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(Gas)lighting Their Way to Coercion and Violation in Narcissistic Abuse:

An Autoethnographic Exploration

Vickie Howard

Abstract: Narcissistic abuse is a hidden form of abuse and remains under-recognized in society and within the helping professions, partly due to victim difficulties in articulating the manipulative behaviors they have experienced. Though research focusing on narcissism is extensive, there is a distinct lack of research into the abusive behaviors individuals with severe narcissistic traits use against others and subsequent victim experiences. With the aim of raising awareness of this form of abuse, the following evocative account utilizes autoethnographic memory work and portrays personal experiences of narcissistic abuse—specifically, gaslighting behavior, pathological dishonesty, and intimate abuse. The autoethnographic methods of this article are aligned with social justice and feminist epistemologies. Suppositions are offered to the reader centered upon trauma, loss, and healing in the context of the author's personal experiences and inherent values as a mental health nurse and educator. Key reflections regarding the use of memory as method along with procedural, relational, and ethical considerations determine how the autoethnography and its portrayal may have been shaped.
Keywords: autoethnography, relational trauma, ethics, psychological abuse, intimate partner violence

Prologue

In response to the lack of personal narratives, scholarly representations, or research studies concerning narcissistic abuse,[1] this article recounts interactions with my ex-partner whom I identify as displaying severe narcissistic traits and behaviors. The accounts are written reflexively, recognizing my personal experiences and influencing values as a mental health nurse and educator. Narcissistic abuse refers to forms of abuse (psychological, emotional, physical, sexual, financial) inflicted by someone considered to hold severe narcissistic traits/narcissism or narcissistic personality disorder (NPD).[2] Narcissism is predominantly defined through psychiatric diagnostic criteria as NPD or via a label of pathological narcissism that has been identified as involving regulatory deficits and maladaptive strategies to deal with threats to a positive self-image.[3] Narcissism has also been associated with interpersonally exploitative acts, lack of empathy, intense envy, aggression, and exhibitionism.[4] These constructs of the

individual's personality often remain hidden and are revealed only at strategic points in order to demean and gain control of others to feed an insatiable desire for self-worth. There are currently no evidence-based treatments for NPD/pathological narcissism, and problems remain in discussing and sharing diagnoses between clinician and the narcissistic individual.[5]

Underpinnings of this research approach align to postmodern and feminist outlooks that establish the validity of subjectivity as an important premise for social inquiry into the human condition.[6] My narrative accounts combine to construct an autoethnography that has been defined as "an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural."[7] Within nursing practice generally, autoethnography has been proposed as an opportunity for nurses to tell stories that would otherwise not be heard, with a courageous laying bare of the self to gain new cultural understanding, incorporating the examination of personal and professional identity.[8] Autoethnographic approaches can be employed in the education of nurses to further develop reflective and reflexive practice and to appraise oppressive habits of the profession.[9] Although my autoethnographic project does not focus on experiences of my nursing practice, it does explore how my mental health nursing values, knowledge, and theoretical perspectives have been challenged by personal experiences of being abused by an intimate other with severe narcissistic traits. This article aims to show the personal and professional explorations I have taken in making sense of my experiences by employing evocative and analytic approaches.

The data in this autoethnography is recalled from memory. Bochner states the essential quality of autoethnography is remembering and that this is active and continual. Memory is also a destination and can be revisited to question and reflect on past meaning; thus, it is inquiry.[10] This article also embodies introspection whereby thoughts and feelings are recalled along with

bodily sensations, mental processes, and external stimuli.[11] Two examples of self-authored poetry are included as memory data for the reader to use in their own interpretations and to locate themselves within the poem.[12] Using poetry in/as research has been identified as a powerful, evocative, and meaningful channel to represent the author's experiences and encourage the reader to engage with data differently.[13] Within my autoethnographic writing I am not only searching out understanding but exploring reflexively the relationship of my own life to the story and also aiming to work toward correcting the injustices experienced by many in society[14]—by sharing my hidden stories of narcissistic abuse. I am presenting, first, autobiographical accounts of my experiences, which are followed by reflection/analyses to discuss the issues raised by the narrative and to further develop aspects of my autobiographical experiences. These reflective passages involve hindsight and analytic connections, concluding with key considerations. It is important to note that the sources cited in my research are both academic and from public domain sources such as the Blogosphere and online communities. This is because the impetus toward the recognition of narcissistic abuse as a phenomenon is predominantly driven by those who have experienced it, rather than through academic sources or via mental health professionals.

There are three voices in this writing: the personal, the mental health nurse professional (educator), and the ethically responsible. One purpose of this inquiry is to explore the ways in which these voices can be aligned or differ. As well as working through my own healing process, I hope this inquiry may offer catharsis for readers who have personally or/and within professional roles experienced some of the consequences of narcissistic abuse described in this study, including trauma, betrayal, re-traumatization, psychological abuse, gaslighting, intimate abuse, and dissonance. This autoethnographic inquiry is not looking for neat conclusions but

rather the opportunity to invite thought and discussion of an under-discussed and hidden type of abuse.

Beneath Your Words

"I can't believe I've found my soulmate"

(How many is that now?)

"I would love another child"

(She tricked me to get her pregnant)

"No one has understood me but you"

(Soon, you will be one of the no ones)

"I love that you have a great job and want to do more"

(She is so selfish with her ambitions)

"Please don't ever leave me"

(. . . until I have degraded you into a shadow of yourself through . . .

Intimate abuse

Taking your money

Abandoning our child

Disrespecting you to others

Portraying myself as the victim

De-humanizing you so you don't know yourself)

The Narcissist Emerges

When you were laying there frightened to move for the fear of more pain, your mind was in turmoil but you thought you had done the right thing.

You said, “Look what we’ve been missing.”

And he said, “It will take more than that.”

The ice-coldness of his response settled in the air.

He then turned to you and spat out, “Do you know when you last gave me [sexual act] . . .”

The guilt crept up on you unexpectedly and you questioned if you had been unkind and unfair to him when you looked back over the past months. (You had not thought this before.)

The color drained from your face with the recognition of this uncertainty. He looked at you with disdain and got out of bed. You tried to sit up, but the pain was like a weight. (This had not been a good idea. Why did you do it?)

When you were in discussion about his visiting this weekend, you had texted him that he would have to stay in the spare room. He had said he really wanted to work out the relationship and if he had to stay in the spare room he could not face visiting because it would be too upsetting for him. He had cried.

“But how can you expect us to sleep in the same bed?”

All you could see was him touching and caressing another woman a few weeks earlier whilst happily explaining he had to travel for work.

You thought you would explode; your eyes looked tearful yet vengeful. This was the definitive sign that the relationship should now end. But he had pleaded with you not to jump to a decision like that and that surely Ava (the daughter you shared) deserved a family and that surely you both would be able to talk and work things out. He had said it had been the worst mistake of his life, a one-night stand, that he had been drunk and could barely remember what had happened. You balanced on a precipice of what to do.

You had fallen for his victim rhetoric (despite the little voice in your head that was in disbelief), but now you lay there violated from the pounding ache through forceful sex you had not stopped because you were paralyzed with confusion. (Wanting your relationship, not wanting it, feeling you had caused the mistake of the infidelity, you had been selfish to block him out, it was your fault anyway, you feared the loss, you needed to prove . . . what?)

If only you had known then that twenty-four hours later a number of enlightening events would occur to make you regret listening to a word he had said. You would never have been "intimate" with him. But you cannot blame yourself; manipulators are very good at making you doubt yourself, making you feel selfish, and then as a consequence you try to put things right, to your own detriment.

Within twenty-four hours of the intimacy/violation, you learned it had not been a one-night stand or the "worst mistake of his life." You saw a full text message flash brightly but silently on his locked mobile (why had he set it to be able to view?) Walking around the bed to have a look, you felt your stomach lurch as if on a fairground ride taking you in unwanted directions. Yes, it was the woman . . . writing of how nothing could come between her and her curry (of all things). All bright and breezy but with that implied intimacy in which at the beginning of a relationship people drop in tidbits about their likes and dislikes with a flirtatious edge. Your mind was doing summersaults trying to work out the message. Why was she sending messages to him, this woman, when he was spending the weekend with his family trying to sort out the problems? Why was she interfering? You knew instinctively this was the "one-night stand," which obviously wasn't a one-night stand. With an urgency, you looked her up on Facebook (her account was set to "public"). You saw their joint announcement from three months earlier saying they were in a relationship. There was an accompanying photo; she was

sitting on his knee, their faces beaming like two young lovers. The photo's background of pale green walls was a good match for the nausea that now welled up and added an anti-redness to your rosy cheeks. She had written underneath: "Spending time with this reprobate." If only she knew that her contrived little joke couldn't have been more accurate.

* * *

I sat on the sofa, my body curled forward. The laptop was on the footstool, and I saw by the messenger icon that I had received another message. I recoiled at the thought of the content of her message. Now knowing the woman's identity, I wanted to *know*—had only a one-night stand occurred? (in my heart, I knew the answer). The woman replied. I sensed she had been knocked sideways. She said they had been in a relationship for three months and had slept together regularly. She said that he had told her I was deranged and that we had split up a year ago and that he visited his daughter only and had nothing to do with me. She said she was sorry.

However, over a number of hours the woman's demeanor and attitude changed.

"You are the liar," she said. "You tricked him into getting you pregnant."

I felt my skin go cold, and now along with the prolonged nausea, the life from me further faded.

"Will I wake up from this unreal experience?" I wondered with desperation.

She said, "Just leave us be" and "We are asking you for your blessing . . . it is really important to him he has your blessing." This turned to "I hope you are not crying into your pillow at night." The woman's judgments and self-preservation whirled around me in a torrent.

Following my unwillingness to play along with the untruths he had told her, I sat there on that sofa disbelieving these online conversations. I sat there, the inside of me throbbing; I felt raped, physically hurting, bruised. But worse, I saw myself being treated as a discarded piece of

rubbish would be, purposefully kicked around by a bored individual who would eventually kick me into a ditch where I would remain invisible. He denied that we had been in a relationship when he had met her and claimed that I was fabricating everything. Every time I disclosed another detail, he said it was more proof I was deranged (I am wondering if my story further demeaned her and the fairy tale he had tried to introduce when he met her). I knew then, sitting curled up, with the demonic memories of the night before in my bed, that the physical pain would pass, but I could not envisage ever feeling who I was again and who I knew myself to be, because why had something like this happened? When one of the most trusted people in my life hurt me (despite the problems we may have had), falsified and misrepresented me in ways I could never have imagined were possible, I didn't know the world anymore.

Beating Me Down with Subliminal (Text) Messages

The relationship has ended, but when you will not fade away and comply to his dishonesty the worst begins . . .

You wake up to 12 text messages calling you a cunt . . . (a word he would never have used before) it carries on . . .

You are told you've brought this on yourself

You are told you couldn't even give birth properly

You are told you will never understand people with mental health problems . . .

Your rational mind says do not listen to the words of a narcissist

Their aim is to painfully hurt again and again attempting to repair the

Unfillable void in themselves . . .

Their hammer keeps coming down . . .

Your mind recounts all their dishonesty to remind you of the truth

You try to erase their words but the sting has penetrated

The poison has already slowly released and . . .

You start to feel their words and own them, not as fact but

Feeling. The poison has seeped in and you are captured again

It is hard not to feel the person they say you are.

When the police read the text messages and emails, they consider . . .

They say a charge can be given but you agree to a warning

A warning is given to the narcissist for stalking and harassment and . . . they are now silent.

The chains are released and you take your first full deep breath in a long time.

A flash of the old me returns. There is hope.

Searching for Further Understanding

What an abuser says and does often do not match. The above autobiographical accounts demonstrate this. Within an intimate relationship, narcissistic abuse is renowned (amongst those who have experienced it) for intense experiences of betrayal often resulting in the target/victim being at risk of losing their sense of reality of what has happened to them.[15] This loss of self is often a result of being presented with many changing narratives by their narcissistic partner, whereby details and accounts of past events are incrementally changed, disempowering the victim and spiraling them further into confusion regarding experiences of their own recalling and memories of how past events occurred.[16] When this abusive behavior occurs, it is often in parallel with overt pathological lying and dishonesty. The pathological dishonesty cements further this overpowering gaslighting experience, Arabi states:

> Gaslighting is a technique abusers use to convince you that your perception of the abuse is inaccurate . . . they will suddenly develop abuse amnesia where they'll forget horrific incidents of abuse or deny saying or doing something that they actually did. This allows them to escape accountability, but it's also a type of crazymaking that enables the abuser to rewrite reality for you and control your world.[17]

Stark argues for the recognition of the social phenomenon of "manipulative gaslighting," which she identifies as "the systematic denial of women's testimony about harms done to them by men, which is aimed at undermining those and other women."[18] In addition, manipulative gaslighting enables misogyny and psychological oppression:

> It causes women to see themselves as inferior both in their ability to make sound judgments but also in their moral status. This is because what they are inspired to doubt are judgments about their moral status. In distrusting their belief that an action done to them is in fact morally objectionable, they are doubting not only their ability to discern harm but their standing as one who is owed better treatment.[19]

In my situation, even though I had clear evidence of an announcement of "their" relationship and an accompanying photo on social media, with many people (strangers to me) congratulating them, this did not appear to phase my then partner when I held my phone under his blank face for an explanation. When I confronted him, while he stood near the kitchen back door, one of his immediate responses was "I wish you would stop digging." He then proceeded to expand by stating that the woman in question had been in an abusive marriage and they had put the announcement and photo up to "put off" her ex-husband from contacting her. My brain could hardly keep up with the changing narrative of what his relationship was with this woman—from one night stand, to friend, to helping her to avoid more abuse.

It is difficult to explain what I was feeling at this time because everything I thought I had known about "my partner" seemed in complete reverse and distortion in this moment. I looked at the man in front of me and did not know who he was. In that split second of realization, I experienced a feeling of desperation and loss that manifested in a separation from my reality. It really did feel like the volume had been turned right down and I intermittently heard his sentences "I'm here aren't I? . . . no, I have told you everything, there is nothing else to tell . . . what do you want me to do?" I felt my whole body shaking so fast that I knew it was not visible, just a numbing vibration. He looked at me, full eye contact, no flinch, no hesitation . . . and then a well of devastation came from an unknown place in me. I knew everything he was saying was a lie for which he had no remorse. This was someone I could not trust, a stranger, though we had been in a relationship for seven years and had a child together. He had no concern for how this overt demeaning and utterly disrespectful behavior may affect me and our daughter and would rock me to my center. I exploded and hit him palm down on the upper arm. He cowered as though I was whirling heavy-handed punches toward him. Some might label this out-of-the-blue "attack" under the umbrella of reactive abuse. I have a problem with the term "reactive abuse," seeing it as language that supports a victim-blaming culture toward women who have experienced domestic abuse/violence:[20]

> Reactive abuse occurs when the victim reacts to the abuse they are experiencing. The victim may scream, toss out insults, or even lash out physically at the abuser. The abuser then retaliates by telling the victim that they are, in fact, the abuser.[21]

I question why we can't refer to this behavior more simply as a description of what it is: reactive anger, or at worst, reactive violence. In my case, my reaction was unexpected but a physical form of self-defense against the violation of my inherent trust of my partner. I was imploring him for

the truth, but he would not give it. I was desperate for a transparent conversation with the man I thought he was, the man whom I had known; but instead, I found myself talking to a man who could look me in the eyes and continue to lie without a flicker of remorse or empathy toward me. It was as though the person I knew had been "body snatched."

This was my experience, then, because I had never heard of narcissistic abuse. I could not make sense of anything that was happening to me—only betrayal. I did not realize that the narcissist's mask had slipped and his only defense was to increase the lie upon lie.[22] I did not realize that he had manipulated me into considering trying to resume our relationship through the insidious tactics he had employed over a number of years to first present himself as a martyr and the victim of mistreatment by others in his life and then to draw me into his misleading rhetoric. When I met him he had put me on a pedestal, and then when I moved away from his covert dominance he decided he did not need to hide these tactics because the new partner would take my place in meeting his addiction for self-esteem.[23]

I cannot deny that at times I felt intense hatred for the new woman, which was interwoven with pity for her ignorance of the man she was trusting after only knowing him a few months. The most traumatizing times were when my ex-partner told her private information I had entrusted him with and which she repeated back to me through online messaging—messages I interpreted as having a taunting and obliterating intention. Again, I found it difficult to believe my previously trusted partner could do this to me. This was the triangulation so often mentioned as a component of narcissistic abuse from an intimate partner; the narcissist uses another person to join in delivering the bullying and abuse.[24] However, what struck me about the woman is that although she had plenty of evidence of his deception toward her as well, she was determined to continue her relationship with him. She messaged me as though immersed in a fog:

"But he bought me a ring."

"He has asked me to marry him."

I could empathize with her to a point; it appeared she had been completely absorbed in the relationship throughout the "love bombing" stage where she had been overpowered with professions of love, as I had been in the early stages of my relationship with him. "Love bombing" refers to the narcissist overwhelming their target with frequent and overpowering love gestures and adoration. This can be in the form of gifts and other token gestures, many repeated text messages, or similar communication. This behavior may be experienced as flattering and confirming initially, but once the narcissistic individual has their target within their grasp, these experiences make it more difficult for the partner to process the experience of abusive behavior at a later stage.[25] This is where the abused may experience a great difficulty with cognitive dissonance in assimilating this overly attentive stage of the relationship to harmful behaviors they experience often later in the relationship.

I found trying to assimilate my experiences of a man (who appeared so attentive and kind in the beginning of our relationship) soul destroying when dealing with the intense psychological and emotional abuse at the end of our relationship. It just did not make sense, and I found myself trying to make rational excuses for his abuse. Cognitive dissonance describes a process whereby two attitudes or an attitude and a behavior are in conflict, which can lead to confusion and discomfort.[26] In narcissistic abuse and other forms of domestic abuse, cognitive dissonance is identified as a main influencing factor regarding why women may remain in an abusive relationship. It has been identified that even though a woman may reflect on the harmful behavior she is experiencing from her partner, other factors such as a lack of resources, potential judgment from family, or beliefs about self in the relationship may force her to change and re-

evaluate negative perceptions about the relationship in order to function or remain within it.[27] A further aligning process is referred to as "trauma bonding" whereby the abused person, who is facing loss, abandonment, loneliness, and sadness, in effect abandons themselves in favor of a highly addictive attachment to a person who has hurt them, bracing themselves against further hurt and placing themselves at further risk.[28]

It has been three years since I left the relationship with my ex-partner. I have reflected on how I was unaware of the responsibility to myself—by this I mean meeting perceived obligations to my ex-partner and family unit without sacrificing my own needs. This dynamic has been identified as difficult to achieve for women when they adopt a conventional interpretation of responsibility, thus impeding women's sense of self as autonomous subjects and equating responsibility to oneself with an act of selfishness.[29] If a woman in addition is continually being told they are selfish by an abusive partner, this dynamic can only be further reinforced.

I experienced processes of grieving that rise to the surface again if triggered. I have faced that my ex-partner was not the person I knew or thought he was and have recognized that I denied the red flags during the relationship.[30] This was the most devastating aspect of my sense of loss. I had to face that he had presented an image of himself to me based on what he thought I wanted to see and, then, when his alliances started moving elsewhere, he dropped the persona and the false performances of being an empathetic and genuine person. I then found myself mourning the living dead.[31] I was mourning a person who had never existed. On discussing the concept of mourning the living dead in relationships with pathological narcissists, Clough offers:

> Of course, we don't wear black all the time, but on every birthday and holiday, a shadow passes over our hearts to remind us somewhere in the world, there is a shell of a human being we once loved.[32]

My mind still reminds me of the (good) times at the beginning of the relationship when I was love bombed unremittingly and when the future faking occurred, identifying all the wonderful things we would do together in our lives.[33] This is when the cognitive dissonance attacks, leaving an uncomfortable abyss. Sometimes the loving feelings have come back and I have felt who I was back then. But then I jolt from this memory as I recall the underhand behavior, dishonesty, and physical ("accidental") incidents that insidiously emerged.

A loss of self runs through all my experiences of narcissistic abuse. I recall the eroding commentary throughout my relationship with the narcissist. Many times it hurt but then passed me by because I made excuses for those remarks from him—remarks that demeaned me as a person, my occupation, and my sense of self.

"Sorry I said that last night," he remarked. "It's because I had had a drink."
But I could deal with these types of comments. I was at risk of losing my sense of self more severely at the ending of our relationship, when I did not understand his betrayal, pathological dishonesty, and smear campaign on social media against me. Why?

In considering portraying an experience of "intimate abuse,"[34] the closest description I can find for my experiences encompassed as a component of narcissistic abuse; I have been on a long and profound journey. I have recalled what a few close friends have said when I recounted to them that I felt raped when I found out the truth that my ex-partner had been sleeping with another woman and planning a future with her while strongly voicing to me he wanted to work out our relationship, "sharing my bed . . . ," then the forceful sexual physical act and my confusion and distress at the time ("Call it 'rape'" a reader of this article has said, "why are you not naming it?" I answer, "because I do not know if it was, but I know it was violation and sexual coercion." The police said, "It is difficult . . . I know it was horrible for you . . . But no,

it's one of those difficult areas.") When I recall sitting on the sofa while in pain from the intimate abuse and with "the woman" sending me online messages saying I was making it all up, telling me to leave them be, as though "I" was the intruder, I am still disbelieving this could happen. It remains something I cannot fully make sense of. This is an experience that will always be there for me and from which I recall feeling overwhelmingly demeaned and disempowered (at the time). A friend pulled a disbelieving face when I said I felt I had been raped. I felt a re-traumatization and devaluation from her reaction. Re-traumatization (meaning to become traumatized again by the actions of others) contributes to a feeling of isolation for the abused, reminding them of aspects of the original abuse they experienced that disregarded their views, preferences, and experiences.[35] Another friend came back to me and said when she had thought about it while driving home from work one day, it made her feel physically sick "to be lied to like that and violated by an entrusted partner and to experience the physical trauma, sexual coercion and resulting devaluation." I still cannot find a label or overall phrase that I think encompasses manipulation, sexual violation, intimate abuse, and the abuser's intentional use of my misplaced trust, and wonder how many other women (and men) have experienced this indescribable violation:

> The embodied and lived experiences of intimate abuse and coercive control are often beyond language, beyond words. For many women and children who have lived through it, their experiences are mostly inarticulable, often invisible and unspeakable.[36]

When contemplating writing this article, I asked myself why I was writing it and who I was writing it for. My first motivation was to add my lived experience research on narcissistic abuse to an under-recognized area of domestic abuse/violence, while working toward my own healing—recognizing the use of memory in autoethnography as a means of understanding who

we are, our identity and how lived experiences change us.[37] Autoethnography has been a key emerging methodology for exploring domestic violence in recent years.[38] I have aimed to enable the reader to interpret their own reactions to my portrayed experiences. I encourage a consideration of more subtle and covert processes that occur between narcissistic abusers and those they target through coercive and manipulative means to meet the driving self-esteem needs of the narcissistic personality. I hope that the social and psychological conditions and processes presented in this article will promote scholarly and public conversation around established myths, assumptions, and perceptions regarding intimate abuse (within narcissistic abuse) and expand current narratives around sexual violence and violation in collaboration with other research in this area.[39]

The Professional Self Searches for Further Understanding

Throughout my career as a mental health nurse, which started in 1997, I had strongly worked within and held at my core a Strengths philosophy to supporting others. This philosophy and approach focus on supporting others to see their inherent strengths and resources within and around them, rather than pointing out deficits and problem areas.[40] When working with individuals with severe mental health problems, who might have hurt others but had simultaneously battled against severe distress and trauma, my philosophy endured, interweaving with Rogers's outlooks on being congruent, aiming for unconditional positive regard and empathy.[41]

During the times of the autobiographical events I have presented here, I was consumed with great sadness, waking up every day feeling such a loss of my world; it lay upon my chest so heavily I could not breathe. Accompanying this great weight was vengeful hatred. I had never hated anyone like that ever. I had had no reason to. I did not recognize myself at times. I was

waiting for karma to pay a visit to him every day, and this is not a way to live. I had nightmares that involved him being buried in cement forever more. I had dreams of losing my relationship with a false person repeatedly. I awoke crying and panicked many times, with emotions of love, violation, and hatred swirling through my brain. While cooking, I burned myself over and over because I lost track of what I was doing, blanked out, and became lost in my all-consuming thoughts. Food charred and then dropped to the floor with a clatter of the tray.

"Who are these evil narcissistic people?" I deliberated when I started to find out more. The professional self immediately contested this: "This is not evil; it is an abnormal personality possibly developed through adverse childhood experiences." I felt my life had a demarcation point—life before narcissistic abuse / life after narcissistic abuse. I wanted to go back to when I had been ignorant of all this. Had I been completely naïve and stupid to hold so dear a strengths- and person-centered philosophy when some people can behave as though they are trying to destroy every fiber of your being? As a mental health nurse supposedly educated in critical perspectives of mental health problems, how had I not known about all this before now?

Working as a mental health professional and not knowing very much about narcissistic personality disorder and nothing about the abuse individuals with severe narcissistic traits can inflict made me feel especially ashamed. But then I also felt ashamed of my all-consuming hatred for someone who could be exhibiting these narcissistic behaviors as a component of a mental health condition—a personality disorder. What was I supposed to think? Cognitive dissonance struck again, but this time between my personal experience and professional outlooks. Was my ex-partner evil or was this a result of trauma experiences/emotional neglect/over-indulgence through developmental stages in his childhood?[42] An article by Bailey and Barton, which describes the considerations and dilemmas of working with narcissistically

orientated clients, helpfully explores and summarizes some of my own concerns and thinking regarding professional outlooks in working with narcissistic service users (and also how I related to my ex-partner on a personal level).[43] The article highlights the importance of applying empowerment models more carefully with narcissistic individuals and states that unconditional positive regard may not be enough. In addition, it highlights that practitioners require a knowledge and theory base on which to work through a course of action, as mental health professionals often fail to recognize aggressive agendas. This is attributed to professionals' cultural practice beliefs that problem behaviors of clients result from troubled situations and distress rather than on "who they really are." Importantly, the authors emphasize how challenging this may be for practitioners who usually relate to and value humanistic perspectives on change and growth.

Personal and Professional Healing

My healing began with finding out about narcissistic abuse. I wrote about it, and while doing so was confused when I discovered the lack of academic literature in this area. This further fed into my anxiety that my experiences were invalid (as an educator and academic) or not based on any real evidence. I was relieved to come across social media pages dedicated to victim/survivor narcissistic abuse experiences and topics that reflected my own experiences very accurately. Writing about my experiences has moved me toward a better place where I can communicate with others regarding narcissistic abuse and/or psychological and emotional abuse experiences. My academic outlooks on narcissism are often challenged in my own mind—it sounds such a negative, judgmental label with no hope. Using the word goes against my aims for nonjudgmental approaches whereby an individual can grow and change. But I cannot deny what I have experienced. I re-read the psychiatric formulation and DSM criteria of narcissistic

personality disorder, and that is the behavior to which I have been subject. Yes, there are subcategories of narcissistic personality disorder that require further investigation, but overall it is the most accurate description I have found. In trying to be more concrete in addressing some of the intangible aspects of narcissistic abuse and asking how narcissistic abuse is different from other definitions of abuse, I align with the view put forward by Milstead: narcissistic abuse is abuse enabled by deception to execute dominance and control. The deception itself is abusive and should be recognized as such.[44]

I am grateful to those individuals who have reached out to me following the publication of my first article on narcissistic abuse[45] and who shared both their thoughts on my article and their own experiences. Through these interactions alone I have learned a lot about what others have been through and their resilience and strength to keep moving forward through personal growth and sheer determination.

As well as interactions with trusted family members and friends, I gained support from a women's domestic abuse case worker. I felt validated through our discussions, and she was supportive of my writing, recognizing my experiences of post-traumatic stress and helping me find a way forward.

I have found the old saying "time heals" to be untrue but would agree that "time numbs." The raw emotion I used to feel most of the time is not there anymore. Instead I experience a nagging pull, as though the workings of my brain have been rearranged and then arranged again, consistent with descriptions of how trauma alters neurobiological pathways.[46] I am the same person but not. I feel good when I recognize the old parts of me and realize they are still there in some form. I do not know how my healing will continue its progression. The wound will always be there, and though it may be invisible to most, there is a risk it can slightly gape or be ripped

open when another realization jolts me again that I have been lied to with seemingly no concern and that I have lived a lie with him. However, the wound knits together quicker now and I am able to look in on these experiences like an explorer of (the worst side of) human nature.

Addressing Key Ethical Considerations for This Autoethnography

Exploring and addressing ethical factors were integral to the development of this autoethnography. While implementing research with intimate others, procedural, situational, and relational components needed to be considered.[47] I hope that sharing these ethical challenges and how I worked through them may support others while writing about sensitive subjects involving intimate relationships and/or abuse.

My first challenge was the consideration of how to define those depicted in my research. In constructing this autoethnography, I am writing about the past and my past experiences. I have not recruited these individuals to be in my story; they are not participants—they are characters from memory. Bochner and Ellis differentiate between "characters" who are part of our personal stories and participants who have consented to be part of our study and whom may be formally and informally observed.[48] Thus I developed a consent form for the procedural ethics approval process for what I have termed a "character-participant." The word is evocative of a "hinge-word," fluctuating between oppositional terms, occupying the ground of the excluded middle with the potential to challenge the terms from which they originate.[49] My definition of a character-participant is "a character in my autobiographical writing based on something the true-life individual said or did." I explained in the participant information sheet that accompanied my ethics application that I would give to them a copy of the extract of my writing that was anonymously linked to the real-life individual, and ask them for their consent to use this statement or discuss a mutually agreeable alternative. This process has been termed "member

checking."[50] Securing informed consent can occur when contemplating the project, while in the field, during the writing process or after the project is complete.[51]

Although member checking and consent was sought from the character-participants mentioned in my writing, I did not approach the identified abusive character-participants because of the risks this may incur regarding further abuse for myself and family. The consideration of safety of the participant-researcher should be primary for ethical consideration.[52] In addition, requesting consent from abusers does not align with the feminist underpinnings of this research where asking abusers to read and agree with autobiographical accounts would not assist with addressing power imbalances and giving a voice to my autobiographical experiences as part of "the marginalized." Metta states:

> to place women centrally within scholarly texts, critical analysis and knowledge-making is a highly political act that challenges histories that have long erased women and subjugated their experiences.[53]

I consider that I have involved character-participants according to best practices for weighing risks to individuals and benefits to society.[54] It is possible that character-participants reading my writing may experience emotional responses. Although scholars should consider if and how the research may cause harm to participants, the absence of harm is not a requirement and emotional responses by definition are not harmful and are difficult to prevent or predict.[55] In addressing essential components of ethical research I have taken measures in the de-identification of data. Individuals have been given pseudonyms or not named at all, place names are not named or changed, and there are examples of composite characters to further protect anonymity. These measures contribute to the "doing" of autoethnography as an ethical practice.[56] However, when the life writing is about a family member or intimate partner, it is impossible to obscure the

identity of some individuals to friends, family, and colleagues, and in these cases the purpose of the writing has been discussed with these individuals where possible in the hope of mitigating possible harm or discomfort.[57]

I felt at times again like the covertly abused, waiting for the validation of an ethics comittee—tip-toeing around, frightened to offend, trying to keep the peace and not make waves and if I did I would be at risk of being labeled "deranged" again. "So much for the feminist epistemology," I think. I feel like I am waiting for a patriarchal system to grant me permission and grant favor that my research is "allowable" and "in line" and that I am allowed to say what I need to say. I considered whether I would realize my intentions in "breaking silence/(re)claiming voice and 'writing to right?'"[58]

I have asked, re-asked . . . and gone around in circles throughout the exploration of the ethical dilemmas I identified before and throughout writing this article. I have discussed my concerns and queries individually with researchers who conduct qualitative, narrative, and autoethnographic research. I have raised some of these queries in research group meetings regarding writing about self and others in your life in addition to consequences of the author's truth claims not being shared by those they include in their stories. I asked, "What if those mentioned read my article and become angry about the way they have been portrayed or are hurt and suffer from the writing?" In the beginning, I hoped I would get a magical answer that would provide an enlightened pathway to follow, but this has not been my journey and I now realize it never could have been. Instead, throughout the development of the article and by utilizing ethical supervision, I discussed my intentions and uncertainties about my research; my supervisor read draft copies of my work, challenging me on occasion on my rationale and writing focus. We discussed my personal motivations and influences and checked these against meeting ethical

standards of respecting persons, beneficence, and justice.[59] Ethical supervision was also used to explore the situational component referred to as "ethics in practice," which describes day-to-day ethical issues that may arise in the context of carrying out the research.[60]

The area of relational ethics described as acting from our hearts and minds in acknowledging our interpersonal bonds with others[61] appeared in theory to be a fairly straightforward process. With those character-participants whereby relationships were on a good footing and the statements I made in my writing could be openly discussed, there were no major contentions. I considered personal vulnerabilities and risks (which in addition were outlined in the ethics committee application) and stated my sources of support in the ethics application (a request following first submission) with an accompanying risk assessment. In addition, it was important to consider what has been referred to as the afterlife of a publication and recognize how interpretations of it may affect me and others over time.[62] Consequently, I have left out some details in my autobiographical accounts, feeling it would not be ethically responsible to those character-participants and connected others to include them. However, in doing so, I question if I have muted my own voice and aligned with the subjugated. A colleague/friend after reading my article voiced, "This is a sanitized version of the messiness of what you have really been through . . . but I was there watching you go through it and a few vignettes will never be able to encompass seeing your face, trying to work out what was happening."

I do not consider I can neatly summarize this section to say all ethical risks have been securely and fully mitigated against, but within the complexities of the aims of this research, which aligns with ethical complexities in other autoethnographic research, I do consider I have taken ethics extremely seriously recognizing the edict to "do no harm."

Epilogue

I have written scholarly works and used different research methods to study narcissistic abuse as an emerging area for research and academic discourse.[63] However, in this autoethnography I align with Carter's intentions when she wrote of domestic abuse: "I returned through my work and allowed myself to re-enter it with the hope of not becoming an (im)partial person writing from a world removed from my reality."[64] An autoethnographic approach has enabled this connection of personal and professional experience to theory, research, literature, and other sources.

I have recognized the difficulties of aligning the personal voice, the mental health nurse professional (educator) voice, and the voice wanting to ensure ethical responsibility. I conclude that the voices of the personal, the mental health nurse, and the ethically responsible must challenge each other and sometimes remain distinct (the "is the abuser evil or traumatized debate?" is not over) and that portraying the invisible characteristics of narcissistic abuse continues to be a never-ending challenge.

Narcissistic abuse is an intricate maze of experiences and definitions from which one may finally emerge or at times get stuck at the dead ends to understanding. For those who have experienced narcissistic abuse and recognize this, there is an insider-language (e.g., love bombing, future faking, trauma bonding, gaslighting) that is immediately relatable to the abused individual's experiences. These terms appear to be absent from mainstream discussions of abuse, enabling a further obstacle to wider societal recognition, comprehension, and compassion for survivors, and facilitates social injustice by discrediting victims' voices. I hope that this article demonstrates autoethnography as a research approach to illustrate the vulnerable yet growing selfhood of a survivor, which acknowledges and accommodates mess, chaos, and uncertainty

that matches social life.[65] I hope my efforts have supported bringing the coercive experiences of a hidden form of abuse, narcissistic abuse, to the forefront of exploration.

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Notes

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