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- o [United States & Canada](#)
- o [Middle East](#)
- o [Europe](#)
- o [Former USSR](#)
- o [East Asia](#)
- o [South Asia](#)
- o [Latin America](#)
- o [Africa](#)
- o [Australia & Pacific](#)
- o [Global Organizations](#)
- o [Terrorism](#)
- o [History, Ideology & Science](#)

[Interviews](#)[Stock Watch](#)[RSS](#)[New York Criminal Lawyer](#)[NY Divorce & Custody Lawyer](#)[Criminal Lawyers in New York](#)

Home >> United States & Canada >> Elections & Politics

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Barack Obama - Narcissist or Merely Narcissistic?

Sam Vaknin, Ph.D. - 8/13/2008

Barack Obama appears to be a narcissist. Granted, only a qualified mental health diagnostician can determine whether someone suffers from Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) and this, following lengthy tests and personal interviews. But, in the absence of access to Barack Obama, one has to rely on his overt performance and on testimonies by his closest, nearest and dearest.

Narcissistic leaders are nefarious and their effects pernicious. They are subtle, refined, socially-adept, manipulative, possessed of thespian skills, and convincing. Both types equally lack empathy and are ruthless and relentless or driven.

Perhaps it is time to require each candidate to high office in the USA to submit to a rigorous physical and mental checkup with the results made public.

I. Upbringing and Childhood

Obama's early life was decidedly chaotic and replete with traumatic and mentally bruising dislocations. Mixed-race marriages were even less common then. His parents went through a divorce when he was an infant (two years old). Obama saw his father only once again, before he died in a car accident. Then, his mother re-married and Obama had to relocate to Indonesia: a foreign land with a radically foreign culture, to be raised by a step-father. At the age of ten, he was whisked off to live with his maternal (white) grandparents. He saw his mother only intermittently in the following few years and then she vanished from his life in 1979. She died of cancer in 1995.

Pathological narcissism is a reaction to prolonged abuse and trauma in early childhood or early adolescence. The source of the abuse or trauma is immaterial: the perpetrators could be dysfunctional or absent parents, teachers, other adults, or peers.

II. Behavior Patterns

The narcissist:

* Feels grandiose and self-important (e.g., exaggerates accomplishments, talents, skills, contacts, and personality

traits to the point of lying, demands to be recognised as superior without commensurate achievements);

* Is obsessed with fantasies of unlimited success, fame, fearsome power or omnipotence, unequalled brilliance (the cerebral narcissist), bodily beauty or sexual performance (the somatic narcissist), or ideal, everlasting, all-conquering love or passion;

* Firmly convinced that he or she is unique and, being special, can only be understood by, should only be treated by, or associate with, other special or unique, or high-status people (or institutions);

* Requires excessive admiration, adulation, attention and affirmation – or, failing that, wishes to be feared and to be notorious (Narcissistic Supply);

* Feels entitled. Demands automatic and full compliance with his or her unreasonable expectations for special and favourable priority treatment;

* Is "interpersonally exploitative", i.e., uses others to achieve his or her own ends;

* Devoid of empathy. Is unable or unwilling to identify with, acknowledge, or accept the feelings, needs, preferences, priorities, and choices of others;

* Constantly envious of others and seeks to hurt or destroy the objects of his or her frustration. Suffers from persecutory (paranoid) delusions as he or she believes that they feel the same about him or her and are likely to act similarly;

* Behaves arrogantly and haughtily. Feels superior, omnipotent, omniscient, invincible, immune, "above the law", and omnipresent (magical thinking). Rages when frustrated, contradicted, or confronted by people he or she considers inferior to him or her and unworthy.

Narcissism is a defense mechanism whose role is to deflect hurt and trauma from the victim's "True Self" into a "False Self" which is omnipotent, invulnerable, and omniscient. This False Self is then used by the narcissist to garner narcissistic supply from his human environment. Narcissistic supply is any form of attention, both positive and negative and it is instrumental in the regulation of the narcissist's labile sense of self-worth.

Perhaps the most immediately evident trait of patients with Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) is their vulnerability to criticism and disagreement. Subject to negative input, real or imagined, even to a mild rebuke, a constructive suggestion, or an offer to help, they feel injured, humiliated and empty and they react with disdain (devaluation), rage, and defiance.

From my book "Malignant Self Love - Narcissism Revisited":

"To avoid such intolerable pain, some patients with Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) socially withdraw and feign false modesty and humility to mask their underlying grandiosity. Dysthymic and depressive disorders are common reactions to isolation and feelings of shame and inadequacy."

Due to their lack of empathy, disregard for others, exploitativeness, sense of entitlement, and constant need for attention (narcissistic supply), narcissists are rarely able to maintain functional and healthy interpersonal relationships.

Many narcissists are over-achievers and ambitious. Some of them are even talented and skilled. But they are

incapable of team work because they cannot tolerate setbacks. They are easily frustrated and demoralized and are unable to cope with disagreement and criticism. Though some narcissists have meteoric and inspiring careers, in the long-run, all of them find it difficult to maintain long-term professional achievements and the respect and appreciation of their peers. The narcissist's fantastic grandiosity, frequently coupled with a hypomanic mood, is typically incommensurate with his or her real accomplishments (the "grandiosity gap").

An important distinction is between cerebral and somatic narcissists. The cerebrals derive their Narcissistic Supply from their intelligence or academic achievements and the somatics derive their Narcissistic Supply from their physique, exercise, physical or sexual prowess and romantic or physical "conquests".

Another crucial division within the ranks of patients with Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) is between the classic variety (those who meet five of the nine diagnostic criteria included in the DSM), and the compensatory kind (their narcissism compensates for deep-set feelings of inferiority and lack of self-worth).

Obama displays the following behaviors, which are among the hallmarks of pathological narcissism:

* Subtly misrepresents facts and expediently and opportunistically shifts positions, views, opinions, and "ideals" (e. g., about campaign finance, re-districting). These flip-flops do not cause him overt distress and are ego-syntonic (he feels justified in acting this way). Alternatively, refuses to commit to a standpoint and, in the process, evidences a lack of empathy.

Ignores data that conflict with his fantasy world, or with his inflated and grandiose self-image. This has to do with magical thinking. Obama already sees himself as president because he is firmly convinced that his dreams, thoughts, and wishes affect reality. Additionally, he denies the gap between his fantasies and his modest or limited real-life achievements (for instance, in 12 years of academic career, he hasn't published a single scholarly paper or book).

- Feels that he is above the law, incl. and especially his own laws.
- Talks about himself in the 3rd person singular or uses the regal "we" and craves to be the exclusive center of attention, even adulation
- Have a messianic-cosmic vision of himself and his life and his "mission".
- Sets ever more complex rules in a convoluted world of grandiose fantasies with its own language (jargon)
- Displays false modesty and unctuous "folksiness" but unable to sustain these behaviors (the persona, or mask) for long. It slips and the true Obama is revealed: haughty, aloof, distant, and disdainful of simple folk and their lives.
- Sublimates aggression and holds grudges.
- Behaves as an eternal adolescent (e.g., his choice of language, youthful image he projects, demands indulgence and feels entitled to special treatment, even though his objective accomplishments do not justify it).

III. Body Language

Many complain of the incredible deceptive powers of the narcissist. They find themselves involved with narcissists

(emotionally, in business, or otherwise) before they have a chance to discover their true character. Shocked by the later revelation, they mourn their inability to separate from the narcissist and their gullibility.

Narcissists are an elusive breed, hard to spot, harder to pinpoint, impossible to capture. Even an experienced mental health diagnostician with unmitigated access to the record and to the person examined would find it fiendishly difficult to determine with any degree of certainty whether someone suffers from a full fledged Narcissistic Personality Disorder – or merely possesses narcissistic traits, a narcissistic style, a personality structure ("character"), or a narcissistic "overlay" superimposed on another mental health problem.

Moreover, it is important to distinguish between traits and behavior patterns that are independent of the patient's cultural-social context (i.e., which are inherent, or idiosyncratic) – and reactive patterns, or conformity to cultural and social morals and norms. Reactions to severe life crises or circumstances are also often characterized by transient pathological narcissism, for instance (Ronningstam and Gunderson, 1996). But such reactions do not a narcissist make.

When a person belongs to a society or culture that has often been described as narcissistic by scholars (such as Theodore Millon) and social thinkers (e.g., Christopher Lasch) – how much of his behavior can be attributed to his milieu and which of his traits are really his?

The Narcissistic Personality Disorder is rigorously defined in the DSM IV-TR with a set of strict criteria and differential diagnoses.

Narcissism is regarded by many scholars to be an adaptative strategy ("healthy narcissism"). It is considered pathological in the clinical sense only when it becomes a rigid personality structure replete with a series of primitive defence mechanisms (such as splitting, projection, projective identification, or intellectualization) – and when it leads to dysfunctions in one or more areas of the patient's life.

Pathological narcissism is the art of deception. The narcissist projects a False Self and manages all his social interactions through this concocted fictional construct.

When the narcissist reveals his true colors, it is usually far too late. His victims are unable to separate from him. They are frustrated by this acquired helplessness and angry at themselves for having they failed to see through the narcissist earlier on.

But the narcissist does emit subtle, almost subliminal, signals ("presenting symptoms") even in a first or casual encounter. Compare the following list to Barack Obama's body language during his public appearances.

These are:

"Haughty" body language – The narcissist adopts a physical posture which implies and exudes an air of superiority, seniority, hidden powers, mysteriousness, amused indifference, etc. Though the narcissist usually maintains sustained and piercing eye contact, he often refrains from physical proximity (he is "territorial").

The narcissist takes part in social interactions – even mere banter – condescendingly, from a position of supremacy and faux "magnanimity and largesse". But he rarely mingles socially and prefers to remain the "observer", or the "lone wolf".

Entitlement markers – The narcissist immediately asks for "special treatment" of some kind. Not to wait his turn, to have a longer or a shorter therapeutic session, to talk directly to authority figures (and not to their assistants or

secretaries), to be granted special payment terms, to enjoy custom tailored arrangements - or to get served first.

The narcissist is the one who – vocally and demonstratively – demands the undivided attention of the head waiter in a restaurant, or monopolizes the hostess, or latches on to celebrities in a party. The narcissist reacts with rage and indignantly when denied his wishes and if treated equally with others whom he deems inferior.

Idealization or devaluation – The narcissist instantly idealizes or devalues his interlocutor. This depends on how the narcissist appraises the potential his converser has as a Narcissistic Supply Source. The narcissist flatters, adores, admires and applauds the "target" in an embarrassingly exaggerated and profuse manner – or sulks, abuses, and humiliates her.

Narcissists are polite only in the presence of a potential Supply Source. But they are unable to sustain even perfunctory civility and fast deteriorate to barbs and thinly-veiled hostility, to verbal or other violent displays of abuse, rage attacks, or cold detachment.

The "membership" posture – The narcissist always tries to "belong". Yet, at the very same time, he maintains his stance as an outsider. The narcissist seeks to be admired for his ability to integrate and ingratiate himself without investing the efforts commensurate with such an undertaking.

For instance: if the narcissist talks to a psychologist, the narcissist first states emphatically that he never studied psychology. He then proceeds to make seemingly effortless use of obscure professional terms, thus demonstrating that he mastered the discipline all the same, as an autodidact – which proves that he is exceptionally intelligent or introspective.

In general, the narcissist always prefers show-off to substance. One of the most effective methods of exposing a narcissist is by trying to delve deeper. The narcissist is shallow, a pond pretending to be an ocean. He likes to think of himself as a Renaissance man, a Jack of all trades. The narcissist never admits to ignorance in any field – yet, typically, he is ignorant of them all. It is surprisingly easy to penetrate the gloss and the veneer of the narcissist's self-proclaimed omniscience.

Bragging and false autobiography – The narcissist brags incessantly. His speech is peppered with "I", "my", "myself", and "mine". He describes himself as intelligent, or rich, or modest, or intuitive, or creative – but always excessively, implausibly, and extraordinarily so.

The narcissist's biography sounds unusually rich and complex. His achievements – incommensurate with his age, education, or renown. Yet, his actual condition is evidently and demonstrably incompatible with his claims. Very often, the narcissist lies or his fantasies are easily discernible. He always name-drops and appropriates other people's experiences and accomplishments.

Emotion-free language – The narcissist likes to talk about himself and only about himself. He is not interested in others or what they have to say, unless they constitute potential Sources of Supply and in order to obtain said supply. He acts bored, disdainful, even angry, if he feels that they are intruding on his precious time and, thus, abusing him.

In general, the narcissist is very impatient, easily bored, with strong attention deficits – unless and until he is the topic of discussion. One can publicly dissect all aspects of the intimate life of a narcissist without repercussions, providing the discourse is not "emotionally tinted".

If asked to relate directly to his emotions, the narcissist intellectualizes, rationalizes, speaks about himself in the third person and in a detached "scientific" tone or composes a narrative with a fictitious character in it, suspiciously autobiographical. Narcissists like to refer to themselves in mechanical terms, as efficient automata or machines.

Seriousness and sense of intrusion and coercion – The narcissist is dead serious about himself. He may possess a subtle, wry, and riotous sense of humor, scathing and cynical, but rarely is he self-deprecating. The narcissist regards himself as being on a constant mission, whose importance is cosmic and whose consequences are global. If a scientist – he is always in the throes of revolutionizing science. If a journalist – he is in the middle of the greatest story ever. If a novelist - he is on his way to a Booker or Nobel prize.

This self-misperception is not amenable to light-headedness or self-effacement. The narcissist is easily hurt and insulted (narcissistic injury). Even the most innocuous remarks or acts are interpreted by him as belittling, intruding, or coercive. His time is more valuable than others' – therefore, it cannot be wasted on unimportant matters such as mere banter or going out for a walk.

Any suggested help, advice, or concerned inquiry are immediately cast by the narcissist as intentional humiliation, implying that the narcissist is in need of help and counsel and, thus, imperfect and less than omnipotent. Any attempt to set an agenda is, to the narcissist, an intimidating act of enslavement. In this sense, the narcissist is both schizoid and paranoid and often entertains ideas of reference.

These – the lack of empathy, the aloofness, the disdain, the sense of entitlement, the constricted sense of humor, the unequal treatment and the paranoia – render the narcissist a social misfit. The narcissist is able to provoke in his milieu, in his casual acquaintances, even in his psychotherapist, the strongest, most avid and furious hatred and revulsion. To his shock, indignation and consternation, he invariably induces in others unbridled aggression.

He is perceived to be asocial at best and, often, antisocial. This, perhaps, is the strongest presenting symptom. One feels ill at ease in the presence of a narcissist for no apparent reason. No matter how charming, intelligent, thought provoking, outgoing, easy going and social the narcissist is – he fails to secure the sympathy of others, a sympathy he is never ready, willing, or able to reciprocate.

IV. Narcissistic and psychopathic Leaders

The narcissistic or psychopathic leader is the culmination and reification of his period, culture, and civilization. He is likely to rise to prominence in narcissistic societies.

The malignant narcissist invents and then projects a false, fictitious, self for the world to fear, or to admire. He maintains a tenuous grasp on reality to start with and this is further exacerbated by the trappings of power. The narcissist's grandiose self-delusions and fantasies of omnipotence and omniscience are supported by real life authority and the narcissist's predilection to surround himself with obsequious sycophants.

The narcissist's personality is so precariously balanced that he cannot tolerate even a hint of criticism and disagreement. Most narcissists are paranoid and suffer from ideas of reference (the delusion that they are being mocked or discussed when they are not). Thus, narcissists often regard themselves as "victims of persecution".

The narcissistic leader fosters and encourages a personality cult with all the hallmarks of an institutional religion: priesthood, rites, rituals, temples, worship, catechism, mythology. The leader is this religion's ascetic saint. He monastically denies himself earthly pleasures (or so he claims) in order to be able to dedicate himself fully to his calling.

The narcissistic leader is a monstrously inverted Jesus, sacrificing his life and denying himself so that his people - or humanity at large - should benefit. By surpassing and suppressing his humanity, the narcissistic leader became a distorted version of Nietzsche's "superman".

But being a-human or super-human also means being a-sexual and a-moral.

In this restricted sense, narcissistic leaders are post-modernist and moral relativists. They project to the masses an androgynous figure and enhance it by engendering the adoration of nudity and all things "natural" - or by strongly repressing these feelings. But what they refer to as "nature" is not natural at all.

The narcissistic leader invariably proffers an aesthetic of decadence and evil carefully orchestrated and artificial - though it is not perceived this way by him or by his followers. Narcissistic leadership is about reproduced copies, not about originals. It is about the manipulation of symbols - not about veritable atavism or true conservatism.

In short: narcissistic leadership is about theatre, not about life. To enjoy the spectacle (and be subsumed by it), the leader demands the suspension of judgment, depersonalization, and de-realization. Catharsis is tantamount, in this narcissistic dramaturgy, to self-annulment.

Narcissism is nihilistic not only operationally, or ideologically. Its very language and narratives are nihilistic. Narcissism is conspicuous nihilism - and the cult's leader serves as a role model, annihilating the Man, only to re-appear as a pre-ordained and irresistible force of nature.

Narcissistic leadership often poses as a rebellion against the "old ways" - against the hegemonic culture, the upper classes, the established religions, the superpowers, the corrupt order. Narcissistic movements are puerile, a reaction to narcissistic injuries inflicted upon a narcissistic (and rather psychopathic) toddler nation-state, or group, or upon the leader.

Minorities or "others" - often arbitrarily selected - constitute a perfect, easily identifiable, embodiment of all that is "wrong". They are accused of being old, they are eerily disembodied, they are cosmopolitan, they are part of the establishment, they are "decadent", they are hated on religious and socio-economic grounds, or because of their race, sexual orientation, origin ... They are different, they are narcissistic (feel and act as morally superior), they are everywhere, they are defenceless, they are credulous, they are adaptable (and thus can be co-opted to collaborate in their own destruction). They are the perfect hate figure. Narcissists thrive on hatred and pathological envy.

This is precisely the source of the fascination with Hitler, diagnosed by Erich Fromm - together with Stalin - as a malignant narcissist. He was an inverted human. His unconscious was his conscious. He acted out our most repressed drives, fantasies, and wishes. He provides us with a glimpse of the horrors that lie beneath the veneer, the barbarians at our personal gates, and what it was like before we invented civilization. Hitler forced us all through a time warp and many did not emerge. He was not the devil. He was one of us. He was what Arendt aptly called the banality of evil. Just an ordinary, mentally disturbed, failure, a member of a mentally disturbed and failing nation, who lived through disturbed and failing times. He was the perfect mirror, a channel, a voice, and the very depth of our souls.

The narcissistic leader prefers the sparkle and glamour of well-orchestrated illusions to the tedium and method of real accomplishments. His reign is all smoke and mirrors, devoid of substances, consisting of mere appearances and mass delusions. In the aftermath of his regime - the narcissistic leader having died, been deposed, or voted

out of office - it all unravels. The tireless and constant prestidigitation ceases and the entire edifice crumbles. What looked like an economic miracle turns out to have been a fraud-laced bubble. Loosely-held empires disintegrate. Laboriously assembled business conglomerates go to pieces. "Earth shattering" and "revolutionary" scientific discoveries and theories are discredited. Social experiments end in mayhem.

It is important to understand that the use of violence must be ego-syntonic. It must accord with the self-image of the narcissist. It must abet and sustain his grandiose fantasies and feed his sense of entitlement. It must conform with the narcissistic narrative.

Thus, a narcissist who regards himself as the benefactor of the poor, a member of the common folk, the representative of the disenfranchised, the champion of the dispossessed against the corrupt elite - is highly unlikely to use violence at first.

The pacific mask crumbles when the narcissist has become convinced that the very people he purported to speak for, his constituency, his grassroots fans, the prime sources of his narcissistic supply - have turned against him. At first, in a desperate effort to maintain the fiction underlying his chaotic personality, the narcissist strives to explain away the sudden reversal of sentiment. "The people are being duped by (the media, big industry, the military, the elite, etc.)", "they don't really know what they are doing", "following a rude awakening, they will revert to form", etc.

When these flimsy attempts to patch a tattered personal mythology fail - the narcissist is injured. Narcissistic injury inevitably leads to narcissistic rage and to a terrifying display of unbridled aggression. The pent-up frustration and hurt translate into devaluation. That which was previously idealized - is now discarded with contempt and hatred.

This primitive defense mechanism is called "splitting". To the narcissist, things and people are either entirely bad (evil) or entirely good. He projects onto others his own shortcomings and negative emotions, thus becoming a totally good object. A narcissistic leader is likely to justify the butchering of his own people by claiming that they intended to kill him, undo the revolution, devastate the economy, or the country, etc.

The "small people", the "rank and file", the "loyal soldiers" of the narcissist - his flock, his nation, his employees - they pay the price. The disillusionment and disenchantment are agonizing. The process of reconstruction, of rising from the ashes, of overcoming the trauma of having been deceived, exploited and manipulated - is drawn-out. It is difficult to trust again, to have faith, to love, to be led, to collaborate. Feelings of shame and guilt engulf the erstwhile followers of the narcissist. This is his sole legacy: a massive post-traumatic stress disorder.

Sam Vaknin (<http://samvak.tripod.com>) is the author of Malignant Self Love - Narcissism Revisited and After the Rain - How the West Lost the East. He served as a columnist for Global Politician, Central Europe Review, PopMatters, Bellaonline, and eBookWeb, a United Press International (UPI) Senior Business Correspondent, and the editor of mental health and Central East Europe categories in The Open Directory and Suite101.

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