

What's the difference between male and female narcissists?

By Sam Vaknin, Ph.D.

Question:

It seems as though most articles that are written about narcissism are about males. Is there any difference between male narcissists and female narcissists?

Answer:

I keep using the male third person singular in my writings ("he") because most narcissists (75%) are males and because there is no difference between the male and female narcissists except in two things:

In the manifestation of their narcissism, female and male narcissists, inevitably, do tend to differ. They emphasize different things. They transform different elements of their personality and of their life into the cornerstones of their disorder. They both conform to cultural stereotypes, gender roles, and social expectations.

Women, for instance, concentrate on their body (as they do in eating disorders: Anorexia Nervosa and Bulimia Nervosa). They flaunt and exploit their physical charms, their sexuality, their socially and culturally determined "femininity". In its extreme form this is known as HPD or the Histrionic Personality Disorder.

Many female narcissists secure their Narcissistic Supply through their more traditional gender roles: the home, children, suitable careers, their husbands ("the wife of..."), their feminine traits, their role in society, etc. It is no wonder that narcissists - both men and women - are chauvinistically conservative. They depend to such an extent on the opinions of people around them - that, with time, they are transformed into ultra-sensitive seismographs of public opinion, barometers of prevailing winds and guardians of conformity. Narcissists cannot afford to seriously alienate those who reflect to them their False Self. The very proper and on-going functioning of their Ego depends on the goodwill and the collaboration of their human environment.

Even the self destructive and self defeating behaviors of narcissists conform to traditional masculine and feminine roles. Besieged and consumed by pernicious guilt feelings - many a narcissist seek to be punished. The self-destructive narcissist plays the role of the "bad guy" (or "bad girl"). But even then it is within the traditional socially allocated roles. To ensure social opprobrium (read: attention, i.e., narcissistic supply), the narcissist cartoonishly exaggerates these roles. A woman is likely to label herself a "whore" and a male narcissist to style himself a "vicious, unrepentant criminal". Yet, these again are traditional social roles. Men are likely to emphasize intellect, power, aggression, money, or social status.

Women are likely to emphasize body, looks, charm, sexuality, feminine "traits", homemaking, children and childrearing - even as they seek their masochistic punishment.

Another difference is in the way they react to treatment. Women are more likely to resort to therapy because they are more likely to admit to their psychological problems. But while men may be less inclined to DISCLOSE or to expose their problems to others (the macho-man factor) - it does not necessarily imply that they are less prone to admit it to themselves. Women are also more likely to ask for help than men. Yet, the prime rule of narcissism must never be forgotten: the narcissist uses anything available to obtain his (or her) Narcissistic Supply. Children happen to be more around the female narcissist because women are still the primary caregivers and the ones who give birth. It is easier for a woman to think of her children as her extensions because they once indeed were her physical extensions and because her on-going interaction with them is both more intensive and more extensive. This means that the male narcissist is more likely to regard his children as a nuisance than as a source of rewarding Narcissist Supply - especially as they grow older and become autonomous. Devoid of the diversity of alternatives available to men - the narcissistic woman fights to maintain her most reliable source of supply: her children. Through insidious indoctrination, guilt formation, emotional extortion, deprivation and other psychological mechanisms, she tries to induce in them a dependence, which cannot be easily unraveled.

But, there is no psychodynamic difference between children as sources of narcissistic supply - and money, or intellect, or any other Source of Narcissistic Supply. So, there is no psychodynamic difference between male and female narcissists. The only difference is in their choices of sources of narcissistic supply.

There are mental disorders, which afflict a specific sex more often. This has to do with hormonal or other physiological dispositions, with social and cultural conditioning through the socialization process, and with role assignment through the gender differentiation process. None of these seem to be strongly correlated to the formation of malignant narcissism.

The Narcissistic Personality Disorder (as opposed, for instance, to the Borderline or the Histrionic Personality Disorders, which afflict women more than men) seems to conform to masculine social mores and to the prevailing ethos of capitalism. Ambition, achievements, hierarchy, ruthlessness, drive are both social values and narcissistic male traits.

Social thinkers like Lasch speculated that modern American culture - a narcissistic, self-centered one - increases the rate of incidence of the Narcissistic Personality Disorder.

To this Kernberg answered, rightly: "The most I would be willing to say is that society can make serious psychological abnormalities, which already exist in some percentage of the population, seem to be at least superficially appropriate."

The Female Narcissist

by Irene Matiatos, Ph.D.

Abusive behavior in men or women can be a function of many underlying issues. Personality disorders or their milder counterparts (i.e., "traits" or "features") are one underlying etiology. This article tries to help the reader understand the mindset of the female with NPD or with narcissistic features.

Like her narcissistic male counterpart, this lady harbors deeply held and undisputed irrational underlying beliefs that affect her feelings and behavior. Most of these beliefs are never questioned and are only dimly realized, if they are realized at all. While we all harbor irrational beliefs, those with personality disorders harbor belief systems that are deeply embedded and intertwined.

A Real Charmer

Dana is an extremely pretty 23-year old young lady. A delight on the surface, she has an uncanny knack of presenting herself extremely well to the target audience she wants to impress. She has a corresponding almost magical ability to make people feel verrrry good. She can WOW you! You'll be gushing (or panting if you're a guy), and there just isn't anything you wouldn't do to please her. She will continue to reward your good behavior as long as she needs you. After all, it is very hard work to be "on" so much of the time.

If she's accomplished her mission and you are no longer useful, she spends less and less energy being perfectly charming and engaging. In most cases Dana has no real desire to be disrespectful, but as she "relaxes," becoming more "herself," she becomes quiet or mildly disrespectful.

A Typical Narcissist

The problem is that the only person Dana cares about is Dana. You are no more than the object who provides her with whatever it is she wants and needs: love, admiration, money, encouragement, support, etc. While she *pretends* to care, and indeed *wants* to care, the reality is that she *doesn't care*. Her world starts and stops with herself. She hides that fact pretty well from most people; especially those who are consistently meaningful to her (i.e., parents, husband, siblings, boss, etc.). Most of these individuals would be shocked to hear this, and in fact would think you're crazy!

Dana is typical as pretty female narcissists go. She relies on her beauty and her charm. She feels good about herself as long as she "has it over" anybody she considers "the competition."

Few Real Friends

Parents are parents and too often love unconditionally, but friends and acquaintances don't. As a result, while new people Dana meets like her, the more they got to know her, the less interested they are in her company. Except, of course, for the young men, most of whom vie for her attention.

Other than a childhood best friend with virtually non-existent self esteem, there are no friends. There are acquaintances and those who share her environment as well as the many men who surrounded her - all of whom she refers to as "friends," but there really are no friends.

She explains this deficit by rationalizing that her peers disappoint her in one way or another. This one uses drugs, that one you can't trust, the other one is jealous of her, etc. There is *virtually no* recognition that the reason people who are not related to her or have no sexual interest in her do not like her given how she treats them!

I'm The Best!

Dana is not content unless she feels she has it over her peers, especially female peers. She believes she has the prettiest face, the nicest hair, and the best figure - which she flaunts with her form-fitting, sexy, and hip wardrobe. She is always well-dressed, even when lounging around. "Studied cool" describes her style. While giving the impression of having thrown together any old top and pair of jeans, the trained eye can discern the hours and hours spent trying the outfits on, making up to appear not made up, etc.

Every asset she has, she flaunts. One weekend, invited to spend a weekend with some new friends at their family's home in a poor section of a neighboring town, she found reason to make a 30-mile detour to her parents' upscale, gorgeous home - to show it off - as though announcing her supremacy. Of course, she would *never* admit that's why she came home. Her reasons are always framed in wording that casts her in a positive light such as "It's my dad's birthday, or, "I have to pick up something important I forgot." Never an honest reason like, "I wanted to show off the house to intimidate them."

Jealousy

Jealousy is a huge issue. Her own envy is as cut off from her consciousness as Wisconsin is cut off from the Atlantic Ocean. While she has no clue regarding her pervasive jealousy, it is sadly evident to the sensitive observer.

One year Dana didn't get her cousin a Birthday present. While Stephanie routinely bought Dana beautiful and expensive gifts, Dana couldn't say why she didn't get Stephanie anything. When pressed, annoyed, she provided a series of senseless answers. "I made a deal with my friends that we were not to exchange gifts." "Did you made that arrangement with Stephanie?" "No, but I'm not getting any gifts. We're going to lunch. I'll pay." Not only did she not end up paying, Stephanie paid for both Dana as well as for Dana's boyfriend!

The "problem" was that Stephanie, her peer, had gotten her life together. Also beautiful, she found her calling and was pursuing an advanced degree with straight As - a feat Dana couldn't hope to accomplish. She also had a rich boyfriend who adored her. You get the picture. When asked point-blank if she was jealous of Stephanie, Dana replied too quickly and with an affected laugh, "Jealous of Stephanie? *WHAT* is there to be jealous about?"

The Price She Pays

Part of the price Dana pays to manipulate others is the exhaustion required to be "on" much of the time. When caught with her vigilant guard down, she is not nice: often impatient, short, arrogant and condescending, reflecting her near chronic bad mood. Shopkeepers, boyfriends who try too hard and all the not-too-important people in her life who will put up with it are the unwitting victims. This is subtle. For example, one day she walked into her compulsively clean mother's house and saw a leaf on the sparkling floor by her feet. Instead of picking it up, she asked, "What's that?" Her mother, almost on cue, dropped what she was doing to pick up the leaf by her daughter's feet.

The Devil in Disguise

The apparent angel is the devil in disguise.

A compulsive liar who needs to mislead to maintain her unblemished facade, Dana is not a mean or cruel person. This young woman *really wants to do the*

right thing. While she derives a measure of immediate satisfaction from her cruelty, when forced to face her behavior, she is not happy she mistreats others. After all, a misbehavior is not in keeping with her perfect image of herself! When reality occasionally hits her and she is confronted with her condescending acts, she becomes upset with herself, often in tears. For a short time. Soon all is forgotten. Time heals or she takes solace in blaming others. When she presents her selectively-presented view, it sounds compelling. Until one realizes nothing ever seems to be her issue. Someone or something else is to blame - or the entire topic is dropped. No matter how much she has vowed to correct these behaviors, she does not. She cannot because she will not.

Why, Why, Why?

She cannot because she chooses not to face the truth about herself. She cannot face that her nature is in fact dark and very imperfect. She cannot face that she is no more special, no more unique, no more perfect than anybody else.

Unthinkable! What can she possibly fall back on if she were to simply enjoy her many assets as well as accept and work around the impact of her many deficits?

She *believes* special rules apply to her, and she is not willing to give these up without a struggle. She's secretly glad others haven't figured out how to be as special as she is. Giving up her specialness is unthinkable. It does not feel good.

How, How, How?

Keep in mind that narcissism is a lifelong pattern developing from childhood and believed to have a biological basis. If deception and pretense have provided a lifetime of comforts and esteem supplies, why mess things up? Isn't it more satisfying to concern herself with gratification in the moment? Why work when you can instead do *just enough* to get by? Better to spend that energy cultivating one's external assets and targets. These yield immediate rewards.

After all, the only thing she compromises is herSelf, her integrity, her relationships. All the things she has never known or understood, but thinks she knows well.

Trustworthiness

With all these issues, the narcissistic woman (or man for that matter) cannot be trusted. *They are not trustworthy* - unless they are expending energy *pretending* to be trustworthy. So, at best, their trustworthiness is inconsistent. Like the male abuser, her moods are unpredictable. When frustrated, the energy demands of being "on" are too great. Her frustration slips away from her - and spills onto anybody unfortunate enough to be in the way.

In a Nutshell

To feel whole, a woman like Dana *needs* to be the center of attention, be the prettiest, the most fortunate, the most talented, the bestest. She cultivates others who will be manipulated by her to admire her, adore her, inflate her, love her, and overlook her pretense, lies and half-truths.

If she is questioned, she distances. This simple yet effective technique invariable affects the codependents in her life. On cue, they lay low and let the issue drop or chase her, thinking they must have done something wrong/ worrying that she won't want to be with them. Should an admirer truly believe in her specialness and try too hard to win her, they are treated with contempt instead of charity. These people represent that which she despises: only the weak and common permit themselves to be demeaned.

The bottom line is that this very beautiful, very charming (and extremely manipulative) young woman has absolutely no concern for others apart from those who are in a position to provide her with narcissistic supplies.

Does anybody know a Dana? Even worse, have any men out there fallen in love with a Diana? (May God help you...)