

## MEN, WOMEN, AND NARCISSISM

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In the latter half of the twentieth century, Western society seemed immersed in an era of self-focus. At the level of the individual, personal needs and gratification took on heightened importance. At the level of nationhood, nationalism and economic protectionism were the guideposts of political decisions. Concern emerged that the church may have been affected by this trend. Were servants of the church becoming more self-focused, drawn to priesthood or religious life as a means of gaining status? These were questions that concerned us greatly, particularly given that one of our mandates is to assess the suitability of those applying for seminary or religious formation. In particular, we were interested in examining the extent to which priests and religious possessed narcissistic traits.

Narcissism is a term that was employed clinically for the first time about 100 years ago, by a physician named Havelock Ellis. The concept gained its name from the Greek myth of Narcissus. The basic myth involves the character of Narcissus who, gifted with beauty and the admiration of others, ultimately turned away from others' love in favor of admiring and adoring himself. Narcissus falls prey to the one condition of his gift (i.e., that he never gaze upon his own reflection); he became fixated on his own image reflected in a pond, and there he died. The flower that then grew in the spot where he died (so the story goes) we have called the "narcissus."

Today the clinical description of narcissism involves much more than vanity. The scale (or "test") that we used in our study assesses six dimensions, in addition to vanity: Authority, Self-sufficiency, Superiority, Exhibitionism, Exploitativeness, and Entitlement. Narcissistic people may or may not think they are more physically attractive than others—they may, for example, hold firmly to the belief that they have special gifts and are entitled to more respect, attention, and admiration than others. One important theoretical point, however, is that the superior, entitled, and even exploitative air put forward by narcissistic people is a defensive cover-up. Most theorists today believe that underneath this façade, self-worth is much lower than in others. Unfortunately, narcissists are too fearful of facing such weakness and poverty in their self-concept; experiences of failure (sometimes called "narcissistic wounds") are intensely negative and at such times, narcissists can see only negative aspects of themselves. There is a tendency toward extremes here and some would argue that there is narcissism evident even in such persons' self-criticism: one narcissistic individual was cited as saying something like "I used to be narcissistic. In fact, I was the biggest narcissist in the world!" Finally, it is important to be aware that most theorists view narcissism as a component of "normal" personality; all of us, to a greater or lesser extent, manifest some narcissistic traits.

In a study we conducted with the assistance of over 100 priests and men and women religious, we examined scores on a scale of narcissism and compared these to scores on scales measuring common personality traits (e.g. extraversion) and interpersonal problems (e.g. being too controlling in relationships). To begin with, we found that overall, our participants did not score high on narcissism. We determined this by comparing the overall mean score of our sample to the normative data available on the measure of narcissism used. This finding led us to conclude that as a group, men and women who have entered religious life do not seem to be narcissistic when compared to the general population. Given the nature of ministry, this was a rather reassuring finding.

More interesting to us was the fact that women scored significantly lower in narcissism than men. Other researchers have not found this difference. Our study was different from others in two important ways; it was the first to look at narcissism in a sample of priests and religious, and our sample was significantly older than



samples used by other researchers. These differences may help to explain the uniqueness of our finding. Perhaps differences in narcissism scores of men and women become more pronounced in the latter stages of adult development.

Our finding may also reflect differences in the formation experiences of priests and men and women religious. Diocesan priests typically report that their formation process focused on awareness of personal role and responsibility, the hierarchy of authority, and the means by which a priest must serve people from his position of authority. Men and women religious report greater emphasis on community life, consensus based decisions, and movement away from hierarchical structure. Interestingly, these differences parallel the socialization (or "formation") of men and women in general. Our society emphasizes competition, autonomy and leadership in males, in contrast to the expression of feelings, nurturance and relationship skills in women. Interestingly, when we divided the sample into three groups, diocesan priests, religious order priests, and women religious, we found that religious order priests exhibited less narcissistic traits than diocesan priests and more narcissistic traits than women religious. This would suggest that differences in narcissism are a function of sex differences as well as differences in the nature of formation.



In order to explore these ideas we looked at the relationship between narcissism scores and scores on measures of interpersonal functioning. For males, narcissism was related most strongly to problems associated with being controlling and a tendency to be autocratic. Moreover, the more narcissistic a male was, the less he was inclined to acknowledge personal problems, weaknesses or worries in general. These relationships were less pronounced for women. To begin with, women's scores on narcissism did not affect their willingness to express worries or concerns. Instead, for women there was a significant relationship between narcissism and the capacity to communicate concerns with others and to assert their feelings and opinions. In fact, narcissism appeared to be something of a protective factor for women, making them less likely to experience interpersonal problems associated with being too submissive and compliant. So, while men are more likely to manifest narcissistic features in a traditional power-oriented manner (e.g. "I want you recognize and respect my authority"), women appear to manifest narcissism in a more relationship-oriented manner (e.g. "My feelings matter and I want you to know what they are").

The findings of this study address several theoretical gaps in our understanding of narcissism. First, contrary to the findings of other researchers, men and women in our sample exhibited different degrees of narcissistic traits. Second, men and women express these traits differently. Finally, men and women encounter different interpersonal problems as a function of narcissistic traits. Whereas men are most likely to be viewed as controlling and rigid, women are more likely to experience problems being too involved in relationships. In addressing narcissism therapeutically and spiritually, we need to acknowledge these important sex differences. With males, the work needs to be based in an understanding of the importance of dominance and submission, whereas with women, the work needs to reflect the importance of relationship and affiliation. It is important to note that these conclusions reflect generalizations that need to be tailored to the individual in any therapeutic or spiritual counseling situation. In addition, our attention to formation issues (both in and out of religious life) needs to recognize the assumptions and expectations that contribute to the differences between men and women in this domain.

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