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'It's All About Me!': Gendered Narcissism and Leaders' Identity Work

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Abstract *This article develops and illustrates a gendered theorization of narcissism as it relates to the self-identity of leaders in organizations. While the value of existing theories of leadership and narcissism are acknowledged, it is noted that they treat narcissism in an implicitly masculine fashion. In so doing they limit narcissistic leadership identity to relatively aggressive, self-oriented, and domineering forms. To develop a more thorough and nuanced appreciation of the implications of narcissism for leaders' identity work, the article articulates a gendered perspective on narcissism that accounts for forms of leadership that are self-focused but not necessarily traditionally masculine. Four types of leadership narcissism are identified and illustrated: the bully, the star performer, the servant, and the victim. While each of these forms is narcissistic in that identity is associated with the defence of a grandiose self-image (ego ideal) through the admiration of others and the love of the self, they achieve this in markedly different, and gendered, ways. The article concludes by arguing how a gendered reading of narcissism and leadership provides a richer understanding of the narcissistic behaviours of men and women in contemporary organizations.*

Keywords *gender; identity; leadership; narcissism*

Prelude

In the ancient Greek myth documented by the Roman poet Ovid (2001), Narcissus was the son begotten by the river-god Cephisus' rape of the water nymph Liriope. When Narcissus was a baby, Liriope consulted the blind seer Tiresias to ask if her son would live a long life, to which she replied, 'if he never knows himself' (p. 52). Narcissus was exceptionally beautiful and by the age of 16 was pursued and desired by many men and women, but he would let none of them touch him. One of his admirers was Echo, a nymph cursed with only being able to talk by repeating the words of others. Echo secretly followed Narcissus, consumed by her love for him. But Narcissus rejected her harshly, saying, 'keep your hands off me! I'd die before I give myself to you!' (p. 53). Echo ran and hid in shame, living in lonely caves, wasting away with a broken heart. She was unable to love anybody except the one who rejected her.

Some time later Narcissus, when resting on the banks of a spring, looked into the water and saw what he thought to be a beautiful boy. He 'fell in love and longed for something that was not real' (Ovid, 2001: 54), admiring in his reflection all those things that others admired in him. Narcissus had never been in love before. Enamoured, he tried repeatedly and futilely to embrace his reflection thinking that it was real. Grief stricken at his inability to possess his love, he took his own life, as foreshadowed by Tiresias. Like Echo he loved that which he could not possess.

Trapped in self-love, yet with no sense of himself, 'Narcissus could not distinguish reality from illusion, and he did not seek such a distinction. Instead he used all means available to contact, possess, and incorporate his own reflection into himself' (Dunbar, 1985: 1). It was when these efforts at incorporation failed that Narcissus killed himself – never really being clear whether what he saw in the pool was himself or not-himself, whether it was real or illusory (Dunbar, 1985).

Introduction

Inspired by the Greek myth, *narcissism* is the term used in psychoanalysis to refer most generally to an obsession with self, and with self-preservation – it is the continually changing processes of obsessively self-oriented behaviour that individuals consciously and unconsciously perform as part of their everyday lives in building and defending their identity. In its excessive and unhealthy forms (Kets de Vries, 2004) narcissism is characterized by a gaping abyss between the loved image of the self as beautiful and potent, and the collapse of this image in the eyes of other people. Seeking to affirm their self-love, narcissists yearn for the admiration of others as a way of protecting their fantasy of selfhood. Narcissism is a disengagement with empathic relations with others such that the narcissist 'cannot distinguish between self and other and treats reality as a projection of self' – a condition where 'the world is a mirror of the self, a surface on which one's own needs are projected' (Sennett, 1977: 72). For managers and others in positions of leadership, excessive narcissism is said to lead to a dysfunctional fixation on 'power, status, prestige, and superiority' (Kets de Vries, 2004) where other people are merely foils in the drive to keep the fantasy of the self alive.

The origins of psychoanalytic approaches to narcissism are attributed to Sigmund Freud in his essay 'On Narcissism' (1914/1991). Narcissism is considered to be Freud's major contribution to the social sciences (Carr, 1998) and has been used widely to develop insight into the behaviour and identity of leaders in organizations (e.g. Brown, 1997; Carr, 1998; Downs, 1997; Hatch & Schultz, 2001; Kets de Vries, 1995; Kodish, 2006; Schwartz, 1990). These studies have done much to explain how narcissism is a normal component of the personality of leaders and how it is a constructive force for developing and achieving organizational change. For Kets de Vries (2004: 188), narcissism 'lies at the heart of leadership' to such an extent that '[a] solid dose of narcissism is a prerequisite for anyone who hopes to rise to the top of an organization'. Similarly, Maccoby (2000: 70) proposes that narcissists can be 'gifted and creative strategists who see the big picture and find meaning in the risky challenge on changing the world and leaving behind a legacy' (cf. Kodish, 2006). What studies of leadership have also shown is how, in excessive forms, narcissism can be highly damaging to individuals, relationships and organizations (Kets de

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Vries, 1985, 2004; Kodish, 2006). Such propositions depend on a distinction between productive and unproductive narcissism (Maccoby, 2000) or healthy and excessive narcissism (Kets de Vries, 2004). In its healthy variety, narcissism comes in the form of a vision for the achievement of success; in its unhealthy variety narcissism is driven by a selfish and single-minded desire for personal power (Kets de Vries, 2004).

While such studies have provided detailed explorations of the psychodynamics of leadership identity, they have been largely immune to any consideration of narcissism in relation to gender. This is the case despite the fact that 'if narcissism is accepted as a construct that can be applied universally, there are clearly gender differences that should be acknowledged in this type of analysis' (Lowe et al., 2002: 424). It is to this task, as it relates to leaders' identity, that we attend in this article. To be clear, we understand gender not as the natural properties of biological men and women, but as the socially produced pattern of meanings which distinguish the masculine from the feminine (Acker, 1990). On this basis, our aim is to extend the sensitivity to narcissism by locating it beyond dominant masculine stereotypes that commonly associate narcissism with aggressiveness, grandiosity and self-aggrandizement. While narcissism may be characterized generally with 'a great hunger for recognition and ... a chronic need for external affirmation to feel internally secure' (Kets de Vries, 1999: 755), we argue that within this there are forms of narcissism that are deeply related to cultural norms of gendered behaviour. By extending the consideration of narcissism in this way, we seek to show how narcissistic leader identity can take forms hitherto unaccounted for in the cases of both male and female managers.

The article begins with a review and discussion of narcissism, focusing particularly on how it has been deployed as a means of understanding leadership in organizations. We next consider how these discussions can be both broadened and deepened by examining narcissism in relation to gender so as to provide a more comprehensive and discriminating consideration of the different ways in which narcissism is manifest in organizational settings. We suggest four types of narcissistic leaders: the bully, the star performer, the victim, and the servant. To provide these with empirical flesh we illustrate each of them with data gathered from a research project investigating managerial identity work at times of organizational change. The article selects data from managers who perform a leadership function as defined by themselves and others in their organization, and who are perceived within their professional context to possess leadership qualities. These data are used to demonstrate how gendered types of narcissism can be identified in the leaders' accounts of their own behaviour and in the way that they project their self-identity in talk. We conclude the article by discussing how gendered narcissism is an important component of the personal identity of leaders in terms of the different ways it mediates the management of fantasy and reality in contemporary organizations.

Narcissism and leadership

In its original formulation, Freud (1914/1991) explained narcissism as being rooted in the relationship between mother and child during infancy. This *primary narcissism* originates in early psychological life when the mother represents the whole world of the child's experience, and where the child has not yet developed a

sense of individuality or identity apart from that of the mother (Schwartz, 2004). At this stage, the child sees itself as the centre of the world, not knowing the difference between self and other. As the child grows it becomes aware of its own self and of the existence of (and rivalry with) others. The child, Freud (1921/1975) argues, encounters feelings of helplessness, isolation and anxiety and defends itself against such feelings by developing a fantasy of the return to the primary state of narcissism. Freud calls this fantasy the 'ego ideal' – an image of what the child believes it could be if it was again at the centre its world (Schwartz, 2004).

The ego ideal is said to be retain an important and healthy part of an adult persons' self-understanding and the construction of identity. The ego ideal defines, for each person, what it would mean to regard oneself as a success – although one can never reach this ideal state, journeying towards it both keeps the fantasy alive and provides people with a sense of hope and direction (Schwartz, 2004). The ego ideal, for example, informs how a person thinks about an ideal job, an ideal career, an ideal relationship and so forth. By this account a person's identity formation and maintenance involve the relationship between experience and fantasy – between the actuality of self-knowledge and the fantasy of the ego ideal. As an extension of this, secondary narcissism is the condition when (as in the ancient myth) a person becomes so enamoured with pursuing the ego ideal that they abandon self-knowledge in favour of reinforcing the belief that the ideal is indeed actual. Freud maintained that this secondary narcissism is a severe example of what is a normal part of selfhood.

Instead of engaging in healthy adult relationships characterized by empathy and compassion, the narcissist constantly seeks to affirm their ego ideal by seeking the admiration (rather than the love) of others, with love being reserved only for the self. While the healthy person has internalized the love of the parent as a 'good object' which provides them with the self-esteem and the ability to engage in mutually loving relationships, the narcissist lacks a history of having felt deeply loved. For the narcissist, in place of the 'good objects' there are 'bad objects', where a personal history of rejection, inattentiveness, or even hatred become internalized, and self-esteem fails to adequately develop. As a defence against low self-esteem, the narcissist retreats into the ego ideal at the expense of experiential reality in the world of others.

Freud's concept of narcissism has become increasingly important in the study of leadership over the past two decades. While narcissism has been used to analyse organizational culture (Downs, 1997; Schwartz, 1990) and explain organizational identity (Brown, 1997; Hatch & Schultz 2001), the main focus has been on analysing leadership and managerial identity (Brown, 2007). Lasch, in his both popular and influential book, *The Culture of Narcissism* (1979), viewed the narcissism of managers as a core feature of the shift in US culture of late modernity from one of the protestant work ethic and competitive individualism, to one of immediate gratification, self-obsessed vanity, and a 'cult of consumption'. Lasch argued that business corporations attract and foster narcissism:

> For all his [sic] inner suffering, the narcissist has many traits that make for
> success in bureaucratic institutions, which put a premium on the manipulation of
> interpersonal relations, discourage the formation of deep personal attachments,

and at the same time provide the narcissist with the approval he needs in order to validate his self-esteem. (p. 44)

In business settings, Lasch (1979) explains, the narcissistic leader strives for personal success won through fierce independence, high visibility, upward mobility and the defeat of rivals. In a situation of 'antagonistic cooperation', the narcissistic leader engages in a form of organizational jungle warfare where the struggle for survival and domination reign as the most important personal values. For the narcissist 'excellence is achieved at the expense of others' (p. 118) and success becomes the social value *par excellence* in its own right. In modern organizations this means that 'ambitious young men [have] to compete with their peers for the attention and approval of their superiors' (p. 57). This is an organizationally inflated version of sibling rivalry where each person constantly seeks approval as a means to achieve wealth, fame and/or power while all the time caring little about the substance of their achievements or its affect on those they lead.

The social changes to western culture that Lasch (1979: 231) reports portend a condition where narcissists 'play a conspicuous part in contemporary life, often rising to positions of eminence'. Indeed, it is often expected for corporate leaders to be narcissistic as if propelled to success on the basis of there larger-than-life egos (Kodish, 2006). What Lasch elaborates is an unhealthy form of narcissism where the narcissist's personality is built on a deep-seated sense of insecurity and inadequacy. Narcissism is exacerbated in societies dominated by individualistic values and a prizing of success and achievement, where the lack of grounding of identity in class, religion, and family status fuels insecurity (Collinson, 2003). In such thinking narcissistic leadership is understood in terms of its cultural and historical specificity in present-day western management practices; practices where the individualized self is increasingly divorced from traditional and stable cultural roots and instead 'up for grabs' as a resource that can be disciplined in and by organizations (Pullen, 2006). This suggests that narcissistic leadership, rather than being transhistorical or trans-cultural, is a phenomenon that is located within the organizational power relations of the present – relations that intensify the identity insecurity that fuels narcissism (Collinson, 2003).

For the narcissist, insecurity is compensated for by a lack of empathy, 'an exaggerated sense of self importance and self-grandiosity and a concomitant need for admiration' (Kets de Vries, 2004: 189). And when narcissists rise through the corporate ranks, they 'are notoriously poor, over involved and abusive leaders (Rosenthal, 2006: 44) who treat others not as people with whom one has a relation-ships but as possessions whose 'only function is to act as accessories in the narcis-sist's pursuit of grandiosity' (Kets de Vries, 1999: 756). Further, this pursuit is not about business either, it is 'about building lofty and inflated images of oneself and of the company that over time cannot stand the tests of reality and sound business practices' (Kodish, 2006: 451). This unhealthy narcissism is manifest when 'one is unable to integrate the idealized ideas one has of oneself with the realities of one's inadequacies' (Rosenthal, 2006: 43).

A focus on narcissism considers identity not only in relation to one's sense of who one is, but also from the imperative to become something that one is not (the ego ideal). This relation is part of what Schwartz (1990: 32) calls the *ontological function*

– a function that tells us not only who we are, but who we should be. For Schwartz social institutions perform this function and for leaders organizations dominate. Problematically, however, people whose identity is located in such institutions can have their behaviour distorted to extremes, for example believing the organization can do no wrong or cannot make mistakes, or adopting a mindset where the organization defines people's happiness for them (cf. Brown, 1997). Further, leaders who feel that their identities are under threat may consciously or unconsciously employ narcissistic behaviours to confirm their sense of status (to themselves and others) as confident, significant, valued and committed organizational performers. They do so by mediating their actions through a 'preoccupation with themselves or their own interests' (Carr, 1998: 87) over those of others.

Narcissism in organizations can be identified by the way it manifests in particular behaviours that seek to fuel and justify the narcissist's self obsession. Brown (1997) identifies six major sets of 'traits' that characterize narcissism, which can be located at individual, group and organization levels:

1. *Denial*: the denial of facts about oneself, the realities of the constraints around one's work, and about the details of past occurrences in order for their ego ideal not to be challenged;

2. *Rationalization*: the development of plausible justifications for explaining behaviour that does not support the belief in the ego ideal. This can come in the form of rationalizing failures, and justifying self-serving policies and decisions as if they were done in the interest of the group;

3. *Self-aggrandizement*: engaging in behaviour that serves to convince both oneself and others of one's fantasy of power, control and greatness. This includes over-stating one's virtues, merits and achievements;

4. *Attributional egoism*: attributing positive organizational outcomes to one's own efforts, and unfavourable outcomes to external factors or other people, regardless of one's own role. Such false attributions seek to defend the ego ideal of the narcissist;

5. *Sense of entitlement*: a feeling that one is entitled to organizational privileges such as success, power and admirations, while at the same time lacking empathy for others and exploiting people in the pursuit of self-interest;

6. *Anxiety*: the experience of an ongoing difficulty in maintaining self-esteem accompanied by hyper-sensitivity to criticism, and persistent feelings of insecurity.

As Brown explains, these traits are used in combination in order to enable the narcissist to defend his or her own ego ideal such that the inflated fantasy of the narcissist's sense of self is not shattered by the reality of his or her lived experience.

Researching gendered narcissism

As discussed earlier, the concept of narcissism has become an incisive tool to understand and critique leadership in contemporary western organizations. To date, however, these analyses have largely failed to consider narcissism in relation to

gender, instead reproducing an understanding of organizations as being masculine (Ford, 2006; Lowe et al., 2002). This is unsurprising, given leadership theory's more general history of ignoring gender relations in its theorizing (Hearn & Piekkari, 2005; for exceptions, see Due Billing & Alvesson, 1994; Wajcman, 1998). It is also unsurprising given the dominant logic that 'the type of behaviour deemed appropriate for managers in contemporary organizations coincides with images of masculinity and centres of rationality, measurement, objectivity, control, and competitiveness' (Ford, 2006: 81) to the extent that leadership behaviours associated with femininity are a 'secret' (Rosener, 1995).

While not surprising, the absence of gender in theorizations of narcissism and leadership is remiss given persistent critiques of the gender-neutrality and gender-blindness in organization theory (see Wilson, 1996 and Linstead, 2000 respectively). Studies of leadership and narcissism in organizations have been dominated by a masculine model that limits considerations of narcissism to attention-seeking aggressiveness, self-exaggeration, a sense of superiority, and boastful and pretentious behaviour (Kets de Vries, 1999). When narcissistic business leaders are identified in the literature, they almost always come in the form of high-profile, competitive and aggressive male stereotypes, the likes of Steve Jobs (Apple), Michael Eisner (Disney), and Kenneth Lay (Enron) (Rosenthal, 2006). This tendency has antecedents in Freud's original theory of narcissism which itself was based largely on a masculine model that did not account for the feminine or for feminine desire (see Grosz, 1995). What this all means for theories of leadership and narcissism is that they significantly overlook much narcissistic behaviour in both men and women. They do so because their image of the narcissist is sedimented with masculine norms derived from cultural associations and instated sexual metaphors where masculinity is seen as active and femininity as passive (Gatens, 1996). The narcissist as masculine is assumed to be the aggressive individualist pursuing his own interest without concern for others. This all concurs with the view that narcissism has been developed in relation to leadership as an inherently masculine construct (see Jorstad, 1996; Lowe et al., 2002).

Extending beyond the assumption of the masculine norm in theories of narcissistic leadership, advancing a perspective on narcissism that accounts for gender requires the addition of the feminine in the modes of theorizing. Furthermore, a gendered perspective on leadership and narcissism is not one that assumes that the differences in gendered behaviour are coterminous with those of actual men and women (cf. Jorstad, 1996), but rather that gender relates to culturally embedded expectations of what is regarded as the norm for men and women. Gendered narcissism is *relational* in that it is a product of social relations between men and women rather than indicative of the properties of fixed identity positions derived from biological sex – both generally (Bordo, 1986; Foucault, 1979) and in organizations (Brewis & Linstead, 2000; Gherardi, 1995; Linstead & Pullen, 2006). Accordingly, the ideas of masculine and feminine forms of narcissism to be developed in this article are analytical devices which are employed to illustrate gendered cultural processes at work. The purpose of this is to expand the consideration of narcissism beyond the masculine norm discussed earlier so that the behaviour of real men and women can be understood in relation to the complexity of gender.

Returning to the discussion of the myth of Narcissus, we can begin to consider a

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gendered differentiation by comparing the character of Echo to that of Narcissus. This is a gendered distinction between destructive, thick-skinned self-obsession of Narcissus, and defensive, thin-skinned self-obsession of Echo. On the one hand, classic masculine narcissism, the active 'thick-skinned' (Rosenfeld, 1965), or oblivious (Gabbard, 1996) form, tends to glorify itself and attract flatterers and fawners to justify its own fantasy. Such people, like Narcissus himself, do not recognize or care about the impact of their actions on others. They discount others, breaking hearts and betraying those who give them their affections and loyalties. On the other hand, the alternate feminine, Echoistic, passive 'thin-skinned' (Rosenfeld, 1965), or hyper-vigilant (Gabbard, 1996) narcissists are aware of their own fragilities to the point of losing their own voice, living only by pale imitation of others (as was the case with the wood-nymph Echo who pined for Narcissus in the original myth). In these terms a more gendered understanding of narcissism complements and adds to existing theories in that 'Echo and Narcissus personify two aspects of the same problem, namely a reaction to lack of self-esteem and the ability to love oneself in a healthy and natural way' (Jorstad, 1996: 17). Both Echo and Narcissus were obsessed with themselves and could not distinguish self from other in the pursuit of love. Despite the gendered distinctions outlined earlier, in the literature on narcissism and leadership it is masculine narcissism that is assumed to be its only form – the question for a gendered theory of narcissistic leadership is, however, 'is Echo hiding in the woods?' (Jorstad, 1996: 21).

In order to extend the way that narcissism can be used to understand leaders' identity we next turn to empirical examples drawn from research conducted in the car and engine manufacturing industries in the United Kingdom. While these data are taken from a much more extensive study into leadership and managerial identity and identity formation, here we refer to a small sub-set of those data and use it to distinguish between masculine (destructive/Narcissus) and feminine (defensive/Echo) forms of narcissism. The project in question employed a qualitative, longitudinal methodology on the effects of organizational restructuring on the identities of work of managers that were perceived as leaders and possessed leadership qualities. In total 150 managers were interviewed from 15 different organizations over a period of 18 months. All of the managers worked for organizations that had recently undergone significant restructuring. The data were collected using face-to-face, semi-structured interviews which focused on the day-to-day experiences at work and how these related to their own self-concept of what it means to be a leader and a manager.

For the purpose of this article we refer to four interviews that were selected in accordance with the relative discursive prevalence of the six traits of narcissism delineated by Brown (1997) (denial; rationalization; self-aggrandisement; attribution egotism; sense of entitlement and anxiety) and which embodied manifestations of destructive/masculine and defensive/feminine forms of narcissism. The point of this is to use the data to distil the narcissistic traits into four types of narcissitic leadership that reflect different manifestations of the masculine (Narcissus) and feminine (Echo) narcissism. We present and analyse extracts from interviews with four leaders – two who we associated with masculine forms of narcissism and two with feminine narcissism. The examples we review are not typical of the data, but instead illustrate 'ideal types' (Weber, 1949) of narcissistic leadership that demonstrate its gendered dimensions. These ideal types 'are neither hypotheses nor descriptions of reality but

"yardsticks" to which reality can be compared; they are neither historical reality nor "true reality"' (Hekman, 1997: 360).

We develop these ideal types by working up from an analysis of the talk of the four leaders. Analytically, we consider the interview data in relation to how they offer a 'first-order accounting' (Garfinkel, 1967) as revealed in leaders' 'persuasive accounts' (Silverman, 1975) of their own actions, their verbal projections of their own identities and how they locate their identities discursively in talk. This location sees the leaders as 'presencing' their sense of identity in the here and now of the interview situation (cf. Iedema et al., 2005). Accordingly, our analysis is 'a device to investigate how people make meaning . . . [and] . . . how people linguistify their identity' (Iedema et al., 2006: 1115). In our case we focus this meaning making in relation to how it linguistically manifests Brown's (1997) identification of the traits of narcissism outlined earlier. This analysis demonstrates how this accounting, while narcissistic, is both varied and gendered. We work up from this to discern four types of narcissistic leadership (the bully, the star performer, the servant, and the victim) which are abstracted from the data so as to be able to locate gender in narcissistic behaviour.

Gendered narcissism and the leadership self

Randle: Narcissus the bully

Randle was a senior production manager in an organization that manufactured diesel engines. He had been employed by the organization since his apprenticeship, working his way through management qualifications in order to progress his career. Restructuring had benefited Randle; his experience and management skills had given him competitive edge over his colleagues and he was proud to have survived. After the restructuring Randle's status had increased in the organization and he was perceived as being a 'good leader' who was very hardworking, strategic and focused.

Extract 1

1.1 I understand all my managers – I've been there and I know the business – and they are in full support of what I do.

1.2 My company is my life. It's when others get involved that things go wrong.

1.3 I am a man with ambition, I don't want to slow down and if others don't like what I do then they know where the door is.

1.4 I know the price of failure, I've seen it . . . I was here seeing the changes happen and seeing senior management leave, it all fell on my shoulders and I'm the one that turned the company around.

Randle's self-oriented behaviour is prominent in this short extract. His seeming obsession with his own position (as a leader as he differentiates his 'managers' from himself) underlined that he is the product of an image that he has created for himself – an image of a person who 'turned the company around' (at 1.4). But several people interviewed in the same company commented on the difficulties they had with Randle's aggressive leadership style, yet Randle expressed no awareness that this

style might be an obstacle for others. His comments dwelled on extolling his own virtues and sense of righteousness, assuming that others supported him unequivocally (at 1.1).

In terms of Brown's (1997) narcissistic traits, at 1.1 Randle's talk indicates denial – while it was clear from the other interviews that many people in the organization opposed Randle and resented his aggressive demeanour, he justified his self-image by claiming that his managers 'are in full support of what I do'. In terms of attributional egoism, Randle's talk suggests directly that he takes credit for success, and, if things go wrong he quickly deflects blame to others. He is thus able to claim excessively and singularly (at 1.4) that 'I'm the one that turned the company around'. At the same time his own sense of righteousness leads him to claim that the cause of problems in his work only ever results from other people ('It's when others get involved that things go wrong' (at 1.2)). The implication of this is, for Randle, that other people merely interfere with the exercise of his own perfection and prowess. Randle also exhibits a strong sense of entitlement, manifest in his lack of empathy with others. If other people do not 'like' his ambition then 'they know where the door is' (at 1.3). Despite Randle's self-positioning as a potent and authoritative masculine leadership figure we also see an anxiety about the potential failure which he feels can only be mitigated by the exercise of his own prowess – at 1.4 he indicates that he is aware of the 'price of failure', a price his own ego could not bear to pay.

Extract 2

2.1 I am a man in full control of the company, I know where it needs to go and I will get it there no matter what.

2.2 I expect a lot from my men, they need to work hard and carry out my instructions so that I can keep control of everything, otherwise things will unravel.

2.3 Of course I consult them – they need to show me that I can trust them and that they can do the jobs I want them to do.

2.4 But at the end of the day I know what I want and where I'm taking the company.

2.5 It's not a job for the light-hearted. Times are tough and I have to be hard on them [the middle managers] because I expect a lot.

In this extract, as well as Randle explicitly linking his identity into a discourse of masculinity ('I am a man in full control' (at 2.1)) we also see him rationalizing his authoritarian leadership style in terms of what he says is his own centrality in the success of the organization. At 2.2 he states that his authority is justified on the basis that if he did not exercise control 'things will unravel'. Even when he discusses consultation (at 2.3) the focus is again back to himself – he consults because of what he perceives as his staff members' 'need' to reinforce his authority. Randle's statements rationalize potential opposition to his actions of being 'hard on them' (at 2.5) on the basis of what he asserts to be organizational necessities. In so doing his talk also reflects a form of self-aggrandizement upon which he takes sole responsibility for the company's success – 'no matter what' (at 2.1). Randle is a man who knows

what he wants (at 2.4) and knows how to get others to do it (at 2.5). To the extent that he acknowledges other people, they are merely there to contribute to the enactment of his own perceived potency. Randle's persistent privileging of himself in his talk suggests an existential anxiety that required the energetic performance of a confident self in public. The result is a form of bullying behaviour where others are only understood as an extension of Randle's own agency – they are merely there to do as they are told without any acknowledgement that they too have a sense of self.

Jackie: Narcissus the star performer

Jackie was a very experienced middle manager at a manufacturing plant where she had been working for over ten years. Younger than her peers at 34 years old, she was the only female manager at the plant at the time of the study. Jackie's account of her self illustrates how she privileged her work commitments over personal commitments and fully invested her identity in her work. She professed to be extremely ambitious and regularly worked 60 hours a week. Her staff saw her as a 'great leader' and she knew that if she led and guided her staff that they would follow. Her leadership qualities set her apart from her fellow managers.

Extract 1

1.1 I don't think I manage differently to my colleagues . . . I work very long hours, evenings, weekends, holidays but then this is my decision.

1.2 I don't have family commitments . . . I don't have a partner, I get to see friends when I can, but most of the time I'm just glad to chill out when I get home and do nothing.

1.3 By the time I've done the things that need doing, like feed the cats, it's a bath and bed, even then I can get called in if something goes wrong.

Jackie positions herself in this extract as a person who is extremely dedicated to her work and who places it as being of primary importance in her life – something for which she claims full responsibility (at 1.1). Her workaholism suggests a sense of self-identity (and self-esteem) that is very much drawn from her achievements at work. She denies her need for sociability (at 1.2) as a means of rationalizing her dedication to her work. Even when she talks about her personal life, work is always rationalized as being more important – for example (at 1.3) she states that even in her few hours of personal time, work is always present.

Jackie actively constructs a 'competent' self and she is outwardly ambitious and aggressive. Her expressions downplay her femininity as a part of her identity, privileging instead her commitment to work (at 1.1). She locates her sense of self in terms of generic qualities possessed by either men or women. Unlike Randle, Jackie is not insensitive or hostile but rather manages her self-esteem through a discourse of self-mastery – she has chosen a path and it was, as she says, her decision to do so (at 1.1). While there may be a hint of nostalgia in her account of her day ending with a hot bath (at 1.3) it is muted. In most other respects this account has the hallmarks of a masculine form of identity dominated by work and achievement.

Extract 2

2.1　If I didn't work the way I do I wouldn't last one minute. I fit in and I manage to get good results but that takes effort and some of 'em won't do it.

2.2　I'm lucky I'm better educated than most and I have the experience which is more than a lot of the lads out there.

2.3　The difference is that I can manage my staff and develop them at the same time which is why I'm in a better position that the rest.

In this extract we see Jackie display self-aggrandizement in how she compares herself to her colleagues in order to reinforce her perception of her own superiority. She articulates that she has more experience and education that her peers (at 2.2), that she is 'better' than the rest (at 2.3) which she often equated with being a good leader and that she is 'different' (at 2.3). Jackie's talk also demonstrates attributional egotism in that she credits positive outcomes to her own disposition and actions – it is because of her hard work, skills and dedication that she feels superior and gets 'good results' (at 2.1). This leads Jackie to feel that she is entitled to her position of admiration and prestige over and above others – 'some of 'em [other managers] won't do it' she claims at 2.1. There is also an indication here that Jackie's hard work and dedication are something that she must continue in the face of the constant threat of failure – an anxiety reflected in her comment, 'if I didn't work the way I do I wouldn't last one minute' (at 2.1). This not only rationalizes her working behaviour, but also shows that her motivation for this behaviour is related to an anxiety about what might happen if she did not.

In the broader context from which these extracts were taken, Jackie's success at work was confirmed by her manager who suggested that she outperforms most of her male peers, as well as working longer hours than them. Jackie's justification of her 'sameness' – she pointed out that she 'fits in' (at 2.1) – can be interpreted as a self-identity that positions her as being both the same as, and better than, her peers. Jackie has resisted the discourses of femininity that promote more passive identities, choosing to present more masculine images in order to 'fit in' as well as to compete and win. While Jackie suppresses the feminine in her identity, she does not do so completely – it is ironic to the point of paradox that her only leadership characteristic that she singles out as being different from those of her colleagues, the ability to develop others, is one which the 'women in management' literature suggest that women managers are particularly strong on (Wilson, 1995). Here we see feminine identity as a means of identifying Jackie as more than masculine.

Jackie's sense of leadership identity, as displayed in these extracts, is one of being 'the best' – a position she defends through the verbal display of narcissistic traits. Jackie is the star performer – a position she uses to her advantage to advance through the system and get 'results'. In so doing she denies her gendered identity as a woman, locating her sense of self-esteem centrally in her work performance as a means to maintain her own belief in her ego ideal.

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Timothy: Echo the servant

Timothy was an ambitious manager whom his peers and himself reported to be career directed, ambitious and ruthlessly competitive. He was well educated with a first degree and a MBA from a leading UK Business School, and, at 37, was relatively young for the position he held. When talking about himself, Timothy expressed his needs for admiration in quite different ways to Randle and Jackie. Most importantly, Timothy's primary way of defending his ego ideal was not in terms of being better than others, but in terms of being subservient to those he perceived as his 'superiors'. Aligned with Echo in the ancient myth, he defended his ego ideal through the voice of others rather than directly at their expense. This role of servility, and the desire to impress others with service, however, was not expressed in terms of the needs of others, but in terms of how, by serving them, he maintained his sense of self.

Extract 1

1.1 It is important to me that my boss thinks well of my performance. Nobody wants not to be liked, don't you think? What do you think?

1.2 Well, I think I'm doing my job properly anyway and I'm keen to impress not only my boss but also others around me.

1.3 It's good to make your mark and stand out from the crowd.

1.4 I might not have as much experience but I think I have more to offer than my colleagues, I have the background and education to outperform them.

In this extract we see Timothy establish his relation to others in terms of his desire to impress – this includes impressing his manager (at 1.1) and his peers (at 1.2). For him being unique and competent is a matter that is reflected only through the eyes of others – he maintains his self-esteem by seeking approval. While he expresses some anxiety about his ability ('I might not have as much experience' (at 1.4)) he suggests an anticipated denial with 'well, I think I'm doing my job properly anyway' (at 1.2) – this appears as a pre-emptive defence against a foreshadowing of his potential failure to impress others. In general, Timothy's self-presentation revolved around his desire to impress others. Further, his narcissism can be understood as echoistic in that rather than seeking to impose his own will on others, he seeks to mirror (in an amplified way) what others expect of him in order to secure self-esteem, and part of this process is wanting to be a better leader.

Extract 2

2.1 I want to do the best job I can. You have to make the most of what you've got.

2.2 I have to present my confident side. I need to show them that I'm knowledgeable, it's important to me.

2.3 I'm also one of the busiest people with the most responsibility but my manager knows that I can do it and he trusts my ability.

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At numerous times Timothy's statements indicate a form of self-presentation that seeks to convince others (and perhaps himself) of his competence as a leader. While at 1.4 he had clarified his view that he had superior education, ability and perform-ance than his peers, in this extract (at 2.2) he adds that he actively seeks to ensure that others around him are as convinced of this as he is. For Timothy it is important not only that he preserves his self-esteem, but also that he does so by having this reflected back through others opinions of him. His attributional egotism is such that he needs others, for example his manager, to sustain his belief that he 'can do it' (at 2.3). This particular manner of narcissism is one where, rather than lauding over others through acts of aggressive self-assertion, self-esteem is maintained through servility, that is by enacting a servile position in order to secure approval and admiration.

Extract 3

3.1 Sometimes when I'm at home and I think about the day I've had, I wonder why I do it all.

3.2 I also feel that I'm being watched and I need to manage this.

3.3 I put so much into managing my career and whether I am getting on can be questioned.

3.4 I guess I try harder and harder but I don't know why.

3.5 I have to try to keep up with the things my colleagues are doing, so I have to spend a lot of time talking to them and networking, sometimes it spills over and occasionally I'll invite them round to tea at the weekend, just to make sure I'm not getting cut out of any loops.

3.6 I don't really like them or have anything much in common with them, but you don't get to the top without keeping up your contacts.

In this third extract, the tension between Timothy's fantasy of himself as successful leader and his anxieties about himself become much more apparent. This anxiety manifested in his lack of confidence in himself when that self is not reflected in the views of others. He simultaneously has an anxiety about 'being watched' (at 3.2) while feeling without purpose when he is alone (at 3.1), and lacking any explicit reasons for his efforts (at 3.4). Despite what he sees as his enormous devotion to his own success, he is anxious too about the extent to which he is 'getting on' in his career (at 3.3). Timothy's need to secure positive esteem from others, however, seems to over-ride his anxieties. His lack of empathy for others and his willingness to use them as tools in his own pursuit of self interest become evident in 3.5 and 3.6. Here he quite boldly suggests that he socializes with his colleagues only as a means to his own professional ends. He rationalizes this quite simply as all part of his strategy to 'get to the top' (at 3.6). Further, such actions rationalize his impending fear of not being as successful as he wants to be (at 3.4) so as to justify his social activities as if they were in the interests of others rather than himself.

Alan: Echo the victim

Alan started working as a setter/operator in a car manufacturing firm. At the time of the research he had worked for the organization for 24 years and had recently been promoted to the position of zone manager. He was responsible for 'leading' 50 people (Alan's manager). The field notes taken at the time of the interview stated that this was 'a very difficult interview – not really sure what he wants or does. He has not been in the job long and he refuses to and/or can't step back and reflect. Even though he talks the talk he won't let go to explore why he refuses to talk about the past and himself'. Despite this observation of lack of reflection, Alan did, somewhat surprisingly, promote a particularly positive account of his own leadership identity, even though he is perceived as a poor leader by his staff.

Extract 1

1.1 My leadership style is open and honest [pause] as much as possible . . .

1.2 I'm in a position of strength having come from the shop floor, with high flexibility, acceptability and respect . . . however, I have a need to learn more skills and they respect me for this.

In this extract, Alan positions his identity in relation to his company experience and how having worked his way up through the ranks he was able to command respect as a leader. His self-positioning was very different to what was garnered elsewhere in the organization when people spoke about Alan. Indeed there was a significant tension between his behaviour and his espoused self-image. This was evident, for example, when Alan's team leaders said of him, 'he has never tried to fit in with us. He isolates himself in his room. He never takes the teamwork things seriously. He's one of the few managers who hasn't tried to make it work'. From the beginning, then, Alan's displays a form of self-aggrandizement both in relation to his claim to openness and honesty (at 1.2) and his claim to 'strength' and respect (at 1.2). This form of self-presentation continued throughout the interview as he persisted in presenting himself as an open, trustworthy and highly respected manager.

Extract 2

2.1 I download everything I know, by doing this I increase trust . . . They may be over-informed but it's a risk I take . . .

2.2 I also coordinate work with other departments . . . I am an organizer and coach of these people . . . I'm not there to direct them everyday . . . I'm here to plan for the future and make sure my staff are safe and to try to keep them on the path if they are wandering off.

2.3 Honesty, helping them make decisions, openness, leading them to make decisions if they want to.

2.4 Knowing them, treating them as individuals because they all need different ways of managing.

Throughout this extract, Alan rationalizes his behaviour by making claims for his competence and the effectiveness of his professed leadership style, although there

are contradictions between being a leader and managing his staff. Despite his isolation from the team he goes to some length to establish himself as being communicative and supportive of his own staff. This rationalization surfaces in particular at 2.2 when he accepts that he is 'not there to direct them everyday'. This coincides with Alan's attributional egoism in that he positions himself as the one whose actions can be attributed to the smooth functioning and development of the organization. At 2.2, for example, he lays claim to his efforts not only of organizing his own team, but extending to his self-image as the organizer of cross-departmental work.

Despite Alan projecting an image of being a successful and competent leader when he was interviewed formally, a different form of self-presentation manifested some days later. The following extract was reconstructed from field notes that recorded an informal and impromptu conversation with Alan that took place at the end of a working day when he was leaving the site. Here, when referring to the major restructure recently undertaken by the organization, his self-approval appears to slip, revealing a more fragile sense of self esteem.

Extract 3

3.1 I was totally lost for four weeks . . . the change was absolutely astronomical . . . a massive change.

3.2 The change in role was totally different than I had imagined, it was an imaginary role . . . I haven't had any managerial training, but I think I'm coping . . . it's more comfortable now.

3.3 Teams are not working well . . . I am tearing my hair out I'm so stressed.

This extract shows Alan displaying anxiety about his competence – at 3.1 he says that he was 'completely lost', and at 3.3 he goes even further in asserting his frustration and stress. The contradiction between hubris and anxiety appears to suggest that Alan's feeling of his own inadequacy is relatively thin skinned and inwardly focused on himself and his own actions and concerns. Alan appears as a victim of the organization and it is against this that he needs to preserve his self-esteem. We also see here a sense of (unfulfilled) entitlement such as the lack of training received (at 3.2). This suggested that Alan was managing his narcissism by defending an ego ideal as an important, productive and trusted leader, while dealing with the more complex realities of his experience by feeling victimized by the organizational changes.

Alan identified with his image of the organization prior to restructuring so strongly that the pain associated with the loss of this order presents itself as a rejection of (his old) self and his inability to see where he fits into the 'new' administration – his new job seemed to him 'imaginary' (at 3.2). Alan's self-presentation can be understood in relation to his ego being challenged by the organization as 'morally inferior' (see Höpfl, 2002) – a feeling that he masked through an espoused ideology of team building, communication, flexibility and other assumed leadership virtues. As was evident in the broader ambit of the research, however, the people with whom Alan worked did not feel that his behaviour was informed by these espoused virtues. Alan was generally considered to be dictatorial, authoritarian, unreflective and extremely hierarchical in his relations with his staff. In practice, this was a leadership style that

seemed to provide Alan with safety and isolation so as to protect him from facing difference and change. It was only in the impromptu conversation recounted in Extract 3 that the tension between Alan's projected fantasy of his self and his experiential reality became partially apparent. Alan is interesting as his apparently masculine denial of his inadequacy is a mask for a much more echoistic underlying position of victimization and withdrawal, if his employees are to be believed.

Discussion

If we accept that narcissism, in general terms, is a condition where a person directs their energies of love and desire to themselves rather than others as a means of maintaining their own idealized self-image, then we can surmise that this is present in the talk of each of the managers discussed earlier. Further, each of these examples contains indications of the major traits associated with narcissism (Brown, 1997). What we have tried to draw attention to, however, is that each of these examples manifests narcissism in quite different types of ways. The most significant difference that we have focussed on is in relation to the direction through which the self-love is realised. In the case of Randle and Jackie, we have associated this with the masculine/destructive form of Narcissus which promotes the self at the expense of others and/or by assuming superiority to others. For Randle this meant asserting his ego ideal by controlling those around him, for Jackie it meant ensuring that her performance and leadership qualities were recognized as superior to others.

Randle's talk illustrated his belief that self-promotion and mastery were an essential component in him managing his public self in the organization. This public self was one of masculine control and potency that asserted authority at the expense of others. Randle's very public displays of narcissism set the stage for others: he wanted to impress and to succeed, and he assumed that others would follow his leadership. The negative consequences of his behaviour on others were not a matter of reflection for Randle. While Jackie also exhibited narcissistic traits, she did so in a different way. In order to maintain her ego ideal as a high achiever and superior performer, Jackie's self-obsession meant that she denied herself a social or family life. She did not draw on her femininity for identity, but focused on fitting in, and being a better man (in terms of performance) than the men. Rather than seeking power and control over others, Jackie's narcissism was apparent in her need to be recognized for her superior work performance

Although the focus on power and/or performance seen in Randle and Jackie illustrate traditional masculine forms of narcissism, in the case of Timothy and Alan we have associated their narcissism with the feminine/defensive form of Echo. In both of these cases, while the stereotype of masculine narcissistic self-aggrandizement was not prevalent, their narcissism came in the form of promoting an ego-ideal through the voice of others. In Timothy's case, narcissism manifested in his desire not only to be recognized by others as superior, but also to be liked by them, especially by his manager – the Narcissus figure to his Echo. For Timothy, self-esteem was best achieved through the approval of his own manager as an authority figure. He engaged in 'managing up' behaviours whereby he sought to impress the boss as a means of validating his own ego ideal. While Timothy lacked the aggressiveness commonly associated with narcissism, he was able to channel the reinforcement of

his ego fantasy through the relation he has with his own manager. He thus became servile, not out of duty or service to others, but as a means of maintaining his own sense of worth as a leader.

In our final example, Alan, we saw another form of feminine narcissism. In Alan's case his isolation and anxiety at work were appeased by constructing a fantasy about the respect and trust that he generated from his staff. For Alan the organization and the changes going on within it were a constant source of strain on his ego ideal. The organization appeared as a force trying to rob him of his self-esteem as if through wilful victimization. In coping with such threats to his ego, Alan responded by locating his identity in the meaning of his work for others – his staff. In reflecting himself in the respect of others, his development of them and his ability to gain trust he buttresses his sense of victimization by an organization that can no longer serve as a vehicle for his narcissistic fantasies.

As we proposed earlier, the four leaders we have been discussing are associated with four 'ideal types' of gendered identity processes of leadership narcissism. The two masculine types are Narcissus as either bully or star performer. The two feminine types are Echo as either servant or victim. Narcissus the bully is a classic form of masculine narcissism where the narcissistic leader seeks to preserve the ego ideal by controlling and tyrannizing others in the pursuit of self-interest. Here, the needs of others are merely incidental to the narcissist pursuing their ego ideal. Narcissus the star performer is driven by the need to perform better than others as a leader in order to confirm their own ego ideal, rather than to control others. In this case the self-fantasy of the ego ideal is maintained through over-achievement and the adulation from others that it anticipates. For Echo the servant the inflated ego ideal is managed by performing service for others and echoing their expectations back to them. In return for service there is an expectation of admiration to secure the reassurance and recognition as a leader that the narcissist craves. In terms of Echo the victim, seeing one's self as victimized is a form of narcissism whereby a person, in recognition of their own sense of inadequacy, becomes obsessed with their own sense of failing to live up to the exaggerated ego ideal as a leader. This is mitigated by imagining that others respect and admire them and echoing this back in one's own words.

The exploration of narcissism that we have presented in this article has sought to extend current thinking on leadership and identity. This has been done by using narcissism to examine leaders' identity in relation to actuality and fantasy, and using gender to examine it in relation to masculinity and femininity. Studying narcissism assists in uncovering the unconscious aspects of identity work, and brings back both the unspoken and the quotidian experiences of our daily lives at work. Including gender in the study of narcissistic leadership extends and deepens the way that we can understand how these unconscious aspects play out in a variety of different practical ways. As we have tried to exemplify in this article, combining gender and narcissism offers a more valuable and comprehensive way for understanding and studying leadership and identity in contemporary organizations characterized as they are by heightened insecurity, escalating personal demands, intensifying pressures on identity, and acute competition.

Acknowledgement

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