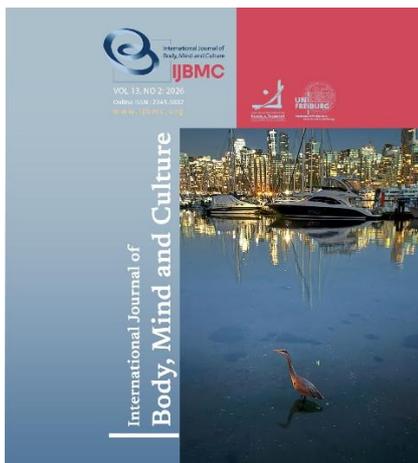


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A Phenomenological Study of Adult Children's Lived Experiences with Narcissistic Parents

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study explored the lived experiences of adult children raised by narcissistic parents, aiming to illuminate the long-term psychological and relational effects of narcissistic parenting.

Methods and Materials: A qualitative design based on Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was employed. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 adult participants (aged 26–42) who self-identified as having been raised by at least one narcissistic parent. Data were analyzed using the six-step IPA framework to extract emergent and superordinate themes.

Findings: Six superordinate themes emerged: (1) Identity in the Shadow of the Parent, (2) Sibling Relationships under Narcissistic Mirroring, (3) Emotional Disconnection and Coping in Silence, (4) Control and Ongoing Parental Intrusion in Adulthood, (5) Reclaiming the Self in Adulthood, and (6) Social and Occupational Impact. Participants reported enduring feelings of inadequacy, identity diffusion, emotional manipulation, and conditional affection, alongside processes of healing, boundary-setting, and post-traumatic growth.

Conclusion: Narcissistic parenting leaves lasting emotional scars that impair identity development, emotional regulation, and interpersonal functioning in adulthood. Nevertheless, through therapy and personal resilience, individuals can reconstruct a coherent sense of self and establish healthy relational boundaries. The findings underscore the importance of trauma-informed clinical approaches for adult survivors of narcissistic parenting.

Keywords: Narcissistic parenting, lived experience, interpretative phenomenological analysis, relational trauma.

Introduction

There is no doubt that the parent–child relationship plays a fundamental role in emotional development and interpersonal functioning throughout the lifespan (Aneesh et al., 2024; Callicott, 2025). Positive parenting strengthens emotional security and fosters psychological resilience, whereas dysfunctional parenting, especially when rooted in pathological personality traits, can leave deep and lasting emotional wounds (Lee et al., 2023). According to Bowlby's attachment theory, the attachment formed between parent and child early in life becomes internalized as the child's internal working model (Thompson et al., 2022). When caregiving is inconsistent, manipulative, or emotionally invalidating, the development of secure attachment is disrupted, leaving the child vulnerable to a wide range of emotional and psychological problems (Bernard et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2025). One of the most destructive forms of maladaptive parenting manifests as narcissistic parenting. Although research specifically focused on narcissistic parents is limited, existing studies indicate that parental narcissism is negatively associated with healthy parenting and that narcissistic family structures are ill-suited to providing a nurturing and secure environment (Hewitt et al., 2024). Narcissism is characterized by excessive self-love, a strong sense of entitlement, and a constant need for attention, admiration, and validation (Oliver et al., 2024). Narcissistic parents are typically marked by emotional manipulation, lack of empathy, and emotional invalidation (Alpay & Aydın, 2023; Estlein et al., 2024).

Emotional manipulation is described in recent literature as a form of psychological violence that involves exploiting another person's emotions to achieve self-serving goals. It often includes tactics such as inducing guilt, fear, or shame to control or dominate others, and has been linked to narcissistic personality traits. Within family and intimate relationships, emotionally manipulative individuals tend to undermine others' confidence and create dependence to maintain control. In the context of narcissistic behavior, emotional manipulation is considered part of the darker side of emotional intelligence — the strategic use of emotional awareness to influence and manage others for personal advantage. Over time, such behaviors can diminish the

target's emotional stability, autonomy, and self-worth (Hyde & Grieve, 2014; Jarwan et al., 2024).

Lack of empathy is a defining interpersonal deficit among narcissistic parents and a major mechanism explaining their non-optimal parenting behaviors. Research shows that narcissists' low empathy predicts unresponsive caregiving, which in turn results in authoritarian or permissive parenting patterns rather than warm and authoritative approaches. This absence of empathic concern reduces emotional attunement to the child's needs and contributes to cold, self-focused interactions. In contrast, parents with higher adaptive narcissism—those showing greater empathy—display more responsive caregiving and supportive parenting. These findings highlight that empathy acts as a crucial determinant of caregiving quality, and its absence in narcissistic parents fosters environments marked by emotional neglect, coercion, and limited warmth (Ewing, 2020; Hart et al., 2017; Henschel, 2014).

Emotional invalidation refers to a parent's tendency to dismiss, minimize, or criticize a child's emotional experiences. In narcissistic or emotionally immature parenting, this often manifests as disregarding the child's feelings, judging emotional expressions, or implying that the child is overreacting. Such parental behavior communicates that emotions are unacceptable or unimportant, fostering shame and confusion in the child. Empirical findings indicate that emotional invalidation frequently co-occurs with narcissistic traits and low empathy, reflecting a self-focused emotional style that neglects the child's inner experience. Over time, children exposed to invalidating environments show higher levels of emotional dysregulation, anxiety, and poor communication skills, as well as difficulties developing a coherent emotional identity. This dynamic not only undermines secure attachment but also contributes to the emergence of vulnerable narcissistic traits in later life (Cicarelli, 2025; Ferrão, 2022).

Yet, despite the expanding body of quantitative research on the consequences of narcissistic parenting, there remains a limited understanding of how adult children make meaning of these experiences and how they interpret their long-term emotional and relational impact. To bridge this gap, the present study adopts a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of adult children raised by narcissistic parents. By giving voice to those who have navigated

such complex familial terrain, this study aims not only to enrich theoretical understandings of narcissistic parenting but also to inform clinical practices that support healing, boundary-setting, and identity reconstruction in adult survivors. While international literature has begun to illuminate the psychological consequences of narcissistic parenting, research within Middle Eastern and particularly Iranian contexts remains scarce. Conducted in Iran, this study seeks to address this gap by situating these lived experiences within the rich sociocultural fabric of Iranian family life, where strong familial bonds, filial duty, and emotional interdependence deeply shape parent-child dynamics and expressions of narcissistic control.

Methods and Materials

Study Design

This study employed a qualitative research design grounded in *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)* to explore the lived experiences of adult children raised by narcissistic parents. IPA was selected for its emphasis on how individuals make sense of personally significant experiences and for its suitability in examining complex emotional phenomena such as relational trauma and identity formation. The study aimed to uncover the nuanced ways in which parental narcissism shapes emotional development, self-concept, and interpersonal functioning in adulthood.

Participants

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling based on the following inclusion criteria: (a) age 25 years or older, (b) self-identification as having been raised by at least one parent exhibiting narcissistic traits consistent with the DSM-5 criteria for narcissistic personality disorder, and (c) willingness to share personal experiences in depth. A total of 15 participants (9 women and 6 men), aged 26–42 years, were recruited through online support groups and psychotherapy networks. All participants resided in Iran at the time of data collection and reported being raised in Iranian family contexts. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was reached, meaning no new themes or insights emerged from subsequent interviews.

Data Collection

Data were gathered through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, lasting approximately 60–90

minutes. The interviews were guided by open-ended questions such as: “Can you describe what it was like growing up with your parents?” “How did your parents’ behavior affect your self-esteem and emotional development?” “What strategies did you use to cope with emotional distress in childhood and adulthood?”

All interviews were conducted via secure video-conferencing platforms, recorded with participants’ informed consent, and transcribed verbatim. Field notes and reflexive memos were kept throughout the process to enhance contextual understanding and researcher transparency.

Data Analysis

Transcripts were analyzed using the six-step IPA process (Smith et al., 2021), including repeated reading and immersion in the data. Initial noting of descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual comments. Development of emergent themes. Identification of connections among emergent themes. Cross-case analysis to identify superordinate themes. Construction of an interpretative narrative supported by illustrative quotations from participants.

Manual coding was performed, and themes were refined iteratively through repeated comparison. Reflexivity was maintained by systematically documenting analytic decisions, personal assumptions, and emotional responses throughout the research process.

Trustworthiness

To ensure the rigor and credibility of the findings, the study adhered to the criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1982). Credibility was enhanced through member checking, in which participants reviewed and validated their own interview interpretations. Dependability was ensured via an external audit of the analytic process to confirm consistency over time. Confirmability was established by maintaining a transparent audit trail of analytic decisions and researcher reflections. Transferability was supported by providing thick, contextualized descriptions of participants’ experiences, allowing readers to assess applicability to other settings.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained before data collection. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were assured of confidentiality, anonymity, and the right to withdraw at any time. Given the sensitive nature of the topic, participants were provided with information

about available psychological support services should they experience emotional distress.

Findings and Results

Through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), six superordinate themes and thirteen subthemes were identified, representing the psychological, emotional, and relational dimensions of participants' lived experiences of growing up with a narcissistic parent. These themes illuminate both the enduring wounds of narcissistic parenting and the processes of survival and meaning reconstruction in adulthood. Although participants differed in gender, cultural background, and current relational status, the identified themes appeared consistently across cases, suggesting shared psychological patterns in the experience of narcissistic parenting.

1. Identity in the Shadow of the Parent

Participants often described growing up feeling unseen and emotionally invalidated. Their identities were shaped by their narcissistic parents' need for admiration, control, and conformity. The relationship was one-sided—participants felt like extensions of their parents' ego rather than individuals with their own voices or worth.

Role Reversal and Parentification

Many recalled having to meet their parent's emotional needs, becoming confidants or caretakers at a young age. This early responsibility hindered their own emotional development.

Internalized Criticism and Perfectionism

A pervasive sense of never being "good enough" emerged, driven by chronic criticism. Many internalized this belief, leading to perfectionism and an ongoing need for approval.

Loss of Authentic Self

Participants described losing touch with their own values and desires, instead being molded by their parents' expectations. In adulthood, they struggled to define their true selves.

Persistent Inadequacy and People-Pleasing

A deep compulsion to please others, rooted in early experiences, continued into adulthood. Self-worth was tied to meeting others' needs, especially the narcissistic parents'.

Erasure of Accomplishment

Participants often felt invisible. Their achievements were minimized or claimed by the parent, reinforcing feelings of insignificance and injustice. "There was always something I did wrong. Even when I tried my best, she found fault. I just stopped trying after a while." (Participant 9). "I spent most of my life trying to be who my mother needed me to be—smart, obedient, grateful. It took years before I even asked myself what I wanted. I thought if I could be better, smarter, quieter... she would finally love me. That guilt never left." (Participant 6). "I was part of the household, but never part of the family. Everything was about her—her emotions, her needs. I was invisible unless she needed someone to blame." (Participant 11)

2. Sibling Relationships under Narcissistic Mirroring

A theme that emerged from several participants' narratives was the impact of having a sibling with narcissistic traits. This dynamic often mirrored the relationship with the narcissistic parent and contributed to additional emotional strain, confusion, and competition. The presence of a sibling with narcissistic traits created a cycle of manipulation and emotional exploitation that perpetuated the toxic family environment. This theme captures how sibling relationships became extensions of the narcissistic parent's emotional system, reflecting patterns of rivalry, manipulation, and emotional exploitation that mirrored the parent-child dynamic.

Sibling Rivalry and Competition

Participants described feeling in constant competition with their narcissistic sibling for the parents' attention, validation, and approval. This rivalry often led to feelings of inadequacy, invisibility, and emotional neglect, as the narcissistic sibling managed to dominate the family dynamic and overshadow the participant. This competition created a sense of emotional exile for the participant, leaving them feeling sidelined and dismissed.

Manipulative Behavior

These siblings often used manipulation to control others, gain attention, and avoid accountability. Their actions minimized the participant's efforts and needs, deepening feelings of injustice.

Perpetuating Narcissistic Patterns

Participants noted how siblings mimicked the narcissistic parent's tactics—gaslighting, shifting blame,

and playing innocent. This reinforced toxic family patterns and deepened emotional wounds.

Emotional Exhaustion and Burnout

Some participants described the exhaustion of managing both a narcissistic parent and a sibling. Navigating these emotionally draining relationships left them feeling overwhelmed, isolated, and burnt out. The constant pressure to meet both individuals' needs allowed little space for self-care or personal growth.

"There was one common trait between them: they never apologized, and their mistakes were always downplayed, but my mistakes were always magnified. Both of them always expect me to thank them and show gratitude, no matter what." (Participant 7)

"She learned all the tricks from our mom—how to act innocent and get everyone on her side, no matter what damage she caused." (Participant 6)

"Even when I left home, they continued to pressure me, and I couldn't relax." (Participant 14)

3. Emotional Disconnection and Coping in Silence

Participants described homes marked by suppression, shame, and constant vigilance. They learned to hide emotions, internalize guilt, and disconnect from their feelings—leading to lasting emotional numbness and difficulty forming authentic relationships in adulthood.

Emotional Numbing and Avoidance

Detachment became a survival tactic. Many struggled to connect with emotions even later in life, describing a habitual emotional disconnection.

Shame and Guilt

Chronic shame and guilt, fueled by emotional neglect and criticism, made participants feel deeply inadequate and silenced. Shame led to chronic feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt, often manifesting as guilt that they were never "good enough."

Fear of Rejection

Fear of rejection led participants to suppress needs and avoid conflict. Disagreement often resulted in punishment through silence or emotional withdrawal.

Emotional Guilt-Tripping and Manipulative Sadness

Narcissistic parents used guilt and emotional displays—especially crying—to manipulate. This left the participant feeling responsible for the parents' emotions and suppressing their own needs.

"I rarely missed people, even family. I just didn't feel that sense of connection. It's like I trained myself not to

need anyone." I don't remember feeling much—not joy, not pain, just... going through the motions." (Participant 1)

"If I disagreed or tried to defend myself, she'd act like I didn't exist. Days of silence. No eye contact. I felt erased." (Participant 4)

"If I ever disagreed or asked for space, she'd burst into tears. It made me feel like the worst person alive. She cried easily—almost on demand. Then I was the bad guy, always. It was like I was hurting her just by being myself." (Participant 11)

4. Control and Ongoing Parental Intrusion in Adulthood

Even in adulthood, many participants experienced continued control, guilt-tripping, and emotional dependence imposed by their narcissistic parent. Full separation remained difficult because the parents maintained influence over their lives.

Parental Interference and Guilt

Participants described constant intrusion into personal choices—romantic, financial, or parenting—disguised as concern. These actions were more about control than care.

Blame-Shifting and Conditional Love

Narcissistic parents often refused accountability and blamed the child, offering love only when their own needs were met. Affection was used as leverage.

"He would create an emotional emergency if I didn't do what she wanted. It was exhausting." (Participant 3). "She was a master of the victim act. One tear and everyone in the family turned against me." (Participant 5). "She'd often push me aside just to win the affection of other relatives. I was expendable in her social games." (Participant 13)

5. Reclaiming the Self in Adulthood

Healing from the impact of narcissistic parenting was described as an ongoing, often difficult process. Many participants shared that their journeys of therapy, self-reflection, and learning to set boundaries were essential steps in reclaiming their sense of self and autonomy. The process of healing was not linear, but involved significant emotional labor, breaking toxic patterns, and developing self-compassion.

Therapeutic Insight and Reframing

Many participants credited therapy or personal reflection for helping them understand the emotional abuse they had suffered. Therapy offered them the language and tools to reframe their experiences,

providing a sense of clarity and validation. This insight was a crucial step in detaching from toxic patterns and emotional manipulation.

Boundary Formation and Autonomy

Setting emotional and physical boundaries was a recurring theme in participants' accounts of reclaiming themselves. These boundaries were often difficult to set and met with pushback from the narcissistic parent, but they were ultimately empowering. Learning to say "no" and assert their autonomy was crucial to reclaiming control over their lives.

Post-Traumatic Growth

While many participants continued to wrestle with the emotional scars left by narcissistic parenting, several found meaning through their pain. This post-traumatic growth allowed them to develop greater empathy for others who had experienced similar struggles and, in some cases, even led them to pursue careers in helping professions to support their healing journeys.

"I had lost something—I had lost my self-compassion. I had suffered so hard in silence to keep everyone else happy that I forgot about myself." (Participant 8). "Deciding to leave home was the hardest and best thing I've ever done. It felt like breathing after years of suffocation. I stopped explaining myself. I don't need her permission to be who I am." (Participant 13). "I used to think I was broken. Now I think I survived something really hard. I'm still healing, but now I can name what happened. That wasn't love, that was manipulation. And I don't have to carry the shame anymore." (Participant 5)

6. Social and Occupational Impact

The effects of growing up with a narcissistic parent extended into participants' adult lives, impacting relationships, careers, and social functioning. Many described persistent anxiety, mistrust, and perfectionism that hindered connection and growth.

Perfectionism and Performance Anxiety

Driven by a need to gain approval and avoid criticism, many felt pressure to be flawless. This led to burnout, impostor syndrome, and trouble recognizing their own achievements.

Fear of Mistakes or Rejection in Social Roles

Participants feared mistakes in all roles—partner, friend, employee. Vulnerability made them feel unsafe, as past experiences had taught them it could lead to rejection or manipulation. Overall, these patterns illustrate how early experiences of conditional affection

and performance-based worth continued to shape participants' adult functioning, linking perfectionism and relational anxiety to internalized parental criticism.

"At work, I feel like I have to be flawless. One mistake, and I spiral. It's like I hear my mother's voice telling me I'm a failure." (Participant 8). "I struggle to trust people with anything personal. Growing up, anything I said could be twisted and used against me." (Participant 12)

Demographic Patterns and Cultural Nuances

While the overarching themes were consistent across participants, several demographic patterns emerged. Women tended to emphasize emotional dependency, guilt, and maternal control, whereas men described greater struggles with paternal competition and the pressure to gain approval. Within the Iranian collectivist context, participants frequently reported intense feelings of filial obligation and moral conflict when attempting to establish personal boundaries, reflecting cultural norms that value family loyalty and obedience to parents. These cultural expectations appeared to amplify the effects of narcissistic control and made emotional separation more difficult. No major age-related differences were found, though those in long-term romantic relationships often described greater awareness of intergenerational transmission of relational patterns and a conscious effort to avoid reproducing similar dynamics in their own families.

Discussion and Conclusion

The current study sought to explore the lived experiences of adult children raised by narcissistic parents, using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to uncover the psychological, emotional, and relational landscapes shaped by such upbringing. The six superordinate themes identified, ranging from distorted identity formation to post-traumatic growth, highlight the deep, enduring impact of narcissistic parenting on an individual's development across the lifespan.

A central theme that emerged was the erosion of personal identity, as participants described being emotionally invisible and treated as mere extensions of the parents' ego. Their autonomy was systematically undermined through parentification, relentless criticism, and emotional manipulation. These experiences align with prior research indicating that narcissistic parents often instrumentalize their children

to fulfill their own unmet emotional needs (Estlein et al., 2024; Vignando & Bizumic, 2023). The narratives reveal how early relational trauma results in chronic self-doubt, perfectionism, and a lifelong struggle to feel “good enough,” echoing previous findings on the internalization of narcissistic messaging (Gao et al., 2024).

A central theme that emerged from the experiences of participants with narcissistic siblings was the escalation of emotional strain within the family dynamic. This supports previous research, which shows that these dynamics often lead to emotional neglect, with participants feeling invisible and emotionally exploited (Bender et al., 2024; Lyons et al., 2023). The presence of a narcissistic sibling significantly exacerbated the emotional and relational challenges faced by participants, further reinforcing the toxic dynamics initiated by the narcissistic parent. The siblings’ manipulative behaviors, emotional competition, and rivalry created a family environment filled with emotional neglect, where participants often felt invisible and emotionally exploited. These dynamics not only intensified feelings of inadequacy but also contributed to long-term struggles with trust, self-worth, and emotional connection in adulthood. Despite these challenges, participants demonstrated resilience by reclaiming their identity through therapy, boundary-setting, and self-reflection. However, the enduring impact of these sibling dynamics highlights the need for greater awareness of how narcissistic family systems perpetuate emotional wounds and relational difficulties.

Another significant finding was the emotional disconnection and chronic guilt that participants carried into adulthood. Emotional suppression, fear of rejection, and shame pervaded their relationships, often leading to emotional numbness or hypervigilance. Many described learning early that expressing needs or vulnerability resulted in manipulation, punishment, or withdrawal of affection—an experience mirrored in studies on emotional invalidation and gaslighting in narcissistic families (Silva & Dâmaso, 2024). These defense mechanisms, while adaptive in childhood, often led to interpersonal difficulties later in life, including avoidance of intimacy, emotional detachment, or people-pleasing behaviors.

Importantly, the findings suggest that narcissistic control extends into adulthood, with parents continuing

to interfere in financial, romantic, and personal decisions. Qualitative evidence indicates that adult children of narcissistic parents often recount experiences of conditional love and acceptance, fostering dependency, guilt, and compliance (Lyons et al., 2023). This blurring of boundaries, often justified by familial obligation, perpetuated emotional enmeshment long after physical separation—a pattern noted in existing clinical literature but here richly described in participants’ own words.

Despite these challenges, many participants also described a process of reclaiming the self. Therapeutic interventions, reflective practices, and the development of personal boundaries enabled them to begin healing from relational trauma. These stories of resilience and post-traumatic growth underscore the capacity for transformation and meaning-making, even after profound psychological injury. These transformative processes are often facilitated by narrative practices that help individuals make meaning of their experiences, reconstruct personal identity, and establish a sense of coherence and agency in the aftermath of trauma (Blagden et al., 2023; Gofman et al., 2022; Janowicz et al., 2022). Participants’ efforts to redefine their self-worth, break intergenerational cycles, and cultivate authentic connections reflect broader themes of empowerment and narrative repair. Their voices demonstrate the importance of not only recognizing harm but also reconstructing identity on their own terms.

Lastly, the social and occupational consequences of narcissistic parenting were evident. Participants reported pervasive fears of rejection and failure, often stemming from early conditioning that linked love to performance. Research shows that narcissistic parenting fosters a conditional environment where love is tied to performance, resulting in adult children who experience anxious-avoidant attachment styles and ongoing struggles with intimacy and self-worth (Faraji et al., 2024). While this sometimes resulted in high achievement, it was often accompanied by anxiety, burnout, and an ongoing sense of inadequacy. These dynamics highlight the need for greater awareness of the long-term impact of early emotional environments on adult functioning in diverse life domains.

However, this study is not without limitations. First, the sample size was small and homogeneous, limiting generalizability. All participants were self-selected and

may have had greater awareness or insight into their experiences than the broader population of adult children of narcissists. Second, the retrospective nature of the narratives may introduce memory bias, especially in emotionally charged recollections. Third, the study did not include perspectives from siblings or other family members, which could provide a more comprehensive understanding of family dynamics.

Future research should consider longitudinal designs, larger and more diverse samples, and comparisons between adult children of narcissistic parents and those from other dysfunctional family environments. Additionally, exploring cultural variations in narcissistic parenting and examining protective factors that buffer psychological harm could yield valuable insights for both theory and clinical practice. Clinically, the findings point to the importance of trauma-informed therapy that emphasizes boundary work, emotional validation, and narrative reconstruction. "Mental health professionals should incorporate trauma-informed approaches tailored to individuals raised by narcissistic caregivers. Ultimately, by centering the voices of those who have survived narcissistic parenting, this study affirms the importance of bearing witness, creating space for recovery, and supporting pathways to authentic selfhood.

This study provided an in-depth phenomenological understanding of how narcissistic parenting shapes the long-term emotional and relational worlds of adult children. Beyond exposing the persistent wounds of conditional affection, emotional manipulation, and identity loss, the findings highlight individuals' capacity for recovery through boundary formation, reflective awareness, and meaning reconstruction. Clinically, these results support the integration of trauma-informed, schema-focused, and emotion-regulation-based interventions. Techniques such as emotion validation training, cognitive reframing of guilt, guided self-compassion, and inner-child repair work can help survivors rebuild self-trust and relational security. At the preventive level, parenting education programs emphasizing empathy development and emotional attunement may reduce the intergenerational transmission of narcissistic traits. Future research should explore how these strategies can be tailored across cultures and contexts to contribute to a more compassionate and psychologically informed model of caregiving.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants. An ethical consideration in this study was that participation was entirely optional.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contribute to this study.

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