

## Review 2

**Title:** Narcissism and politics, dreams of glory. J. M. Post.  
(2015). New York, Cambridge University Press.  
Paperback ISBN 978-1107401297

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Jerrold M. Post is an authority in the field of political profiling and in this book he presents an overview of narcissism in politics. According to the writer, the ranks of politics are full of people with a narcissistic personality. In the introduction Post states that he wanted to write this book for a very long time. However, because of his professional experience as a psychiatrist, he felt that analyzing personalities from a distance, i.e. without personal contact, would harm his ethical code. Especially for diagnosing people with narcissism, which can be considered rather delicate. Post therefore stresses that he doesn't give scientific psychological proof for the presence of narcissism and merely says he suspects it after analyzing the personality from a distance. He states this as a political scientist and not as a psychiatrist.

In this book Post gives an overview of the different facets of narcissism he encountered in his many years of study. Each chapter presents a theoretical framework and is afterwards clarified by different examples. Post studied narcissism in the broadest sense possible. As defined in the book, people who are narcissistic are very ambitious and confident. They feel like they are meant for something bigger and possess a sense of entitlement. They dream of glory and feel as if people should treat and see them as the special person they are. People who have narcissistic personalities are involved with only themselves and are therefore incapable of having a healthy relationship with others. Paradoxically, underneath this self-assured external resides a fragile person who can't handle criticism and needs to be reassured all the time. When the dreams of glory are not reached, they feel ashamed and often infuriated. Post states that narcissism is a phenomenon of all times, but today it is almost regarded as a normal personality trait. The social media generation shares everything with the world as if they live the most important life on earth. The emergence of selfies is another example of the collective narcissism of this generation. Post focusses nonetheless on politicians and leaders. In his book he discusses many leaders who exhibit narcissistic features in one way or another.

Here follows a summary. First, Post discusses how he believes narcissism can manifest itself into a personality. In particular, he thinks it has to do with traumatic

experiences during the crucial phase of childhood in which a child develops a positive self-image due to the love it receives from its parents. This positive self-image must be transformed into a healthy self-perception. A process in which the child's parents must assist. If this transformation does not happen in a normal way, the child develops a damaged personality and craves to be admired and loved. Since individuals with wounded personalities have low self-esteem, they create a great self-concept in which they have dreams of glory. This explains why narcissists can become aggressive when their dreams are shattered as they feel ashamed and this will determine their subsequent actions. Post provides many examples of narcissistic leaders whose childhood was rough. The most striking case must be Saddam Hussein who experienced death and abandonment very early in his life.

So a child can fail in developing a positive self-concept because of a lack of love and support. On the other hand, it is also possible that they never create a realistic self-concept because they get too much love and adoration. Freud defined this phenomenon as overvaluation. Parents or other loved ones overvalue the child and consider it perfect and unique, what Freud described as 'his majesty, the baby'. Parents project their own dreams and goals onto the child and give them a sense of entitlement. The child has to satisfy its parents' great expectations by making all their dreams come true. Post gives some examples, in which the mothers of some leaders raised them focusing on how special they were. Woodrow Wilson, General MacArthur and Franklin Delano Roosevelt were all nurtured by ambitious mothers who were narcissistic themselves. They passed their sense of entitlement on to their little boys who, as hoped, all became leaders, be it with a strong narcissistic personality.

In light of children whose parents force them into success, Post spends extra attention on what he calls 'The daughters of destiny'. He is referring to Indira Gandhi and Benazir Bhutto. They both grew up in a family with a long standing tradition of greatness. These women do not only have to fulfill great expectations, they also have the burden of the success of previous generations. Post calls this telescoping of generations. He states that there is a narcissistic link between the different generations. The new generation has to take the wishes, hopes and traumas of previous generations into account. They have to be great and they most certainly cannot be the ones responsible for the downfall of their family name after generations of leadership. So, in sum, there are different ways in which an individual can develop a narcissistic personality but it is always during the crucial phase of childhood in which the self-concept is formed.

In the following chapters of the book Post discusses different characteristics and aspects of leaders with narcissistic personalities. A very important aspect of a narcissistic leader is the charismatic leader-follower relationship. A leader is not a leader without at least one person following him. A charismatic leader can bring out certain crucial psychological aspects within its followers. Post states that scientists neglected the role of the follower for a long time. An important example is Weber, who saw the compelling personality of the leader as the cause for the devotion of his followers. Post on the other hand believes that charismatic leaders are in essence the creators of their followers. The followers view their leader as a superhuman and follow him blindly. They support their leader no matter what and obey his orders without any doubt. An important insight that Post gives is that devoted followers are also narcissistic, damaged people. He makes a

distinction between mirror-hungry and ideal-hungry damaged narcissistic personalities. They both have an incorrect self-image. The mirror-hungry person is always searching for support and confirmation from others who see him as perfect. An ideal-hungry person will search for strength and support within an idealized other. The two personalities are complementary and herein lies the strong bond between the leader and his devoted followers according to Post. An important note is that not all followers are ideal-hungry personalities. Post states that there are also followers who are temporarily overwhelmed by a social situation. Because of this social crisis they search for strength in a charismatic leader. These followers will become less devoted as soon as the crisis is resolved. An important example of this special dynamic between ideal-hungry and mirror-hungry damaged narcissistic personalities can be found within religious cults. Ideal-hungry people will devote themselves to a leader who gives them a sense of purpose. The mirror-hungry leader on his turn draws strength from the admiration of his followers.

Another characteristic of narcissistic leaders is that their wives or close circle fulfill the role of self-object. Leaders who are not narcissistic want to surround themselves with the best possible advisers, who are experts, often critical and search for alternatives that might be better. Narcissistic leaders on the other hand are insecure and don't tolerate criticism. They surround themselves with nodding donkeys who are only there to give support and make the leader feel good about himself. These self-objects are often the wives of the leaders. There are many cases in which the wife has an important influence on the leader, for better or for worse. This relationship is extra interesting if the wife also has a narcissistic damaged personality. Post discusses the role of the wives of Robert Mugabe, Slobodan Milosevic and Nicolae Ceausescu. Summarized, it can be stated that if the wife of a leader is a narcissistic individual herself, it can enlarge the negative personality features of the leaders. But as can be seen in the case of the first wife of Robert Mugabe, the wife can also have a positive and a soothing effect on the personality of the narcissistic leader.

A third very interesting feature of narcissistic leaders is that they often behave as if they stand above the law. There are hundreds of recent examples of politicians who preach one thing and do the complete opposite in their personal lives. Post ascribes this to a sense of entitlement and greatness. They think it is okay to judge others while doing it themselves. They feel as if they are unique and that the rules and laws that apply to the common people do not apply to them. It's normal for them to have mistresses and make corrupt deals because they are special and they are entitled to everything they want. A very explicit example of a narcissistic leader who behaves like this is senator Gary Hart. There is a duality between the leaders' personal agenda and personal life. Senator Hart can preach against homosexual relations while having a same sex lover on the side. Narcissism creates a feeling of intangibility. A very common reason for extramarital relationships is the fact that the wife can no longer fulfill the role of self-object. Post devotes a special chapter to Silvio Berlusconi, the man who for many years used an entire country for his own narcissistic dreams and goals. His sense of entitlement led to a political career full of corruption and sex scandals.

Some narcissistic personalities are, according to Wilhelm Reich (a close friend of Freud), phallic narcissists. What makes these individuals special is that they are self-promoting and have an excessively inflated self-image. They are in search of social

success because it provides admiration and empowerment. A special feature is that phallic narcissists find body image and an athletic built very important. They want to be seen as sex symbols. Post gives Arnold Schwarzenegger as most explicit example of a phallic narcissist.

The influence of illness and age is the next aspect that Post discusses. Dreams of glory don't fade with age. Narcissists do not get softer as time passes by. On the contrary, they will experience a sense of urgency. Time is ticking by and they still have to do so much to reach their goals. There are many examples of narcissistic leaders who make rash and dangerous decisions when they are diagnosed with a fatal illness. An important but tragic example is Mao Zedong. His big leap forward and his cultural revolution was a plan that would take decennia to complete. Due to an illness he forced to accelerate the changes with the known catastrophic effects. An aspect that is strongly associated with this is the fact that narcissistic leaders want to be immortal. They try to accomplish this by appointing a successor who will complete their mission. Most of the time this successor is selected out of his progeny. Important examples of this are Kim Il-sung who groomed his son Kim Jong-Il to be his successor who on his turn chose his son Kim Jong-un as successor. Narcissistic leaders often choose one child who will have to make all their unfulfilled dreams come true. In the last chapter of his book Post looks at what happens when this chosen child dies and another child becomes the leader by default. These runner-up leaders live and rule in the shadow of their successful siblings. This has proven to be very difficult. Nevertheless, in the case of John F. Kennedy and Benjamin Netanyahu it turned out rather good. Both proved to be good leaders despite being not the first choice. Rajiv Gandhi and Bashar Al-Assad in contrast struggled with taking leadership and their reigns were not successful.

It is hard to criticize this book. It is very well written and very approachable. It reads like a running train and Post is clearly an expert in the field of political-personality profiling. After reading this book you will have acquired a very broad knowledge of narcissism and political personalities. The book excites and makes you consider further research or reading on the topic. The book can be seen as a great introduction into the field of political psychology.

Post gives many examples and combines theory with very clear cases about important leaders. The cases he selected are illustrative and give you new insight into world politics. A criticism here is that Post selected many non-western leaders. The leaders he discussed are very often dictators or leaders of countries that do not have a democratic tradition. He rarely discusses American leaders and when he does do it, it is in a more positive light. It would have been very interesting to read more about democratic narcissistic leaders. A fascinating example would be a case about George W. Bush senior and junior. Post also does not mention, with the exception of Berlusconi, any West-European leaders. I feel that this is a bit of a missed opportunity. I think it would be interesting to read about cases of more subtle narcissistic leaders in democratic societies.

Another point of criticism is the fact that Post mentions Martin Luther King as an example of a narcissistic leader who had a positive effect. This is a very remarkable idea and it is a shame that Post does not devote a chapter on this. The book revolves mostly around very negative examples of narcissistic leaders and in that regard it is kind of limited.

Finally, in my opinion Post forgets a profound theoretical framework in certain chapters and gives a bit too much attention to the cases. This makes the book very readable but leaves the academic reader sometimes a bit unfulfilled. This became very clear when I tried to make an overview of Posts theory which proved to be rather difficult.

Notwithstanding these points of criticism this book remains a must-read for everyone who is interested in a different view on international politics. Post is a pioneer and proves in this book that he still has a lot to contribute to the field of political psychology.