# THE QUARRY

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## The Looking Glass Self

Black skirt, black stockings, and shiny black shoes with a little heel – I was tall enough without wanting to tower over anyone. These clothes were perfect to make the interviewer think I'm a woman he definitely needs to hire. The business shirt was crucial to finishing the look; too casual and it would ruin the professionalism, too formal and I ran the risk of reminding them of their grandmother. I settled on a dark purple lacy blouse. My mother told me it brought out the colour of my eyes when I asked her for a quick look over. Success.

But low self esteem reared its ugly head when I took a glance in the mirror. Reflected back was my pale – *very* pale – face. It needed to be dealt with, preferably with makeup. No one wants to hire a ghostly looking person or so I've been told. The purple blouse was meant to draw attention to my eyes, not the dark circles underneath them.

I wondered if anyone would notice any of these decisions. Would anyone notice any intricate details about how I looked? From my skinny wrists that buckled under the size of my large 'classy' watch to my twice-ironed skirt that had been hung up all night to avoid getting wrinkles. I wanted to create an image of myself, a

'masterpiece'. Unfortunately what I created wasn't what the employer wanted and I didn't get the position. Sigh.

What I then began to focus on and was really puzzled by was whether this was normal – do others become conscious of how they appear? If perception by others is the concern, does that lend credence to the notion of the 'looking glass self'?

I contacted criminal profiler and Policing and Investigation Studies lecturer at Charles Sturt University, Amber McKinley, who detailed how the attention and care we put into our appearance for others can reflect our level of narcissism.

'I believe that we all have a small amount of narcissistic traits in us,' McKinley said. 'Most people have little enough that they may stop and admire their reflection in a window as they pass by or seek other's approval on how they appear. I suppose you can consider it 'self love'.'

Narcissistic traits exist on a continuum that can be measured from low to high, healthy to unhealthy or 'clinical'. But what exactly *are* narcissistic traits? How can you tell if someone is more narcissistic than another? As I posed this question to Amber McKinley, I too wondered if there were easy to spot signs of narcissism; was it as easy to notice in a person as, say, hair colour?

'My answer to this question would be yes and no. Yes, because if you know what you are looking for, it is very obvious. No, in that you can't see particular things in a person that will give it away in terms of physical features. It is all determined on the individual's behaviour.'

She elaborates that the main determiners of a person's narcissistic 'level' are the perception of the 'self' in relation to reality, achievements and expected recognition from others for these achievements, how an individual interacts with others and what they gain from social interaction.

To provide a measurable example, when you enter a conversation with another person, are you interested in what they have to say and include relevant information into the conversation that may involve yourself? Or are you waiting for them to stop speaking so you can regale them with your latest tales so you can appreciate the admiration they will heap upon you at its conclusion?

The former of these two options is a healthily narcissistic approach to social interaction. In fact, a healthy level of narcissism is observed in confident individuals. They know their strengths, their weaknesses and how they can put their best foot

forward. Confidence is a valuable asset for success but I argue against the notion that self-enhancement should be ever-present, with individuals creating and adopting self-enhancing stories as reality[1]. This is because 'confidence is often based on actual abilities or achievements, [while] self-deceptive self-enhancement is thought to produce *over*confidence'[2]. Overconfidence is not meeting reality and feeds into an unhealthily narcissistic view of life, producing people who would answer the latter to the example posed earlier. Confident people's views match reality and they are admired for their approach to life, particularly in our success driven society. However, because of the stigma of the word 'narcissism', this sentiment crops up under new synonyms; 'entrepreneurial', 'enterprising' and most annoyingly, 'diva'.

After all, people place an extraordinary amount of effort into constructing an image of themselves. They do this, partly for their own benefit, but mainly to attract and/ or influence others. No one wants to think that what they are doing is 'bad' or self indulgent. Most actions that reflect how someone appears to another are subconscious. It's the conscious effort and deliberation that intrigue me because they expect a certain reaction from others. Do they receive it in turn?

After uncovering more research and information about narcissism, I began to notice it everywhere. The most obvious tool in modern society used by narcissists is Facebook. It's well known, accessible from any technological device and seems to be ubiquitous in society. It also allows someone to cultivate a whole internet page about themselves. This runs the risk of self indulgence and over exposure.

It has become a staple of Facebook to detail every thought, belief and photo that a person experiences in a week or day. For some, it becomes what is happening to them *several* times a day. As I scrolled through the updates of my Facebook friends, I was continually exposed to my teenage estranged cousin who updates her status hourly. Her posts were filled with hateful diatribes against classmates, her school and suburb that make me want to hide under my bed. To help paint this picture, I have included a typical Facebook status update from her profile* -

*'Your existence annoys the absolute shit out of me. Please do everyone a favour and fuck off forever. Would be greatly appreciated!'*

Sexually suggestive pictures of herself, underage drunken rampages and crass language galore! Immediately, this constructs a mental image for someone – stereotypes and connotations surround each of these behaviours. I personally do not

know much of this relative; I have nothing to base my opinion of her on except for this Facebook profile that she has crafted to reflect some semblance of herself. Every post, every picture that was put up became another device she implemented to create an image of herself. I'm assuming the aim was a 'tough girl' persona.

A quick investigation through people's profiles is guaranteed to reveal who they want to appear as – whether or not they really *are* that type of person. How do they phrase their status updates? What do they talk about? What do they *not* talk about? Are there many pictures of them alone, in a group, or have they cropped the image to feature just themselves? Looking at these indicators made me consider some people that I know in a different light. For example, one friend included an image of the United States First Lady, Michelle Obama, after the recent 2012 election. Instead of discussing the election results or Mrs Obama's role in the campaign, she brought attention to the fact that the dress that she was wearing was one that she too had bought.

Facebook can be set to 'private' so that only friends can view their profile. However, friends are unlikely to point out to the person that they are not the riveting, fascinating person they strive to develop online or in person. Firstly, it's socially unacceptable to point out people's flaws in such a blatant fashion. Also, if you do, you can receive a verbal or physical lashing from the friend in question. This is more likely to occur if your friend is a particularly narcissistic individual as their 'vulnerable self-esteem opens him or her up to distress from criticism or defeat. For this reason these individuals may react in an outrage or defiant counterattack'[3]. So, many bite their tongue and smile. A truly unhealthy narcissistic person views this as positive reinforcement.

This ties into the 'looking glass self'. Briefly put, we construct our identity based on how others see us and modify behaviours to how we want others to see us. It is most readily observed in teenagers who are trying to establish a sense of self, with my Facebook-addicted cousin serving as a testament to this. It involves implementing a healthy level of narcissism, to observe how others may perceive us and create a sense of self. Unhealthy narcissists become absorbed by what they think others see, rather than what is actually seen.

'A person who is considered to suffer with 'clinical narcissism' loves the 'image' which he or she projects for others because it is affirmed by them and in turn

supports his or her behaviour – a vicious cycle,' McKinley continues. 'The projected image is reflected back at the narcissist and, thus, he is reassured both of its existence and of the boundaries of his Ego. This continuous process blurs all distinctions between reality and fantasy.'

The creation of an image involves an element of manipulation, which has been called self deception. This wielding of self deception is magnified when applied to social media. As theorists have argued, self deception can be implemented by in three ways. These include denying what is the 'truth', promoting a lie as the truth as well as concealing information, whether it's the truth or a lie. This last point is the most used, despite ironically being an effort to conceal. We've been taught that lying is wrong. So why do we willingly deceive others?

Surprisingly for the moral, and unsurprisingly for the cynical, advantages are offered to those who can present an impressive image of themselves to the world. The value of confidence earlier touched upon is an incentive for a person to modify behaviours, promote or withhold information about themselves. However, confidence is rewarded with achievements while falsity and unwarranted confidence leads to vulnerabilities. For example, an unhealthy narcissist who overvalues their strength can be susceptible to injury if paired in a physical altercation with a stronger individual and risk public ridicule for lying. After all, no one likes a liar – lying is wrong.

The lender of his name to these amalgamations of characteristics, Narcissus, had a fatal flaw:

'Legions of lusty men and bevies of girls desired him; but the heart was so hard and proud in that soft and slender body that none of the lusty men or languishing girls could approach him.'[4]

His flaw was not his beauty or that he appreciated how he looked. Instead his behaviour towards others and lack of empathy for other's situations and circumstances became his tragic undoing.

Lack of empathy is a key characteristic in determining the malignancy of a person's narcissism. In order to be properly diagnosed with Narcissistic Personality Disorder an individual must display 'a pervasive pattern of grandiosity, need for admiration, and lack of empathy that begins by early adulthood and is present in a variety of contexts'[5].

The most destructive manifestation of narcissism is found in the behaviour of the criminal. Alarmingly, from research conducted, it was found that:

> ...narcissistic offenders seek out power or status while trying to eliminate competition during their criminal activities. This study also shows the narcissistic offenders are more likely to resist arrest when caught and tend to deny any use of violence... Narcissistic individuals expect to be catered to and when this demand is not met, he or she may become furious potentially resulting in a criminal act.[6]

For a well publicised, real life criminal figure, Amber McKinley referred me to infamous serial killer, Ted Bundy. Many acquaintances described him as charming, intelligent and relatively good looking. He apparently thought that of himself too. He had an abnormal sense of entitlement that he expressed by stealing various items from work and other homes for the thrill it brought him. He never felt or expressed remorse for these actions.

What he became known for were not these petty burglaries; instead Ted Bundy is remembered for violent, planned and sinister murders. As it has been found, there is a 'positive correlation between Narcissistic Personality Disorder and incarceration for violent crimes'[7]. Psychologists and criminologists who have studied the case closely point to an early romantic break up as a motivating factor for his violent spree against women who all fit the same profile. This girlfriend he had had was wealthy, athletic and was from an 'upper class' society to which Bundy did not belong. Her rejection that he was not a suitable match shattered the grandiose view of himself that he held and destroyed the fantasies of unlimited success, power and ideal love he envisioned that their union would bring. Saying 'no' to a person who has a pathological relationship with narcissism is like provoking a vicious dog – it's not going to end well. They have built an image in their head and shown others that they are special, unique and all things extraordinary; evidence that contradicts this must be removed, devalued or ridiculed to protect their sense of self. Bundy believed that he had to re-establish himself as a powerful individual and to do this he dominated and killed only women. His unhealthy view of himself led to a fatal error; he thought he would be able to represent himself for his serial murders, attempting to convince the jurors that he was innocent. He enjoyed the audience's attention and relished media coverage as

it validated his view of himself as important. Unsuccessful in his attempt, he was put to death on January 24th, 1989.

As with most things in life, the negatives of narcissism remain the focus of its definition and can tarnish alternative views. Narcissism can be destructive, harmful and chaotic. Too much narcissism can control a person's life and how they interact with others. That is true and well documented. However, to completely distance ourselves from it and reserve it for a select few is not to see the concept as it really is. Everyone has traces of narcissism linked to their personality. We use it to create a distinctive self to operate in this big world that is bursting at the seams with people. We use it to create a self for others to recognise and form their perception of us; the looking glass self. In my search for employment, I know I will have to implement a healthy dose of narcissism.

* Out of sheer hope that this is just a phase and noting that she is underage, I have decided to keep my cousin anonymous here.

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[1] Brooks, M.L., and Swann, W.B., 2011. 'Is social interaction based on guile or honesty?', *Behavioural and Brain Sciences*, Vol. 34, Iss. 01, p 17

[2] Brooks ibid

[3] Sereno, A, 2004. 'Types of Crimes:  The Relationship Between Narcissistic and Antisocial Personalities', Saint Bonaventure University. Retrieved 19th August 2012. <http://web.sbu.edu/psychology/lavin/abbey.htm>

[4] Publius Ovid Naso, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Raeburn, D. (2004, Penguin Books, London). Book 3, 'Narcissus and Echo', lines 353-355

[5] Sereno ibid

[6] Sereno ibid

[7] Sereno ibid