

# How Narcissists Function – a Phenomenological Analysis Based on Case Studies

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**Abstract:** Power structures are narcissists' "natural place". But they are destructive, because such people invert their insecurity into dominance, unfairness, brutality and disregard for others. The same applies to narcissists who dominate others by celebrating their weakness; who do not accept that they are the "aggressor", the perpetrator. These two forms of narcissism are distilled from case studies coming from accompanying especially traumatized persons. The cases were analysed in an eidetical-phenomenological way: the essence of narcissism is crystallised from these long-term-evaluations of actual cases. Narcissists seem to celebrate their strength, but their innermost self is weak. Self-confidence, self-reflection, self-regulation and self-distance are lacking. Narcissists live in concentric circles: (1) in the circle of loyalty, (2) in the circle who admire or bemoan the narcissists. If they are not acknowledged, they end up (3) in the circle of destruction. There everything bothering adding to the narcissist's insecurity is eliminated. Narcissists function according to several principles and use the principles of the power game. But as they need the security a pseudo-reality gives them, they destroy averse any opposing reality. Their victims therefore live in a constant nightmare – until the narcissists fail. Some hints are given how to survive narcissists without being destroyed.

**Keywords:** Narcissists, Abuse, Trauma, Power-Narcissist, Powerless-Narcissist, Concentric Existence, Power Game

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## 1. Narcissists in Power Structures

### 1.1. Narcissists Preferred

It seems that some advertisements for leading positions announce: "narcissists preferred". (Berschneider, 59ff. [1]; Chamorro-Premuzic, 1 [2]). Power structures are narcissists' "natural place" (Dominguez, 21 [3]). They gravitate to power positions where they are admired; they are charming, so leaders gravitate towards them (Schneck, 1064, 1079 [4]). But they are destructive, because such people invert their insecurity into dominance, unfairness, brutality and disregard for others (Dominguez, 21 [3]; Berschneider, 61 [1]; Schneck, 1250, 1321 [4]). They overestimate their power and competence and take high risks (Chamorro-Premuzic, 1 [2]). The other kind of narcissists dominate others by celebrating their weakness; from now on called powerless-narcissists. Everybody has to give them a helping hand and cannot break the relationship. The victim is always "right", those who do not believe this are automatically wrong and become the

"aggressor", the perpetrator.

In order to understand the narcissistic way of living we have to be aware of its inner dynamism. Narcissists seem to be strong personalities, in reality they are not (Berschneider, 119 [1]). The power they want to gain at all costs serves to give them absolute control. Primitive narcissists can easily be detected; the intelligent ones are more "sophisticated" (Meredith Miller in: Mirza, 77 and 90 [5]) and hide behind niceness, cooperation, success and good will; this is "the worst and most insidious form of narcissism" (Mirza, 135 [5]; Dinesh Kumar V [6]) which is, of course, the most common in the power game. Although those narcissists seem strong, they suffer from the same problems as all narcissists. Narcissism is in essence a lack of self-competence; the "me-dimension" is too weak (Dinesh Kumar V [6]). For a fully developed and mature personality, self-directedness, cooperation with others and self-transcendence are necessary. The lack of one of these dimensions leads to a lack in the other dimensions (Bonelli, 30 [7]).

## 1.2. Phenomenological Analysis

This article is based on a philosophical methodology, the *eidetic-phenomenological analysis* of case studies. It is based on long-term accompanying mainly traumatized persons. This methodology permits us to gain an insight into the essential traits of the phenomenon, in this case narcissism. Existential phenomenology is able to respect the psychological dimension and the dynamism stimulated and determined by the phenomenon.

In order to gain the *intersubjective* perspective, which is crucial for the eidetic analysis, literature on narcissism is consulted. In this case it means not just to consult psychological specialist literature but also testimonies of other victims who also distil essential points from their own and other peoples' experience. What is published here is an analysis of the dynamism specific to narcissists in power structures, while respecting also the hidden power game of the less known powerless-narcissists. This article is a short summary of a broader study, which will soon be published in book form.

The first step will be to describe the centre of the narcissistic approach to life; the second step will be dedicated to the three concentric circles, which characterize the functioning of the narcissist's way of living. The third step will describe the role narcissists play in power structures. In the fourth step, some hints are given on how to deal with narcissists.

## 2. The Centre of the Narcissistic Character

### 2.1. An Initial Definition

In literature a difference is made between positive and negative narcissism, that is, *positive or negative self-reference* (Wardetzki [8]; Berschneider, 17ff. [1]; Wolf, 17 [9]). In order to develop a realistic, un-exaggerated self-reference, children need to learn self-control, cooperation skills and self-transcendence (Bonelli, 74, 94 [7]). Children mainly acquire a healthy relationship to themselves through experiencing unconditional love, protection and praise, which makes them able to cooperate with others and accept wider and different world views (Bonelli, 85, 189f. [7]). An unhealthy self-love leads to deficits of the personality: to exaggerated self-esteem, looking down on others and a lack of self-transcendence, the three traits of narcissists! (Bonelli, 187f., 28, 32 [7]; Völkel [10])

Berschneider distinguishes *three forms of narcissism*: (1) the grandiose narcissists, who are convinced of their enormous importance and excellence, while abusing others and behaving in an invidious and arrogant way. Such "pathologically self-absorbed" (Evans, 244 [11]) people have a strong tendency to hubris. (2) The fragile narcissist is hyper vigilant, shy and sensitive, but easily hurt (3) The well-functioning narcissist is optimally adapted, leads indirectly, and is even charming – but is as destructive as the grandiose

narcissist (Berschneider, 29f., 36f., 41ff. [1]; Behrendt, 269f. [12]; Blackburn, 61ff. [13]). Each form of narcissism is somehow pathological, because narcissists cannot learn, change or deal with reality; they depend on admiration or pity (Berschneider, 30, 63ff. [1]; Behrendt, 266 [12]; Wardetzki, 28 [8]). As narcissists hide their inner truth from themselves, they often hide their disorder from others. Intelligent narcissists are quite good in this. The "covert passive-aggressive narcissist" (Mirza, 339ff. [5]) is thus successful; that is why those narcissists easily find their way into power structures.

### 2.2. Deterioration of the Me-function

Narcissism may be seen as a "result of an especially *low self-esteem*. This kind of narcissist's self-esteem is so low that their personality becomes fragile (Wolf, 15 [9]), and over-dependent on the opinion of others" (Blackburn, 61 [13]). Narcissists try to prove their value because they have been deeply hurt and feel shame; self-confidence, self-reflection, self-regulation and self-distance are lacking (Wardetzki, 15, 30 [8]; Berschneider, 43, 54, 79ff. [1]; Behrendt, 173ff. [12]; Dominguez, 23 [3]; Bonelli, 52, 62ff. and 127 [7]). This can result from "excessive criticism" or "excessive appraisal" in childhood or "nonchalance by parents or guardian" (Wolf, 13f. [9]). The "self" might be broken because of a traumatic experience such as rape or abuse, but also because of micro-traumatic events, especially in primary relationships (Berschneider, 72f., 80, 85, 67ff. [1]; Bonelli, 18f., 43f., 52, 57 [7]; Wardetzki, 37ff., 80f., 93 [14]; Evans, 253 [11]). These influences can lead to the disintegration of the personality, to a lack of basic trust, as well as to a distorted sense of reality and the inability to form sound relationships (Behrendt, 87 [12]; Berschneider, 73f., 123 [1]; Wardetzki, 28 [8]; Bonelli, 91, 94 [7]; Bergmann, 51 [15]). Narcissists are always afraid of failure; they therefore lack resilience and the power to deal with a problematic reality (Wardetzki, 96 [14]; Bergmann, 22, 45 [15]; Dominguez, 22ff. [3]). This results from a kind of compensation: narcissists overemphasise the primary compensation they had chosen as a hurt child who tried to gain love. Strong narcissists present themselves as heroes; the weak ones celebrate that they are the permanent victim. Brought up in the vicious circle of useless compensation, they do everything to never return to this destructive initial position:

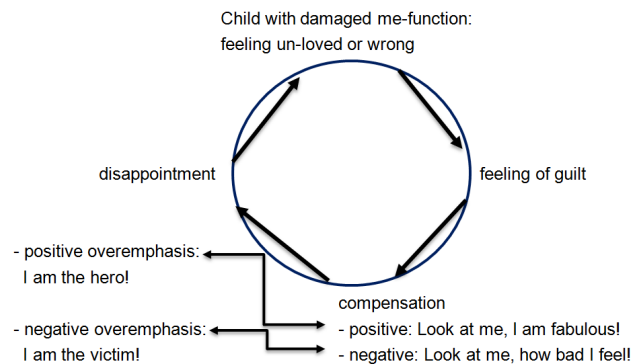


Figure 1. The vicious circle.

This is how the two main forms of narcissism occur. In order to protect themselves from this vicious circle, narcissists develop by overemphasising a secondary self, or false self: the hero or the victim. They tend to fulfil the wishes of others, using selective empathy (Berschneider, 76ff. [1]; Behrendt, 273 [12]; Wardetzki, 22 [8]) – but they are weak in real relationships (Wolf, 17 [9]). In their mind narcissists succeed or are dependent and therefore attribute special rights to themselves out of a sense of grandiosity (Wolf, 24 [9]) or need, or excessive self-esteem (Bonelli, 31, 52, 126, 151 [7]; Wardetzki, 15, 25, 29, 74 [8]; Berschneider, 47, 101f., 127 [1]; Bergmann, 23, 45, 26ff. [15]; Dominguez, 23 [3]; Wardetzki, 67f. [14]). “They expect always to be the centre of attention” (Wolf, 23 [9]) – of admiration or pity.

### 2.3. Elements of Functioning

Narcissists can function well as they have a very strong focus – but they are also fishing for compliments and showing off (Bonelli, 108f. [7]; Berschneider, 73 [1]). They manipulate others by means of a strong, but selective, empathy, and manipulate reality for their own ends (Wardetzki, 165 [8]; Blackburn, 63 [13]; Dominguez, 22 [3]; Wolf, 23 [9]; Völkel [16]; Dinesh Kumar V [6]). They are masters in this and mesmerise others in order to abuse them. (Behrendt, 349f., 373ff. [12]); Wardetzki, 10, 14, 43, 73 [8]; Wardetzki, 9 [14]; Evans, 253 [11]; Morningstar, 259ff. [17]). Since they are very convinced of their own value and importance, they tend to convince others. The strongly positive emotions focused on themselves, however, go along with strongly negative emotions towards adverse facts, feelings or the judgments of others, which they experience as a form of *lèse-majesté*, or even affront, which arouse strong feelings of rage, hatred and revenge (Wardetzki, 31f. [14]; Dominguez, 23 [3]). They will never admit these feelings – and they are even not aware of them because they hide even their negative traits from themselves (Wolf, 14 [9]).

## 3. The Concentric Existence of Narcissists

Narcissists have a certain way of arranging their world. It is all a defence of the weak “me” which shows as either strength or neediness; the self is always the centre of the world.

- (1) They create an inner circle, a fortress against all adversity, and this becomes the core of their existence. Narcissists are “living in their own bubble” (Wolf, 19 [9]). People who are part of the fortress have to be absolutely loyal. This circle is exclusive and closed. It is the only place where moderate criticism is possible, but it has to serve the purpose of providing more admiration (Wolf, 24 [9]; Wulf, 100f. [18]).
- (2) The second circle consists of followers who admire or bemoan. For narcissists, admiration and bemoaning are a kind of drug, which replaces real love; [38] this is why power-narcissists show excessive niceness to others; they flatter and manipulate the powerful in

order to share in their power – however they do not really respect those in power (Bonelli, 122, 150 [7]; Dominguez, 22 [3]; Berschneider, 102 [1]; Wardetzki, 29 [14]; Behrendt, 97 [12]; Blackburn, 63 [13]). Lower narcissists and higher narcissists meet each other in mutual admiration (Berschneider, 41f. [1]; Wardetzki, 45f. [8]). A weak-narcissist remains isolated, but wants to be counted among the poorest creatures ever seen – no help is possible. No narcissist accepts criticism (Berschneider, 128 [1]; Wolf, 16 [9]; Shudi Liao et al., 3 [19]). They think that they are absolutely right and look for publicity for their worldview, insinuating that what is public must be true (Wardetzki, 26 [8]).

- (3) Narcissists get rid of objectionable facts (Blackburn, 77 [13]), and exclude critical people by means of insults, accusations, character assassination and defamation – without pity or empathy (Dominguez, 24 [3]; Berschneider, 40 [1]; Bonelli, 148f., 194 [7]). This is the third circle. A psychopathological narcissism shows malign streaks (Schneck, 707 [4]). These narcissists ignore norms and even laws, and follow their own rules (Wardetzki, 74 [8]; Bonelli, 130f., 136, 144 [7]). In this circle they are seen as antisocial and cruel personalities; correction is absolutely impossible (Bonelli, 103f., 198 [7]; Wolf, 15 [9]).

The deeper meaning of this behaviour is that narcissists want to protect the real, weak “Me” – although they are not conscious of doing so. They create their own perverse world in which they are always right and never have to take over responsibility.

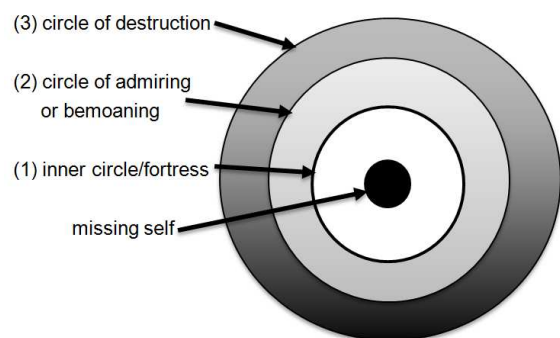


Figure 2. The concentric existence.

## 4. Narcissists in the Power Game

Narcissists are quite successful in the power game, especially if they are intelligent narcissists (Papageorgiou et al. [20]). As a “sane narcissism” is somehow expected in these contexts, the subtle progress to a pathologic form of narcissism is not easily recognized as such. But even traits of malign narcissism may be shown, although psychopathological personalities won’t survive in complex social systems (Schneck, 677ff. [4]).

### 4.1. Principles of Narcissism

I give a brief description of some principles on which

power-narcissists build their power:

- (1) The free-rider-principle is based on the mutual admiration of narcissist and co-narcissist (Shudi Liao et al., 4 [19]).
- (2) The servant-principle: co-narcissists behave like the best servant ever. Their excessive loyalty flows into admiration and lack of criticism (Berschneider, 130 [1]). As a reward they participate in the power of the person they serve (Dinesh Kumar V [6]).
- (3) The cyclist-principle, which is effective in middle positions: the narcissist bows before the person with superior power and carries favour with them, but they suppress those in inferior positions (Chamorro-Premuzic, 2 [2]; Dinesh Kumar V [6]; Shudi Liao et al., 3 [19]).
- (4) The principle of the absolute: narcissists see themselves as absolutely good and always right; their reality is the only reality (Völkel [10]; Dinesh Kumar V [6]). In this game of absolute power, moral restraints or thoughtfulness for others do not exist (Berschneider, 21, 129 [1]; Wardetzki, 23 [8]; Dinesh Kumar V [6]).
- (5) The principle of raising co-narcissists: narcissists motivate others to follow them (Shudi Liao et al., 3 [19]). The more attractive co-narcissists are, the better it is for the narcissist’s self-image. Co-narcissists profit from their relationship and therefore applaud the narcissist without criticising them (Berschneider, 56ff. [1]; Wardetzki, 59 [8]).

Powerless-narcissists follow other principles, but they are no less effective:

- (1) The underdog-principle: I am small, you must help me! Although everybody is forced to help, this help must never lead to changing the situation.
- (2) The servant-principle works the other way around: Everybody has to serve me because I am so weak! Powerlessness and dependence are thus the power which reduces everybody else to serving (Hartmann, 22 [21]).
- (3) The principle of vulnerability: narcissists manipulate others by suggesting: If you act or react in the wrong way you will hurt me! By appealing to the nobility of others they enslave them (Berschneider, 40f. [1]; Resch et al., 65 [22]).
- (4) The principle of the absolute: the suffering of powerless-narcissists seems to be absolute, unique,

hopeless, even terminal. They underestimate the possibilities of healing and force everybody into pitying them – in order to prevent change.

- (5) The principle of raising co-narcissists: narcissists seem to be motivating (Shudi Liao et al., 3 [19]) but their co-dependent are slaves. This gives the powerless-narcissist absolute control and absolute power. Co-narcissists see themselves as powerless victims, but they don’t change the situation either, because they would lose the admiration of those who regard them as being noble.

#### 4.2. The Principles of the Power Game

At first sight narcissists seem to play the power game very efficiently (Dinesh Kumar V [6]). This game follows certain rules. Let me introduce some of its principles. I call it a “game”, because the powerful would never admit that they sometimes act in a harsh and even brutal way!

- (1) Knowing how to use reality to reach their aim: Leaders have to deal with reality and the restrictions imposed by real conditions.
- (2) Knowing what is needed and what is desirable or undesirable, and what people want the powerful to achieve, especially in democratic structures. Leaders always depend on others.
- (3) Knowing who will join in the game: democratic leaders need a majority, and collaborators who show solidarity with them.
- (4) Knowing how to deal with information and the truth: Information is the most important instrument for gaining solidarity and for protecting their power.
- (5) Knowing how to judge and how you will be judged.

Narcissists, however, have only one aim: absolute power; they forget about the other aspects. The principle of the absolute now shows its weakness, because reality is never absolute. This is where the power of narcissists ends: their vision is not compatible with the truth (Ten Brinke et al. [23]). In addition, they neglect and disregard the judgment of others. This is the decisive point in the power game – this is why narcissists finally fail. In the short term they may win, in the long run they will lose. The main problems are enumerated here:

Table 1. Narcissists in the power game.

Power game	narcissist’s strong behaviour	narcissist’s weak behaviour	failure
- using reality	have a strong focus	deny unwanted facts	unrealistic issues
- what is needed	follow their own aim	overlook other perspectives and/or the needs of others	unable to live in real and deeper relationships
- collaboration	have influence on others	influence is based on manipulation	will be seen as defrauder and end up in isolation
- truth	focus on what is important to them	manipulate truth	will be seen as liars, as not reliable
- judging	clear and strong judgement	subjective criteria	their wrong judge-ments will create enemies
- being judged	pretend not to be sensitive to the judgement of others	oversensitive, afraid of devaluation, insecurity	do not change and repeat mistakes

#### 4.3. The Destructive Power of Narcissists

Both kinds of narcissists *really* think that they are right.

Their world consists of projections, which they take for the truth; others have to share this vision, so do organisations (Schneck, 1321ff. [4]). Narcissists are not able to deal with adverse facts, and create a pseudo-reality on which they base

their plans (Wardetzki, 31 [8]; Berschneider, 53 [1]; Dinesh Kumar V [6]). This can lead to terrible impasses. Since their limited reality has to be simple and clear, they function better in hierarchical, top-down-systems where the higher authority tells them what is needed. Bottom-up-systems, like democracy, are a danger to narcissists, because they depend on others and on numerous and complex conditions and expectations. To simplify them, narcissists undermine decision-structures and spread ideologies that attack these structures. However, narcissists' ways of manipulating truth by spreading, repeating and emphasizing alternative "facts", by imposing projections, or quoting authorities and creating pseudo-intersubjectivity ("other competent people also say..."), may be very effective (Wardetzki, 79 [8]; Behrendt, 347ff. [12]; Dinesh Kumar V [6]) – until real truth breaks through. Their ideology is in fact dangerous and "toxic" (Dinesh Kumar V [6])! Under these circumstances employees in higher positions resign inwardly; they do not work best in their job any more, which is a bad development for the business (Chamorro-Premuzic, 1 [2]; Shudi Liao et al., 10f. [19]).

Narcissists negate their negative feelings of others, and ignore the feelings and the dignity of others (Berschneider, 84ff., 93, 128 [1]; Shudi Liao et al., 5 [19]). We experience in feelings what matters, what is of value. This is why narcissists do not acknowledge the dimensions of morality if they ignore feelings. This leads to morally incomprehensible and unacceptable behaviour (Bergmann, 51ff. [15]; Dinesh Kumar V [6]). A victim of these perversions is afraid and feels like a prisoner in a Kafkaesque situation, as though they are in the "wrong film" (Berschneider, 32 [1]; Shudi Liao et al., 3, 10 [19]). From the absolute world of narcissists no escape is possible. This drives victims to become psychologically ill – which confirms the narcissist's view of them (Bonelli, 49f. [7]; Arabi, 146ff. [24]). It is an absolutely destructive vicious circle!

All this does *not* have *any influence* on narcissists, because they do not take any responsibility for causing it (Bonelli, 26 [7]). Here another pathological element becomes evident: narcissists seem to be incapable of insight into their errors; they do not learn and attribute their guilt to others. The loss of reality can be so deep that narcissists live in a state of delusion. This is personally dangerous, because their fall will be deep and can even lead to suicide.

## 5. Dealing with Narcissists

I will conclude with some hints, from Berschneider, Arabi and others, on how to deal with narcissists (Berschneider, 23, 131-146ff. [1]; Wardetzki, 159 [8]; Arabi, 188ff. [24]). In order to *protect* yourself against narcissists you have to be aware of the fact that they are weak in one point: the truth (Wolf, 68ff. [9]; Evans, 26 [11]; Mirza, 340 [5]). That is why they use "gaslighting" in order to destabilize the perception of reality, hence of the truth, by their victims (Wolf, 69 [9]; Stangl [25]). Gaslighting is one form of "devaluing tactics" (Mirza, 151 [5]) practiced by narcissists (Arabi, 56 [24]). It is crucial to stick to the truth about yourself and your own

value in order to escape from the nightmare created by the narcissist and to not end up in traumatization (Arabi [24]). This is how you gain resilience against the psychological reactions caused by these persons, such as, fear, anxiety, emotional freezing and the feeling of being a victim (Arabi, 183ff. [24]). The truth of the real situation should be documented in writing, or by intersubjective witnessing (Arabi, 188, 384 [24]; Dinesh Kumar V [6]). This helps to unmask the "malicious, pathological liar" (Evans, 212 [11]). Norms and rules (as a framework) must be applied without exception. Learn to see the narcissist as such; see the weak person behind the big ego, and accept that they will not change! This calls for "reframing" techniques (Arabi, 390 [24]). Find a new attitude towards the situation, defend your boundaries and stay independent and professional (Arabi, 384f., 389 [24]). Respect the narcissist as an individual, but not his/her attitude and behaviour. Look for help and think of positive solutions.

*Co-existence* with narcissists is only possible if their power is defined, thus limited. Narcissists must know about the bad consequences of negative behaviour; facts, solidarity and rules must be clearly accepted by everyone concerned, even by the narcissist. In order to protect organisations from narcissism it is important to evaluate them in the right way: not top-down but bottom-up, because they tend to bedazzle bosses while showing their destructive face only to those in lower positions (Chamorro-Premuzic, 2 [2]; Shudi Liao et al., 11 [19]). Social norms have to be respected; this is the only way how organizations can become and stay fruitful in the long run (Shudi Liao et al., 5 [19]).

It is possible for narcissists to *escape* from their situation if they accept reality and decide to change. This cannot be imposed from outside; they must change themselves (Dominguez, 23 [3]; Bonelli, 175ff. [7]; Evans, 253 [11]). Changing is mainly brought about by *failure*, which confronts narcissists with their fragility and vulnerability, with reality, with others and their reality, and with the necessity to transcend their closed world (Bonelli, 181ff., 230ff., 250, 256 [7]; Blackburn, 61ff. [13]; Berschneider, 47, 109 [1]; Dominguez, 22f. [3]; Wardetzki, 18 [14]; Wardetzki, 168 [8]). Narcissists will not accept therapy unless they are forced to do so by serious failure (Berschneider, 122 [1]); therefore failure must be possible! Don't protect narcissists! Help them when they fall, but be clear about their dysfunctional behaviour (Berschneider, 41ff. [1]). The greatest help and healing is brought about by honest relationships (Berschneider, 123 [1]). This is precisely reflected in Dostoyevsky's suggestion: "To love someone means to see them as God intended them to be." This would grant narcissists the dignity they need and protect their victim(s) from losing their dignity.

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