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Reply to Kealy et al.: Theoretical precision in the study of narcissism and its origins

We thank Kealy et al. (1) for noting that our article on the origins of narcissism (2) “is a notable contribution to the empirical literature” and “has important implications for helping parents foster appropriate and realistic self-views in their children.” However, they raise questions regarding the interpretation of our findings.

Kealy et al. ask to what extent narcissism as we measured it maps onto pathological narcissism. As noted in our article, we measured narcissism as a subclinical personality trait in a general, nonclinical sample of children. Even in its subclinical form, narcissism predicts significant maladjustment, ranging from aggression, violence, and delinquency to anxiety, depression, and addiction (3). In its extreme form, subclinical narcissism may become pathological, and develop into narcissistic personality disorder: “a pervasive pattern of grandiosity (in fantasy or behavior), need for admiration, and lack of empathy” (4). We advocate a dimensional perspective that conceptualizes narcissistic personality disorder as an extreme manifestation of subclinical narcissism (3). Consistent with this perspective, research in adults shows that (i) subclinical narcissism correlates substantially with interview assessments of narcissistic personality disorder, (ii) subclinical narcissism and narcissistic personality disorder have similar correlates, (iii) and there is no “shift” from normal to extreme narcissism (5). Thus, studying subclinical narcissism may provide preliminary insight into narcissistic personality disorder.

Additionally, Kealy et al. argue that our findings do not refute psychoanalytic theory as a whole. We agree. Our findings do, however, refute the psychoanalytic hypothesis that narcissism is cultivated by lack of parental warmth. Psychoanalytic theory has long been criticized to be unfalsifiable. Most notably, Karl Popper noted, “Once your eyes

were thus opened you saw confirming instances everywhere: the world was full of verifications of [psychoanalytic] theory. Whatever happened always confirmed it” (6). We believe, and our study demonstrates, that psychoanalytic theory can generate falsifiable hypotheses. What makes psychoanalytic hypotheses generally difficult to falsify, however, is their imprecision. For example, Kealy et al. argue that psychoanalytic theory predicts that children develop “identity distortion” when they are “not really loved for [themselves] as a person” and that this resonates with our finding that children become more narcissistic when they are overvalued by their parents. However, “identity distortion” and “not really being loved for oneself as a person” are imprecisely defined concepts that leave considerable room for speculation. For too long, research on the origins of narcissism has been hampered by such theoretical imprecision. Precision is imperative in research on socialization, because even subtle differences in socialization practices can have remarkably different consequences for children’s development. In our study, we precisely demarcated parental overvaluation from parental warmth, and demonstrated that overvaluation predicts narcissism, whereas warmth predicts high self-esteem. Narcissism entails unhealthy feelings of superiority, whereas self-esteem entails healthy feelings of worth.

Thus, we call for a dimensional perspective on narcissism, but above all, we call for theoretical precision. Our task is to demarcate the socialization practices that foster narcissism from those that do not. Only by doing so can we develop targeted interventions to curtail narcissistic development.

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2 Brummelman E, et al. (2015) Origins of narcissism in children. *Proc Natl Acad Sci USA* 112(12):3659–3662.

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5 Miller JD, Campbell WK (2010) The case for using research on trait narcissism as a building block for understanding narcissistic personality disorder. *Pers Disord* 1(3):180–191.

6 Popper K (1957) Philosophy of science: A personal report. *British Philosophy in Mid-Century*, ed Mace CA (Allen and Unwin, London), pp 155–189.

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The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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