

# **Gendered Manifestations of Narcissistic Personality Disorder: Exploring Discrepancies and Dynamics**

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*“Narcissism is the part of my personality that I am the least proud of, and I certainly don't like to see it highlighted in everybody else I meet.” - Ben Affleck.*

Narcissism is defined by nine key traits. This includes having a need for admiration from others, a sense of superiority, envy, fantasies of grandeur, manipulative behavior, low empathy, a sense of entitlement, and arrogance. Affleck’s reflection on this topic emphasizes the complexity of narcissism and highlights the trepidation it may evoke when perceived in oneself or others. Everyone has these traits to a certain extent, and they are considered to be healthy in moderation. These traits are typically associated with masculinity in the form of aggression and dominance. The article “Female Narcissism: Assessment, Aetiology, and Behavioural Manifestations” states, “The DSM-5 reports that up to 75% of those diagnosed with Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) are men” (Green et al., 2022). It further suggests that “overemphasis on grandiose features extends to the empirical literature, which defines narcissism as a normative personality trait and is widely assessed using the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI), on which males obtain significantly higher scores than females” (Green, et al., 2022). It’s estimated that 0.5-5% of the population has Narcissistic Personality Disorder. However, experts are currently unable to produce an accurate estimate. Symptoms of narcissism must be self-reported, and most people

with NPD are either unaware of their narcissistic behaviors or attempt to conceal them (Cleveland Clinic, 2023). Although exaggerated displays of these traits are typically associated with masculinity, they are just as prevalent in women. Nonetheless, they tend to present differently and often go unnoticed because of this difference. Exploring how narcissism is exhibited differently in men and women can provide insight into how gender dynamics affect social expectations, as well as lead to improved identification strategies for narcissistic traits in women.

Possessing enough of these traits is indicative of a personality disorder. Narcissistic traits are prominent among all Cluster B personality disorders. Cluster B disorders are characterized by “volatile emotionality and often unpredictable behavior” (Sussex Publishers). Disorders in this category include antisocial personality disorder, borderline personality disorder, histrionic personality disorder, and narcissistic personality disorder; nevertheless, narcissistic traits are found to be most exacerbated in narcissistic personality disorder. There are two primary subtypes of this disorder. The first is the grandiose subtype, also known as overt narcissism, and is defined by a presentation of grandiosity, aggression, and boldness. The second is the vulnerable subtype, also known as covert narcissism. This is characterized by hypersensitivity and defensiveness. These individuals have a perpetual victim complex and use this to garner sympathy from others. Due to this, they don’t fit the societal stereotype of narcissism and are often less easy to identify (Zhu et al., 2021). Grandiose narcissism is more commonly found in men, while vulnerable narcissism is more common in women. It is important to note that narcissism exists on a spectrum. An individual may possess enough of these traits to impact their relationships, while simultaneously not meeting the criteria for a diagnosis of narcissistic personality disorder. Due to

the possession of narcissistic traits in unhealthy quantities, these individuals may have difficulty forming close relationships, and will often inflict narcissistic abuse on those closest to them.

There are a few traits that one must possess in order to be considered a narcissist, as stated in the DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders). The first is grandiosity. This involves having an exaggerated sense of self-importance and a preoccupation with “fantasies of success, power, brilliance, beauty, or perfect love” (Kacel et al., 2017). Narcissists view everyone they meet in a hierarchical way. They feel they are at the top of that hierarchy and that they should only be in the company of those who share their status. They also require an excessive amount of admiration. Although they seek to receive this from everyone around them, they will often find a main source for this admiration and validation called a “supply.” Another trait is a sense of entitlement, which is characterized by expecting favorable treatment and compliance with their expectations and actions, often without justification. Furthermore, they are often exploitative and will take advantage of others to obtain what they desire. They may also frequently experience feelings of envy towards others or hold the belief that others harbor envy towards them. They might exhibit haughty, conceited actions and attitudes, as well as a sense of arrogance. The last trait is a lack of empathy. This creates a lack of guilt, as well as an inability to care about the needs of others. An individual must have at least five of these nine qualities in order to qualify for a diagnosis of narcissistic personality disorder. Nonetheless, as stated previously, narcissism exists on a spectrum, and one does not necessarily need to be diagnosed with a personality disorder in order for these traits to interfere with their personal life (Kacel et al., 2017).

There are intrapersonal and interpersonal aspects of narcissism. Intrapersonal functioning involves one's identity and self-regulation. This includes having a stable sense of self and the

ability to self-reflect. Interpersonal functioning concerns intimacy and empathy, or social cognition. This applies to understanding and tolerating other people's perspectives, as well as a desire to connect with others. In terms of intrapersonal characteristics, in a 2021 study, individuals with grandiose narcissism were reported to have high self-esteem and satisfaction with their lives. They were also reported to display self-enhancement in aspects such as intelligence and appearance. This study additionally showed that the grandiose narcissists held “positive illusions about their intra- and interpersonal emotional abilities” (Jauk & Kanske, 2021). On the contrary, the study also revealed that these grandiose individuals experience a weak sense of self and self-alienation, despite their overly positive grandiosity. In terms of intrapersonal characteristics, grandiose narcissists were found to be charming, bold, and extroverted. Nevertheless, they also displayed a lack of empathy and an abnormally high sense of self-focus (Jauk & Kanske, 2021). In contrast, vulnerable narcissists were found to present themselves in a way that is avoidant, anxious, and defensive (Jauk & Kanske, 2021). It’s important to note that, in spite of these differences, vulnerable narcissists still share the same sense of entitlement and lack of empathy as their grandiose counterparts. In terms of intrapersonal characteristics, vulnerable narcissists were found to be more introverted and displayed neuroticism, which is an inclination toward negative feelings such as anxiety and depression. This subtype was found to experience a more negative effect from their symptoms due to internalizing their neuroticism. They reported having lower self-esteem and lower life satisfaction (Jauk & Kanske, 2021). In terms of interpersonal characteristics, vulnerable narcissists were found to have a greater need for social acceptance and fear of rejection, despite displaying a lack of empathy. A narcissist's personality is essentially a "mask," due to the fact that they have an unstable sense of self. The mask is used to create a persona that is appealing to

others. In the overt's case, it involves being charming and appearing confident. In the vulnerable narcissist's case, it involves presenting oneself as a victim in order to garner sympathy from others (Jauk & Kanske, 2021).

Narcissistic traits can be a trauma response, typically caused by childhood trauma such as rejection, neglect, and physical and sexual violence. While narcissistic traits are often attributed to trauma, narcissistic personality disorder also exhibits links to both environmental factors and genetics, as many with this diagnosis report having a narcissistic parent. There is currently little research exploring the relationship between biological sex and narcissistic pathology. However, a study was done to explore the connection between certain types of stress among narcissistic individuals. Using functional magnetic resonance imaging, which is a type of brain scan that detects changes in blood flow related to brain activity (RSNA & ACR, 2022), an experiment was conducted using the cyberball technique (Cascio et al., 2014). CyberBall is a virtual ball toss game that is used for research on social behaviors. This experiment showed that high narcissism, measured by the Narcissism Personality Inventory, is correlated with an overactive Social Pain Network, which is composed of the anterior insula, dorsal anterior cingulate cortex, and subgenual anterior cingulate cortex, as shown below in Figure #1 (Cascio, et al., 2014). The strong correlation between the NPI (Narcissism Personality Inventory) and the Social Pain Network is depicted in Figure #2 (Cascio, et al., 2014). The correlation between Social Pain Network and narcissism implies that narcissists may be exceptionally sensitive to social rejection.

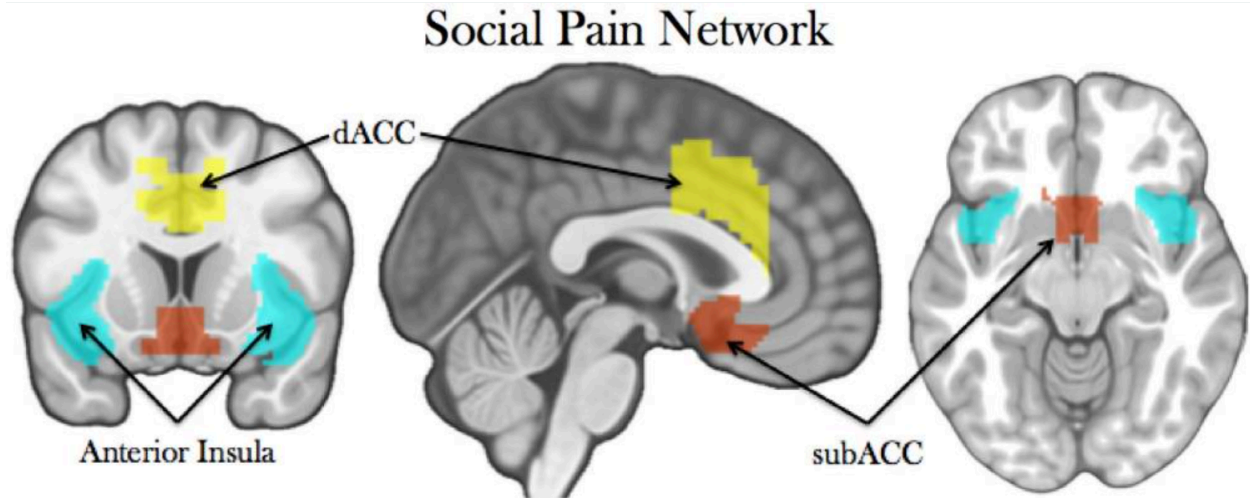


Figure 1: Location of Social Pain Network (Cascio et al., 2014)

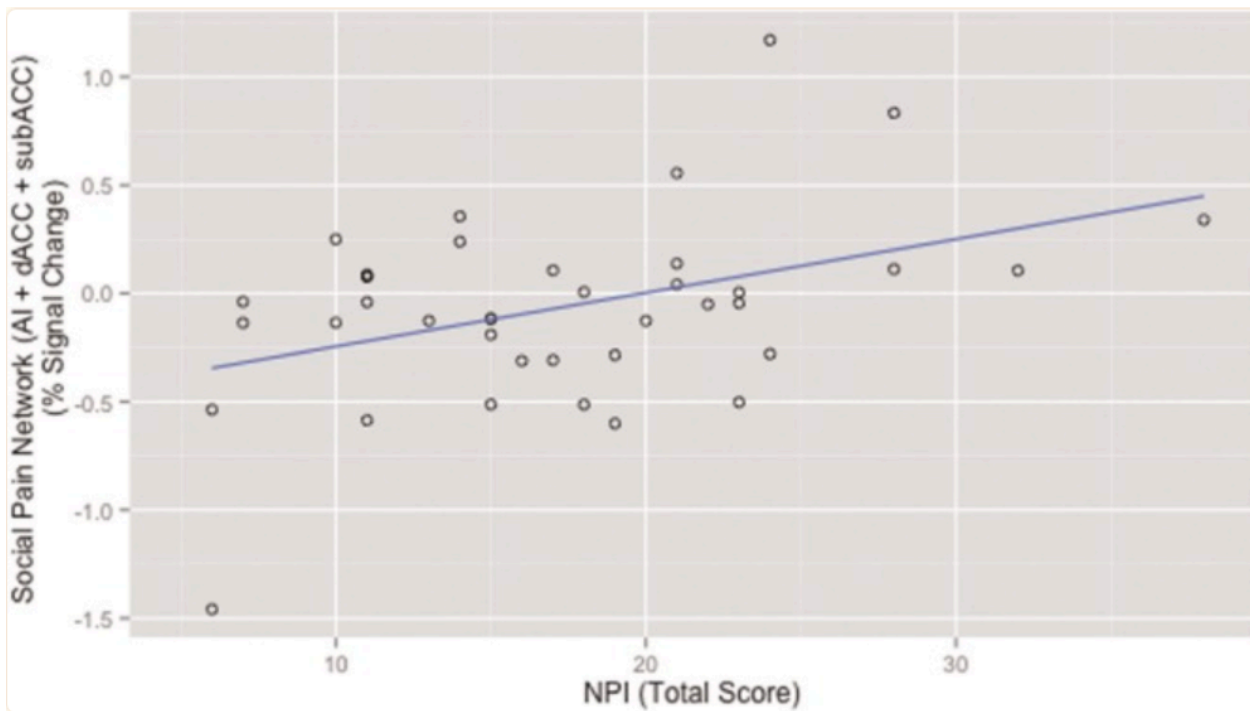


Figure 2: Describes the relationship between NPI (Narcissism Personality Inventory) and the Social Pain Network (Cascio, et al., 2014)

A series of studies were conducted to discern which parts of the Social Pain Network were associated with certain behaviors, as well as which hormones are affected by narcissism (Jauk & Kanske, 2021). The results show that individuals with higher testosterone levels

exhibited higher scores for exploitation and entitlement on the NPI scale when assigned social power. It also showed that while grandiose narcissism is associated with aggression, the vulnerable subtype is not. In addition, higher cortisol levels were found to negatively affect narcissistic women more than narcissistic men. Cortisol is a hormone released by the body when an individual is experiencing stress. On average, men have lower cortisol levels than women. However, when considering exploitative and entitled behavior, narcissistic men tended to maintain their cortisol levels, while narcissistic women displayed heightened cortisol levels. These results further imply why women are more commonly vulnerable narcissists, and men are more often grandiose narcissists. The heightened stress levels among narcissistic women when considering manipulative behaviors are indicative of the desire to conceal their behaviors due to gendered social norms. An additional study was conducted to assess how women react to stress in different situations and whether or not their reactions were correlated with their narcissistic tendencies, depending on whether they displayed more overt or covert narcissism. The researchers measured heart rate, sweat secretion, and level of performance on the tests used to conduct the study. The results showed that women with higher levels of overt narcissism were more likely to experience a stronger reaction in heart rate while under stress, while women with covert narcissism were more likely to have higher levels of perspiration (Kelsey, 2022).

Due to their narcissistic behaviors, narcissists are prone to inflicting narcissistic abuse on those closest to them. This is a particular type of abuse that has a few stages, which may vary in presentation due to societal norms and gender roles, as explained in the article “Stages of a Narcissistic Relationship: The Cycle of Abuse.” The first stage is idealization. As mentioned previously, the narcissist has delusional fantasies, including fantasies of a “perfect relationship.” As a result, the narcissist places the victim on a pedestal. The victim receives charm, attention,

and what appears to be devotion. This is commonly referred to as “lovebombing.” This is the tactic that is used to draw the victim in initially and convince them to give the narcissist their trust, respect, and admiration. As the narcissist gains trust, they begin to take note of the victim's weaknesses, which will be implemented into their manipulation strategies down the line. Another tactic used during this stage is future faking, where the narcissist makes promises or commitments about the future that they have no intention of keeping, which are catered to what they know the victim wants. This is a form of manipulation used to get what the narcissist desires in the moment, which may involve delaying a commitment or avoiding a conflict. This tactic may also be used in the following stages. The next stage is devaluation. During this stage, the narcissist has started to see the victim's flaws and take them down from the pedestal. The narcissist grows resentful towards the victim, as they feel “betrayed” that the victim was not the idealized fantasy they created in their head. Additionally, they are aware that they have secured the trust and admiration of the victim during the lovebombing phase, so they feel comfortable revealing their narcissistic qualities. This stage involves insulting, gaslighting, controlling behavior, and emotionally abusing the victim, causing the victim to question their own sanity. It may also include intermittent reinforcement, which involves a cycle of lovebombing, icing out, gaslighting, and re-engaging. Many of these behaviors are often used to elicit an emotional reaction. This is referred to as a narcissist’s “supply.” Oftentimes, due to childhood trauma, the narcissist views being able to elicit an emotional reaction from someone as a form of love. Moreover, they have a need for control and a fear of abandonment, which is triggered by perceived threats to their sense of superiority. The final stage is the discard. During this stage, the devaluing behavior may increase, and the narcissist will either emotionally withdraw or end the relationship abruptly. This is typically because the narcissist has found a new supply. After the



discard, many narcissists will go on a “smear campaign,” badmouthing the victim to mutual friends, colleagues, and peers, who are commonly referred to as “flying monkeys.” These “flying monkeys” grow to side with the narcissist unconditionally, as the narcissist has used the same grooming techniques on them as they do on their victims. This allows the narcissist to deflect from their abusive behaviors and alienate the victim. On the other hand, some victims may experience hoovering, which involves the narcissist reaching out to lovebomb, future fake, guilt trip, gaslight, and triangulate the victim. Triangulation involves bringing a third party, typically the new supply, into the relationship dynamic to elicit feelings of jealousy and insecurity in the victim. One supply typically isn't enough for a narcissist, so many prefer to have a backup. Another stage the victim may experience is post-separation abuse. This involves threats, stalking, harassment, and financial and legal abuse (Drescher, 2024).

The way these stages present may vary for each individual. Many of the primary behavioral distinctions between male and female narcissists stem from gendered societal norms. As discussed previously, due to socialization, narcissistic men are more prone to aggressive behavior. Male narcissists are more likely to engage in verbal or physical abuse. Antisocial women that are abusive typically only display aggression towards their partner, while antisocial men exhibit aggression towards strangers as well as their partners (Nicolson, 2019). The emotional and psychological abuse is more likely focused on diminishing the victim's self-esteem. Since women are expected to be emotional and sensitive, their tactics may be more subtle. Their emotional and psychological abuse tends to be more focused on distorting the victim's reality and self-perception. Because men are often encouraged to be assertive and dominant, narcissistic men are often less concerned about concealing their behavior. Since the opposite is encouraged for women, they are more likely to mask their manipulative and

controlling tendencies to avoid backlash. Although both genders are emotionally abusive, narcissistic men are more likely to instigate this abuse by using aggression and physical violence, while women are more likely to use tactics of psychological abuse. These gendered differences show how social conditioning influences how narcissism ultimately presents itself (Rakovec-Felser, 2014).

There are many physical and mental side effects that occur during and after experiencing narcissistic abuse. The under-recognition of narcissism in females perpetuates a cycle of narcissistic abuse, so the effects on the nervous systems of their victims are often overlooked or dismissed. Narcissistic abuse typically has a severe effect on the victim's nervous system due to chronic stress. The nervous system has two main parts: the central nervous system and the peripheral nervous system. The central nervous system is comprised of the brain and spinal cord, while the peripheral nervous system is composed of all the nerves in the body that branch off the spinal cord. Narcissistic abuse primarily affects the central nervous system, specifically the sympathetic nervous system. The sympathetic nervous system is the part of the brain that reacts to stress, eliciting the acute stress response, more commonly known as the “fight or flight” response. Narcissistic abuse causes the victim to experience chronic states of hyperarousal and hypervigilance because the sympathetic nervous system is constantly activated (Healthline Media, 2023). This leads to an increased heart rate, shallow breathing, and a heightened sensitivity to potential threats. Consequently, the body’s stress response is dysregulated. This leads to abnormal cortisol levels, resulting in symptoms such as fatigue, irritability, and difficulty concentrating. Some specific parts of the sympathetic nervous system that are affected are the amygdala and hypothalamus. When the stress response is activated, the amygdala sends a distress signal, which causes the hypothalamus to activate the sympathetic nervous system by

sending signals to the adrenal glands, which pump adrenaline into the bloodstream. The hypothalamus is responsible for regulating sleep, appetite, and stress responses, while the amygdala administers the stress response. Due to the constant overactivity, the hypothalamus becomes dysfunctional and the amygdala becomes hyperactive. All these things work together to deplete the nervous system's energy reserves, which prevents it from completing the remaining responsibilities. As a survival mechanism, it suppresses regulatory functions. Due to the inability of the nervous system to complete its regular functions, a victim may experience vision changes, loss of the menstrual cycle, and recurrent illness. The amalgamation of these factors may manifest as impaired judgment, impulsivity, disrupted sleep patterns and appetite, and difficulty managing emotions (American Psychological Association, 2023). Overall, a dysregulated nervous system greatly affects one's mental and physical well-being. When the neurobiological consequences of narcissistic abuse go unaddressed, the lack of identification of female narcissists is perpetuated further. However, it's crucial to recognize that narcissistic abuse is detrimentally harmful, regardless of the gender or subtype of the perpetrator.

Narcissism includes a variety of traits and behaviors that extend beyond mere egotism. Whether grandiose or vulnerable, narcissists both present a facade to conceal their underlying characteristics, although they may manifest differently in public. While grandiose narcissists display overt aggression and superiority, vulnerable narcissists adopt the guise of victimhood to manipulate and garner sympathy. Male narcissists typically fall into the grandiose category, while female narcissists are more likely to be classified as vulnerable. Despite their varied presentations, the core traits of narcissism are present in both, contributing to the damaging impact of narcissistic abuse. The discrepancy between the presentation of the two, alongside the fact that narcissism is more commonly associated with men, is one of the primary factors in the

lack of acknowledgment of female narcissists. Almost everyone has some narcissistic traits to varying degrees, but when an individual has an excessive and unmanageable amount, it affects their relationships and inflicts harm. Therefore, understanding the complexities of narcissism and its effects is essential for identifying narcissists in order to address the disorder and administer treatment effectively.

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