The Ascent of Narcissism in Contemporary Daily Life

Joy Adams-Jackson, Charles Darwin University, NT, Australia
Sue Dean, The University of Technology Sydney, New South Wales, Australia

Abstract: Dealing with the problems of daily living is an important objective for all of us and most discussions by academics or health professionals centre on the use of effective interventions. In this paper we draw on both the psychoanalytic and socio-cultural literature to examine claims of an increased cultural and pathological narcissism attributable directly to underlying changes in the psychological constituents of Western populations. In our discussion we examine some of the intended and unintended consequences of cultural and pathological narcissism and the underlying pattern of social and cultural change.

Keywords: Pathological Narcissism, Western Populations, Cultural Narcissism, Social and Cultural Change

Opening Remarks

THIS PAPER DRAWS on our current experiences with, and interests in, everyday narcissism in both the workplace and in day-to-day life. As academics and mental health clinicians we experience regular exposure to the many facets of narcissistic behaviours.

Among the personalities that present problems for society in general and for the corporate world in particular are *narcissism*, *Machiavellianism, and psychopathy*. As described by researchers Nathanson, Paulhus, and Williams, "Those high in narcissism are characterized by grandiosity, entitlement, and a sense of superiority over others... Such individuals are arrogant, self-centered, and consistently self-enhancing...Individuals high in Machiavellianism are characterized by cynicism and the manipulation of others...these individuals exploit a wide range of duplicitous tactics to achieve self-interested goals...Those high in subclinical psychopathy are characterized by cold emotion, interpersonal manipulation, impulsive thrill-seeking, and a tendency to engage in antisocial behaviour. (Babiak & Hare, 2007: 124)

Introduction

A Freudian view of narcissism contends that our formative psyches internalise social norms and values by absorbing the principles or standards that influence the subject by regulating his or her desire (Tyler, 2007). In other words, narcissism is a form of self-management allowing the subject to become accustomed to socio-cultural ways of existing in the world. A socio-cultural theory of narcissism thus provides an opportunity to explicate the notion of 'subjection' or, how dominant ideological norms imitate specific models of 'us' in keeping

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with our family and social values. Tyler (2007) notes though, that Freud used his notion of narcissism in his essay 'On Narcissism' to add force to the patriarchal values of early twentieth-century Vienna. For example, Freud assigned pejorative narcissistic connotations to 'women, homosexuals, and primitives' (Tyler, 2005). Freud used these so-called narcissists to underscore the difference between the ideal 'masculine, ethical, self-sacrificing and loving' male subject and the 'childish, self-obsessed, criminal and sexually deviant' female subject (Tyler, 2007). Freud's critics assert that his negative attribution of narcissism reflected his own values and beliefs.

The mythical character Narcissus is familiar within the disciplines of literature and fine arts. However despite this, the term narcissism resides within the psychological and psychoanalytic disciplines. Publication of influential clinical studies of personality disorders by Heinz Kohut and Otto Kernberg in the 1970s created widespread interest in narcissism among the academic and general community. Academic interest in narcissism coincided with a growing interest in cultural narcissism made popular in the writings of Tom Wolfe and Christopher Lasch, along with various sociological and media accounts (Tyler, 2007).

Critics of Christopher Lasch and his widely acclaimed book *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (1978)*,* and Tom Wolfe who wrote *The 'Me' Decade and the Third Great Awakening* (1976), draw attention to their nostalgic and conservative analyses of an idealized and repressive patriarchal family whose demise they asserted was responsible for creating an "American selfishness" that was destined to 'destroy the social and political fabric' of that nation (Tyler, 2007). Tyler (2007) claimed that Freudian readings influenced Lasch's thinking, which ascribed positive cultural attributes to maintenance of the patriarchal family. Hence, any dismantling of the patriarchy would automatically result in negative social consequences and psychological damage.

From the 1970s the psychoanalytic literature moved from its Freudian interest in narcissism to focus on an increasing prevalence of pathological narcissism.

While both socio-cultural and psychological perspectives have something to offer us in relation to narcissism, we want to focus attention on a somewhat more insidious form of narcissism that has crept into the boardrooms, classrooms and other general spaces of our lives. In other words a focus on *impossible people* best described as "part narcissistic personality disorder, part psychopath, and wholly destructive" (Kirsner, 1999). We provide some case studies of narcissists and difficult people in different work contexts.

Narcissists at Work

Case Study 1

James was a 42 year old company manager with a pharmaceutical company, responsible for 20 employees. At first glance he was successful and impressive. He resided in a luxury executive apartment with his 21 year old trophy wife. He presented to people outside his work environment as confident, competent and committed to his colleagues and the organisation. Work colleagues however, told a different story about James who they described as moody, vindictive, disingenuous and manipulative, especially if things didn't go his way. They also mentioned that he kept a diary recording conversations and events involving every employee; this was kept for 'future reference' if required. James made a point of outlining what he perceived were staff strengths and weaknesses.

Staff was unanimous in their distrust of James who spoke to many people in a smarmy and condescending manner. People always sensed a hidden agenda; some staff took to keeping their own diary, recording contemporaneous events and conversations with James so that they too could provide evidence, if it were ever necessary to do so. If things did not go according to his plans, James would make veiled threats to staff about their employment conditions, the threats were intended to make people feel confused and insecure. The threats worked!

James was appointed from within the team to his position following the resignation of the previous manager. He worked as a rank and file member of the team for 5 years prior to assuming his current management role. During his tenure as 'one of the team' James was work avoidant, duplicitous, hungry for overtime and preferred to work solo rather than function as a team player. After taking on the management role, James adopted a 'do as I say not as I have done in the past, approach'. To pre-empt cries of 'hypocrisy', James was compelled to explain that although he was guilty of past 'wrongs' the moment had come for a cultural shift within the organisation and that he, along with everyone else would have to make some much needed changes, or else! Staff suggested with some degree of cynicism, that his current appointment to the manager's position occurred because of his apparent previous overseas management experience.

James cultivated strong relationships with powerful employees within the organisation. He promoted himself, his management style and intentions in an effort to highlight the problems and deficits of his predecessor. He managed to seduce people who did not know him very well. Despite his rise within the organisation, James always feared making a fool of himself in public. Consequently, he avoided threatening situations; he refused to speak publicly about his organisation and his role within it. He recognised this weakness and often spoke about remedying it.

Managers such as James derive their sense of esteem and purpose by making others feel inferior, by putting them down and keeping them 'on their toes', insecure in other words. They feel too threatened to foster and encourage collaborative and open relationships with others. In the case of James, he had few friends and derived his sense of power and importance solely from the recognition received by senior management.

Case Study 2

Phillip was a young twenty something psychologist; when he arrived at his new job everyone noticed. He burst onto the job scene oozing a mixture of confidence and arrogance. Phillip had held only 2 jobs since graduating from university. He was young, reasonably attractive, excessively confident and highly ambitious. From day one he presented as outspoken and critical of the workplace and those within it. He wasted no time letting his new colleagues know how he felt about them and made it abundantly clear that he thought their work practices belonged to a bygone era. Phillip was arrogant and confronting with little regard for his co-workers who he considered inferior academically and clinically to himself. He was outspoken; he did not care what he said or to whom he said it. Phillip believed that his new workplace was woeful and that only his input and level of energy could pull it into shape. Phillip worked with an all-female team, with at least 30 years of collective work experience. This was a challenge rather

than an obstacle for Phillip. The females appeared to kow-tow to him despite his age and inexperience. He was, after-all a male with something 'worthwhile' to offer, even if he was brutally frank about his workplace and his colleagues! While some of his colleagues seemed in awe of him, others found him boorish and overbearing. Needless to say, Phillip's days were numbered; he needed to move on to a workplace more conducive to his aims and ambitions. After only 9 months 'on the job' he moved to a larger facility in a metropolitan area. His former colleagues welcomed his departure.

Phillip was both glib and superficial. Despite working in an organisation with other qualified professionals, he set about promoting himself in an egocentric and grandiose manner. Workplace speculation had it that he hoped for a promotion to a senior leadership position, but when such a promotion looked unlikely, he departed the organisation with a view to finding success in a large city centre.

Difficult and Impossible People

Case Study 3

Diane was a 35 year old nurse academic with a large measure of self-regard; she regarded herself as capable and competent in her job. She was an effective educator who generally inspired her students. In social situations she was always the life and soul of 'the party'. She always appeared warm and engaging and was a very adept conversationalist. People who met her were impressed, initially. While she impressed many of her students and colleagues with her confident and capable manner, there were many also who felt uncomfortable and somewhat ambivalent around her. Former colleagues who had observed her for significant periods of time remarked that they thought she 'was odd'. Most people found it difficult to explain the oddness precisely. One minute she was happy and 'normal' then 'crazy' very nasty and vicious. The crazy stuff flew out of left field. Several people thought she was 'creepy' or weird and did not relish spending too much time in her company.

Former friends and lovers described Diane's intimate interpersonal life as turbulent and unsettling. Her seemingly gregarious personality made her attractive to others.

Despite this, Diane was choosey when it came to sexual partners. Once involved however, Diane became ambivalent and set about dismantling any relationship she formed. Diane's ambivalence to relationships was apparent in her simultaneous acts of jealousy, neediness and independence. In other words, she was a mass of contradictions; able to appear strong and independent one minute, then jealous and needy the next. If respective partners strove for any sort of independence, Diane would become moody, sullen or feign a physical ailment for attention seeking purposes while announcing that 'her needs were not being met'. By most accounts it was never possible to please Diane. She sabotaged any attempts people made to please her. If life was on an even keel she did her utmost to create drama and draw attention to her alleged 'unmet needs'. Needless to say, intimate relationships were short-lived because partners eventually felt uncomfortable, overwhelmed, suffocated and frustrated.

Diane presented to people as both likeable and manipulative, she was also socially demanding; her behaviour fits neatly with Kirsner's description of an 'impossible person'. She was difficult, demanding and dysfunctional in both her professional and personal life.

Some Theoretical-empirical Explanations of Narcissism

Contemporary writers (Wolfe, 1976; Lasch, 1978; Kirsner, 1999; Tyler, 2007; Greene, 2008; Kilminster, 2008) have presented somewhat divergent views about narcissism and its impact on modern life. Lasch (1978) and Wolfe (1976) blamed narcissism for the cultural excesses of liberalism, secularity and consumerism and a breakdown of the patriarchy while Kilminster (2008) referred to 'waves of informalisation' since the 1890s and into the 1960s-1970s that challenged some of the dominant forms of social conduct and power relationships leading to less formal regulation and behaviours. Greene (2008) pointed to the development of individualistic ideologies that accompanied the spread of capitalism across North America and Europe. He suggested that individualistic ideologies such as the ideology of self-reliance spawned such culturally validated individual pursuits as 'self-esteem, self-fulfilment and self-actualization'. Kirsner (1999) drew on his extensive experiences in universities and various professional associations when he coined the term 'impossible person'. Kirsner's work underpins our own investigation into narcissism and narcissistic behaviours.

This body of theoretical-empirical work sits alongside ever expanding references to narcissism and narcissistic behaviours in the 'popular media'.

Media Discussions of Narcissism in an Age of Entitlement

Media references to narcissism and the age of entitlement exist alongside academic descriptions. The popular press introduces readers to articles about various aspects of narcissism from time to time. Below are two examples of such media accounts.

Anthony B. Robinson's (2007) "Articles of faith, the unfortunate age of entitlement in America" in the Seattle Post-Intelligence describes the age of entitlement accordingly:

> A sense of entitlement means that we have a right or a claim to something, whether it's the best school, a grand home, preferential treatment, or the good life.
>
> Robinson asks: How has this pervasive sense of entitlement come to pass? Is it self-esteem run amok? Is it the emphasis on 'rights' in speech and thoughts? Is entitlement a corollary of affluence or consequence of consumerism? Does it owe to being the world's sole superpower? Whatever the cause, this much seems true; entitlement is the handmaiden of the ego, the sign of a neglected, malnourished soul.

The age of entitlement and narcissism have aroused media interest; claims appear in the popular press suggesting that today's young people are more narcissistic than previous generations and they are ever more likely to agree with statements such as ' I think I'm a special person' and 'if I ruled the world it would be a much better place'.

A slightly different representation of narcissism appeared in a recent Australian Sydney Morning Herald article under the heading *These Days:* The scary same game by Jacqueline Lunn (2009). To quote Lunn:

> At first I thought this desire to look like your daughter was just an unnatural extension of the whole unnatural mother-and-daughter-as-best friends' concept. But it's more than that. The celebrity fountain of youth relies heavily on personal trainers, chefs, stylists, Botox, fillers and telling anyone who asks that sunscreen and eight hours' sleep are the secrets to staying young. Now there is another well to sip from. Celebrity off-spring can be used to turn back the clock. It doesn't involve sucking out their fat or drinking collagen. It involves a bit of Freaky Friday. Your daughter becomes you and you become your daughter. (SMH 30/4/09, 3)

Lunn describes a disappearing generation gap and suggests that 'using your own young to feel young is an act of narcissism'.

Discussion

Narcissists are self obsessed grandiose people with a constant need for admiration; they show little or no empathy for others. In addition, many overstate their achievements and their abilities and do so in a ruthless and arrogant manner. James and Phillip, case studies 1 and 2 respectively, were both arrogant and ruthless in their dealings with co-workers. They had regard only for themselves. Furthermore, narcissistic individuals believe in their own superiority and seek to enhance their sense of worth by mixing with successful or influential people. While influential people are very attractive for the narcissist, the relationships they forge with these people are disingenuous given that the narcissist has no interest in ongoing commitment or loyalty to individuals or organisations beyond the furtherance of their own goals and achievements. They will move on to 'the next best thing' at the earliest opportunity and repeat their pattern of personal and professional seduction.

Years of working in the health and university sectors have provoked our interest in what is an apparent increase in the number of difficult or impossible people (Kirsner, 1999) in the workplace. We are all too familiar with people we can aptly describe as difficult, im-possible, troublemakers, tyrants, bullies; indeed, there are untold possible attributions for such people. They are the people from hell who seem to do everything in their power to create chaos and destruction wherever they go. As our case studies demonstrate, narcissistic and difficult people are present in many walks of life. No individual or organisation is immune from them.

Our research, like Kirsner's work in the late 20th century, indicates that organisations such as hospitals, the public service and universities are fertile grounds for difficult and narciss-istic people to thrive. Kirsner's (1999) study of impossible people suggests that universities are especially good places for such people to flourish due to the competitive nature of the university system and the often unrelenting pressure on academic staff to be entrepreneurs; to think and act outside of academe in order to attract very large competitive grants and large numbers of fee-paying international students. The modern university not only fosters wealth creation as the goal for students, but encourages and fosters relentless self-interested com-petition among staff. Collaboration for some academics is almost an after-thought when single-mindedly pursuing academic glory in all its many forms. Further, universities are nebulous places without clear authority structures thus making it possible for difficult people to survive and thrive. Kirsner described the situation accordingly:

> Personality issues often seem to dominate in universities where it is difficult to do anything about impossible people, because of inappropriate organisational structures and the sheer prevalence of such people. (Kirsner, 1999:35)

Kirsner (1999) offers sage advice for dealing with difficult and impossible people; 'do not work with them', but if that is not possible, then we need to 'keep our distance as far as possible'. That said though, many people in the workplace are unable to avoid working with narcissists especially if the narcissist is the boss. As Paulus and Williams (2002) noted, narcissists may be more of an irritant than a threat initially while they emerge as leaders, it is not until further down the track that problems may emerge.

Narcissistic Leaders

A contradiction exists with respect to narcissistic leaders; on the one hand, narcissists prevail as chief executive officers and company presidents (Maccoby, 2000; Wasylyshyn, 2005; Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006;) while on the other, research demonstrates that narcissistic leaders potentially create problems for themselves and the organisations that employ them (Hogan & Hogan, 2001). The problems include poor decision making and performance resulting from over confidence (Blair, Hoffman & Helland, 2006), negative workplace behaviour (Judge, LePine & Rich, 2006), and in some instances, white-collar crime (Blickle, Schlegel, Fassbender & Klein, 2006). In addition, narcissists do not handle criticism very well and nor do they learn from their mistakes but show instead a propensity to blame others when things go wrong, thereby contributing to the creation of workplace problems.

Closing Remarks

In this paper, we have sought to expose and highlight some of the different facets of narcissism and the consequences of difficult and impossible behaviours. The idea that impossible people feature prominently in both our organisational and daily personal lives is indeed troubling. In our own workplaces we have witnessed the vast amount of emotional and professional damage these people create. It may be easy to shrug off and ignore the sort of narcissism described in Lunn's (2009) article as just an example of flaky spoilt behaviour; of older women behaving badly; a case of mutton dressed as lamb; and so on. Nevertheless, this sort of narcissistic behaviour provides little impetus for change while it is possible to benefit from the behaviours – the negative consequences occur later in life. In this case individuals get old and lose their looks. The increase in entitlement, the selfishness, shallow relationships, decrease in ethical and moral behaviour, the fostering of competition rather than cooperation, are all part of the narcissistic enterprise. We need to increase our awareness of such people, their behaviours and the many problems they create. By recognising the problems and acknowledging that the narcissistic enterprise it is not good or desirable for a truly civil society means we can start to make concerted efforts to nullify the ascent of narcissism in contemporary daily life.

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About the Authors

Dr. Joy Adams-Jackson
Dr. Joy Adams-Jackson recently accepted an academic appointment in the School of Education, Health and Science at the Charles Darwin University, in Australia's Northern Territory. Joy has specific interests in the social construction of women's 'madness', domestic violence and difficult relationships in the workplace.

Sue Dean
Sue Dean is an academic and her area of clinical practice is mental health.

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