

Dark Entanglement: Narcissistic Leaders, Their Followers, and the Contexts They Create.

Emily E. Forgo (ORCID: 0000-0002-6476-1795)¹,

Paul J. Hanges (ORCID: 0000-0001-8716-7644)²,

& Dritjon Gruda (ORCID: 0000-0002-8315-0826)³

Abstract

This chapter describes the complex interplay between narcissistic leaders and their followers and how different contexts influence this dynamic relationship. In contrast to the traditional narcissistic leadership literature, which has concentrated on the leader's characteristics and tendencies, we apply a relational-based perspective to argue that followers can enhance or suppress these characteristics of the leader. We also discuss how contexts also have a similar effect on leaders and followers. Narcissistic relationships flourish under certain circumstances and wither under others. We argue that a complete understanding of narcissistic leadership requires understanding of and empirical study of the entangled nature of these three variables.

Keywords: narcissistic leadership, followership, leadership, narcissism, context, relational-based perspective

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¹ Doctoral Candidate, Department of Psychology, University of Maryland, USA

² Professor of Industrial/Organizational Psychology, Department of Psychology, University of Maryland, USA

³ Associate Professor of Organizational Behavior, Research Centre in Management and Economics, Católica Porto Business School, Universidade Católica Portuguesa, Portugal
& Lecturer, School of Business, National University of Ireland Maynooth, Ireland.

Leadership is complex and far more intricate than traditional research frameworks—focused predominantly on leaders' attributes, characteristics, and actions—have allowed us to grasp. This traditional research paradigm used to study leadership is called the leader-centric perspective (Meindl et al., 1985). In this perspective, follower characteristics and environmental conditions are simply factors that leaders consider when making their behavioral choices (Blanchard et al., 1993; Fiedler, 1967; House & Mitchell, 1975). The inadequacy of this perspective has increasingly been discussed in the literature (Kellerman, 2008; Kelley, 2008; Lapierre & Carsten, 2014; Riggio et al., 2008). In contrast to leadership being a property of one individual, we adopted the newer relational-based perspective that conceptualizes leadership as an emergent property of two or more interacting individuals (e.g., Hanges et al., 2024; Vroom & Jago, 2007). While leaders influence followers' attitudes, motives, behaviors, and value saliency (Hangs et al., 2000, 2005, 2016; Gruda & Hangs, 2023), followers do not passively receive this influence. Rather, followers choose to engage with the leader actively, and they influence the leader's own behavior, values, attitudes, and beliefs over time (Brown, 2018). This new perspective focuses on the interpersonal behaviors of leaders and followers and pays less attention to their specific roles (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). It views leadership as a dynamic process in which leaders and followers jointly co-create this thing called leadership over time (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014).

In this chapter, we apply a relational-based perspective to more fully understand narcissistic leadership by examining how narcissistic leaders and their followers interact in different contexts. As we will discuss, leaders who possess narcissistic characteristics tend to emerge when they interact with followers who also have a unique set of characteristics.

However, we also recognize that these narcissistic leader-follower relationships won't always emerge when these individuals interact. Rather, a particular set of contextual factors is needed for this leader-follower relationship to flourish. Padilla et al. (2007) labeled this destructive combination of leaders, followers, and context as the toxic triangle. Traditionally, researchers have focused on the leader side of this triangle to understand narcissistic leadership (i.e., they applied the leader-centric perspective). We believe the three sides are entangled and difficult to separate. Thus, studies that focus on one or even two sides of the toxic triangle provide incomplete information about narcissistic relationships.

We start by reviewing what is known about narcissistic leaders. The literature being reviewed is derived from leader-centric research. Next, we will move toward the relational-based perspective by considering the literature examining the follower side of this toxic triangle. We explore how followers interact with and change the nature of narcissistic leader-follower interactions. Finally, we consider the context side of the toxic triangle and extend from this literature to note how context also changes the nature of narcissistic leader-follower relationships.

Narcissism and its Types

When the typical layperson is asked to describe a narcissistic individual, they describe someone who has a grandiose sense of self-importance and who is preoccupied with fantasies of success, power, brilliance, beauty, or perfect love. Narcissists that we encountered probably are not operating at a pathological level of this disorder (Caligor et al., 2015). Rather, we all have a tendency toward narcissistic behavior. We all can engage in narcissistic behavior; some of us are simply more prone to it than others. Thus, narcissism can be viewed as an individual difference, with people differing on the extent to

which they exhibit narcissistic tendencies (Asad & Sadler-Smith, 2020; Braun, 2016; Grijalva et al., 2014).

All narcissists seek validation of their self-perceived grandiosity, entitlement, and power (Grijalva & Zhang, 2016; Rentzsch & Gebauer, 2019). However, research has shown that not all narcissists are alike. Researchers have identified several types of narcissists, which include *grandiose*, *vulnerable* (Miller & Maples, 2011; Miller et al., 2011), *malignant*, and *communal* types of narcissistic leaders. These different types of narcissists differ in the behavior they use to validate their inflated self-perceptions (Gebauer et al., 2012a; Gebauer & Sedikides, 2018; Gebauer et al., 2012b).

Grandiose narcissists tend to align with the aforementioned layperson view of narcissism and have a tendency towards higher self-esteem and gregariousness (Miller et al., 2021). *Vulnerable narcissistic* leaders, on the other hand, tend to be introverted, defensive, and neurotic (Gaughlitz, 2021). Unlike the grandiose version, vulnerable narcissists' self-confidence is fragile and tenuous. These two types of narcissism have been repeatedly found to be conceptually and empirically distinct (Miller et al., 2011). Recently, researchers have focused on the traits, motives, values, and self-perceptions of these two narcissism types and they have clustered these attributes into three factors (Back et al., 2013). This three-factor (i.e., trifurcated) model distinguishes between attributes that are shared and attributes that are unique to grandiose and vulnerable narcissists (Crowe et al., 2019). These three factors are antagonism, agentic extraversion, and narcissistic neuroticism (Miller et al., 2021). The first attribute factor, antagonism, is shared by both grandiose and vulnerable narcissists. People high on antagonism use arrogance, callousness, cynicism, and deceitfulness to attain their goals (Miller et al., 2021). They act

entitled and they are exploitative. The second attribute factor, agentic extraversion, is associated with assertiveness and proactive behavior. People who are agentic extraverts think very highly of themselves (i.e., high self-esteem) and they strive to become group leaders. Agentic extraversion is unique to grandiose narcissism (Miller et al., 2021). The third, and final, attribute factor is narcissistic neuroticism. This set of attributes are unique to vulnerable narcissism. Narcissistic neuroticists have a fragile sense-of self (i.e., low self-esteem) and they have a high level of negative emotionality. Narcissistic neuroticists feel shameful and experience other self-conscious emotions.

A third type of narcissism, *communal*, has recently been identified. Communal narcissists were more difficult to identify because they exhibit atypical behavior for classic narcissists. Consistent with the previously discussed types of narcissists, the communal narcissist has an inflated self-image (Gebauer, 2012a). However, unlike grandiose narcissists who use agentic and proactive behaviors (i.e., dominance, power, success) to achieve their goals, communal narcissists use prosocial means like helpfulness, trustworthiness, and warmth (Gaughlitz, 2021) to fulfill their motives. Through these prosocial behaviors, the communal narcissist receives the praise and “ego boost” that they seek. Communal narcissists want others to see them as the most helpful or the kindest person in social situations.

The idea that someone can be both narcissistic and empathic (Bloom, 2017) seems counterintuitive. We typically assume that self-absorbed individuals have difficulty appreciating or relating to other people’s emotions (Back et al., 2013). However, based on the existing – albeit limited – research on the interaction between narcissism and empathy, initial studies indicate that empathy has both a cognitive (i.e., understanding and

considering others' perspectives and feelings) and an affective/motivational (i.e., experience sympathy and experience the emotions and distress of others) components. For grandiose, vulnerable, and communal narcissists, empathy seems to be an affective/motivational issue rather than a cognitive issue (Hepper et al., 2014). In other words, empathy for the narcissist is probably more of a choice, closer to a value, not a trait (Davis, 1983). We argue that communal narcissists are more likely to focus on the affective/motivational component of empathy compared to agentic narcissists. That probably is why communal narcissists focus on increasing their social status based on their "exceeding" communal qualities and characteristics (Gebauer et al., 2012b).

Finally, some researchers have discussed *malignant narcissism*. A malignant narcissist is someone who is paranoid and hyper-aggressive (Kernberg, 1975; Lenzenweger et al., 2018; Padilla et al., 2007). These narcissists seek to dominate others and will use cruelty and sadistic behavior (Lenzenweger et al., 2018) to get their underlings to follow their orders. Such individuals disregard social behavioral norms and use extreme forms of anti-social behavior to obtain their goals. Unlike grandiose, vulnerable, and communal narcissists, malignant narcissists do not engage in the affective/motivational component of empathy (Wai & Tiliopoulos, 2012). Wai and Tiliopoulos (2012) suggest that these narcissists use the cognitive component of empathy to dominate and overwhelm others.

This form of narcissism reflects more than just narcissism itself. Such people are also Machiavellian (i.e., manipulative individuals with cold personalities), psychopaths (i.e., highly impulsive and thrill-seeking individuals who lack anxiety and the affective/motivational component of empathy), and sadistic (i.e., individuals who get pleasure by causing pain, suffering, and humiliation on others). Researchers have typically

referred to narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy as the dark triad traits (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). However, more recent research has added sadism to that triad and now these four traits are called the dark tetrad traits (Paulhus, 2014; Paulhus et al., 2018).

Malignant narcissists have all of the dark tetrad traits. While malignant narcissists are not considered to be a psychiatric disorder, these individuals are also more likely to warrant a diagnosis of Narcissistic Personality Disorder as determined by the DSM-V (American Psychiatric Association, 2022; Caligor et al, 2015).

In summary, four different types of narcissists (i.e., grandiose, vulnerable, communal, and malignant. While all these narcissists want to validate their inflated self-perceptions, they differ in the behavior used to validate these perceptions. In the next section, we discuss how these types of narcissism act when in positions of power.

Narcissistic Leaders

As discussed previously, narcissists are preoccupied with power and have an inherent sense of superiority and entitlement. Their desire for power stems from a belief that having power brings social status and the desire to attribute positive qualities to oneself (i.e., self-enhancement) (Asad & Sadler-Smith, 2020). Thus, it is not surprising that these individuals are drawn to leadership positions in organizations. Once power and status are achieved, these leaders benefit from the increased opportunities for self-enhancement and, perhaps even more importantly, they benefit by showing others their attained power and status (Asad & Sadler-Smith, 2020). Narcissistic leaders are motivated by their own egomaniacal needs and beliefs (Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006). Fulfillment of these needs and beliefs by the leader outweighs followers' and organizational interests. The narcissistic leader's behavior is self-centered and focused on what will provide them with

their desired self-enhancement, regardless of whether those behaviors align with the best interests of others (Padilla et al., 2007).

The four types of narcissists discussed before behave differently when in a leadership role. Grandiose narcissistic leaders think of themselves as born leaders who strive for status, authority, and power over others. Usually, such leaders are described as charming and can even positively contribute to organizational performance, for example, in terms of corporate fundraising success (Gruda et al., 2021b). However, these leaders tend to exploit followers over time, and the initial positive impression wanes (Gaughlitz, 2021; Miller et al., 2011). Grandiose narcissistic leaders exhibit extreme self-confidence and self-esteem and project a sense of superiority (Gruda & Hanges, 2023). They are agentic in fulfilling their needs by asserting and dominating others to demonstrate their competence, intelligence, and leadership skills (Braun, 2016). Their extroversion, assertiveness, and confidence make them initially seem to be the perfect leader, and thus, they often emerge as group leaders (Asad & Sadler-Smith, 2020; Grijalva et al., 2014; Härtel et al., 2023; Hoffman et al., 2012; Nevicka et al., 2018a) though this perception wanes as the group members learn the true nature of the narcissistic leader.

Unlike grandiose narcissistic leaders, vulnerable narcissistic leaders are unlikely to emerge as group leaders immediately. They lack the confidence, charisma, and extroversion needed for others to classify them as leaders quickly. They also have difficulties building positive relationships with followers due to a fundamental distrust of their followers (Gaughlitz, 2021). While the lack of confidence and follower distrust seems to suggest that vulnerable narcissists would have a difficult time attaining a leadership position, their need for the status and power drives them to seek these roles (Gaughlitz,

2021). Unlike grandiose narcissistic leaders, however, they probably do not want to be in roles that have increased visibility or notoriety and will use more covert behaviors to counter threats to their self-image (Gauglitz, 2021). Vulnerable narcissists may be inclined to assume a leadership role in which they play the “puppet master” who pulls the strings behind the curtain. To illustrate this example, one might think of the ancient Egyptian Viziers. Viziers were individuals who served as head advisers to Egyptian Pharaohs. The Vizier held the ear of the Pharaoh and was in charge of other Pharaoh staff, which provided the unique ability to hold positions of power without the notoriety and public scrutiny that may often come with such positions. This seems like it might be an ideal leadership role for a vulnerable narcissist in that they attain the power and status that they desire, but they are operating behind the scenes, somewhat protected from direct public criticism that could threaten their fragile sense-of self and activate their negative emotionality. Gauglitz (2021) points out that when vulnerable narcissists enter leadership positions, they are likely to engage in passive-aggressive forms of abusive supervision due to this inhibited and hypersensitive nature.

The narcissistic leadership literature has predominantly focused on the more overt and well-known aspects, such as grandiose and vulnerable narcissism (see e.g., Liu et al., 2022). Not as much is written about communal or malignant narcissistic leaders. However, Gruda et al. (2023) recently presented a paper exploring the effect of communal narcissistic leaders on their followers’ mental health during the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic. Given that these types of narcissists use pro-social behavior (e.g., helping) to attain their personal goals, these researchers hypothesized that communal narcissistic leaders might be a positive influence on their follower’s mental health during the uncertainty and stress

caused by the pandemic. Their results supported their hypotheses. Specifically, they found that unlike the followers of other types of leaders, the communal narcissistic leaders' followers showed less anxiety during the pandemic. This reduced anxiety continued for the entire length of the research study (i.e., 316 days). More research on communal narcissistic leadership is clearly needed.

Regardless of the specific type of narcissistic leadership, it is easy to imagine that their intense pursuit of power and self-enhancement would lead to negative evaluations by their followers. Surprisingly, however, narcissistic leaders do tend to be viewed positively, at least in the short term. Narcissistic leaders are more likely to take risks, and they may use inspirational/motivating speeches to get their followers on board with their vision. These inspirational speeches may often result in the perception by followers and observers that the leader is charismatic or transformational when, in reality, they are not (Galvin et al., 2010). Hogan and Kaiser (2005) refer to combination of positive and negative tendencies as the “mixed blessing” of narcissistic leadership.

To understand why narcissistic leaders are not truly charismatic, researchers have distinguished between socialized charisma from personalized charisma (House & Howell, 1992; Howell, 1988; Humphreys et al., 2010). Socialized charismatic leaders use their influence in the service of others. They align their vision for the future with their followers' needs and desires. Socialized leaders work to maintain open, two-way communication, and they adhere to some set of moral standards (Popper, 2002). In contrast, personalized charismatic leaders use their power for personal gain. They promote their own vision for the future, rely on only one-way communication, and they will only apply moral standards when it suits their self-interest. All four types of narcissists

discussed earlier follow a personalized charismatic leadership profile (Humphreys et al., 2010; Popper, 2002). Even communal narcissistic leaders who use prosocial behavior in their interactions with followers (Gaughlitz, 2021), are only doing so to fulfill their personal motives. The term charismatic leadership is reserved to those individuals who fit the socialized charismatic profile. Thus, narcissistic leaders cannot be truly thought of as charismatic.

Narcissists are also not transformational leaders. Transformational leaders listen to their followers' needs and try to foster organizational climates that support followers' needs (Northouse, 2019). This aspect of transformational leadership has been labeled "individualized consideration" (Bass, 1985). While narcissistic leaders may initially appear to listen to their followers, this consideration of their followers' needs and desires is short-lived and fake (Campbell & Campbell, 2009; Ouimet, 2010). Any care and support for their employees is only a guise to manipulate and exploit followers into acting in the interest of the narcissistic leader. Thus, narcissists are not truly transformational leaders. Rather, they are more appropriately referred to as pseudo-transformational leaders (Bass, 1998).

Narcissistic leadership mainly results in a host of negative group and organizational outcomes, such as risky decision-making (Chatterjee & Hambrick, 2007), harm to others (Aasland et al., 2008), diminished subordinate trust and organizational effectiveness (Benson & Hogan, 2008), increased dysfunctional management (Campbell & Campbell, 2009), development of unethical organizational climates (Hoffman et al., 2012), increased counterproductive work behaviors (Braun, 2016), and a higher propensity for white-collar crime (Blickle et al., 2006). These negative behaviors can cascade with followers'

counterproductive work behaviors, increasing as a counter-reaction to the narcissistic leader (Braun, 2016). Over time, follower satisfaction will diminish, reports of follower exhaustion and burnout should increase, and questionable decisions lacking integrity should increase (Bernerth, 2022; O'Reilly et al., 2020).

In summary, we reviewed the leader-centric literature and found that not all narcissistic leaders act similarly. This literature focused on the characteristics of leaders to explain why some are grandiose while others are vulnerable, communal, or malignant. In the next section of this chapter, we consider the follower side of the toxic triangle. We will discuss how certain types of followers are attracted to narcissistic leaders as well as how follower characteristics alter how narcissistic leadership is manifested.

The Follower's Role and Influence in Narcissistic Leader-Follower Relationships

The complex relationship between narcissistic leaders and followers is hinted at in the fable of the scorpion and the frog. In this fable, a scorpion wants to cross a river but cannot swim, so it asks a frog to carry it across the river. Initially, the frog is afraid because the scorpion might sting and kill it, but the scorpion convinces the frog that they will both die if it does. The frog is convinced, and the scorpion hops on the frog's back. Everything is going well until halfway across the river, the scorpion stings the frog. Before dying, the frog asks the scorpion why it stung the frog because now they both will die. The scorpion responds that it couldn't resist the urge because stinging is in the scorpion's nature. While this fable is a simplification of the complex interplay between narcissistic leaders and their followers, it is a helpful metaphor to start our discussion of the leader-follower relationship. In this fable, the scorpion had a specific personal goal and it enlists the frog's assistance to help it accomplish this goal. Thus, the scorpion occupies a quasi-

leader role in this story. Two specific elements of this fable make it applicable to narcissistic leadership. First, narcissistic leader-follower relationships rarely end happily. While narcissistic leaders may be initially beneficial, it is likely that they will eventually become destructive and a negative force to their followers and their organization. Second, like the frog, followers may often be aware of the narcissistic tendencies of their leader, especially when the leaders and followers are well acquainted with each other (Grijalva et al., 2014; Ong et al., 2016). Despite this awareness, they may still choose to follow the leader, perhaps because they hope that the potential risk of following the leader may outweigh the potential risks of not doing so. The characteristics of the followers or the specifics of the context they are in probably influences the decision to follow the leader. We will now focus on aspects of the followers that influence their reaction to work with a narcissistic leader.

Followers are differentially attracted and susceptible to narcissistic leaders. Consistent with Schneider's Attraction-Selection-Attrition⁴ (ASA) Model (1987; Schneider et al., 2000; Schneider et al., 2012), the nature of a leader-follower relationship is not only a function of the narcissistic leader. It is also a function of the kinds of followers who are attracted to and stay with such leaders. Followers' motives, personalities, values, interests, social skills, and other factors influence the nature of the leader-follower interactions (Hanges et al., 2024). As Schneider (1987) said, the people really do make the

⁴ The ASA model was designed to explain how organizational climate is a function of the people who are differentially attracted to, selected by, and stay with the organization. First, the attribute profile of individuals determines which organizations they want to work for. A subset of these individuals is hired by an organization because they have a desired attribute profile. Finally, over time, the people who stay in an organization are increasingly similar in their attribute profile. Schneider (1987) claims that the climate of an organization is a function of the attribute profile similarity among the people who are attracted to, get selected by, and stay with an organization. In other words, the people make the place.

place, and we would add that they also shape leader-follower relationships and determine how narcissistic leadership will be manifested. Followers are active participants in entering into or out of such relationships. Consistent with the ASA model, the similarity of followers who seek to work with and remain working with the leader create a group norm that affects the frequency of the leader's narcissistic behavior. As a function of their choices and their attributes, followers can modify the leader-follower relationship.

For example, Nevicka et al. (2018a) hypothesized that follower self-esteem would moderate the degree to which followers are susceptible to the leader's abusive behavior. They reasoned that followers with low self-esteem, due to their insecurity and need for external validation, would be strongly attracted to the power and confidence exhibited by grandiose narcissistic leaders (Thoroughgood et al., 2012). Further, these researchers hypothesized that follower self-esteem would also moderate the extent to which followers recognize their leaders as narcissistic. Consistent with their hypotheses, followers lower in self-esteem were more likely to be negatively affected by the leader (i.e., show more burn-out and lower job performance than their higher self-esteem colleagues) and these low self-esteem followers perceived the leader as more abusive than their higher self-esteem colleagues (Nevicka et al., 2018a). Like moths to a flame, lower self-esteem followers are more likely to be enticed by a narcissistic leader, and they are also more likely to be harmed by these leaders.

Gruda et al. (2021a) demonstrated that followers higher in trait anxiety (i.e., those who frequently experience intense levels of uncertainty across various contexts) are more likely to be attracted to the confidence and charisma of grandiose narcissistic leaders. Highly anxious followers more frequently interact with narcissistic leaders, although the

level of this interaction was moderated by the leader's gender. Anxious followers were found to engage more with male narcissistic rather than female narcissistic leaders.

Beyond self-esteem and anxiety, follower personality also has been found to influence followers' interaction frequency with narcissistic leaders. Gruda et al. (2022) measured followers' and leaders' personality and narcissism by using machine learning algorithms to score Twitter posts of known leaders and their followers. They found that follower personality traits strongly influenced the interaction levels between narcissistic leaders and followers. Specifically, highly agreeable and neurotic followers were more likely to engage with narcissistic leaders than their less agreeable and neurotic counterparts. Gruda et al. (2022) reasoned that because highly agreeable followers want to avoid interpersonal conflict, these followers seek leaders who seem to have sufficient power and status in the hope that these leaders will handle any difficult situations that may arise in the future. Similarly, these authors argued that neurotic followers interacted more frequently with narcissistic leaders because the leader's confidence probably reduced followers' feelings of uncertainty. However, not every follower in the Gruda et al. (2022) study was attracted to narcissistic leaders. Highly conscientious followers and those more "open to experience" were less likely to interact with such leaders. In addition, Gruda et al. (2022) found that leader and follower gender both moderated these leader-follower relationships. Narcissistic followers were more likely to interact with female narcissistic leaders, whereas non-narcissistic followers were more likely to interact with male narcissistic leaders.

In summary, these last three studies have identified several individual differences that influence follower interaction patterns with narcissistic leaders. These differences not

only influence followers' perceptions of the leader, but also the extent to which the followers desire to work with and their frequency of engaging with the narcissistic leader. In the next section, we discuss how followers behave differently when they encounter narcissistic leaders.

Follower Behavior.

Even when followers are attracted to working with narcissistic leaders, they do not all act similarly when they execute their roles. Padilla et al. (2007) postulate that followers who actively work with destructive leaders can be classified as one of two types of followers: conformers or colluders. Conformers do not buy into the destructive beliefs of their leader but choose to conform to the leader's wishes and orders. They follow the orders and directions of these leaders even though they don't agree with the leader's beliefs. Conformers follow destructive leaders due to unmet basic needs, perhaps negative self-evaluations or psychological immaturity. In the eyes of the conformist, following the destructive leader provides opportunities for belonging and community. A negative core self-evaluation and low psychological maturity result in an external locus of control that makes them more willing to follow and internalize the values of leaders they perceive as powerful and capable.

Colluders, like conformers, want to follow destructive leaders. However, unlike conformers, colluders actively work to perpetuate the leader's goals, mission, and methods (Padilla et al., 2007). These ambitious followers have values/beliefs that overlap with the destructive leader. Their ambitious nature makes them more willing to follow a destructive leader if they believe that the outcomes they will receive justifies the means by which they achieve it. Sharing beliefs with the leader may eventually lead to a tighter leader-follower

bond, which should enhance followers' motivation to engage in behaviors that the leader thinks as desirable.

Both colluders and conformers choose to work with and stay with narcissistic leaders. These are exactly the type of followers these leaders would want because they either actively enable or simply refuse to hinder the leader's destructive behavior and tendencies. Given the apparent success that narcissists have finding these types of followers, it is possible that these leaders may be sensitive to implicit cues emitted by future conformers or colluders.

Once the leader-follower relationship has formed, followers can shape the way that this relationship evolves through their attitudes and behaviors. For example, narcissistic leaders tend to have more favorable opinions of followers who are self-promotional than non-narcissistic leaders do (Den Hartog et al., 2020). Den Hartog et al. (2020) drew upon the similarity-attraction principle to explain this. People tend to like others who are similar to them. Thus, it is unsurprising that self-promotional narcissistic leaders would be favorably disposed toward followers who are also self-promotional. Followers' self-promotional behavior is probably less threatening to the leader than if the self-promotional behavior was coming from someone at the same level and directly competing with the narcissistic leader. In addition, Den Hartog et al. (2020) hypothesized that narcissistic leaders would denigrate humble followers and interpret humility as either insincere or evidence of an inherent weakness. Thus, followers who engage in greater self-promotional behavior and who aren't humble can strength the leader-follower relationship and potentially become a member of the leader's trusted inner circle.

Interestingly, the similarity-attraction principle does not seem to apply when both followers and their leaders score high on the dark triad traits. Schyns et al. (2018) note that followers high on these dark traits might actually repel the narcissistic leader. These followers might just be too similar to the leaders leading to potential battles “for the limelight” when opportunities for self-aggrandizement arise.

The composition of the followers and their attributes directly affects how authentic narcissistic leaders can be. That is, it is easier for leaders to behave unethically when their followers consist of colluders and conformists. The Enron scandal uncovered in the early 2000s is a perfect example of how unethical narcissistic leaders can be when they have colluding and conforming followers. Enron actively engaged in unethical accounting practices for years in an effort to misrepresent company earnings and losses. Their accounting practices allowed Enron to maintain its positive reputation with the public as well as maintain its highly valued stock by hiding substantial amounts of company debt from shareholders and the public. Enron’s unethical accounting practices were only one secret, among many, known by the CEO and a select group of organizational members. These unethical practices, facilitated by both colluding and conforming followers, ultimately ended in massive financial losses, bankruptcy, and criminal charges for members of Enron and their accounting firm, Arthur Anderson. The Enron story probably would have had a different ending if the organizations CEO and fellow top executives had fewer colluders and conformers among their followers. A different organizational climate created by executives who refuse to go along with the deception would serve as guardrails to limit the destructive behavior of the narcissistic leader. Just as a leader with no followers

is not truly a leader, a narcissistic leader without colluders and conformers among their followers are limited in their destructive behavior and potential for negative outcomes.

In summary, we discuss the active role that the follower plays in shaping the leader-follower relationship over time. We discussed how certain types of followers are attracted to the narcissistic leader and how these followers permit the leader to be authentic to their destructive tendencies. However, we also discussed the possibility that followers can serve as guardrails for the leader's behavior and thereby modulate their destructive tendencies.

Of course, consistent with the framework we are using in this chapter, just studying the leader and follower sides of the entangled triangle is insufficient to understand this destructive relationship. Contextual factors also play a role. Certain types of environments enable narcissistic leader-follower relationships, and other types of environments inhibit such relationships. Indeed, the Washington Post's new slogan that "democracy dies in the darkness" (Farhi, 2017) implies that unethical behavior occurs in organizational climates that emphasize secrecy. In the next section, we consider the third component that needs to be considered to comprehensively understand narcissistic leadership: context. We discuss the literature explaining how contexts either hinder or facilitate narcissistic leader-follower interactions.

Contextual Contribution to Narcissistic Leader-Follower Relationships

Narcissistic leader-follower relationships require special conditions to grow and flourish. Without these conditions, narcissistic relationships will either wither and die or simply never grow in the first place. According to Ouimet (2010) and Hambrick and his

associates (Crossland & Hambrick, 2007; 2011), the contextual conditions that facilitate the emergence and growth of narcissistic leader-follower relationships can be classified into (a) established culture, (b) the VUCA nature of the environment,⁵ and (c) organizational climate. These factors are believed to affect the leader-follower relationship by primarily restricting managerial discretion (Hambrick & Finkelstein, 1987, Hanges et al., 2024). Managerial discretion refers to the tolerance granted to managers and leaders to devise and implement solutions to organizational problems (Hambrick & Finkelstein, 1987). The leader's discretion to engage in certain unethical and destructive behaviors is reduced under certain cultural, environmental, and organizational conditions. Knowing what these conditions are will help to mitigate the negative outcomes of narcissistic leadership.

Established Culture. It has long been argued that culture influences team, group, organization, and society behavior (Schein, 2010). Culture refers to the shared perceptions among members of some collective regarding the collective's norms, values, beliefs, and assumptions (Hanges et al., 2024; Lucas et al., 2023; Schneider et al., 2013). Culture has been studied at various levels of analysis, such as small groups, organizations, industries, and societies. Regardless of the level of analysis, culture is transmitted to new group members through fictional (e.g., fables) or non-fictional stories as well as by members with longer tenure sharing their past interpretations of events to aid new members in interpreting the meaning of the group's practices and rituals. In this way, culture informs new members on the "correct way to perceive, think, and feel" about the group's or organization's events and practices (Schein, 2010, p. 18).

⁵ VUCA refers to environments that are Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous.

With regard to organizational culture, the entrepreneurs and early organizational leaders set the tone for the organization and they have a substantial impact on how the organizational culture initial forms and evolves over time (Schein, 2010). Leaders' actions, behaviors, and words and how those words are conveyed can reinforce the norms, values, and assumptions underlying culture. Thus, the culture originally espoused by the early organizational leaders only persist over time if each new generation of leaders act, behave, and says things that reinforce the existing norms, values, and assumptions.

A narcissistic leader can try to alter the existing culture of an organization. O'Reilly et al. (2020) found that narcissistic leaders tend to endorse fewer collaborative policies and act in more deceitful and duplicitous ways. The narcissistic leader might make statement that collaboration is unnecessary and a waste of time because they are unrealistically confident in their ability to solve problems (Braun, 2016). Grandiose, vulnerable, and malignant narcissistic leader would be the most likely type of leader that would push against collaboration due to their heightened sense of self and need for validation. Over time, the narcissistic leader will diminish soliciting the opinions of others, and soon, this lack of follower input becomes the new norm and culture of the group.

It has been speculated that narcissistic leader-follower relationships will proliferate in groups with an uncertainty avoidance culture (Padilla et al., 2007). An uncertainty avoidance culture stresses norms, rules, and procedures that attempt to reduce the unpredictability and uncertainty of the future (House et al., 2004). This cultural context is perfect for leaders with narcissistic tendencies. Groups, organizations, and societies whose members strongly endorse an uncertainty avoidant culture will be driven to find a confident leader who claims to be able to handle all future problems. Groups with strong

uncertainty avoidance cultures might even anoint a narcissistic leader suspecting that such a leader will make reforms to the organization that result in group members losing voice and organizational influence (e.g., elimination of participative organizational practices).

Another cultural factor that may facilitate narcissistic leader-follower relationships is power distance (House et al., 2004). Power distance culture refers to groups whose norms, rules, and procedures reinforce the message that status has privileges and power should not be distributed equally among group members. In such cultures, unilateral decisions by the people in power is the norm. This kind of culture would not place any discretion limits on the darker tendencies of the narcissistic leader. The narcissistic leader is free to claim special privileges for themselves and take power away from lower-status group members because it is consistent with the accepted power asymmetries in these groups.

However, while leaders can create, sustain, and change the cultures in which they thrive, they are also influenced and restricted by them (Dorfman et al., 2012; Hanges et al., 2016; Hanges et al., 2024; House et al., 2004). Certain cultures can curtail the emergence and persistence of narcissistic leader-follower interactions. Such cultures need to be strongly established to withstand the expected resistance of and attacks by the narcissistic leader. A culture becomes strongly established as there has been long-term consistent and persistent communication about what behavior is expected and acceptable in the group (Mischel & Patterson, 1976). The clarity regarding desired behavior can potentially constrain the narcissist's more destructive behavior (Meyer et al., 2010). For example, organizations with a strong ethical culture probably have clear norms regarding acceptable and ethical behavior. The consistently clear expectations, constraints, and consequences

make engaging in negative behaviors toward one's followers strategically disadvantageous for the leader. Thus, such clear and well-established norms restrict managerial discretion and the narcissistic leader cannot use certain behavioral strategies to attain their goals without the risk of being thrown out of power. Similar to the follower attributes acting as a guardrail, the strength of the certain types of norms, values, and assumptions also will moderate narcissistic leader behavior.

In summary, while the leader can change the culture of a group, the culture can also change the behavior of narcissistic leaders. Narcissistic leaders will probably be very motivated to change a strong and clear culture to one that is weaker and more ambiguous. We will discuss context ambiguity in the next section.

VUCA Nature of the Environmental. It has been theorized that narcissistic leader-follower relationships thrive in unstable or highly ambiguous environments (Schyns et al., 2018; Wang, 2021). Not surprisingly, prior literature has empirically documented that such contexts have more narcissistic leaders than more stable and transparent environments (Gruda et al., 2021; Nevicka et al., 2013). Political, economic, or technological instability along with other factors increase the ambiguity, uncertainty, and instability of the business environment resulting in the more positive beliefs regarding narcissistic leadership (Ouimet, 2010, p. 720). These kinds of environments have been labeled VUCA (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous) and unfortunately, business environments appear to becoming more VUCA every year (Bennett & Lemoine, 2014).

The outsized confidence of narcissistic leaders is reassuring to their followers and may even be considered inspirational and increase group morale and cohesiveness in VUCA environments (Campbell & Campbell, 2009). Followers no long seek out

participative, relationship-oriented leaders, but rather, they gravitate toward more agentic, autocratic leaders who espouse and emit confidence (Gruda et al., 2021; Nevicka et al., 2013). All of the dark traits seem likely to emerge in such environments (Schyns et al., 2018). So the grandiose narcissistic leader claims of competence, decisiveness, and overconfidence seems ideal to reduce follower anxiety and enhance follower conviction that the leader can handle any future threats to the group (Nevicka et al., 2013, p. 371; Lipman-Blumen, 2005).

In summary, narcissistic leader-follower relationships thrive in VUCA environments. From recent experiences of supply chain disruptions and changing customer demand resulting from the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, the increasingly VUCA nature of the business environment is a perfect breeding ground for narcissistic leader-follower relationships. In the next section, we will discuss organizational factors that might moderate narcissistic leadership.

Organizational Climate. Formal organizational policies, practices, and procedures can serve as guardrails that diminish the frequency of narcissistic and unethical behavior in an organization. These factors act as checks and balances to prevent unethical and destructive behavior. In the organizational literature, organizational factors, such as a company's policies, practices, and procedures, are referred to as the climate of an organization. Climate refers to the shared meaning employees attach to organizational policies, practices, and procedures and as well as the behaviors employees see rewarded, supported, and expected (Ehrhart et al., 2014). While culture refers more to the norms, values, and assumptions held in organizations and passed along informally by stories and

myths, climate is more associated with the meaning group members associate with more formally enacted policies, procedures, and practices.

Organizational climates can limit the destructive behaviors of narcissistic leaders because they reduce managerial discretion regarding permitted strategies and behaviors. Institutionalized rules and practices can place formal limits on the narcissistic leader's use of power, especially when these rules and practices emphasize the importance of accountability. Of course, the effectiveness of organizational climate depends upon all group members being well-informed regarding these rules and policies. The more group members understand what the organizational climate is, the more likely the behavior of the narcissistic leader will be monitored and kept in check (Maccoby, 2007). Of course, the narcissistic leaders will be highly motivated to expand their sphere of influence and break any constraints on their behavior and power. Indeed, the narcissist's sense of entitlement may give them the impression that they have personal permission to break the rules others follow (Schyns et al., 2018). They will undermine established organizational climate if it constrains their behavior and there is a lack of oversight restricting them from doing so.

Ethical organizational climates might be able to regulate narcissistic leader behavior (Hoffman et al., 2012). A strong ethical climate will clearly and unambiguously communicate to all group members that narcissistic behavior is unethical and ineffective. Of course, firmly established ethical climates are anathema to narcissistic leaders and such leader-follower relationships should have difficulty thriving in such climates (Hoffman et al., 2012). A well-established ethical climate combined with incentives and social pressure can convince narcissistic leaders that it is wiser to engage in pro-social behavior, such as organizational citizenship behaviors (OCBs), than their preferred mode of behavior (Spain,

2014). This is especially true if the leader's pro-social behaviors are visible to others.

While the conditions of the business environment is not within an organization's control, creating and enacting desirable organizational climate is within the control of the organization. Thus, Ouimet (2010) provided some recommendations regarding organizational factors that should regulate narcissistic behavior and its destructive consequences if they are implemented. Ouimet recommended that organizations implement (a) team-based rather than individual-based reward systems, (b) a coaching program that monitors the narcissistic leader's behavior, and (c) governance committees formed to assess the narcissistic leader's professional performance regularly.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we departed from the traditional leader-centric perspective taken in the narcissistic leadership literature and applied a relational-based perspective to understand narcissistic leader-follower relationships. The relational-based perspective emphasizes the dynamic and entangled relationship between narcissistic leaders and their followers. We added to our discussion of the relational-based leader-follower perspective by explicitly considering contextual factors and their importance in shaping the nature of the leader-follower relationships.

In this chapter, we stressed that leaders and their followers are dynamically working to co-create and co-define the leader-follower relationship (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). Followers are fully integrated in our model and we emphasized that they play an active role in shaping this relationship. Followers clearly influence their leader's behavior, values, attitudes, and beliefs over time (Brown, 2018). We reviewed the literature showing how the attributes of followers differentially attract them to or away from narcissistic

leaders. Colluders and conformists increase and enhance narcissistic leadership whereas other follower attributes minimize such leadership. The right kinds of followers can serve as a “check-and-balance” mechanism to minimize unacceptable narcissistic behavior along with any accompanying negative outcomes.

In addition to leaders and followers, we also discussed how the context operates to moderate the relationship between leaders’ and followers’ individual characteristics and interaction patterns and the production of narcissistic leadership relationships. We discussed how the established culture, the VUCA nature of the environment, and strong organizational climate can provide guardrails that potentially limit the strength and frequency of narcissistic leader-follower relationships in an organization. Only by considering all three components (i.e., leader, follower, contexts) can we understand the nature of narcissistic leadership.

Future Research

The interconnected and embedded nature of leader, follower, and context require changes to the typical methodology used in leadership research. While there are several notable exceptions, the majority of the empirical leadership studies collect their data using a cross-sectional research design. As evidenced by the proliferation of box-and-arrow models used in this literature, the cross-sectional design assumes a unidirectional causal direction between leaders and follows. One variable has to be treated as the predictor (e.g., leadership) and the other variable (i.e., follower behavior) has to be the dependent variable (Y). To minimize confusion regarding the causal direction of the variables, researchers may measure one variable first (e.g., leader information) and then collect the other variable

(follower information) after some time interval has passed.⁶ If the researcher is interested in the testing the reverse causal direction between these two variables (e.g., follower effect on leaders), then new data has to be collected with follower data collected first, and then leader data after some suitable time period. Similar statistical analyses will be conducted using this new data except that the variables assigned to the predictor and dependent variable role will be switched.⁷

We would like to encourage leadership scholars who are interested in testing the proposed codetermined and co-created leader-follower relationship discussed in this chapter to adopt a longitudinal research design in which leadership and followership information is measured repeatedly over many time periods. Further, the data collected using a longitudinal design could be analyzed using analyses consistent with dynamical systems and complexity science (Aiken et al., 2019). Complexity science is inherently focused on the emergence and evolution of phenomena over time (Marion, 1999; Vallacher et al., 2002). Dynamical systems and complexity science is consistent with the discussion of our model as well as adaptive leadership and such approaches are believed to be useful for understanding a variety of individual and group processes (Aiken et al., 2019; DeRue, 2011; DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Hanges et al., 2000; 2005; Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2007; Vallacher & Nowak, 1994; Vallacher et al., 2002). Aiken et al. (2019) indicate that a number of well-established qualitative (e.g., interviews, ethnographies, observations) and quantitative (e.g., questionnaire, social network data, pseudo-continual attitude

⁶ The effectiveness of this time delay design depends upon a number of other conditions (Hanges & Wang, 2012).

⁷ The authors recognize that both causal directions between two variables can be tested using data in which the leader and follower variables are measured simultaneously. However, no matter how sophisticated the analytic strategy, the causal direction of these two variables collected at the same time will be somewhat ambiguous.

measurement) data collection methods can be used strategically to collect data over time to understand how phenomena of interest emerge and evolve. This longitudinal data can be analyzed via complexity-science consistent quantitative tools (e.g., social network analysis, stochastic linear adaptive systems) to test the more dynamic aspects of our entangled leader-follower-context model.

When studying the dynamic nature of some phenomena, it is important to ensure that at least one variable does not reflect stable or enduring characteristics (e.g., traits), but rather reflects the current state of some system and the phenomena of interest. To ensure that this requirement is met in leadership research, researchers have to identify the process through which the leader/follower interactions takes place (e.g., Braun et al., 2022; Mohr, 1982; Simon, 1992; Strauss & Grant, 2022). For example, according to DeRue (2011), the most basic unit of the leader-follower relationship is what he calls the “double interact” episodes. A person can only enact leading or following as a function of other group members granting those roles to that person (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). DeRue’s double interact episode emphasizes that taking the role of leader or follower is contingent and dependent on the other members of a group. Repeated measurement of claiming and granting over time will show some fluctuations over time (Hanges et al., 2024). DeRue proposes that these fluctuations are a function of two aspects of the leader-follower interactions: (1) magnitude of leading/following and (2) dispersion of leadership. Magnitude of leading/following reflects the frequency of double-interact episodes that occur in a group over time. Higher frequency of double-interact episodes reflects the importance of leadership for the group (DeRue, 2011). Lower frequency could reflect that leadership is not relevant for the group (e.g., the task does not require coordination) or a

lack of leadership (e.g., management by exception, laissez-faire leadership). The dispersion aspect reflects the percentage of time that the leadership role is primarily enacted by one group member (i.e., low dispersion) versus the leadership role being shared across multiple group members over time (i.e., high dispersion). Both of these aspects could be repeatedly measured to reflect state-level changes in the interaction pattern among group members.

How does narcissistic leadership affect the frequency and magnitude of the double interacts? Research is needed to validate our expectation, but we predict that low dispersion may reflect more and high dispersion reflect less narcissistic leader-follower relationships in a group. Do the follower and contextual characteristics discussed earlier in this chapter actually enhance or inhibit narcissistic leader-follower relationships over time? The primarily cross-sectional research that we reviewed earlier suggests that it would. However, the extent that we see this in the emergence of and evolving nature of narcissistic leader-follower relationships needs to be investigated. How do narcissistic leaders change and manipulate contexts to be more tolerant of their destructive tendencies? All of these questions are worth exploring. We are only at the beginning of this journey.

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