

Metaphor as a Means of Forming the Concept of Narcissism in Modern American Psychology Books

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Abstract. This article explores the role and significance of metaphor in shaping the conceptualization of narcissism in the contemporary American psychology literature. Drawing the analysis from a corpus of highly popular psychology books published between 2000 and 2025, the study analyzes metaphorical expressions and frameworks utilized to describe narcissistic personality traits and disorders. The research uses a qualitative methodology based in cognitive metaphor theory and discourse analysis. The results indicate that metaphors not only structure the way the concept of narcissism is viewed but also reflect broader cultural peculiarities about individuality, identity, self-esteem, self-worth, self-respect and mental health in general. The provided discussion addresses the implications of metaphor usage for both medical understanding and ordinary public perception of narcissism. Ultimately, the study highlights the powerful impact of language and culture in affecting both the clinical discourse and popular opinion of narcissistic pathology, which suggests that metaphor can serve as a cognitive frame as well as a cultural reflection.

Key words: metaphor, narcissism, psychology, conceptualization, American literature, discourse analysis.

Introduction

Being one of the most widely circulated stylistic device, metaphor play a crucial role in human cognition and language. It lets complex and abstract concepts to be realized and pictured in people's minds relating to more familiar life experiences. In psychology, metaphors frequently function as bridges or mediators between scientific discourse of the researchers and clear understanding of a particular phenomenon by the addressed audiences. The prevalence of metaphorical mind in American psychological literature reveals how linguistic choices shape cognitive frameworks and influence both professional and public discourse .

This article researches how metaphors contribute to the formation of the concept of narcissism in modern American psychology books. Narcissism, a term rooted in Greek mythology, has evolved into a multifaceted psychological concept. While initially considered a personality trait, it has grown to encompass various pathological states, including Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD). Contemporary psychology literature, particularly books targeted at the general audience, frequently uses metaphorical language to explain narcissism's causes, symptoms, manifestations, relations and consequences. The exploration of these metaphors reveals not only how narcissism is communicated but how it is interpreted, viewed and conveyed in cultural narratives.

Methods

The study uses a qualitative methodology based on the principles of cognitive metaphor theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) and critical discourse analysis. A sample of ten influential psychology

books published between 2000 and 2025 was selected based on their popularity, accessibility, and influence on public discourse. Books by authors such as Jean Twenge, W. Keith Campbell, Craig Malkin, Brené Brown, and Nancy McWilliams were included.

Each text was examined for metaphorical expression directly or indirectly related to narcissism. These metaphors were categorized according to the conceptual domains they invoked (e.g., spatial metaphors, war metaphors, object metaphors). The analysis focused on how these metaphors shape the reader's perception of narcissistic behaviors, identities and relationships between narcissistic people and others. Coding and categorization allowed new themes and topics to emerge inductively. The emphasis was placed on the repetitive recurrence of metaphors, the emotional connections of the imagery, and their implications for conceptual framing. In addition, contextual analysis was applied to explore how metaphorical constructions can relate to broader sociocultural peculiarities and phenomena, such as individualism, consumerism, American dream and digital identity.

Results

A number of dominant metaphorical patterns were discovered through the analysis:

1. The Mirror Metaphor: Narcissism is often described through the mirror metaphor, symbolizing self-reflection and self-obsession. Authors frequently use metaphorical expressions such as "mirror gazing," "distorted mirror," or "trapped in their own reflection" to depict the narcissist's self-absorption excessive focus on their image. In the self-help book "Will I Ever Be Good Enough?" by Dr. Karyl McBride dealing with a narcissist is described the following way: "Entering their reality is like being trapped in a house of mirrors. These metaphors are not only related to the original myth of Narcissus but also create a form of visual entrapment, in which the individual becomes disconnected and detached from reality and presence of others in their lives.
2. The Mask Metaphor: Another common metaphor is portraying narcissism as a facade concealing deep-rooted insecurity. Terms like "wearing a mask of confidence" or "a false self" suggest that narcissists are acting in public rather than authentically experiencing their identities. In "Becoming the Narcissist's Nightmare" Shahida Arabi states that "The narcissist wears a mask to hide their true self." This duality leads to the tension between outer appearance and reality which implies a fundamental instable situation at the core of narcissistic personality.
3. The Addiction Metaphor: Narcissistic behavior is linked to addiction, emphasizing compulsive obsessive attention-seeking, dependency on validation and approval. Phrases like "hooked on admiration," "craving applause," or "needing a fix of praise" were prevalent. These metaphors position narcissism as a form of emotional dependency that requires continuous reinforcement, drawing parallels with substance abuse and its associated cycles of craving, gratification, and withdrawal.
4. The War Metaphor: Some psychology texts frame narcissism in combative terms, using metaphorical expressions such as "battling narcissism," "a war within," or "emotional armor." These metaphors highlight the inner and interpersonal conflicts portraying the narcissist as either embattled by internal struggles or as an aggressor in relationships. The war metaphor also serves to show a pathology of a pathological phenomenon as an existential conflict.
5. The Developmental Metaphor: Metaphors relating to growth and development—such as "emotional stunting," "arrested development," or "immature self"—were used to suggest that narcissism stems from unresolved childhood traumas. These metaphors invoke developmental psychology frameworks and imply that narcissistic traits are the result of disruptive traumatized emotional process of maturation.
6. The Disease Metaphor: In some cases, narcissism is related to an illness or contagious disease, expressed in phrases like "the narcissism epidemic" or "infected by self-love and self-centeredness." In their book *Narcissism Epidemic* Jean M. Twenge and W. Keith Campbell associate narcissism to a contagious disease, describing it as an 'epidemic' that has spread through culture. This metaphor suggests that narcissism spreads socially, potentially encouraged by social media (in particular

Instagram, Facebook, tiktok, YouTube, etc.), celebrity culture and ideologies of self-promotion. It frames the concept of narcissism as both a personal and societal pathology.

Discussion

These metaphorical constructions and expressions are not merely stylistic devices; they shape the conceptual framework through which narcissism is perceived. The mirror and mask metaphors, for example, draw attention to the themes of self-identity, self-perception, self-image and self-representation in public. They suggest that narcissism involves a tension between the internal self and external image, with authenticity being a central concern.

The addiction and war metaphors emphasize the compulsive obsessive and conflict-driven nature of narcissistic personality. Through connecting narcissism to addiction, these metaphors shape their repetitive patterns. They also suggest a necessity for correction, possibly by means of therapeutic or behavioral treatment. War metaphors introduce an conflicting framing, implying that narcissism involves a struggle or a battle, either within the self or against others.

Developmental metaphors provide a psychological etiology, linking narcissism to disturbed childhood experiences, immaturity and incomplete emotional growth. This particular framing encourages a therapeutic approach originated in psychodynamic or developmental models, requiring long-term exploration of family relationships and traumas.

Disease metaphors raise important issues about the social basis of narcissism. By framing it as a widespread affliction, these metaphors both put a stigma on the condition and explain its emerging. However, they also have a criticism of cultural values that promote narcissistic tendencies, especially in societies where self-promotion and self-branding are rewarded.

Metaphors also influence clinical interpretations. By framing narcissism as addiction, clinical therapists and readers may be inclined to view it through the lens of dependency of different kinds. Similarly, developmental metaphors imply that therapeutic intervention should help the narcissists with resolving early childhood traumas. In addition these metaphors do not exist in isolation; they interact and complete one another, creating a complex web of various meanings that shape the understanding of the concept from different angles .

Moreover, these metaphors become the reflection of cultural values and attitudes. In a society that constantly seeks individual achievement, self-image and self-promotion, the metaphoric language used in psychology texts often serves to criticize and question these values when they go to extremes. Metaphors do not simply describe reality—they reflect it, having a great impact on how readers view themselves and others in a clinical or everyday context.

Conclusion

Metaphors are not just stylistic devices but powerful tools that shape our understanding of psychological concepts. In modern American psychology books, metaphors used to describe the concept narcissism do more than illustrate, they reflect the concept itself. By analyzing these metaphorical patterns, we can determine the relations and establish the connection in psychological understanding of narcissism as well as cultural contexts in which these understandings are formed. The recurring use of metaphors such as the mirror, mask, addiction, war, development, and disease not only contributes to conceptual framing but also reveals the value related nature of psychological discourse. A thorough research and critical examination of these metaphors allows to establish the correlation between the clinical opinion and cultural criticism.

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