THE NEW SCIENCE OF NARCISSISM

Understanding One of the Greatest Psychological Challenges of Our Time—and What You Can Do About It

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sounds true

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CONTENTS

PREFACE:
Why You Need This Book
ix

PART I. DEFINING NARCISSISM TODAY

CHAPTER 1:
Defining Narcissism
3

CHAPTER 2:
Measuring Narcissism
23

CHAPTER 3:
Basic Traits and the Narcissism Recipe
45

CHAPTER 4:
Narcissists' Goals and Motives
63

CHAPTER 5:
Narcissistic Personality Disorder
79

CHAPTER 6:
Narcissism's Cousins: The Four Triads
97

PART II. OBSERVING NARCISSISM IN THE WORLD AROUND YOU

CHAPTER 7:
Relationships and Narcissism
113

CHAPTER 8:
Leadership and Narcissism
135

CHAPTER 9:
Social Media and Narcissism
153

CHAPTER 10:
Geek Culture and the Great Fantasy Migration
171

PART III. DEALING WITH NARCISSISM TODAY AND IN THE FUTURE

CHAPTER 11:
Using Narcissism Strategically
185

CHAPTER 12:
Reducing Another's Narcissism
197

CHAPTER 13:
Reducing Your Own Narcissism
211

CHAPTER 14:
Psychotherapy for Narcissism
223

CHAPTER 15:
Future Science Around Narcissism
237

EPILOGUE:
Facing the Future with Hope
251

QUICK-START GLOSSARY
255

NOTES
257

SUGGESTED READINGS
265

ABOUT THE AUTHORS
25

CHAPTER 1

Defining Narcissism

Narcissism can range from everyday actions to more extreme behaviors. I want to intentionally start with an extreme example that has become familiar to us all—the narcissism-driven mass shooting. It's extreme and harrowing but provides a common starting point to talk about the elements of narcissism that drive certain behaviors. This example is similar to the Columbine shooting in 1999 that I incorporated in my research around social rejection, but it is a more recent illustration that pulls in today's cultural context of social media. Although this case is extreme and pathological, all of us can relate to feeling rejected. And some of these feelings of entitlement may look familiar in small doses in yourself or a friend.

This example focuses on Elliot Rodger, the twenty-two-year-old son of a Hollywood filmmaker who killed six students and injured fourteen others in the college town of Isla Vista, California, in May 2014. Near the University of California at Santa Barbara campus, Rodger stabbed three men—his two roommates and their friend—in his apartment, and then three hours later, he drove to the Alpha Phi sorority house and shot three women outside. Next, he drove past a deli and shot a male student, and then he sped through the small town, shooting and wounding several

pedestrians and hitting some with his car. During the chase, Rodger exchanged gunfire with police twice and received a nonfatal shot to the hip. In the end, he crashed his car into a parked vehicle. Police found him dead in the car with a self-inflicted shot to the head.

Authorities later found a video he uploaded to YouTube, called "Elliot Rodger's Retribution," which outlined his upcoming attack and his motives. In the video, Rodger said he wanted to punish women for rejecting him, as well as men who had successfully picked up women. He also emailed a manuscript, called "My Twisted World: The Story of Elliot Rodger," to two dozen people, including his therapist and some family members. What became known as his "manifesto" details his relatively affluent childhood, family conflicts, hatred of women, contempt of couples, frustration about his virginity, and his plans for retribution. In the final section of the document, Rodger said: "I am the true victim in all of this. I am the good guy."[1]

Rodger's case was cited across mainstream media as a heightened example of narcissism-gone-wrong, and psychologists were asked to comment on his grandiose fantasies, twisted motivations, and ongoing YouTube delusions that may have signaled a diagnosable disorder. We'll use this example to unpack what narcissism is, how it motivated Rodger's actions, and how it shows up in our society. First, let's define narcissism, and then we can pull apart the case throughout the chapter to better see the details.

BROACHING THE NARCISSISM CONVERSATION

Narcissism has become an enormously popular term, but we often don't have a clear idea of what the term means. Is it about being arrogant or vain? Is it about being a jerk? Is it about manipulativeness? Is it about insecurity? Is it a normal trait or a psychiatric disorder or something in between? The truth is that the answer to all these questions is "yes," but it is a little more refined than that. Narcissism has nuance and falls on a

spectrum of sorts. For example, the following three individuals demonstrate different types of narcissistic traits and behaviors:

- Your favorite blogger talks about the high-status people she meets and the fancy places she goes. She name-drops constantly, and you get the sense that she sees herself as superior to most people. She expertly turns conversations back toward herself and her experiences, no matter the topic. However, she is also charming and entertaining, which makes her likable despite her self-centeredness. You think that you two could be friends.
- An acquaintance of yours is shy and insecure. He seems depressed but at the same time a bit full of himself. He wants everything done his way, doesn't show a lot of compassion for others, and complains that people don't realize how smart he is. You have talked to him about his depression, but he can't take responsibility for it. To him, all of his problems are a result of the unfair treatment the world has given him. If only the world recognized his brilliance, everything would be okay.
- Your coworker uses his Twitter account to brag about his accomplishments at work, although you don't consider them to be as significant as he does. He belittles coworkers and is incapable of showing gratitude to others who help him with his projects. He expects special treatment, and when he doesn't get it, he is mean and vindictive. Some people call him "prickly" because he is so reactive to criticism. Despite all of these flaws, the boss likes him. He is seen as a go-getter, but you see him more as a suck-up.

These three people seem different, but each shows features of narcissism. The first is outgoing and charming, the second is insecure and depressed, and the third is a combination of the two—arrogant but also defensive.

At its core, narcissism is about self-importance, antagonism, and a sense of entitlement. Narcissists believe they matter more than other people and deserve to be treated that way. Each of these three individuals shares this selfish core of narcissism, but they also differ in important ways that the science of narcissism is now beginning to reveal.

The first individual is what we call a *grandiose narcissist*. These are ambitious, driven, and charming individuals. They have high self-esteem and generally feel good about themselves. These are the narcissists you will see most often in your life: you work for them, date them, and are entertained by them. You are often drawn to their boldness but are later repelled by their self-centeredness and lack of empathy. Many fictional characters are grandiose narcissists, including Tony Stark in *Iron Man*, Gilderoy Lockhart in the *Harry Potter* series, Gaston in *Beauty and the Beast*, and Miranda Priestly in *The Devil Wears Prada*. These characters range from humorous, like Ron Burgundy in *Anchorman,* to evil, like Nicole Kidman's character in *To Die For*. Historically, many labels describe grandiose narcissists, including *overt*, *exhibitionistic*, and *special child*. You might think of this first example most frequently as you move through the book.

On the other hand, you may also start to think about the second example, a person who is considered a *vulnerable narcissist*. These people are introverted, depressed, and easily hurt by criticism. They report having low self-esteem, but despite that, they see themselves as deserving of special treatment. Vulnerable narcissists are harder to see in your life, so much so that psychologists often call them "hidden" narcissists. Vulnerable narcissism is also harder to see in fiction. Woody Allen plays a vulnerable narcissist in many of his movies—neurotic and self-absorbed—with Alvy Singer in *Annie Hall* being a good example. Another character with these qualities is George Costanza in *Seinfeld*. The labels for vulnerable narcissists include *covert*, *closet*, and *shame child*. Table 1.1 lists the terms that have been historically used to identify grandiose and vulnerable narcissists. You'll begin to understand these narcissists and what motivates them, too.

Table 1.1: Historical Narcissism Labels

GRANDIOSE NARCISSIST	VULNERABLE NARCISSIST
Manipulative	Craving
Overt	Covert
Uncivilized spoiled child	Infantilized spoiled child
Thick-skinned	Thin-skinned
Oblivious	Hypervigilant
Overtly grandiose	Overtly vulnerable
Exhibitionistic	Closet
Special child	Shame child
Arrogant	Shy
Unprincipled	Compensatory

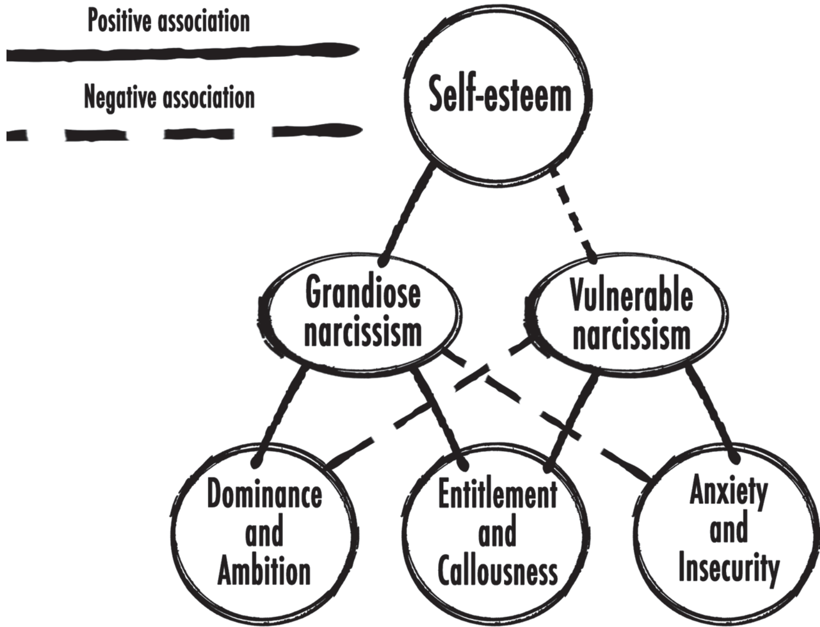
The individual in the third example is a combination of the two types of narcissism. He has the extraverted, ambitious qualities of grandiose narcissism and the more defensive qualities of vulnerable narcissism. Yes, to make things more confusing, some individuals can be both grandiose and vulnerable and live in the "middle zone" of the two types. Former US president Richard Nixon is a good example of combined grandiosity and vulnerability. Another more recent figure who appears to have both high grandiosity and high vulnerability, at least in his public image, is rapper and pop culture icon Kanye West, who is known for having a high opinion of his work but doesn't take criticism with grace. Although we technically don't define the narcissism types on a spectrum, it can be helpful to think about it that way. You may see a bit of grandiosity or vulnerability in yourself; in general, most of us exhibit some measure of narcissism, and it can come out in different ways, both positive and negative.

ONE OR THE OTHER? GRANDIOSE VERSUS VULNERABLE NARCISSISM

Until recently, many psychologists didn't separate these terms and typically researched the grandiose form of narcissism, so the early studies of narcissism focused on its extraverted, arrogant qualities. At the same time, psychotherapists were seeing patients who exhibited more of the vulnerable form of narcissism. As you might imagine, most people seek psychotherapy when they feel bad—anxious or depressed—or they're struggling socially. And not just bad, but bad enough to seek psychological treatment, with its costs and potential stigma. Psychotherapy is usually not plan A in life.

Because of this, psychotherapists didn't often see the grandiose narcissists, who didn't believe they needed help. Grandiose narcissists don't tend to struggle socially, feel depressed about their circumstances, or see distressing behavior in themselves that they need to address through therapy. In fact, they often feel full of self-esteem and are socially successful. Some grandiose narcissists seek treatment for issues outside of depression and anxiety, such as substance use or relational therapy, but still not as often as vulnerable narcissists. As a result of this bias, narcissists in treatment exhibit more vulnerability than the average grandiose narcissist. And since people are encouraged to express themselves or "open up" in therapy, grandiose narcissists who do seek treatment may be more likely to discuss personal weaknesses in therapy than they would otherwise. In essence, therapists were likely to see more vulnerability in grandiose narcissists than the outside world did, including in the studies we were conducting in psychology labs.

This is where the new science comes in. When psychologists and psychiatrists met in recent years to define and discuss narcissism, they wanted to include both sides of what the researchers and clinicians were seeing. We knew that having two forms of narcissism was a problem, and it was odd for one term to describe two different personality structures.



At first, the grandiose/vulnerable distinction was resolved by assuming that grandiose narcissists feel vulnerable deep down, having a vulnerable core with a grandiose mask, which is sometimes called the "mask model" of narcissism. Under this interpretation, however, it would mean that when President Donald Trump goes home at night and looks in the mirror, he sees Woody Allen staring back at him. This is a neat idea, but like many neat ideas, it doesn't hold up to scrutiny. Researchers (myself included) have tried to find this hidden vulnerability in grandiose narcissists with the available tools, including word association tests, projective tests, neuroimaging, and the wonderfully named "bogus pipeline," which is essentially a fake lie-detector test. There are some hints of grandiose narcissists' hidden vulnerability, but it remains a bit like Bigfoot—hard to locate and probably just a human in an ape suit. What we find is

that grandiose narcissists become reactive in the face of a threat. In addition, they don't typically feel sad or depressed, but instead, aggressive and angry. They lash out at those they believe are criticizing them or treating them unfairly.

As research psychologists and clinical therapists pieced their theories together, we found that each group was right in its own ways, so we developed a cohesive model that combines everything and creates a solid foundation for discussion. This new model, called the Trifurcated Model of Narcissism, connects grandiose and vulnerable narcissism as two related but separate traits. Both share a core of disagreeableness, self-importance, and a sense of entitlement, but they differ a great deal on what additional traits they blend with that core. With grandiose narcissism, you see confidence, boldness, and self-esteem, but with vulnerable narcissism, you see low confidence, anxiety, and low self-esteem.

Looping back to the story about Elliot Rodger, you can see elements of vulnerable narcissism. He felt social rejection and wrote a manifesto about his frustrations and what he believed he deserved. You may also note aspects of grandiose narcissism and entitlement, which were tied in some ways to his privileged upbringing and affluent background. Throughout the book, I give examples of both forms of narcissism so you can see how the new model has changed our understanding. As we clarified and united the two concepts of grandiose and vulnerable narcissism, we saw a major increase in understanding the workings of narcissism in everything from violence to selfies. This new understanding should change the cultural conversation around how narcissism operates in our society.

HOW DID PSYCHOLOGISTS START STUDYING NARCISSISM?

Since narcissism is often seen as either a personality disorder or a personality trait (and we know now that it's related to both), I want to take a moment to briefly explain how psychologists began to make sense of

the overlapping worlds of personality and personality disorders. This lays the groundwork for our insight into narcissism and how it shows up in our lives.

Essentially, personality psychologists observe the world in a few broad ways, which have heavily influenced how we talk about personality and personality disorders in everyday conversations. One of the broadest "old-fashioned" models for thinking about personality is the *psychodynamic model*, which studies the psychological forces that underlie human behavior, particularly the conscious and unconscious. Sigmund Freud, known as the founder of psychoanalysis, talked about this model and the major psychological drives of sex, aggression, and pleasure-seeking. In Freud's model, sexual energy and early childhood experiences—often influenced by your parents—shape your ego and personality. Subsequent researchers, such as well-known psychiatrist Carl Jung, expanded on Freud's ideas by talking about the ways relationships are represented in our unconscious and collective unconscious. With this psychodynamic model, you might say narcissism and narcissistic traits come from our earliest experiences in life. Although research psychologists don't use this model as much anymore, we still think of Freud and Jung often. Many modern theories are based on these ideas, and some clinicians still use modern variants of methods from psychodynamic models.

Another common broad model is the *humanistic model*, which emphasizes empathy and the good in human behavior. In this model, personality is said to grow from basic needs such as food, shelter, love, self-esteem, and self-actualization, and based on that, psychologists focus on the best ways to help people improve themselves and their self-image. You may know about this as American psychologist Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theory, which says that we need to take care of our physiological needs first (such as food, water, and sleep) and then safety, friendship, self-esteem, and self-actualization. Related to narcissism, you might talk about self-esteem and how a grandiose narcissist has an overly

high sense of self or how a vulnerable narcissist has a wounded sense of self. This model is useful, but like psychodynamic models, humanistic models have either been discarded or absorbed into other ideas.

Today in the United States, popular culture often uses what I call the "standard psychological model" to explain personality, which is a mixture of psychodynamic lite and humanism lite. Essentially, people see their problems as grounded in childhood but also believe in the possibility of greater fulfillment through self-improvement. Not everyone believes this, but it's common in Western culture. Think about the problems that television characters face: They're usually rooted in childhood conflicts and then resolved through confrontation with tough truths. This leads to a path of transcendent growth and a better life filled with more love, authenticity, and joy, which parallels the "hero's journey" that writers often use. To put it another way, these plots rarely revolve around characters who realize that their depressive symptoms or anxiety problems are largely genetic and biochemical in origin, ask their parents for detailed family histories of mental illness, and then retool their psychobiology through a combination of dietary, physical, social, cognitive, and pharmaceutical interventions. This process works, but it doesn't lend itself to exciting TV drama.

However, this last example lines up with clinical thinking in today's personality psychology studies and related fields. Clinical areas, such as medicine and clinical psychology, use the *biopsychosocial model*, which says biology, personality, and social dynamics are connected. This is why, if your friend says, "I need meds. My kids are driving me insane, and I hate my job," you nod with understanding. Personality, as well as narcissism, springs from biology, psychology, and society.

Since most models are built for human needs, they tend to focus on treating disease more than adding potential. That's why personality disorders were first studied more than personality strengths, and that's also why we tend to think of narcissism as its most negative form—narcissistic personality disorder—which is discussed in chapter 5. The medical establishment wanted to see what risks personality presented to humans. They