



# **NARCISSISM AND LEADERSHIP**

**A REVIEW AND RESEARCH AGENDA**

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“Narcissism: Excessive self-love or vanity; self-admiration, self-centredness.”

**Oxford English Dictionary (2005)**

“It is probably not an exaggeration to state that if individuals with significant narcissistic characteristics were stripped from the ranks of public figures, the ranks would be perilously thinned.”

**Jerrold M. Post (1993a, 99)**

“The big danger is one of hubris. There’s a tendency...to think you’re invulnerable.

You’re not just king of the mountain, you’ve mastered the mountain. That can often lead to mistakes of excessive pride.”

**David R. Gergen (in Bumiller, 2004)**

## INTRODUCTION

It is clear that a significant number of world leaders have rigidly grandiose belief systems and leadership styles. Often, the authors who recount the “psychohistories” of these leaders connect both the leaders’ ascent to power, and their ultimate (and seemingly inevitable) downfall, to their narcissistic grandiosity. While not every author employs the term “narcissism” to describe the leader in question, across the board they reliably depict individuals whose aspirations, judgments, and decisions, both good and bad, are driven by unyielding arrogance and self-absorption. The pantheon of purportedly narcissistic leaders ranges from the great tyrants of recent history including Hitler, Stalin, and Saddam Hussein (Glad, 2002), to lesser-known malevolent leaders like the founder of the American Nazi Party, George Lincoln Rockwell (Miliora, 1995) and cult leader Jim Jones (Zee, 1980), great historical figures such as Alexander Hamilton (Chernow, 2004), business leaders of all stripes including Steve Jobs (Robins & Paulhus, 2001), Michael Eisner (Sankowsky, 1995), David Geffen (Kramer, 2003), and Kenneth Lay (Kramer, 2003), and an eclectic and sometimes surprising list of current political leaders such as Benjamin Netanyahu (Kimhi, 2001), John McCain (Renshon, 2001), George W. Bush (Krugman, 2005; Suskind, 2004), and both Jimmy Carter and his mother, Lillian (Glad & Whitmore, 1991).

While many of these leaders suffered ignominious downfalls, the jury is still out on a few of them. What truly ties them together is that ultimately, their leadership is driven by their own personal egotistical needs for power and admiration (Kets de Vries & Miller, 1997), rather than by an empathetic concern for the constituents they lead (Conger, 1997). In fact, narcissists are thought to seek leadership positions specifically to garner the power that enables them to “structure an external world” that supports their grandiose needs and visions (Glad, 2002, 25). Taking these psychological motivations into account can help us make sense out of particular leaders’ seemingly incomprehensible decisions and actions. On the other hand, failing to understand that some leaders are not psychologically equipped to make rational and strategic decisions can be risky, and, when those leaders are your adversaries, even perilous (White, 1991, 1994). To address these issues, I briefly discuss the history and current status of the concept of narcissism, outline the debate about the negative and positive sides of narcissistic leadership, and suggest seven areas researchers might want to explore empirically to help clarify the debate.

## BACKGROUND

### Narcissism—History and Current Status

The term “narcissism” was derived from the Greek myth of Narcissus, a young man whose punishment for rejecting the nymph Echo was to fall in love exclusively with the beauty and perfection of his own reflection. Havelock Ellis (1898) was the first to connect the myth of Narcissus to a clinical condition of “perverse” self-love (i.e., auto-eroticism). Freud (1905/1953) first used the term “narcissistic” in his early work “Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality,” and later developed a theory of narcissism as a distinct psychological process in “On Narcissism: An Introduction” (Freud, 1914/1957). In 1931, Freud (1931/1950) first suggested that there was a specific narcissistic personality type characterized by outwardly unflappable strength, confidence, and sometimes arrogance. Horney (1939) elaborated on this idea by suggesting that the personality traits exhibited by narcissists are unfounded; self-inflation, self-admiration, and the expectation of admiration from others based on qualities that the narcissist does not actually possess.

Subsequently, the Object Relations theorist Otto Kernberg, and the Self-Psychology theorist Heinz Kohut, advanced the theory that narcissism constitutes a character pathology or personality disorder. Kernberg (e.g., 1967, 1989) described patients who presented an unusual degree of self-reference in their interactions, a seeming contradiction between an inflated self-concept and inordinate need for tribute from others, shallow emotional lives, lack of empathy, envy, vacillating extremes of idealization and devaluation of others, exploitativeness, and a charming and engaging presence that conceals an underlying coldness and ruthlessness. This constellation of haughty and grandiose behaviors is a defense against “oral rage,” a pathological process in psychosexual development and an expression of vengeful feelings toward either coldly indifferent, or aggressively rejecting parents.

While other theoreticians posited that pathological narcissism is due to a regression to earlier points in psychosexual development, Kohut (e.g., 1966) suggested that narcissism has its own independent developmental sequence that stretches from infancy to adulthood. In their healthy form, mature narcissistic structures and processes produce behaviors such as humor and creativity. However, pathological narcissism occurs when one is unable to integrate the idealized ideas one has of oneself with the realities of one’s inadequacies. Pathological narcissists spend the balance of their lives seeking recognition from idealized parental substitutes as an emotional salve against their shortcomings.

Because of the long-standing clinical and theoretical interest in narcissism, the American Psychiatric Association (APA) included the construct as an Axis II Personality Disorder in the Third Edition of its Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-III; APA, 1980). The diagnostic criteria were largely developed from Kernberg’s (1967, 1989) formulation. Currently, to qualify for a diagnosis of Narcissistic Personality Disorder based on the updated DSM-IV-TR guidelines (APA, 2000), an individual must:

exhibit a pervasive pattern of grandiosity (in fantasy or behavior), need for admiration, and lack of empathy, beginning by early adulthood and present in a variety of contexts, as indicated by five (or more) of the following:

- 1 has a grandiose sense of self-importance (e.g., exaggerates achievements and talents, expects to be recognized as superior without commensurate achievements)
- 2 is preoccupied with fantasies of unlimited success, power, brilliance, beauty, or ideal love
- 3 believes that he or she is “special” and unique and can only be understood by, or should associate with, other special or high-status people (or institutions)
- 4 requires excessive admiration

- 5 has a sense of entitlement, i.e., unreasonable expectations of especially favorable treatment or automatic compliance with his or her expectations
- 6 is interpersonally exploitative, i.e., takes advantage of others to achieve his or her own ends
- 7 lacks empathy: is unwilling to recognize or identify with the feelings and needs of others
- 8 is often envious of others or believes that others are envious of him or her
- 9 shows arrogant, haughty behaviors or attitudes (717).

There are two notable omissions from the DSM-IV-TR formulation of narcissism that figure in the debate about narcissism and leadership. First, while the “Diagnostic Features” and “Associated Features and Disorders” sections mention narcissistic hostility and fragility of self-esteem, these problems are not included among the diagnostic criteria. Second, and especially pertinent, Freud’s and Kohut’s idea that narcissism is a healthy and essential process in normal development is abandoned in favor of the idea that narcissism reflects purely pathological processes.

## THE DEBATE

### The Downside of Narcissism

As noted in the Introduction, the quintessential narcissistic leaders have leadership visions that are synonymous with their own personal needs, rather than those of their constituents (Conger, 1997). Out of their need for recognition, narcissists are more likely than others to self-promote and self-nominate (Hogan, Raskin & Fazzini, 1990), and to employ their skills in “deception, manipulation, and intimidation” (Glad, 2002, 1) to secure leadership positions more often than they otherwise would based on their actual qualifications (Hogan, et al., 1990). And often, this narcissistic air of dominance is exactly what inspires a group of followers (e.g., the voters, a board of directors) to select a narcissist to lead them (Hogan, Curphy & Hogan, 1994; Gladwell, 2002; Post, 1986). While the quest for personal glory can sometimes motivate a narcissistic leader in the direction of positive bold and transformative innovation (see Maccoby, 2000, below), even at their best, narcissistic leaders are bound to leave damaged systems and relationships in their wake. Narcissists are notoriously poor, overinvolved, and abusive managers (Hogan, et al., 1994). Narcissistic leaders resist advisers’ suggestions, take more credit for successes than they are due, and blame others for their own failures and shortcomings (Hogan, et al., 1990). They are also highly prone to “lapses in professional judgment [and] personal conduct” (Kramer, 2003, 58). However, because of their drive and grandiosity, narcissists make their poor judgments and decisions with greater certainty and confidence, and thus with greater influence, than less narcissistic leaders and advisers (Hogan, et al., 1990).

A preliminary list of the (highly interrelated) psychological underpinnings of the problems associated with narcissistic leadership might include narcissists’ feelings of inferiority, insatiable need for recognition and superiority, hypersensitivity and anger, lack of empathy, amorality, irrationality and inflexibility, and paranoia:

#### *Feelings of Inferiority*

The idea that narcissistic leadership behaviors stem from feelings of emptiness and inferiority (Glad, 2002; Harwood, 2003) can be traced to the theories of Kernberg (e.g., 1967, 1989) and Kohut (e.g., 1966) discussed above. These feelings are so pervasive that taking credit for success and blaming others for failure can only temporarily moderate them, but can never alleviate them entirely (Glad, 2002). Narcissistic leaders constantly self-aggrandize in an attempt to “defend maniacally against a feeling of emptiness or narcissistic hurt” (Harwood, 2003, 124). However, even when idealized by flattering sycophants and

imbued with unquestionable authority (Harwood, 2003; Sheng, 2001), narcissists still do not have the ability to sustain positive feelings about themselves (Morf, Weir & Davidoff, 2000). Because of this, the slightest mishap or misstep can produce completely disproportional reactions. For instance, Sheng (2001) recounts the story of how Mao Zedong insisted on being completely placated in his negotiations with the Soviet Union's Nikita Khrushchev. Mao expected his proposals to be accepted without question, and considered any counterproposals by the Soviets to be deep personal affronts. Sheng (2001) concludes that Mao's personal narcissism was one of the major forces that drove the dangerous wedge between China and the Soviet Union by the early 1960s.

### ***Insatiable Need for Recognition and Superiority***

For narcissists, the primary mode of coping with their omnipresent feelings of inferiority is an unrelenting quest to gain recognition and prove their superiority (e.g., Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001a). As noted above, even absolute power cannot match narcissists' grandiose expectations (Horowitz & Arthur, 1988). However, rather than give up the pursuit, narcissists engage in a chronic, all-encompassing quest for recognition and superiority (e.g., Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001a, 2001b). Narcissists in positions of power have an especially large assortment of means by which they can prove their potency—they craft their goals, beliefs, and rhetoric around their impact and recognition rather than their meaning (Post, 1993a), they demand unquestioning devotion and loyalty from followers (Harwood, 2003), they “embark on grandiose projects and indulge in conspicuous consumption” (Horowitz & Arthur, 1988, 141), and at their worst, leaders such as Saddam Hussein turn to sadism and destructiveness (Glad, 2002; Post & Baram, 2003).

### ***Hypersensitivity and Anger***

While narcissists often rely on feelings of superiority to quash their feelings of inferiority, in situations where this grandiosity itself is threatened, they are likely to react with extreme hypersensitivity and anger (e.g., Kernberg's “oral rage”, 1989; Horowitz & Arthur, 1988). The threat of self-righteous, out-of-control rage is, of course, particularly ominous in a world leader. Narcissistic leaders may be “intensely, vengefully hostile as an exaggerated response to an insult” and feel completely justified committing horrific atrocities (Horowitz & Arthur, 136). Steinberg (1991a) suggests that “placing foreign policy leaders in positions of humiliation may stimulate their desire for revenge, invite retaliatory [and aggressive] behavior, and, particularly in times of crisis, run the risk of all-out war” (643). As an example, she notes that the Cuban Missile Crisis escalated at least in part out of the individual narcissistic hypersensitivity of both John F. Kennedy and Fidel Castro. She goes on to hypothesize that fortunately, in this case, both leaders' “ego strength and reality testing remained sufficiently intact to allow them to limit the demands for revenge imposed by their prior experience of narcissistic injury” (Steinberg, 1991b, 81).

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### ***Lack of Empathy***

As mentioned above, the inability to understand others' perspectives can be inimical to good leadership (White, 1991, 1994), and a lack of empathy is also a hallmark of narcissism (APA, 2000). Narcissistic leaders are therefore more likely than others to make decisions guided by an idiosyncratic, self-centered view of the world and to disavow advice that conflicts with this view. For instance, recent critiques of the Iraq War have been especially noteworthy in their focus on Bush administration's seeming unwillingness to view the world as it is, in favor of viewing it as they wish it to be. Or, as former CIA analyst Michael Scheuer (writing under the pseudonym “Anonymous,” 2004) puts it, the Bush administration saw Iraq through “lenses tinted by hubris, not reality” (p. xvii). He goes on to portray the U.S. itself as a narcissistic entity, stating that “because of the pervasive imperial hubris that dominates the minds of our political,

academic, social, media, and military elites, America is unable...to believe the Islamic world fails to understand the benign intent of U.S. foreign policy and its implementation” (166). Even conservative columnist and Iraq War supporter David Brooks (2004) uses the language of narcissistic lack of empathy (although he calls it idealism rather than narcissism) when he says that “[t]here was, above all, a failure to understand the effect our power would have on other people around the world. We were so sure we were using our might for noble purposes, we assumed that sooner or later, everybody else would see that as well....We expected to be universally admired when it was all over” (A23).

### ***Amorality***

As noted above, when enraged, narcissistic leaders may commit the most appalling acts and feel completely justified (Horowitz & Arthur, 1988). This behavior is not reserved solely for the narcissistic leaders’ enemies. Glad (2002) suggests that narcissistic leaders can turn on their followers in much the same way—these leaders ask the impossible of their followers, and when they inevitably do not get everything they ask for, they decide that their followers have forfeited their right to exist. While such behavior may be used strategically by the leader to take and hold power (e.g., Saddam Hussein’s notorious purging of Baath Party members in 1979), it may also be a route to his or her ultimate downfall. Ultimately, as the leader

moves toward absolute power, he is also apt to cross moral and geographical boundaries in ways that place him in a vulnerable position. Thus, he may engage in cruelties that serve no political purpose, challenge the conventional morality in ways that undermine his base, engage in faulty reality testing, and overreach himself in foreign engagements in ways that invite new challenges to his rule (Glad, 2002, 1-2).

### ***Irrationality and Inflexibility***

All of the personality disorders in the DSM-IV-TR (APA, 2000) share the symptom of enduringly inflexible patterns of thinking and behavior, and narcissism is no exception. Glad (2002) contrasts narcissistic leadership with Machiavellianism (i.e., expedient leadership characterized by deceit and cunning) and realpolitik (i.e., political leadership based on practical, rather than moral or ideological considerations). Machiavellian leaders are rational actors capable of flexibility in their thinking and behavior—they use cruelty to consolidate power, and then moderate their behavior, “avoiding carelessness born of overconfidence and unbearable harshness born of excessive distrust” (12). This contrasts with narcissists, whose narcissistic “fantasies, grounded as they are on transient wishes and fears, provide poor guides to action” and maintaining power (28). “The vision in essence becomes so much a part of the leader’s personality that he or she is unwilling or unable to consider information to the contrary” (Kramer, 2003, 219). For instance, Hitler made poor military decisions in part because he was “[l]oathe to use even the information available to him, he relied instead on his inspirations, which were shaped by his deep contempt for and underestimation of other people” (Glad, 2002, 30). Research confirms that, while statistically related, narcissism and Machiavellianism are distinct traits (Paulhus & Williams, 2002).

### ***Paranoia***

Finally, another trait that the litany of narcissistic leaders share, and that can also ultimately lead to their downfall, is their paranoia (e.g., Glad, 2002; Sheng, 2001). A narcissistic leader is “apt to create enemies where there had been none” (Glad, 2002, 30). While it is rational, of course, for a leader surrounded by acquiescent sycophants to be wary of their true intentions, narcissistic leaders go beyond rationality, often rejecting, and even destroying their most loyal followers out of distrust. For instance, Saddam Hussein purportedly believed that he knew which of his followers were conspiring against him before the followers even knew it themselves (Glad, 2002).

## The Upside of Narcissism

While there are many clear-cut examples of destructive narcissistic leaders, Post (1986, 1993a) argues that there are certain types of narcissistic leaders, who, when matched with the appropriate followers in a particular historical context, are not only constructive, but a necessity. At times of societal crisis, a narcissistic leader can be crucial. At such times, when a “mirror-hungry” narcissistic leader finds a group of “ideal-hungry” followers, that leader can resolve the “splits in a wounded society” (Post, 1986, 686). Post (1986) presents Atatürk, the founder of the Turkish Republic, as a prime example of such a leader. And there are clearly situations that call for the kind of great vision and dramatic action most likely to be spurred by a narcissistic leader. For instance, John Sweeney, President of the AFL-CIO has recently been criticized for creating a leadership vacuum by focusing too much on consensus-building and having a “business-as-usual” approach as two of the AFL-CIO’s main component unions (the Service Employees International Union and the Teamsters Union) voted to break away from the parent organization (Greenhouse, 2005). Clearly, this is an example of a moment that called for a strong, driven individual with tremendous charisma and power, but was not met by one. However, such historical moments can be transient. For instance, Post (1993a) notes that Churchill’s rapid fall after World War II highlights that the needs of followers for a “larger-than-life” leader are often historically bound and intimately connected to crises (Post, 1993a).

While Post (1986, 1993a) and others cautiously suggest that narcissistic leadership may not be exclusively toxic, consultant and psychoanalyst Michael Maccoby (2000, 2004) goes much further, advocating and extolling the virtues of narcissistic leaders. He suggests that today’s hectic and chaotic business world necessitates leaders who, rather than playing the role of solid foundation to companies that change at a glacial pace, are grand visionaries and innovators. These leaders, whom he dubs “productive narcissists,” do not try to understand the future, they shape it. They are transformative CEOs who are PR-hungry superstars with stimulating personalities (e.g., Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, Jack Welch). They are driven to gain power and glory, and work aggressively to be admired rather than loved.

Maccoby (2000) lists two strengths particular to productive narcissists that make them ideal leaders for our times: They are visionaries, and they can inspire great numbers of followers. Productive narcissists are “not only risk takers willing to get the job done but also charmers who can convert the masses with their rhetoric” (70) to help shape our “public and personal agendas” (69). As visionaries, narcissistic leaders always see the big picture, and tend to leave the analyzing and minutia to others. When they do not like the rules, they ignore, or even change them. Their visions are grand ones, because they are inspired by needs for power, glory, and a legacy. And through these grand visions, coupled with great charisma, they gain the allegiance of their followers. In turn, the followers fulfill the narcissistic leaders’ needs for admiration, further bolstering the leaders’ confidence and conviction in their visions.

However, even Maccoby is cautious in extolling the virtues of narcissistic leadership. While he lists two particular strengths of narcissistic leaders (see above), he accompanies them with a list of five weaknesses that echo the problems noted in the preceding section (i.e., narcissists are hypersensitive to criticism, poor listeners, lacking in empathy, unwilling or unable to mentor or be mentored, and intensely competitive; Maccoby, 2000). He suggests that for narcissistic leadership to work, the leader’s narcissism must be constrained by self-knowledge, and by restraining anchors within the organization (see below). With this optimal set of circumstances, productive narcissistic leaders’ personal visions for the future can become reality, bringing forth great innovation and advancement.

## A FRAMEWORK FOR EMPIRICAL RESEARCH—SEVEN AREAS TO EXPLORE

The contrast between the strong theoretical and case-study evidence that narcissistic leadership is often toxic, and the compelling evidence that narcissism is a key trait of some of the world's most creative and generative leaders, suggests that the area is ripe for further research into the relative dangers and merits of narcissistic leaders. A review of the extant literature suggests seven areas in particular that might be particularly fruitful to investigate: (1) Narcissism versus confidence and self-esteem; (2) optimal conditions for narcissistic leadership; (3) gaining versus maintaining power; (4) followers who choose narcissistic leaders; (5) realms of success and failure; (6) avoiding the downfall; and (7) predictive validity.

### Narcissism Versus Confidence and Self-Esteem

In some of his more positive comments about narcissistic leadership, Post (1993a) suggests that “[a]t one level, narcissism is nothing more than extreme self-confidence.” (99-100). This idea is supported by recent non-leadership-oriented narcissism research programs (e.g., Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger & Vohs, 2003; Campbell, 2001). Further, Maccoby (2000) asserts that all people need to be at least somewhat narcissistic in order “survive or assert our needs” (71). This accords with Kohut’s (1966) notion that narcissism is an independent and potentially healthy process in normal development. And there are multiple frameworks of narcissistic leadership that highlight not only destructive, but also constructive variants of the trait, including “productive” narcissism (Maccoby, 2000, 2004), “constructive” narcissism (Kets de Vries & Miller, 1997), and “charismatic” narcissism (Post, 1993a).

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However, a crucial first step in studying narcissism is differentiating the grandiosity that is its hallmark from normal confidence and self-esteem (Rosenthal, 2005)—a particularly difficult task because most theory and research do not make it a high priority. It is clear however that most of the more positive theories about the relationship between narcissism and leadership are based, at best, on a highly inclusive (and possibly overly inclusive) definition of narcissism that includes aspects of non-grandiose positive feelings about the self (i.e., normal confidence and high self-esteem). For instance, Maccoby (2000) suggests that “[p]roductive narcissists have perspective and are able to detach themselves and laugh at their irrational needs....A sense of humor helps them maintain enough perspective and humility to keep on learning” (77). Kets de Vries and Miller (1997) describe constructive narcissists as confident, thoughtful, and realistic, rather than unstable, reactive, and self-deceptive. Although they “enjoy being admired, they have a realistic appreciation of their abilities and limitations” (211).

Beyond theory, research suggests that the confidence, charisma, and optimism associated with “productive” or “constructive” narcissists are positive leadership traits. For instance, in a military context, such traits lead to higher leadership ratings from peers and supervisors (Chemers, Watson & May, 2000), and confidence is one of a number of personality traits viewed by current officers as important to selecting future officers (Sümer, Sümer, Demirutku & Çifci, 2001). Unfortunately, while it is clear that confidence and charisma can be positive leadership attributes, it is less clear that they should be labeled as “narcissistic” traits to begin with. As noted above, there are competing, and sometimes contradictory, definitions of narcissism—some definitions include normative self-confidence (e.g., Campbell, 2001), while others do not (e.g., APA, 2000). This is an ongoing debate which may be nearly impossible to settle, because there are no “gold standard” criteria on which to base a definitive description of narcissism (or any other personality trait for that matter; Funder, 2001). However, if future behavioral research aspires to differentiate the consequences of leaders’ self-confidence from those of leaders’ arrogance, it will be important to clearly distinguish the two in our nomenclature as well.

## Are There Optimal Conditions for Narcissistic Leadership?

Whether narcissists succeed or fail in leadership depends not only on their personality, but also on the circumstances in which they lead (Glad & Whitmore, 1991; Robins & Paulhus, 2001). Narcissists might be more likely to succeed in a position where charisma and extraversion are important (e.g., sales), or where self-absorption and self-importance are important (e.g., science), but not in a position that requires building sustained relationships and trust (Robins & Paulhus, 2001). They are also likely to do better in situations where their personal goals converge with those of their followers and the organization rather than situations where their success is likely to come at the expense of those around them. Narcissists are likely to emerge, and often flourish, in times that call for a new order to be established, but to be unable to maintain the necessary stability once that new order has come to the fore (e.g., Mao, who established a new political order in a huge and powerful nation went on to starve millions of his citizens, split with Soviet ally at the same time he was facing conflict with the U.S. over Taiwan, and nearly destroyed China's economy; Sheng, 2001). While narcissistic leaders may thrive in chaotic times, they may also seem out of place in more tranquil times (like a “pompous buffoon;” Maccoby, 2000, 77), and consequently be removed from power. Finally, and somewhat counterintuitively, narcissistic leaders may be more successful when they are young. While many narcissists recede into submission and despair as they age (e.g., Dawidoff, 1994) and the realities of their human weaknesses and failings become more apparent, narcissistic leaders are often able to use their social power to fend off this encroaching reality. Therefore, they may become more grandiose and tyrannical over time (McIntyre, 1983; Post, 1984, 1993a). Each of these theories (and others) about optimal conditions for narcissistic leaders have the potential to promote testable hypotheses to help assess their accuracy.

### Gaining Versus Maintaining Power

It is clear that in most leadership contexts “the qualities needed to form a group may be different from those required to maintain it” (Hogan, et al., 1994, 499). Further, nearly all leaders are vulnerable to seductions of power, which can lead them to become grandiose, reckless, and even abusive (Glad, 2002; Kramer, 2003). Hogan, et al. (1990) describe leaders with “well-developed social skills and an attractive interpersonal style who, in reality, have little or no talent for management” (346).

These leaders can either have a “rapid rise-and-fall trajectory” (Robins & Paulhus, 2001, 212), or, if they maintain their power, they can be “very costly to [their] organizations” (Hogan, et al., 1990, 343).

Whether narcissistic leaders are more susceptible than other leaders to deviations from good leadership as time progresses is an empirical question that requires further research. However, numerous theorists suggest that narcissists are just the type of leader most likely to falter over time. Not only does their narcissism fuel their poor decision-making, but the power they attain through their leadership fuels their narcissism, driving a downward spiral into poor leadership (Glad, 2002). As opposed to ordinary narcissists who experience ordinary frustrations, a narcissistic leader has the power to “construct a world that provides him with temporary relief from his internal conflicts” (27). However, this power ultimately feeds self-defeating behavior, because for a narcissist, it is never fully satisfying—it cannot fully “heal his underlying lack of self-esteem” (27).

### What about the Followers? Why are Narcissists Chosen?

Implicit leadership theory suggests that we choose as our leaders those people who seem most “leader-like” (Hogan, et al., 1994). These individuals are intelligent and honest, but also charismatic, confident, and aggressive. In other words, our selection process can be tautological, we make non-leaders into lead-

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ers because they seem like leaders to begin with. This is especially true of charismatic leaders—followers perceive them as superhuman, blindly believe them, follow them unconditionally, and give them unqualified emotional support (Post, 1986). Narcissistic leaders are not only likely to abuse their power, but, by their exploiting their charisma, they are more likely to convince their followers to buy into the abuse and to shoulder the blame for failure (Sankowsky, 1995). And those followers who are no longer swayed by the narcissist leader’s charisma are often intimidated into subordination (Kramer, 2003).

One of the more provocative theories of the rise of narcissistic leaders is that they are selected because they complement their followers’ own narcissism. While narcissistic leaders are “mirror hungry” (i.e., constantly seeking confirmation and admiration to counteract an inner sense of worthlessness), their followers are “ideal hungry” narcissists—they are incomplete as individuals and “...experience themselves as worthwhile only so long as they can relate to individuals whom they can admire for their prestige, power, beauty, intelligence, or moral stature” (Post, 1986, 679). This may be especially prevalent in moments of historical threat, because people who are normally psychologically self-sufficient are made vulnerable by external events (Kohut, 1977).

However, on top of temporal and historical influences, there may be certain cultures more susceptible than others to the ideal hungry narcissism that leads them to choose narcissistic leaders. For instance Alford (1988) suggests that at least part of Ronald Reagan’s immense popularity stemmed from his ability to protect us from our own narcissistic humiliation. Instead of raising expectations and “enhancing our collective mastery” (580), Reagan soothed our narcissistic wounds (in the face of the Iranian hostage crisis and economic stagnation), by lowering the expectations of our collective ideals and relieving us of our responsibilities to others. He thus reframed our retreat from pressing challenges as “collective [national] mastery over the public world” (571). Demause (1992) further suggests that the U.S. not only picks its own leaders to soothe its narcissistic insecurities, but that we also create and support our own narcissistic enemies (e.g., Saddam Hussein, Manuel Noriega) to have on hand to “embody [our] country’s shared anger” (127) and our “belligerent, confrontational mood” (129) when our own confidence flags. While these interpretations of the American psyche are clearly highly politicized, they do suggest interesting hypotheses about the types of followers who will enthusiastically choose and support narcissistic leaders.

Finally, as with narcissistic leadership, narcissistic followership can also have a temporal trajectory. “While narcissistic followers will experience obvious pleasure in seeing their beloved leaders work their way up the ranks, they will also get equal satisfaction out of seeing them brought down a notch.” (Kramer, 2003, 63). Of course, many followers of narcissistic leaders eventually rebel against their leaders’ callous and exploitative behavior, but beyond that, they “blame their leaders for failing to live up to their own exaggerated expectations” (Kets de Vries, 1997, 238). In a vicious cycle, narcissistic leaders’ self-loathing makes them loathe their sycophantic followers (Glad, 2002), while at the same time their own failings lead them to be loathed by those followers.

### **Realms of Success and Failure: Sacrificing Relationships for Success**

To be diagnosed with a personality disorder (narcissistic or otherwise), an individual must not only display an inflexible and pervasive personality style, but their personality must lead “to clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning” (APA, 1994, 633). There are doubtless many “failed” narcissists “wallowing in obscurity and complaining about how their exceptional talents remain unrecognized” (Robins & Paulhus, 2001, 212) who exemplify this “distress and impairment” criterion. However, it is less clear whether it is legitimate to ascribe such suffering to “successful” narcissists, particularly those in top leadership positions whose reality is actually commensurate with their desire for admiration and power. If a narcissistic leader experiences impairment in his or her personal life (e.g., no true friends, multiple divorces, etc.), should that be taken as evidence that the

leader's narcissism is pathological, even if the leader's most important personal goals (admiration and power) are being met? It might be easy to ascribe social impairment to someone like Stalin, who let his son die after the Germans captured him, because he felt betrayed that the son allowed himself to be captured (Post, 2002). But for someone like Benjamin Netanyahu, who prides himself as a "family values" politician but has been divorced twice (Kimhi, 2001), the picture is less clear. Many non-narcissists, and many non-leaders, have been divorced twice. And while Netanyahu's political career has waxed and waned over the years, the downturns are not primarily attributable to his marital difficulties. While distress and impairment can be measured empirically, it is important to balance our cultural norms about what constitutes suffering with the personal expectations and experiences of the leaders we are studying.

### **How to Avoid the Downfall**

Regardless of the advisability of placing narcissists in leadership positions, the fact is that narcissists head numerous countries, companies, and other organizations. Because of this, "the challenge...is to ensure that such leaders do not self-destruct or lead...to disaster" (Maccoby, 2003, 71). A number of authors propose approaches to this task, however whether they can be effective in the short, and especially long term is ultimately an empirical question. As an example, Maccoby (2000) suggests that (a) narcissistic leaders need a trusted sidekick who is rooted in reality and able to frame critiques of the leaders' ideas in ways that show the leader how they fit his grandiose vision, (b) the organization needs to be indoctrinated to completely accept and subordinate itself to the ideology of the leader (i.e., it becomes a "my way or the highway" organization), and (c) the leader must get intensive psychotherapy [this final recommendation might be taken with a grain of salt as Maccoby himself is a psychotherapist]. The feasibility and effectiveness of these suggestions are questionable, however. The first and third recommendations require a sidekick and a therapist, respectively, who are psychologically immune to the inevitable attacks the narcissistic leader will force them to endure (Levinson, Sabbath & Connor, 1992). As for the second recommendation, while a subordinated organization may be more peaceful, any deficiencies in its leader's abilities will be greatly magnified.

Other formulations for increasing the viability of narcissistic leadership are somewhat less passive and submissive than Maccoby's (2000). For instance, Kets de Vries (1997) suggests safeguards such as organizational checks and balances, frank feedback, and executive training to keep narcissistic leaders in check, although Glad (2002) warns that such constraints must be "clear and impersonally used" (34) and non-humiliating lest they be more destructive than constructive. Kets de Vries and Miller (1997) also recommend avoiding the problem as much as possible by reducing narcissists' influence, transferring them out of harm's way, and keeping inexperienced and insecure subordinates out of their reach. Finally, Kramer (2003) makes his suggestions directly to the narcissistic leader, entreating them to "retain a...sense of proportion and...self-awareness" (64), keep their life simple, nurture their humility, understand their weaknesses, and reflect on everything they do. However, while these suggestions may be advisable for those who wish to optimize their leadership abilities (Collins, 2001), it is far from clear that they are the types of practices to which even the most well-adapted narcissist would be amenable.

### **Predictive Validity**

While it is instructive to conduct research in order identify the trends associated with narcissistic leadership, and to develop expectations and strategies based on these trends, it is not clear how well such a general understanding can help us make reliable predictions in any particular case. For instance, Post (1991; 1993b) accurately warned that Saddam Hussein would find demands that stipulated his unconditional surrender humiliating, and thus unacceptable. However, Post also predicted that Saddam "does not wish a conflict in which Iraq will be grievously damaged and his stature as a leader destroyed" (Post, 1991, 286). Later, Post (2003) stated that

Saddam would not go down to the last flaming bunker if he had a way out, but...could have been extremely dangerous and might have stopped at nothing if he was backed into a corner, if he believed his very survival as a world-class political actor was threatened. It was believed that Saddam could have responded with unrestrained aggression, ordering the use of whatever weapons and resources were at his disposal, in what would surely be a tragic and bloody final act (216).

This prediction stands in stark contrast to the overwhelming initial military victory by coalition forces in Operation Iraqi Freedom, and to the capture of Saddam Hussein the infamous “spider hole” on December 14, 2003. This is not to criticize Post, whose political profiles have been invaluable to the U.S. and its security (e.g., Schneider & Post, 2003). It is simply to note that ultimately our research is of greatest value when it can help us predict the actual behaviors of narcissistic leaders (Funder, 2001).

**“The current research on narcissism and leadership accords well with the idea that narcissism is positively linked to attaining a leadership position, but not necessarily to performing well in that position.”**

#### CURRENT RESEARCH

The current research on narcissism and leadership accords well with the idea that narcissism is positively linked to attaining a leadership position, but not necessarily to performing well in that position. For instance, as noted above, narcissists garner higher leadership ratings than non-narcissists (Chemers, et al., 2000; Sümer, et al., 2001). Our field data (Pittinsky & Rosenthal, 2006) support this finding, but with a major caveat—the benefits of narcissism for leadership wane with time. In our study, members of small project-groups (five members per group) reported in the first month of the group’s existence that the

more narcissistic group members provided more leadership than did the less narcissistic members. However, by the end of the semester (and the end of the group’s existence), narcissistic group members were no longer viewed as leaders. These findings are supported by non-leadership-oriented narcissism research—narcissists make positive first impressions because they are outgoing and entertaining, but they are routinely disliked within a few weeks (Paulhus, 1998).

Our data (Pittinsky & Rosenthal, 2006) do not address why the narcissistic group members fell out of favor, at least as leaders, with their peers. However, some laboratory-based research suggests that it may be related to narcissists’ overconfidence and overvaluation of their contributions to work. For instance, in their review of narcissism research relevant to workplace issues, Robins and Paulhus (2001) state that “[n]arcissistic individuals have inflated views of themselves [compared to objective measures or others’ subjective views] regardless of whether they are evaluating their task performance, personality traits, expected academic performance, behavioral acts, intelligence, or physical attractiveness” (205). In other words, narcissists’ inflated assessments of their ability are not accompanied by greater ability (Campbell, Goodie & Foster, 2004). For instance, narcissism is related to job satisfaction for people in sales (as well as to their comfort with ethically questionable sales behaviors) but not to their actual sales performance (Soyer, Rovenpor & Kopelman, 1999). Narcissists believe that they are empathetic (that they can understand others’ intentions and emotions); however, they overestimate their social judgment skills much more than do others (Ames & Kammrath, 2004). Narcissists make riskier decisions and are less interested in low-risk decisions than non-narcissists, and thus lose more often than do non-narcissists (Campbell, et al., 2004). However, their predictions about future performance (even on similar future tasks) are not tempered by their actual past performance on those tasks. Overall, even when narcissists underperform others, they still maintain the belief that they will do better than others in the future—not necessarily a recipe for maintaining dedication and loyalty among one’s followers. Put succinctly, “there is a kind of manager who routinely over evaluates his or her performance, and that tendency is associated with poor leadership” (Hogan, et al., 1994, 496).

A final method of research on narcissism and leadership (along with the case-study, field-based, and lab-based research reviewed throughout this paper) is the historiometry method, which combines the examination of biographical information of historic figures (i.e., the case-study method) with quantitative measurement, including content analysis of texts and the use of adapted personality measures. In one notable study (Deluga, 1997), independent raters read profiles based on archival evidence describing each of the U.S. presidents through Ronald Reagan (not surprisingly, politicians score higher on narcissism scales than do individuals in many other professions; Hill & Yousey, 1998). Without knowing that they were rating presidents, or even prominent politicians, the raters gave each president narcissism, charisma, and performance ratings based on their profiles. Based on these ratings, presidential narcissism predicted charisma, creativity, war avoidance, great decisions, mean greatness, and consensus of greatness, but not war entry.

Interestingly, although the author does not elaborate on the overall narcissism scores of the presidents, the second most narcissistic president in the study is Franklin D. Roosevelt and the third is Lyndon B. Johnson (the first is Chester A. Arthur). Their legacies, leading the U.S. successfully through World War II for F.D.R versus escalating the country's role in Vietnam for L.B.J., were markedly different. In contrast, domestically, *both* presidents successfully promoted bold and transformative social programs. Also, Nixon and Lincoln are both in the mid-range of narcissism scores, 16th and 24th respectively. It is apparent then that narcissism, as defined and rated in this study, is clearly not necessary to either presidential disaster or presidential greatness. Finally, Jimmy Carter, who was described by Glad and Whitmore (1991) in narcissistic terms, was ranked 27th of 39 presidents in narcissism, suggesting a stark lack of agreement between authors and/or methods. Overall, Deluga's (1997) results should be taken with a grain of salt for methodological reasons (e.g., different individuals rated different presidents, and the narcissism measure used as a basis for narcissism scores likely confounds narcissism and healthy self-esteem; Rosenthal, 2005). However, his method is noteworthy, especially because it provides a means for making more objective assertions about historical figures than does the case-study method.

## CONCLUSION

This paper began with the assertion that it is the egotistical needs for power and admiration that set narcissistic leaders apart from other leaders (Kets de Vries & Miller, 1997). The downside of such egocentric, ego-driven leadership is clearly articulated from diverse perspectives (e.g., Conger, 1997; Glad, 2002; Gladwell, 2002; Kramer, 2003). Leaders who convince us of their primacy by taking more than their share of the credit for success while blaming all of their failures on others are likely to bring disaster to those they lead (Gladwell, 2002), at least in the long run (Robins & Paulhus, 2001). However, it is also plausible that without such intra-personally driven leaders, we would live in a world relatively devoid of bold innovation and social change (e.g., Maccoby, 2000). And whether or not narcissistic leaders provide a net gain or loss, it seems inevitable that narcissists will continue to become our leaders by force of their charisma and self-promotion (Hogan, et al., 1990, 1994). It is therefore incumbent on researchers to address the eclectic theoretical formulations of narcissistic leadership by testing specific hypotheses using empirical data. A partial list of the issues we might consider includes: Narcissism versus confidence and self-esteem; optimal conditions for narcissistic leadership; gaining versus maintaining power; followers who choose narcissistic leaders; realms of success and failure; avoiding the downfall; and predictive validity. By understanding these and other aspects of narcissistic leadership, we can begin to see more clearly whether narcissistic leaders' "incredible pros" outweigh their "inevitable cons" or vice versa (Maccoby, 2000, 69).

## ENDNOTE

Likewise, Sheng (2001) suggests that Mao's rise to power depended on collectively damaged and needy followers in China.

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