

Defining Narcissistic Abuse: The Case for Deception as Abuse

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Narcissistic abuse is a serious form of abuse that is estimated to affect somewhere between 60 and 158 million people in the U.S. alone (Bonchay, 2017). Just recently, June was recognized as Narcissistic Abuse Awareness Month. Despite its prevalence and the efforts to promote awareness, however, there is almost no public knowledge of this type of abuse.

Most types of abuse, such as physical abuse and psychological abuse, have generally agreed-upon definitions. Yet often the definitions supplied for narcissistic abuse in mental health literature as well as books and articles written for survivors are vague, imprecise, and inconsistent. Although the definitions offer a lot of helpful details, they usually do not provide enough context to indicate exactly what narcissistic abuse is. This lack of a clear and consistent definition is possibly one of the reasons for the general lack of mainstream awareness of this type of abuse.

In this article, I will propose a working definition and discuss why it is so important to be able to precisely and consistently define it.



The Problems in the Current Definitions of Narcissistic Abuse

To define narcissistic abuse, sources typically use descriptions of certain aspects of it. For example, some sources define it as a combination of tactics that are used by the perpetrator to abuse a partner (i.e., Lancer, 2017, et al.). Other sources define narcissistic abuse by describing the signs it has occurred through how it has affected the survivor (i.e., Arabi, 2017, “11 Signs You’re the Victim of Narcissistic Abuse,” et al.).

These types of descriptions have been extremely beneficial to millions of survivors around the world who are currently in or have come out of relationships with narcissists, are traumatized by what they have been through and are seeking answers.

The problem with the descriptions, however, is that they are too broad to convey easily. They are also imprecise because they only focus on one aspect of narcissistic abuse instead of describing its actual underpinnings. This lack of precision in the definitions used can lead to challenges in explaining it. For example, if a definition mentions psychologically abusive aspects of the relationship, such as putdowns or silent treatment, then it raises questions about how the abuse is distinct from other psychologically abusive relationships that aren’t referred to as narcissistic abuse. Or in another example, if infidelity and cheating are mentioned as characterizing narcissistic abuse, an explanation for why this is abusive may be necessary, as infidelity and cheating, though painful, may occur in any relationship.

In other words, by only focusing on the tactics, there is no explanation for what characterizes the relationship as a distinctive type of abuse or even as abuse at all.

A Working Definition of Narcissistic Abuse

The National Domestic Violence Hotline website defines domestic violence as “a pattern of behaviors used by one partner to maintain power and control over another partner in an intimate relationship” (“What is Domestic Violence?” *n.d.*). Linking narcissistic abuse back to the perpetrators and what characterizes them is the key to defining it because it leads to identifying the specific action by which these abusers in particular gain control.

Although they may never be diagnosed, the perpetrators of narcissistic abuse are typically those whose behavior meets the criteria for one of two Cluster B Personality Disorders — Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) or Anti-Social Personality Disorder (ASPD) (Arabi, 2017, “Why Survivors of Malignant Narcissists Don’t Get the Justice They Deserve”). Individuals with these disorders have a strong propensity to exploit others, due to having low levels of emotional empathy, an inability to feel remorse, and the pathological ability and desire to deceive and manipulate.

Although the typical cycle of abusive relationships includes “honeymoon periods,” (Walker, 1979), the cycle of narcissistic abuse is different. Narcissistic relationships instead have an

idealization period, during which narcissists intentionally manufacture a “soulmate” persona at the beginning of the relationship that is not who they genuinely are in order to encourage targeted partners to become vulnerable to them quickly and fall in love.

Once the narcissist has gained the trust and confidence of the partner, the “true self” of the narcissist eventually shows itself. The abuser turns on the partner and behaves in cruel ways, such as through verbal abuse, withholding the love and attention that was previously freely given, intentionally manufacturing emotions such as jealousy and insecurity, and engaging in various forms of betrayal.

It is only through the deception of the “false self” that any of the abuse can occur, and the deception is unique to narcissistic abuse and is its particularly damaging feature, as it leads to cognitive dissonance and grieving over the person who does not exist. Sandra L. Brown (2009) says in her book *Women Who Love Psychopaths* that intrusive thoughts and cognitive dissonance were the two most disruptive symptoms in the women she counseled who came out of relationships with psychopaths. “This is why the mid-relationship dynamics are marked by grieving. What [the survivor] becomes acutely aware of is that her grieving is caused by a unique feature of the psychopath. This unique feature is the unbelievable contradictions, opposites, and dichotomies that mark this man as the disordered person he is.” I propose a definition of narcissistic abuse that has at its core the idea that this intentional deception for the purposes of exploitation is abusive.

Narcissistic abuse is the intentional construction of a false perception of someone else’s reality by an abuser for the purposes of controlling them.

It has the following features:

- The false reality is constructed through elaborate, covert deception and psychological manipulation over a long period of time.
- The false perceptions created are of the abuser as someone who has the survivor’s best interests at heart and of the relationship as a beneficial one for the survivor.
- The goal of the abuse is to allow the narcissist to extract whatever he or she perceives is of value from the partner, including attention, admiration, status, love, sex, money, a place to stay or other resources.
- The abuser takes advantage of societal norms that assume everyone participates in social relationships with a basic level of empathy, which makes it easy for the abuser to convince the survivor (and everyone else) that no abuse is taking place.
- Because the abuse is “hidden” using deception, it is difficult for survivors to recognize, understand, and escape it.

This definition provides the overall mechanism that explains what makes narcissistic abuse distinct from other forms of abuse and why that mechanism is so harmful. This specificity also makes it easy to convey consistently and use as a framework for understanding the variety of tactics used by narcissists.

Focusing on “deception” as the key to understanding narcissistic abuse brings the very thing that makes the abuse possible out into the light. Although narcissistic abusers may also abuse in other ways, they rely on deception to execute their dominance and control, to maintain it, and to avoid being detected as abusers. This is itself abusive and should be recognized as such.

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