



Narcissism, Narcissism Everywhere

A Review of

Narcissism and Politics: Dreams of Glory

by Jerrold M. Post

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Reviewed by

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Narcissism and Politics: Dreams of Glory is essentially the product of the author's distinguished career as a psychiatrist in a rather particular area of study. Post has focused much of his career on psychiatric insights into world leaders, especially with respect to narcissism. His book is loosely structured around aspects of narcissism in leaders such as rage, glory, entitlement, sex, power, and the narcissism of followers. The concepts presented in the book are amply illustrated with examples from the lives of world leaders.

As I read Post's book it occurred to me that there are three perennial problems with the construct of narcissism, especially in a broad social context like politics. For one, narcissism, like other disorders based on personality traits, is a continuum that describes a range of behaviors from everyday moments of vanity to the deeply pathological (Millon, 2011). Existential authors like Becker (1973) have even argued that the human condition makes us all essentially narcissistic, seeing the world as we do from only our own point of view. How useful is a label if it applies to everyone? Two, as narcissism is rooted in pathology of the self, one wonders whether the label of narcissism should only be applied to those contextualized within Western cultures where the achievements of the self are relatively highly valued. Does it make sense to use the term narcissism to describe individuals within cultures that favor collective and familial achievement? And three, narcissism—especially when it is described in terms of perceived social superiority—appears to overlap with ambition and achievement focus. If we find ourselves accusing many (or even most) of the highest achievers of our society of narcissism, are we merely relabeling drive and exceptionality?

In approaching the book, I thought that Post would address the problem of narcissism's universality by claiming to focus solely on pathological narcissism. Indeed, he does so, but only to a point. Partly to satisfy the ethical obstacle of diagnosing people he has not personally interviewed, Post makes the disclaimer that he is solely pointing out pathological narcissistic traits in political leaders and emphatically not arguing for a particular diagnosis in any of the high profile cases he discusses. Post focuses instead on the dynamics of

narcissism, mostly from a psychoanalytic perspective, using time-worn concepts such as mirroring, selfobject, and narcissistic injury (e.g., Kohut & Wolf, 1978). Each chapter focuses on a different group of processes, and Post notes how these processes operate in the lives of famous political leaders. For example, he points out that Saddam Hussein needed extensive mirroring from his followers, due in part to early familial losses.

While it can be instructive to exemplify such dynamics in famous leaders, Post's somewhat low bar of only identifying traits and processes rather than diagnosable syndromes allows him to have his cake and eat it too. On the one hand, the language he uses to describe every leader (including delusional, would-be leaders like the Unabomber) is quite definitive and strong. There are very few people he describes as exemplifying a process that don't emerge from the page as decidedly disturbed. On the other hand, it seems that because Post claims he is not making diagnostic conclusions, he is able to make his pronouncements without the benefit of exhaustive evidence. In this one volume, Post notes pathological processes in well-over 50 famous people, most of whom only warrant a page or two of historical and life events to support his claims. Readers who are familiar with the careful research of psychobiography may be disappointed with the rather low ratio of evidence to confidence in Post's conclusions. Moreover, when the behavior of so many world leaders and others, who act quite divergently in the face of myriad events, is all reduced to dynamics of narcissism, the label (and its related processes) at times seems limiting and repetitive rather than illuminating.

As to the question of cross-cultural applicability of narcissism, Post's book is largely silent. In one example of apparent over-application, Post essentially argues that hyperbolic titles and grandiose claims of greatness are universal signs of narcissistic pathology. The book does not discuss, however, the possibility that in many countries (or at least, with many constituencies) that grandiosity and boasting by leaders may be taken as signs of strength, and thus these behaviors may say less about the leader's psyche and more about their propaganda skills. To a Western ear, endless titles and saber rattling might seem bombastic and egotistical, but readers may want to be provided with evidence that such behaviors are experienced similarly by followers in other cultures.

My last question, whether the act of finding narcissism in so many highly achieving people is merely a relabeling of ambition and achievement, is also not adequately addressed in this book. Nevertheless, the question is an insistent one, especially given that in several instances Post uses an individual's belief that one can lead (or rule) as evidence of narcissism. Here, as in the previous concern about culture, contrary explanations for behavior besides narcissism seem to arise. One example of an explanation for will to leadership that does not involve narcissism is dynastic influence. Whether you are George W. Bush or Indira Gandhi, given your family's historical political power and influence, is it necessarily narcissistic to think you could wield broad power effectively? Or for those of more humble beginnings, if success after success in positions of leadership leads you closer and closer to stratospheric heights, is it necessarily pathological to seek the highest office? If we find that as a child a world leader acted out scenarios of running the world, must that be a pathological process? Consider how many children act out such fantasies yet never become world leaders. Unfortunately, Post's book provides no avenue out of these conundrums. On the contrary, even the most effective and beloved leaders are not spared the label of narcissism. Some readers may be puzzled, for example, by Post's conclusion that Mahatma Gandhi, the great spiritual and political leader that brought India out of colonial rule via non-violent political action, was narcissistic. The confusion of these readers

may not be cleared by Post's explanation that Gandhi was a narcissist of the "reparative charismatic" type.

Reflecting on Post's book, I am reminded of a training difference between psychiatry and clinical psychology that was pointed out to me years ago. Year for year, psychiatry residents generally triage and treat a far greater number of patients than clinical psychology interns. Thus, psychiatry residents learn by making many cross comparisons, distilling essentials from those comparisons. Clinical psychology interns, however, focus on the processes of diagnosis, assessment, and treatment within a few individuals, perhaps learning experimentally what does and doesn't work for a given person. Perhaps this difference in emphasis is at the crux of Post's book. Readers who are comfortable moving quickly through many exemplars of a few key processes may be quite comfortable with Post's evidence and conclusions. Readers looking for deep insight into individual political figures may need to turn to more focused works by Post or others in the field. Generally, scholars with a specific interest in narcissism may want to take a look at Post's book. Additionally, a chapter or two may be useful to exemplify narcissism in an undergraduate or graduate course taking up the topic.

References

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