

Narcissistic Disorders of the Self as Addictions

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Abstract

Pathological narcissism is an addiction to Narcissistic Supply, the narcissist's drug of choice. It is, therefore, not surprising that other addictive and reckless behaviours – workaholism, alcoholism, drug abuse, pathological gambling, compulsory shopping, or reckless driving – piggyback on this primary dependence.

The narcissist – like other types of addicts – derives pleasure from these exploits. But they also sustain and enhance his grandiose fantasies as “unique”, “superior”, “entitled”, and “chosen”. They place him above the laws and pressures of the mundane and away from the humiliating and sobering demands of reality. They render him the centre of attention – but also place him in “splendid isolation” from the madding and inferior crowd.

Such compulsory and wild pursuits provide a psychological exoskeleton. They are a substitute to quotidian existence. They afford the narcissist with an agenda, with timetables, goals, and faux achievements. The narcissist – the adrenaline junkie – feels that he is in control, alert, excited, and vital. He does not regard his condition as dependence. The narcissist firmly believes that he is in charge of his addiction, that he can quit at will and on short notice.

The narcissist denies his cravings for fear of “losing face” and subverting the flawless, perfect, immaculate, and omnipotent image he projects. When caught red handed, the narcissist underestimates, rationalises, or intellectualises his addictive and reckless behaviours – converting them into an integral part of his grandiose and fantastic False Self.

Addiction and Personality

A voluminous literature notwithstanding, there is little convincing empirical research about the correlation between personality traits and addictive behaviours. Substance abuse and dependence (alcoholism, drug addiction) is only one form of recurrent and self-defeating pattern of misconduct. People are addicted to all kinds of things: gambling, shopping, the Internet, reckless and life-endangering pursuits. Adrenaline junkies abound.

The connection between chronic anxiety, pathological narcissism, depression, obsessive-compulsive traits and alcoholism and drug abuse is well established and common in clinical practice. But not all narcissists, compulsives, depressives, and anxious people turn to the bottle or the needle. Frequent claims of finding a gene complex responsible for alcoholism have been consistently cast in doubt.

In 1993, Berman and Noble suggested that addictive and reckless behaviours are mere emergent phenomena and may be linked to other, more fundamental traits, such as novelty seeking or risk taking (“**Childhood Antecedents of Substance Misuse**”, Current Opinion in Psychiatry, Volume 6, Issue 3, June 1993).

Psychopaths (patients with Antisocial Personality Disorder) have both qualities in ample quantities. We would expect them,

therefore, to heavily abuse alcohol and drugs. Indeed, as Lewis and Bucholz convincingly demonstrated in 1991, they do (“**Alcoholism, Antisocial Behavior and family History**”, British Journal of Addiction, Volume 86, Issue 2, February 1991, pp. 139-244). Still, only a negligible minority of alcoholics and drug addicts are psychopaths.

Addiction and Narcissism as Organizing Principles

In our attempt to decipher the human psyche (in itself a mere construct, not an ontological entity), we have come up with two answers:

- I. That behaviours, moods, emotions, and cognitions are wholly reducible to biochemical reactions and neural pathways in the brain. This medicalization of what it is to be human is inevitably hotly contested.
- II. That behaviours, moods, emotions, and cognitions can be explained and predicted by the introduction of “scientific” theories based on primary concepts. Psychoanalysis is an early - and now widely disregarded - example of such an approach to human affairs.

The concepts of “addiction” and “(pathological) narcissism” were introduced to account for oft-recurring amalgams of behaviours,

moods, emotions, and cognitions. Both are organizing, exegetic principles with some predictive powers. Both hark back to Calvinist and Puritan strands of Protestantism where excess and compulsion (inner demons) were important topics. Yet, though clearly umbilically connected, as I have demonstrated elsewhere, addictive behaviours and narcissistic defenses also differ in critical ways.

When addicts engage in addictive behaviours, they seek to change their perception of their environment. As the alcoholic Inspector Morse says, once he had consumed his single Malts, “the world looks a happier place”. Drugs make the things look varicolored, brighter, more hopeful, and fun-filled.

In contrast, the narcissist needs narcissistic supply to regulate his inner universe. Narcissists care little about the world out there, except as an ensemble of potential and actual sources of narcissistic supply. The narcissist’s drug of choice - attention - is geared to sustain his grandiose fantasies and senses of omnipotence and omniscience.

Classical addiction - to drugs, alcohol, gambling, or to other compulsive behaviours - provides the addict with an exoskeleton: boundaries, rituals, timetables, and order in an otherwise chaotically disintegrating universe.

Not so for the narcissist.

Admittedly, like the addict’s search for gratification, the narcissist’s pursuit of narcissistic supply is frenetic and compulsive and ever-present. Yet, unlike the addict’s, it is not structured, rigid, or ritualistic. On the contrary, it is flexible and inventive. Narcissism, in other words, is an adaptive behaviour, albeit one that has outlived its usefulness. Addiction is merely self-destructive and has no adaptive value or reason.

Finally, at heart, all addicts are self-destructive, self-defeating, self-loathing, and even suicidal. In other words: addicts are predominantly masochists. Narcissists, in contrast, are sadists and paranoids. They lapse into masochism only when their narcissistic supply runs hopelessly dry. The narcissist’s masochism is aimed at restoring his sense of (moral) superiority (as a self-sacrificial victim) and to prod him into a renewed effort to reassert himself and hunt for new sources of narcissistic supply.

Thus, while the addict’s brand of masochism is nihilistic and suicidal - the narcissist’s masochism is about self-preservation.

Narcissistic Supply

Healthy narcissism (self-love) is the foundation of self-esteem and underlies self-confidence. We all need and consume narcissistic supply. We all search for positive cues – feedback, approval, affirmation, love, or even hard-earned admiration - from people around us. These cues reinforce in us certain behaviour patterns. There is nothing special in the fact that the narcissist does the same. However there are two major differences between the narcissistic and the normal personality.

The first is quantitative. The normal person is likely to welcome a moderate amount of attention, both verbal and non-verbal. Too much attention, though, is perceived as onerous and is avoided. Destructive and censorious criticism is shunned altogether. Healthy people can endure long periods without these inputs and their absence does not

affect their self-regulation and psychological health and functioning.

The narcissist, in contrast, is the mental equivalent of an alcoholic. He is insatiable. He compulsively directs his whole behaviour, in fact his life, to obtaining these pleasurable titbits of attention. He embeds them in a coherent, completely biased, fantastic picture of himself. He uses them to regulate his labile sense of self-worth and self-esteem. He needs narcissistic supply to carry out basic mental (ego) functions. Without it he crumbles and becomes dysfunctional.

To elicit constant interest, he projects to others a confabulated, fictitious version of himself, known as the False Self. The False Self is everything the narcissist is not: omniscient, omnipotent, charming, intelligent, rich, or well-connected.

The narcissist then proceeds to harvest reactions to this projected image from family members, friends, co-workers, neighbours, business partners and from colleagues. If these – the adulation, admiration, attention, fear, respect, applause, affirmation – are not forthcoming, the narcissist demands them, or extorts them. Money, compliments, a favourable critique, an appearance in the media, a sexual conquest are all converted into the same currency in the narcissist’s mind.

This currency is what I call Narcissistic Supply.

It is important to distinguish between the various components of the process of narcissistic supply:

1. The **trigger of supply** is the person or object that provokes the source into yielding narcissistic supply by confronting the source with information about the narcissist’s False Self (a grandiose statement of any kind or information which aggrandizes the narcissist.)
2. The **source of narcissistic supply** is the person that provides the narcissistic supply
3. **Narcissistic supply** is the reaction of the source to the trigger. Publicity (celebrity or notoriety, being famous or being infamous) is a trigger of narcissistic supply because it provokes people to pay attention to the narcissist (in other words, it moves sources to provide the narcissist with narcissistic supply). Publicity can be obtained by exposing oneself, by creating something, or by provoking attention. The narcissist resorts to all three repeatedly (as drug addicts do to secure their daily dose). A mate or a companion is one such source of narcissistic supply.

But the picture is more complicated. There are two categories of Narcissistic Supply and their Sources (NSS):

The **Primary Narcissistic Supply** is attention, in both its public forms (fame, notoriety, infamy, celebrity) and its private, interpersonal, forms (adoration, adulation, applause, fear, repulsion). It is important to understand that attention of any kind – positive or negative – constitutes Primary Narcissistic Supply. Infamy is as sought after as fame, being notorious is as good as being renowned.

To the narcissist his “achievements” can be imaginary, fictitious, or only apparent, as long as others believe in them. Appearances count more than substance, what matters is not the truth but its perception.

Narcissistic supply comes in two forms: **animate (direct)** and

inanimate (indirect). Inanimate supply is comprised of all expressions of attention which are communicated impersonally (in written form or via third parties, for instance) as well as aggregate measures of popularity and fame (number of friends on Face book, views on YouTube, readers of his blog, etc.) Animate supply requires an interpersonal interaction with a source of narcissistic supply “in the flesh.” To sustain his sense of self-worth, the narcissist requires both types of supply, but especially the animate variety. He needs to witness first-hand the impact his False Self has on living, breathing, flesh-and-blood human sources and on his immediate environment.

Triggers of Primary Narcissistic Supply include, apart from being famous (celebrity, notoriety, fame, infamy) – having an air of mystique (when the narcissist is considered to be mysterious), having sex and deriving from it a sense of masculinity/virility/femininity, and being close or connected to political, financial, military, or spiritual power or authority or yielding them.

Sources of Primary Narcissistic Supply are all those who provide the narcissist with narcissistic supply on a casual, random basis.

Secondary Narcissistic Supply includes: leading a normal life (a source of great pride for the narcissist), having a secure existence (economic safety, social acceptability, upward mobility), and obtaining companionship.

Thus, having a mate, possessing conspicuous wealth, being creative, running a business (transformed into a Pathological Narcissistic Space), possessing a sense of anarchic freedom, being a member of a group or collective, having a professional or other reputation, being successful, owning property and flaunting one’s status symbols - all constitute secondary narcissistic supply as well.

Sources of Secondary Narcissistic Supply are all those people who provide the narcissist with narcissistic supply on a regular basis: spouse, friends, colleague, business partners, teachers, neighbours, and so on.

Both these primary and secondary Narcissistic Supply and their triggers and sources are incorporated in a **Narcissistic Pathological Space**.

There are hundreds of forms of narcissistic supply - and, consequently, hundreds of types of suppliers with specific functions (called “emergent roles”). The narcissist trains and conditions his nearest and dearest to act these parts. He allocates these “scripts” and “narratives” to his spouse, children, subordinates and dependents in accordance with their strong and weak points: it is the personality of the source of supply that determines which type of supply he or she is to provide. Thus: a shy, insecure and reticent child may be prevailed upon to admire and serve the narcissist; a smart, outgoing and independent off-spring may be cajoled to accomplish impressive feats, enhancing the narcissist’s standing in the community.

Narcissistic Supply includes all forms of attention - both positive and negative: fame, notoriety, adulation, fear, applause, approval. Whenever the narcissist gets attention, positive or negative, whenever he is in the “limelight”, it constitutes NS. If he can manipulate people or influence them – positively or negatively – it qualifies as NS.

Even quarrelling with people and confronting them constitute NS.

Perhaps not the conflict itself, but the narcissist’s ability to influence other people, to make them feel the way he wants, to manipulate them, to make them do something or refrain from doing it - all count as forms of narcissistic supply. Hence the phenomenon of “serial litigators”.

Negative supply should be distinguished from low-grade or fake supply (collectively known as **spurious narcissistic supply**).

Low-grade narcissistic supply comes from sources which cannot be idealized, no matter how hard the narcissist tries and to what extent he blocks out and denies reality. The type of narcissistic supply determines whether its source can be idealized or not. For instance: compliments on his intellectual achievements doled out to a cerebral narcissist by an intellectually-challenged person would never pass muster and would never qualify as narcissistic supply.

Fake narcissistic supply is tinged with ulterior motives and hidden agendas. Sources of fake supply compliment the narcissist in order to manipulate him or some third person or in order to accomplish a goal. Endowed with cold empathy, the narcissist picks up on these true motivations and feels injured and slighted. Many narcissists test their sources of supply repeatedly: they engineer situations intended to expose the sincerity or lack thereof of the supply and the consistency and authenticity of the source’s conduct.

In turn, all the above should not be confused with **static narcissistic supply**.

Narcissistic supply is either **static or dynamic**. Dynamic supply upholds, enhances, buttresses, and abets the narcissist’s grandiose and fantastic False Self. The contents of dynamic narcissistic supply and the identity of its sources conform to the narcissist’s image of himself, his “destiny”, the evolution of his life, and his place in the Cosmos. Static supply fails to do so despite the fact that it is largely positive, reliably recurrent, and abundant. Static supply is akin to “hospital rations” or “junk food”: it maintains the narcissist for a while, but, as an exclusive diet, it results in malnutrition (deficient narcissistic supply). Static supply is repetitive, “boring” because it is predictable, and pedestrian. It does not propel the narcissist into new “highs”, nor does it reinflate him when he is down.

Narcissism, Substance Abuse, and Reckless Behaviours

Pathological narcissism is an addiction to Narcissistic Supply, the narcissist’s drug of choice. It is, therefore, not surprising that other addictive and reckless behaviours – workaholism, alcoholism, drug abuse, pathological gambling, compulsory shopping, or reckless driving – piggyback on this primary dependence.

The narcissist – like other types of addicts – derives pleasure from these exploits. But they also sustain and enhance his grandiose fantasies as “unique”, “superior”, “entitled”, and “chosen”. They place him above the laws and pressures of the mundane and away from the humiliating and sobering demands of reality. They render him the centre of attention – but also place him in “splendid isolation” from the madding and inferior crowd.

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Thus, a drug abusing narcissist may claim to be conducting first hand research for the benefit of humanity – or that his substance abuse results in enhanced creativity and productivity. The dependence of some narcissists becomes a way of life: busy corporate executives, race car drivers, or professional gamblers come to mind.

The narcissist’s addictive behaviours take his mind off his inherent limitations, inevitable failures, painful and much-feared rejections, and the Grandiosity Gap – the abyss between the image he projects (the False Self) and the injurious truth. They relieve his anxiety and resolve the tension between his unrealistic expectations and inflated self-image – and his incommensurate achievements, position, status, recognition, intelligence, wealth, and physique.

Thus, there is no point in treating the dependence and recklessness of the narcissist without first treating the underlying personality disorder. The narcissist’s addictions serve deeply ingrained emotional needs. They intermesh seamlessly with the pathological structure of his disorganised personality, with his character faults, and primitive defence mechanisms.

Techniques such as “12 steps” may prove more efficacious in treating the narcissist’s grandiosity, rigidity, sense of entitlement, exploitativeness, and lack of empathy. This is because – as opposed to traditional treatment modalities – the emphasis is on tackling the narcissist’s psychological makeup, rather than on behaviour modification.

The narcissist’s overwhelming need to feel omnipotent and superior can be co-opted in the therapeutic process. Overcoming an addictive behaviour can be – truthfully – presented by the therapist as a rare and impressive feat, worthy of the narcissist’s unique mettle.

Narcissists fall for these transparent pitches surprisingly often. But this approach can backfire. Should the narcissist relapse – an almost certain occurrence – he will feel ashamed to admit his fallibility, need for emotional sustenance, and impotence. He is likely to avoid treatment altogether and convince himself that now, having succeeded once to get rid of his addiction, he is self-sufficient and omniscient.

The Adrenaline Junkie

Narcissistic Supply is exciting. When it is available, the narcissist feels elated, omnipotent, omniscient, handsome, sexy, adventurous, invincible, and irresistible. When it is missing, the narcissist first enters a manic phase of trying to replenish his supply and, if he fails, the narcissist shrivels, withdraws and is reduced to a zombie-like state of numbness.

Some people – and all narcissists – are addicted to excitement, to the

adrenaline rush, to the danger inevitably and invariably involved. They are the adrenaline junkies. All narcissists are adrenaline junkies – but not all adrenaline junkies are narcissists.

Narcissistic Supply is the narcissist’s particular sort of thrill. Deficient Narcissistic Supply is tantamount to the absence of excitement and thrills in non-narcissistic adrenaline junkies.

Originally, in early childhood, Narcissistic Supply is meant to help the narcissist regulate his volatile sense of self-worth and self-esteem. But Narcissistic Supply, regardless of its psychodynamic functions, also simply feels good. The narcissist grows addicted to the gratifying effects of Narcissistic Supply. He reacts with anxiety when constant, reliable provision is absent or threatened.

Thus, Narcissistic Supply always comes with excitement, on the one hand and with anxiety on the other hand.

When unable to secure “normal” Narcissistic Supply – adulation, recognition, fame, celebrity, notoriety, infamy, affirmation, or mere attention – the narcissist resorts to “abnormal” Narcissistic Supply. He tries to obtain his drug – the thrills, the good feeling that comes with Narcissistic Supply – by behaving recklessly, by succumbing to substance abuse, or by living dangerously.

Such narcissists – faced with a chronic state of deficient Narcissistic Supply – become criminals, or race drivers, or gamblers, or soldiers, or investigative journalists. They defy authority. They avoid safety, routine and boredom – no safe sex, no financial prudence, no stable marriage or career. They become peripatetic, change jobs, or lovers, or vocations, or avocations, or residences, or friendships often.

But sometimes even these extreme and demonstrative steps are not enough. When confronted with a boring, routine existence – with a chronic and permanent inability to secure Narcissistic Supply and excitement – these people compensate by inventing thrills where there are none.

They become paranoid, full of delusional persecutory notions and ideas of reference. Or they develop phobias – fear of flying, of heights, of enclosed or open spaces, of cats or spiders. Fear is a good substitute to the excitement they so crave and that eludes them.

Anxiety leads to the frenetic search for Narcissistic Supply. Obtaining the supply causes a general – albeit transient – sense of wellbeing, relief and release as the anxiety is alleviated. This cycle is addictive.

But what generates the anxiety in the first place? Are people born adrenaline junkies or do they become ones?

No one knows for sure. It may be genetically determined. We may discover one day that adrenaline junkies, conditioned by defective genes, develop special neural and biochemical paths, an unusual sensitivity to adrenaline. Or, it may indeed be the sad outcome of abuse and trauma during the formative years. The brain is plastic and easily influenced by recurrent bouts of capricious and malicious treatment.

The adrenaline junkie’s point of view is that the only real things in life are memories. When at 98, one is likely to be bed-bound, in a hospice, all one’s friends long gone; one’s “family” thrice removed

and distant; and one's "accomplishments" and fights so derisive and meaningless in hindsight. What's left? That movie in the private screening room we call the brain: memories, fleeting images, sound bites - the shredded remains of one's existence [1-33].

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