



Narcissistic Injury and the Self: A Novel Model of Socio-Affective Conflict

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Abstract

Feeling hurt, sad, or angry after a social interaction is something that everyone experiences at some point within their lifetime. This experience is normal, but it has a stigmatized label in the clinical literature, narcissistic injury (NI). NI is an attack on, or challenge of, one's self-esteem and identity that comes from an outside source. This outside source of challenge is, almost always, other people. In the field of psychology, this injury is colloquially applied to individuals with Narcissistic Personality Disorder ("Narcissists"), however all people are capable of feeling their identity and self-esteem threatened by others. A large amount of psychodynamic research has been conducted on clinically significant levels of narcissism, however there is a dearth of academic literature utilizing models to conceptualize typical narcissistic reaction patterns from the general population. This novel model asserts these normative reactions are a function of social conflict or rejection and relate to personal growth.

Keywords: Conflict; Injury; Narcissistic; Behavior; Tendencies

Introduction

In social situations with individuals who have a strong sense of self and do not have Narcissistic Personality Disorder, a disagreement or a lack of empathy can still be perceived as an attack on their self-concept and self-esteem (SCSE), which would display the fact that the person in question is indeed imperfect [1,2]. When people lack empathic connections with others, they are more likely to have narcissistic tendencies [3,4]. Moreover, a higher degree of narcissism is predictive of a reduced desire to take the perspective of others, which is indicative of a lack of empathy [5]. If a person perceives a threat to their identity or self-esteem while in a social setting, they should then be less likely to take the perspective of others, as well as engaging in compensatory behaviors to reaffirm their self-esteem and identity.

Applying the Narcissistic Injury Model to Social Situations

Narcissistic Injury (NI) can occur in any social situation as long as an aspect of a social interaction challenges or

threatens one's self-esteem or identity. The proposed model of NI walks through the stages of this injury and how it can, eventually, be used as a clinical tool. Starting with the first step of the model, "narcissistic threat" which is the initial social transgression upon the individual. The step following the threat is the mind's unconscious desire to protect one's SCSE.

The third step is the mind's response to the threat; internal anger and a desire to dominate the threat; unconsciously mobilizes their mental defenses to protect against it. It is important to distinguish that the transgressor of the social threat to another's SCSE is not initially the object of domination, but rather the feelings elicited by the threat. Depending upon the threatened individual's latent degree of narcissism, this reaction will vary in intensity of anger and dominance behavior.

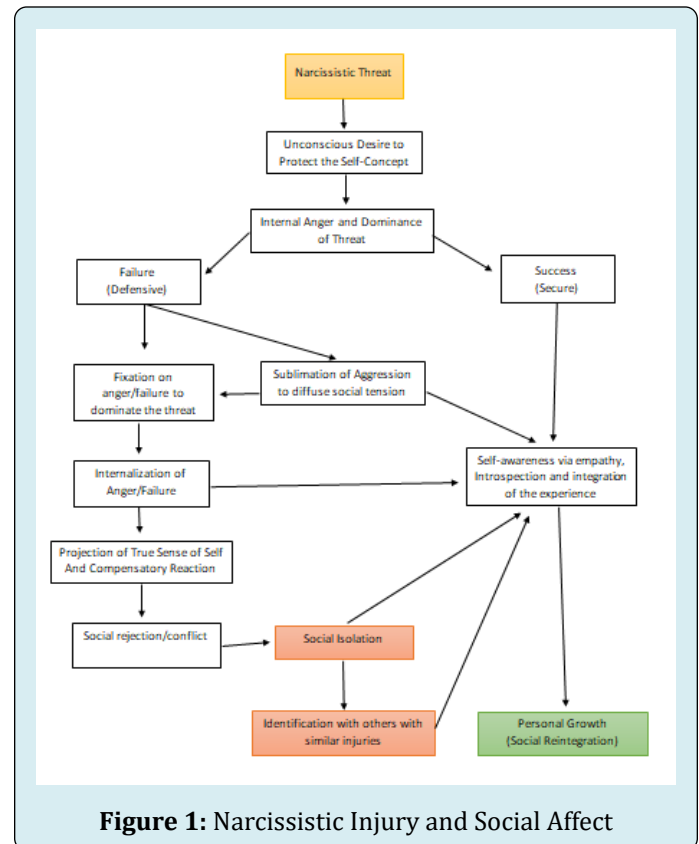
The next step of the model is crucial as it splits into success or failure to dominate the threat. One's ability to defend their SCSE determines the success or failure of domination of the external threat. Successful defense of the

self will occur through self-awareness of the social situation via empathizing with the transgressor(s), introspection, and integration of the experience. Success can involve a great deal of sadness, and although the individual is able to empathize with the transgressor(s) of the NI, it does not always dull the pain of exposing an aspect of the injured person's true sense of self. The final step after empathizing, introspecting, and integrating, is personal growth, which the individual accepts their role in the social conflict and becomes a better version of themselves as a result (the ideal positive outcome from NI).

Failing to dominate the threat via one's own ego strength leaves two options, fight or flee. When fleeing, the individual no longer directly confronts the transgressor(s). When fighting the threat, an individual becomes overtly aggressive to the transgressor(s), sometimes described as "Narcissistic Rage," which is an extreme anger reaction to the threat which can manifest in a number of behavioral forms such as debasement of the transgressor [6]. The model bifurcates further into sublimation of aggression to diffuse social tension, and fixation on failure (and any associated anger). Sublimation is the creative transformation of socially unacceptable desires into socially acceptable ones [7]. The purpose of sublimation is for the individual to recoup from the failure to defend their self-esteem/identity by diffusing the inevitable social tension. The desire to diffuse social tension requires a degree of empathy because the individual needs to recognize discomfort of not only themselves, but of others as well. Because empathy is required, the greater degree of narcissism, the less one's ability (or desire) to empathize with others, and therefore the less the chance they will grow from the injury. The sublimation to diffuse social tension allows for both positive and negative outcomes. There is a possibility for positive sublimation where the injured individual can change their anger into an attempt to empathize and understand the perspective of the transgressor(s). The next step following positive sublimation of aggression to diffuse social tension is self-awareness via the newly found empathy, introspection and integration of the experience. Eventually, the individual is grown from the situation and able to socially re-integrate. One can sublimate their aggression with the intention of diffusing the social tension and fail at doing so, resulting in the injured person fixating on their anger and failure to defend their sense of self.

Fixation on anger and failure leads to the next point in the model, the internalization of anger and failure. Fixation upon any negative emotion can result in rumination, and ultimately emotional distress [8]. Moreover, the internalization of failure and its associated anger can result in the affirmation of a maladaptive response pattern. The emotional distress resulting from fixation and rumination can be handled in a

positive or negative way. The positive way: the result of socio-emotional distress creates an opportunity to learn from the experience, more specifically, self-awareness of the conflict via empathizing with the transgressor(s), introspection, acceptance, and integration of the experience. The negative way: move to the next step in the model, where one attempts to defend their self-esteem and identity by projecting their true sense of self. This projection is reactive to the threat [9] and comes in the form of devaluation. While this projection occurs, a compensatory overcorrection occurs, where the injured person asserts their idealized SCSE.



The aggressive act of projection due to the NI will result in the next step of the model, social rejection or conflict [10]. When isolated, the individual can either stay isolated, or seeking out others with similar injuries with a warped attempt at empathy. Identifying with others with similar injuries may help heal each other's injuries, however these individuals are likely to create an echo chamber for their ideas and to reaffirm their attitudes [11]. At either of these moments, the individual is prone to become "stuck" in either step in the model (highlighted red, see Figure 1). These individuals are however, not condemned to permanent social isolation or identification with others with similar experiences of injury. However, many people are prone to stagnation in the aforementioned areas due to the difficulty to move past the pain of the injured SCSE. If these individuals manage to gain

the self-awareness via empathy and introspection, they will be able to integrate the experience and then ultimately grow as an individual from the NI.

Social Affective Theory of the Self

The concept of the self as described by Finkel and Baumeister (2019) [12] suggests that one's self concept is broken down into three key concepts: reflexive consciousness, interpersonal relations, and choice and control. Reflexive consciousness implies the presence of the following inter-related constructs: self-knowledge, self-awareness, self-concept, self-deception, and self-esteem. The second component, interpersonal relations, implies the presence of self-presentation and SC change. Thirdly, choice and control require self-regulation and self-determination. All of these constructs are interrelated and necessary for us to form a sense of "self".

The Self Applied to the Narcissistic Injury Model

To apply the model of NI to our sense of self, we must narrow in on the construct self-esteem. Self-esteem, particularly high self-esteem, has two states: secure and defensive [13]. When measured by the Rosenberg self-esteem scale if someone is secure in their high self-esteem, they are stalwart in their positive self-regard and identity (high implicit self-esteem). However, when a person is defensive in their high self-esteem, it is indicative of vulnerability to threats, suggesting their self-esteem is unstable (low implicit self-esteem). What we perceive as narcissism is when an individual has low implicit self-esteem, but high explicit self-esteem. Jordan and colleagues (2003) [13] suggest that defensive high self-esteem is both conscious and unconscious, where someone holds themselves in high regard at a conscious level, but unconsciously feels the opposite. Moreover, when people have high overt self-esteem but low internal self-esteem, they have a higher degree of narcissism as a function of defending themselves against their unconscious low self-esteem. Individuals with low intrinsic self-esteem seek to boost their self-esteem from external sources since they cannot do so themselves. This self-esteem-boosting behavior is often viewed as arrogant, and sometimes aggressive to the point of violence [14].

Since narcissism implies low implicit self-esteem, narcissistic injury requires an individual to view themselves (unconsciously), at least in part, negatively. The unconscious defense of one's self-esteem results in an anger and dominance behavior [14]. If someone initially fails to internally dominate the threat, the anger grows and they fixate on it, internalize it, and then project it onto others in an attempt to debase or discredit the transgressor(s) of the NI [15]. The social conflict that results from this aggressive behavior leads to social isolation, where an individual can maintain their

isolation, or seek out others to garner sympathy. These past 2 steps are problematic as theoretically, narcissists stagnate after a NI, however if they can gain self-awareness and introspection, as well as accept and integrate the experience, it will result in personal growth. A second path after failing to dominate the threat is to sublimate the anger to reduce social tension. To reduce social tension requires an understanding of self-presentation, self-awareness, and self-knowledge because to understand how you look to other people, you need to understand your internalized concepts and ideas of yourself as well as understanding and attention to yourself (introspection, emotions, and self-regulation). If someone is successful in quelling their anger and internally dominating the threat, the individual can begin the aforementioned process of self-awareness and personal growth.

Conclusion

Whether an individual is high or low on the spectrum of explicit self-esteem, low implicit self-esteem will involve them in a defensive self-esteem strategy and entering them into the pathways of the NI model. It is essential to keep in mind that this model is applied to a social situation, and therefore depends on not only the emotional reactions of one individual, but of two or more. An individual's sense of "self" is critical in their ability to react to NI. Moreover, the reactions of self-esteem (secure, defensive) are the foundation of this model. It is improbable that the presented dichotomy of secure vs defensive responses is as black and white as presented, in fact it is more likely that there is a spectrum of security and defensiveness such that the more one leans to one side, the more likely that individual is to engage in that end of the model, thus placed into the conceptualized dichotomy. Interpersonal and relational clinical practices support the rationale of this novel model, however more research needs to be conducted to explore the factors presented. There are many variables at play when dealing with a social situation and the prediction of emotion, however a social affective theory of the self provides a strong basis for this model's conceptualization. Future quantitative and qualitative analyses to test this conceptual model are warranted.

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