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**Narcissism's Beguiling Social Facade**

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## **NARCISSISM and ITS DISCONTENTS**

Narcissism is a multilateral construct that has puzzled theorists in psychology and other fields: In years past, poets, psychoanalysts, and psychological researchers have attempted to conceptualize the phenomenon through mythological stories, family social dynamics, and various power obsessions. For example, the Greek figure, Narcissus, falling in love with his reflection by a river, where he eventually stays until his death (Grenyer, 2013). Psychologists proposed that a lack of early childhood parental love and appropriate affection contributes to the development of an unhealthy obsession with the self viewed as an object (Freud, 1914); or, through the miscalculations of undeserved praise, the child develops a distorted view of their grandiosity in relation to others and the world around them (Kernberg, 1970; 1975): These explanations focus on the etiology of narcissistic behavior. However, these explanations' metaphorical and abstract nature does not adequately help conceptualize the continued use of an individual's narcissistic behavior.

Focusing on the interplay of the intra- and inter-personal behavioral dynamics of narcissistic behavior, Back et al. (2013) devised a dynamic processing model such that the underlying goal, to maintain an imaginary, inflated self-view, is the narcissist's number one priority. The fundamental reason narcissists may justify their intra- and inter-personal behavior is for the immediate, short-term benefit, persuaded by their belief that they are more special than others. This paper aims to explore the different conceptualizations of narcissism within psychology and philosophy using Back's more concrete framework. In particular, this paper focuses on the mechanisms that pull narcissists towards acting through self-serving, egocentric behavior by exploring how this misguided goal may present in the form of distinct social traps.

Back, Egloff, and Schmukle (2010) showed that narcissists tend to be rated as more likable within initial (first meeting or introduction) to short-term interactions (as having had a handful of experiences with that person). Furthermore, the narcissist tended to exhibit more socially attractive traits such as extraversion, higher self-esteem, charmingness, and more humorous behavior within these introductory interactions. On the contrary, narcissist's long-term interactions and relationships showed poorer prognoses: Narcissists tended to engage in more self-serving, agentic traits such as hostility, need for power, selfishness, dominance, and a low need for intimacy from others which lead to poorer valuations from interaction partners (Back et al., 2010; Campbell & Campbell, 2009; Campbell et al., 2011; Paulhus, 1998; Sedikides et al., 2004).

What makes these behavior tendencies so enticing? Proving how detrimental they may be, why do narcissists continue to blind themselves with false narratives? How might we explain the lure to these tendencies regarding their underlying behavioral motivation? These questions are the crux of this paper's intentions: Attempting to articulate the motivational and social processes that influence the continued use of narcissistic behavior and the interpersonal lure to the narcissistic self despite long-term consequences.

## **GENERALITY**

Narcissistic characteristics are evident in individuals all around us; some traits may even occur in us, whether we are cognizant of it or not. Although there are adaptive and maladaptive traits, thinking, and behavior that can commonly be associated with narcissism, the maladaptive manifestations of these tendencies are the concern of this paper. The distinction between a typical individual and someone diagnosed with Narcissistic Personality Disorder is the degree of severity in which they behave and the impairments they may cause to themselves and others. The behavior portrayal exists in terms of self-defensive and self-enhancing strategies used to protect or amplify the individuals' view of themselves (Back et al., 2013). These strategies describe a social interaction process for which the element surrounding the narcissist's tendency to act on motivations, goals, or ideas involving their self-interests can be observed and measured. Therefore, a processing model is a device used to describe and understand these internal and social processes (Back et al., 2013).

A majority of previous models have come to the same relative conclusion: Narcissists tend to engage in social interactions with the underlying goal of maintaining their highly inflated self-views or interests above and before others (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001; Campbell & Campbell, 2009; Back et al., 2013). The Narcissistic Admiration and Rivalry Concept (Back et al., 2013) model can define narcissism and explain the social consequences that appeal to the narcissistic individual through various social trap theories (Campbell et al., 2005; Campbell & Buffardi, 2008; Platt, 1973).

## **NARCISSISM IN NON-CLINICAL AND CLINICAL POPULATIONS**

Normal narcissism—what exists in the general population—manifests more as the grandiose type. The grandiose type of narcissism is when an individual's ostentatious and unrealistic self-image materializes through exploitative and manipulative interpersonal means. In essence, the grandiose narcissist tends to insist on convincing others of their specialness, uniqueness, and the self-perceived deservingness of others' attention. It presents itself through various forms of Machiavellian—evil and not empathetic—social dynamics. These social dynamics reflect the inner workings of a perceived status—that existed prior to the interaction. This perceived status often involves an exceedingly swollen self-image, full of their own significance in accordance with others. On the other side of the narcissism spectrum, the vulnerable type is primarily characterized by avoidant and reactive behavioral tendencies (Krizan & Herlache, 2017), driven by poor self-evaluations and anxiety (Ruocco et al., 2013), reserved inhibitions (Lannin et al., 2014), and ruminating envious thoughts leading to resentment toward others (Krizan & Johar, 2012; Dickinson & Pincus, 2003). The vulnerable narcissist is common when discussing clinical cases of narcissism (i.e., less general population research has been conducted and analyzed with this subgroup) (Back et al., 2013). This paper will focus on grandiose narcissism because it is more common in the general population.

Another conceptual way to view narcissism was laid out by Campbell et al. (2011), mentioning that narcissism is an interaction between three different components, each of which plays a role in what social engagements the narcissist tends to pursue: the self, interpersonal relationships, and self-regulatory strategies. For the narcissist, the self is a perception that involves grandiose feelings about their uniqueness compared to others, often encapsulating behaviors like entitlement, deservingness of special treatment, and disagreeableness (Campbell et al., 2000). These agentic personality characteristics also describe the tendency to be chosen for social image purposes before more humanistic and communal qualities (e.g., empathy, compassion, warmth, sharing) (Gebauer et al., 2012). Interpersonal relationships exist as a playing ground with substantial opportunities to bolster their inflated views about themselves. Considered as a chance to reassure their views of themselves, narcissists persist in displaying an inaccurate 'them' for the sake of others; they intend to alter the perception of themselves in the eyes of others. Successful social image alterations are a means of determining which behaviors to use in future interactions. These opportunities are the source of their self-regulatory strategies by using manipulative and exploitative means to maintain their inflated self-views (Campbell et al., 2011). The critical component influencing the narcissistic self-regulatory manner is using "by whatever means necessary" for their egotistical maintenance.

Although everyone participates in creating and maintaining the goal of a positive self-image, narcissists create and attempt to maintain a grand and over-the-top self-image. Through destructive enhancement and protective self-regulatory social strategies, narcissists use others to satisfy their self-image needs. Moreover, in another view of narcissism, Becker (1997) went so far as to say that narcissists view themselves as immortal or superior in a sense and that their perception of others is such that they are 'expendable' in nature and undeservingly numerous in numbers. "If you took a blind and dumb organism and gave it self-consciousness and a name, if you made it stand out of nature and know consciously that it was unique, then you would have narcissism" (Becker, 1997, p. 3). Although Becker's analysis of narcissism assigned the universal characteristic present in all of us, he then carefully described

the dark side of our selfishness that involved maintaining our self-worth; in-that individuals need to perceive stable self-esteem accurately to feel complete:

In man a working level of narcissism is inseparable from self-esteem, from a basic sense of self-worth. We have learned, mostly from Alfred Adler, that what man needs most is to feel secure in his self-esteem. But man is not just a blind glob of idling protoplasm, but a creature with a name who lives in a world of symbols and dreams and not merely matter. His sense of self-worth is constituted symbolically, his cherished narcissism feeds on symbols, on an abstract idea of his own worth, an idea composed of sounds, words, and images, in the air, in the mind, on paper. And this means that man's natural yearning for organismic activity, the pleasures of incorporation and expansion, can be fed limitlessly in the domain of symbols and so into immortality. The single organism can expand into dimensions of worlds and times without moving a physical limb; it can take eternity into itself even as it gaspingly dies. (Becker, 1997, p. 3).

Although quite poetic, Becker's writing has some grounding components. He uses an individual's imagination to describe how they might perceive themselves: In their fight for internal security, a stable sense of self-worth, toward an inseparable notion of self-involvement maximizing their self-fulfillment, the individual uses their imaginative belief of themselves to manifest future behavior capable of elevating their perceived self-worth. In this sense, the individual pursuit of self-worth becomes obsessive and compulsory to an unforgiving end in narcissism. As a result, maladaptive behavior forms while pursuing an unrealistic self-image. The trend throughout the narcissist's worries is primarily an affliction involving an obsession with the self and a willingness to use interpersonal interactions to maintain an inflated sense of self.

### **PROCESSING MODELS PAST and PRESENT**

Morf and Rhodewalt's (2001) version of a processing model includes the grandiose and over-the-top delusional behavior for maintaining the narcissist's inflated self-view, however, with an added aspect of an underlying vulnerability. They claimed that the narcissist's underlying vulnerability seemed to be the fundamental cause of why they were such grandiose individuals. The hidden softness tends to exhibit itself through the narcissist needing a continuous external source of admiration and praise from others to mask their true and hidden low self-esteem. Morf and Rhodewalt's (2001) dynamic self-regulatory processing model conceptualizes the cognitive and affective motivation underlying the narcissist's interactions; in other words, how they think and feel about their relationships. The model claims that narcissists hold rather cruel views of others and are persistently insensitive throughout these interactions, inevitably leading to the narcissist's rejection from others. Although historically, this has been true in terms of long-term interactions (Back et al., 2010; Back et al., 2013; Campbell et al., 2011; Leckelt et al., 2015), what Morf and Rhodewalt's (2001) model showed was that narcissists would tend to engage in interactions strictly to manipulate the other individual, concluding that they sought their reward or satisfaction from this manipulation aspect early in relationships. If this were true, the narcissist does not have an avenue involving subsequent success for future interaction outcomes. Then, later, the narcissist would not have the opportunities within the social interaction to gain any ground or achieve their desired gratification from the other. In a sense, they would not be able to climb the social ladder and therefore are unable to gain any of the social admiration they desperately crave from their peers except in the initial interaction.

Campbell and Campbell's (2009) processing model, the contextual reinforcement model, focuses on behavior that tends to have more immediate short-term benefits, though it may cause longer-term negative consequences. Narcissists then are blinded by the ease of any immediate pleasurable benefit, which involves performing a behavior that immediately generates an associated reward. Therefore, continual engagement establishes a tendency to act for that immediate behavioral benefit, despite the unknowingly potential future consequences. This pattern subsequently creates a reinforcing loop of

behavior that continuously produces immediate pleasure. Campbell and Campbell use the example of individuals smoking cigarettes to outline this behavior: Smoking cigarettes produces an immediate pleasurable outcome, even though the smoker is likely to develop health issues later. In terms of narcissistic behavior, this includes using lies and deceit in exchange for short-term mating partners (Tsoukas & March, 2018), manipulating company investors with faulty and inaccurate quarterly earnings (Marquez-Illescas, Zebedee, Zhou, 2019), and a tendency to choose 'non-green' environmental products (Naderu & Strutton, 2014), all of which maximize immediate gain. Narcissists ignore the longer-term consequences in exchange for immediate benefits or rewards. Each time someone acts, they weigh the conflicting immediate and later outcomes that the action will likely produce. There are numerous scenarios in which negative outcomes will not present themselves in the foreseeable future, mainly because they are ignored for the immediate pleasurable good, thus leaving the individual to enjoy the present outcome of their behavior regardless of later damage. Although the contextual reinforcement model describes an interplay between narcissistic self-enhancement and the mainly negative outcomes of their social interactions, it does not outline the underlying true intentions for engagement that involves the narcissist's behavioral and affective motivational social interaction strategies.

The Narcissistic Admiration and Rivalry Concept (NARC) outlines the underlying intra- and inter-personal dynamics present in the narcissist's overarching goal of maintaining an inflated and grandiose self-image (Back et al., 2013). Back and colleagues (2013) intended to examine how social admiration and rivalry motivations alter the maintenance component of narcissists' cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions. Two pathways exist from the base strategy of maintaining the narcissistic self-image; assertive and antagonistic orientations. Their distinction is how the narcissist interprets the scenario: as either a social opportunity or a perceived social threat. Each scenario includes behavioral strategies that manifest as either a chance to boost their social valuation or as a protection and preservation measure against attacks on their social image. The narcissist's behavioral strategies are the basis for maintaining their previously held inflated views of the self. What differentiates this model (NARC) from the models proposed by Morf and Rhodewalt (2001) and Campbell and Campbell (2009) is the two-dimensional component of the NARC's underlying motivational dynamic process: assertive self-enhancement and antagonistic self-protection. The narcissist will tend to engage in either of the two pathways, activated from an opportunity to self-enhance or protect from a perceived potential threat.

### **THE NARCISSISTIC ADMIRATION and RIVALRY CONCEPT**

One of the underlying motivational dynamics, antagonistic self-protection, also known as self-defense, is utilized when the narcissist interprets or perceives a potential threat to their social image. Back et al. (2013) used three different behavioral domains to explain the dynamics of the self-regulatory behavior strategies used in this route: striving for supremacy, devaluation of others, and aggressiveness. These domains contribute to the narcissist maintaining their self-views through means of aggression (verbal or physical) to—metaphorically—bring the other individual down to bolster their own self-image. Striving for supremacy is portrayed through a sense of entitlement or the "I am better than you" mood state common amongst narcissists. When viewing their social behavior as a hierarchical strategy to gain 'perceived relevance,' the narcissist feels they should be at the top. So, by ranking themselves in terms of strength, influence, and dominance compared to the other (Koski, Xie, & Olson, 2015), the narcissist then creates this false perception of their social relevance. The devaluation of others is the narcissist's maladaptive cognitive process that reflects their ill-perception of others. Considering their excessively high perception of themselves, narcissists view others as relatively menial and subordinate. The narcissists' perceived social status reflects their falsely held perceived deservingness of said position, which gets projected onto the other for them to respect and cherish. The aggressiveness behavioral dynamic is the misuse of psychological abuse by condescending verbal means when displaying dominant tendencies for a social ranking. Predominantly mediated by their impulsive behavior (Miller et al., 2009), their psychological aggression presents itself through belittling others' achievements and underestimating

others' competencies and capabilities (Zeigler et al., 2019). Using insensitive, psychologically aggressive strategies to protect their self-image is a path that reflects their inner lust towards how much they cherish their perceived social status. "The perception for these negative outcomes strengthens the negative view for the generalized other, thereby intensifying the intention to prevail over one's rivals and boosting aggressive behaviors" (Back et al., 2013, p. 1016). In other words, this cycle of threats toward the narcissist's inflated perceived self, and a less valued view of the other individual, results in aggressive social defense. On most occasions, these aggressive means are portrayed as the narcissist's persistent annoyance and irritation caused by their own less-than-agreeable, socially inept behavior.

Engaging in any of the three rivalry behavioral tendencies will create social conflict. When engaging in this self-defensive attitude, the narcissist will likely view the altercation as a win post-interaction. With the false belief that they have successfully defended their social image, their negative perception of the other intensifies, meaning that the narcissist is likely to further devalue and dehumanize others in future interactions. This behavior creates a feedback loop that reinforces the narcissist to continue to engage in this socially antagonistic way, strengthening the idea that they are superior to others.

The second behavioral pathway, assertive self-enhancement, also known as self-promotion, is presented to boost or promote their social image. Through seeking admiration and ego-enhancement, the narcissist will approach social interactions intending to get praise and reassurance for their inflated self-views. The narcissist will continuously emphasize their specialness and expect others to admire and bask in their swollen ego. Although in the general population, self-enhancement can be viewed as striving to fix and adjust one's imperfections for future personal betterment, it should be noted that narcissists use self-enhancing strategies to prioritize or preserve one's present self (Wallace, 2011). The distinction between the two exists in perspective; narcissists prioritize how others view them in that interaction, whereas the general population prioritizes their betterment while respecting others' selfhood. Three behavioral dynamics reflect the other intra- and interpersonal pathway that assists in attaining the narcissist's desired outcome of social admiration: striving for uniqueness, grandiose fantasies, and charmingness. Striving for uniqueness tends to be shown in the narcissists' attempt to be better and individually distinct from others. A false idea regarding their exclusivity of personality or characteristics persists when comparing themselves to others. Their perceived dominance attempts to outshine others with material wealth or some tangible comparison attained by their individualistic-minded behavior. The narcissists' grandiose fantasies reflect their cognitive aspirations of being sought after and looked up to in the eyes of others, which means that narcissists tend to engage in interactions assuming that they are superior and above the other individual. In their initial interactions, narcissists' charmingness includes their tendency to act more expressively, be self-assured, and exhibit more dominant traits (Back et al., 2013). Although these aspects sound harmless, when taken to their pathological extremes, it becomes clear that they strictly do it for personal satisfaction. Again, not because they want to engage in the interaction; the narcissist will engage in boosting their self-image by using the other as a tool to reach their egocentric desires.

These three self-promotion behavioral dynamics support the interaction outcome of social potency. Based on the immediate interaction outcomes, the narcissist can then reassure themselves about their inflated self-views. Furthermore, if they receive positive feedback from this self-interest behavior, they will perceive that it is socially attractive in their first interactions with others; therefore, an ego boost reinforces a positive outcome for the narcissist to continue self-promotional behavior in future interactions.

When the narcissist's internal and external worlds do not match up or when they have not been paid their perceptual dues, this creates a cognitive expectancy distortion (Back et al., 2013). As a result, their grandiose, desired self (i.e., the inflated self-view) and their peer-perceived, realistic self (i.e., the objective measure of their behavior) are not in alignment, which is known as a 'perceived misfit' (Back et al. 2013). Back et al. (2013) called this the 'subjective monitoring' of the narcissist's social interaction outcomes: Depending on the outcome, the narcissist either experienced a 'perceived misfit' or a 'perceived

fit' regarding their perception of admiration received—or lack thereof. In other words, the narcissist goes into the interaction expecting the interaction partner to reciprocate the level of self-admiration that they, the narcissist, feel they deserve about themselves. When the interaction partner has not provided the appropriately perceived admiration required, this creates a misfit. In that case, the narcissist pursues the antagonistic behavioral dynamic, further interjecting a sense of dominance, enhanced aggressiveness, and pathological indignant modes of behaving to accumulate the rest of their desired level of social admiration. In the case of the interaction partner providing an adequate amount of social admiration – a perceived fit, this fuels the narcissists' ego with a sense of pride and accomplishment, further inflating their perceived social relevance.

The narcissist, in summary, engages in interactions to maintain their self-image. They then interpret the interaction as an opportunity to promote or protect that image through various behavioral strategies. All serve the purpose of bolstering or preserving their image in the eyes of others, thus reflecting the interaction outcome each strategy brings with it, promoting a cycle that reinforces and strengthens their initial underlying intention. "The ego is ... primarily engaged in its own defense and the furtherance of its own ambitions." (Johnson, 1994, p. 44) Thus, in this case: the ego represents the self-image; the defense is the maintenance of their perceived social relevance; the ambitions are the behavior and cognitive processes that are involved in maintaining that image – rendering them in the constant pursuit of the perceptual fit of their self-image laid out in the social world.

## **SOCIAL TRAPS LURING THE NARCISSIST**

Social traps are behaviors that produce severe and damaging consequences to the individual or society (Platt, 1973). Social traps depict an individual perceiving and acting towards their immediate prosperity at the expense of others. Societal traps essentially embody behaviors that sacrifice the good of society for the good of the individual with delayed or immediate consequences. Platt (1973) notes that the effects of both positive and negative consequences may strengthen or weaken future behavior; by using the Skinnerian model of learning, we can account for how narcissists mold their selfish behavior.

Skinner (1969) used a three-pronged sequence in describing the feedback from an individual's interaction with an environment: an opposing individual or environment creates a 'situation or stimulus' (S): the perceiving individual then articulates or performs a certain behavior (B): resulting in positive or negative reinforcement (R) or punishment (P). The resulting reinforcement (R) or punishment (P) are the determining factors that shape our future behavioral patterns. To have the behavior likely occur again, the outcome must produce a supportive or serviceable good for the individual—this is reinforcement (R). On the other hand, when the individual experiences an unwanted outcome, the consequence is contrary to their ideal or expected outcome; that situation or stimulus forces the individual to alter their previous behavior in similar future scenarios – this is punishment (P).

In general narcissism terms: The presented situation or stimulus is the mediating factor determining which pathway the narcissist may take (admiration or rivalry); in essence, whether they perceive an opportunity to promote or protect their self-image. Thus, the situation or stimulus influences the operation of an observable action, the behavior, wherein the partial, maladaptive appraisal of potential outcomes becomes real; this is where the narcissist portrays their inner lust for immediate self-satisfaction. Once made real, the opposing situation or stimulus responds with a behavior of its own mediated by the narcissist's chosen behavior. The resulting reinforcement or punishment for its corresponding behavior is influenced by the opposing situation or stimulus's behavior in response to how it may have affected any goals for the interaction. Thus, in further actualizing the interaction, the narcissist will respond to the opposing situation or stimulus's reinforcement or punishment by interpreting the outcome compared to their social goal and choose to use it or lose it when presented with a similar situation or stimulus in the future.

To further elucidate this sequence, here is an example of a basic interaction process using two individuals. Steve and Margaret are walking from opposite directions toward each other. Steve waves at



Margaret (S); Steve may have the goal of developing his relationship with Margaret. Margaret sees Steve wave her way and decides to wave back (B); since she perceives interactions as opportunities to promote her grandiosity and social image, she decides to engage more. As Margaret waves back at Steve, this reinforces the behavior of waving (R). Steve then goes in for a hug (B): further establishing his intention of wanting to build a stronger relationship. As Steve, positive and cheerful, leans back from the hug (S), Margaret then detects her opportunity to point out her new outfit, making sure to mention how much it costs, which establishes her intention of raising her social image (B). Steve is then quick to compliment how nice she looks: again, to establish his intention of building the relationship (B). This compliment further reinforces Margaret's behavior of focusing on herself (R). Margaret guiltlessly self-assures his comment with an internal "I know" but bashfully thanks his compliment with no regard or interest in him. Due to the satisfying nature of how the interaction went, receiving multiple instances of praise from Steve molds Margaret's intention to continue interacting to boost her social self-image with Steve and potentially in other social interactions.

Skinner (1969) mentioned that behavior is most strongly shaped by how quickly the consequence presents itself to the individuals. "Immediate reinforcement singles out some particular recent behavior, while long-run reinforcement is ambiguous, not indicating which of the thousands of previous behavioral acts is responsible for it" (Platt, 1973, p. 643). This immediate reinforcement strengthens narcissists' selfish social behaviors, which will be discussed further in the following section.

There were three social traps that Campbell and Buffardi (2008) took out of Platt's (1973) summary relevant to understanding the maladaptive social behaviors that characterize narcissism: the time-delay trap, sliding-reinforcer trap, and the individual goods and collective bads trap. These three traps, on their own, each have utility in understanding narcissistic behavior; to further strengthen these traps, Skinner's model of behavioral reinforcement, an addiction model, and value hierarchies will be intertwined to link their behavior to non-traditional narcissism literature.

### **Time-Delay Trap and Skinners Model of Behavioral Reinforcement**

The time-delay trap explains how the individual will choose something for its potential quality based on the immediacy of reward. The sacrifice comes when that choice has hidden costs that do not reveal themselves until faced in the future, hidden because they are blinded by the lure of immediate pleasure. This trap can be the most dangerous to fall into; without first acknowledging possible future consequences, one unconsciously walks through life, never understanding that they are the judge and determinant in choosing their behaviors. Simple reductionism explains that "... actions are chosen by the individuals because there is a benefit from performing them, and not chosen because there is a cost" (Campbell & Campbell, 2009, p. 214). Unfortunately, it is not that simple to deduce from the infinite number of possible behaviors to take at any given moment; an individual cannot simply know which behavior will create more benefit than harm in that context, though socialization may provide a guide. However, narcissists do have a general idea of what has worked in the past; they want to create the most pleasure for themselves by behaving egotistically without considering the other. The lure of immediate pleasure creates ignorance of possible future suffering. Thus, the narcissist is most susceptible to this line of cognition. Taken to its pathological extent, the narcissist pursues this pleasure-seeking behavior feverishly by not acknowledging any long-term consequences.

Platt (1973) briefly mentioned another kind of trap: The social trap of ignorance is essential in understanding the basic social process of trial and error. It seems simple enough to state that 'what one does not know, one will fall blindly into,' yet it is a complex phenomenon that will not be uncovered until they are in it. Ignorance requires a sense of metaphorical stumbling, paying enough attention to surroundings and its consequence on any desired goal that may alter future behavior. Narcissists have their own avenues when facing ignorance, involving scenarios of otherwise not knowing that their current behavior is genuinely unrealistic; their frame of reference involves falsely held, positive perceptions of immediate benefits. Here this trap is explained through an analogy: For one to catch a lobster, one would

need a particular type of cage that contains bait (a lure); the trap has an effortless entrance for the lobster to access but a rather tricky and unforeseen exit (if one exists at all). The benefit for the lobster is the immediate satisfaction of eating the bait; the cost is in the long-term consequences after it gets hauled up to the boat and sold as food. The analogy represents the narcissist's ignorance that their destructive social behaviors have longer-term detrimental consequences and are like that of the lobster: the lobster's ignorance of crawling into the trap without knowing that he will not be able to get out. The narcissist then is blindly being lured into behaving for immediate pleasure rather than being cautious and cognizant of potential long-term danger.

Skinner's (1969) proposal that how quickly the consequence occurs after the initial behavior is essential to understanding what behaviors the individual will pursue in future interactions. If a narcissist were to engage in an interaction with the motive to maintain their self-esteem through defending it (i.e., they are taking the rivalry pathway, therefore perceiving a potential threat), they may perceive an 'interaction win' regardless of their longer-term outcomes; maintaining their imaginary perceived self-image is their only requirement for labeling an interaction as a win. This social win does not go unnoticed; the narcissist takes pride in the win by reaping the immediate pleasure of devaluing the other to defend their own social interests. Therefore, the immediate perceived win is the gratification needed to reinforce the behaviors used in that altercation. On the other hand, if a narcissist was to perceive a loss, then they will note what behaviors did not work, dispense with them, and move into another interaction using a greater extent of the previous behavior or new ones altogether. Thus, by the underlying motive to maintain their social image, they will likely come back more aggressive, have a further depreciation of the other, show them less respect, and be more ready to defend their perceived deservingness of the others' attention.

Using derogation, devaluation, and other forms of antagonistic altercation tactics to interject that their self-esteem is worthy of the praise it so graciously deserves, the narcissist behaves with their previous 'winning' interactions as a guide. The ignorance comes out of those past pleasurable feelings ushering the motive to attain that feeling again—mainly the feeling of superiority and dominance, but more on this later in the section on values. After, the narcissist perceives a win—they have 'successfully' maintained their self-worth—regardless of the damage their behavior created for the possibility of developing any relationship with the other interaction partner. The narcissist is then ignorant that they ruined a potential relationship in return for the momentary pleasure of 'winning' the interaction and achieving their desired level of praise. The narcissist is unaware of this damaging consequence; as the narcissist basks in their victory, the interaction partner notes that they do not want to spend additional time with them, obscuring the narcissist's future possibilities of achieving their desired level of social admiration. Over time, more people have noted the narcissist's egocentric behavior, resulting in fewer opportunities for the narcissist to attain any level of admiration. Again, due to ignorance, the narcissist is unaware of any long-term consequences because of their antagonistic social behavior, rendering their immediate interaction outcome as the determinant of what behaviors are chosen for future interactions.

Through Skinner's model of behavior, we can see how the narcissist persists in engaging in maladaptive behavior due to immediate consequences. The behavior we engage in is mainly influenced by our past interactions. Although interpreting each interaction as a means of attaining something from the other is not purely Machiavellian in its own right, using that interaction to attain social gratification by devaluing and abusing the other is flirting in the right—but socially wrong—direction of perfidious social behavior. As individuals move through more deceitful experiences, they label behaviors that have achieved their underlying goals as valuable and, therefore, 'survive' as habitual stimulus responses. "Strangers like narcissists at zero acquaintance and will thus immediately show more positive reactions toward them. In this manner, however, the negative interpersonal motivations and behavioral strategies of narcissists become reinforced, specifically the most problematic aspects" (Back et al. 2010, p. 142). These habitual responses are an individual's repertoire of behaviors, which they will continue to use because of their high success rate. "... Skinner seems to think of the evolution of behavior in an organism

from childhood as involving a similar natural selection of behaviors that work and therefore survive in a given stimulus situation..." (Platt, 1973, p. 643). In other words: if one particular behavior was profitable during an interaction or situation (meaning that you obtained your desired goal for engaging in the interaction), an individual is likely to store and use that behavior later for similar situations. The narcissists' repertoire of behaviors then contains mainly 'winning' interaction performances, used further as attempts to alter their perceived status in the presence of others.

### **Sliding-Reinforcer Trap and the Addiction Model**

The sliding-reinforcer trap is one "... in which the benefit of a particular course of action decreases slowly as the costs increase" (Campbell & Buffardi, 2008, p. 26). For example, after repeatedly receiving an item, it slowly loses its intrinsic value; depending on the action, the costs of continuing to pursue that item may increase. An action may no longer feel pleasurable when an item has lost its immediate value; this results in dissatisfaction with the usual amount of that item or action. Therefore, this trap involves reducing a once pleasurable good into a less rewarding reinforcement. Then, most importantly, requiring one to engage in more of that behavior to attain the same level of satisfaction they received the first time, as is often the case in addiction.

Baumeister and Vohs (2001) mention that narcissists' self-regulatory behaviors work as their addiction; they are 'yielding' to that specific urge and maintaining their addiction by thoughtlessly seeking out behaviors that serve to boost or protect their self-image. Addiction is the unconscious urge or giving in to a stimulus that mediates an obsessive behavioral pattern that commonly leads to destructive intra- or interpersonal elements. In some instances, ignorance blinds the addict from knowing they are under the influence of a powerful force shaping their behavior. While the narcissist has the central social goal to seek out admiration from others, the praise they receive requires them to tend to a fire: Each praise the narcissist receives adds to the fire, only to be burned through, therefore rendering the narcissist to seek out more praise to keep the fire burning. "The admiration of others is simply a means to create the satisfaction, not the end in itself" (Baumeister & Vohs, 2001, p. 206). The narcissist molds a perspective that views others and their interactions as a way to achieve a goal or stoke the fire. The end in itself for the narcissist is the satisfaction of social admiration, not the interaction itself, the potential relationship, or the personal connection that could develop with that individual.

Tolerance, a related concept, refers to a presenting stimulus that does not provide the same emotional charge as it may have in prior interactions. Developing tolerance requires more interactions with the same intention. In the narcissist's case, pursuing an interaction for receiving praise becomes pathologically absorbed into their intention for engagement. Over time, a single interaction loses its potential for a boost, creating a continual cycle of interacting with others in an attempt to maintain their sense of perceived admiration. If perceived praise is not adequately met, the narcissist may fall into withdrawal. Simply the lack of a particular stimulus, withdrawal may turn narcissistic behavior sour. Self-regulation is a process of managing and maintaining a stable sense of behavior towards a desired goal; the narcissist becomes dysregulated in a state of withdrawal. Because of their lack of perceived admiration, the narcissist seeks continual admiration at a pathological level, further disrupting interpersonal relationships in their fight for a higher perceived social status.

Although selfish and egotistical in nature, this sort of intent does not seem like it should inherently be of much worry. Left to the devices of narcissistic behavior against the communal nature from those at the receiving end, this intent is not quite what it seems. There seems to be a societal notion that selfish behavior can be weaned out by simply ignoring those that partake. When withdrawal occurs for too long, narcissistic behavior becomes even more manipulative, unpredictable, and impulsive. After initially receiving numerous accounts of praise, the narcissist develops an expectation for what they think they should be receiving in their interactions. Under the behavioral intention presumption of using whatever means necessary, the narcissist is like an addict expecting to get the same high after being deprived of their fix for an extended time. This expectancy means the narcissist develops a dangerous inclination to

acquire more praise-producing interactions. The danger comes when others do not give them the praise they think they deserve or that they received in the initial 'fix.' This behavior comes from the rivalry pathway (Back et al., 2013) that exists as a means of self-protection from individuals impeding the narcissist from achieving their underlying goals. While having their goals interrupted momentarily, the narcissist will engage in antagonistic-type behaviors such as reinstating their perceived superior status by devaluing the other to protect themselves from the social humiliation of having someone wrinkle their inflated self-views.

If narcissists persist with this behavior, the other individual in the interaction begins to see through their social facade. "Their manipulation tendencies might be ineffective for the development of intense social relationships but effective at zero acquaintance" (Back et al. 2010, p. 132). This is to say that narcissists use their behavior routinely—due to the initial effectiveness—throughout a relationship; what is attractive initially may turn maladaptive long-term. Moreover, Back et al. (2010) showed that narcissists are not interested in long-term relationships, thus explaining their use of aggressive interpersonal behaviors serving short-term benefits. Not only are narcissists not interested in long-term connections, they also showed that others are not interested in engaging in a long-term connection with the narcissist either. The addictive behavioral patterns of narcissistic individuals serve as relationship threats, destroying themselves and the possibilities of real social connection.

### **Individuals Goods and Collective Bads Trap; Value Hierarchies**

This trap is when an individual sacrifices others' future prosperity for the malicious immediacy of their gain or success (Platt, 1973). To illustrate this trap, consider a story outlining the moral wrongdoing of one affecting all: Ten fishing companies are fishing in a particular part of the ocean, trying to catch the same fish. This fish is a delicacy and can sell for a large fortune. Even though no regulations or organizations enforce these guidelines, all companies agreed regarding how much fish each could catch to sell. Unfortunately, one fishing company fished all night and day to catch most of this fish. Soon enough, after fishing all day and all night for several weeks, the population of this fish was now too low for any repopulation to occur and eventually led to the extinction of this species by the greed of one fishing company. Therefore, the desire for immediate fortune, pursuing immediate success, compromised the fleet's ability to bring in any income leading to a collective bad.

It is important to restate that narcissists tend to shape their behavior to have their own benefit in mind (Byrne & Worthy, 2013). While compromising the other group members' ability to prosper, the narcissist is incapable of sacrificing their status and personal gain for the group's success (Campbell & Campbell, 2009). On the notion that narcissism is purely a social disorder that requires the reciprocation of others involved in the narcissist's endeavors, this social trap affects all group members by a single individual's behavior. Therefore, depending on which greedy archetypal action the narcissist takes, it will affect others negatively—it may not have immediate negative consequences; however, they add up through continued abuse. Whether from letting too many sheep graze a communal grassland (Hardin, 1968) or from financial advisors letting too many individuals acquire loans to buy houses they cannot afford (Shulman, 2016), the individual goods and collective bads trap involves a morally false notion of immediate success. An individual pursuing the short-term benefit by sacrificing the demise of the entire group represents the collective bad – notably, this includes the narcissist. This trap is a zero-win scenario; not a single individual has the success they may presently have through long-term, continued egotistical behavior.

An individual will act depending on their underlying value structure, and this trap provides important context for understanding values related to the individuals versus the group and immediate versus sustained success. Grijalva and Zhang (2016) define a 'positive distortion' as the revealing nature of an individual's behavioral intentions and ultimate goals. In this view, an essential part of the narcissist's value priorities has to do with themselves. Meaning that their value hierarchy is lopsided and socially faulty; rather than valuing more humanistic or communal traits (e.g., agreeableness, warmth, and

honesty), the narcissist emphasizes agency and individual prosperity (Rogoza & Fatfouta, 2019). This behavior of valuing an unrealistic self-image results in maladaptive behavior, but explicitly, the others around the egotistical self are affected. For narcissists, the significance lies in the ability to appreciate themselves more than others. This selfish moral structure goes along with Grijalva and Zhang's (2016) point about how an individual who 'positively distorts' one aspect of their life—valuing it above all else—will act within the distortion as their value priorities. A value priority is a hierarchical structure that depicts the motivational means for behavior or action toward a goal (Schwartz, 1992). A value priority represents someone's philosophy of life: The values someone 'positively distorts' are the ones that are considered important. In abiding by that specific value's guiding principle, the individual forms their behavior toward that value's position in the hierarchy. In other words, the value and its 'positive distortion' mediate behavioral relevance: That which are relevant—structurally speaking—are considered important and will precede others. If a narcissist—or any other individual—were to write down the reasons for their behavior and place them in order of most important to least important, they would be drawing out their value priorities. Notably, although the least important values may be considered lesser than those listed above, they are still 'positively distorted' values that were deemed important enough to make a list.

To people lower on narcissism, group scenarios are seen as opportunities to develop relationships, socialize for enjoyment, or assist in another individual's personal dilemma—largely, group scenarios demand cooperation. Group scenarios, for the narcissist, are dual-dimensional situations. They would prefer if an evaluator or someone to impress were present; however, if any judgments or objectively valid evaluations—negative and talent-diminishing—were provided, threat protection is immediately activated (Horton & Sedikides, 2009). Furthermore, alongside the will to succeed and their tendency to devalue all things related to group success or situations that would kick them out of the spotlight and off their social podium push them to neglect longer-term relationships suffering longer-term consequences.

Generally speaking, the top of the narcissist's priorities list is to reassure themselves that they have maintained their social self-image. According to the Back et al. (2013) model, this priority mediates narcissistic behavior when perceived in certain threat-provoking situations. It showed that the rivalry pathway was directly related to dislike, disgust, and devaluation ratings from partners in group interactions. Moreover, not only was their rivalry behavior inversely related to communal qualities, but their tendency to use admiration behavioral strategies first to become acquainted with someone "... lets them fall into the trap of perceiving the necessity to defend this inflated self-esteem against a hostile social environment (rivalry)." (Back et al., 2013, p. 1031). Meaning their ability to use only one route was affected by the procedure of using the other as a defense mechanism for their own self-gain: They initially set out for praise, if failed, or no praise is received, activates the other pathway.

Here lies the distinguishing factor between those high and low in narcissism: An ability to consider others' perspectives for the sake of the common good. In summary, these traps represent the motivation for narcissistic behavior. In the sense of individual prosperity and moral forgetfulness, the narcissist falls into these social traps for their ease and significant immediate advantages for themselves. Based on a false perception of the social consequences, the narcissist slowly damages themselves, their relationships, and others around them.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Traps are relatively easy to fall into. The definition of a trap is the deceiving element that a presented lure has on an individual's perception of future outcomes. Thus, one will not necessarily know that a trap is present until already in it. In this case, the narcissist engages in socially deceptive behaviors for the immediate pleasurable benefits that strengthen their illusory self-image, leading to a problematic exit: The long-term costs of ruined interpersonal relationships, economic demise, social destruction, and other undesirable outcomes. Traps embody the essence of ignorance, wherein not understanding the potential consequences of behavior, depending on underlying value structure and past similar social scenarios, may lead to future demise. Engaging in behaviors with little-to-no regard for future

repercussions almost seems like the mentality of an adolescent: "... they seem like adult versions of infantile characteristics most people leave behind early in the course of development" (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001, p. 177). This immature behavior continuously presents itself in the narcissist because they immediately obtain the benefits, and the costs occur in the future and often only affect others. As a result, there needs to be a revelation of responsibility on the narcissist's part. They need to willingly correct their mistakes while shouldering that others will be affected if they continue to act in their self-serving ways. In adopting more humanistic traits, the narcissist will see the value in others and not view them as mere objects or tools for their own goals.

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