Narcissism in Organizational Leadership

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Abstract
This paper reviewed literature to explore the concept of narcissism, describe its nature, and summarize what other researchers are reporting about its effect on organizational leadership, and specifically on followers. Through content analysis of articles, dissertations and other publications, using narcissism and narcissistic leadership as the key words, this paper found followers of narcissistic leaders suffer low self-esteem, experience unhealthy levels of stress and low job satisfaction. Some followers were found to suffer extreme emotional stress and either quit their jobs or frequently sought therapy. Extreme narcissism was also found to be destructive on the leader as it estranged them from the very people the leader was trying to successfully lead. Research determined more males than females espouse this leadership style. Narcissism is frequently associated with charismatic leadership, however, the few benefits of the narcissistic construct, do not outweigh the disadvantages, and the consistent outcome of counterproductive work behavior exhibited by both leader and follower. Narcissism is characterized by perverse self-love, vanity, a sense of entitlement, exploiting others, a desire for power and esteem, and an inflated self-view. An increased awareness of what narcissism is may reduce follower stress and equip followers with skills to manage and make a narcissistic leader more accountable and ethical, which might eventually reduce the prevalence of narcissistic leadership, and increase organizational success and wellbeing.

Keywords: narcissism, narcissistic leadership, followership, feminine leadership, altruistic leadership, gender, social-personality, Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI), follower effectiveness, follower wellbeing, effective leadership, counterproductive work behavior (CWB), authentic leadership
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Our history is riddled with stories about self-aggrandized leaders who charismatically drive organizations and organizational members to great success and profit, yet on a psychological level, these narcissistic leaders leave behind disenfranchised followers, burdened with negative experiences of organizational leadership.

Grijalva and Harms (2014) report public interest in narcissism has increased. Narcissism has been used as a discernible construct in social-personality literature to describe destructive organizational behaviors of CEOs and politicians, characterized by psychological components including arrogance, haughtiness, and low levels of empathy and emotional intimacy. A widely used measure of narcissism is the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI), a forty-item choice test developed by Raskin and Hall (1979). Some researchers were found to support a three-factor model with dimensions of Leadership/Authority, Grandiose Exhibitionism, and Entitlement/Exploitativeness proposed by Robert Emmons (1984).

An understanding of narcissism and its effect on leadership and followers is crucial for organizational wellbeing, effectiveness, and success. Many organizations have reported experiencing high levels of managerial incompetence associated with unethical behaviors by their narcissistic leaders.

Theoretical Approaches

On the etiology of narcissism, most of the researchers whose work was reviewed for this paper based their studies on social learning, trait and leadership theories of power motivation, attachment theory, accountability theory, transformational leadership, transactional leadership and charismatic leadership (Ackerman et al., 2011; Yang, 2009; Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006; Maccoby, 2003; Raskin, 1981). Some took perspectives in support of the view that narcissism is
a positive dimension for leadership while others approached it as cultural, and still others as a clinical entity (Millon & Davis, 2000; Emmons, 1987; Raskin, 1981). Factors contributing to narcissistic behavior were said to include cultural, environmental, idiosyncratic factors and structural factors.

Although power was found by most researchers to be one of the greatest motivators for narcissistic leaders, non-narcissistic leaders who were high in power motivation were found to also seek strength from power but by influencing followers, focusing on collective success rather than intimidating followers and pursuing individual achievement (Ackerman et al., 2011; Yang, 2009; Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006; Maccoby, 2003; Millon & Davis, 2000; Emmons, 1987; Raskin, 1981; McClelland & Burnham, 1976). “Leaders high in power motivation are not concerned with being liked, but unlike narcissists, they are concerned with having a positive impact on others” (Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006, p. 627).

The cultural and psychoanalytic approaches were viewed as unjustified in that they attempted to describe an entire culture with a single clinical concept. The Dimaggio and colleagues’ model (2002) also integrates the use of values in light of affective deficits. Every action performed by the narcissist is completed according to a predetermined set of values or an end-state scenario that is in mind.

**Defining and Categorizing Narcissism**

Narcissism is defined by Campbell et al. (2010) as grandiosity, perverse self-love, vanity, a sense of entitlement, exploiting others, a desire for power and esteem, and inflated self-views containing three components including the self, interpersonal relationships, and self-regulatory strategies. The term *narcissism* first appeared in 1898 (Grijalva & Harms, 2014) linked to Narcissus from Greek mythology, who obsessively adored his own image. Historically,
narcissism and its archetypes originate from psychoanalytic thought and Greek mythology, and manifests in nine different types, which include: craver, special lover, martyr, rescuer, rager, trickster, body shaper, power broker, and fantasy maker.

The American Psychiatric Association (2000) defines it as a pervasive pattern of overt grandiosity, self-focus, and self-importance behavior, displayed by an individual or group of individuals, and lists the guideline by which to identify it: grandiose sense of self-importance, preoccupation with fantasies of unlimited success and/or power, belief in unique status, need for excessive admiration, unreasonable sense of entitlement, conscious exploitation of others, lack of empathy, envious of others, and arrogant behavior directed towards others. Leaders displaying any five of these behaviors are categorized as having a Narcissistic Personality Disorder.

Major types of narcissism that were identified include reactive, self-deceptive, and constructive (Cassano, 2001; Ket de Vries & Miller, 1985) with results of managerial incompetence, inability to maintain relationships within a network or build a team, and never learning from failure. A major characteristic of narcissists lies in their ability to link an inner state with relationship variables. Others include classic/overt narcissist, inverted narcissist, cerebral narcissist, somatic narcissist, covert or stealth narcissist, elite narcissist, narcissistic psychopath—unprincipled, amorous, compensatory, elitist and fanatic (Millon & Davis, 1996).

**Narcissistic Leader Impact on Followers**

Given that narcissistic leaders tend to surround themselves with unquestioning followers and that narcissistic-charismatic leaders develop parental relationships with selected followers (Blair, Hoffman & Helland, 2008), these leaders are therefore likely to receive little resistance from their followers. It also forces the follower to be bound to egoistic desires for retaliation and vindictive actions such as sabotaging the company. Additionally, the extent of time spent with
the leaders and followers caught in complex webs of workplace bullying, egos, retaliation, and other subcultural pursuits, keeps the organization from running smoothly even if it appears on the surface to be running well. In fact, the breakdown of organizational systems through these pockets of dysfunction, create shortfalls to organizational structures similar to the impact of mold, asbestos, and termites in a home. The back and forth of this leader-follower-leader exchange creates enough negativity to derail organizational goals and vision. This type of leadership does not go unnoticed by clients and workgroups or organizational members outside direct association to the leader.

The argument persists claiming narcissism has valuable qualities for leadership. Grijalva, (2013) insists narcissism builds self-esteem and self-confidence and produces results in crisis situations. We offer that although this may have been true in the past, especially in times of war, or may even be true today in times of combating terrorists, there are many other and clearly better ways to develop self-esteem and self-confidence, and to support organizational success without the negative impacts of narcissism.

Rosenthal and Pittinsky (2006) suggest “an examination of the dynamics between leaders’ psychological motivations and behaviors and the motivations and behaviors of the constituents and institutions they lead” (p.630). Grijalva and Harms (2014) found that for the high benefits narcissistic leaders bring to the workplace, there are significant costs to followers from their counterproductive work behavior. In charismatic leadership, Grijalva and Harms (2014) found negative relations to altruism and ethical behaviors. Poor follower outcomes are the product of narcissistic leaders’ complex and impractical visualizations (Sankowsky, 1995). Narcissism subsists on a high and low continuum, which impacts workplace productivity (Grijalva & Harms, 2014). Narcissistic leaders demonstrate a distorted self-image, which causes
a selective or distorted memory recall, and produces biased and subjective interpretations of their leadership performance should any feedback counter their self-image (Grijalva & Harms, 2014; Cassano, 2001). “Both empirical and theoretical evidence suggests that narcissistic individuals lack integrity” (Blair, Hoffman & Helland, 2008, p. 258). Narcissistic leaders have a higher propensity to react on their negative emotions, particularly if their self-esteem is threatened, and the results in the workplace create a toxic and even hostile working environment. In addition, the negative aspects of narcissistic leadership have the potential to alter the behaviors of impressionable followers; not to mention giving consent to these narcissistic behaviors.

**Narcissistic Leadership and Organizational Effectiveness**

A surprising find during research of this paper was that narcissism is not only recognized and celebrated as a component of leadership and a charismatic trait, but it has been studied to the extent it has become a type of leadership in itself. In fact, some leadership coaches and researchers even recommend a moderate amount of narcissism produces effective leadership outcomes (Grijalva, 2013). Jorstad (1996) and Campbell (2001) argued that narcissism is a character trait and a state of mind, which changes based on circumstances and is necessary if the circumstances are competitive or hostile. Narcissists actively seek leadership roles, yet narcissistic leadership negatively predicted servant leadership, which has a positive correlation to concern for followers’ needs, financial performance and personal integrity (Grijalva & Harms, 2014).

The NPI measures narcissism as a personality trait in social psychological research. This instrument reveals narcissistic categories including *corporate narcissism* characterized by these four states: an authoritarian with task-oriented decision making, democratic with task-oriented decision making, authoritarian with emotional decision making, and democratic with emotional
decision making. Raskin and Hall (1979) set out to measure authority, superiority, exhibitionism, entitlement, vanity, exploitativeness, and self-sufficiency among other variables. Other researchers, dissatisfied with Raskin and Hall’s categories, have developed their own tool ranging from three to eight factors, that they suggest is more descriptive of narcissism not as a trait or leadership style but as a phenomenon (Ouimet, 2010; Resick, et al. 2009; Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006; Millon & Davis, 2000; Millon & Davis, 1996).

From a mental health perspective, common workplace neurotic styles of narcissism were found to include these types: explosive, implosive, abrasive, narcissistic, apprehensive, compulsive, and the impulsive (Humphreys et al., 2010; Cassano, 2001). Neurotic tendencies were found to be feelings of entitlement, excessive demand for attention, and pursuing power and prestige at any cost. Results of destructive narcissism were found to be loneliness, depression, inability to self reflect, inability to be introspective, fear of envy, and inability to understand one’s situational perceptions (Ket de Vries, 2003; 1985); all of which have significant negative impact on organizational effectiveness. The traps of narcissism, however, negatively possess the leader to the extent the leader is unable to liberate from its hold. Kets de Vries (1985) describes this hopeless state as a thing so strange or a double-edged sword because, like the old adage, too much of it is poisonous and yet too little of it can be seen as lack of self-confidence or leadership ineffectiveness.

In an attempt and motivated to protect their identities, destructive narcissistic leaders continue down a path of conscious self-destruction. Followers of destructive narcissistic leaders are advised to recognize that the leader is an emotionally disturbed person, to relinquish efforts to change the leader, and either seek alternative employment; or should the follower decide to remain under this leadership, to remain calm, not take their criticism personally, document all
communications with leader, and not to confront the destructive narcissist directly as it may lead to increase in the leader’s paranoia, rage or vindictive retaliation (Humphreys et al., 2010; Ouimet, 2010; Rosenthal and Pittinsky, 2006; Raskin and Hall, 1979).

Clements and Washbrush (1999) argue that lack of acknowledgement of the role of followers and ignoring the negative and toxic relationship that results from having a narcissist leader distorts the leader-follower dynamics and undermines authenticity. Duchon and Burns also argue that over time every organization develops its own identity, which is reinforced and imitated by followers through shared assumptions, practices, ideologies, and perceptions about identity ultimately mirroring the leader’s narcissism into extreme organizational narcissism. At this point, the organization loses touch with its clients and markets, eventually destroying organizational members and organizations (Duchon & Burns, 2008).

Considering the attraction of narcissists to leadership, the tendency for narcissists to emerge within originations as leaders and the negative impact of their self-image obsession on organizational effectiveness, organizations may consider interventions to screen for narcissistic leaders (Grijalva & Harms, 2014) and to impose leadership development programs that incorporate servant leadership, altruistic leadership, authentic leadership, and ethical compliance.

The goal of most organizations is to successfully produce highly profitable products and/or services over a long term. These organizations need to be lead by effective leaders in order to consistently achieve such a goal. Hoffman et al. (2013) concluded that although ethical climate did not deter narcissistic behaviors, it reduced the process of an employee rising through the ranks and becoming a narcissistic leader without checks and balances that an ethical climate provides. Narcissistic leaders operating in ethical environments have less impact on followers (Grijalva & Harms, 2014), therefore ethical compliance would be yet another positive solution to
narcissistic leadership.

**Gender in Narcissistic Leadership**

Scholars and experts agree men and women lead differently (Jorstad, 1996; Raskin & Hall, 1979). Thus, we propose that typically feminine leadership traits of collaboration, empathy, and compassion would dilute narcissism in male leadership.

The authors found most researchers and scholars agree that the traits of selflessness, authenticity and transformational leadership, typically present in feminine leadership, positively impact organizations in significant and notable ways, and that women, who are more likely to embrace such desirable characteristics, refrain more frequently than men from accepting leading positions. For example, using “core self-evaluation” (CSE) and narcissism evaluation to provide insights into CEO leadership styles, Resick et al. (2009) suggest “that CEOs with high CSE—a positive trait—are more likely to engage in transformational or contingent reward leadership while narcissists are less likely” (p. 1365). They concluded that “CEO personality characteristics and leadership styles have implications for organizational effectiveness” (p. 1376).

**Recommendations and Suggestions for Further Research**

Most of the dimensions used to study narcissistic leaders were on personality, cognitive abilities and leadership from a quantitative approach based on cultural factors, environmental, idiosyncratic factors and structural factors. Most methods used were clinical and psychoanalytic. With many researchers viewing narcissism and its leadership style as a pathological disorder, the failure to agree on whether it is beneficial to organizations or not, and with others researchers viewing it as a normal personality and leadership style, this paper offers that narcissistic leaders need to be studied qualitatively and their stories and lived experiences explored.
Conclusion

Unlike Grijalva (2013) and Jorstad (1996), we found no repeatedly productive utilization for narcissistic leadership, particularly since the constructs of self-esteem and self-confidence, which are redeemable qualities of narcissism, can be found within transformational leadership and through self-actualization and leadership development. Therefore, we propose if narcissistic leaders would consider engaging in leadership development, which includes training in self-awareness, self-regulation, self-governance, servant leadership, authentic leadership, altruism, self-confidence and self-esteem with the goal of self-actualization, these leaders over time would have a higher potential to become effective leaders.

An increased awareness of what narcissism is may reduce follower stress and equip them with skills to manage and make a narcissistic leader more accountable and ethical, which might also eventually reduce the prevalence and increase organizational success and wellbeing. Further, if the narcissistic leaders surrounded themselves with a network of non-narcissistic people who would be committed to keeping them accountable, then they might desist from narcissistic behavior.

Wonneberg (2007) suggests that narcissistic behavior may be the cause of high levels of organizational leadership incompetence because as one moves higher up in organizations, their narcissistic levels also increase. He recommended that society start “demanding for greater corporate responsibility given the damaging effects of narcissism” (p. 82).

Considering the high-paced, profit-centered practices of business leaders and business organizations today, we are not convinced that narcissistic leaders would be willing to engage in our suggested level of leadership development, if they were able to identify the need in the first place. The responsibility, then, may fall to followers of narcissistic leaders to share their
frustrations en masse and to corporate boards of directors to intervene and insist or direct their narcissistic leaders to participate in psychological interventions and treatment.

   Additionally, ethical organizations with caring cultures remove the ripe environment for destructive narcissistic leadership, and when servant leadership is added to the mix, the negativity of narcissistic leadership again minimizes (Grijalva & Harms, 2014).

   In the end, organizations and their clients and consumers may indeed suffer unless honest attempts are made to manage narcissistic leadership. The transition will occur when organizations led by effective leaders continue to thrive; and their organizational members flourish in their work and personal lives to the degree the word spreads about the positive influence of their ideal effective leadership.
References


