11.491	0.304	98	0.620
	Without Siblings	50	58.080	11.534			

The results were analyzed using the independent samples t-test. Table 1 highlights the differences in narcissistic traits between young adults with and without siblings. According to the t-test results, the mean value on total narcissism score for those with siblings is 58.78 and for those without siblings it is 58.08, with a t-value of 0.304. Additionally, both groups

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exhibit a mean narcissistic admiration score of 34.66, with a t-value of 0.00. And mean values for young adults with siblings and without siblings on narcissistic rivalry are 23.92 and 23.56 respectively, with a t-value of 0.313. The results suggest a minimal difference between the two groups as the t-values are all small and close to 0, implying that the observed differences are not statistically significant.

Table 2: Gender-based comparison of narcissistic traits among young adults.

Variables	Groups	N	Mean	SD	t	df	Sig (2-tailed)
Narcissistic Admiration	Males	44	35.454	7.075	1.029	98	0.306
	Females	56	34.035	6.660			
Narcissistic Rivalry	Males	44	24.681	7.519	1.204	98	0.232
	Females	56	22.910	7.130			
Total Score	Males	44	60.090	11.091	1.289	98	0.200
	Females	56	57.125	11.674			

Table 2 highlights the differences in narcissistic traits between males and females. The results suggest that males, on average, have a slightly higher score than females in all three categories: total narcissism, narcissistic admiration, and narcissistic rivalry. However, the differences between the two genders are relatively small and not statistically significant, given the t-values.

DISCUSSION

The findings of the current research showed that there were no significant differences in narcissistic traits between young adults with sibling and those without siblings. Both groups exhibited nearly identical average scores, suggesting that the presence or absence of siblings during upbringing does not have a clear impact on narcissistic traits. Therefore, the initial hypothesis of the study, which suggested that young adults without siblings would have higher scores on narcissistic traits compared to those with siblings, was not supported.

While males demonstrated marginally higher scores than females, the difference was not statistically significant. The previous studies have indicated that males tend to exhibit higher levels of narcissism compared to females. However, these generalizations about male and female populations may not accurately reflect individual differences, as narcissism may vary across individuals irrespective of their gender as there are several other determinants of the trait. Therefore, it is crucial to recognize the multifaceted nature of narcissism and individual differences within each gender when discussing the trait.

Implications and Suggestions for Future Research

In the present research, no significant differences were found between young adults with siblings and without siblings. However, the results may differ if other variables are also taken into context (e.g., nuclear family/joint family, parenting style). Despite previous researches suggesting that males and females differ significantly in terms of narcissistic traits, no such differences were found in this study. This discrepancy may have aroused due to the unequal number of males and females in the current study.

As it was a questionnaire-based study, the response made by the participants may not be true information and the mental state of the individual while filling the questionnaire may have affected their responses. This study was conducted on a relatively small sample, so it may be

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lacking in terms of generalization. Cross-cultural differences may also exist, which were not examined in the present study. Therefore, further studies by considering a larger sample from diverse geographic regions may be planned, while also focusing on the cross-cultural aspect. The questionnaire used is fairly new as compared to other standardized measures of narcissism like Narcissistic Personality Inventory; so, its reliability and validity must be established in different regions. Future research will benefit from using different approaches in addition to self-report measures such as observation method, parent-teacher reports and observations, experimental designs, etc.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the differences between young adults with siblings and without siblings in terms of narcissistic personality traits; while also examining potential gender differences. The rationale behind this study was to check the credibility of the stereotypes that surround 'only children,' which often persist from early on in life through adulthood.

A comprehensive literature review revealed a lack of recent research surrounding this subject. Earlier studies did not offer a consistent stance, with some suggesting that individuals without siblings exhibit higher narcissistic traits, while others contradict this claim. This disparity underscores the need for further investigation into the domain.

The study included 100 participants from urban areas. All the participants were from middle class family background and within the age range of 18-25 (young adults). The participants were selected through the snowball sampling method. Three hypotheses were formulated to conduct the study. The first hypothesis stated that there is no significant difference in narcissistic traits between young adults with and without siblings. Second hypothesis stated that young adults without siblings exhibit a higher levels of narcissistic traits compared to those with siblings. And the third hypothesis expressed that the level of narcissistic traits is higher in males compared to females.

The data was collected using the Narcissistic Admiration and Rivalry Questionnaire (NARQ). For the analysis of data, independent samples t-test was employed via the SPSS software, in order to compare the means of the two groups. The results showed no significant differences in narcissistic personality traits between young adults with and without siblings, and no significant gender differences were observed.

The results of the study prompt a critical reevaluation of the beliefs regarding individuals without siblings, indicating that the assumption about higher narcissistic traits in individuals without siblings might not be universally recognized. The study underscores the importance of broader environmental factors such as parental influence, societal dynamics, and peer interactions, in shaping narcissistic personality traits. Furthermore, it suggests that the manifestation of narcissistic personality traits might also be affected by the contextual factors, i.e., societal, and cultural contexts, thus emphasizing that the development of narcissistic traits cannot be solely explained based on whether an individual grew up with a sibling or not.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declared no conflict of interest.

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