The Narcissistic Personality: Perspectives in Organizational Behaviour

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The paper, based on a review of literature, is an attempt at exploring the origins of the narcissistic personality and the traits associated with it. Individuals with narcissistic personality disorder display grandiosity, a lack of empathy and an excessive desire for admiration. Narcissism is particularly associated with counterproductive work behaviour, trait anger, egotism, and unethical conduct. Research indicates that such individuals do occupy leadership roles in organizations and that narcissistic leadership has its pros and cons. Studies also suggest ways of dealing with such individuals. The paper, therefore, unearths the complexity of the narcissistic personality and its effect on organizational health and workplace outcomes. Lea

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Personality’ is a core concept in the study of organizational behaviour. Apart from its utility in recruitment and selection and in the adjustment of the individual to the work environment (Holland, 1997), it is a predictor of work-related outcomes, influences social interactions within organizations, and determines the organizational culture. It is a potential predictor of training effectiveness, leadership, individual responses to stress, perceptions and attitudes.

The operational definition of personality, as given by psychologists and organizational behaviour practitioners is: ‘behaviour that is displayed by an individual while interacting with others. All port (1937) defines it as “the dynamic organization within the individual of those psychophysical systems that determine his unique adjustment to his environment.” Derived from the word ‘persona’ meaning a mask worn by Greek theatre artists, it relates to a set of unique characteristics that make an individual different from others (Luthans, 2010). If not addressed, these differences may escalate conflicts within an organization thereby undermining the effectiveness of a work team.

Most organizations hire a broad spectrum of personality types. An effective organization requires people who like detailed work as well as those who look at the big picture; creative people as well as analytical ones; people who work best in groups as well as those who think best on their own. Thus, the complexity of human nature has to be kept in mind while dealing with people at work.

Unfortunately, apart from balanced, mentally healthy individuals, there are grossly maladjusted and disruptive personalities. One of these is the narcissistic personality – one of the three personality types included in the ‘dark triad’, the other two being machiavellian and psychopathic personalities (Paulhus and Williams, 2002). There are two characteristics that are common to the three dark personalities: lack of empathy and self-centredness resulting in a distorted pattern of relating to other individuals.

The subject of study in the present paper is the “narcissistic personality” and its impact on organizational functioning. The term ‘narcissism’ comes from the Greek myth of Narcissus – a prince who fell in love with his own reflection in a pond. The American Psychiatric Association (2000) defines narcissism as a personality disorder characterized by “a pervasive pattern of grandiosity, need for admiration, and lack of empathy… and is present in a variety of contexts” (p. 717). The trait, however, exists on a continuum – higher levels indicating pathology. A narcissist is a person who has extreme self love, grandiose ideas about him, extreme sense of self entitlement, and who appears to have a high self esteem (e.g., Campbell et al., 2006; Morf&Rhodewalt, 2001).

According to Campbell et al. (2011) narcissism has three features: First, the narcissistic self is characterized by “specialness”, vanity, and a desire for power and esteem. Second, narcissistic relationships contain low emotional intimacy, are shallow and can range from exciting and engaging to manipulative and exploitative. Third, there are narcissistic strategies for maintaining inflated self-views. For example, narcissists seek out opportunities for attention and admiration, brag, steal credit from others, and play games in relationships. When narcissists are successful at this, they feel good, report high self-esteem and positive life satisfaction (Sedikides et al., 2004). When they are unsuccessful, they show aggression and sometimes anxiety and depression (Bushman and Baumeister, 1998; Miller et al., 2007). According to researchers, it is an enduring and inflexible character structure.

Research literature provides evidence for two primary forms of narcissism: grandiose (overt) narcissism and vulnerable (covert) narcissism. The classic narcissist in the workplace, especially at the CEO level, is most likely to be grandiose narcissist. Someone who is overconfident, extraverted, high in self-esteem, dominant, attention seeking, interpersonally skilled and charming, but also unwilling to take criticism, aggressive, high in psychological entitlement, lacking in true empathy, interpersonally exploitative and grandiose or even haughty. In contrast, a vulnerable narcissist is someone who is hostile, thinks the world is unfairly against him, is high in psychological entitlement but also has low self-esteem, is depressed and anxious (Miller and Campbell, 2008). Such an individual typically has occupational aimlessness. However, on the inside, narcissistic behaviour is an ego defense mechanism to protect a fragile self that has roots in morbid child rearing. The trait underlying narcissism, whether overt or covert, is low self esteem.
The grandiose form seems to emerge in part from parental overvaluation; whereas the vulnerable form seems to emerge from parental coldness (e.g., Otway and Vignoles, 2006). Studies, by and large, focus on grandiose narcissism which is of particular concern to organizations, especially when discussing leadership and decision making.

The link between leadership and narcissism has long been recognized (Freud, 1950). Narcissistic leadership has both dark and bright side to it. On the one hand, such CEOs have been praised because of their passion, vision, and innovation; on the other hand, they have been condemned for their lack of empathy and for being oversensitive to criticism (Hogan and Kaiser, 2005).

Maccoby (2000) lists two strengths of narcissistic leaders: their ability to set compelling visions for companies and second, to attract followers. “Productive” narcissists are, by nature, able to see through the big picture. This quality is particularly needed in today’s volatile business environment. They are good orators, possess personal magnetism, and are able to lift the spirits of the subordinates. But even productive leaders can be dangerous to organizations. When people start responding to them positively, they become increasingly self assured, think they are invincible, and thereby become exploitative and coercive. Thus, charisma first leads to closeness and then to isolation of the leader from the followers.

Sensitivity to criticism, poor listening skills, lack of empathy, paranoidal thinking, tendency to control others, and inability to learn from mistakes are some of the negative characteristics of narcissistic leaders. They refuse to be mentored and are particularly averse to mentoring others. If at all they do so, they want their protégés to be pale reflections of them. They succeed in the short term but eventually destroy organizational systems on which they and other members thrive.

Due to low emotional intelligence and impulsivity (Vazire and Funder, 2006) their strategies fail. Miller et al. (2009) reports that narcissistic impulsivity is primarily associated with flawed risk taking and sensation seeking (e.g., responding in a dysregulated way when upset or the simple inability to control desires). Research has focused on how narcissists approach investment decisions (Foster and Trimm, 2008). Narcissism does not predict uniformly bad investment decisions. Instead, it predicts risky decisions (e.g., the purchase of high beta stocks). These risky investments carry more variance, and thus outperform in “bull markets” and underperform in “bear markets.”

Practitioners suggest that while working with a narcissistic boss the employee should always empathize with his feelings and not expect any empathy back, let the boss take the credit for his ideas, hone time management skills since narcissists encroach upon other people’s time. Ideally, one must disengage and maintain minimal contact with such individuals.

A huge pitfall of narcissistic leadership is that it is contagious and might result in ‘organizational narcissism.’ Organizational culture is, first and foremost, an outcome of the ideology of the founder of the organization. Its values, vision and mission cascade from the top and are internalized by the employees. If the value system of the pioneer and promoters lacks a moral basis and is self serving, the organization acquires a narcissistic identity. Organizational narcissism is analogous to individual narcissism (Whetten, 2006). The central and enduring attributes of such an organization are self obsession, a sense of entitlement, self agrandizement, denial, and rationalizations to justify anything it does. Because of narcissistic character, the motive to protect its identity is more powerful than the motive to behave ethically (Duchon and Drake, 2009). Hence, organizational identity – reflected in collectively shared assumptions and ideologies – determines moral identity (MacIntyre, 2007). Thus, Unethical behaviour can be a consequence of a corporation's self-concept; a consequence of how it defines itself.

The identities of business units, departments, groups, and ultimately individuals are influenced by organizational identities (Weaver, 2006). A narcissistic corporation disregards market accountability, civic responsibility, or ethical concerns (Ganesh, 2003) and institutionalizes dominance, control, entitlement, and exploitation (Gregory, 1999). Brown (1997) has argued that extreme narcissistic organizations use denial to cope with conflict and stress. For example, such organizations deny facts about themselves through spokespeople, annual reports, and myths. They develop plausible and acceptable justifications for their actions through rationalization and making claims of their uniqueness. They propagate flattering corporate histories through executive speeches and media campaigns. They assume that they are entitled to continued success and to exploit resources, people, and other organizations (Brown, 1997). Clearly, such extreme organizational narcissists will not be inclined to engage in virtuous practice (MacIntyre, 2007) and the culture would be excessively ego-centric and exploitive.

Organizations like Enron, SalomonBrothers, or Arthur Andersen, had unethical and non-virtuous behaviour as a part of their collective identity (“thisis who we are; this is what we do”) which they considered logical and tried to preserve, resulting in their downfall. Once unethical behavior becomes institutionalized, individuals in the organization, ironically, think of themselves as moral and continue to behave unethically without pangs of conscience (Anandet al., 2005).

An organization with a virtuous character (Moore and Beadle, 2006), on the other hand, abides by certain standards of excellence and accepts the deficiency in its own performance (MacIntyre, 2007), focuses on profit or reputation without indulging in unethical business practices and only to the extent necessary for its survival. It resists the corrupting power of institutions in its environment. In the words of Duchon and Drake (2009) “the extreme narcissist is the supreme exploiter and, in itself, a corrupt institution.”

At the individual level, the phenomenon leads to much negativity at the workplace. Penney and Spector (2002) found a link between narcissism and counter-productive work behaviour. Counter-productive work behaviour (CWB) refers to intentional behaviour by employees to harm or intend to harm the organization or the people in it. It could range from nasty interpersonal behaviour (insulting or yelling at someone), service sabotage (directed at customers) to behaviour directed towards inanimate objects (such as theft) and psychological or physical withdrawal from work. It is a result of both individual and situational or environmental factors (Rotundo and Spector, 2011). Other aspects of the ‘dark triad’ such as Machiavellianism are also related to workplace deviance (e.g., Giacalone and Knouse, 1990).
Penney and Spector, precisely, found that individuals high on narcissism indulged more in CWB when job constraints (e.g., poor equipment or supplies, interruptions by other people such as the supervisor, inadequate training, low budgetary support, time constraints, and unsatisfactory work conditions) were high than individuals low on narcissism. Also, a strong link was found between trait anger (a tendency or predisposition to experience situations as annoying) and narcissism.

The results were explained in terms of theory of threatened egotism and aggression (Baumeister et al., 1996). The narcissistic personality is characterized by a fragile sense of self that is not based on objective reality (Bushman and Baumeister, 1998). This unstable, distorted, inflated self image is susceptible to a large number of ego threats. Such personalities are hypersensitive to criticism and whenever they encounter actual or perceived negative (or unpleasant) appraisal (or feedback) information they feel threatened and resort to disproportionately high aggressive behaviour. Such individuals find a wide range of situations as ego-threatening. The term ‘narcissistic rage’ has been used to describe the emotion underlying such behaviour.

Spector's model of organizational frustration (Spector, 1978; Spector, 1997) says that if an event or a situation is interpreted as thwarting an individual’s progress towards a goal, it will lead to frustration. The only goal of a narcissist is feeling superior to everyone else, and any information perceived as unflattering will lead to frustration manifested in the form of minor annoyance or rage (Spector, 1997, p. 2). Laboratory studies by Bushman and Baumeister (1998) found that, overall, individuals high in narcissism were more aggressive toward competitors than individuals low in narcissism.

Other personality traits have been studied in relation to CWB namely, trait anxiety or negative affectivity (a tendency or predisposition to experience negative emotions), hostile attribution bias (the tendency to attribute hostile motives to others), boredom proneness, and dispositional envy (Rotundo and Spector, 2011). Research indicates that the narcissistic personality is marked by all of these.

Narcissism is also likely to be linked to an overly sexualized workplace. It predicts uncommitted sexual relationships, infidelity and sexual coercion, each of which has potentially destructive consequences in an organizational context (Bushman et al., 2003; Foster et al., 2006).

There are two opposing motives behind engaging in OCBs (Organizational Citizenship Behaviours) viz. impression management versus genuine altruism (Bolin, 1999). Bourdage et al. (2009) found impression management to be the major reason behind the display of OCBs among employees lower on humility (akin to higher narcissism). Hence narcissists indulge in strategic (and not constructive) impression management when the OCB suits their needs and do not consistently show such a behaviour.

Besides hurdles in Organizational Behaviour Management (OBM) resulting from narcissistic problems and pitfalls, discussed earlier, narcissism has far reaching implications in human resource management. Research on personnel selection in an interview context (Paulhus et al., 2010) found that narcissism is positively predicted interviewer evaluations. The reason being that narcissists have excellent verbal skills and talk a good deal in interviews, which seems to reflect competence. These individuals also tend to be more positively evaluated by trained assessors in assessment center exercises (Brunellet et al., 2008). To combat the high possibility of selection of narcissistic candidates recruiters, interviewers, and assessors should be trained to be on the lookout for behaviours indicative of narcissism. Probationary employment periods can help track behavioural or character issues that might go unnoticed in initial interactions. Psychometric tests, such as the NPI (Narcissistic Personality Inventory), might be especially useful in spotting narcissists. If narcissistic individuals are recruited into an organization, a comprehensive performance evaluation system might aid in preventing their continued career advancement. Ethical, interpersonal, and various citizenship oriented behaviours should be the focus of attention. Narcissism primarily impedes organizational functioning through its association with increased unethical behaviour and decreased OCB. A multisource performance feedback (from supervisor, peer, and subordinate, customer) in addition to objective metrics is important to monitor narcissistic employees.

Narcissists are very resistant to behaviour modification; hence, it is near impossible to reduce these maladaptive patterns. Increasing the sense of connection to others seems to mitigate some of narcissists' more destructive behaviours, under lab conditions (Finkel et al., 2009; Konrath et al., 2006). Narcissistic employees can be given tasks in which they can excel, for example, those requiring public performance or interactions of a relatively brief duration. Thus, placing a narcissistic individual in a role that matches with his talents could be a win/win situation for the organization and employee.

Organizational researchers describe narcissism as a “mixed blessing” or “trade-off” (Campbell & Campbell, 2009; Paulhus, 1998). It has positive and negative outcomes for the self and the social environment. In general, both in personal and professional domains, narcissism as a trait is good for the narcissist (especially in terms of feeling good about the self) but bad for those who are close to the narcissist (e.g., Miller et al., 2007). To sum up, awareness about the dark triad is the first step in dealing with pathological behavioural patterns.

References