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COMMENTARY

## The Narcissist's Dilemma: Balancing Power and Inadequacy in Family Law

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Narcissism is often characterized by an inflated sense of self-importance and a deep-seated need for admiration. However, beneath that facade lies a complex interplay of psychodynamics that can lead to tumultuous forces within the mind of the narcissist -- specifically, the tension between their internal sense of power and entitlement versus their pervasive feelings of inadequacy. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for judges, family law practitioners, trial consultants, mental

health professionals, and litigants all of whom are charged with navigating the challenges posed by narcissistic individuals in family law cases.

### *Understanding the Narcissistic Psyche*

At its core, narcissism is not merely about egotism or being the smartest person in the room. It encompasses a fragile self-esteem that is often masked by grandiosity. According to contemporary psychodynamic theories, narcissists oscillate between feelings of superiority and profound insecurity. This internal struggle can manifest in a variety of ways, particularly in high stakes family law litigation where power dynamics are inherently at play.

### *The Dual/Duel Nature of Narcissism*

Narcissism can be understood through two primary lenses: [grandiose narcissism](#) and [vulnerable narcissism](#). Grandiose narcissists exhibit overt confidence and entitlement, often demanding admiration and control over others. By contrast, vulnerable narcissists may appear more insecure, displaying sensitivity to criticism and a constant need for validation. This duality can lead to many duels at the courthouse, complicating interactions in family law settings, as narcissists may switch between these modes at lightning speed, depending on the circumstances of the case.

### *The Role of Early Relationships*

The roots of narcissistic behavior often can be traced to early familial relationships. Research indicates that [parenting styles](#) significantly influence the development of

narcissistic traits. For example, children who experience excessive praise or critical neglect may develop an inflated sense of self or deep-seated feelings of inadequacy. Parenting styles vary from authoritative, to authoritarian, permissive, or neglectful. Parenting styles lay the foundation for formative experiences that shape how individuals perceive themselves, thereby setting the stage for future conflicts in family law litigation.

### *The Psychodynamics at Play*

In family law disputes, narcissists grapple with competing psychological forces that drive their behavior. On one hand, their need for power and control can lead to aggressive litigation tactics. On the other hand, their underlying feelings of inadequacy may prompt defensive reactions and emotional volatility. As [Bill Eddy](#) wrote in “It’s All Your Fault,” there are ways of managing litigants who blame others for everything, including:

1. Don’t take personal attacks personally.
2. Don’t give them negative feedback.
3. Don’t bend boundaries.
4. Don’t get hooked by histrionics.
5. Don’t get conned.
6. Don’t advocate negatively.

### *Power and Control*

Narcissists often seek to dominate situations to reinforce their sense of superiority. This need for control can manifest in many ways during family litigation, including:

- **Manipulation:** Narcissists may use emotional manipulation to sway opinions or outcomes in their favor.
- **Aggression:** They might resort to intimidation tactics against opposing parties or even legal professionals.
- **Parent-child contact problems:** In custody disputes, narcissists may attempt to persuade their children to align with them, and to reject the other parent in order to attempt to maintain control over family relationships.

These behaviors stem from an internal narrative that equates power with self-worth. When faced with challenges to their authority – such as divorce proceedings or custody battles – narcissists may react defensively, escalating conflicts rather than resolving them amicably. To settle amicably without a fight is often perceived as an intolerable loss for a narcissist. Narcissists see the world as black and white, devoid of nuance and shades of gray. They lack empathy for others, and an understanding of the costs of their behaviors.

### *Inadequacies and Vulnerability*

Despite their outward bravado, many narcissists harbor deep feelings of inadequacy. This vulnerability can surface during family disputes when they feel threatened or criticized. Common reactions include:

- **Defensiveness:** Narcissists may become hostile or dismissive when confronted with feedback or challenges.
- **Victimhood:** They might adopt the mentality of being victimized, portraying themselves as wronged parties to elicit sympathy and to justify their actions.
- **Emotional Volatility:** Sudden outbursts or emotional breakdowns can occur when their fragile sense of self is threatened. Their sense that they are losing often escalates the narcissist's internal inferiority that creates anxiety and anger.

Such responses complicate legal proceedings, as they can lead to unpredictable behaviors that hinders resolution efforts.

### *Strategies for Family Lawyers*

Navigating cases involving narcissistic individuals requires a nuanced understanding of their psychodynamics. Here are several strategies that can help:

#### *Establish Clear Boundaries*

Setting firm boundaries is essential when dealing with a narcissistic client or opposing party or opposing counsel. This includes:

- Clearly defined communication channels.
- Limiting aggressive or manipulative behaviors.

- Maintaining professionalism despite emotional provocations.
- Choose your battles wisely.

By reinforcing boundaries, legal professionals can minimize some of the chaos that often accompanies narcissistic disputes.

### *Employing Collaborative Approaches*

Encouraging collaborative dispute resolution methods can help reduce conflict while addressing the underlying issues driving narcissistic behavior. Techniques include:

- Trial consultant: Hire someone experienced in family litigation – often another attorney or a mental health professional – who can help coach the client in a variety of ways. How can the coach help? The trial consultant can help coach the client how to:
  - avoid inappropriate behaviors,
  - best communicate with a co-parent who is predisposed to high conflict communications,
  - grapple with children who are resisting parent child contact.
- Mediation: Facilitating discussions between parties can promote understanding and reduce adversarial dynamics. The mere fact that the case involves narcissistic behaviors does not make the case an inappropriate candidate for the collaborative law model.
- Therapeutic interventions: Involve mental health professionals to counsel with the parties individually, with their child(ren) and with the family.

This can provide insights into managing emotional volatility and improving communication.

Collaborative approaches shift the focus from winning at all costs to finding mutually beneficial solutions.

### *Focus on the Evidence*

In litigation involving narcissistic individuals, it is vital to rely on objective evidence rather than on emotional appeals. This includes:

1. Documenting instances of manipulative behavior or behavior that creates parent child contact problems.
2. Gathering testimony from neutral third parties who can provide an unbiased perspective on family dynamics.
3. Using expert witnesses who understand the psychological dynamics at play.

The reader will notice that these three points are consistent with well-done child custody evaluations. In seeking a collaborative approach in a case where either or both parents have significant narcissistic characteristics, the objective evidence condensed into a custody evaluation report with recommendations can be very useful.

By grounding arguments in factual evidence, attorneys may counteract emotional turbulence typically associated with narcissistic disputes.

## *Conclusion*

This interplay between power and inadequacy within the mind of a narcissist creates unique challenges in family law cases. Narcissists have been described as tending to have high conflict personalities. Self-discipline is crucial to resist reacting to each and every provocation that a narcissist will launch. Make positive choices as to when to respond, and when to ignore provocations. Understanding these psychodynamics allows legal professionals to navigate conflicts more effectively while promoting healthier outcomes. As [Dr. Benjamin D. Garber](#) writes: “In the dance of relationships, it is often the unacknowledged vulnerabilities that lead to the most profound misunderstandings and conflicts.” We must recognize the importance of underlying emotional struggles in litigating family law matters. These cases are not linear. These cases are not black and white. Understanding dyadic vulnerabilities can help us develop more effective strategies for conflict resolution, and fostering healthier family interactions.

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