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**“My life felt like a cage without an exit” – Narratives of childhood
under the abuse of a narcissistic mother**

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“My life felt like a cage without an exit” – Narratives of childhood under the abuse of a narcissistic mother

This research focused on narcissistic homes as described by adult daughters of narcissistic mothers. The definition of narcissism reveals the problematic behaviors of narcissists (e.g., blaming, manipulation, nullification, and self-sufficiency to hide one’s own low self-esteem). How do these affect upbringing? How do children of narcissistic mothers describe their childhood? The research participants consisted of 13 women who wrote widely about their childhood in the shadow of their narcissistic mothers. They all had taken therapy when adults. This was a narrative research. The data brought up three childhood narratives: incompetent childhood, isolated childhood, and denied childhood. The elements and contents of the narratives are partly overlapping but provide a multidimensional picture of upbringing by narcissistic mothers. Many children felt being without support by health care, education, or social service agents and had difficulties defining their selfhood and identity. This research provided new information and means to support the biased mother-child-relationship.

Keywords: narcissism, upbringing, narcissistic parent, childhood, narrative research, separation-individuation.

Introduction

The phenomenon of narcissism has aroused more and more discussion and it is well-known globally (Twenge et al., 2008). It has been claimed that the number of narcissists has increased from generation to other. When comparing children born in the 2000s to their grandparents, Brown (2017) noted that “[m]illennials (born between early 1980s and 2004) are the most narcissistic”. On the other hand, the demands of the modern life may easily lead to someone labeled as narcissistic when trying to advance in life without showing altruism or empathy (White, Szabo, & Tiliopoulos, 2018). To some extent, this kind of behavior is natural in this century.

However, the actual concept of narcissism was first used in psychoanalysis and then in other sciences after Sigmund Freud’s definition (1957). The most central

theorists of narcissism Otto Kernberg (1975) and Heinz Kohut (1977) stated that narcissism resulted from cold, indifferent, and rejecting parenting, that is inadequate for meeting the child's needs. However, Theodore Millon (1981) argued that narcissism could be ignited by parents who were overly indulgent and admiring their children. These notions led to numerous research highlight such features of narcissism that would threaten a child's balanced development (e.g., Otway & Vignoles, 2006; Trumper, Watson, O'Leary, & Watkinson, 2008).

The explanations for narcissism were conducted by researching people who had been identified as narcissists with a Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI) (Raskin & Hall, 1979) despite the criticism targeted at the inventory (Ackerman et al., 2011; Twenge et al., 2008). In addition, narcissists' perceptions of their upbringing have been studied abundantly (Hart et 2017; Mechanic & Barry, 2015), and they have provided a good picture of what kind of upbringing can lead to the emergence of narcissism.

In sum, earlier research has been mostly statistical risk analysis trying to predict how likely children of narcissistic parents become narcissists themselves (e.g., Cramer, 2011). Likewise, the connection between various types and dimensions of narcissism have been measured widely with various narcissism scales (e.g., Clarke, Karlov, & Neale, 2015; Houlcroft, Bore, & Munro, 2012; Maxwell, Donnellan, Hopwood, & Ackerman, 2011).

Instead, research on what upbringing by narcissistic parents is like as described by their children is scarce. What is it like to live in home with a narcissistic mother or father? What kind of memories do these children have of their narcissistic homes?

The multidimensional concept of narcissism

The concept of narcissism is quite multidimensional. It has been categorized, for example, in two ways. Ackerman et al. (2011) defines narcissism in two dimensions, as adaptive and maladaptive narcissism. Adaptive narcissism refers to mental health and resilience (Sedikides et al., 2004), whereas maladaptive to negative, self-centered characteristics with wish to control and require constant attention from others (Pincus et al., 2009).

The definition of adaptive and maladaptive narcissism is similar to the categorization of the so-called normal and pathological narcissism (Brown, 1998; Pincus & Lukowitsky, 2010). Normal narcissism includes good social skills and positive self-image. Pathological narcissism differs from it in two ways: (1) as strong need to exercise power and control others and (2) as the lack of empathy (Miller & Campbell, 2008). In general, pathological narcissism is connected with problematic self-regulation processes (Ackerman et al., 2011).

Furthermore, pathological and maladaptive can be further divided into grandiose and vulnerable narcissism (Ackerman et al., 2011; Miller, Gentile, Wilson, & Campbell, 2013; Wink, 1991). Vulnerable narcissists have grandiose fantasies but are timid and insecure, and therefore, they do not appear narcissistic on the surface. Grandiose narcissists have higher levels of happiness and life satisfaction (Rose, 2001) and are more exhibitionistic than vulnerable narcissists (Wink, 1991). Miller et al. (2013) have noted that despite their differences, these two dimension have in common a tendency to act antagonistically toward others.

Typical of narcissists is the lack of self-appreciation due to which they demand constant attention and admiration from others: to strengthen their self-esteem (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). Another core characteristic is the lack of empathy (Ritter et al., 2011) 2011), which allows narcissists use their relationships and others to satisfy and

fulfill their own goals and sense of self-appreciation. The narcissistic feeling of grandioso (exaggeration of one's own abilities and unrealistic perceptions of one's excellence) has been defined the core differentiating characteristic between narcissism and other personality disorders (Ronningstam & Gunderson, 1991). They have overly positive self-views and they disregard other people's feelings and concerns while manipulating them to benefit themselves (Sedikides, Campbell, Reeder, Elliot, & Gregg, 2002), which conduct problems (Barry, Frick, & Killian, 2003) generally and violence in particular, especially when confronted with unfavorable feedback (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Ronningstam & Gunderson, 1991). They go to great lengths to protect their inflated sense of self-worth (see Campbell, Reeder, Sedikides, & Elliot, 2000).

Narcissism and parent-child relationship

As mentioned, there is plenty of research showing that narcissism can result from dysfunctional interactions between children and their parents. The change in upbringing practices over time is claimed to increase narcissism and decrease empathy (Konrath et al., 2011), but there are many other explanations, too.

Kernberg (1975) and Kohut (1977) define that narcissists have typically the following characteristics: sense of superiority, grandiosity, self-absorption, exhibitionism, arrogance and feelings of entitlement but also fragile self-esteem and emotional instability. These characteristics seem to be permanent (e.g., Kernberg, 1975), but the intensity of them differs and not all narcissists have all these characteristics (Kernberg, 2010). Narcissists' behaviors vary and does not look the same in all narcissists (Miller, Widiger, & Campbell, 2010).

The relationship between a parent and a child creates a foundation to form the basic structure of personality. It gives a child a sense of selfhood, individuality, and uniqueness. Separation-individuation in the narrow sense refers to specific developmental challenges of early childhood and adolescence. During infancy this process is likened by Margaret Mahler to a “psychological birth” that unfolds over several phases (Mahler, Pine, & Bergman, 1977). The child becomes to understand how people act toward others and how to control one’s own moods, behaviors, and reactions to other’s messages. Learning all this necessitates close interaction and secure attachment relationship with one’s primary caregivers (Bowlby, 1973).

Positive experiences of being cared provide sense of one’s value and create a basis of good self-esteem development. Insufficient care can reflect as later negative self-conceptions and interaction with others. A child can see his or her parents also as bad objects because they are the only ones to identify with when looking for desperately needed safety (Lapsley & Stey, 2010). The separation-individuation and construction of identity continues after childhood even in adulthood (Karpel, 1976).

According to Rappoport (2005), narcissistic parents’ ability to form a safe attachment relationship with their children is threatened because they are strongly controlling, blaming, self-sufficient, intolerable to others’ opinions, and unaware of their children’s needs and consequences of their own behavior. These parents want to have their children to be and see themselves as they want to see them. They also demand certain kind of behavior from their children because they perceive their children as their own continuum or addition, and thus, parents can see the children as a way of satisfy their own emotional needs (Rappoport, 2005).

How children of narcissists remember their care and treatment during childhood is unspoken and thus makes a challenging research topic. However, by giving voice to

these children it is possible to help recognizing the nature of narcissistic upbringing and secure the safety and development of a child who lives in a shadow of a narcissistic parent.

Method

The purpose of this research is to describe upbringing in a narcissistic home based on adult children of narcissistic parents. One main research question was set for this research:

What is upbringing like in narcissistic homes as described by children of narcissistic parents?

The main question was specified with two sub-questions:

- (1) What do narcissists' children tell about their treatment and upbringing during their childhood?
- (2) How does childhood appear as described by narcissists' adult children?

The research approach was qualitative narrative research (Heikkinen, 2010; Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Ziber, 1998; Polkinghorne, 1995). Narrative research represents an approach that focuses on narratives as ways of transmitting and constructing information. The relationship between research and narrative can be viewed from two main perspectives: the research data can be narratives but research also produces a narrative about the world (Heikkinen, 2010). Narrative research can refer to the information process as such, way of knowing, and the nature of information when it represents constructivism (Bruner, 1991; Heikkinen, 2010; Lieblich et al., 1998). In this research, the narrative approach covered not only the methodological choices concerning data collection but also data analyses thus forming a framework for the study as a whole (Heikkinen, 2010; Salmela & Uusiautti, 2017).

The best way to obtain data was considered to be written narratives. Narrative research provides an opportunity to think back childhood experiences (Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010). When writing narratives the research participants may express themselves perhaps more freely than in an interview situation. Interviews could be challenging since the topic is so sensible and touching. Writing also allows the research participants to peacefully think and decide what they want to reveal. While this can enhance data collection, it may also limit the variety of experiences revealed in research. On the other hand, this can happen in interviews, too. Thinking back at the childhood is demanding also because it requires detachment from an adult-centered thinking and ability to give voice to childhood views about the world (Mahon, Glendinning, Clarke, & Craig, 1996).

Narrated memories represent social action and remembering is always tied to interaction with other people. The surrounding community has an influence on what and how we remember. However, what someone tells that he or she remembers from his or her childhood might be the most crucial information and still present in his or her life. The narrative written for research is a published description of oneself by oneself (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). In the core is the way people perceive and describe the phenomenon under investigation (Spector-Mersel, 2010). Narratives always represent retrospective meaning making and analyses of past experiences (Bruner, 1991; Polkinhorne, 1995).

The data were obtained through contacting the peer-support coordinator at the Finnish association called *Narsistien uhrien tuki ry* [Association for the Victims of Narcissists]. The coordinator forwarded the request to participate in this research members of the association who had lived their childhood with a narcissist parent. The written narratives were collected in February-March 2018. The research participants were explained the purpose of the research and given a few questions to help them write

their narratives. The question were, for example, how it was like to live in a home with a mother or father being narcissistic and what kinds of practices or methods narcissistic parents had. How were children taken care of or nurtured in by the narcissistic parent? It was being emphasized that the narratives would be free-form and voluntary, in-depth descriptions of childhood experiences.

Altogether 13 narratives were received. Everyone did not tell their age, but quite many were already retired. Those who gave their age were 32-69 years old (mean 52 years). The data appeared rich and versatile. Narratives were 2-12 pages long so that the whole narrative data were about 80 pages. The narratives were personal, detailed, and extremely touching. Many research participants had found it important to describe their experiences carefully and to help other children of narcissists.

What was special about the data was that all participants happened to be women who wrote about their childhood under the upbringing of a narcissist mothers. This was not planned when collecting the data, but eventually as there were not men participating or no narcissistic fathers appearing in the data, the topic in the study became limited to the viewpoint of daughters of narcissistic mothers. Mothers were already old: some over 90 years old or already dead. All research participants had taken therapy when adults and learned that their mothers suffered from narcissism. Therefore, the participants were victims of narcissism. However, they all had successfully organized their lives, were employed or retired. They also had children of their own and some wrote about their own motherhood, too.

The narrative analyzing methods try to understand the phenomenon under research, and therefore, the narrative research pursues lifelikeness (Bruner, 1986). The data can be analyzed according to the content, meaning, or form of narratives as a whole or one narrative at a time (holistic vs. categorical analysis) (Lieblich et al., 1998).

Kelchterman (1994) refers to thematic and horizontal analyses, while Polkinghorne (1995) distinguishes analysis of narratives and narrative analysis.

In this research, the data analysis resembles a mix of the aforementioned methods. First, the narratives were categorized into various themes and qualitative categories (cf., McAdams, 2012) to get an impression of how the research participants constructed their experiences. The narratives were also analyzed as a whole to make sense of the relationship of childhood narratives and contexts of other parts of the narratives. The holistic analysis of form produced three holistic themes that each included certain features of the research participants' childhood narratives (see also Lieblich et al., 1998). These themes indicate certain features of narcissistic upbringing that became evident from the data. The research participants' narratives represented quite evenly these three themes. However, the childhood narratives were not excluding but overlapping. The three themes are researcher's interpretations of the childhood descriptions provided in this research. It is necessary to realize that the narratives were produced from a certain viewpoint by thinking back the childhood experiences as adults and after having taken therapy to recover from the childhood trauma (see Elbaz-Luwisch, 2002).

Results: Childhood narratives—being raised by a narcissistic parent

Three childhood narratives were conducted after analyzing the narrative data: incompetent childhood, isolated childhood, and denied childhood. Incompetent childhood describes childhood where the child experienced that she is not sufficient and cannot do anything correctly. Isolated childhood refers to home circumstances where important elements of child development (e.g., playing, hobbies, and friendships) were denied and the child had to stay at home under the control of mother. Denied childhood

means a situation in which the child was seen as a bothering burden and being on the mother's way, and therefore, the child was neglected and scorned. These childhood narratives were partly overlapping, because they included similar features or common experiences but as a whole, they present a multidimensional picture of narcissistic women as mothers.

Incompetent childhood

The experience of incompetent childhood emerged from the mother's exercise of power, cruelty, humiliation, and nullification.

Nullification

The daughters experienced that they were never supported, appreciated, or thanked by their mothers. Everything they did was worthless, and if their activities did not meet mothers' needs, hopes, or opinions, they had to give up on those doings.

Nothing was enough. I was never good enough. (12)

Mothers made it clear to their daughters that nothing was enough or sufficient. The daughters had the experience that they could not do anything correctly even if they tried to please their mother and act as she told.

I have tried to deserve my existence by being useful. (3)

Mothers were nullifying their daughters' school success, hobbies, and appearance. The daughters started to accept a self-image according to which they were "difficult and unthankful". They were receiving this feedback for decades from their mothers.

Mothers did not care about their children's needs and were not tolerating any of their wishes and hopes if they did not comply with the ones of their own. Children were merely as the extensions of the mothers themselves.

I liked singing a lot. Like a child, I told my mom and dad that I will be a singer when adult. Mother said that I do not need to even consider that kind of a lousy job. It is not a profession. Better to quit singing once and for all. I remember how I was crying for

many days and decided that I will not sing ever again. My music teachers tried very hard to get me in the choir. (4)

Somehow my mother sensed my weaknesses and insecurity. Once I did the mistake and told her joyfully about my first salary as an entrepreneur. Her response was that 'you must have hoaxed people'. With these words, she nullified all my work. (1)

The daughters did not get any support or encouragement and therefore, they could give up on important goals in their lives, including education. They started to believe that "they are useless".

She despised, scolded, and never complimented me about anything. I would have done well at school but when nothing was enough, I gave up. (5)

The narcissistic mother was always right:

Expressing my own opinion was arguing. All in all, she would always creating arguments that she would win. Someone could doubt that how come it is not possible to cope with that kind of an argument. But the narcissist twists and turns the situation/things so that no one eventually knows what it was about, and the narcissist has to always win. (2)

Exercise of power, cruelty, and humiliation

Narcissistic mothers determined what children were allowed to do. However, even if the daughters obeyed their mothers, they remembered that whatever they did was wrong or inappropriate. Mothers showed their power not only by dictating what daughters could do but also being uninterested, showing no empathy or willingness to comfort and care for their children, and expressing constant dissatisfaction with them.

All the things that I would have liked had to put aside (e.g., reading). only fulfilling the set duties was allowed, and even that i heard always having done badly. (2)

Narcissistic mothers were selfish rulers who interfered their children's lives and were not interested in their needs or opinions.

When I put on clothes, I had to take them off because my mother said they are of ugly color and I should wear something she had chosen, usually blue clothes. I hated blue for a long time. (2)

She showed in every way how disappointed she was in me and how I had ruined her life. (3)

Mothers' behavior was fluctuating and inconsistent. Often, the daughters were also humiliated in front of others. The exercise of power could get very cruel at times.

I remember how much I shamed and ran away when we had guests because my mother always used to scold me and say that I am lazy. (13)

I could never feel relaxed at home because I could never know what would make my mother angry. I remember crying in a shower with my sister and discussing if it would be better just to commit suicide. My mother overheard us and laughed at us: 'Well just do it!' (9)

Shame

Blaming and exercise of power caused shame in these daughters. They were specifically ashamed of themselves thinking that they are not worth anything and cannot do anything correctly. Their identity was featured by imperfection, weakness, and inferiority. Even when trying to be nice and act according to mothers' wishes, the daughters were scolded. Their worth was constantly questioned by mothers and themselves.

I felt ashamed of just existing. I tried to be nonexistent and obedient. - - She reproached me about everything. My appearance had always been bothering her and she would let me know that all the time. I feel ugly and am ashamed of myself in every way. (3)

Isolated childhood

Another theme evident in the data was that mothers tended to tie their daughters with them, were dependent on them, and defamed others who were in contact with their children. As the self-centered mothers used scapegoating, weaseling, and envying as upbringing methods, they were putting themselves in front and polishing façade.

Tying, dependability, and scapegoating

It was common to the narratives that the daughters were not accepted as they were but were seen merely as mothers' continuums. They were lonely and could not have friends or peer support. Mothers had to be enough for them because mothers did not want to have any rivalries.

My mother needed someone to accompany her at home. She made me to be her accomplice with whatever reason. I hated those moments but my mother happily thinks back at them. (4)

I was not allowed to have opinions or friends; in other words, I was missing support from my peers. (2)

I was never allowed to invite my best friends to my birthday party or even to visit me. On the other hand, I could never go visit them, not even attend their birthday parties. (12)

Daughters were to satisfy mothers' needs. Mothers seemed to use all energy of the family, demanded all attention, and poisoned relationships with other people, including daughters' fathers.

She never had anything positive to say about other people. She would always find something to blame in everything. Therefore, you did not want to tell her about even your good experiences. She could ruin those too. (1)

Mothers used to scapegoat others so that they themselves look good. Even fathers could become rivalries when mothers wanted to tie their daughters in a sick way. Narcissistic mothers manipulated their children against their fathers.

My parents were almost always arguing. The arguments were physical and often verbally very offending and nullifying. My mother would hurt my dad with words and he would reply with fists. My mother manipulated us to hate our dad by telling daily how repulsive he is. - - I remember once when my dad had gotten a big stick in his toe when building our terrace and he could not get it off. He asked everyone in turn to help, first my mom, my siblings, and me. My mother sharply said that ‘ you are not going to help him, are you’. (9)

She had to scapegoat me and my dad so that no one would spend time with us but just with my mother. - - If I talked to my dad, he would suffer. (2)

Mothers were controlling and blocking daughters’ romantic relationships. Daughters were expected to sacrifice themselves for their mothers. Isolation was boosted with a prohibition to tell outsiders about home matters.

My mother broke all my friendships, called to my friends and boyfriends and their parents, isolated me from my friends and made me stay at our cabin as her company when I was about 20. (4)

We were not allowed to tell outsiders how things were at our home. We would not have even dared to that. (1)

Blaming and taking the blame

Narcissistic mothers could see themselves as innocent and perfect but could find flaws in their children and other people. Blaming was one way of controlling and tying the children: when the basic trust in others is crashed the child could cling to their mother even more. Blaming was ruthless and mothers did not have conscience. Mothers were experts of turning things up-side-down.

My mother was a master of finding someone to blame afterwards. Even showers of rain were my dad’s fault sometimes. She herself had no flaws. (1)

My mother was blaming me for everything although I would have needed someone to defend me many times, for example, when at school. (7)

She would develop an argument about anything, twisted it to her benefit by blaming others what she had done or said, even if it was about her own child. I still do not know when she is telling the truth. (2)

From weaseling, envy, and self-centeredness to shiny façade

The children were not allowed to be happy about things that were not related to their mothers or her wishes. Spending time with mother was typically tensed and agonizing, and filled with worry about how each situation could end.

I could not tell my mom about any good events in my life: she would call you the next time crying how she has been awake all night long because she does not have anything nice and fun. You always have to be on your toes with mother. You can never reply to her honestly. (4)

Everyone else seemed to be worthless in mothers' opinions. Others were despised, which was a way to underpin their own worth.

In her images, she hoped to be equally rich and successful as our neighbors but to us she would scold and despise them emphasizing that they had not deserved their wealth. (9)

Mothers took all attention and energy in the family. Still, holding up the faced and looking good and happy to outsiders were important. Mothers positive and skillful acting seemed to work, too.

Plenty of relatives visited us on all possible holidays. It was like theater. Mother was radiant and hustling. And after the guests had left, mother and father started arguing. Christmases were the worst. (4)

My parents were respected and trusted in their work. Therefore, no one could imagine what kind of nightmare my life was as their only daughter. - - My mother can skillfully describe herself as scarifying, wonderful person who gives her all. (7)

Outsiders were not really able to understand how life in these narcissistic homes was.

Children had to behave nicely and give impression of a good home. When children were

complemented about their nice behavior, mothers took the credit and played their roles as caring and sensitive parents. The reality was far from this ideal family life.

Once when I was a teen ager, about 13-14 years old, I was courageous enough to go to talk to school nurse about my mother. I had one-month-long detention at home after that. The nurse had called my mom, my mom was yelling that I had ruined her reputation. She does not dare to go to work because her daughter is telling lies. (4)

To outsiders, my mother has always talked about our childhood and us little kids with pride. - - We did not make any mess or leave our toys all around the house. She was proud of that and especially proud she was of the fact that SHE had raised us like this. (9)

Denied childhood

Thirdly, upbringing by narcissist mothers appeared in keeping their daughters not only invisible but also nonexistent. Their physical existence was constantly threatened, and the children lived in fear and inconsistency. They were repeatedly let know what a continuous nuisance they were to their mothers. The daughters were physically abused, neglected, and spurned.

Physical abuse and violence

Mothers were violent and harsh. They often used violence as a way to punish their daughters. More often than not, the punishments were given due to insignificant issues, and showed that mothers were unable to control their own behavior.

My mother really hit us with a stick and hand without any reason. When I was already in high school, she put me on the floor and started kicking. (5)

Physical punishment was allowed when she was raising us children. - - The bigger we grew, the harder the punishing methods were. - - She got easily angry about the smallest things, even if it had been an accident such as dropping glass on the floor or having a stain in your shirt. (9)

Denial could lead to downright neglecting. Mothers could deny their children or consider them being bad only because their children were daughters.

In her opinion, I was a whore already before I even know what that meant. (5)

Scaring and threatening

Denial of existence happened through denying help and support. Daughters could not ask help or guidance from their mothers but were constantly afraid of making mother angry. Frightening mothers separated children from their peers because they had to cope by themselves and avoid punishments and violence. The daughters had to learn to be careful about their words and acts.

I learned the feature that would extensively limit and make my later life difficult, not to ask for guidance or help. My mother would often reply that 'are you not able to do even that even though you went to school'. (1)

Everyone was afraid of my mother. My classmates or other friends never visited us. My mother would yell and swear and was almost always angry. I was alert all the time. I could never know what would happen next. (5)

I always had to prove her how irreplaceable mother and spouse she was. By constantly assuring her how perfect she is I tried to keep her in a good mood. (12)

Spurning

Mothers were spurning their daughters by ignoring their needs. The daughters had experiences of being left alone, forgotten, and ignored by their mothers. Their basic safety was threatened constantly.

left me home alone... left me at the play field alone... I was scared of dark because I was frightened staying at home alone in the evenings. (3)

Mothers did not care for their daughters' hygiene or clothes, nor were they allowed to act as normal children.

At school, I had to sit next to a boy who asked why I do not wash my teeth. I was not guided to keep myself clean or care for myself, I guess I was dirty quite often. (10)

All my toys were taken away because I was told that I was too old to play with toys at the age of 9. (3)

The daughters were forgotten and neglected or abused physically and mentally, even sexually.

In the summer, I was traveling across Finland with my mother. I experienced things that a child should not see or hear. My mother did not care for me and I had to sleep wherever. In a chair, or on the floor at strange men's houses. I was afraid all the time. (3)

Discussion

In this research, childhood in the shadow of a narcissistic mother had three main features: incompetent childhood, isolated childhood, and denied childhood. The purpose was to illustrate the typical features of narcissistic upbringing. While the childhood narrative of an incompetent child referred to the mother's cruelty, nullification, and humiliation, isolated childhood narrative included the features of mother's pursuit to tie the child under her control and proximity by scapegoating and scaring other people away from them. Furthermore, denied childhood narrative illustrated the insufficient care, mental and physical violence, and negligence that a narcissistic mother used as her so-called parenting methods.

Each of these themes had specific consequences to the daughters' self-conception and identities. Incompetent childhood made daughters feel ashamed of themselves. Feelings of inferiority, imperfection, incapability made them consider themselves worthless. Isolated childhood turned the daughters against other people making them serve and please their mothers. Manipulation, scapegoating, and pursuit of keeping up the façade kept daughters scared, ashamed, and alert. Denied childhood

increased the sense of insecurity, shame, and worthlessness through ignoring their needs and abusing them in many ways.

Indeed, the children's self-conception and healthy personality development were in danger. Rappoport (2005) calls people who live with narcissistic persons "co-narcissists". Co-narcissistic children's lives are filled with attempts to preserve their relationship with parents, tend to please them, and defer their points of view. Children are often depressed or anxious as they may easily be considered selfish if they act assertively. Furthermore, children are punished if they do not correspond to the parents' needs and hopes (Horton et al., 2006). This research showed that punishing could get various forms, including physical abuse, condescensions, blaming, criticism, and pure emotional coldness. Narcissistic mothers' psychological control refers to "control attempts that intrude into the psychological and emotional development of the child" (Barber, 1996, p. 3296). Control could also have many forms from manipulation of a child via guilt induction or withdrawal of love, personal control of a child (via possessiveness), to expressions of disappointment and shame in a child.

Narcissistic people as parents seem resemble the dysfunctional pattern of affectionless control, characterized by excessive control and lack of empathy. In the attachment theory framework (e.g., Bowlby, 1973), it is generally argued that parents, not able to be a secure base for their children, induce the development of an insecure attachment, making them more prone to psychopathology. Although theorists disagree about the nature of narcissism, researchers have been unanimous of the fact that a human being self-conception and healthy cognitive, emotional, physical, and social development necessitates healthy interaction with the primary caregiver, who is usually mother.

What was common to the childhood narratives illustrated in this research, was the influence on daughters' self-conception and separation-individuation development due to which these all research participants had to have therapy to heal from their traumatic childhood with narcissistic mothers.

<<<<Figure 1 about here >>>>

Based on this research, narcissistic mothers not only manipulated and controlled but also neglected and ignored their children. The daughters' narratives repeatedly pointed out how they had to struggle and control their own behavior to conform to their mothers' expectations. Therefore, they did not have a chance to grow as individuals nor could their mothers support their healthy development. The attachment relationship (cf., Bowlby, 1973) remained insecure, contradictory and/or avoiding due to, for example, the mother's unpredictable behavior. Daughters' separation-individuation development was skewed so that their self-conception was lost until they became aware of their mothers' disorder and could have professional help for themselves.

These results support earlier findings about the meaning of early child care and how lack of care threaten emotional, cognitive, and social development. The child's self-conception is dependent on others: if the mother is frightening, inconsistent, unpredictable, nullifying, and humiliating, the development of a healthy self-conception is shaken. Namely, one main developmental task for children is to establish a sense of self that is distinct and individuated without dependence on approval, self-esteem, and standards of conduct determined by parents. Disturbances in separation-individuation lead to various problems, including borderline and narcissistic personality, family and marital dysfunction, suicidal ideation, and college adjustment (Lapsley & Stey, 2010).

Pine (1979) distinguishes higher- and lower-order forms of pathology of separation-individuation. The latter includes the experience of fusion with another and the lack of self-other boundaries. In higher-order disturbances, people are not able to be alone and tend to use coercion to control others as an extension of the self. An assessment of pathology of separation-individuation has been used successfully in several studies (Lapsley, Aalsma, & Varshney, 2001). Attachment theory also provides resources for understanding disturbances in the process of separation-individuation and about the reasons between normal and abnormal individualization and socialization also outside the family.

Conclusion

The participants of this research had all become members of a peer support group for children of narcissistic parents. Therefore, they were aware of the features of narcissism. They had survived from the distorted upbringing methods used in their homes and could analyze their experiences. Therefore, these women made a highly selected group of research participants. However, it arouses an important question of how many children are there living with narcissistic parents at the moment who are not aware of the serious problems making their parents act like they do and are just trying to cope with their lives.

A relevant limitation of the present study is the use of retrospective measures of the parental upbringing style as reported by the adult children. More specifically, an important review of the literature (Brewin, Andrews, & Gotlib, 1993) reported that the assessment of parental behavior with retrospective reports has been questioned for some different reasons, such as the low reliability and validity of autobiographical memories, the presence of memory impairment associated with psychopathology, and the presence

of specific mood-congruent memory biases associated with psychopathology. However, based on a critical discussion of these limitations, Brewin, Andrews, & Gotlib (1993) concluded that retrospective measures of parental rearing are more reliable compared to what is generally thought and suggested to reconsider their utility and validity, even though (they added) other studies should be carried out to further examine and overcome them (Dentale et al., 2015).

In this research, it was impossible to hear the narcissistic mothers or validate their diagnosis. Therefore, the findings lean on the adult children's definitions of their mothers' narcissism. It is also impossible to know what type or how severe the mothers' narcissistic disorder was. However, the purpose of the research was to hear children's perceptions of how upbringing in a narcissistic home was like. The next research topic could be to find out what the consequences are and how to cope with childhood in the shadow of narcissism. Narcissistic upbringing leaves its marks and even those who have gone to therapy cannot totally separate themselves from the influence of narcissism, as one of the research participants mentioned:

The narcissistic parent molds his or her child's images and memories according to his or her wishes, and therefore, it can be hard or even impossible to clear your own thoughts without psychotherapy. (9)

Earlier research has showed that children easily are ashamed of their parents because they may see the parent's illness as a part of themselves (e.g., Jähi, 2004). Children may also feel guilty for their parent's condition and think that they are wrong or different than others. As children constantly hear being bad or worthless, they may think that it is their fault that the parents are mentally ill. Furthermore, children rarely know enough about mental illnesses and thus, they may find it difficult to tell outsiders what is happening in their homes. They learn to hide. Not being able to share their experiences with anyone, children feel isolated and lonely.

Narratives in this research data did not draw a positive picture of narcissistic mothers. Even physically abusing father was seen nicer than the narcissistic mother (research participant no. 9). Was there not anything positive in the childhood? This research revealed one side of the reality with the focus on how the research participants described their childhood experiences. Even nice clothes and beautiful homes described in narratives did not guarantee happiness but were just means to polish mother's reputation and keep up the façade.

One important conclusion is that it seemed extremely difficult for children to tell outsiders about their mothers' narcissism. And even if they dared to or could talk to someone, it was not certain that they would become heard or taken seriously. How to then help a child living with a narcissistic parent? This is a challenge to health care and social work. Based on this research, it seems that special attention should be paid on children who seek help. Namely, this step can be huge because narcissistic parents are constantly emphasizing that it is forbidden to tell anyone about their family life. In addition, telling someone and asking for help might lead to even worse abuse by parents.

This research unintentionally focused on mother-daughter relationship. It would be interesting to know why only women choose to participate in this research and why the narcissistic parents all in this research happened to be mothers. The viewpoint became limited but still, the value of the data is unquestionable and unique. This research challenged the image of caring and loving mothers and showed how painful it was to think back at childhood with a mother who did not comply with the traditional conception of motherhood (Phillips, 1996). Many of the daughters also pointed out that the outsiders did not even think that their mothers would be any different than so-called

ordinary mothers. However, it would be interesting to research also sons' perceptions and descriptions of narcissistic fathers (Diamond, 2018).

Another future research topic would be to study narcissistic mothers' own perceptions of themselves as mothers. Although research has increased, mentally ill mothers' specific experiences and needs are still little known or understood (Perera, Short, & Fernbacher, 2014). It is possible that mothers feel guilty (Shor & Moreh-Kremer, 2016) or have noticed that their mental illness disturb their task as parents. However, when it comes to narcissistic mothers, it is likely that they do not feel any kind of guilt and blame their children for trouble. This is due to the nature of narcissism and inability to realistically perceive oneself. A fact is, though, that even seriously mentally ill women can be mothers (Diaz-Caneja & Johnson, 2004). It is important to provide more information about narcissism to educators at day care centers and schools, and in teacher training to provide help for children who have become victims of narcissism. Detaching from the chains of a narcissistic mother requires knowledge and courage from outsiders. The children themselves are quite helpless—and at its worst, incompetent, isolated, and denied.

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Figure 1. Childhood under narcissistic upbringing

