

Narcissism Explained: Jungian Theory

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~ 6 min read

Warning: This is not light reading!

Introduction

Here's an interesting approach to defining and describing narcissism using Jungian theory as a basis. This theory

involves a spiritual component to personality disorders, a concept that is vastly underrepresented in Western society.



Carl Jung, a 20th century Swiss psychologist, had this to say about the idea of a spiritual aspect to psychopathology:

*"Possession, though old-fashioned, has by no means become obsolete; only the name has changed. Formerly they spoke of 'evil spirits', now we call them 'neuroses' or 'unconscious complexes.' Here as everywhere the name makes no difference. **The fact remains that a small unconscious cause is enough to wreck a man's fate, to shatter a family and to continue working down the generations....**"* (Quoted by Miller, n.d.)

Collective Unconscious

Jung believed the human psyche comprised three components – the ego (the self,) the personal unconscious, and the collective unconscious.

Jung ascribed the "collective unconscious," to be universal "types" of personas found in all humans; akin to an ancestral consciousness. Jung noticed that all humans possessed central themes and ritualistic behaviors that were common to all mankind.

Archetypes

He describes archetypes as unconscious psychic counterparts manifested in people's lives; these emerge seemingly out of nowhere or when prompted by precipitating events.

Here are the descriptions of some of these universal archetypes which apply to the subject of personality disorders, particularly narcissism:

☒ **The Ego:** The true self.

☒ **Shadow:** The part of a person that is split off from the Self; the dark side of the real self; if a person is empathic, kind, and compassionate, his shadow has callous disregard for others; is fearsome and despicable. "not an activity of the individual but something that happens to him" (Jung, 1959). Complexes have shadow selves.

☒ **Magician:** In the shadow it can be used to deceive, distract and manipulate by altering perceptions of reality (Barlow, 2016). It is the boundary crosser; a person who violates societal rules, mocks authority, is fond of breaking rules; can be described as crafty, cunning, manipulative. **The magician is the master of illusions.**

☒ **The Vampire:** A sub-complex that does the bidding of the Magician. **The vampire often appears to be a distant and detached, disinterested onlooker.**

☒ **The Bad King:** A sub-complex that does the bidding of the Magician. The bad king is like **a mini dictator.**

☒ **The Innocent:** A sub-complex, appearing normal, which does the bidding of the Magician as well as the other two sub-complexes. **The Innocent is the persona that is most like a child; he engenders others' sympathy; tends to be naïve, and ignores reality.**



Other definitions:

Complex: a psychic structure organized around a specific theme; a complex ascribes a core meaning to particular experiences, perceptions, and feelings.

Dissociation: When a person experiences emotions that overwhelm his capacity to take appropriate action the memory of this traumatic experience is split off, and results in dissociation. Jung believed dissociation was fundamental to the operation of the psyche.

Manifestation

Think of a person with the personality disorder of narcissism as having two ego states – one, the Self, we will call this person, “Bob;” the other, angry and abusive person, “Not Bob.” With respect to the above descriptions, Bob is the Ego, and Not Bob is manifesting as the Shadow of the Magician persona.

Add another component to the problem. Let’s say that Bob is an alcoholic and he decides to go to AA and work a program of recovery.

Now, let’s put Bob in a job and he gets fired. Now Bob has what can be termed a, “life altering event.”

Bob starts acting differently. He becomes more irritated than usual. He doesn’t start drinking again, but he stops going to his regular meetings and quits calling his sponsor.

People in the program of AA start saying that Bob is a “dry drunk.” Bob’s wife and children do not know what to make of Bob. They know he has become moody and unpredictable, and lately they notice his behavior is even overtly abusive. They begin “walking on eggshells, doing anything they can to keep themselves from having to face the wrath of their loved one, Bob.

Bob has been replaced by Not Bob, but no one realizes this because both Bob and Not Bob appear the same. This was triggered by the precipitating event of having the humiliation of losing his job, causing

Bob's alter ego to show up as a defense to protect Bob from having to feel the insecurity and vulnerability of having "failed." **As long as Not Bob is in the picture, he can be angry, punitive, self-absorbed, and entitled.**

Protection

The Magician is the master of illusions. For a person without childhood trauma, the Magician serves to protect the individual by strategizing effectively. For a person with childhood maltreatment and attachment trauma, **the Magician serves as a protector, but in a more sinister manner than for the non-abused person.** This is the *Shadow Magician* whose methods involve having other sub-complexes do the "protecting" in very anti-social ways.

In the case of the narcissist, anything that looks like nurture or empathy or attachment and attunement is frighteningly dangerous.

The Self must be protected from such vulnerability at all costs; hence, enter the Magician.

In this scenario, the Magician uses the three sub complexes – the Bad King, the Vampire, and the Innocent to do his bidding. Bob, the "host" is still present, but in an altered or coma-like state. He is observing everything that is happening as the sub-complexes take over to protect him.

Confabulation

In some respects, the host is flummoxed by the Magician; while the two ego states share memories, the memories are somewhat confusing. The Magician **confabulates** the truth and Bob believes it, so that when Bob is explaining his behavior to others, it is a slanted rendition of what really happened.

If you've ever known a narcissist, you notice he or she has a Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde routine. Sometimes Mr. Hyde does not show up very often. Days may go by and you might see some slight rudeness, but nothing that devastating or noticeable. **Stress and emotional triggers tend to exacerbate the alter-ego of Mr. Hyde to rear his ugly head.**

Suffice it to say that Dr. Jekyll represents the Self and Mr. Hyde represents the Magician.

Moral Accountability

In some cases, such as with addicts and alcoholics, working an AA

program keeps a check on addictive behaviors. For others, church keeps a check on bad behaviors. The ingredients required to impede the work of the Magician are in the realm of morality. The moral accountability helps the Host stay in touch, and diminishes the appearance of the Magician and his minions.

Childhood Factors

The Magician capitalizes on child abuse. He will use all the wounds of childhood to give an alcoholic an excuse to drink. When a person relapses either addictively or behaviorally, his inner Magician is telling him things such as, "You've been way too close to these people."

In some cases, if the ego experiences too much trauma, then it may give up altogether and let the Magician have the host altogether.

Medication

Sometimes psychotropic medication works to some degree. Medication affects the brain chemistry, which can serve to modulate the effects of the Magician by slowing down the neural responses and providing brain chemicals that diminish the need for the Magician's "protection."

Coping

A person with a severe personality disorder is akin to a spiritual battle, waged within the host. The Magician is like the Devil and everything he does is designed to hurt others and keep them away, and his methods are very effective at doing just that.

A good therapist and a savvy loved one are well served to understand that what they are dealing with. Here is some advice on how to manage the various complexes that reside within Bob. When the host, or the true Bob is in the room, address him as such, saying, "Hi Bob," or "How are you doing, Bob?"



But, when you notice a change in Bob, even if it appears "normal," for the Innocent often appears normal to others who aren't savvy enough to notice covert manipulation when it happens (which is most people,)

then do not address this persona by name. Say something like, "You are not Bob. Bob is kind and generous," and walk away.

If you remember nothing else, remember this: **"Never talk to the Devil."**

In conclusion, I am sharing this theory with you because I think it's interesting and useful for helping understand the various sub-parts of the narcissistic personality. I'm not saying I agree with this theory, but it does provide some rather compelling explanations for what we cope with in the world of narcissism.

To receive a copy of my free newsletter on *the psychology of abuse*, please send your email address to: therecoveryexpert@gmail.com

Resources:

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