



Parental Grandiose and Vulnerable Narcissism and Helicopter Parenting: Mediation Through Parent Separation Anxiety and Parental Contingent Self-Worth

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Abstract

The mediational role of parental contingent self-worth and maternal separation anxiety between maternal reports of narcissism (grandiose: *assertive/extroverted* and *antagonistic/disagreeable*; vulnerable: *vulnerable/neurotic* narcissism) and mothers' and emerging adults' reports of overparenting ($n = 243$ dyads) was investigated. Given the theoretical differences between *assertive/extroverted*, *antagonistic/disagreeable*, and *vulnerable/neurotic* forms of narcissism, mothers' reports of *assertive/extroverted*, *antagonistic/disagreeable*, and *vulnerable/neurotic* narcissism were hypothesized to be mediated by parental contingent self-worth in predicting overparenting, and the association between *vulnerable/neurotic* narcissism and overparenting was hypothesized to work through parent separation anxiety. Results generally supported hypotheses. Structural equation models revealed that narcissistic *assertive/extroverted* and *antagonistic/disagreeable* forms of narcissism were positively and directly associated with maternal reports of overparenting, as expected, and they were partially mediated through parental contingent self-esteem. Maternal *assertive/extroverted* and *vulnerable/neurotic* narcissism were linked to overparenting via parental contingent self-worth and maternal separation anxiety. Similar patterns appeared for emerging adults' reports of overparenting. Results are discussed in terms of narcissistic mothers' use of overparenting as a tactic to control, ensure self-validation, and maintain child dependency of their emerging adults.

Keywords Overparenting · Grandiose narcissism · Vulnerable narcissism · Parental contingent self-worth · Parent separation anxiety · Emerging adults

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Overparenting (i.e., helicopter parenting) has gained increasing attention in recent years. It is the application of developmentally inappropriate parenting behaviors through the use of control, overinvolvement, and problem-solving (Padilla-Walker & Nelson, 2012; Reed et al., 2016). Overparenting during emerging adulthood (EA; ages 18 to 29) is of particular concern because it could inhibit youths' transition into adulthood and undermine their emancipation from their families of origin to become independent adults (Arnett, 2015; Padilla-Walker & Nelson, 2019). Most research examines emerging adult outcomes linked with overparenting, such as risk for psychopathology and difficulty adjusting to college (Darlow et al., 2017; Schiffrin et al., 2014; Winner & Nicholson, 2018). With few exceptions (see Segrin et al., 2013), why parents engage in overparenting is rarely studied. Yet, determining why parents overparent may offer insight into reasons for youth outcomes and possible interventions (Belsky & Jaffee, 2006). We propose that while parents' personality traits, such as narcissism, are associated with their

parenting behavior, the predictiveness of personality does not fully capture underlying mechanisms (Belsky & Jaffee, 2006). In the present study, we investigated direct associations between parent narcissism and overparenting as well as potential indirect, mediational links via parental contingent self-worth and maternal separation anxiety.

Overparenting

Although there is debate as to whether overparenting is unidimensional (LeMoyne & Buchanan, 2011; Padilla-Walker & Nelson, 2012) or multidimensional (e.g. Luebbe et al., 2018; Segrin et al., 2012), most scholars agree that it depicts parent overinvolvement (Padilla-Walker & Nelson, 2012; Reed et al., 2016). We used a multidimensional approach. Here, parents' age-inappropriate "hovering" involves different forms of control in relevant contexts of children's lives, such as academics, interpersonal relationships, and daily functioning (Luebbe et al., 2018). Luebbe et al. (2018) identified four domains: *information seeking*, *academic and personal management*, *direct intervention*, and *autonomy limiting*. *Information seeking* occurs when parents request information about their children's daily life and is often linked with positive outcomes (Luebbe et al., 2018). *Academic and personal management* (managing academic work and personal functioning), *direct intervention* (involvement in children's interpersonal relationships), and *autonomy limiting* (micromanagement to prevent mistakes), conversely, are more invasive parenting behaviors associated with youth maladaptation. We propose that a multidimensional approach offers greater variety, validity, and measurement specificity to better examine its link with parents' narcissistic traits.

Narcissism as a Personality Trait and Parenting

In 1984, Belsky proposed three prominent influences on parenting—parent personality, characteristics, and psychological resources; children's unique qualities; and contextual determinants. Among those influences, he proposed that parent personality likely was the most influential. Parent personality, he argued, was most salient because it not only directly determines parental responsiveness and behavior, but it also "shapes [these] other forces also theorized to impact parenting" (Belsky & Jaffee, 2006, p. 42). For example, parent personality may contribute to the harmony or disharmony of a marital relationship, which transactionally impacts parent personality over time. Parent personality is embedded in a process that incorporates personal sociohistorical experiences and psychological resources in

a dynamic interplay with important social contexts; thus, it is the most predominant force.

Several lines of inquiry corroborate Belsky's (1984) assertions investigating linkages between the Big Five personality traits and parenting. Both contemporaneous and longitudinal research reveals that higher Neuroticism and lower Extraversion and Agreeableness were linked with more intrusiveness and behavioral control and less responsiveness (Belsky & Jaffee, 2006; de Haan et al., 2009, 2012; Prinzie et al., 2009). Similarly, clinical research revealed that parent psychopathology compromises parenting. It is associated with insensitivity to child needs, overprotective and intrusive parenting, and hostile interactions (Beaver et al., 2014; Belsky & Jaffee, 2006; Zahn-Waxler et al., 2002). In sum, extant research indicates that parent personality qualities are tied to the ways in which parents rear their children, including overprotective and intrusive strategies. Guided by Belsky's (1984; Belsky & Jaffee, 2006) parent process model, the present study extends the existing literature by examining potential mechanisms through which parent sub-clinical narcissism is related to overparenting.

Clinically, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition-Text Revised (DSM-5-TR*; American Psychiatric Association, 2022), defines narcissism as a personality disorder characterized by "pervasive patterns of grandiosity (in fantasy or behavior), need for admiration, and a lack of empathy" (F60.81, online). Social and personality researchers suggest that narcissism is a personality trait varying on a skewed continuum with most people having very few narcissistic traits and a small group presenting with clinical levels (Krizan & Herlache, 2018). Krizan and Herlache (2018) proposed the narcissistic spectrum model (NSM) which synthesizes clinical and social/personality approaches. In their model, the most telling characteristic of narcissism is "*entitled self-importance*", where narcissistic individuals view their own needs and goals as more important than those of others (Krizan & Herlache, 2018, p. 6). The sense of superiority and entitlement manifests in identifying opportunities to self-aggrandize or be self-protective when threatened (Campbell & Campbell, 2009; Lamkin et al., 2015). For the present study, narcissism is investigated as a personality process (a dynamic self-regulatory system) rather than a categorical personality structure (static trait or diagnosis).

According to Morf and Rhodewalt (2001), strategic manipulation of the social environment is fundamental to narcissistic intrapersonal and interpersonal processes. Intrapersonal processes include biased views of social feedback and performance outcomes, biased attention to features of social situations, and selective or distorted recall of earlier experiences. For example, narcissistic individuals tend to take personal credit for positive outcomes and view those accomplishments as superior (Rhodewalt & Morf, 1995).

Interpersonally, individuals high in narcissism prefer relationships that enhance their aggrandized self (Campbell, 1999; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). They may also engineer positive and mitigate negative feedback through intrusive, often bullish orchestration during interpersonal interactions. Yet, distrust of the feedback results in cyclical efforts to control relationships and seek reassurance.

Over the past decade, consensus among scholars suggests that a three-factor model best captures narcissism, thereby extending earlier models where narcissism was represented by two dimensions—grandiose and vulnerable narcissism (Crowe et al., 2019; Dickinson & Pincus, 2003). Grandiose narcissism is characterized by a superior sense of uniqueness, self-enhancement, interpersonal charm, and a need for social prominence (Back, 2018; Krizan & Herlache, 2018; Miller et al., 2016). Vulnerable narcissism is witnessed by reactivity, insecurity, negative affectivity, a need for approval, insecurity, and distrust (Krizan & Herlache, 2018; Miller et al., 2021). These two forms have different nomological networks that are associated with differing traits, motivations, relationships, and self and other evaluations (Back et al., 2013; Zeigler-Hill et al., 2011). Three-factor models of narcissism emerged because of the omnipresence of antagonism in both grandiose and vulnerable forms of narcissism. Those high in antagonism diminish the significance of interpersonal harmony in favor of attaining other goals. It is a defensive, hostile, narcissistic self-defense strategy that is triggered by social disapproval, failure, or criticism, provoking efforts toward re-establishing superior status (Back, 2018; Back et al., 2013).

In Krizan and Herlache's (2018) narcissistic spectrum model, grandiose and vulnerable expressions of narcissism share, at their core, entitled self-importance which includes arrogance, superior importance, and self-centeredness to the detriment of others; it is reconceptualized as antagonistic. The trifurcated model of narcissism (Miller et al., 2016; Weiss et al., 2019) is comprised of three dimensions, namely agentic extraversion (akin to grandiose narcissism), neuroticism (akin to vulnerable narcissism), and antagonism (the shared component of both). Antagonism as a core feature, however, manifests differently in each primary expressions of narcissism. Thus, exploitativeness and manipulateness, for example, characterize antagonism associated with grandiosity. Distrust, reactive anger, and self-centeredness characterize antagonism for the vulnerable expression (Lynman & Miller, 2019; Weiss et al., 2019). In sum, the present study was guided by a three-factor approach to narcissistic dimensions to include three interrelated, yet distinct aspects of narcissism—*Assertive/extroverted* (grandiose, agentic, extroverted, self-enhancing), *vulnerable/neurotic* (negative affectivity, reactive, insecure, need for approval), and *antagonistic/disagreeable*, which overlaps with both of the other narcissism dimensions (Back, 2018;

Krizan & Herlache, 2018; Lynam & Miller, 2019; Miller et al., 2021; Weiss et al., 2019).

Many of the measures used to assess narcissism to date were developed before the existence of three-factor theoretical approaches; thus, in the present study, we “stacked” assessments using the Narcissistic Admiration and Rivalry Questionnaire (NARQ; Back et al., 2013; Weiss et al., 2019) to assess *assertive/extroverted* narcissism (Admiration) and *antagonistic/disagreeable* narcissism (Rivalry) with the Hypersensitivity Narcissism Scale (HSNS; Hendin & Cheek, 1997) used to assess *vulnerable/neurotic* narcissism. Originally, the NARQ dimensions were intended to reflect two aspects of grandiose narcissism, namely admiration (a means of social promotion through assertive self-enhancement, entertaining grandiose fantasies, and being charming) and rivalry (preventing social failure through antagonistic self-protection by devaluing others, striving for superiority, and being aggressive) (Back et al., 2013). Given the current consensus around a three-factor structure of narcissism, the ‘rivalry’ dimension has been reconceptualized as representing antagonism, albeit less broadly than currently conceptualized and is viewed as having some overlap with vulnerable narcissism (See Table 1 in Weiss et al., 2019).

All three expressions of narcissism utilize relationships as contexts to aggrandize the self and ensure security and superiority. We propose that narcissistic efforts to contrive social relationships can be extended to parent–child relationships via overparenting behaviors. Some support is provided in research noting associations between narcissism and parenting behavior. For example, parental narcissism has been found to negatively predict authoritative parenting through parents' lower empathy and unresponsive caregiving, and it was linked positively to authoritarian parenting both directly and indirectly through unresponsive caregiving (Hart et al., 2017). Using the Five-Factor Narcissism Inventory (Miller et al., 2016), Truhan et al. (2022) showed that fathers' narcissistic neuroticism (i.e., vulnerable narcissism) and mothers' antagonistic narcissism (i.e., *antagonistic/disagreeable* narcissism) were negatively linked with warmth. Dentale et al. (2015) found that parent narcissism predicted retrospective accounts of overprotection, parental shaming, and favoritism, which in turn, predicted young adult anxiety and depression. We hypothesized that overparenting is a way to engineer relationships that result in validating narcissistic parents' sense of entitled self-importance. They would be more likely to monitor and manage their children's personal and academic lives, intervene in their children's relationships, and limit autonomous functioning.

Unique Motivational Processes

The means by which *assertive/extroverted*, *antagonistic/disagreeable*, and *vulnerable/neurotic* aspects of narcissism are associated with overparenting likely occurs through differing

cognitive and motivational processes. Individuals higher in *assertive/extroverted* narcissism have a need for power and control in relationships (Carroll, 1987; Vrabel et al., 2020), a desire for high social status (Zeigler-Hill et al., 2019), and are attracted to those who are esteemed by others (Campbell et al., 1999). They view themselves and close others, such as their children, as more attractive and are biased toward grandiose fantasies (Back et al., 2013). Given their desire for dominance and admiration, such parents may strategically “create” a child esteemed by others. Overparenting, then, becomes a means to ensure children’s success by observing, monitoring, and managing their children’s lives. Because antagonism is defensive and protects feelings of superiority through aggression, manipulateness, and other derogation (Back, 2018), parents reporting higher *antagonistic/disagreeable* narcissism may perceive threats to their children’s achievements as personal threats and intervene to solve them. That is, overparenting is a strategy that preempts ego-threat should their child be perceived as failing. Often, *vulnerable/neurotic* narcissistic individuals exploit others to validate and support the self (Pistole, 1995); they are vigilant in detecting threats (especially threats of abandonment), engage in passive-aggressive actions to control others, and tend to be needy and obsessive in their relationships (Krizan & Herlache, 2018). For *vulnerable/neurotic* narcissistic parents, children may be a source of reassurance and a target of interpersonal control (Hansen-Brown, 2018); as such, overparenting may be a strategy used to foster children’s dependency and maintain parents’ self-worth and personal security.

Mediating Mechanisms

The unique underlying motivational processes between overparenting and different types of narcissism may result in differing mediating mechanisms. In the present study, we focused on parenting contingent self-worth and parent separation anxiety as underlying processes, both of which are inherent to narcissism and likely linked with overparenting. Expressions of narcissism work through parenting contingent self-worth and parent separation anxiety to predict overparenting. Although these constructs appear unrelated, their underlying communality is the degree to which parents are reliant on their children’s admiration, validation, and provision of emotional security.

Contingent self-worth reflects feelings about the self that depend on one’s own and others’ beliefs and evaluation of the self and performance (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001; Deci & Ryan, 1995). It tends to be specific to those domains deemed most important, such as in competition, academic performance, and parenting (Crocker et al., 2002; Grolnick et al., 2007; Park & Crocker, 2005). Thus, much time and effort are expended within those domains in order to bolster self-worth

(Crocker & Wolfe, 2001). Recent work has demonstrated that contingent self-worth also is tied to qualities of narcissism. Zeigler-Hill and Vrabel (2022) found that *assertive/extroverted* narcissism was related to competition-based contingencies and somewhat to evaluations by and connections with others, *antagonistic/disagreeable* narcissism was linked to contingencies that offer superiority, while *vulnerable/neurotic* narcissism related to all measured domains of contingent self-worth. By extension, we speculated that *assertive/extroverted* narcissism and overparenting were linked through parental contingent self-worth because of the narcissistic need to attain others’ positive valuations; that is, micromanagement is prompted to show their children’s pre-eminence and secure their children’s success. *Antagonistic/disagreeable* narcissism was expected to be positively related to overparenting via parental contingent self-worth as the narcissistic motivation to reduce potential threats and maintain superiority over their emerging adult children would result in intrusive parenting thereby circumventing possible undesirable child outcomes and, by proxy, for the self. Finally, the link between *vulnerable/neurotic* narcissism and overparenting was hypothesized to operate via parental contingent self-worth because such individuals have an undifferentiated self-reliance on any form of affirmation or approval. Those higher in *vulnerable/neurotic* narcissism depend on others’ validation of their self-worth. For such individuals, intervening and managing their young adult children’s lives solicits needed self-focused feedback.

Originating in attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969), separation anxiety is anxiety manifesting when fears of separation from close relationship figures are activated. While the original theory pertained to young children, separation anxiety can also be seen in parents dealing with the growing independence of their adolescent children (Hock et al., 2001; Kins et al., 2011). Such parents find a source of psychological security in the emotional responsiveness and presence of their children; it manifests as a desire to keep children close and dependent. We expected that parents’ experience of separation anxiety may mediate the links between *vulnerable/neurotic* narcissism and overparenting. Individuals higher in vulnerable narcissism report greater general anxiety (Dickinson & Pincus, 2003; Miller et al., 2011), and may likewise experience more separation anxiety, especially if their children serve as a source of validation. In turn, parent general anxiety and separation anxiety have both been positively linked with overparenting (Luebbe et al., 2018; Segrin et al., 2013). In contrast, *assertive/extroverted* and *antagonistic/disagreeable* narcissism were not expected to be linked with separation anxiety as most individuals with grandiose tendencies rarely experience anxiety (Dickinson & Pincus, 2003; Miller et al., 2011). Thus, separation anxiety was expected to be a conduit by which *vulnerable/neurotic* narcissism, but not *assertive/extroverted* and

antagonistic/disagreeable forms of narcissism, were linked to overparenting.

The Current Study

The overall objective of the current study was to examine the associations among maternal narcissism and maternal and emerging adult reports of overparenting via parental contingent self-worth and parent separation anxiety. First, we examined predictors of mothers' reports of their own overprotective parenting as mothers were investigated as they usually are the parent most involved with parenting emerging adults (Padilla-Walker & Nelson, 2019). Typically, researchers focus on emerging adults' perspectives, often overlooking parents' views of their own parenting. Yet, parent perspectives are important as they, too, have unique perspectives which are then tied to their parenting behavior (Schwarz et al., 1985; Tein et al., 1994).

Further, most research investigates overparenting and emerging adult adjustment (see Cui et al., 2022 for a review). Rarely have investigators examined parental factors linked to overparenting. We expected that mothers' reports of *assertive/extroverted*, *antagonistic/disagreeable*, and *vulnerable/neurotic* narcissism would be positively and directly associated with their own reports of overparenting. These associations, subsequently, were expected to be mediated by parental contingent self-worth. Each aspect of narcissism was expected to be positively related to parental contingent self-worth, which in turn, would be positively linked to overparenting. Parent separation anxiety also was expected to mediate the link between *vulnerable/neurotic* narcissism and overparenting but not the linkages between *assertive/extroverted* and *antagonistic/disagreeable* narcissism and overparenting.

As a secondary focus, we also investigated whether mothers' reports of narcissism were linked with *emerging adult reports* of overparenting via mothers' reports of parental contingent self-worth and parent separation anxiety. Assessing emerging adult children's perspectives could offer insight into whether the proposed model is generalizable across different family members' reports of overparenting. Important differences, however, may emerge given that parent and youth reports of parenting practices typically show only low- to-moderate correlations (Hou et al., 2020). Depending on the overparenting measure used, correlations between mother and emerging adult reports have ranged between $r=0.20$ to $r=0.46$ (Cui et al., 2019; Segrin et al., 2020; Van Petegem et al., 2020). Moreover, each reporter brings subjective bias into their perceptions given differing intrapsychic processes and the limited extent to which internal motivations are observable to others (Rote & Smetana, 2016). For example, as dimensions of narcissism are

tied to the strategic manipulation of the social environment (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001), including potential overparenting behaviors, it would be expected that narcissism would be directly linked to emerging adults' perceptions of overparenting. Similarly, parent separation anxiety will likely emerge as a mediator because it is linked to the impending absence of a relationship with the young adult child and may be clearly observed in day-to-day interactions. Parental contingent self-worth, however, is an intrapsychic attitude about the self, and while based on the ability to parent, it is less likely to be experienced in relational interactions by emerging adults. In sum, we hypothesized that maternal reports of narcissism would be tied directly to emerging adult reports of overparenting in an initial model testing direct relations. The mediational model was expected to show that these direct linkages would be mediated by parent separation anxiety and not by parental contingent self-esteem.

Methods

Participants

Primarily first-year and second-year college students ($N=971$) from three metropolitan universities in the United States (Michigan, Wisconsin, and Florida) participated in a larger study from which this sample was drawn. Students were recruited through introductory psychology courses and/or a mass email invitation sent to a random sample of 30% of the first-year student body (Florida only). For parent recruitment, emerging adults were asked to voluntarily invite their 'most involved parent' to complete a complementary survey online by providing the email address of their parent. Survey links were then sent to the student-provided parent email addresses, using an ID number that would link to the student survey yet maintain anonymity. To prevent students from completing parent reports, contacted parents answered a filter question: "What year did you graduate from high school (or last year of school they attended Grades K-12)?" which was timed and checked for feasibility. If the question was not answered within 15 s or had an invalid year (later than 2003), we assumed that the respondent was not a parent and the survey session was terminated. We also checked parent emails for similarity to students' university-assigned addresses; if emails had the same stem or same general information (e.g., initials with last name), then the "chosen parent" was not contacted. Initially, emerging adult participants provided 572 parent emails; 98 (17%) were dropped from the study due to failing the screening criteria, with 475 emails sent to the 'most involved parent'.

Of the 347 parents (73%) who responded to email invitations, 307 parents provided valid and complete surveys as the 'most involved' parent (mothers: $n=243$; 79.1%;

fathers: $n = 64$; 20.9%). Although there were fathers who were nominated as most involved, our focus was on mothers as research has indicated their greater involvement through emerging adulthood (Padilla-Walker & Nelson, 2019). Thus, all subsequent statistics and analyses are based on mothers' and emerging adults' reports for whom matching surveys were available. The final sample for this study includes 243 college students (82.8% women; $M_{\text{age}} = 18.55$ years, $SD = 0.86$ years) and their mothers ($M_{\text{age}} = 49.06$ years, $SD = 5.67$ years). Among mothers, 66.3% identified as White/European American, 7.0% as Black/African American, 11.5% as Hispanic/Latino, 8.2% as Asian/Pacific Islander, and 2.9% as Multiracial. For emerging adults, 62.6% identified as White/European American, 7.8% as Black/African American, 11.1% as Hispanic/Latino, 8.6% as Asian/Pacific Islander, and 8.2% as Multiracial. Mothers reported that the median and modal household income was \$75,000–\$99,000 USD. Most mothers had attained an associate's or technical degree (38.2%) or earned a college degree (35.1%), with the remaining sample of mothers reporting that they earned a post-graduate or professional degree (15.9%), some high school education or less (2.8%) or graduated high school (7.7%). Approximately one-third (30.5%) of students reported living at home with their parents.

Procedure

Students and parents completed a 40-min online survey (Qualtrics). College students were compensated with one hour of research credit for participation (Michigan and Wisconsin) or given a \$15 gift e-gift card (Florida). Additional compensation was issued to students (\$10.00 e-gift card) and parents (\$10.00 e-gift card) contingent upon parent survey completion for Michigan students; Wisconsin students whose parent participated were entered into a drawing for a \$25 Amazon gift card; and, for Florida, every 10th student whose parent participated earned an additional \$10 Amazon e-gift card. Each university's respective Institutional Review Board approved the study.

Measures

Means, standard deviations, and the range for each of the following scales can be found in Table 1.

Overparenting

Emerging adults and their mothers reported on overparenting behaviors using the Emerging Adults' Perceptions of Helicopter Parenting Behaviors Scale (23 items; 4 subscales; Luebbe et al., 2018). A stem statement ("My parent is the kind of parent who ...") is followed with items that were

rated on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*). Mothers responded to a modified version where pronouns were changed. Per subscale, items were averaged such that higher scores reflected greater overparenting. Because intrusive and controlling forms of overparenting were our focus, three of the four subscales were used in the present study: *Direct Intervention* (4 items; e.g., "...intervenes on my behalf with my friends" mothers: $\alpha = 0.90$; emerging adults: $\alpha = 0.89$), *Autonomy Limiting* (4 items; e.g., "...structures my life for me" mothers: $\alpha = 0.65$; emerging adults: $\alpha = 0.68$), and *Academic and Personal Management* (9 items; e.g., "...rewrites my papers." mothers: $\alpha = 0.76$; emerging adults: $\alpha = 0.84$). *Information Seeking* (mothers: $\alpha = 0.82$; emerging adults: $\alpha = 0.82$) tends to be associated with adaptive outcomes and is viewed as a positive dimension (Luebbe et al., 2018); it was not used in the present study.

Grandiose Narcissism

Mothers of college students completed the Narcissistic Admiration and Rivalry Questionnaire (NARQ; Back et al., 2013) to assess *assertive/extroverted* (admiration; 9 items; e.g., "I am great." $\alpha = 0.86$) and *antagonistic/disagreeable* (rivalry; 9 items; e.g., "I want my rivals to fail"; $\alpha = 0.84$) narcissism. Mothers responded with a Likert format from 1 (*not agree at all*) to 6 (*agree completely*). Items were averaged per subscale with high scores reflecting greater admiration or rivalry.

Vulnerable Narcissism

Mothers of college students completed the Hypersensitive Narcissism Scale (HSNS; Hendin & Cheek, 1997; 10 items) to assess mothers' *vulnerable/neurotic* narcissism. This measure assesses hypersensitive elements of narcissism (e.g., "I dislike sharing the credit of an achievement with others"; $\alpha = 0.81$). Mothers rated items on a scale of 1 (*very uncharacteristic*) to 5 (*very characteristic*). Items were averaged with higher scores reflecting greater *vulnerable/neurotic* narcissism.

Parental Contingent Self-Worth

Using the Parental Contingent Self-Worth Scale (PCSWS; Eaton & Pomerantz, 2004), mothers indicated the degree to which they base their self-worth on their children's successes and failures. Mothers rated each of the 9 items on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = "*Strongly disagree*" through 5 = "*Strongly Agree*." Example items include: "When (Child's name) does something bad, I feel ashamed" or "When (Child's name) does something good, I feel good about myself." Using a sample of mothers of 4th-grade

Table 1 Bivariate relations among maternal narcissism, maternal separation anxiety, maternal parenting contingent self-worth, maternal perceptions of overparenting, and emerging adult perceptions of maternal overparenting

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Narcissism (mother reports)											
1	–										
2	0.07	–									
3	0.01	0.51***	–								
Mediators (mother reports)											
4	0.13	0.23***	0.40***	–							
5	0.23***	0.34***	0.30***	0.33***	–						
Overparenting (mother reports)											
6	0.26***	0.36***	0.19**	0.42***	0.30***	–					
7	0.17**	0.39***	0.25***	0.37***	0.28***	0.58***	–				
8	0.20***	0.42***	0.32***	0.41***	0.40***	0.58***	0.60***	–			
Overparenting (emerging adult reports)											
9	0.09	0.06	–0.02	0.12	0.00	0.36***	0.21***	0.23***	–		
10	0.10	0.17**	0.16*	0.22***	0.16*	0.22***	0.30***	0.26***	0.46***	–	
11	0.18**	0.14*	0.21***	0.27***	0.23***	0.29***	0.23***	0.42***	0.34***	0.39***	–
Mean	3.03	1.55	2.32	2.45	2.57	1.75	1.38	1.75	2.18	1.53	2.19
SD	0.73	0.60	0.73	0.86	0.80	0.69	0.74	0.76	0.91	0.88	0.94
Range	1.22–5	1–4	1–4	1–4.60	1–4.56	1–4.89	1–4.50	1–5	1–5	1–5	1–5

n = 243

*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001

children, Grolnick et al. (2007) noted that, when modified slightly to reflect social contingent self-worth, all items loaded on a single factor, and the scale demonstrated acceptable psychometric properties. An exploratory factor analysis was calculated because the scale was used with an emerging adult sample. A single factor emerged, according to the Scree test (eigenvalue of 3.93, with the next factor at 1.41), with loadings ranging from $\lambda=0.58$ through $\lambda=0.74$. Coefficient alpha was 0.84. Items were averaged with high scores reflecting greater parental contingent self-worth.

Separation Anxiety

Mothers of college students completed the Parent Separation and Anxiety Scale-Short form (PSAS-S; Soenens et al., 2010), containing 10 items of the original 21-item scale developed by Hock et al. (2001). The scale assesses the extent of parents' anxiety triggered by separation from adolescents or young adults (e.g., "I dread thinking about what my life will be like after my child leaves home permanently." $\alpha=0.88$). Mothers rated items on a scale from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly agree*) which were averaged to create the score. High scores indicate more separation anxiety.

Plan of Analyses

Structural equation modeling using IBM SPSS Statistics AMOS-27 was conducted. The primary analyses focused on predicting maternal reports of overparenting as a latent exogenous variable, represented by loading mean composite variables, as mentioned above, for each overparenting subscale (academic and personal management, direct intervention, and autonomy limiting) onto a latent factor. Direct links between maternal reports of narcissism and maternal reports of overparenting were tested initially. A second model focused on the conceptual mediational model, with parental contingent self-worth and parent separation anxiety as mediators. Nonsignificant pathways were then trimmed, and the model re-estimated. As a set of secondary analyses, the same sequence of models were applied to emerging adult reports of overparenting. Goodness of fit indices (Kline, 2016) included: Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) between 0 and 0.08; a Comparative Fit Index (CFI) >0.95 , and the standardized root-mean-square residual (SRMR) less than 0.08. Indirect effects were determined by using bootstrapping analyses based on 2000 bootstrap resamples and a 95% confidence interval. Measurement invariance of the latent overparenting factors across mothers and emerging adults also was examined. To test for invariance, a repeated measures confirmatory factor analysis was used because overparenting scores of mothers and emerging adults concern the same child and are not independent (Olsen & Kenny, 2006). Invariance is established

if there was a nonsignificant $\Delta\chi^2$ with a $\Delta\text{CFI} > -0.01$, $\Delta\text{RMSEA} < 0.015$, and $\Delta\text{SRMR} < 0.03$ (Putnick & Bornstein, 2016).

Data Preparation

A Little's MCAR test was used to examine missing responses for the reports of mothers and emerging adults used for the present study ($n=243$). For models using mothers' reports of overparenting, Little's MCAR test was nonsignificant [$\chi^2(47)=62.21$, $p=0.068$; missingness per measure ranged from 0.4 to 1.2%]. Little's MCAR test for models employing emerging adult reports of overparenting was significant [$\chi^2(56)=78.30$, $p=0.026$; missingness per measure ranged from 0.8 to 1.2%]. Because missingness for either approach was less than 5%, missing data were filled via regression imputation through AMOS-27 (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007).

Chi-square analyses were used to determine whether participants from each site (Florida, Michigan, Wisconsin) differed significantly in demographic qualities (gender, ethnicity, residence, mother's education, and family income). Some links were found between sites and demographic characteristics [emerging adult gender, $\chi^2(241)=6.55$, $p=0.04$; mothers' ethnicity, $\chi^2(242)=35.10$, $p<0.001$; emerging adult residence, $\chi^2(10)=61.01$, $p<0.001$] but not for mothers' education, $\chi^2(8)=2.30$, $p=0.97$ and household income, $\chi^2(18)=9.21$, $p=0.96$.

Differences in emerging adult reports of overparenting between those whose parents participated vs those whose parents did not participate were tested. Results revealed that non-participating parents' scores ($M=2.41$) were higher in academic and personal management than participating parents ($M=2.19$) [$t(914)=3.26$, $p<0.001$]. Similar findings were revealed for direct intervention [$t(914)=2.69$, $p=0.007$], non-participating parents ($M=1.73$) were greater than participating parents ($M=1.54$). Again, this pattern was found for autonomy limiting [$t(914)=3.26$, $p<0.001$], where non-participating parents ($M=2.38$) was greater than participating parents ($M=2.18$).

Demographic differences were also examined between emerging adults with participating parents and emerging adults without participating parents. Emerging adults whose parents participated were older ($M=18.78$) than emerging adults whose parents did participate ($M=18.57$), [$t(969)=3.12$, $p=0.002$]. There were more students in their first year among parents who did not participate $\chi^2(1, 971)=14.63$, $p=0.006$. Fewer than expected emerging adults whose parents did not participate were unemployed versus employed $\chi^2(1, 966)=6.379$, $p=0.012$. Among those whose parents did not participate, more students than expected lived at home with parents, $\chi^2(1, 967)=40.25$, $p<0.001$. Additionally, more women than expected were among those whose parents did not participate $\chi^2(1,$

960) = 6.14, $p < 0.001$. No differences emerged for emerging adult-reported family income (although parent-reported income was used in the study for the sake of accuracy) $t(969) = -0.71$, $p = 0.48$.

In addition, parent age and emerging adult age were correlated with each variable, finding that parent age was correlated negatively with emerging adult reports of direct intervention ($r = -0.17$, $p < 0.01$), and emerging adult age was correlated with mothers' reports of *antagonistic/disagreeable* narcissism ($r = 0.15$, $p < 0.05$) and maternal reports of autonomy limiting ($r = 0.15$, $p < 0.05$). Parent age and emerging adult age were controlled in each model. Before testing SEM models, a series of MANOVAs and corresponding Games-Howell post hoc analyses were calculated to determine whether research site or key demographic characteristics (gender, ethnicity, residence, mothers' education, family income, mother and emerging adult age) had systematic effects on mothers' and emerging adults' reports for all study variables. No significant effects for research location or any demographic characteristic emerged, with the exception of ethnicity/race (Please see the supplemental files for a description of significant findings). However, because sample size for any ethnic/racial group other than "White" was less than 30 participants, and thereby disproportionate and unrepresentative, the interpretability of findings and the violation of statistical assumptions call into question their inclusion as control variables (See Supplemental Tables 1 through 3).

Results

Bivariate Analyses

Pearson correlation coefficients were used to examine bivariate associations among the study variables (See Table 1). In brief, mothers' reports of overparenting were correlated positively to parenting contingent self-worth, separation anxiety, and all dimensions of maternal narcissism. Among emerging adult reports of overparenting, direct intervention and autonomy limiting were correlated with maternal separation anxiety, parenting contingent self-worth, and all dimensions of maternal narcissism.

We also examined whether there were mean differences between mother and emerging adult reports of overparenting. Separate paired t-tests revealed differences between maternal and emerging adult reports. Means of emerging adults' reports were significantly greater than those of mothers' reports for academic and personal management [Wilk's Lambda = 0.82, $p < 0.001$, Greenhouse–Geisser $F(1, 238) = 53.08$, $p < 0.001$], direct intervention [Wilk's Lambda = 0.91, $p = 0.008$, Greenhouse–Geisser $F(1, 237) = 7.23$, $p < 0.001$], and autonomy limiting [Wilk's

Lambda = 0.80, $p < 0.001$, Greenhouse–Geisser $F(1, 237) = 57.81$, $p < 0.001$]. Means can be found in Table 1.

Before testing conceptual models, the measurement model for mothers' overparenting was calculated. It was fully identified with strong factors loadings (autonomy limiting, $\lambda = 0.77$; direct intervention, $\lambda = 0.73$, academic and personal management, $\lambda = 0.77$). Emerging adult overparenting measurement model was acceptable showing that academic and personal management ($\lambda = 0.63$), direct intervention ($\lambda = 0.74$), and autonomy limiting ($\lambda = 0.55$) reflected the latent construct.

Measurement invariance between mothers' reports and emerging adults' reports revealed that when these subscales loaded onto a latent variable construct representing overparenting, measurement invariance testing showed that there was metric invariance between mother and emerging adult reports of overparenting $\Delta\chi^2(2) = 1.38$, $p = 0.50$ [configural model: $\chi^2(5) = 6.03$, $p = 0.30$, CFI = 0.998, RMSEA = 0.029, SRMR = 0.028; metric model: $\chi^2(5) = 7.41$, $p = 0.39$, CFI = 0.999, RMSEA = 0.016, SRMR = 0.025], but not scalar invariance $\Delta\chi^2(3) = 74.05$, $p = 0.000$ [scalar model: $\chi^2(10) = 81.5$, $p = 0.000$, CFI = 0.832, RMSEA = 0.173, SRMR = 0.044].

Model Testing

Predicting Mothers' Reports of Overparenting

The first model examined the direct associations between narcissistic qualities and maternal reports of overparenting. All dimensions of narcissism were allowed to covary, revealing that *assertive/extroverted* narcissism was unrelated to *antagonistic/disagreeable* ($r = 0.07$, $p = 0.30$) and *vulnerable/neurotic* narcissism ($r = 0.01$, $p = 0.83$) but *antagonistic/disagreeable* narcissism and *vulnerable/neurotic* narcissism covaried significantly ($r = 0.51$, $p < 0.001$), as has been demonstrated in other work (Crowe et al., 2019). Thus, only *antagonistic/disagreeable* and *vulnerable/neurotic* narcissism were covaried in all subsequent analyses. For the direct pathway model, with mothers' age and emerging adult age controlled, fit indices were acceptable: $\chi^2(10) = 16.80$, $p = 0.08$, RMSEA = 0.053 [90% CI 0.00, 0.01], CFI = 0.99, SRMR = 0.03. Significant, positive, direct associations to overparenting were revealed for *antagonistic/disagreeable* ($\beta = 0.43$, $p < 0.001$) and *assertive/extroverted* ($\beta = 0.25$, $p < 0.001$), but the pathway from *vulnerable/neurotic* narcissism was nonsignificant ($\beta = 0.11$, $p = 0.13$) likely due to the shared variance with *antagonistic/disagreeable* narcissism (Crowe et al., 2019).

The fully saturated mediational model also demonstrated acceptable fit: $\chi^2(16) = 23.50$, $p = 0.10$, RMSEA = 0.043 [90%CI 0.00, 0.08], CFI = 0.99, SRMR = 0.02, controlling for mothers' age and emerging adults' age, which were

unrelated to the endogenous variables (See Supplemental Files for the fully saturated model—Figure S1). Two pathways were nonsignificant—the pathway between *antagonistic/disagreeable* narcissism and maternal separation anxiety ($\beta=0.02, p=0.75$) and the pathway between *vulnerable/neurotic* narcissism and maternal reports of overparenting ($\beta=-0.06, p=0.37$). The trimmed model (with nonsignificant paths and covariances removed) also demonstrated acceptable fit: $\chi^2(18)=16.24, p=0.30, RMSEA=0.04$ [90%CI 0.00, 0.07], CFI=0.99, SRMR=0.03. As Fig. 1 shows, direct pathways remained statistically significant between *antagonistic/disagreeable* and maternal reports of overparenting and between *assertive/extroverted narcissism* and maternal reports of overparenting. Indirect pathways were evident among all three qualities of narcissism and maternal reports of overparenting via parental contingent self-worth, indicating partial mediation (See Table 2). Indirect pathways also appeared for *assertive/extroverted* narcissism via parent separation anxiety as well as for *vulnerable/neurotic* narcissism via parent separation anxiety in predicting mothers' perceptions of overparenting (Fig. 1).

Predicting Emerging Adults' Reports of Overparenting

A secondary set of analyses were conducted to determine whether maternal reports of narcissism predicted emerging adults' (EA) perceptions of overparenting via mothers'

parental contingent self-worth and parent separation anxiety (See Fig. 2). Controlling for mother and emerging adult age, the direct model had an acceptable fit to the data, $\chi^2(10)=24.7, p=0.006, RMSEA=0.078$ [90% CI 0.04, 0.12], CFI=0.93, SRMR=0.04. Only *assertive/extroverted* narcissism was directly linked to EA reports of maternal overparenting ($\beta=0.17, p=0.03$); the multicollinearity between *antagonistic/disagreeable* and *vulnerable/neurotic* narcissism likely reduced each dimension's unique contribution (Crowe et al., 2019). The goodness of fit for the fully saturated mediation model was acceptable, $\chi^2(14)=31.72, p=0.004, RMSEA=0.073$ [90%CI 0.04, 0.11], CFI=0.94, SRMR=0.04 (See Supplemental File—Figure S2). Nonsignificant pathways included pathways between *antagonistic/disagreeable* narcissism and parent separation anxiety ($\beta=0.02, p=0.81$), *antagonistic/disagreeable* narcissism and EA reports of overparenting ($\beta=0.11, p=0.24$), *assertive/extroverted* narcissism and EA reports of overparenting ($\beta=0.13, p=0.10$), *vulnerable/neurotic* narcissism and EA reports of overparenting ($\beta=0.03, p=0.77$), and parental contingent self-worth and overparenting ($\beta=0.06, p=0.46$). The trimmed model (with nonsignificant paths and correlations removed) also showed acceptable fit: $\chi^2(19)=39.08, p=0.004, RMSEA=0.066$ [90%CI 0.04, 0.10], CFI=0.94, SRMR=0.06. None of the direct pathways between maternal narcissism and emerging adult perceptions of helicopter remained. Indirect pathways were observed for *assertive/extroverted* narcissism to emerging

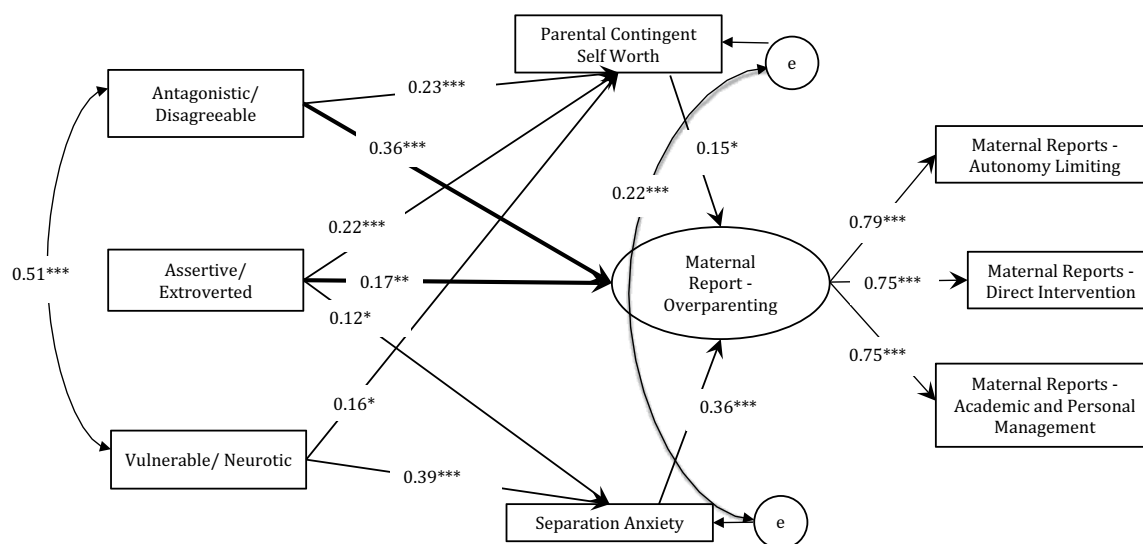


Fig. 1 Direct and indirect associations between narcissism, parental separation anxiety, and mothers' reports of overparenting. *Note:* Bold lines represent significant direct effects. Nonsignificant paths and covariances were removed from the trimmed model. Parent age and emerging adult age were controlled in the model. Because all pathways were nonsignificant between parent age and endogenous variables (parent age to parenting contingent self-worth $\lambda=-.07, p=.24$; to maternal overparenting $\lambda=.00, p=.998$; to separation anxiety

$\lambda=.07, p=.43$) and between emerging adult age and endogenous variables (emerging adult age to parenting contingent self-worth $\lambda=.06, p=.28$; to maternal overparenting $\lambda=.02, p=.67$ to separation anxiety $\lambda=.00, p=.97$), they were not included in the graphic representation for parsimony. Endogenous error correlations also are not shown in the figure for parsimony. Estimates are standardized. * $p<.05$; ** $p<.01$; *** $p<.001$

Table 2 Results of the path analyses: indirect effects for emerging adults and mothers

Pathways	B	95% CI	SE
Mother reports of overparenting			
Assertive/extroverted narcissism → Parenting contingent self worth → Overparenting	0.028***	[0.008, 0.064]	0.014
Antagonistic/disagreeable narcissistic → Parenting contingent self worth → Overparenting	0.035***	[0.011, 0.077]	0.017
Vulnerable narcissism → Parenting contingent self worth → Overparenting	0.020**	[0.004, 0.052]	0.011
Assertive/extroverted narcissism → Separation anxiety → Overparenting	0.037*	[0.003, 0.077]	0.019
Vulnerable narcissism → Separation Anxiety → Overparenting	0.119***	[0.070, 0.187]	0.029
Emerging adult reports of overparenting			
Assertive/extroverted narcissism → Separation anxiety → Overparenting	0.028*	[0.001, 0.081]	0.020
Vulnerable narcissism → Separation anxiety → Overparenting	0.093***	[0.032, 0.179]	0.038

95% CI confidence interval, SE standard error

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

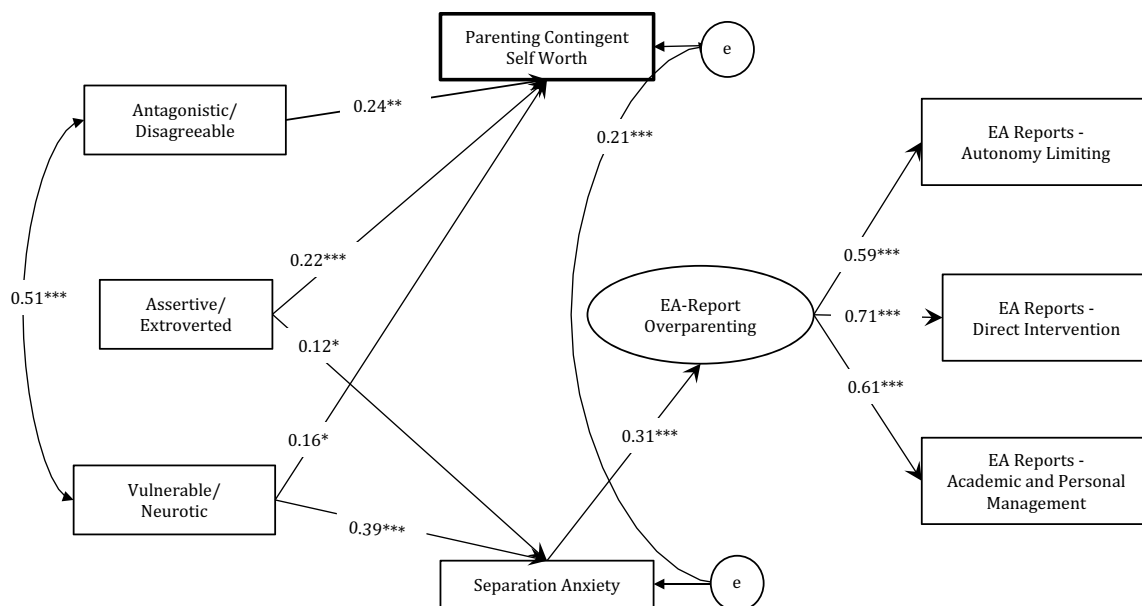


Fig. 2 Indirect associations between narcissism, parental separation anxiety, and emerging adults’ reports of overparenting. *Note:* Parent age and emerging adult age were controlled in the model. Because all pathways were nonsignificant between parent age and endogenous variables (parent age to parenting contingent self-worth $\beta = -.07$, $p = .23$; to emerging adult reports of maternal overparenting $\beta = -.08$, $p = .37$; to separation anxiety $\beta = .05$, $p = .42$) and between

emerging adult age and endogenous variables (emerging adult age to parenting contingent self-worth $\beta = .07$, $p = .27$; to emerging adult reports of maternal overparenting $\beta = -.02$, $p = .77$; to separation anxiety $\beta = .00$, $p = .96$), they were not included in the graphic representation for parsimony. Endogenous error correlations are not shown in the figure for parsimony. Estimates are standardized. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

adult perceptions of overparenting via parent separation anxiety and for *vulnerable/neurotic* narcissism to emerging adult perceptions of overparenting via parent separation anxiety (See Table 2).

Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to determine whether mothers’ reports of narcissism were directly associated with their own and their emerging adults’ perceptions

of overparenting and whether these associations were mediated by contingent self-worth and parent separation anxiety. Results generally supported our hypothesized models. In the models, *assertive/extroverted* narcissism and *antagonistic/disagreeable* narcissism were positively and directly associated with mothers' overparenting, as expected, and they were partially mediated through parental contingent self-worth. Although *vulnerable/neurotic* narcissism was not directly linked with overparenting in the direct model, it was associated via maternal separation anxiety. Unexpectedly, maternal separation anxiety also mediated the link between *assertive/extroverted* narcissism and maternal reports of overparenting.

The secondary analyses involving emerging adult reports of maternal overparenting also revealed that *assertive/extroverted* and *vulnerable/neurotic* narcissism worked through maternal separation anxiety. Noteworthy differences emerged when the focal overparenting measures were completed by emerging adults versus mothers. In the model predicting maternal reports, direct linkages between *assertive/extroverted* and *antagonistic/disagreeable* narcissism remained directly linked and were mediated by parental contingent self-worth and parent separation anxiety; whereas for emerging adult reports of overparenting, maternal narcissism was exclusively mediated by parent separation anxiety. Findings provide evidence that overparenting may be a strategic means by which mothers higher in narcissism orchestrate their children's lives to validate their sense of self-importance.

Assertive/Extroverted Narcissism

Mothers who need to be admired, feel superior, and control relationships, that is, have *assertive/extroverted* narcissism, reported engaging in more overparenting. They were inclined to structure, make decisions, manage and monitor academic and personal lives, and directly intervene in their children's personal relationships with friends and roommates. In the model, *assertive/extroverted* narcissism was positively and directly related to mothers' reports of their own overparenting. Such intrusiveness is consistent with research indicating that individuals high in narcissistic admiration have a particular need for power and control in relationships (Carroll, 1987; Vrabell et al., 2020). These results also support the notion that *assertive/extroverted* mothers use overparenting as a strategic interpersonal method to proactively improve the success or attain the perfectionism they desire in close others, including their children (Hewitt & Flett, 1991; Stoeber et al., 2015). The connection between a need to be admired and engaging in overparenting was found to work through parental contingent self-worth, that is, valuing others' external feedback

of them as parents. By engaging in overparenting, mothers capitalize on the opportunity to validate a self-view as a successful, superior parent and contribute to a "grandiose fantasy" which often is associated with higher levels of *assertive/extroverted* narcissism (Back et al., 2013).

Contrary to expectations, maternal separation anxiety also mediated the link between *assertive/extroverted* narcissism and overparenting. Although general anxiety and grandiose narcissism are typically unrelated (Dickinson & Pincus, 2003; Miller et al., 2011), anxiety tied to close relationships may work differently for those reporting higher *assertive/extroverted* narcissism. Perhaps emerging adults' literal and psychological distancing during the college transition removes *assertive/extroverted* mothers' source for admiration and relational control thereby triggering feelings of dread, sadness, or emptiness. Strategic efforts, such as those characterizing overparenting, mitigate such feelings and maintain mothers' centrality in their young adult children's lives. Thus, overparenting becomes a strategy that satisfies needs for grandiosity, maintenance of relational control, and increases the likelihood that they and their children would be held in high esteem by others (Zeigler-Hill et al., 2019).

Antagonistic/Aggressive Narcissism

Overparenting also appears to be a strategic way to reduce the threat of failure—a motivational goal often associated with those higher in *antagonistic/aggressive* narcissism (Back et al., 2013). To achieve this objective, narcissistic individuals use interpersonal strategies that re-establish dominance and superiority (Back, 2018; Back et al., 2013). *Antagonistic/aggressive* narcissism remained directly linked to overparenting in the conceptual model, and it was partially mediated through parental contingent self-worth. As originally theorized, mothers who see others as inferior, dislike not being the center of attention, or want rivals to fail, may intrusively intervene to allay threat or remove barriers to children's achievement efforts. For example, when more *antagonistic/aggressive* mothers structure their children's daily lives and demand decision-making authority (autonomy limiting), they remain the center of attention as permission is required for activities, or they can act as gatekeepers to reduce the threat of failure or rejection. Similarly, when narcissistic mothers directly intervene in their children's personal relationships with friends and romantic partners (direct intervention), they believe they can control dispute outcomes in favor of their children. In essence, threats to children may be experienced as personal threats. This interpretation is supported by the partially mediating role of parental contingent self-worth. That is, the association between *antagonistic/aggressive* narcissism and overparenting partially depends on whether mothers base the

evaluation of themselves on how well they parent and how successful their children are. Thus, overparenting becomes a means to dominate and control relationships with emerging adults, thereby, controlling potential outcomes.

Vulnerable/Neurotic Narcissism

To date, the association between *vulnerable/neurotic* narcissism and parenting practices had not been investigated. Overparenting behaviors may be similar in form yet different in underlying motivations because aspects of grandiose narcissism (*assertive/extroverted* and *antagonistic/aggressive* tendencies) and *vulnerable/neurotic* narcissism have different nomological networks. *Vulnerable/neurotic* narcissistic mothers likely interpret normative emerging adult autonomy as an abandonment threat (Krizan & Herlache, 2018). We speculated that mothers with *vulnerable/neurotic* narcissistic traits use overparenting as a tactic to undermine autonomy and keep them dependent and enmeshed (Munich & Munich, 2009; Pistole, 1995). Personal negative self-views and masked feelings of incompetence or insecurity are reduced by keeping children near and dependent.

The use of overparenting to reduce feelings of inferiority and insecurity of *vulnerable/neurotic* narcissistic mothers is further supported by the mediational model, where parental contingent self-worth and maternal separation anxiety fully mediated the linkages among maternal *vulnerable/neurotic* narcissism and mother and emerging adult reports of overparenting. The more *vulnerable/neurotic* narcissism reported, the more mothers' self-worth was contingent on parenting, which was then linked with more overparenting. Individuals high in *vulnerable/neurotic* narcissism have highly contingent, undifferentiated self-worth beliefs (Krizan & Herlache, 2018; Zeigler-Hill & Vrabell, 2022), which also appeared in their parental contingent self-worth. Intervening in children's lives through overparenting becomes a tactic to solicit validation of self-worth as a parent and a person. Overparenting becomes a prevention-focused regulatory style (Krizan & Herlache, 2018).

Further, Pistole (1995) proposed that individuals with vulnerable narcissism likely experience separation anxiety when partners do not meet closeness needs. Vulnerable narcissists' sense of shame and beliefs of negative evaluation are associated with relational strategies characterized by enmeshed boundaries, high anxiety about intimacy, and a fear of rejection (Krizan & Herlache, 2018; Pistole, 1995; Smolewska & Dion, 2005). Such beliefs trigger preventive strategies to re-establish power and control in relationships (Krizan & Herlache, 2018). We propose that, for mothers high in *vulnerable/neurotic* narcissism, children are viewed as another relational source that offers affirmation and validation. The college transition may pose a particularly poignant threat even though it is a natural developmental

milestone to leave the family of origin. As our data show, vulnerable narcissistic mothers may feel anxious regarding their children's increased autonomy as witnessed in higher maternal separation anxiety (Hock, et al, 2001), which, in turn, was associated with greater overparenting. Thus, overparenting may be a strategic tactic that is used to secure a key source of self-validation when *vulnerable/neurotic* narcissistic mothers experience higher separation anxiety and wish to maintain emotional and physical closeness with their children.

Differences Across Mother and Emerging Adult Reports of Overparenting

A secondary goal of the study was to test the generalizability of our model across both maternal reports and emerging adult reports of overparenting. The finding that metric invariance was upheld suggests that overparenting has the same underlying meaning for mothers and emerging adults and associations can be compared. The finding of scalar non-invariance was consistent with the mean differences found between mothers and emerging adults on the observed overparenting subscales, where emerging adults reported higher levels of overparenting than did mothers.

These findings suggest that emerging adults may include a wider range of parenting behaviors at this age as inappropriate. Perhaps they are more sensitive to parenting behaviors that could be considered intrusive and controlling, as personal identity exploration is central to this developmental period (Arnett, 2015). In fact, evidence exists showing that adolescents often hold more negative views of family functioning than do parents, that these views are maintained into late adolescence, and that they may stem from processes of autonomy and identity development (De Los Reyes et al., 2016). As has been found in other overparenting research (e.g., Cui et al., 2019; Van Petegem et al., 2020), the links among emerging adult- and mother-reported overparenting were only moderate in size (e.g., r 's = 0.2–0.4). These findings suggest that some disparity is evident between the perceptions of overparenting across both parties perhaps reflecting a lack of understanding in family relationships. Indeed, incongruence between mother and adolescent reports of overparenting appear associated with more problematic adolescent adjustment (Van Petegem et al., 2020). Such informant discrepancies are likely true of emerging adults and parents, as well. More research into the reasons and impacts of these discrepancies is still needed, however.

As expected, both parental contingent self-worth and separation anxiety served as mediators in the mother report model; the only indirect effects found in the emerging adult-reported models were through separation anxiety. Moreover, although both *assertive/extroverted* and *antagonistic/disagreeable* forms of narcissism were related to mothers'

report of overparenting, no direct relations among facets of narcissism and overparenting were evident in the emerging adult model. Indeed, it appears that emerging adults' perceptions of parenting may not be directly impacted by parental intrapsychic attitudes such as parental contingent self-worth. Instead, they are more likely to be shaped by factors relating to disruptions in parent–child relationships, which have more overt expression during interactions as is consistent with prior work (De Los Reyes et al., 2016). The persistence of mother-emerging adult discrepancies in overparenting into emerging adulthood but may reflect differences in family members' understanding of the motives of such parenting behavior. Given the salient role of separation anxiety for emerging adults and parents, interventions identifying, understanding, and addressing these maladaptive patterns would likely improve the relationships between parents and children, as well as influence downstream parenting behaviors.

Limitations and Future Directions

The present study has several limitations. First, the sample was a fairly homogeneous convenience sample that was primarily White and female; it does not represent emerging adults who attended trade school, identify with other ethnicities or race, or did not continue education past high school. Sample diversity is important for future research as overparenting may be experienced differently depending on cultural context. Second, parent and emerging adult gender may determine the ways in which overparenting is expressed by parents and perceived by emerging adults. Consistent with extant research (McGinley, 2018; Padilla-Walker et al., 2021), Rote et al. (2020) found that mothers engaged in overparenting more than did fathers, but adolescent relationship quality suffered similarly with parents of either gender when they engaged in overparenting and their co-parent did not. Third, fathers were not included, yet they would be an important focus for future research. Men tend to report higher levels of grandiose forms of narcissism than do women and are more attuned to public status (Weidmann et al., 2023). Perhaps, then, the link between narcissism, particularly, *assertive/extroverted* and overparenting via parenting contingent self-worth would be more pronounced. Certainly, additional research is needed to test difference pathways through which mother and father narcissism is linked with overparenting. Fourth, results of the present study might have been affected by shared method variance, reporting bias, cognitive distortions, and selective memory which is more likely with self-reports, especially among those with mental illnesses, undermining reporting accuracy (Zahn-Waxler et al., 2002). Still, self-report measures are a consistent method of assessing personality characteristics. We have confidence in our conceptual model because a similar pattern of results emerged with mother and emerging adults' reports. Other methodological approaches to assess

overparenting, such as vignettes and experimental designs, would benefit the field greatly. Fifth, we acknowledge that the use of cross-sectional data precluded our ability to draw conclusions about temporal order or causal relations. However, when theory can guide posited temporal relations, using cross-sectional data in mediational models may be an important first step (MacKinnon et al., 2012). Future longitudinal methodological approaches may yield corroborating evidence in support of our model. It is also important to acknowledge that overparenting was *higher* among emerging adults whose parents did *not* participate (italics added for emphasis). For some of those parents, not participating in the study reflected their own resistance to being challenged, judged as parents, or was indicative of autonomy limiting. In fact, our models might have been stronger in this group, but there is, of course, no way of knowing.

Last, there was significant overlap between the *antagonistic/disagreeable* and *vulnerable/neurotic* narcissism scales ($r = 0.59$, $p < 0.001$). This overlap was expected given theory and extant empirical work (Crowe et al., 2019). Crowe et al. (2019), using 287 items from existing narcissism measures (including the NARC and HSNS scales), found that antagonism correlated with vulnerable narcissism ($r = 0.62$), “consistent with the notion that antagonism is the ‘glue’ that holds the narcissism dimensions together” (p. 1164). Future research might further explore this overlap with more contemporary measures of narcissism that might better capture each of the three dimensions as well as utilizing overparenting measures that assess motivations and attitudes. Finally, future research may also benefit from research identifying additional correlates of maternal and paternal overparenting, such as additional qualities of parents, children, and contexts (Belsky, 1984; Belsky & Jaffee, 2006). Parenting factors might include attachment security (Smolewska & Dion, 2005), fear of society, or socialization goals. Child factors might include the presence of a disability or mental health concern (Holmbeck et al., 2002). Contextual correlates may include cultural beliefs or neighborhood or regional safety and instability (e.g. war-torn areas). In sum, more work is needed to understand why parents may engage in overparenting behaviors.

Conclusion

Findings from the present study show that, for parents who are more narcissistic, overparenting is enacted strategically to validate their need for superiority, grandiosity, and intrapsychic security. Specifically, *assertive/extroverted*, *antagonistic/disagreeable*, and *vulnerable/neurotic* narcissism were linked with overparenting behaviors directly. Further,

associations between *assertive/extroverted* and *vulnerable/neurotic* narcissism were mediated through parental contingent self-worth and maternal separation anxiety. For mothers higher in all aspects of narcissism, relationships with children are a social context that they can orchestrate to secure the admiration, grandiosity, and sense of superiority either as admirable parents or as a means of asserting control over children to reduce potential threat and ensure success (Hart et al., 2017). For mothers higher in *vulnerable/neurotic* narcissism, the motivation for overparenting appears to work through a need to reduce insecurity and gain continual validation by keeping emerging adult children dependent and close. As several authors noted (McGinley & Davis, 2021; Padilla-Walker & Nelson, 2012; Segrin et al., 2012), however, not all forms of overparenting are maladaptive and linked with poor emerging adult outcomes. Future research would benefit from identifying conditions that are linked with more and less adaptive forms of overparenting. Perhaps the distinction lies in overparenting associated with self-protective and aggrandizing objectives versus vigilant parenting that is child-focused. Identifying differing nomological networks associated with adaptive and maladaptive overparenting is worthy of future research efforts.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Ethical Approval All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional review boards committee per each university [Blinded for review] and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed Consent Informed consent was obtained from all participants included in this study. No identifying information was collected from participants as part of this research.

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