

CASCADING CONSTRAINTS: THE ROLE OF EARLY DEVELOPMENTAL DEFICITS IN THE FORMATION OF PERSONALITY STYLES

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ABSTRACT

Defining the subclinical personality styles and the longitudinal coherence of the personality constructs of psychopathy and narcissism is a necessary prelude to discussing component processes that constellate to make up the signature personality dispositions. I then profile the descriptive similarities of the dark triad (*Machiavellianism, psychopathy and narcissism*). Despite the dark triad's shared moments of difficulty in a developmental trajectory outlined briefly, it is likely that the milestones are differently negotiated. I take as case study, in dynamic systems terms, the differing development of empathy deficits in psychopathic and narcissistic personality styles. The unusual neuro-cognitive profiles of psychopathy reveal early affective and motivational deficits which impact upon empathy development, while profiling narcissism reveals a failure to differentiate self and other, and an inability to integrate a sense of self which spans abilities admired by others as well as an inherent sense of self worth. Experience consolidates and renders accessible emotion-cognition-action sequences. Such 'attractors' are stable, recurrent or resilient states in which systems, like these personality styles outlined, tend to get stuck, though they may be highly maladaptive 'solutions' to environmental challenges. Importantly for this chapter, the set of attractors or 'preferred solutions' that can arise is not infinite, but is constrained by organismic variables and by child-environment interactions. These constraints have cascading, knock-on effects for further development. Such detailed understanding is relevant to intervention, treatment as well as real-time prediction of the actions and experiences of these personality styles.

Keywords: Dynamic systems, Empathy, The dark triad, Neuro-cognitive profiles, Personality development

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INTRODUCTION

Many personality psychologists view personality as dimensional rather than embracing the typological approach. Discernable subclinical personality styles like Machiavellianism, narcissism and psychopathy, for example, seem to exist as a clustering of dimensional attributes. This article suggests that these styles arise as the knock-on effects of early deficits or suboptimal experiences, which constrain later development; certain developmental paths are well worn, others are closed off altogether. Using a variation on Lewis's (1997) dynamical model of cascading constraints in emotion-cognition links, this article explores such cascading constraints in personality development. Lewis and Granic (2000) note that the dynamical systems approach "demands detailed attention to the elements and the interactive mechanisms that contribute to the emerging structure" (p. 3).

Lewis' model has been applied specifically to emotional self-organisation by Izard, Ackerman, Schoff and Fine (2000). They suggest that the processes relevant to a dynamic system include: "(a) recursion among system elements, (b) emergence of unique forms and patterns, (c) consolidation of the forms over repetition and time, and (d) constraints on system formation" (p. 16). Experience consolidates and renders accessible emotion-cognition-action sequences. Such 'attractors' are stable, recurrent or resilient states in which systems settle or tend to get stuck, which can be maladaptive 'solutions' to environmental challenges. Importantly for this article, the set of attractors or 'preferred solutions' that can arise is not infinite, but "is always constrained by organismic variables (e.g., physiological reactivity), initial organizations of system elements, the extent to which attractors are developmentally embedded and task demands" (p. 17). Here I extend such dynamical models of emotional self-organisation to address affective personality dispositions, by focussing on two of the three subclinical styles mentioned above. Specifically, I take as a case study the shared feature of a lack of empathy in psychopathy and narcissism (I have already mapped the way that Machiavellians bypass empathy—McIlwain, 2003). I explore the elements and interactive mechanisms that have resulted in the development of this 'attractor', showing that despite surface similarities across personality styles in terms of a lack of empathy, it has arisen as a result of different inputs and interactions within psychopaths and narcissists. There are developmental differences highly relevant to remediation and intervention.

Understanding the elements and interactive mechanisms contributing to the development of a personality style helps in predicting what a person is likely to do in real-time. Personality is a process, a dynamic equilibrium (Mischel & Shoda, 1998; Cervone, Shadel & Jencius, 2001). Knowing contextual, if-then contingencies, like "if I threaten your ego you will fly into a rage" is highly relevant if you are going alone to Antarctica with a narcissistic colleague. Such a schema-like constellation of emotion-cognition-action links forms an 'attractor'. In narcissism it involves experiencing shame when a grandiose self-image is threatened and attempting to regain dominance via aggression. Such an attractor is part of an ongoing recursive process; it is the product of a set of developmental experiences, and in turn feeds into the ongoing development of the personality, shaping, for example, interpersonal relations and the stability of self-worth (Kernis & Sun, 1994; Rhodewalt, Madrian & Cheney, 1998) and capacity for self-compassion (Neff, 2003a).

My basic thesis is this: The dark triad have a lot of features in common. They have also had difficulties at similar developmental moments. However, I suggest the difficulties are

underpinned by different mechanisms, which mean that there are different “attractors” that characterise the dispositions central to these personality styles.

The three personality styles have a lot in common. They are all often superficially charming (at least in the short-term), glib manipulators (Cleckley, 1941; Hare, 1970, Wilson, Near & Miller, 1996) who are prepared to harm others directly via aggression (Bushman & Baumeister, 1996) or indirectly via exploitation of others for selfish reasons. They all lack empathy, or at least the scales we use do not tap into whatever empathy they are capable of and may be unwilling to use. They are hostile in their worldview—though perhaps for different reasons (Palatano, 1979). They do not trust others (Gurtman, 1992). They all wear masks, what you see is not what you get, but what they are hiding is quite different and that is a sign of the different pathways taken to reach this similar descriptive trait (as I will also show in the case of a shared lack of empathy). The narcissist wears a mask of grandiosity (McWilliams, 1994; Westen, 1985, 1990), the Machiavellian a mask of cynicism (Hunter, Gerbing & Boster, 1992), the psychopath a mask of sanity (Cleckley, 1941). These masks take a canny observer to see through. An observer needs to be alert to the discrepancies in narcissists between avowed high self-esteem and thin-skinned preparedness to aggress when slighted, to be alert in Machiavellianism to the discrepancy between being a seemingly agentic strategist, and the readiness with which blame and causal responsibility are ascribed to fate, chance, powerful others—anything but themselves (McIlwain, 2003); to be alert in the psychopath to the odd way they live in time—shown in discrepant, sometimes mutually exclusive personal histories and future goals that are laid claim to (Hare, 1970) and that reveal perhaps an absence of an overarching reflective sense of self. Across all three personalities there is a discrepancy between the rhetoric of standing alone, needing no-one and the *unempathic* callous exploitation as Machiavellians and psychopaths use others to their detriment, and the *unempathic* blurring of identity between self and other as narcissists expect the other to offer up their own labour, time, admiration and emotional soothing, without acknowledgement or thanks (McWilliams & Lependorf, 1990), and at the risk of rage should those narcissistic supplies be withheld.

I now outline developmental milestones that have not been optimally negotiated due to organismic or experiential constraints. For all three styles there are signature and different deficiencies in direct and vicarious range of emotional experience and intensity. Psychopaths have amygdala deficiencies, while narcissists have experiential difficulties. They are all deficient in their capacity to trust; “defined interpersonally trust is an individual’s characteristic belief that the sincerity, benevolence, or truthfulness of others can generally be relied upon” (Gurtman, 1992, p. 989). Gurtman found Machiavellians to be hostile distrusters, marked by a coldness or indifference to others. All three have a dismissive *avoidant* attachment style (though *covert* narcissists appear to be *preoccupied*—Otway & Vignoles, 2006). All have an intact theory of mind (though narcissists overestimate their abilities—Ames & Kammerath, 2004), but are unable to see others as whole and independent. All lack empathy and have non-normative moralities. All three styles mask much inner experience.

That is quite a lot to have in common across three personality styles. My suggestion is that despite surface commonalities, they differ in how they acquired this dynamic assembly of attributes—that the profiles are, in short, underpinned by different causal mechanisms. Just to hint at the way that there may be recursive causal linkages in this picture consider Neff’s recent suggestion that self-compassion may counter tendencies towards Narcissism and the self-centredness that may stem from attempts to maintain high self-esteem. Neff (2003b)

suggests that self-compassion is negatively associated with Narcissism. Interestingly for my argument here, Neff (2003b) notes that self-compassion develops from internalizing the empathic responses of the environment experienced as a child, resulting in “intrapyschic empathy...the ability to pay adequate attention to one’s emotions” (p. 94). So while self-worth may arise as a result of early interpersonal experiences and one’s emotional experiential capacities, but it may also feed back in to capacity to discern emotional experience (see also Lambie & Marcel (2002) in this regard).

Selecting one variable from above I will show how the paths to (and from) a deficiency in empathy differ across narcissists and psychopaths. Understanding the developmental trajectory will enable us to discern temporal windows of opportunity for remediation, and understanding the component processes will help us tailor remediation to the profile of the person. But let me pan back for a moment to discuss a few relevant assessment and definitional concerns.

BROADBAND AND SPECIFIC PERSONALITY ASSESSMENT

Researchers use well-established measures like the Five-Factor Model for broadband description of personality. Using the Five-Factor Model, Paulhus and Williams (2002) found that: Machiavellians, Psychopaths and narcissists are low on *agreeableness*; that Machiavellians and psychopaths are low on *conscientiousness*, and that psychopaths are low in *neuroticism*. They note however, that the maximum intercorrelation is 0.50, suggesting that they are distinct styles. Such broadband measures provide broad brush stroke profiles. Unlike the personality scales developed to assess the personality styles themselves (to which Williams and Paulhus have also contributed), the five factors are not unique descriptors. They do not help us identify underlying causal mechanisms or *explain* why attributes may cluster in particular ways.

Specifically honed measures of the relevant personality constructs have attracted a lot of research testing the coherence and longitudinal reliability of a construct (whether measures assess the same thing in children as they do in adults). These enable us to address empirical markers of the construct of interest. Establishing construct stability does not address is the developmental question as to whether fledgling psychopaths grow up to be adult psychopaths.

There are many sources of confusion in how a personality style is defined and operationalised: heterogeneity in a given construct or an array of differing scales assessing the construct, some of which may be more behavioural, some more personality-based. One is never sure if those identified as being high in (say) Machiavellianism are comparable across studies, as there is often variability in the way that extreme groups are defined. Researchers frequently use different and sample-derived cut-off points delineating high and low scorers, for example, using upper and lower quartiles. Bracketing statistical criticisms of this procedure for a moment, it influences results in other ways. For instance, one may have been very lucky and got a sample brimming with narcissists, but one uses one’s own sample distribution as the basis for doing quartile splits and even the low narcissists may actually be rather high scorers. There is also variability in the cultural groups assessed, and different gender representations. For the purposes of this article, I accept researchers’ definitions of high-scorers. I signal which measure has defined the groups by referring to (say) ‘NPI-

narcissists' when I wish to indicate that I am discussing narcissism as assessed by the *Narcissistic Personality Inventory* (Raskin & Hall, 1979). I will similarly abbreviate the scales defining psychopaths.

THE UTILITY OF DEFINING PSYCHOPATHY AT A PERSONALITY LEVEL

Anti-social Personality Disorder > Psychopathy > Callous-Unemotionality

Following Cleckley's classic approach, those psychopaths of most interest are the subset of 'factor one' psychopaths, defined by their personality rather than behaviour. They are characterised by *callous unemotionality* (CU). This personality approach is "not currently reflected in current psychiatric parlance" (Dadds et al., 2005). However, many researchers distinguish between *Factor One Psychopathy*—the 'personality level' interpersonal or affective dimension (CU), and *Factor Two Psychopathy*, linked to impulsivity and poor behavioural control. The personality-defined psychopaths are a subset of psychopaths who are in turn a subset of those with *Antisocial Personality Disorder* (APD). Lorber (2004) notes that all psychopaths meet APD criteria, 25% of those with APD meet Psychopathy Criteria (according to Hare's checklist). Hill (2003) notes that APD is present in 50-80% of convicted offenders, but a much smaller group of 15-30% are judged to have characteristics such as grandiosity, callousness, deceitfulness, shallow affect and lack of remorse (Hart & Hare, 1989, cited in Hill, 2003, p.13). Viding (2004) suggests that focusing on behavioural symptoms alone could lead to overdiagnosis, and Frick (1995) and Frick et al. (2003) note that only a subset of children with conduct disorder also exhibits the interpersonal affective characteristics of psychopathy. Evidence suggests that psychopathy does not have the same environmental markers as anti-social behaviour, and even family environment seems to make less of an impact on children high in CU (Wootton, Frick, Shelton & Silverthorn, 1997; Devita, Forth & Hare, 1990).

Blonigen et al. (2006) suggest that "delineating the developmental trajectory of psychopathic personality traits represents a relatively neglected, yet important domain research" (p.85). In a longitudinal study (at ages 17 and 24 years) using a broadband measure of normal personality traits (Tellegen's *Multidimensional Personality Questionnaire*—MPQ) on a community sample (of both sexes) they found two broad factors: *Fearless Dominance* (FD) (composed of the subscales *social dominance*, *stress immunity* and *fearlessness*), and *Impulsive Anti-sociality* (IA) (composed of the subscales *impulsivity*, *aggression* and *alienation*) which were strongly consistent over time. Within this small developmental window from late adolescence to early adulthood, Blonigen et al. (2006) find "distinct developmental trends to the underlying personality traits of psychopathy" and suggest "that the interpersonal-affective and social deviance facets may reflect separable trait dimensions of personality with distinct etiologic processes" (p. 92).

The twin studies cited by Viding (2004) suggest that the two risk factors *Callousness* and *Neuroticism* are highly heritable, and show a high degree of genetic independence. Viding suggests that those high in CU show distinct neuro-cognitive profiles and distinct patterns of offending: they start earlier and are more versatile, with an emphasis on predatory rather than

reactive violence (Viding, 2004, p. 1330). Differential assessment is important for treatment since, Viding notes ‘treated psychopaths’ have higher rates of violent rates of recidivism than their non-treated psychopathic peers. It is possible that “insight-based therapy allowed them to develop better ways of manipulating, deceiving and using people. Importantly, such treatment does not appear to increase empathy in psychopaths” (p. 1330). Though Skeen, Monahan and Mulvey’s (2002, cited in Viding, 2004) meta-analysis challenges the view that psychopaths are untreatable, several reports suggest that they are less responsive to treatment than other offenders.

Frick, O’Brien, Wootton and McBurnett (1994) found a similar two-factor solution for a childhood psychopathy measure, the *Antisocial Process Screening Device* (ASPD; Frick and Hare, 2002), one subscale of which addresses the CU personality component. In a longitudinal study using parent-based assessments of callous-unemotionality in young children (aged 4-9 years old), CU appears to “facilitate an escalating pathway of conduct problems over time” (Dadds et al., 2005). CU had added predictive power for younger boys and older girls though not for older boys. These findings show the utility of separately assessing CU, but do not address the developmental question, Dadds et al. note, which asks whether fledgling psychopaths become adult psychopaths.

Addressing precisely that question, in an attempt to determine who will become chronic offenders, Lynam, Caspi, Moffit, Loeber and Stouthamer-Loeber (2007) found that childhood psychopathy scores (across rating methods; mother’s rating and interview) at age 13 (based on mothers’ report) bore significant relations to the outcome assessment of psychopathy 10-12 years on (assessed by interview ratings and the psychopathy checklist screening version), even after controlling for a number of other well-known risk factors. The factors they controlled for accounted for between 13-27% of the variance and included an impressive array: race, family structure, *socio-economic status* (SES), neighbourhood SES, use of physical punishment in the family, inconsistent discipline, lax supervision, lack of positive parenting, peer delinquency, behavioural and cognitive impulsivity, verbal IQ and previous delinquency.

Lynam et al. (2007) show continuity of difficulty in emotional processing and deficits in behavioural inhibition for child and adolescent psychopathy. While studies showing fledgling psychopaths are more prone to acting out rather than beating themselves up intrapsychically, the more insouciant aspects of psychopathy may arise later, as Lynam et al. (2007) note, “certain traits such as grandiosity, glibness and lack of guilt, may appear later developmentally in response to the behavioural consequences (e.g., alienation of parents, peers and teachers; arrest) of the earlier appearing traits such as callousness, impulsiveness and behavioural dyscontrol” (p. 162).

A BRIEF DEFINITION OF EMPATHY

Before I give a discursive overview from the psychopathy literature to illustrate how deficiencies in brain mechanisms underpinning affective processes can have ongoing and

recursive consequences for later development of empathy and morality I first offer a quick definition of empathy. “Mind-reading is not monolithic” says Robbins (2008, p. 13). It breaks down into many mechanisms and detectors. All accounts, he suggests, draw the distinction between: (a) the capacity to represent intentional mental states like beliefs, desires and intentions and; (b) the capacity to represent phenomenal states—what it feels like to be in those states. Most research emphasises *belief tasks*, he suggests, and the more *phenomenal* aspect has been neglected. Yet the phenomenal aspect links mind-reading to empathy. As Singer et al. (2006) note “[e]mpathy enables us to share the emotion, pain and sensation of others. The perception-action model of empathy states that the observation or imagination of another person in a particular emotional state automatically activates a representation of that state in the observer” (p. 466). Feeling pain on behalf of another, or as a result of social experiences, is a motivation with evolutionary relevance (Panksepp, 2003). Singer et al. (2004) show overlapping activation patterns in brain activation when people were given direct experience of a painful electric shock and when they observed a loved one being shocked. Singer et al.’s (2006) work shows that these empathic neural responses are modulated by whether the person you are watching being shocked has just shafted you in a prisoner’s dilemma game. If they have been unfair to you, and you are male, empathy related activation in pain-related brain areas is diminished or abolished (Singer et al, 2006, p. 467).

So, empathy has a *hot affective* and *cold cognitive* component (Davis & Kraus, 1991) and can be modulated in its bodily effects by cognition. The development of empathy should also be influenced by signature emotional intensities and lacks. Taking empathy as a case study in dynamic systems terms we can ask: Why does it not arise in psychopaths and what are the knock-on consequences?

NEURO-COGNITIVE PROFILES OF PSYCHOPATHY

Early deficiencies in the functioning of the amygdala in psychopaths are linked to a reduced ability to discern another’s fear or distress, in their face or in their voice. Less able to discern such emotional states in another, psychopaths lack the first minimal requirement for the empathy required to inhibit violence and exploitation of another. An inability to sense that another is feeling threatened or harmed in turn contributes directly to moral development. Harm-based moral concerns are unlikely to arise, since such a person cannot see the signs that another is being harmed, or anticipate that an action will cause harm. So all morals seem like mere practical conventions. There are further developmental consequences. Such affective deficits compromise both incidental learning (whereby if another’s distress is painful to me, I desist from whatever causes it, and do whatever reduces it), and the effectiveness of empathy-based socialisation (Kochanska, 1993; Saltaris, 2002; Wootton, Frick, Shelton & Silverthorn, 1997). The specificity of the affective deficits has further recursive effects in that the advantages or rewards of exploitation can still affect learning in such a personality. Particularly where there is, as I discuss in detail below, a distinctively predatory style of engagement with visual cues – interest endures until threat is imminent. Despite a similar lack of empathy in narcissists, it does not seem to have the same origins and consequences.

Blair and his colleagues have provided an array of evidence suggesting deficient amygdala functioning is associated with childhood and adult psychopathy and with gaps in

the full range of directly experienced emotion—specifically with a truncated ability to experience fear and the distress of others. Adults and children with psychopathic tendencies show reduced responsiveness in skin conductance to sad but not angry expressions (Aniskiewicz, 1979; Blair, 1999; Blair, Jones, Clark & Smith, 1997) and Viding (2004) suggests that psychopathic murderers have reduced skin conductance to fearful and sad faces. Children with psychopathic tendencies, as assessed by the *Anti-social Process Screening Device* (APSD), have selective recognition difficulties for sad and fearful expressions but not for angry, disgusted, surprised or happy expressions (Blair & Coles, 2000; Stevens, Charman & Blair, 2001). Such children require more stages from neutral to a fully intense pictorial representation of sad or fearful facial emotions before they can recognize the emotion and name it, and they make many more errors—with many children never correctly recognizing fear (Blair, Colledge, Murray & Mitchell, 2001). The naming impairment for adults high in psychopathy is seen for fearful facial expressions only. Blair and his colleagues (2002) have shown that incarcerated adult psychopaths (as assessed by the *Psychopathy Checklist-Revised* (PCL-R)) have poor recognition of fearful vocal affect. The ability to recognize sad and fearful vocal affect was significantly associated with the PCL-R total score and with CU (once IQ as assessed by the *Raven's Progressive Matrices* was partialled out). So for psychopathic personalities there are difficulties with aural or visual stimuli portraying certain negative affects, but such adults are better able to recognise distress than are children.

In profiling these personalities Lorber (2004) suggests that autonomic measures may be sensitive indices of brain processes contributing to behaviour. Evidence addresses bodily reactivity—heart rate (HR) (indexing sympathetic, parasympathetic and neuroendocrine activity) and electro-dermal activity (EDA) as well as facial expression and indicators of startle. Lorber (2004) also found diminished HR and EDA responses to negative stimuli for those with psychopathy, in his meta-analysis of the psychophysiology of aggression in men with psychopathy and those with conduct problems. He suggests that the most compelling significant results were obtained in “adult data with the indicator of reduced electrodermal activity in response to negative stimuli for those with psychopathy/sociopathy” (p. 540). Interestingly children with conduct problems (that is those who are not CU-Psychopathically inclined) had results in the opposite direction; these children showed less EDA in response to *positive* stimuli and had *elevated heart reactivity* in relation to negative stimuli. Lorber notes this reflects the value of psychophysiological assessment in differential diagnoses.

The certainty that these neuro-cognitive profiles are unique to psychopathy is challenged however by findings by Fung et al. (2005) who found that the hypo-responsivity in EDA was not specific to psychopathy, but characterized those who were involved in non-psychopathic forms of anti-social behaviour as well (p. 192). They sought to demonstrate that “juvenile psychopathy is related to the same core processes that underlie adult psychopathy” (p. 187). They replicated in adolescents (average age sixteen) the relatively robust finding that psychopathy-prone adolescents show reduced skin conductance responsivity in anticipation of punishment and in response to others' pain. This manifested in reduced anticipatory fear, and hypo-responsivity to the aversive stimulus itself, whether it was signalled in advance or unsignalled. The psychopathy-prone adolescents were electrodermally indistinguishable from control groups when not being stressed or not anticipating predictable punishment, so the hypoarousal is specific to a “situation involving a salient, imminent stressor” (p.193). However, these findings do not provide support for a distinctive pattern of bodily responses to

anticipated punishment and observing pain in another in the personality-defined aspect of psychopathy but for the broader definition that includes behavioural features.

Interestingly Kelsey, Ornduff, McCann and Reiff (2001) found less electrodermal activity in NPI narcissists during a countdown to an aversive white-noise stimulus. NPI-narcissists were indistinguishable from controls on a passive coping task, but had much less skin conductance reactivity than controls where it was possible to prevent the onset of the aversive stimulus by pressing a button in the last second of countdown. Kelsey et al. suggest that psychophysiological profiles of those high in Narcissism may mirror the profiles of psychopaths.

A PREDATORY ATTENTIONAL STYLE

Psychopaths are deficient in perceiving and responding to vicarious and direct threat, show diminished empathy and perhaps even a pleasurable response to the distress of others. Focusing on CU in a sample of incarcerated men, Levenston, Patrick, Bradley and Lang (2000), using skin conductance reactivity, heart rate and facial expressions as indices, found that those high on CU are slower, relative to controls, to see the emotional/motivational significance of stimuli, revealing an “initial failure to process the emotional pictures at a deep, action-response level” (p. 383). Normally when viewing an aversive image, the viewer moves from attending to the image, to a measurable startle, which inhibits attention. The CU group was slower to show this expected move from attention to inhibitional startle when viewing stimuli most people consider aversive, such as starving children, and mutilation. Startle potentiation is an indicator of fear; startle is mediated by the amygdala (the cornerstone of the aversive system); and those with the most deviant startle pattern were those highest on the ‘emotional detachment’ factor. This reveals interesting differences in personality-defined psychopathy at the level of differing neuro-cognitive profiles. There was “a delay in the recognition of the motivational significance of these stimuli” (p. 382), but once startle was inhibited to prioritize attention to stimuli of emotional significance, there was a delay in shifting from orienting to defense, in the presence of direct and vicarious threat. Levenston et al. (2000) refer to this as a ‘predatory pattern’, noting that where resources are scarce “goal-seeking must persist in the face of all but imminent danger” (p. 381). They add that “there was diminished empathy and perhaps even a pleasurable response to the distress of others” (p. 381). They conclude, the current data indicate that “psychopathy involves a deviation in affective response at the most fundamental level—that of evoked action dispositions” (p.382). They note however, that this is dissociated from overt expression—calling to mind Cleckley’s famous observation that this group may indeed have a ‘mask of sanity’.

It seems then, that for psychopathically inclined individuals, the deficiency in empathy arises from a quite specific set of deficiencies in amygdala functioning (early acquired or inherited). In dynamic systems terms, these organismic constraints result in the development of ‘attractors’ which is the sustained interest in what are considered normatively aversive stimuli, with a non-normative presence of pleasure. These early affective deficits set the stage for difficulties in discerning the motivational significance of stimuli, for that perception to percolate through to bodily resonancing, in terms of skin conductance, heart rate and startle, which would form the basis of hot empathy. Such bodily responses form one basis for

apprehending signature phenomenological features of being emotionally affected by the plight of another. Thus the emotional impact of another's suffering is bypassed, and any appeal to such experience in the name of socialisation is fruitless. Thus parents would need to find other ways of socialising such a child (Kochanska, 1993), and, while the brain is still plastic other pathways may be potentiated (Viding, 2004). As Blair and colleague's results show, adult psychopaths are capable of discerning distress more than the fledglings—some learning may have happened, but the 'attractor' state of exploitation and anti-social behaviour may be sustained by its own rewards.

DEFINING NARCISSISM IN THEORY AND PRACTICE

While the personality style of narcissism has a long history within psychoanalysis, it is only since the development of the *Narcissistic Personality Inventory* (NPI) by Raskin and Hall (1979) that research into *subclinical* narcissism in mainstream personality psychology has rocketed. Contemporary mainstream models echo the concerns of the original psychoanalytic formulations (Westen, 1985, 1990). Freud (1914) mapped how as the child matures its relationship to external reality and to others there is a parallel development in the investment of interest and energy in the development of its own ego. A sense of self and other as separate is central to empathy (Hoffman, 1981), and to psychoanalytic accounts of development. In the face of loss or disappointment, the investment made in others breaks down, and the person reinvests that energy in their own ego, which Freud terms secondary narcissism. Usually this is a transient, grief-like process where interest is temporarily diminished in world and others (Freud, 1917). However, for some, this results in a kind of megalomania or grandiosity. For later psychoanalytic theorists, object-relations theorists, it was the legacy of one's relationship to others that shaped one's sense of self. They also emphasised the importance of a cognitive and affective distinction between self and others in moving from need-based (narcissistic) relationships to others to more complex love. On this view, love entails concern for the other, recognition of their separateness, and loving them in the face of their fallibility rather than splitting them into good and bad. Westen (1985) puts it succinctly:

... this development involves a gradual shift from the use of others as transitional objects or tools of gratification to the recognition and valuing of autonomous others. While this shift is not primarily cognitive, in that it entails a change in the valuation of others and not just understanding of them, it is...dependent on cognitive development. It relies, for example, upon the development of empathy (p.164).

Hoffman (1981) has emphasised from his earliest theories of empathy the importance of a distinction between self and other, and a capacity to bracket one's own emotional state to take on the state of the other. As one might expect from theory, studies consistently suggest that narcissism is negatively associated with empathy (Watson, Grisham, Trotter & Biderman, 1984; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001; Wink, 1991). Watson and Morris (1991) suggest that

diminished empathic capacity is associated with NPI-Narcissism (though not with the Hogan (1969) empathy scales).

There are many forms of narcissism beyond the narcissistic personality disorder versus subclinical distinction. One distinction that has ‘made it through’ to the psychometric literature, the distinction between *overt* and *covert* narcissism, has been empirically supported in factor analytic studies (Wink, 1991; Rathvon & Holmstrom, 1996), confirming earlier theoretical distinctions (Akhtar & Thompson, 1982). Hendin and Cheek (1997) devised a short scale assessing covert narcissism, which they refer to as *hypersensitive narcissism*, though many other scales assess this dimension (Rathvon and Holmstrom, 1996). Rose (2002) characterises the difference in this way: “[O]vert narcissists experience a grandiose sense of self, tend to demand others attention, and are socially charming even though they are relatively oblivious of others’ needs. Covert narcissists ... feel profoundly inferior to others, are hypersensitive to others’ evaluations, and are generally dissatisfied” (p. 380). Many, like Watson and his colleagues, now see overt and covert narcissism as being on a continuum, with ‘overt’ being at the more adaptive end, and ‘covert’ being seen as more maladaptive. Overt and covert narcissism certainly seem to be uncorrelated, regardless of which scales operationalise the constructs, suggesting distinctive subtypes. Wink (1991) suggests that the divergent styles reflect the operation of *splitting* (a primitive defence which separates the sensitive, vulnerable features of the narcissist from the grandiose, entitled features). Thus, there may be different presentational features of the overt and covert narcissist (McWilliams, 1994), but the core concerns of grandiosity and entitlement are still present in both, and results are consistent with narcissism being a defence against depression and rage; either somewhat successful in the case of overt narcissism and less so in the case of covert narcissism (Rathvon & Holmstrom, 1996).

Splitting, a lack of integration and dramatic shifts in self and other evaluation is central to narcissism (Broucek, 1982; Gramzow & Tangney, 1992; Watson & Biderman, 1993). Many of the dynamic features of narcissism hinge on the protection of an unrealistically enhanced or ‘grandiose’ self-image developmentally produced and sustained in real time by splitting. Morf and Rhodewalt (2001) make stunning inroads into mapping a dynamic model of the component processes involved in narcissistic self-regulation of a grandiose yet vulnerable self-concept.

My suggestion is that narcissists’ lack of empathy is not due to early affective deficits which underpin deficiencies in empathy for psychopaths. The grandiose yet vulnerable sense of self is the key. It has arisen developmentally as a result of parental mixed messages, and intrapsychically, as a result of the defensive the operation of splitting attendant on the experience of shame (Broucek, 1982; Gramzow & Tangney, 1992). Lacking an integrated, compassionate self image as fallible but worthy of love (Otway & Vignoles, 2006), one ‘attractor’ of this personality style arises when they outsource their needs for sustained self worth. This is the product of a blurred sense of self and other, and also recursively results in the permeability of the narcissist’s sense of self to the evaluations of others which so many empirical researchers have found (Kernis & Sun, 1994; Rhodewalt, Madrian & Cheney, 1998) and their use of aggression and hostility to shore up their grandiose sense of dominance, as noted by Kelsey, Ornduff, McCann & Reiff (2001).

DEVELOPMENTAL ACCOUNTS OF NARCISSISM

Dadds et al. (2005) suggest “no evidence was found for the specificity or usefulness of the narcissism construct” (p. 408) with parent ratings of very young children (aged 4-9 years), and all of the narcissism items merged with items pertaining to conduct problems when they pooled items from the *Antisocial Process Screening Device* (APSD) and the *Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire* (SDQ). They note that “[i]n younger children, narcissism appears not to be differentiated from a broader aggressive-manipulative style” (p. 408) which is indeed the unique focus of the items listed. Weise and Tuber (2004) acknowledge that narcissistic children do not necessarily have a child-sized version of an adult disorder, and they will not definitively go on to develop one. But, as they lucidly point out, the “origin of these disturbances is early childhood’ so it seems intuitively sound to suppose that we are ‘seeing a future adult disorder in its infancy” (p. 246). They note that the clinical presentation may change, but that the underlying organization may remain unchanged.

Parents and teachers refer narcissistic children for treatment for a variety of symptoms including: “disturbances in interpersonal relationships; coldness, exploitativeness, and excessive efforts to control and manipulate; impulsivity and poor tolerance for frustration; school problems (usually underachieving); mood swings, irritability and lability of self-esteem; persistent lying, stealing and chronic violation of rules; exhibitionism, haughtiness, arrogance and a constant need for attention and admiration; self-doubt and intense envy” (Bleiberg, 1984, p. 504, cited in Weise & Tuber, 2004, p. 245).

Weise (1992, cited in Weise & Tuber, 2004, p. 246) gives a great example of early parental relationships with a narcissistic child, whereby there was a largely unsuccessful attempt to get parents to understand that “their relationship with him was based largely on his fulfilling their own needs”—they saw him as a “misunderstood child prodigy” (Weise & Tuber, 2004, p. 246). This captures in a nutshell the overvaluation of skills combined with a rejection of the child for his own sake that psychoanalysts have long suggested is the painful parenting combination it takes to produce narcissistic tendencies, specifically splitting in response to shame.

The existence of this combination of parenting style and its predictive power regarding narcissism has recently had compelling statistical validation from an elegant study by Otway and Vignoles (2006). In a predominantly white UK sample between the ages of 18 and 52 years, they sought to determine which patterns of recollection of parental treatment were linked to overt and covert narcissists (taking into account the contribution of attachment styles to those recollections). They tested their accounts of competing psychoanalytic theories: Millon’s theory backs parental overvaluation as a contribution, while, Kohut and Kernberg back coldness, unempathic parenting characterised by implicit aggression and rejection. Freud (1914) is portrayed as suggesting that an ambivalent combination of the two contributes to narcissism. Otway and Vignoles’ structural equation modelling results support Freud’s account. The ‘fit’ of the model was significantly stronger when overvaluation and cold rejection were both in play. The best fit model which permitted all possible paths between both forms of narcissism and both forms of parental responses, accounted for approximately 21% of the variance in overt narcissism, and 6.3% of the variance in covert narcissism. Further, and interestingly, there were suppressor relations, statistically, between the two inputs (parental coldness and overvaluation). It was when they were modelled

together that the pathways were strengthened for predicting overt and covert narcissism. This suggests to me the possibility that parents were inculcating a sense of the child's special abilities (overvaluation) but not a sense of acceptance and valuing of who the child is (warmth).

The results with the subscales of narcissism revealed authority, exhibitionism, superiority and exploitativeness were particularly linked with suppression effects between parental overvaluation and coldness—covering three of the subscales found in Washburn et al.'s sample of adolescent African Americans using the same scale (see below). Entitlement showed links only with parental overvaluation. Otway and Vignoles conclude that “the combination of parental overvaluation and coldness ... was a key factor in predictions of both overt and covert narcissism” (p. 114). These ambivalent and confusing mixed messages from the parents may have arisen either from one parent running hot and cold, or one parent overvaluing accompanied by a colder, more rejecting other parent. It would be interesting to extend this excellent study by collecting separate recollections of mother and father, in childhood and adolescence (see McIlwain, 1990 for separate assessment measures). It may be the mixed messages that may lead to the distrust since varied treatment from one parent, or diverse treatment across two parents precludes one from believing that people in general are reliably there to depend upon. Further, in the recollections of these earliest exchanges with others we see that the person's (overvalued) capabilities have been split off from the warm acceptance of them as whole others. The mixed messages may be thus be resolved if one sees that the young people have been overvalued as ‘narcissistic supplies’ by parents rather than valued in their own right; resulting in the formation of a grandiose sense of self based on their overvalued abilities. Lacking a basal assumption of their own worth this grandiosity is fragile, requiring constant shoring up from the feedback of others. This links with the dynamic, open-ended, process nature of narcissism (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001), and the defensive splitting where, recollecting a history of overvaluation, overt narcissists hide their vulnerability, and recollecting coldness and with an anxious fear of possible abandonment (as Otway & Vignoles found), covert narcissists hide their more grandiose aspirations (Akhtar, 1989; McWilliams, 1994).

Weise and Tuber (2004) give an example of what I interpret as an ‘attractor’—whereby grandiose fantasies and self-absorption may maintain a pathological equilibrium that interferes with differentiation (of self from other) and integration (of a coherent sense of self). On this account narcissists outsource their needs for a sense of themselves. Rather than establishing an ‘authentic’ and integrated sense of self, they rely on “what others expect, or what will gain them admiration and special advantages” (p. 247). This external locus of appreciation prevents the development of a robust and stable sense of self-worth, and by emphasizing what ‘elicits delight’ from others, they neglect and “cannot integrate more troubled feelings needs and self-images” (Weise & Tuber, 2004, p. 247). They develop a coherence based on splitting, an admired image of themselves based on the exclusion of certain features of themselves. Thus they end up as defensive individualists, masquerading as independent and needing no-one, while highly reliant on others for appreciation, approval—an unstable and paradoxical position. To experience gratitude is to acknowledge that one has had needs met by others, and narcissists are famously poor at apology and gratitude (McWilliams & Lependorf, 1990). Their grandiosity is linked to poor reality testing, the sense of themselves as exceptions (Freud, 1916) to rules and regulations, and they use and manipulate others before discarding them, or wearing them out.

In researching narcissism in young adolescents, Washburn et al. (2004), found self-image of central relevance to an exhibitionistic defence that was linked to depression, and to exploitative relationships to others. Washburn et al. found three meaningful factors in this age group: adaptive narcissism, exhibitionism, and exploitativeness. These factors tap into concerns highly relevant to the 13-15 year olds they studied—predominantly African Americans from a tough poor neighbourhood in Chicago, where many had witnessed high levels of community violence. They show the worth of assessing narcissism early on as this study which suggests that narcissism, with its increased emphasis on self-image in relation to others, is of relevance to how young adolescents conceptualise their self-image and “may assist in identifying at-risk youth that would otherwise be missed by an exclusive focus on global self-esteem as an indicator of mental health” (p. 258). More specifically they show where narcissistic features mask depressive (internalising symptomatology)—“the apparently outgoing nature of exhibitionistic behaviour may distort the accurate identification of youth with internalising symptoms” (Washburn et al., 2004, p. 258), and “young adolescents with high exploitative narcissism may be at risk for depression even if they report high self-esteem” (p. 258). They found traditional predictors of internalising symptoms (self-esteem and exposure to community violence) to relate powerfully, but unexpectedly they found that exhibitionism was also significantly predictive of depression. *Exhibitionism* is an attractor in terms of the model discussed here. As they note it may fulfil the immediate need for attention, but likely draws negative attention that evokes feelings of embarrassment, and does not shore up a grandiose sense of self. They recommend prospective research to see how “feelings of superiority over others, be it exploitative, attention-seeking and/or adaptive, contributes to an adolescent’s developing sense of identity” (p. 258).

In a study with 11 and 12 year olds, Weise and Tuber (2004) found that narcissistic children showed a strong overlap between themes revealing difficulties in management of aggressive impulses and emotional investment in values and morals linked to behaving selfishly and without remorse. Relative to the control group, narcissistic children were significantly lower in their investment in morality, had more difficulty managing aggressive impulses, and evidenced less stable self-esteem. However, contra their predictions, Weise and Tuber found that narcissistic children were significantly more invested in relationships than the control group. However, the variable increased with any mention of relationship—so it measured quantity of relationships mentioned in stories in response to Murray’s *Thematic Apperception Test* (TAT) cards, rather than quality of relationship. This carefully controlled study shows the significant presence in children of themes indicative of clinical portraits of narcissistic children and adults.

So despite the attributes narcissists share with psychopaths (exploitativeness, hostility, preparedness to use others, indifference to the wellbeing of others and turning a defensive mask towards the world), the ontogeny of a lack of empathy differs. Rather than arising from an organismic constraint in the form of deficiency in amygdala functioning and a non-normative affective attentional style, it seems to be the parent-child interface that contributes to the lack of differentiation between self and other, and the lack of integration of a sense of self. The lack of empathy hinges more on a lack of personal integration that has persisted in tandem with a failure to see others as integrated, fallible yet lovable whole others.

CONCLUSION

It may be that the differences in evidence reflect how research has been driven by the different theoretical traditions that have informed exploration of the personality styles of psychopathy and narcissism. Research has commenced into the neuro-cognitive profiles of narcissists (Kelsey, Ornduff, McCann & Reiff, 2001). Comparison of these personality styles systematically at the level of neuro-cognitive profiles would enhance our detailed understanding of underlying mechanisms. Despite surface similarities in lack of empathy, there are marked differences in the underlying mechanisms and attractors that arise dynamically.

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