Narcissistic Personality Disorder: Victim or Survivor?

An Analytical View of NPD, Children of Narcissistic Parents, Overcoming Patterns of Trauma, and Societal Implementation of Narcissistic Tendencies

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Abstract

This research paper delves into the impact of Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) in caregiver-child relationships. I challenge the notion of "unconditional love" and discuss the difficulty of discussing caregiver emotional abuse. The paper focuses on the psychological abuse of children such as: adultification, parentification, and triangulation. I look at the damage caused to a child's autonomy, self-confidence and the increased risks for anxiety and depression for those children as they grow older. The origins of NPD are much debated, and research is hampered due to difficulty in diagnosis, as those with NPD are rarely introspective or seek therapy.

This paper also looks at how praise reinforces narcissistic tendencies through social media. Technological advancements have had a profound impact on societal behavior and have fundamentally reshaped contemporary communication, fostering a culture valued on self-promotion, external validation, and digital affirmation. Social media has become a narcissist's playground.

The exploration of psychoanalytic and historical perspectives on leadership, focusing on the link between narcissism and successful leadership, is also discussed. Narcissistic tendencies can prove successful in entrepreneurial ventures, yet when placed in the public eye and exemplified by political figures like Trump, these behaviors are accepted and normalized in contemporary society. These complex dynamics shape modern attitudes towards narcissistic behavior, which can morph into collective narcissistic thought forms.

"Papercuts" explores the imperfect family dynamics of a young woman, Jacklynne, and her father, Joel. Utilizing discontinuous scenes, the film portrays the maze of fractured trust, scrutiny, and scars in a family affected by narcissistic tendencies.

The film draws connections between individual experiences and societal trends, linking the rise of narcissistic traits to broader social phenomena, such as the influence of social media on communication patterns. Overall, "Papercuts" and the accompanying research contribute insights into the complexities of family dynamics and the lasting effects of narcissistic behaviors on individuals and society.

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Introduction

Papercuts is a live-action drama film following a young woman named Jacklynne. This film highlights the relationships and dynamics of a family struggling with imperfection. Using discontinuously edited scenes, we get snapshots of what life is like for these characters. Jacklynne's convoluted relationship with her father, Joel is revealed in scenes with her parents. These interactions highlight the truth that every family dynamic has both camaraderie and love but also twists and deformities.

How is a family impacted when one parent has narcissistic tendencies? Being raised by someone with such qualities can be a difficult, confusing way of life. It is inconsistent, a maze of guilt trips, explosions, and emotional distance. How do you reconcile the love, care, and enthusiasm of a parent that also inflicts emotional pain? By using an inconsistent and sporadic means of storytelling, the viewer can traverse the inconsistencies for themselves. With only subtle indications of how much time has passed between encounters, one can experience the unsettled relationship dynamic for themselves.

The film also includes experimental, non-narrative construction to allude to Jacklynne's mental state. These are abstract images in juxtaposition to narrative scenes. They symbolize Jacklynne's interpersonal mindset and way of processing her relationship with her parents. I used tight closeups to emulate the narrow view inflicted by the psychological abuse a young adult experiences and the patterns, anxieties, and traumas repeated from childhood when not treated. These pains can be well protected by the individual, as the trauma can be severe enough to block recall and reflection. One buries their internal world and painful upbringing, which allows these patterns to continue in their adult lives subconsciously, influencing their actions, thoughts, and sense of self. These shots illicit this blinded view, and if these traumas of narcissistic abuse are left

untreated and unaddressed, one can adopt narcissistic qualities as well. These close-ups can be seen through the perspective of this neurotic, selfish point of view and hint at the growing loss of humanity, which can occur if a child of narcissistic abuse does not seek healing. If one caters to their narcissistic tendencies, self-absorption, self-importance, and self-aggrandizement can occur, which puts the individual at the center of the world, thinking it revolves around them, which can be symbolized by these tight close-ups. This perspective can be rewarded through the emergence of social media, and narcissistic tendencies are being seen earlier and earlier in life as younger and younger generations are adopting to social media platforms. This evolution, societally or personally, has an impact on our society as our forms of communication cater to narcissistic tendencies.

However, in the context of the film, the tight close-ups pay tribute to those who receive therapy for narcissistic abuse. The healing process is full of mixed emotions: doubt, sadness, anger, frustration, and relief. Throughout the healing process, the patient can feel as if their wounds are on display, feeling vulnerable. These shots expose this injured internal world of a survivor of narcissistic abuse as they are candid and unbearably honest yet allow an outlet and space for Jacklynne to express her experience, as therapy does for victims seeking help. These close-ups allow the audience to enter the mind of Jacklynne and connect with her deeper as we hear her internal dialogue throughout the film. They act as a bridge between past and present Jacklynne since her commentary continues throughout the whole film, signifying how the cycle of narcissistic abuse never ends, as a narcissist will never change, but it is how the victim handles the guilt-trips, bursts of anger, judgment, love-bombing, disappointment, etc. that truly matters.

The closeups of her mother, Sandra, during the flashback scene, are also intentionally executed, yet in a different way. A dynamic forced perspective is created when Sandra answers

Joel's phone calls and leaves young Jacklynne in the background. In one instance, young Jacklynne is seen playing with her dolls in a wide shot to the left, while Sandra is in a closeup to the right of the frame. This shot signifies a frame of reference for the audience to realize that there is a reality within a reality occurring here and creates a divide in perceived reality. Young Jacklynne is aware that something is not right, yet Sandra shields her daughter from the truth of the situation, rephrasing the context of her conversations with Joel. This causes Jacklynne to recall these memories later in her closeups with a deeper understanding of the situation as she has grown older, insinuating that children are shielded yet never fully protected from trauma in their youth.

The purpose of *Papercuts* is to explore the family dynamic, the many facets of each person, and the many aspects of relationships. A caretaker influences how a child grows up and learns to interact with the world. These fundamental teachings impact the child as they grow into an adult. With *Papercuts* following Jacklynne as a young woman, the audience receives insight into how behaviors impacted her as a child and how they continue to affect her. One cannot escape one's family's lessons, so involving the multiple aspects of narcissism emphasizes these points much more.

NPD in Caregiver-Child Relationships

In an idealized view, the parent/child relationship is one that is meant to be filled with unconditional love and support. Ideally, this would be the case for every child, but in reality, the relationship between a parent and child can be far more loaded than the idealized cliche. There are many instances of parent/child dynamics that cause psychological issues in their children later in life. To list a few: living vicariously through their children, placing unrealistic expectations on them, or burdening them with more responsibility than their age allows.

It is not unheard of to hear grievances from children about their parents. It is a natural process of growing up and coming into one's own. But what is to be said about parents who neglect their children? Limor Goldner, the head of the School of Creative Arts Therapies and the head of the Emili Sagol research center at the University of Haifa, co-wrote *Understanding PTSD Symptoms Resulting from Childhood Emotional Abuse and Boundary Dissolution: The Mediating Role of Narcissistic Pathology* with Israel Limor, who does research on relational trauma and child maltreatment, art-based assessment, mentoring, and civic engagement. Zarbiv and Goldner explain, "Caregiver-child relationships range from good, to maladaptive, to psychologically damaging that can be abusive or neglectful. Caregiver emotional abuse is difficult to define operationally. This is especially true in situations with no apparent intent to harm, although the interaction is damaging to the child" (Zarbiv and Goldner).

So, the concept of parents having "unconditional love" for their children is a fantasy. Every relationship has conditions, whether that be the agreement to remain faithful or not lying on a resume to get a job. But, when it comes to a parental relationship, no matter how messy it may be, it is expected for a parent to be ready and willing to provide for their child financially, mentally, and emotionally. This is a part of the parental obligation—the job both parties signed up for at

conception (theoretically). However, some parents may have fibbed a bit on their resume to get hired for such a job. Just as important as being financially responsible for their offspring, a parent should heal their personal traumas in order to have a clear heart and head when it comes to caring for their child. Unfortunately, this seems to be an area often overlooked when parents "applied" for the position.

Unresolved traumas manifest in present-day situations. Parents impose their wounds onto their children. This creates issues within the children. In a healthy scenario, a parent realizes their shortcomings, or their children inspire them to grow, so the parent seeks help and therapy. But what happens when a parent is blind to their faults or negative behavior? What occurs within the child when a parent is too consumed with themselves to realize the needs of others? A parent with narcissistic tendencies and Narcissistic Personality Disorder is a prime example of this type of blindness. Parents with NPD deal with the world as a transactional relationship: expectations must be met in order to receive love. This sets up a contradiction since a narcissist's love is never fully available to be given. As they grow older, children realize their narcissistic parents are simply too self-centered to see beyond themselves. This can lead to children feeling they are a burden to their parents when asking for fulfillment of their needs. The child internalizes that parents' wants or needs are more important than their own and can lead to traumas and issues later in life. In spite of the pain that growing up with a narcissistic parent causes, the child of such a parent can sometimes be empowered by the immature behavior of their parents. Growing up with a narcissist is intolerable but gives painful clarity to that young adult to build stronger relationships than their parents ever achieved and teaches them the power to see through the lies of people feigning authority, and to push beyond to seek healing for their own weaknesses.

Parentification and Adultification

It is a parent's role to care for the child, not the other way around. However, with narcissistic parenting, a parent may use "various strategies to control the child." This may be by the "caregivers forc[ing] the child to take on an adult-like caring role, which impedes separateness and autonomy and compels these children to satisfy their caregivers' self-absorbed, narcissistic needs while relinquishing their own needs for comfort and care" (Zarbiv and Goldner).

The act of a child feeling the need to play the role of a parent is called parentification, also referred to as "role-reversal." A concept "directly mentioned or implicated in literature on children of alcoholics and familial alcoholism, co-dependency, sexual abuse, single-parent families, the impact of parental death or mental illness on the family, marital conflict, divorce, addictive relationships, attachment styles, infant and child development, identity development and adolescent separation, hyperactivity/attention-deficit, depression, and anxiety" (Chase). Zarbiv and Goldner's text supports this by explaining how,

> In parentification, the caregivers turn to their children for instrumental or emotional support….This type of relationship can derive from various circumstances or the intra-personal qualities of the caregiver. These include the absence of a caregiver, single-parent households, caregiving dysfunction resulting from mental illness or physical disability, substance use, immigration, marital conflict, domestic violence, the caregiver's insecure attachment style, and intergenerational transmission of role reversal (Zarbiv and Goldner).

Zarbiv and Goldner continue to describe how these relationships can adopt either an *adaptive* or a *destructive* form. The adaptive form is one where "parentification is relatively moderate in intensity, consistent with cultural norms, and coincides with the developmental phase of the child". The destructive form of parentification is a force of "exaggerated emotional and instrumental obligation and responsibility, which the child perceives as an intolerably heavy burden." This destructive form can manifest into adultification, where the child is "…expected to function as the caregiver's partner by taking an active role in decision-making and problem-solving while also

serving as a friend and confidant.… These relationships can involve concrete partnerships such as helping with the housekeeping or fulfilling the caregiver's need for support, comfort, and closeness" (Zarbiv and Goldner). It can be an outcome in single-parent households where the caretaker simply needs more help than they are able to provide, or can be due to a narcissistic tendency within the parent. A child of a narcissist can experience adultification when they are expected to fulfill their caretaker's needs more often than be taken care of, and their own needs can even become warped and intertwined with their caretaker's. This is a selifsh and manipulative tactic, leaving the child with a warped sense of self.

Triangulation

With triangulation, "…a child becomes involved in parents' conflictual interactions by taking sides, distracting parents, and carrying messages in order to avoid or minimize conflict between parents" (Buehler and Welsh) and can occur in marital crises or severe conflicts (Zarbiv and Goldner) when "two people in a family bring in a third party to dissolve stress, anxiety or tension that exists between them" (Buehler and Welsh) and the child acts as an "intermediary and a negotiator between the two caregivers" (Zarbiv and Goldner). Triangulation into parents' disputes has received "much less empirical attention than has verbal and physical interparental aggression. However, some evidence exists that triangulation places youth at risk for adjustment problems, particularly internalizing problems such as anxiety, depressive symptoms, and social withdrawal" (Buehler and Welsh). This can be a result of "the child feel[ing] torn and trapped between the two caregivers, especially when the caregivers demand that the child chooses between them" (Zarbiv and Goldner). The concept of parental psychological control is another form of psychological abuse that consists of "Manipulative, intrusive, invasive, and over-protective caregiving practices that impede the child's autonomous behavior, feelings, and thoughts so that the caregiver can uphold a position of power…. These caregivers pressure their children to think, act, or behave in ways that hinder individuation by using covert and overt tactics such as criticism, overprotectiveness, instilling anxiety, induction of guilt or shame, invalidation of the child's perspective, and withdrawal of love to control the child's behavior." (Zarbiv and Goldner).

This repeated caregiver abuse—that deepens children's sense of worthlessness and flaws, conditions their love and appreciation to instances where their children meet their demands and standards—satisfies the caretaker's unfulfilled needs for self-esteem and attachment, but they

hamper the child's volitional functioning and the development of a confident sense of self, leading to disruptions in psychosocial functioning.

Zarbiv and Goldner executed a study that examined the "associations between emotional abuse and neglect and various types of boundary dissolution as experienced during adolescence on young adults' current narcissistic vulnerability, narcissistic grandiosity, and PTSD symptoms" (Zarbiv and Goldner). It examined, "whether and how a narcissistic pathology mediates the associations between emotional abuse, emotional neglect and boundary dissolution, and PTSD symptoms. It was hypothesized that emotional abuse, emotional neglect, and boundary dissolution would positively correlate with narcissistic vulnerability, narcissistic grandiosity, and PTSD symptoms. Further, it was predicted that narcissistic vulnerability and grandiosity would mediate the relationship between emotional abuse and emotional neglect, boundary dissolution, and PTSD symptoms" (Zarbiv and Goldner).

Given the aforementioned relationships between narcissism and emotional factors and the conflicting research regarding narcissism, the present study aimed to:

> Explore the association between narcissism and the frequency and severity of post-traumatic symptoms…analyze the association between narcissism and emotional factors such as resilience capacity, emotional regulation, positive and negative affect, perceived stress and intolerance of uncertainty…and study the possible mediational role of emotional factors on the relationship between the various narcissistic personality traits and the frequency and severity of post-traumatic symptoms. Additionally, owing to the reported mediational role of resilience in the effect of grandiose narcissism on stress reactivity, an exploratory mediational analysis of the different narcissism dimensions, perceived stress, and resilience was conducted (Zarbiv and Goldner).

Overall, the analyses indicated "…correlations between emotional abuse, emotional neglect, parentification, triangulation and psychological control, and narcissistic vulnerability and grandiosity" (Zarbiv and Goldner). In addition, "…correlations were found between emotional abuse and emotional neglect, emotional and instrumental parentification, triangulation and

psychological control, invasive experience, avoidance, changes in cognitive function and mood, hyperarousal, and the general score for PTSD symptoms" (Zarbiv and Goldner). In terms of narcissistic pathology, narcissistic vulnerability and grandiosity, they "correlated positively with invasive experience, avoidance, changes in function and mood, hyperarousal, and the general score for PTSD symptoms" (Zarbiv and Goldner).

The Origins of Narcissism and NPD

Joan Nicholas Leggio, a specialist in psychology and author of *Mental Health Outcomes for Adult Children of Narcissistic Parents,* states:

> According to the DSM-5, around 1% of the population has NPD; however, there is no clear explanation for this estimate. Researchers predict that this number is probably an underestimation. In addition, the underestimation of NPD prevalence might reflect the fact that to be diagnosed with NPD, one must first present him/herself to treatment. Individuals with NPD also usually seek out treatment for a comorbid disorder (i.e., depression) and are not seeking help for NPD (Leggio).

When it comes to mental illness, it is hoped a person would seek therapy or treatment. With narcissists, having either rationalized their shortcomings, failing to see the benefit of aid or being blind to their flaws completely, it becomes clear they who arguably need treatment most fail to seek it or follow through.

The latter is the case for those with narcissism and Narcissistic Personality Disorder. The two are similar, yet NPD is described as obtaining the qualities of narcissism but simply with more extreme behavior and is also seen as a "maladaptive pattern of behavior" (Campbell). Treating a narcissistic person with NPD can be increasingly difficult as it is a therapist's "central task…to balance these patients' avoidance and sudden urges to reject the therapist and drop out of treatment with the goal of encouraging and enabling them to face and reflect upon their experiences and behavior" (Ronningstam and Weinberg, 2013). Reflection of oneself is a natural form of life, yet a narcissist's resistance to reflection is due to their need to preserve their concept of self. Therapists will often make mistakes when aiding an NPD patient, as the process of treatment is slow, and gaining treatment alliance is a greater difficulty due to a narcissist's resistance to being emotionally vulnerable. A therapist may make the error of "overindulging the grandiosity of the patient…and ignoring treatment-interfering behaviors" (Ronningstam and Weinberg, 2020) in order to gain trust

with the patient or "directly challenging the grandiosity of the patient" (Ronningstam and Weinberg, 2020) which attacks the ego and foundation of those with NPD.

The National Institute of Health, and subsequently the National Library of Medicine, defines narcissism as a "personality trait characterized by a grandiose self-concept, as well as by behaviors intended to maintain this self-concept in the face of reality. Core traits of narcissism include entitlement, grandiose fantasies, and the need for admiration" (Montoro et al.). Zarbiv and Goldner define pathological narcissism as:

> Exhibiting grandiosity characterized by their absorption in illusionary successes, power, brilliance, a sense of entitlement, demands for attention and admiration, exhibitionistic behaviors, and a lack of empathy. These individuals are interpersonally exploitative, respond to self-esteem threats with feelings of rage, rebelliousness or shame, and humiliation, and manifest mood swings between idealization and devaluation (Zarbiv and Goldner).

In more recent studies, two broad personality processes of narcissism have been identified: vulnerability and grandiosity.

Both forms exhibit a shared core of arrogance, entitlement, mistrust, and neuroticism. Narcissistic vulnerability is evident in a personality marked by shame, hypersensitivity, shyness, a focus on internal flaws, self-resentment, alienation, the overwhelming experience of negative emotions and pessimistic thoughts, extreme sensitivity to criticism, rejection, and failure, and a proclivity for self-concealment. They tend to be "anxious, defensive, and avoidant" (Montoro et al.). On the other hand, grandiosity typically displays intense envy, aggression, manipulative and anti-social behaviors, a lack of empathy, a reluctance to commit to relationships, a devaluation of others, and emotional shallowness (Zarbiv and Goldner). They are "extraverted and self-satisfied, with a high propensity to strive for feelings of uniqueness and supremacy" (Montoro et al.).

The research regarding narcissism and where it stems from has taken many forms and has gone in many different directions. The NIH states, "Most recent theories have focused on the link

between narcissism and negative childhood experiences, such as physical or sexual violence, neglect, or rejection. The emergence and development of narcissistic traits, such as seeking excessive admiration from others, feelings of grandiosity, and interpersonal competitiveness, have mostly been related to traumatic experiences in childhood" (Montoro et al.). On the other hand,

> Some studies have also pointed out that narcissistic characteristics may not only arise from childhood environments characterized by neglect/abuse but also from environments in which a child is sheltered or overly praised. Both of those situations foster an unrealistic image of the child": devaluation and idealization (Montoro et al.).

Montoro continues to explain how "few studies have analyzed the relationship between narcissism and healthy emotional factors. Typically, narcissism has been related to difficulties in emotion regulation, simultaneous with resilience capacity. However, the reported relations seem to depend on the type of narcissism" (Montoro et al.).

Another theory surrounding narcissistic tendencies, and more specifically, the grandiose nature of a narcissist, is that the self-confidence of people suffering from NPD is a façade to mask deep feelings of shame, low self-esteem, and low self-worth. NIH describes, "grandiose narcissism might be a protective factor against emotional problems" (Montoro et al.).

Their mask of grandeur is so thick it has seeped into their self-perception. In a sense, narcissists lie to themselves to uphold their interpersonal image. As Brummelman at the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences explains in Origins of Narcissism in Children,

> Although narcissists feel superior to others and feel entitled to privileges, they are not necessarily satisfied with themselves as a person. That is, narcissism and self-esteem capture two different dimensions of the self. As scholars put it, 'High self-esteem means thinking well of oneself, whereas narcissism involves passionately wanting to think well of oneself' (Brummelman et al.).

Additionally, unlike narcissism, high self-esteem anticipates low levels of anxiety and depression over time (Brummelman et al.).

Narcissists aren't likely to receive help unless some form of narcissistic wound is triggered (Fox). A narcissistic would entail some form of psychological injury that "hurts their view of themselves and the world" (Fox). This injury could be caused by a multitude of factors, including "being threatened or criticized by a significant other, a boss, a family member, or a coworker" (Fox), threats of divorce or abandonment, "failure to achieve a goal, or having been treated in a particular manner by someone that they perceive as valuable" (Fox). All aforementioned wounds are threats to the ego, a necessary life form of a narcissist. Due to the strong tie to their ego, a narcissist may walk through life without awareness of their faults, apathy, or selfish behavior. Consequently, they also lack cognition of their effects on others, making it increasingly difficult to be romantically involved or familially tied to such a personality. Narcissists can severely impact those around them and cause contortions of reality in those people as well. A victim of narcissistic abuse is left with a gaping hole within themselves of how "normal" people act and treat them, and how their loved one, friend, parent, co-worker, boss, etc., with narcissistic tendencies, treat them. It can be frustrating when they do not understand why those with NPD act the way they do or how they cannot see outside of themselves enough to change.

In fact, "Most individuals in a relationship with someone along the narcissistic spectrum have usually given up or completely foregone the idea of…relationship satisfaction and composed of foundational beliefs to sustain the relationship" (Fox). Daniel Fox, a specialist in the treatment and assessment of individuals with personality disorders within the state and federal system, universities, as well as private practice, delves into how

> These distortions [within a narcissistic relationship] and/or compensations are usually rationalizations for the continuance of the relationship. These individuals usually end up in treatment because the dissonance between what they want from the relationship and what they are receiving is growing" (Fox).

This demonstrates that being in such a relationship–romantic or familial–is extremely psychologically taxing, especially when pertaining to a child. A narcissistic parent can place "responsibility for emotional needs [onto] the child or children, instead of with the parents, where it belongs" (Fox). These emotional burdens can include "family secrets, abandonment anxiety, idealization of the child, fractured trust, emotional compliance, triangulation, misdirected communication, indistinct boundaries, and superficiality" (Fox), which can lead to distortions of reality and an "unhealthy global perspective that influence how they see the world, interact with it, and develop relationships with significant others, friends, coworkers, and their own children" (Fox). Children who grew up being "cared for" by parents or caregivers with narcissistic tendencies tend to "develop psychological components that they carry with them all their lives" (Fox), and it increases their chances of carrying life-long, early learned patterns for the rest of their lives.

Similarly, Minna Lyons, a psychology professor at Liverpool John Moores University, states that:

> Parenting exerts a powerful influence on the child, which can last for the duration of their lifetime. Parents are especially influential in the success of their adult children's romantic relationships via the development of attachment styles. For example, controlling and overly critical parenting guides infant and child attachment, which can later lead to relationship insecurity, jealousy, and suboptimal emotion regulation strategies in romantic conflict (Lyons et al.).

These patterns may not be evident to the adult child, as they have not experienced any sexual or physical abuse, and can be written off in a statement of absolution: "That's just how they are." Thus, it can be difficult for one to understand how there could be scars (Fox). And there, indeed, are scars left behind on these children, as "parents or caregivers along the narcissistic spectrum cause psychological damage by wearing away at various points of psychological development that impact adaptive and healthy living" (Fox). It is possible for children to also fantasize about their

perfect family and what they'd do differently when they grow older: love and respect their spouses/children and receive it as well. However, a possibility is that "without the foundation of experience, they require skill building and insight to do things differently." Their distorted foundation can leave them trapped, living past experiences and traumas, picking partners who "manifest traits they understood as a child" (Fox). It is possible that the distortion and abnormality they experienced as a child could become a part of their core structure (Fox). However, hope is not lost on these children. Fox, in his book *Narcissistic Personality Disorder Toolbox: 55 Practical Treatment Techniques for Clients, Their Partners, and Their Children*, discusses how

> Narcissistic family characteristics are more common than many mental health providers realize and the impact of this type of family system tends to create a lifelong struggle for many clients who want to grow beyond their childhood experiences and make changes to their own lives and relationships. Increasing insight into narcissistic family characteristics increases the probability of success and influences long-term change in those clients who continue to fall into and recreate those early patterns in their adult lives.

Fox addresses his clients–mental health providers, and how their patients may feel "betrayal, anger, fear, confusion, etc. associated with addressing these issues" (Fox) as their whole reality crumbles around them; their traumas, anxieties, and distrust formed subconsciously due to the selfish, infantile nature of their caretakers. This isn't a realization that occurs pleasantly, as Fox explains how the nature and trauma of narcissistic family characteristics are "well-protected by the individual," as the trauma is so rooted, that the provider must be able to discuss and delve into these issues. The infiltrating awareness of the trauma driving their lives causes a child of narcissistic abuse to be protective of their reality, as this is all they've known. To surpass the resistance, Fox provides worksheets that are filled out by the patient and later analyzed by the mental health provider. They are composed of the patient checking boxes next to a narcissistic family characteristic that corresponds to his/her family. The worksheet delves into topics such as family secrets, abandonment anxiety, idealized childhood, fractured trust, emotional compliance,

triangulation, misdirected communication, indistinct boundaries, and superficiality. Then, they must answer questions to describe characteristics that match their family, provide examples, describe how these characteristics have affected their life, and unfold their unedited feelings and thoughts surrounding overcoming these experiences with their family. There is much more to these worksheets as they continue to focus on "Components of Adult Children of Narcissists" (Fox). Therefore, much, if not all, of the therapeutic weight rests on the victim's shoulders, rather than the NPD instigator's. If a person in a romantic relationship with an individual on the narcissistic spectrum had a healthy childhood, they have better footing when addressing their issues and complications within their relationship. However, it is seen that it is much more distressing and taxing on a child of such abuse, as they have become desensitized to their upbringing and accepting of their caretaker's behavior without examples of a healthy childhood. With cognitive skills not strong enough to decipher right from wrong, good from bad, traditional from unusual, growing up with a narcissist can cause severe developmental stunting, separation anxiety, trust issues, self-esteem complications, inferiority complexes, struggle with boundary setting, and the list goes on. Yet, despite these predispositions, children are not held back by the same limitations their parents are, and through therapy, treatment, compassion with oneself, and awareness and determination, one can be able to surpass the box their upbringing might've placed them in. It is likely that a narcissist will not receive the help they need, so the duty, yet again, rests on the child. It becomes their job to seek healing, and it is very possible for them to finally release their past traumas and learn to develop healthy relationships with themselves and the world.

Nature vs. Nurture

The development of narcissistic tendencies and NPD is a question long debated by psychologists: nature versus nurture? Is it a neurological predisposition? Or does the environment one grows up in dictate one's behavior, and narcissism is almost a coping mechanism due to a lack of love and/or care? Or is it due to specific actions that children normally grow out of that were left uncorrected?

Unfortunately, the causes of narcissism are challenging to pinpoint. Author of *Humanizing the Narcissistic Style* and a professor and chair of the faculty at Pacific Graduate School of Psychology in Menlo Park, California, Stephan M. Johnson splits his time between clinical teaching and the private practice of psychotherapy in Menlo Park and San Francisco. He describes the different phases that a child goes through during development. If a certain phase is stunted due to trauma, actions, or behavior of the parent, it is possible for the child to grow into adulthood, constantly searching to fill in the gaps left from childhood. For example, "The rapprochement with reality is a most basic task of human life first encountered in the subphase of individuation, which Mahler used primarily to highlight the child's reemerging need to reconnect with the mother after his striking independence in the prior practicing subphase of development" (Johnson). The practicing phase that Johnson discusses is one where a child learns to walk, talk, etc., and gains independence, seeing the world a new way for the first time, infused with excitement about his new abilities. S/he is beginning to separate physically from their mother, yet mentally, the child still believes their mother and them are one and the same, that s/he controls their mother's actions and is entitled to receive aid and care simply by having a need or demand. This is because, after the Practicing phase, the "child is now grandiose, experiencing a sense of omnipotence due, in part, to the still retained belief of unity with the mother…The grandiosity, omnipotence, euphoria,

and self-involvement of this period provide the clearest developmental analog of that grandiosity seen in the most clearly narcissistic patient" (Johnson). To that end, Dr. Stathis Grapsas, professor in developmental psychology at Utrecht University, explains that "Narcissism is a personality trait that emerges in childhood and is characterized by feelings of superiority, sense of entitlement, and desire for respect and admiration" (Grapsas et al.). Grapsas et al. continue, In *Climbing up or Falling Down: Narcissism Predicts Physiological Sensitivity to Social Status in Children and Their Parents*, to hypothesize that the development of narcissism stems from social status, as "Status indicates children's position within a social hierarchy and is often reflected in their popularity" (Grapsas et al.). Through testing using:

> A randomized experiment examined how children with high narcissism levels and their parents respond to gains and losses of social status…using facial electromyography (fEMG) to track children's and parents' affective responses (e.g., smiling, frowning) to children's status gains and losses (Grapsas et al.).

Grapsas et al. relate this to the Motive Disposition Theory, which posits that individuals "exhibit stable differences in their achievement, affiliation, and power motives" and shapes their "capacity to perceive performance, social affiliative, or competitive contexts as rewarding" (Müller et al.). Based on this theory, individuals can cultivate tendencies to derive pleasures and displeasures from "motive-relevant experiences" (Grapsas et al.) and create unique "affective-motivational" (Grapsas et al.) contingencies such as "If I am popular, then I am happy" or "If I am respected, then I feel fine." Correspondingly, "narcissism might be underpinned by a strong status motive, giving rise to a heightened sensitivity to status gains and losses" (Grapsas et al.). This proposal has never been directly tested, yet indirect evidence supports these claims. Grapsas continues,

> Narcissism tends to emerge in middle-to-late childhood when children start pursuing status more vigorously. From this age, children with high narcissism levels tend to desire

> and seek status. To gain status, they may brag, show off, and try to be the center of attention (Grapsas et al.).

This is a natural form of child development. They begin to make friends, find their own personality, and begin to express interest in their appearance, and notice how they may differ from their peers (for better or for worse). This typical evolutionary process can be altered by a child's parent's relationship to status and

> Children with high narcissism levels might acquire their status sensitivity partly through their parents… [and] given the malleability of narcissism, parents might socialize status sensitivity. Status sensitivity might be reinforced by parental overvaluation—parents seeing and treating their children as more special and entitled, while pressuring them to stand out" (Grapsas et al.).

Subsequently, Brummelman et al. in *Origins of Narcissism in Children* describe the Social Learning Theory in relation to children being likely to "grow up to be narcissistic when their parents overvalue them: when their parents see them as more special and more entitled than other children…Consequently, children might internalize the belief that they are special individuals who are entitled to privileges" (Brummelman et al.). However, in contrast, psychoanalytic theory holds that children are likely to grow up to be narcissistic when their parents lack warmth toward them. When parents lack warmth, they express little affection, appreciation, and positive affect toward their child, and they show little enjoyment of their child" (Brummelman et al.). Consequently, being raised in such a way can influence a child to put "themselves on a pedestal to try to obtain from others the approval they did not receive from their parents" (Brummelman et al.). The theories Brummelman proposes are valid; a child is malleable at a young age, so the actions, opinions, and interactions of their parents have a stronger influence. However, as a child develops, so does their sense of self-worth and cognitive reasoning skills. So, a slight or jilted response may not carry the same weight as it might've prior. Yes, it is natural for a child, even as it grows into adulthood, to yearn and strive for parental approval and affirmation, yet that individual now has

more experience in the outside world, has more developed connections beyond their parents, and may not carry the same expectations for their guardians as they once did. That being said, ages 7–12 is a "key developmental phase during which individual differences in narcissism first emerge" (Brummelman et al.). While at this age the child is still developing, s/he begins to evolve a sense of self and isn't directly dependent on their caretakers. Thus, research finds that "from this age, narcissism can be assessed validly" (Brummelman et al.). This is due to the fact that "children this age are able to form the global evaluations of themselves as a person (e.g., 'I am a special person') that underlie narcissism" (Brummelman et al.). The coos of adoration and false amazements that parents praise their young children for normally don't comfort an adolescent, as they have developed enough awareness to sniff out such farce used in developmental years. Brummelman argues such a point since, at this age, "they have typically outgrown the unrealistically positive, inflated self-views that are normative for younger children, making narcissistic self-views non-normative" (Brummelman et al.). For a child to bring infantile belief systems into adulthood is what differentiates a narcissistic personality from a non-narcissistic one. An individual with healthy self-esteem has an awareness of their strengths and weaknesses and maintains a balance between the two. They are not hyper-focused on a need for adoration and respect. There is a basic necessity for these elements in a human being, yet a narcissist's obsession with their pomposity falls into the category of non-normative and could possibly be a developmental delay.

Johnson believes that "the developmental arrest of narcissism usually occurs in rapprochement" (Johnson). Rapprochement, which is the act of resumption (the action of beginning something again after a pause or interruption) and is defined by Notre Dame University as a task to "develop a sense of individuality in the context of on-going relationships. This necessarily entails the integration of attachment and individuality and the concomitant resolution

of the conflict between connection and psychological separateness" (Quintana and Lapsley). The rapprochement "first called for by a mere 18-month-old child is really with some central realities of existence, including unity versus separation, dependence versus independence, grandiosity versus vulnerability, the desire to control versus the need to be controlled, limitlessness versus realistic limitations, etc." (Johnson). While Johnson may be exaggerating in terms of age and desires of such pertinence, M.S. Mahler, who pioneered the field of infant and young child research, the originator of the separation-individuation theory of child development, and child psychoanalyst, states that "principal psychological achievements of this process take place in the period from about the fourth or fifth month to the thirtieth or thirty-sixth month, a period we refer to as the separation-individuation phase" (Mahler et al.). The evolution into individuality is an innate part of growing up and adolescence, whether that be when a five-year-old takes his first steps onto the school bus for the first time, symbolizing his first moments of true separation from his parents and the start of his roughly seventeen year-long academic career; the first night in his dorm room, embarking his journey of beginning to pave his own way, and separate from his parents further; the graduation of college, illustrating the start to his own life, truly free to set out on the path of his own choosing. Growing pains are a staple in life, no matter how major or minor. The task of rapprochement Johnson speaks of is a part of those growing pains and pertains to the concept of the separation-individuation process, which is the considered "psychological birth of the individual." It is the

> Establishment of a sense of separateness from, and relation to, a world of reality, particularly with regard to the experiences of one's own body and to the principal representative of the world as the infant experiences it, the primary love object" (Mahler et al.).

Mahler, and her associates, Pine, and Bergman, note "four major subphases of separation-individuation: *differentiation*, *practicing*, *rapprochement*, and *consolidation of object constancy*"

(Quintana and Lapsley). These phases can be focused within the separation-individuation processes, yet "particular attention has been focused on the dynamics of rapprochement for accounting for adolescent ego development" (Quintana and Lapsey).

As one ages, it becomes clear that every desire, need, and demand cannot and *should* not be met and that the people around a person are not responsible for their caretaking and meeting every request. Yet, with a narcissistic personality, this phase of development, as Johnson hypothesizes, is stunted. It is seen in surrounding society, as well as many personal lives, that "Many adults are still having temper tantrums, delusions, depressions, debilitating anxieties, perfectionistic obsessions and compulsions., and other painful adaptations to the failure to realize this rapprochement with reality" (Johnson). According to Johnson, this is due to the task of rapprochement being handled incorrectly. There is a challenge to both adolescents and parents during rapprochement to "preserve parent/adolescent attachment bonds while simultaneously encouraging adolescents' movements toward selfhood" (Quintana and Lapsey). As Johnson puts it,

> To the extent that the issues of the rapprochement phase are not handled adequately, the individual may, in a very meaningful way, remain developmentally fixed in these patterns of archaic infantile consciousness - grandiosity, idealization, splitting the representations of self and others (Johnson).

Through this split during development, a true sense of self that a child develops comes out from the "neutralization or accommodation of one's grandiosity and idealization, there is a real impairment in the self from such developmental arrest" (Johnson). Parents must foster a sense of "celebrating, acknowledging, respecting, and supporting the adolescents' newly developing sense of individuality" (Quintana and Lapsey) during individuation, which preserves the adolescents' attachment during this phase but encourages an urge to differentiate. Meanwhile, the child is "continually confronted with minimal threats of object loss (which every step of the maturational

process seems to entail)" (Quintana and Lapsey). In contrast to situations of traumatic separation, however, this normal separation-individuation process takes place in the setting of developmental readiness for, and pleasure in, independent functioning (Mahler et al.). Consequently, Johnson proposes that if unencouraged or done inadequately, "the individual, perhaps for an entire lifetime, continues to look for his or herself in all the wrong places – in the fulfillment of the archaic grandiosity and/or in the fulfillment of the archaic idealization" (Johnson), to describe the traits associated with narcissistic behavior. The narcissistic person's theme through life becomes seeking gratification and self-assurance from outside themselves. The mantra becomes "I am nothing if I am not perfect," and in the latter, the life theme seems to "emerge from whom I can derive the guidance and confirmation that will make my life meaningful" (Johnson) whether that be in a romantic partner or even weighing that burden of meaningfulness on their child. In either case, "the self is sought outside the self - in accomplishment or in others. More often than not, these two themes coexist in the same narcissistic person" (Johnson). Mahler describes "the experience of being both fully in and at the same time basically separate from the world out there is taken for granted as a given of life" (Mahler et al.). A narcissistic personality does not contain self-esteem to support the ideology they believe about themselves. Consequently, they continually search for outside sources to back up their claims, whether that be in accomplishment or in others–they simply do not contain the self-belief that they are enough; they must constantly search, affirm, and live both fully in and separate from the world. Their lack of empathy forces them into a box of alienation from those around them, always separate. Yet, their necessity for outside affirmation wears at them from the inside out, forcing them out of isolation, yet unable to relate to those surrounding them. Not to say those with narcissistic tendencies and, more severely, NPD are outcasts. Many are high-functioning and present in many different areas of everyday life. Many

form families and have close relationships and friends. However, much like the rings of a tree, a narcissist may allow access to the first few rings, but once one gets too close to the center–the essence that a person is, their deepest desires, feelings, and fears–they can snap in an instant, resulting in "hostility, criticism, control, and coerciveness associated with the trait" (Blinkhorn et al.).

Johnson argues, "Pure narcissism, unaffected by other characterological issues, is extremely rare if it exists at all. In a sense, all characterological adaptations are narcissistic, in that they are defensive compensations to early injury" (Johnson). "Other studies have focused on environments and interactions with others" (Campbell). Campbell continues to focus on the root cause of narcissism and how "Some researchers have suggested it could emerge from unrealistic parenting, in which the child is praised unrelentingly, and transgressions are not corrected" (Campbell). Johnson's concept of failure to accept the rapprochement phase into reality supports Campbell, and elaborates that the "narcissistic character derives primarily from a failure to accommodate around the issue of grandiosity and limitation" (Johnson). This is certainly a possibility, but there is also reason to believe that due to a narcissist's attachment to their appearance, persona, importance, and achievements stem from a lack of love and care from their parents/caretakers as a child. A fair assessment since many unresolved issues and traumas experienced in childhood can recur in adulthood. What one lacks is often what one seeks out for the most.

Johnson mentions two characters that emerge from "severe environmental frustration during this crucial developmental phase" (Johnson): the symbiotic and the narcissist. The Symbiotic character

> Suffers primarily from the failure to resolve the issue of separateness. Insufficiently individuated, the symbiotic character can feel or know herself only the immediate relation to another…she will tend to want to merge with or alternatively push away from a significant other in order to keep some continuing sense of her own existence, boundaries,

> or identity. Like the youngster she emulates, she will be characterized by attempts to coerce others to take care of her, respond to her, fight with her, and in all of these ways affirm her otherwise fragile existence (Johnson).

The narcissistic character derives "primarily from a failure to accommodate around the issue of grandiosity and limitation" (Johnson). Of course, there are narcissistic women and men with symbiotic issues, but "There tends to be a very profound sex difference in the frequency of the borderline problem in women and the narcissistic problem in men" (Johnson).

In Quintana and Lapsley's study, the "subject sample had a predominance of males" (Quintana and Lapsley). However, it was concluded from a review of research on identity formation that there was

> Far more evidence of similarities than differences between males and females…There were no significant differences between males and females in parental control, individuation, and ego identity measures or in the relationships among these variables. It is, however, particularly noteworthy that indices of attachment were predictive of ego identity for a predominantly male sample when male adolescent development has traditionally been thought to be based on separation and autonomy (Quintana and Lapsley).

However, this assessment may be due to the predominance of males in psychological studies. Ilene Philipson, a doctorate in both clinical psychology and sociology, describes that narcissistic personality disorder is

> Universally assumed to describe both female and male experience insofar as there exists no reference in either the psychoanalytic or sociological literature to any relationship between narcissism and gender. This gender neutrality is brought into question, however, by the disproportionate representation of men in the clinical case material that forms the basis of our understanding of what narcissism is and how it functions as both a psychological and social pathology (Philipson).

It is clear that narcissism is an intricate personality disorder to understand. It is possible to derive from many areas, whether that be through the developmental process, genetics, traumatic stress responses, lack of clinical research and diagnosis, or even nurtured through societal expectations and headways. It is also possible for narcissism to be created, or even worsened, by

the current technological advancements. “Some individuals may be influenced by popular culture, which often focuses on narcissists and narcissistic behavior” (Campbell). Due to the innate inclination towards adoration, appreciation, and attention, a narcissistic personality is incredibly susceptible to the power of social media.

The Impact of Social Media

The world has become one of constant noise: text tones, feed updates, news notices, dating app pings, Facebook messages, Snapchat responses, Instagram posts, TikTok videos; likes, nudges, warnings, gossip, chit-chat, and chatter, happening all around, 24/7. Feeding off others' opinions, people have become attached and addicted to social media. The world has become increasingly obsessed with their own appearance, persona, and public image. What once was personal can now be shared with the whole world in one push of a button. Each individual person has the opportunity to stake claim in the public eye, and celebrity worship has now migrated to "regular people," encouraging them to share content, lifestyle tips, financial advice, and appear as authoritative experts, destroying the legitimacy of real scholars and real experiences. "Influencers" and those with a high following on social media are paid for their digital impression, further rewarding the infiltration of narcissistic tendencies. As Pat MacDonald, a psychotherapist who focuses on psychotherapeutic processes, describes:

> Ever-increasing levels of greed, self-obsession, superficial relationships, arrogance, and vanity are everywhere apparent and not making us any happier, with common mental health problems on the increase, especially among the young. Seemingly irreversible alterations to family life, and technological development – including social media, attitudes to death and dying, and celebrity worship, all feature in the rise of our narcissistic society and are interconnected trends. (MacDonald).

Group greed and grandiosity, as in the world of banking, have led to "wide-scale corruption and cover-ups leaving us vulnerable and unable to place our trust in many organizations" (MacDonald). Perhaps most sinister of all is the attitude toward the planet that supports humanity, as many play a "part in the destruction of much of the environment and many of the species that share the earth with us" (MacDonald). Continuously, MacDonald emphasizes that psychologists are "seeing many more clients high on the narcissistic spectrum" (MacDonald). However, attention

must also be paid to the "narcissism of the therapist and the impact of the therapist's narcissism on the client" (MacDonald).

The world is migrating towards nurturing narcissistic tendencies due to the nature of the technologically advancing world we live in. As Kristupas Ceilutka puts it in *The Discontents of Competition for Recognition on Social Media: Perfectionism, Ressentiment, and Collective Narcissism*, "The rise of social media platforms (SMPs) in the early 2000s has fundamentally reshaped contemporary communication." With a whole new way to browse, shop, observe, judge, and interact, SMPs have changed the world as we know it today.

Subsequently, one is now able to send an instant response, with just a photo of their face (a "selfie"), via Snapchat. The "selfie" emerged innocently enough. Taking a photo of one's face to appreciate their effort to look pleasant or sharing a photo of themselves at a long-awaited vacation spot has become a common theme on social media feeds in hopes of gaining likes, attention, and admiration. Personal gratification and the breakdown of social interaction have many facets, and all stem from the innocent "selfie." By placing self-worth, value, and adoration in the hands of others, many begin to assume self-importance due to being rewarded by likes, comments, shares, and attention for narcissistic behavior. Generations younger and younger are also being introduced such that even an eight-year-old knows what a "selfie" is.

Katrin Tiidenberg is an Associate Professor of Social Media and Visual Culture at the Baltic Film, Media, Arts and Communication School of Tallinn University, Estonia, and a Post-Doctoral Researcher at the School of Communication and Culture in Aarhus University, Denmark. When asked if he knew what a "selfie' was, Tiidenberg's eight-year-old son responded,

> Selfies are 'when you take a picture with your phone. Like you turn the camera around, and you look at yourself, like with Snapchat, and you take a picture.' He stretches out his arm and mimes the gesture. He then presses his cheek to mine [Tiindenberg] and takes a pretend selfie. From the corner of my eye, I catch him pulling a face, but can't really

> tell what the expression is. 'Do you have to make a face to take a selfie?' I ask. 'Yeah,' he says like it's obvious. 'You can do this,' he says and winks, raises his hand and spreads his fingers into a victory V that grazes his cheekbone; 'or this,' he pouts his lips" (Tiidenberg).

Tiidenberg goes on in her book *Selfies: Why We Love (and Hate) Them* to question whether the essence of the "selfie" reflects narcissism. However, it can be argued that even though a selfie may not be directly related to narcissism, it is the entire culture of social media and posting yourself online that does.

The now-established self-importance seeps into viewing oneself as the center of the world, replacing true connection to those around them with digital fulfillment and abstract affirmation from those online. What used to be filled by gatherings and in-person interactions can now be satisfied by likes, DMs, video chats, followers, and profile views. This constant stream of recognition and praise is addictive. It can feed into a person's ego and become a poison that continues to spread throughout our society. It can be seen through the mere act of people watching as the world looks less and less at each other and more at the screens being carried in their hands. "There are several reasons why SMPs provide an extremely suitable space for pursuing affirmation…features of reaching a large audience and the predominance of positive expressions are crucial incentives for sharing positive aspects of the self" (Ceilutka).

The problem is found if one uses social media solely to boost their self-confidence, self-esteem, and self-worth; that is where the concept of narcissism bleeds in. Being caught up in a virtual, refined, algorithmic reality shields people from the true world around them, and "continued use can lead to social problems, such as neglecting friends and family, being left behind at work or school, or neglecting one's physical health, all of which can contribute to negative emotional states" (Syahputra).

With children being exposed to social media content at younger and younger ages, the neurological pathways of young people's minds are sure to hardwire into thinking what people on social media is normal, whether that be people editing their physical appearance, posting photos of themselves relentlessly, fishing for likes and comments, body shaming, or even bullying.

There is also the side of social media that focuses on a constant stream of information. Recent Common Sense Media research shows that "media use by tweens (ages 8–12 years) and teens (ages 13–18 years) rose faster in the two years since the COVID-19 pandemic than the four years before. The research found 8 to 12-year-olds spend an average of five and a half hours a day on screens and consuming media" (American Academy of Pediatrics). With children in such impressionable years molding to the social media habits of older generations, it can be concerning how society will develop as these generations age, seeing that "excessive use of social media is associated with behavioral addiction, which in extreme cases can manifest itself in anti-social symptoms, and a loss of tolerance or empathy" (Syahputra). Those using social media have an increased intake of news, politics, and entertainment due to the constant stream of media bombarding them. Consequently, it is possible for many to become desensitized to genuine human emotion and interaction.

A rise in narcissism due to social media use and exposure is likely since "several recent studies argue that the popularity of social media is an increase in the level of narcissism in today's society" (Syahputra), due to the way it nourishes narcissistic traits. It further enables these personalities by creating

> Easy access to a large number of other individuals (the opportunity to send information related to oneself and receive feedback about oneself); users can choose the information they want to disclose about themselves; and communication on social media gives users the opportunity to carefully craft their self-presentation. Narcissists are often associated with those who brag, take pictures, and then show them off to others on their

social media in order to get high self-views and traits such as strength and physical beauty (Syahputra).

Social media is a narcissist's playground. The ability to receive seemingly endless amounts of validation and recognition is a dream for someone with egotistic tendencies. These traits can spread to those without the disorder. Social media praises those with a high number of likes, comments, followers, and influence. Now more than ever, people are posting content, sharing ideas, selling products, bragging about their travels, etc., to become more popular on social media, creating obsessive links to life and their online personality, constantly need to update their profiles and do everything they can to gain more interaction with their content. This disconnects people from the world and encourages a narcissistic mindset of grandiosity. Accepting this behavior into everyday life, it is no surprise that narcissistic behavior has been assumed within leadership. However, these tendencies can be beneficial to an entrepreneurial mind through the tendencies of lack of empathy and ruthless action towards meeting their self-concept.

Narcissism's Impact on Society and Politics

Maccoby and Fuchsman discuss in *Psychoanalytic and Historical Perspectives on the Leadership of Donald Trump* that narcissism is "one of three normal personality types proposed by Sigmund Freud" (Maccoby and Fuchsman): *Erotic*, *obsessive*, and *narcissistic*. Erich Fromm later added a fourth type: *marketing personality*. "Both Freud and Fromm proposed that we all express combinations of these types, but that one is usually dominant. Fromm pointed out that each type can be either positive and productive, or negative and unproductive" (Maccoby and Fuchsman).

This can be conceptualized in many variations. From a financial standpoint, narcissists can make extremely prosperous businessmen. Their hyper-focus on fulfilling their vision of themselves, as well as their vigilant mindset on their grandeur, can prove to be very successful. One may even see it as manifestation, from a metaphysical standpoint, where one has a goal and believes it into existence.

Michael Maccoby, a psychoanalyst, and consultant, believes that "billionaires like Jeff Bezos, Steve Jobs, and Ted Turner are successful in part because they are narcissists who devote their talent with unrelenting focus to achieving their dreams, even if it's sometimes at the expense of those around them" (Maccoby and Fuchsman).

In Maccoby's book *The Productive Narcissist,* he makes the argument that narcissism "can be a useful quality if you're trying to start a business. A narcissist does not hear the naysayers" (Maccoby and Fuchsman). A narcissist dismisses any skeptics as s/he deems their idea the greatest, most successful, most relevant, etc., and everyone who thinks otherwise is witless.

This can be seen in the recent 2016–2020 president, Donald Trump. His extreme conviction in his beliefs and ideas was palpable in the way he led the country. It was obvious during his reign

that many were disgruntled by Trump's leadership style, vigor, and authority as people spoke out against him, news channels bashed him, and his approval rating in 2020 was a mere "39%" (Gallup). Trump once said, "'I listen to people, but my vision is my vision'" (Maccoby and Fuchsman). Maccoby and Fuchsman analyze Trump in the light of Freud and Fromm's personality types: He seems to combine narcissism with a marketing personality:

> Their sense of self-worth is based not on their human qualities, such as caring for others and integrity, but on their perceived value in the market of public opinion. Trump is an extreme example. His marketing orientation makes him vulnerable because he needs constant approval. His grandiose bluff and bluster are parts of a fragile narcissistic self-image defense that must be protected. He dismisses messages and attacks messengers who disparage his self-worth. He seeks constant adulation (Maccoby and Fuchsman).

This type of narcissistic tendency is illuminated all around the country and around the world, highlighting, normalizing, and even honoring such tendencies. Social media can even exemplify this concept as people feel entitled and qualified to share their political and personal biases, as well as slander and argue with people over the internet on such ideals.

Collective/Group Narcissism

This sense of authority many people are adopting is contaminating the minds of others, as it is apparent in society, and cluttering the screens on mobile devices. Many are beginning to personify themselves as experts and influencers in their niche and sharing content to spread their knowledge. This can be beneficial as it can offer insight into different perspectives and ways of living, but can also be detrimental to the way we accept and qualify information. These voices on social media and in the news are portraying a *version* of themselves to their audiences, which the viewers then absorb and integrate into their own lives. This creates a culture wiped of all original thought and personality. It fosters a desire to follow the crowd, ignore intuition by listening to the loudest voice, and chase the greener grass. Such narcissism infiltrating everyday lives leads to what is called collective narcissism, which is defined as "an emotional investment in an unrealistic belief about the in-group's greatness" (de Zavala), as well as described as "the unconditional approval of in-group values and simultaneous hostility towards outsiders that challenge or otherwise undermine the in-group (Ceilutka). Maccoby and Fuchsman depict collective narcissism as:

> When people with shared identities feel attacked, they are likely to band together. Shared identities can become group narcissism that supports cooperation rather than intra-group rivalry. Cults are a form of group narcissism where people are connected by their identification with a charismatic leader. Malignant group narcissism fuels feelings of group or racial superiority and, in the extreme, results in the dehumanization of other groups, leading to violence or even genocide. But group narcissism can also be more benign when it is based on positive shared values. It can motivate people in teams and in companies to collaborate and work harder to prove their superiority (Maccoby and Fuchsman).

Collective narcissistic groups may not begin narcissistic and may even choose a "noble cause to champion as a way of maintaining an altruistic image…maintaining this persona in a group setting ensures the compliance of others and can eventually morph the group into a narcissistic extension" (Prause). Prause, a Los Angeles-based psychophysiologist, continues to indicate that

when this occurs, the group and/or platform becomes fixed in self-importance and grandiosity, and ostensibly charitable goals can morph into "means to acquire money, power, and fame" (Prause). According to Prause, once a group turns narcissistic, four key factors keep the culture alive: "entitlement and exploitation, dominance and arrogance, apathy, and admiration" (Prause), and the social consequences may include "inflammatory attacks, unfounded accusations or scapegoating, lies, hateful rhetoric, smear campaigns, character assassination attempts, and black-and-white thinking" (Prause). A research study in 2010 indicated that collective narcissism may have "directly contributed to negative behaviors and attitudes toward Arab immigrants in the United States" (Prause), and according to a 2009 research review, collective narcissism could create a preference for military aggression, authoritarianism, and blind patriotism" (Prause). It has become clear that since 2009, many of these predictions have come to fruition.

However, there is a way to decrease collective narcissism, and Prause suggests: "Start with the individual. By encouraging someone to identify with another group, [one] may be able to help shift their sense of self" (Prause). On a broader scale, another option is to question and pay attention to power structures and authority (Prause). Prause continues:

> Evaluating the character structure of those in charge is a useful tool in identifying potential corruption and subterfuge…malevolent motivations are often masked by noble ideologies. It can be helpful to remain mindful of possible alternative agendas…Upholding a stance of equanimity and inclusive critical dialogue ensures that ethical group processes have a fighting chance (Prause).

Conclusion

Narcissism isn't something specific to personality, politics, or development; it's a societal problem that is seeping in and infiltrating every aspect of human life. It is a personality disorder, yes, but it is one that can be caught like a cold, taught like the ABCs and is as covert as an assassin. Children can learn from their parent's behavior and become narcissistic themselves. Teens can notice the attention they receive online and develop their personality around the desire to be liked and adored. Middle-aged men can be consumed by their political stance and become blinded by their convictions. These narcissistic behaviors can occur in any gender or age, but it is astonishing when attention is paid to how prominent these tendencies are in everyday society.

When one witnesses narcissism in those around them, it can be frustrating, hurtful, and recognized as destructive. The omnipotence and authority a narcissist feels is isolating and alienating. A child who was a product of a transactional relationship is one with many facets, wounds, and distortions, yet this upbringing is only the starting point. Narcissistic abuse can be psychologically fracturing as the manipulation, lies, jealousy, immaturity, and selfishness wear on an individual from the inside out, leaving options of becoming a narcissist themselves or becoming a narcissist victim. Children of narcissistic abuse can sway either way, for in childhood, one is "the victim, but in adulthood [they] can become the abusive controller as a result" (Fay), since children learn from their parent's ways, learn "how to treat people and take care of themselves, and understand how people interact with one another" (Fay). Mary Jo Fay is a national speaker, author, columnist, and a personal survivor of several narcissists and their abusive behaviors. A narcissistic abuse survivor in her book, *When Your "Perfect Partner" Goes Perfectly Wrong*, explains:

> My therapist said that I should think of my narcissistic husband…as "emotionally retarded." If he were mentally retarded, I would never expect him to be smart. As emotionally retarded, she helped me to realize that I can never expect him to be able to understand emotions" (Fay).

One comes to recognize that their relationship with their narcissistic partner, friend, or parent is not one to be combatted or struggled. A victim of narcissistic abuse realizes and accepts that the narcissist in their life is simply incapable of understanding empathy, emotional intimacy, and depth, and it allows the victim to detach from the expectations they have of that narcissistic person.

What can be a painful realization and action to take, allows for the victim to reclaim their power as an individual and not succumb to the abusive cycle. It allows them to love their narcissistic person for who they are from a healthy distance and leave behind the self-doubt, confusion, stress, anxiety, guilt, and depression that victims of narcissistic abuse are often left with.

> The choice then becomes whether to be a victim or a survivor: one who has already lived through the trauma and is ready to move on, heal, and take responsibility for their actions and consequences (Fay).

No one deserves to grow up amidst the conflict, pain, and limitations their provider carries with them. Humans are beings of connections and behaviors learned through those surrounding them. The innocence of humanity can be corrupted by selfish, deceptive, asinine behavior, which is becoming increasingly prevalent today. It becomes an individual's responsibility to sniff out the rhetoric, acknowledge fractured parenting, and fight against the toxic individualism narcissism creates. Humanity yearns for intimacy. Relationships, cultures, governments, and families are built on this innate desire, yet narcissistic tendencies take this all away. People no longer connect with the essence of those around them, divided by screens. Society no longer communicates with one other, divided by politics. Children are no longer raised on values of love and kindness, divided by parents' selfishness and apathy. But what began as a painful past can brighten into a future of awareness, acceptance, and understanding. Even when starting as a victim, processing your anger and resentment towards those who facilitated the abuse, we can start the natural process to heal

and overcome our trauma. You can choose to be a victim or to be a survivor. Acceptance is key for transcending the hurt and pain one endures. A narcissist is stunted. The survivor is not.

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